Keeping Secrets

by ElvenSemi

Summary

Just another elf come to serve the Inquisition... That's what you hope to be, anyway. But you're an elf with a secret, and a little bit too much pride to just blend in peacefully.

Notes

((The slow burn tag is there for a reason. This is first and foremost a plot-driven mystery. Enjoy, but if you're looking for a fast payoff this may not be your best bet.))
Arrival

You look around at the fortress, your new home, with no small amount of awe. No small amount of fear, either. There aren’t a lot of places to run from here. And you’re used to being able to run.

In the end, however, it’s the lesser of a whole lot of evils. Running around during a mage rebellion had made things difficult enough. Then this madness with the rifts started happening, demons fucking everywhere… Now there were red Templars, which were somehow worse than regular Templars, which shouldn’t have even been possible. And the worst of it was this damned Inquisition, which had swooped in and rescued what Templars weren’t corrupted.

But it was the safest shelter in a storm. Even if it was full of Templars. Everywhere else was getting burned to the ground.

You enlist the same way as everyone else, by showing up one day with nothing but the clothes on your back and a sack of food. Someone is going through the new “recruits,” called such only because it sounds nicer than “desperate refugees,” trying to help them figure out where they will be the most useful. And now they’re in front of you, asking what skills you can lend to the Inquisition.

“Um,” you say, shifting your feet awkwardly. A hood covers your pointed ears, but there’s no hiding your larger-than-human eyes. “I was a scribe, before… everything. I can read, I can write, several languages-“

Before you can even finish listing off your skills, the fellow is nodding. “Alright, another elf for the library. Head up into the main hall, first door on your right, up the stairs. Find the other kni… nice elf, he’ll sort you out. Maker knows he could use the help.”

It really shouldn’t be so easy… But you shrug, and take your measly bag up the stairs. And there are a lot of stairs.

Skyhold is huge. Uncomfortably huge. The walls don’t help; they make it feel like the whole place is looming over you. You have a distinct feeling of being watched that leaves your skin crawling. You keep your head down as you slip through what is clearly a training ground, a blonde human shouting orders at men with swords. You glimpse a man in Templar armor and frown inwardly. Dodging Templars has almost become second nature, and being so close to them willingly chafes on you as much as your ill-fitting trousers. Still, you know you need to get used to it. Acting skittish around them is basically turning yourself in.

You take the steps up to the giant building two at a time, eager to get away from the muscle-bound humans. You have to admit, the “Great Hall,” as it seems to be called, is rather impressive. Utilitarian, somehow, but attractive. A bit too much Chantry influence for something that the Chantry had spent a lot of effort decrying, really.

You’re a bit surprised to see a dwarf at a table near the door you supposedly need to go through, rather engrossed in writing something. He glances up, as if sensing your eyes lingering on him. He flashes you a grin.

“Another newbie? We’re getting a lot of you.” His voice is amicable, but you get a feeling he’s a bit sharper than he looks. Better watch yourself.

“Y-yeah,” you stammer. “I’m… supposed to go to the library?” You gesture towards the door, as if you’re already a bit lost.
“Through there, up the stairs. Don’t worry, Stutter, you’ll fit in.”

Great. You have a nickname. Rather than reply, you bow your head slightly in thanks and duck through the door.

You should just go up the stairs. You know that. Lingering has never brought you anything but pain, but the sight of what’s on the other side of that door steals your breath away. A giant, round room, with a half-finished mural ringing it. You step in despite the voice in your head screaming that there would be time to look around later, spinning around as you walk to stare at everything.

Voices are bouncing down from above… The library, most likely; they had said it was upstairs. Were those birds you heard screeching? Still, this mural. Wolves howling at a mysterious figure, beautiful browns and golds. Had it come with the place?

You hear the sound of a clearing throat and go rigid, spinning around towards the source of the sound. There is a man on the scaffolding; in your admiration, you utterly failed to notice him. Stupid. Stupid! He isn’t saying anything, and you begin to worry you walked in on someone particularly important, or into a private area.

“U-u-um, s-sorry,” you stammer, wincing at the nervous tick. “I… I was looking for the library?”

“You were admiring,” the voice short, low and mature, with an accent you didn’t recognize. “The library is up the stairs.”

Was everyone in this damn castle astute? You’d be pegged within the month if this kept up. “Thanks. Sorry. Thank you,” you wince as you make all haste towards where you know the stairs are. No more sightseeing for you!

You all but charge up the stairs, hoping that the librarian is a little bit more normal than the last two. At least he’ll be an elf, apparently. Hopefully he’s one of those kinship-and-togetherness elves, and he’ll cut you some slack.

You come up the top of the stairs, and are immediately absolutely sure that you are, in fact, hearing birds. The cawing and flapping is unmistakable. Was there a rookery in this bizarre tower, as well? For a fortress with so much space, there sure was a lot of things crammed into one place. You pause, catching your bearings. This is obviously the library, but there are quite a few people, and you’re tasked with finding a single elf. You immediately scan the crowd for someone short.

“What?” came a rather cultured voice. It takes a great deal of self-control not to let out a long groan. Is everyone in this stupid Inquisition perceptive? This will be no end of grief. Your eyes focus in on the person talking, a tanned human with an admittedly marvelous moustache.

“I’m looking for the librarian?” is all you say, wondering if any qunari will be shaking you down as well, by the time you find where you’re supposed to be.

“Just over there. Dark hair, mousy, you can’t miss him.” The man looks amused. You don’t care to guess as to why.

“Thank you, ser,” you say politely, and turn to find the librarian before he can question you further. Go figure, the Inquisition is Inquisitive. And clearly, you were a genius for deciding you were a good enough secret-keeper to sit right underneath their noses.

Finally, you do manage to find the librarian, or who you sincerely hope is the librarian. You don’t see any other elves, so… You take a deep breath, then address him.
“Um, hello? My name is Emma.” A lie so practiced it isn’t even a lie anymore. “I was sent up here… to help, ostensibly.”

The man glances up at you, seeming startled by your presence. “Oh… oh! Are you one of the new arrivals?”

“I am, yes,” you say gravely. Thank the Maker, finally someone who isn’t on top of everything.

“And they sent you up here, not to the maid’s quarters? You must be something interesting.”

You frown. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, no offense, they just tend to see pointed ears and automatically assign any kind of servant work they can think of. What did you do to get put up here?”

Great, so much for an Inquisition for everyone. You knew those posters with the elf girl were a load of druffalo shit. You try not to look offended, and probably fail. “I read and write several languages,” you say, managing to hold yourself back from going on a rant listing them. Humility gets you far in a life of keeping secrets.

“That would be why, then. Are you any good at organization? You might be more use upstairs.”

Upstairs again? Maker have mercy. You let out a long sigh. “Honestly, ser, I just want to find a place where I can be of some use. I don’t care if it’s translating ancient Tevinter manuscripts or shoveling horse shit, at this point.”

The elf snorts. “Be careful saying that, or they’ll send you to the stables, and frankly, you’ll be of more use up here. Oh, my name’s Mahvir, by the way. Emma, you said, right? Alright, Emma, for now, I’m going to hand you off to Thea. She can give you a tour and get you settled in. We’ll find some work for you before long, don’t worry.”

And thus, you’re bustled off once again, this time to a redhead of a human who shows you around the library. “It’s not organized in the least, and we’re getting new books in every day,” she comments with a scowl. She also shows you around a few of the important places in Skyhold, like the mess where most of the non-soldier workers eat, the privies, the bar (why Skyhold has a bar, you’re uncertain), and the quarters for general workers. You’re a little impressed despite yourself; the room is tiny, but it is a room, and it apparently all yours, having been set aside for the next library worker. Enough space for a bed, a trunk, and a tiny stand. But it’s a bit of privacy you weren’t expecting.

By the time the two of you circle back to the library, a whole new set of faces is in it. You decide to give up on remembering who’s who unless they’re introduced to you.

“Oh, there you are!” The elf… his name was, what, Mahvir? Mahvir, yeah. “Upstairs wants to know what languages you can read, altogether.”

You hesitate, then stall. “Upstairs? Another wing of the library?”

“Oh, no. Upstairs is where… information is gathered.”

Oh. The spies want to know about you. Grand. This whole day just keeps improving with every step.

“I specialize in ancient Tevene,” you say carefully.

“Look, just give me a list,” he says impatiently. “I don’t know what they’re looking to hear.”
You let out a pained sigh. No point in lying about this. Plenty of people know multiple languages, and you do want to be as much as help as you can be, despite your hesitations about being here. You really don’t want to end up in the maid’s quarters if you could be doing something interesting, instead. “Ancient Tevene and ancient Elvhen, within reason, are the only ones I can imagine being useful, but I’m fluent in Orlesian, Antivan, and Qunlat.”

The man blinked in surprise. “What, Qunlat? Really?”

All of that, and he fixates on fucking Qunlat. You hope you’re stationed with this moron. “You pick these things up,” you say dryly. “Is that any help?”

“Hmm… You might as well go on up. They’ll want you.”

You barely bite back a groan. You should have lied. You’d rather be down here, organizing or translating. But, if they can put you to use, you can just find a niche and stick in it. That’s what you’re good at. With a growing sense of doom, you climb yet another set of stairs.

Well, this was where the bird sounds were coming from.

You’re almost immediately accosted as you come up the stairs. “You the elf? Course you are. Come with me.” The man grips your arm, and you resist the urge to pull yourself away. He half leads, half drags you towards a hooded figure leaning over a desk. “Got the linguist, Spymaster.”

Fucking Spymaster. Of course.

“And? What does she know?” The woman looks irritated at being interrupted. She has a rather thick Orlesian accent, which is a small comfort. Orlesians are notoriously tricky, but they are tricky in a reliable, predictable manner.

“Um…” The man stammers under that glare. You don’t particularly want it turned on you, but you also don’t want her looking any more irritated than she already does.

“Ancient Tevene, ancient elvhen, Orlesian, Antivan, Qunlat,” you say shortly. “Honestly, I’m not sure what use I could possibly-“

“That’s quite a list.” Her eyes fix onto you, and you really wish you had just left the man to flounder uselessly.

“I was a scribe, before,” you say, trying to keep things as simple as possible.

“Mn. Clearly. Well, if you speak Qunlat, we could use you. For now, however… you said ancient Tevene?”

“Ahm… yes, ser?” you say, floundering for a title. What did one call a spymaster?

“Give her the manuscript and set her up at a desk,” she directs this to the man who brought you over. “The Inquisitor has been breathing down my neck about it.”

And then you’re whisked away again, and before you can say cheese, you’re at a desk in a quiet corner of the library, with what appears for all the world to be an ancient Tevinter manuscript on dragons.

“This has been such a weird day,” you mutter to yourself. But translation is something you know how to do. You begin flipping through it, impressed at the quality, when you are interrupted yet again.
“What’s this then? They finally found someone pathetic enough to dig through that thing?”

Your eyes snap up, setting the speaker in an icy glare before you can remember you’re supposed to be acting small here. It’s the human from earlier, the one with the dramatic moustache. He holds up his hands, probably a reaction to the glare, but his face is fixed in a smirk. You force yourself to calm down. It’s been a stressful day, and it will be difficult enough to switch from arrogant to meek without losing your temper.

“Yes, I suppose they did, ser.”

“None of that. My name’s Dorian.”

“Mmm.” You look back down at the manuscript, but a few moments later…

“So you know ancient Tevene?”

You grit your teeth together, but manage to keep yourself composed. “Yes, ser. I didn’t realize literacy was such a marketable skill within the Inquisition.”

The man snorts out a laugh, which surprises you. You were being rude, a little on purpose.

“You, I like. What’s your name, then?”

You shake your head slightly. Weird humans, dwarves, redheaded Orlesian spies… This place was a little odd. “Emma.”

“Well, Emma, the reason I’m so interested is because I am an illustrious Tevinter citizen, and therefore I am aware that there really aren’t that many experts in Ancient Tevene outside the empire. What’s your history?”

Maker’s balls, a Vint, here, really? What is wrong with this godforsaken place? The Chantry’s damnation is making more and more sense. And now you have to explain yourself. Grand.

You clear your throat. “Certainly nothing as dramatic as you imagine, ser. I have simply always had a knack with language.”

“Mmhm. Sure. Escaped slave, maybe?” He reaches a hand out to clasp your chin, and it takes every ounce of your willpower not to strike him.

“If I was, ser, it would be no one’s business, let alone that of an altus.”

“Oooh, you’re good. You’ve given me chills.”

“My pleasure, ser. May I get back to work?”

“How’d you know?” he demands, and you almost roll your eyes.

“It’s not subtle, ser. You said you were Tevinter. You’re far too attractive and well-groomed to be anything but upper class, but if you were a Magister, you wouldn’t be allowed within twenty miles of this place.”

“Attractive and well-groomed, eh? I think I like you.”

“Glad to be of service, ser.”

“You might as well open up, Emma dearest. If our Leliana’s got our eye on you, she’ll know your
history within the week.”

That sends a chill down your back, but you manage to ignore it. There is very little in your history that would cause any raised eyebrows. You have been very careful, for a very long time. “My life’s story is very boring, ser. I suspect it won’t take her even a week.”

The man snorts, but he seems content to let you be. Finally. Perhaps you can actually get some work done on this manuscript. It has been your life’s experience that if you are useful enough, no one really cares where you’re from.

You’ve managed to get a bearing on the book by the time Thea arrives to invite you to the mess with her. You consider declining, but decide that making friends isn’t a terrible idea. It isn’t as though you’re going to be found out by the librarian’s assistant, for pity’s sake.

You’ve arrived at the mess, gotten your food, sat down, and begun eating, when you hear a low voice.

“So, you speak Qunlat, eh?”

You clench your jaw, close your eyes, and take a long, deep breath. This place will be the death of you.

Forcing yourself calm, you turn to reply to the man, but your voice catches in your throat, coming out only as a squeak.

THAT. Is a QUNARI.

A huge one, muscular, shirtless and covered in scars. Your eyes trace up him, as you would have been addressing his stomach. You had not been expecting someone so tall. Or broad. Or horned. One eye and a shit-eating grin gleam down at you. You attempt to speak again, cough, and then clear your throat.

“Uh, yes, ser,” you manage, not having to force a meek sounding voice. Fucking hell, they have a Qunari? Why do they have a Qunari? What is wrong with this place?

“No way, no one calls me ‘ser’,” the giant of a man says, so firmly that you find yourself willing to consider an alternative. “You can call me Iron Bull.” He taps his chin thoughtfully. “Or ‘Boss,’ if you prefer.”

You barely suppress a shudder. The damned size of him… He could snap you in two by flexing. Is he a mercenary? What on earth is he doing here? To your horror, he plops down on the seat across from you. “Qunlat is a hell of a language. Where’d you pick that up?”

“Oh, you know,” you say with a weak smile. “Around.”

The look he gives you makes you seriously regret ever thinking the Inquisition was a good idea. It also makes you seriously regret trying to make a joke.

You clear your throat again, trying to calm yourself. You’ll be no good at lying if you get flustered. “You should ask the Tevinter in the library, I think he’s getting a racket going on my history,” you try again, smiling a bit.

“When I ask a question, kid, I expect an answer.”

You frown. You’d assumed he was a Vashoth, being all the way out here, probably a Sten run away
from the rough life, but you’re now quite certain that’s not the case. If he is Tal-Vashoth, he sure as shit was no Sten. They didn’t think this hard.

“Sorry, ser, er, Boss, er, Iron Bull,” you stammer at the look he gives you. “I didn’t realize you were serious. I was a scribe, before. My job was translating texts.”

“Very interesting, but still not quite an answer. You translate Qunari texts?”

You glance over at Thea, desperate for some help from the unexpected interrogation, but she’s looking fixedly at her plate. Damn traitor.

You let out a long sigh. You have a story for this, might as well use it. That damned spymaster will find the trail before long, if she’s worth half a twig.

“Seheron,” you say shortly. The look on his face is a little bit priceless. It clearly was not the answer he was expecting.

“Seheron,” he repeats, slowly. You nod.

“I don’t like thinking about it,” you say, your voice quiet, a little shaky. Years of practice.

Iron Bull is quiet, but eyeing you up and down. You keep yourself small, all but folded into yourself “Well,” he says finally. “That explains why you looked like you were about to shit yourself when I came to say hi.”

“Sorry,” you say with a timid smile. “I wasn’t expecting… well…”

“You don’t look much like a native,” he says pointedly. Apparently the interrogation isn’t over yet. You manage to bite back a sound of frustration.

“No, I was… imported,” you make a face. “Tevinter goods. I guess that altus can win his bet after all.”

He speaks in Qunlat suddenly, a language rough on your ears. It’s been years since you heard it, but you manage to catch on.

“Asit tal-eb. Anaan esaam Qun.” Your pronunciation is likely rusty after so long. You really do mostly translate tomes, after all.

“Shokrakar?” he says, sharply. You shake your head quickly.

“Kabethari. I ran.”

“Not so fast as to avoid learning Qunlat,” he says pointedly.

You groan. “I’m sorry, s… Iron Bull. But I was a slave brought to Seheron, with a knack for languages. I believe you can guess why I know Qunlat, as well as why I was brought to Seheron in the first place.”

He grunts, seemingly satisfied. You let out a breath you didn’t realize you were holding, thinking the nerve-wrecking day finally winding down, when you find your chin caught in another grasp, your head forced up so that you make eye contact with the giant Qunari. Will people forever be grabbing at you? You want to take the stupid Vashoth’s last eye. You hope it doesn’t show in your face.

He stares at you for a moment, then drops your chin, stands up, and walks away without a word. You turn to Thea, only having to pretend a little bit in order to come across as shaken. “What was
“That’s half the fun. So what’s this Seheron you two were talkin’ about?” Thea asks, her mouth half full of stew.

“Mmm… Nasty place,” you say, starting in on your own stew. “The Tevinter Emperium and the Qunari have been fighting over it for ages. It’s in a constant state of chaos.”

“And you were a slave?”

“I’d appreciate if you didn’t go spreading that around,” you sigh.

“Alright, alright, mum’s the word. You don’t have to worry ‘bout that Dorian, though, he’s a nice sort.”

You glance out the door Iron Bull left by. “Right now, Dorian’s the least of my worries.”

Amazingly, the rest of the night passes peacefully, or relatively so. It’s become quite clear that you arrived with quite the batch of recruits, so most of the chaos can perhaps be attributed to everyone running around, attempting to get them settled. Despite the noise, you manage to get quite sucked in to your work on the manuscript, which is a VERY nice and VERY valuable ancient piece on dragons, one of the translations to which you will be keeping for personal use. You haven’t even noticed how quiet it’s gotten until a voice snaps you out of your translation fugue.

“Emma? You going to bed?”

You glance up. It’s Thea. You glance around the library, and realize that essentially everyone has left. It had gotten late without you noticing.

“Oh… yes, thank you, Thea. Let me just…” You glance down at the manuscript. You’re certainly not leaving it on a table! These people let anyone walk in out of the snow, and this is valuable. “Let me just take care of this, and I’ll head down.”

“D’you want me to wait for you?”

She’s clearly very tired. You shake your head. “I can find my way, thank you. You go on ahead.”

“Alright,” she says with a yawn, obviously eager to get into bed. “See you in the morning, Emma. Don’t get lost.”

As she leaves, you clean up your assorted papers, organizing them so that they will be easy to find in the morning, then stack them on top of the large manuscript, lift it with a grunt, and begin making your way up the stairs. The spy’s headquarters aren’t a pleasant place to be, but no one will be stealing anything from under their noses.

Voices from the top of the stairs make you pause.
“So, anyone suspicious?” That Orlesian voice could only be the redheaded Spymaster.

“A few obvious spies.” You freeze, blood chilling in your veins like ice. THAT voice belonged to the Qunari, Iron Bull. “In the maids and stablehands.” You relax slightly.

“Did you get a chance to look at that linguist?”

“Mmm, yeah. She’s jumpy.”

“A spy?”

Maker have mercy. You get ready to tiptoe back down the stairs, out the gates, and into the snow. You’d rather risk freezing.

“Not sure. If she’s a liar, she’s a good one. She says she’s a Tevinter slave who was in Seheron. You should see if it checks out.”

“Alright. Thanks, Iron Bull.”

Oh, shit. You quickly dart down the stairs, managing to get to the bottom and turn around just before you see the hulking shadow of Iron Bull dancing down the stairs. You grit your teeth, already regretting what you know is the best course of action, and head up the stairs, flipping through some of your papers.

He stops walking when you’re partway up, but you pretend not to notice until his shadow falls over the paper you’re looking at. You stop, midstep, and look up. You knew what to expect, but you’re still horrified at just how much he *looms*, looking larger than life in a stairwell clearly built for smaller men. You duck over to the side to allow him to squeeze past, avoiding eye contact. Despite this, when a hand hits the wall near your head, you startle, looking up.

The Qunari is indeed squeezing by, but he’s squeezing a little closer than he absolutely needs to, and he’s looking right at you. The glint in his eyes is challenging, and you stare into them a few heartbeats more than is wise, a fierce desire to answer that challenge rising in you. You force yourself to look down and away, as if flustered, but inside, you’re seething.

He finishes slipping past, and chuckles as he goes down the stairs. You glare after him, deciding that if the time comes that you need to cut and run, you really ought to set him on fire, first. You take a moment to compose yourself, than head back up the stairs.

Unlike the library, the top floor is still a bustle of activity, ravens coming and going. You spot the redheaded Orlesian by a desk, and avoid it to plop your book and papers down elsewhere. You set a nearby paperweight on top of them. Finally, you can head to bed, although with your luck, there will be some curious bastard sitting on it, ready to ask you leading questions about your past.

“Did you make any progress?”

You manage not to spin around, instead merely glancing over your shoulder. You don’t recognize the speaker, a rather average looking human, but assume that if he’s asking, there’s a reason.

“Yes, some.” You slide a piece of paper out from under the paperweight. “It’s quite the find, and certainly the most information on High Dragon biology I’ve ever heard of. Although,” you add with a self-deprecating chuckle. “That’s not really difficult.”

“How soon do you think you can have the whole thing finished?”
“Hmm…” You run a finger down the spine. “I’m not sure. I was told to translate it, and I’m assuming they want a finished tome in the common tongue. A simple translation I could have written in a week, but for a completed tome, I’ll need supplies and time. Is this time sensitive?”

“Well, no, not technically,” the man says with a laugh. “I’ve just got some very interested parties.”

You eye the man curiously. He’s tall, and broad, but speaks in a calm, easy voice. One of the spies, perhaps? He does look remarkably normal; he’d make a decent spy. “I’ll do my best to work swiftly. It’s not as though I’ve anything else to do with my time, and I did come to help.”

“I’m fortunate that so many think as you do. Welcome to the Inquisition, miss. If anyone gives you a hard time,” he taps his ears at this, likely indicating your own pointed ones, “Let Dorian or Solas know. They’ll straighten it out.”

You nod, despite having no idea who ‘Solas’ is. The only person you could possibly qualify as having given you a hard time is Iron Bull, and since he seems to work with the Spymaster, that’s hardly something you can report. The man wanders off to speak with the redheaded Orlesian, and you head back down the stairs.

You manage to get to your quarters unmolested, and there isn’t even anyone in your room. You do wish your door had a lock, but at this point, you’re just glad to have a door. You kick off your shoes and fall into the bed, rather uncomfortable compared to what you’re used to, but a bed is a bed. You’re asleep within minutes.
Fitting In

You awaken to Thea’s face looming over you, and you can’t even summon up the energy to be surprised.

“Mornin’, sunshine!” she says cheerfully. You glance out the narrow window. Sunshine is one thing particularly lacking; it’s drearily overcast and it looks horribly cold. “Here, supplies for the new recruits are making their rounds. I guessed your size.” She plops down a small stack of clothing onto your bed. You smile, perhaps the first genuine one since you arrived at Skyhold.

“Thank you, Thea… I’ve been wearing these clothes for far too long. I appreciate it, truly.”

She waves her hand at you, dismissively. “It weren’t nothin’. ‘Ere, get dressed, we’ll head to the mess together.” She exits to give you a bit of privacy, and you shed your dirty clothes gleefully. The new outfits are nothing special, simple cotton and lambswool, but they are clean, and that in and of itself is a blessing. You’re elated to find even smalls and breastbands, as you’ve been without both for quite some time.

You dress yourself and exit the room, then head to the mess with Thea, letting her steady stream of prattling wash over you. It’s strangely soothing. Breakfast goes without interruption, despite your fears that Iron Bull will appear around every corner. You even manage to get quite a bit of work done on the manuscript before your first stupid interruption of the day.

“Hello, Emma darling! How are you this fine morning?”

You chew on your bottom lip, finish the sentence you were working on, and then look up at the painfully cheerful face of the human who had introduced himself as Dorian.

“I am fine, ser, thank you for asking. Is there anything I can help you with?”

“I told you, call me Dorian.” He swipes a paper of your desk, examining it. “You have very neat handwriting.”

“I am a scribe, ser. That is, very literally, my job.”

“You’re fast at this, too,” he adds, ignoring you. “Leliana thought we were going to have to send this off.”

“Leliana?”

“Red hair, Orlesian accent, terrifying stare?”

“Oh, yes. We spoke only briefly. Well, I’m pleased to be of use. I was half convinced I’d be digging latrines and doing laundry.”

“If so, why did you come?” Dorian asks, and something in his voice makes you believe he’s genuinely curious. You smile thinly.

“I could ask you the same question, ser. But I suspect I’m here for the same reason as everyone else… to help, and to be safe.”

“Things are quite bad out there, aren’t they?” His voice is quiet.

You nod. “Things were already chaotic, with the Templars and mages going at it. Then the sky tore
open. I avoided the worst of the fighting, thought I could bunker down somewhere and stay out of trouble’s way. Then Templars started growing crystals out of my neighbors, and I decided it was time to leave."

“How did you escape?”

Irritation creeps back into you. “Ask your Qunari friend,” you say, cold but polite. “I believe he’s making a study on the subject.”

Dorian winces, then holds up his hand in surrender. “Alright, alright, I’ll let you get back to work, then. Try not to take it the wrong way, though. Leliana investigates everyone who walks through the gates, and Iron Bull has a thing for redheads.”

You don’t take it as an insult, not really, but it is a danger. And if that “Leliana” is interested in you for translating more sensitive material, which you suspect, she’ll be going through your past with a fine-toothed comb. You try to think of anything she might come across that could give you away as you continue your work with the dragon manuscript.

“Alright, Emma, let’s- Wait, have you been there all day?” Ah, it was Thea again. You glance up from your growing stack of papers.

“Hmm? More or less. Why?”

“Didn’t you eat lunch?”

There are no windows in the tower for you to glance out of. You stretch your fingers, stiff with writing and cold. “If you’re asking me, it must be suppertime, so I suppose the answer is no, I did not.”

Thea shakes her head, slowly. “I swear, Emma. You’re not on the road anymore, you can eat three square meals a day! It’s the best part about being here.”

“I think the walls are the best part,” you say dryly. “Are you heading to the mess?”

“Yes, and so are you! You’re certainly not skipping two meals!”

“Alright, alright… Let me just…”

“And put that book away for the night. Some of the other girls and me are going to the bar. You should come.”

You pause, considering. You would much prefer to stay in the library until late again, especially since there was at least one person waiting eagerly for the translation. But people trust you after you get drunk with them. Fitting in is more important than the manuscript, at least for now. You nod.

“Alright, let me just put it away upstairs.”

Dinner passes, glorious and without interruption, and you’re beginning to think that you’re in the clear with regards to Iron Bull, at least for the day. You and Thea meet up with a few other women and head over to the pub. You still have no idea why Skyhold has a pub, but it seems like it does quite a lot for morale. It’s full of song and drink, drunken soldiers and cheerful handymen mingling together.
The girls pick out a table, and you all settle into your ale. In such a group, it’s easy to remain quiet without it being noticed, and you listen as the women around you trade stories with no small amount of enjoyment. It’s nice to be able to just sit back, relax with a mug of ale, and –

“Well, hello, ladies!” You had been leaning your chair back slightly, and you nearly lose your balance out of shock. You manage to tilt forward instead of backwards, the legs of the chair banging down onto tavern floor.

What was he doing here? You don’t care much for the cheerful tittering of the women at the table, particularly Thea. You try to allow them to draw Iron Bull’s attention and simply nurse your mug, but when you risk a glance, you find he’s looking at you. To your growing dread, he pulls up a chair and joins in chattering with the women. You run a hand over your forehead. This is what being social gets you! You could be in the library with an ancient dragon tome right now, dammit!

“So, Emma,” his voice inevitably comes. You manage to avoid wincing. “How’s life in Skyhold treating you?”

“She skipped lunch today, she was so engrossed in that book they’ve got her working on,” comments Thea, her voice scolding like a nagging mother.

“I’m doing quite well, s… Iron Bull.” It seems more awkward, calling him by name in mixed company. “Thea was nice enough to bring me new clothing this morning.” You grace her with a smile, and she gently pushes against your arm, bashfully.

The conversation continues naturally, for which you’re grateful. If Iron Bull is here for any reasons involving you, he’s at the very least not interrogating you. You’re almost startled when Thea asks you a question, rather than him.

“So, your accent. You’re Ferelden?” she says, red-faced and waist-deep into her fifth ale. With the company of Iron Bull and few of the other “Chargers,” it seems the ladies are staying later than they had intended.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, I am.” There’s an awkward pause as Thea and a few of the others look at you expectantly. You roll your eyes, knowing where this is going. “I was from an alienage in Denerim.”

“That was safe enough, and the almost the truth.

“How did you get out alive?” By this point, the entire table is watching you with wide eyes. It’s hardly a drinking story.

“I’d really rather not…” You begin, only to be interrupted unexpectedly.
“Yeah, let’s not make the little lady relive something like that! We’re supposed to be having a good night!” Iron Bull, of all people, swooping to your rescue? Well, swooping, at the very least. He places a mug of something foul smelling in front of you, to replace your empty mug of ale. You eye it suspiciously, then knock it back.

You’ll later remember that as the very moment the night went to hell.
Confusion. Confusion and pain. Those are your only two companions. You groan as you begin to wake, seriously regretting every decision in your life. What… what happened last night? Wait, more important than that, where are you? You blink, blearily, and try to focus on your surroundings. This isn’t your tiny little room, and for a confused moment, you wonder if the whole “joining the Inquisition” thing was just a drug-induced nightmare.

You don’t recognize the bed you’re in. It’s a giant, four poster monstrosity of a bed. You can honestly say you’ve never woken up in a bed like this in your life. You rub your head and let out a little moan. Your entire face is throbbing. What… what happened last night?

“Oh, hey, you’re up.”


You stare at Iron Bull, utterly uncomprehending. Flashes from last night… a drink that burned like fire. Thea laughing and leaving the bar, but you were still there.

You stare at Iron Bull in abject horror, not particularly concerned about looking meek and small in the face of all this.

“Here, drink this, you’ll feel better.” You eye the cup he hands you cautiously, and give it a sniff, but it’s just water. You drink it slowly, staring at the giant Qunari over the rim. It’s ice cold, and it does help you feel a little better, but nothing was going to be particularly comforting after the realization that you’d woken up in the absolute worst place you could have. You eye yourself, and find that you are, praise Andraste, still fully clothed.

“Wh… what happened last night?” you manage to choke out, clutching your head, which feels as though it’s about to spin off your shoulders.

The giant of a man chuckles. “Don’t panic, you just had a little bit too much to drink. None of us had any idea where you slept, so I decided to be the gentleman.”

You groan into your hands. “I didn’t… did I do anything stupid?”

“Well, chugging that Dragon Piss was pretty stupid.”

“Nnnn. Yeah. Other than that?”

“You threw a mug at a Templar. Or you might have been throwing it somewhere else, but it hit a Templar.”

“Oh, Maker. I hit a Templar?”

“She had a good sense of humor about it.”

You groan again. “Please, if you see her, point her out so I can apologize. What was in that alcohol you gave me?”

“Alcohol.”

You let out a sound that could only be described as a whine, despite yourself. “Andraste’s breath… anything else?”
“You sat on Krem, for a bit, but I don’t think he minded.”

“Who the hell is ‘Krem’? Please don’t tell me he’s a priest or something.”

“Wow, you really don’t remember much, do you?” Bull says with a chuckle, running a thumb across his nose. “He’s one of the Chargers.”

Sitting on a mercenary’s lap. Alright. You’ve done weirder things. Like throwing a tankard at a fucking Templar! You want to be irritated at Iron Bull; he’s the one who handed you that damn drink. But at the end of the day, you’re the one who got out of control. You let a long sigh. “I am very sorry. I don’t normally drink very much at all.”

“Yeah, we kind of guessed that one.”

You wince. “Sorry. Thanks for…” The words turn like worms in your mouth, but you spit them out. “…taking care of me.” Ugh. Gross. You feel gross now. “I’ll avoid… what did you call it, Dragon Piss? I’ll avoid that, in the future. I think I have some apologies to make.”

“Hold on.” You freeze, halfway through standing up, just kind of awkwardly squatting over the bed. Iron Bull laughs. “You used to be military? You’re good at following orders.” You flush and finish standing up, but you don’t try to leave, instead turning to watch the giant Qunari. He’s less scary when he’s sitting and you’re standing, at least. “I wanted to ask some questions about a few things you said last night.”

Well, shit.

“It seems like private is the best place for them.”

Well, FUCK.

You manage to keep your face calm. “A-alright, what did else did I say?”

“Well, you got in a bit of a screaming match with Threnn, it was a little hard to make out the words.”

You lean back against a wall. “Okay, wait. Who’s Threnn, and why was I in a screaming match with them? God, she isn’t the Templar, is she?”

“Oh, no, just another servant of the Inquisition, like you.” His voice is casual, so is his body language, but you’re not fooled. In fact, you’re starting to have a nagging suspicion about what he was before he left the Qun. Not that you’ve ever heard about a Qunari re-educator ever leaving. “She used to work for Loghain. Still pretty loyal to him, even now.”

You stiffen. “Oh.”

“That name got thrown around a LOT during the fight, as I recall.”

You grunt, then sigh, rubbing your head. “I have no idea why you’re so curious about me, ser.” He gives you a look, but you ignore it. “Yes, I can see myself getting into a fight about that. But I’ll need to apologize to her nonetheless.” You grind a hand into your forehead, ignoring the pain and nausea it causes. “And I’ll need to avoid that tavern. It seems I cannot handle my… ‘Dragon Piss,’ you called it?”

“Eh, you had a good night. No one here’s going to hold much of a grudge about a drunken elf in a tavern. It’s expected. But I’m still curious about what has you irritated about Loghain. Sounded a bit more personal than ‘traitor to my country,’ and I’ve never known Alienage elves to give much of a
You are too hungover for this bullshit. “How much do you know about Loghain, ser? Because there’s a factoid about him that gets left OUT of the stories when they’re busy praising him for slaying the archdemon! For example, did you know, to fund his stupid little petty civil war, he sold Fereldan citizens into slavery? Slavery is bad, apparently, only when it happens to human children. Elves, we’re basically free little money bags for the kingdom, running around the alleyways!”

Iron Bull’s look softens, almost imperceptibly. “I’d heard the Hero put a stop to it,” he comments. You’re too busy glowering.

“Oh, she did. After a good number of elves had already been shipped out.”

“So that’s how you wound up in Tevinter?”

You sink down onto the floor. “Yeah. That’s how I wound up in Tevinter. Are we done playing Twenty Questions now? Because I’m hungover and I have to go apologize to half of Skyhold for being a drunken prat.”

“Hey, calm down.” His voice is soft, or you would have bristled at the command. You’re still pretty out of it, and cold water only helps your hangover so much. You’re also irritated at having been pecked and prodded about your history for two solid days. No one has ever cared this much, and that’s made it easier. All these half-truths will wear on you, eventually. How long can you possibly hope to stay? He slides down onto the floor next to you, and this time, you do bristle, a bit.

“Don’t worry so much about what people think of you. Everyone’s seen behavior a lot worse than someone getting a little too much drink in them. You’ll see.”

You grumble something incoherent into your knees.

“So… when did you get away from Tevinter? In Seheron?”

You stand up abruptly, finally more irritated than you are cautious. “I really should be reporting into the library, ser. That manuscript won’t translate itself. Thank you for your assistance.” Your voice carries the ice you’d like to be throwing. You leave, somewhat surprised when no one tries to stop you.

You decide not to even bother trying to get to your room to change clothes and just head straight towards the library.

“Hey, Emma!” You turn, startled, to find a man you barely remember waving at you. Mildly confused, you wave back. “Hope I see you at the tavern again.” He winks. That’s a wink that carries a lot of meaning. You just sort of smile and then continue on, through the practice yard.

“Hey, elf, think fast!”

Having heard that line more than once in your life, you do, in fact, think fast, which means fast enough to turn towards the sound, see a mug barreling towards you face, and reach up. You don’t manage to catch it, but you do bat it away. Startled, you stare in the direction it came from, and see a group of laughing Templars.

“She’s got faster reflexes than you, Belinda!” One of them snorts, playfully shoving at another Templar.
“Aw, shut it,” ‘Belinda’ says, rolling her eyes. “You didn’t have to throw a mug at her.”

“It was hilarious! She smacked the damn thing out of the air. Isn’t she a librarian?”

You clear your throat, memory flashing backwards for an appropriate quip. “You should see the way Dorian throws books. You’d need fast reflexes, too.”

The Templars laugh even harder, and even Belinda, who you are fairly sure is the one you clocked with the mug, cracks a smile. “Eh, get out of here, elf,” she says, waving her hand carelessly. “Go wrestle your books.”

By the time you get to the Great Hall, your mood has improved. You even go through the rotunda, rather than around to the other set of stairs, as most of the library workers do. You glance around carefully, to see if the man from before is in here, but you don’t see him. You relax slightly, and make your way around the wall, admiring the mural. It seems more had been done since you were last here. Perhaps that fellow is a painter?

“Came back to admire some more?”

At the low voice, you damn near jump out of your skin, spinning around to see a man you would swear by the Chant had not been there before. The man from before, by the sound of his voice, but… an elf? You had been so flustered before, you hadn’t even noticed.

“Maker’s breath! I’m not going to survive here a week! My heart will give out!” you exclaim, clutching at your pounding chest.

The corner of the bald elf’s mouth quirks up, very slightly. “My apologies. It was not my intention to startle you.”

He stands with his hands locked behind his back, and you notice something else odd about him… He is tall. Taller than perhaps any elf you’ve seen, and broader as well, but too lithe looking for it to be said he looks like a human. You shake your head slowly. “I’ve intruded on you again. I’m sorry, ser.”

He shakes his head. “It’s no intrusion. This is hardly a private room. Although, I do note most library staff go up the other stairwell.” He tilts his head slightly, as if inquiring, despite the fact he asked no question.

You gesture lamely at the wall behind you. “It’s pretty,” you say dryly. “I wanted to get a better look at it. Last time I was in here, some strange man startled me.” His lip quirks again, and you find it strangely satisfying.

“So, I assume you’re new library staff?” he asks as you absentmindedly study the length of his ears.

“Huh? Oh. Well, yes, I suppose I am. They have me translating an old manuscript on High Dragons.”

He frowns then, his brow crinkling, and you remember that your goal was to be known to as few people as possible. Seems a little late for that, however, after making a spectacle of yourself at the tavern.

“The one in Ancient Tevene?”

You nod. “I was a linguist, before,” you say, for what seems like the thousandth time since you arrived at this damn fortress.
“Quite the linguist, it seems.” You don’t like the way he’s looking at you. Well, that’s not entirely true. Part of you likes it quite a bit, but that is the part you don’t listen to. That way lies disaster. “Leliana was having quite the time finding someone to translate it.”

“Yes, so I keep hearing. If I’d realized a growing military force was in such dire need of a linguist, I might have come sooner.”

You feel a light surge of mana brushing against you, and freeze, before forcing yourself to relax again. It’s not something you should be able to notice. His prodding is more subtle than most mages’, and you’re a bit surprised you noticed it all. But as long as he doesn’t cram that mana down your throat, you’re confident that your secret is safe.

“What made you come?” he inquires, as if to cover for his prodding.

“There were very well crafted posters featuring an elven lass with a bow,” you say dryly. He raises an eyebrow. “No, really, there were. They couldn’t have been complete nonsense, since I managed to trip into the library instead of into the maid’s quarters.”

“The Inquisition is very good at recognizing talent, regardless of who holds it.” His voice is polite, clipped.

Your mouth curves into a smile. “That was a very good answer, ser. Formal! Practiced, even. I like it. I bet a lot of the elves in the place would say that. Exactly in the manner you said it, even!” You grin at his raised eyebrow. “I’m not blind, ser, nor am I deaf. I’ve had half a dozen stammered words starting with ‘n-’ since I arrived, and people ask me what I did to wind up in the library, but don’t ask Thea. But I wasn’t expecting heaven, I was expecting walls. These are very thick, and I find myself becoming fond of them.”

“Are you normally so casual with strangers?” The firmness in his voice makes you flush slightly.

“No, ser. Sorry if I’ve given offense.” You move to duck into a bow, but a hand snaps from behind his back to stop you, resting firmly on your shoulder.

“I am not someone to be bowed to.”

You frown. People not wanting you to call them ‘ser,’ not wanting you to bow, wanting to know all about you. “Pardon me for saying, ser, but this Skyhold is a very, very strange place.”

“I suppose it may be a little out of the ordinary,” he admits, and you smile despite yourself.

“I am sorry to have bothered you, ser.”

He shakes his head. “You were no bother. Just watch that waggling tongue doesn’t get you into trouble.”

“Yes, ser,” you say as you turn towards the stairs. “I will be very careful with the location of my tongue from now on.”

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You settle in with your manuscript, determined to get a good day’s work in despite your delayed start. Unfortunately, fate is working against you in the form of more or less constant interruptions. Thea, of course, is eager to know what exactly happened with you and Iron Bull. You say you’ll tell her later, which only gets her more excited. Then the mustached human appears as well, blathering on even as you try to ignore him.
“Ser, do you honestly have nothing better to do?” you finally ask him, exasperated.

“Oh! My wounded heart! How could you be so cruel, Emma?”

“Melodramatic. You’re Tevinter alright,” you say with a scowl.

“Ah, yes, about that. I heard I was right in my guess.” He even looks smug. You will constantly be wanting to punch people, it seems. Such is your lot in life.

“Please tell me that Iron Bull told you, and it isn’t just common knowledge across the keep.”

“Iron Bull told me, but I suspect it’ll be common knowledge soon enough. These soldiers like their gossip.”

You let out a frustrated groan through clenched teeth. “You people have no concept for personal privacy.”

“Would you feel better if I told you my dark and sordid history?”

“Let me guess,” you say sharply. “You didn’t fit into the mold your parents wanted for you, and you left rather than be forced to conform.”

He actually looks taken aback, and is gloriously quiet. You turn your attention back to the manuscript.

“Alright, how did you guess?” he says, after a moment. You grind your teeth together. This man cannot take a hint. You rub the bridge of your nose.

“Honestly, ser, think about this. Maybe you’re a spy, and if you are, you’re either the best or worst spy in history. If you’re not a spy, you’re an attractive altus miles away from Tevinter, possibly working with their enemies. Tevinter nobles are all about the perfect fit. It’s not much of a jump.”

“Not for some, apparently.” You jolt at the sound, and turn guiltily to see Iron Bull coming out from behind a bookshelf, still looking into a book. You wouldn’t have figured him for a reader.

“Our delightful elven friend was just regaling me with tales of what an open book I am,” Dorian says sourly.

“Well, she’s not wrong,” Iron Bull says thoughtfully. Dorian huffs sourly. “Still, it’s not a layman’s observation.”

“I’m afraid it is,” you say bluntly. “I’ve had more than my share of experience with Tevinter. It was an educated guess, yes, but that’s all it is.” You glare between the two of them. “Do neither of you have any important work to be doing for the Inquisition? Because I believe I am supposed to translate this tome before next year.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll let you work,” Iron Bull said with a chuckle. As he turned, he added over his shoulder, “See you at dinner!”

You drop your face into the book you’re writing in to hide the look of murder that has to be plain on your face. You growl into the spine. These men will be the death of you!
“Did… did you skip lunch again?” You glance up at Thea, who looks mildly pissed.

“…There is a distinct possibility,” you admit, glancing around at the nearly empty library.

“Alright, that’s it! Put that book away, I’m taking you to dinner. Honestly, you need a keeper!” You snort at the turn of phrase, but know she wouldn’t get it.

“Just let me finish up this sentence. Calligraphy is hard, you know.”

“If it’s so difficult, maybe you should take breaks.”

“Alright, alright…” You finish up the sentence, but leave the page open to dry. “No one will bother this if I just leave it here, right? I’m certainly not going to the tavern again.”

“It should be fine. No one here but you could read the original, and no one’s going to steal a half-written book.”

You submit to her nagging as the two of you head across the courtyard to the mess. You are utterly unsurprised to see Iron Bull loitering outside. He lifts a hand to wave, and of course, Thea waves eagerly back.

“Looks like your new boyfriend came to keep you company,” she teases, and you groan.

“Don’t even say that. He’s not anything of the sort. And nothing like you’re thinking happened!” you snap.

“Oh, really? Because word round the keep is, he carried you out of that tavern over his shoulder—“

“He did WHAT?”

“Let me guess, you two are talking about me?” Iron Bull steps in next to you as you head through the door of the mess. You scowl at him.

“Apparently, someone carried me out of the tavern like a sack of potatoes.”

“Would you have preferred I carry you princess style? I’ll keep that in mind for next time you pass out.”

You press your hand firmly against your face, then rub your eyes and take a deep breath. “Alright. It’s a rumor mill. People will move on to the next interesting thing in a matter of minutes. They likely already have.”

“Well, the two of you eating dinner together isn’t going to stop rumors, but if it makes you feel any better, this stallion’s bedded half the girls in the keep and at least a quarter of the men,” Thea points out. “He’s a favorite for gossip.”

Well, there are worse ways to blend in, you suppose. You’re still not going to encourage it. You’re not even sure how people can possibly believe it. The man probably has two hundred pounds on you. You can’t even imagine how that would work.

The three of you get your food and settle down at one end of a long table. You turn your eyes upwards towards Iron Bull, who’s sitting across from you.
“Alright, let’s get the interview out of the way before I settle in to my meal. What would you like to know next? The name of my first pet, perhaps?”

“Don’t be so hostile,” he says with a chuckle.

“I’m unaccustomed to such prodding,” you say with a scowl. “Please try to understand my position, ser. I am an elf making a living as a linguist. I am used to being little more than background decoration. Machinery. Manuscript goes in, translation comes out. All this attention is… I’m not used to it. I hear that this Spymaster of yours investigates everyone. But you’re not asking everyone these questions.” You pause, considering. “Or maybe you are, and you’re just more discreet about it.”

“Whatsoever you are, elf, you’re not stupid,” Iron Bull says with a grunt. “But what if I told you that this has nothing to do with Leliana? What if I said I was just curious? Interested?”

Your throat goes dry. You take a quick gulp of water, struggle to swallow it. “That,” you manage, “would be even more confusing. Possibly even more alarming.”

“Oh, let the nice Qunari sweep you off your feet, Emma,” Thea says with a giggle. “Live a little!” You fix her with your best glare, but she doesn’t even flinch.

“I’m already living. I’d like to keep doing so, as a matter of fact,” you say with a scowl.

“And you think attention is counter to living? Interesting…”

“You stop that!” you snap at Iron Bull.

“I think she’s intimidated by your…” Thea clears her throat delicately, counter to the wicked grin on her face. “Girth.”

“So help me, Maker, I will-“

“You Andrastian?”

Iron Bull’s interjection seems so random that it actually startles you. “W… what?”

“Lot of elves I meet, they say ‘by the Creators,’ ‘Dread Wolf take you,’ that sort of thing.”

You snort. “Dalish and those who want to be like them. I don’t need special swears to remind me that I’m an elf, the rest of the world does that for me.”

“Oooh, someone’s a little bitter.”

You roll your eyes. “Were you not here for my tragic backstory?” you ask with an exaggerated flip of your spoon. “Elves kidnapped on their wedding day by evil shems? Sold into slavery by an entirely different yet equally evil shem?”

“Speaking of which, you never did tell me how you got out of that,” Iron Bull says mildly. You glare at him.

“Yes, imagine that, it’s almost as though it’s an unpleasant memory I don’t wish to revisit. Won’t your Spymaster dig it up before long?”

“Were you not here for me saying I was interested for my own reasons?”

“I-I’m repressing it,” you say with a scowl. “It’ll be hard if you keep repeating yourself.”
“Bet that’s not the only thing hard…”

“You guys having a party without me?”

You glance over, and so used to craning your neck to look up at Iron Bull, you almost miss noticing the speaker, who is significantly shorter, and also, on a related note, a dwarf. He’s easily recognizable, as well, as the beardless dwarf you had seen when you first arrived.

“ Heard you’d been harassing the help, Tiny,” he says as he sits down on the bench next to Iron Bull.

“I’ve been doing nothing of the sort,” Iron Bull says, almost managing to successfully sound offended.

“Yes, he has,” you quip before you can get control of your tongue. It’s too easy to be a smart-ass around these people.

“See? You’re going to scare her off this way, Tiny. You have to move with more finesse!” Iron Bull rolls his eyes, but the dwarf turns to you. “Please to meet you, serah elf. The name is Varric Tethras.”

You blink. “Wait, Varric Tethras? As in Tales of the Champion by Varric Tethras?”

“I see my reputation precedes me,” he says, looking quite pleased about it.

You’re not exactly a fan, or anything, but you have read his book. Who hasn’t? Everyone was curious about what happened in Kirkwall. That you have a copy in your room that you’re seriously considering getting signed is pure coincidence. “Is the part about the Arishok true?”

“You’re gonna have to be a little more specific than that, Stutter,” he says with a chuckle.

“The part where Hawke defeats him in single combat to save Isabella,” you say excitedly, ignoring the amused expression on Iron Bull’s face.

“Absolutely true. I couldn’t make that up, no one would believe me.”

“What I wouldn’t give to have seen that,” you murmur to yourself. You’re no fan of Hawke; he and his dumb-ass friends are part of the reason the mage rebellion even got started. Anders would have had a field day with you, no doubt, but you never had an interest in saving mages, and you still don’t. Saving yourself is more important.

“We could reenact it with Tiny here, maybe?” Varric says with another laugh.

You find yourself joining in the laugh despite yourself, but shake your head. “Wouldn’t be the same. It was the Arishok. That’s what makes it so unbelievable.”

“You seem to know a lot about the Qun, kid.”

You brush away the moment’s irritation at Iron Bull’s comment. “Tevinter doesn’t like to think about it, but if you’ve got a slave who speaks three languages, guess what, that slave is smart. They don’t think you read, understand, and absorb the information they have you translate. Idiots.”

“So you learned all you know from translating Qunari documents?”

“More or less,” you say with a nod. “I was in Seheron for… for a while. Too long. You learn about the situation, or you die.”
“We should swap stories sometime.” He said it so casually, the meaning flew over your head for a moment.

“Swap? I would have thought you’d be more interested in… wait. You were in Seheron?”

“Mmmm.”

You shake your head in disbelief. That explains a lot. “No wonder you ran. That place is hell.”

“Hey. I didn’t run. I’m no Tal-Vashoth.”

You normally have good control over your expression, but your jaw gapes open at this. “W-wait… What? …But the Chargers, the…” He’s just looking at you, but you don’t need him to explain. The gears are clicking in your head, coming to the inevitable conclusion. “It’s a station,” you marvel. You stare over at Varric. “You knew? Everyone knows?” How could they possibly be okay with this?

“Yeah, Tiny here was pretty forthcoming with it,” Varric said, looking nonplussed, maybe a little confused at how distraught you are.

“But that m-means…” You turn your eyes back to Bull, who’s still looking at you with that goddamned neutral expression. You push your bowl of half-eaten stew away from you, appetite immediately gone with an onrush of memories. *Ben-Hassrath.* You don’t even want to say it. Fear is gripping your stomach, threatening to expel its contents, tying your tongue into knots. Ben-Hassrath, and no runway. Still a Ben-Hassrath, still an enforcer of the Qun. “I-I-I have to g-go,” you eke out, and even manage to walk, not run, out the door. Once it shuts behind you, however, you bolt.

“Emma?” you hear Thea’s voice shouting behind you, concerned, but you don’t stop. There has to be some kind of place in this goddamn fortress you can hide. You need to think, you just need ten minutes to fucking *think!* You run up stairs blindly, swing a door open and charge directly into… the rotunda. Goddamnit. This place is a maze.

The elf from before is looking at you, paused in his painting, seeming mildly alarmed at the force with which you thrust open the door. You look him firmly in the eye. “I’m not h-here. I w-was never here.” You turn to leave, but see Iron Bull in the courtyard. Fuck. You shut the door quickly, eyes sliding over the room. Can’t go into the Great Hall. Can’t go upstairs. Can’t go outside. Damnit.

Your eyes shift back over to the elf, who’s still just watching you. A neutral expression is honestly the last thing you want to see. “I m-mean it,” you say, trying to sound firm despite your stupid stutter. “J-just ignore me.” And with that, you duck under the desk in the middle of the room. It’s the closest thing to privacy you’re going to get.

You hear the elf go back to painting, and breathe a sigh of relief. There are a lot of things an elf could be running from in this goddamn fortress… Seems he’s content to live and let live. Thank the Maker.

You’ve been skipping about this goddamn place with a fucking Ben-Hassrath sniffing at your trail.

You know damn well they’re not all… re-educators. Most of them aren’t. There’s no way one of those would be here, right? Right?

A Ben-Hassrath of any kind had no right being here. The most obvious choice, since he claimed to still be under the Qun, was that he was Hissrad, a spy, but what kind of shitty spy just tells everyone he’s a spy? It couldn’t be that obvious. There’s something you’re missing, some piece… You want to believe he’s just an Asaad sent out here for reasons unknown, but there’s just no way. Tal-Vashoth are always bandits or mercenaries, like they don’t know how to do anything else. This was a deliberate disguise.
And worse, he said he had been in Seheron? When? If he had been there at the same time as you, that could pose several kinds of new, horrific danger. You didn’t recognize him, or you would never have stayed in this damned place, no matter how thick the walls are. But if he even knows of you, he could put two and two together, and… Damnit, the past should stay in the past.

Your thoughts are interrupted by the voice you want to hear least.

“Hey, Solas, you seen that new elf librarian around?”

Aaaah, fuck. You curl up smaller under the desk. Come on, Solas, just lie… Wait, Solas? That name is familiar… And a weird goddamn name for an elf. Who names their kid that? Some silly little Alienage elf who doesn’t even know what the elven words they spout mean, maybe. Still, unfortunate.

“I believe she’s hiding under the desk.”

You scramble out from under it to glare at the man. “Oh, come on! Not even a little solidarity?”

This ‘Solas’ just raises an eyebrow, crossing his arms. Your scowl deepens.

“Don’t bolt again,” Iron Bull says, as if he can see the tensing of your muscles from across the room. “I know I’m not the person you want to see right now, but running across Skyhold doesn’t really look good.”

“Oh, don’t come at me like I’m the spy!” you snap. “I’ve been dealing with your prodding for days, on behalf of a spymaster who might want me for some undisclosed job at some point in the future that I might not even want to do! I ran because I w-was f-fucking scared, okay?”

“Calm down. I believe you. But it also matters what everyone else believes.”

You grind your teeth. You really want him to stop being right; it’s annoying. “Just… just stay on the other side of the desk. And you, you… traitorous elf, you stay here too.”

“Come on, Emma, if I was going to try some Ben-Hassrath trick on you, don’t you think I would have by now?” Iron Bull cajoles gently. You glare at him.

“Would I even notice? What are you?” you demand.

“Hissrad.”

You relax slightly, some of the tension sliding out of your muscles. He could be lying, obviously, but it’s the answer that makes the most sense. “You’re the worst Hissrad I’ve ever met. What are you even doing out here?”

“Gathering intel on the Inquisition.”

“In the most obvious way possible!” you say with a nervous laugh. “They’re okay with this? Really?” You glance over at the elf, who has, annoyingly, gone back to painting.

“Honesty is a good policy.”

You snort. “For a spy? Seems counter-intuitive.” You wave your hand dismissively. “Guess I don’t know much about spying.”

“That’s a shame, you’d be good at it.”
You look at him sharply. Damn that face of his, it was impossible to read. “That’s not something I want on my resume,” you say bluntly.

“So, why’d you freak out?”

“Wh… why’d I…? Are you kidding me?” You look at him exasperatedly, then slump down into a the chair at the desk, not really caring that it probably belongs to the elf, Solas.

“Back when we first met, you said ‘Kabethari’… That you ran.”

“I don’t want to get into my sordid history with you, Bull,” you say shortly. It’s probably the most casual you’ve been with him, but you’re feeling too strained to be polite. “I want the opposite of that.”

“Then just give me an excuse. Why run?”

“Ben-Hassrath are scary,” you say bluntly. “Tell a twelve year old girl that there are big horned beasties out there, and they can turn you to their way of thinking, just by talking. Or drugging. It’s as scary as blood magic. I was in a war zone, Iron Bull, for years. The Tevinter weren’t my friends, the Qunari weren’t my friends, and the Fog Warriors weren’t my friends. Any one of them would kill me given a chance and half a reason.”

“So, I’m going to go with ‘trauma involving Qunari’ as an excuse.”

“Whatever works,” you say tiredly. “Tell your spymaster she can move me to latrine duty if she’s that worried about where my loyalties lie.”

Iron Bull seems to decide that he’s not getting much more out of you, and just leaves with a nod. You sink the whole top of half of your body over the desk, flopping down dramatically. Adrenaline with nowhere to go pulses through you. It’s only an obscene amount of discipline that kept you from losing control. You were close several times.

As the tension finally begins to unwind, you let out a torrent of curses in a multitude of languages. That makes you feel a little better.

“Your elven is terrible.”

You glare sharply at the painting elf. “Excuse me?”

“Your elven. The pronunciation is all wrong.”

“How could you possibly-“ You pause, then pale slightly. “You, uh… speak elven?”

“Yes. And those weren’t Dalish curses, either. How does a Tevinter slave come to know ancient elven?”

You close your eyes, and force yourself to take two deep breaths. “Ser. I appreciate your curiosity. Really. I’m sure it charms all the ladies. But I am very, very tired of answering questions about myself at the moment.”

“I believe the Iron Bull respects that. I, however, do not.” You don’t really care for the way he’s looking at you. Those blue eyes had gotten rather sharp.

“Do you work for Lady Spymaster, too?”

“No.”
You let out a long sigh, pulling yourself up to sit on the desk. “The short answer is books. Scrolls. Anything I could get my hands on. I’ve always had a knack for languages, and anyone would be curious about their heritage.” You rub the back of your neck sheepishly. “Never had anyone to speak it with… Is my pronunciation really that bad?”

“Abysmal.”

“Ugh. Alright then, Ser Curious, how is it that you know ancient elven so well?”

“I am a mage, an expert on all things of the Fade, as well as the ancient elves, in particular.”

You make sure to pretend to look surprised. “Seriously? An elven mage just sort of… hanging out, in the middle of the Inquisition? Are you one of those ‘last true’ Circle Mages?”

“No. I was with no Circle, even before they fell.”

You frown, this time in earnest. “What, you were an apostate?”

“Correct.”

“And now you’re here? An elven apostate. Here.”

“Is it so unbelievable?”

“Frankly, yes!”

“I was nearby when the Breach formed. It was I who discovered the Inquisitor’s mark could be used to seal the rifts. I will not pretend everyone has been wholly welcoming, but they appreciate anyone willing to help.”

“You… what?” you shake your head slowly, trying to absorb the shit-ton of information that had just been flung at you. “Wow. I… wow. Kinda feel bad about calling you a traitor earlier, now.”

“Why? Because I’m a mage? Because I speak elven?”

“Well, mom always taught me you should be nice to someone who can set you on fire with their mind,” you say with a smirk. Casual, even though your mind is racing with the implications. You’d known he was a mage, from the way he practically molested you with his mana the other day, but you’d just assumed he was with the First Enchanter. An apostate… That was really something else.

You’re curious, despite yourself. You hope this isn’t the feeling you inspire in others, because just then, you would give an awful lot to know more. You consider the man, eyes narrow. “Is your elven really any better?”

He rambles off several long sentences of elven. A… a poem? Was that a poem, goddamnit? Elven sounds better when he says it, fluid, like a lullaby. Damn, your pronunciation is off. It’s got a rhythm to it you had never learned from books.

You tap your chin, considering. “What will it take for you to teach me more elven?” you ask finally.

“I don’t believe you have anything that I want, da’len.”

“Excuse me?” you say darkly. “I have a name.”

“Did you ever tell me? I must have missed it.”
You flush with embarrassment. Come to think of it, the two of you had never been properly introduced. You only knew his name because Iron Bull had used it. “Fair enough,” you grumble. “My name is Emma.”

His eyes meet yours sharply. “Emma. Who speaks elven.”

“That’s me,” you say warily. “And you’re Solas, right?”

“I am.”

“I know other languages. Ancient Tevene, Qunlat, Antivan, Orlesian. I’m sure there’s something I could do that you want,” you insist.

“You could stop sitting on my desk.”

“You ask too much of me, ser.”

“Did being mildly bratty get you far in life up until now?” he asks pointedly.

“I take my pleasures where they come, ser,” you say dramatically. “In fact, I-“

“Emma? Is that you down there? Are… are you bantering with the mage? I was worried!”

You look up. Thea is leaning over the railing, and she does look concerned.

“You ran off, so suddenly!”

“Sorry, Thea. Would you buy that the soup wasn’t going down right?”

“No.”

“Worth a shot.”

You stand up of Solas’ desk. “You, good ser, I will win over,” you say, pointing at him. “I’m a charmer.”

“I’m feeling positively enthralled.”

You snort. “You say that now, but just you wait. I know your type. Somewhere, there’s a tome you can’t translate. And when you find it, I’ll be the one you come to.”

You take the stairs two at a time, mind already filling with a good explanation for Thea. She meets you at the top of the stairs, her foot tapping impatiently.

“I can explain!”

“I told everyone it was a lover’s quarrel.”

“You… you what?”

“Next time, don’t run off without explaining, and it won’t happen.”

“You’re a little evil, Thea.” You rub the back of your neck. “You’ve noticed I’m a little skittish around Iron Bull, right?” You make sure your voice is loud enough to be heard by the several pairs of interested ears pretending not to be listening.

“I figured it was sexual.”
“Not everything is sexual,” you say with a roll of your eyes. “Not even with Bull. I had something of a… rough encounter with a Qunari. Back in Seheron. Hearing that he was there, and that he was… Well, it brought back a lot of bad memories. I’m sorry I freaked out on you.”

She looks you up and down, then nods. “Alright. I’m not mad; I was just worried. You’re easy to worry about, Emma.”

“Sorry, Thea,” you say with a lopsided grin. “If I’m done causing drama for the day, I’m going to get back to my tome.”

“Oh, go on,” she says with a wave of her hand, and you consider yourself dismissed.

You work on the tome until the candles run low. Thea comes and informs you that she’s going to bed, and you wave her off, saying you’re just going to do a bit more and then head to bed. She looks skeptical, but she leaves. Essentially everyone is gone. Eventually, you trudge up the stairs with your book in hand, intent on placing it down somewhere safe again. To your surprise, upstairs is still bustling. You suppose spies never get to sleep. You shrug and set the book down, when you hear an accented voice behind you.

“Emma. A word, please.”

You look around, confused… who up here even knows you? And realize with growing dread that there’s probably only one Orlesian up here, and certainly only one looking straight at you. Leliana.

You approach stiffly. You’re less scared of her than you are of Bull, but only because she’s more of a known quantity. Orlesian. Spymaster. Probably a master of the Game and a very, very smart woman. Hardly safe, but at least she’s no Ben-Hassrath.

“Seheron, hmm?” she asks, holding up a piece of paper that you can only imagine contains a chunk of your life history. She got that damn fast. Connections inside the Qun? Who was that lug honestly working for, anyway? She eyes the paper. “And then one day, you just vanish. Off of an island. No record of you on any shipping documents my men came across. If you stowed away, you did it well.” She eyes you over the paper. “Care to illuminate?”

“No, but I think I’ll have to,” you say, feigning a reluctant sigh. “There are some things a captain doesn’t leave records of, s…ser?” You still have no idea what her title is, but she doesn’t correct you. “At least none that would seem interesting. If you look at the records of a rather shady Antivan trade ship that landed in Seheron near the time of my disappearance, you will find the name of the cabin boy changes. A young Orlesian lad named Nikolas Le Coz.”

The woman’s eyebrows raise up. “You disguised yourself as an Orlesian boy?”

“I was still young, and my Orlesian was good. I pretended to be an escaped slave… well, a different kind of escaped slave, anyway, and…” You delicately clear your throat. “Convinced the captain that I was worth the risk.”

“Why disguise yourself as a boy?”

“The Captain didn’t want to share. It was a very shady ship, and I was safer as a young boy than a young girl.”

Understanding and a bit of anger glint in the woman’s steely eyes. Damn, but she is quite scary. Well, you suppose she never would have gotten his post if she weren’t. “I see. And from there?”

“I wound up in Antiva. You can probably find evidence of me under the name Nikolas there.”
“Do you change your name often, ‘Emma’?”

“It’s not wise for an escaped slave to go around leaving a trail,” you say pointedly. “I just wanted the girl I was in Seheron to disappear.” You frown. “It’s been an unpleasant couple of days, reliving all of this, but I suppose it’s necessary. I came here to be safe, and it wouldn’t be safe if you let everyone in without checking.”

“How’s the manuscript coming?” she gestures towards the table you set it and your papers on.

You blink for a moment, confused by the sudden topic change. You suppose the interview is over. “Well enough, considering all the distractions. If you’re wanting an actual Common tongue tome, however, I’ll need the proper materials.”

“You’ll have them. Get me an estimate of how long it will take as soon as you know.” You say nothing, simply nod. She looks at you again, a curiosity in her eyes that you’re becoming accustomed to. People look at you here like you’re a particularly interesting jigsaw puzzle. “You’re more interesting than you let on, Emma. But if you are honest in your intents, you’ll have nothing to fear here.” You say nothing, again, and she waves you off.

You leave your exaggerated eye-roll and under-your-breath grumbling until you’re down the stairwell and into the library. “Nothing to fear, yeah, right. There’s never nothing to fear…”

You take the long way down, avoiding the rotunda, but instead of heading towards your room, you go out to the courtyard. There’s some liveliness going on at the tavern—you suspect there is almost every night—but you’re looking for something else.

You finally find it in an empty archery practice field. Silence. Glorious, blissful silence. You want to take the dagger you carry out from its hiding place, practice throwing it at the target. Without practice, you might get rusty, be unable to defend yourself when you need to. But all it would take is one guard noticing and mentioning it to the wrong person, one set of eyes looking out a window at the wrong time… You’re under enough scrutiny. You can’t risk it. You can’t risk anything, not now.

You lean onto a fence post and stare up at the frozen grey sky. No sign of any stars… too cloudy. What a miserable place… it’s the middle of summer, but this place is bloody freezing.

It’s a sign of just how strained you are, or perhaps how out of practice you are, that a hand clamps around your mouth without you noticing its owner creeping up behind you. Instincts kick in and you swing around, the brunt of your arm smacking into some else’s as they block. You jump backwards to have a look at your assailant, and are quite surprised to see a grinning, blonde waif of an elf. A bow is on her back. She makes a rather striking figure, actually… kind of…

“Are you the girl off the poster?” you ask, bewildered, before you can think better of it.

She looks surprised. “What, did those things actually work? You saw those, decided to come here?”

You shrug. “Yeah, more or less. I was already considering it, but after seeing that kind of a thing plastered all over Val Royeaux, well, I kind of had to see what you were selling.”

“Huh… Guess I owe his Inquistorialness a drink,” she muses, tapping a finger against her chin. “Never thought that’d actually work.”

“I can’t help but notice that you don’t seem to be attacking me.”

“Wasn’t gonna. Just wanted to give you a start, fine lass sittin’ out here all alone.”
You snort. “That’s a terrible idea.”

“Have to admit, didn’t think you’d actually take a swing at me,” she said with a shrug.

“Next time, I hope you do that to a mage on accident,” you say with a smirk. “They’d do more than throw a punch.”

She shudders. “Ugh, now you’ve ruined it.”

“So, what do you do around here? Scare elven lasses professionally?”

“No just the elven ones! I’m a menace to all women, equally.” The way she licks her lips is a little distracting.

You laugh, a bit despite yourself. It’s a bit nice to meet someone who isn’t immediately peppering you with invasive questions. Iron Bull would immediately want to know where you learned to knock a bitch out, this lady just sort of took it in stride.

“It’s nice to meet someone… normal,” you admit. “Most of the people I’ve met so far have been… ah…” You hunt for the right word. “Either very suspicious or very friendly. I’m honestly not sure.”

“Bit of both, pro’ly. Though I think you’re the first person callin’ me normal since I got here.” She gestures for you to follow her, and for some damn reason, you actually do. You don’t think it’s just because she’s a woman, or even just because she’s an elf, although that one might be closer to the truth. It’s probably just because she’s a friendly face who hasn’t asked any invasive personal questions. Still, you have to admit, that’s not a great reason to wander off with someone.

“So, wotcher name?” Her question snaps you out of your thoughts a little suddenly.

“Emma,” you say with a blink. “Where are we going?”

“Back to my place, of course! S’cold out here.”

“Your place?” you ask, bewildered. “What exactly is ‘your pl’- Is that the tavern?”

“Well, yeah!”

“The tavern is your place?”

“My place is in the tavern.”

“You live in the… never mind.” You stall near the door. “Look, I really should…”

“Aw, c’mon, elfy, don’t get shy now.” She grabs your wrist and you remind yourself that you’re a shy elven linguist who doesn’t like confrontation, not the kind of person that snaps someone’s fingers backwards for daring to touch them.

“Well, but, I was just there yesterday and I kind of made a scene…” you say, digging your heels into the ground as she attempts to pull you forward.

“Wait a minute,” she says, her grip on your wrist loosening. “Are you the one that beaned the Templar?”

“Uh… …maybe?”

“That was hilarious! Alright you’re definitely coming in now!” Her grip tightens and she yanks,
throwing you off balance. You stumble, but manage to regain your footing, twisting your feet into the dirt.

“Look, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I really can’t.” She lets your wrist go, pouting, and you almost feel a little bad. Not bad enough, though. “Do you have anywhere else you go? Some place not filled with loud drunks?” And Qunari. Some place one hundred percent Qunari-free would also be nice.

“Ugh, picky!” she says, sticking her tongue out. “What, you wanna go to the library or some place boring?”

“I work in the library,” you say dryly.

“Wot? Someone with a swing like that? What’re you doing in a library?”

“We’re an impressively athletic bunch. And I’m there because I’m a linguist.”

“Really? You good with your tongue, eh?”

“Oh my! In all of my long years, I have never heard that joke! You’re the first person to ever say it! I am in shock! Abash! Awe!”

“Alright, alright, smart-ass,” she says with a scowl. Then her face breaks out with a mischievous grin. “Wanna climb the roof?”

You pause. “You know, that sounds like a horrible idea, and yet I find that I really, really do.”

“There ya go, elfy!” she says cheerfully as she jumps onto a barrel by the side of the building and reaches for a windowsill.

You eye the building for a moment as Sera begins scrabbling up. You’re fairly sure climbing is a skill no one’s going to call you out for having. You’re an elf for the Maker’s sake, weren’t you supposed to be naturally graceful or something? So you kick off your shoes, grip onto the corner of the rough stone building and simply scramble your way up, fingers and toes digging into grooves and holes.

You and Sera reach the top at about the same time. It’s cold up there, with little to block the wind, but music is drifting cheerfully up from the tavern and you have to admit, the view is nice.

“There!” she says, sitting down with a satisfied thud. “This quiet enough for you, librarian lady?”

“Actually, it’s nice,” you say thoughtfully, sitting down. “Better than sulking in the archery range, anyway?”

“Whatchoo got to sulk about? Books givin’ you trouble?”

You snort. “The books are as easy as they’ve always been. I’m just… having trouble fitting in, I guess.”

“Well, coming here just ‘cause an elf on a poster told you to was pretty stupid.” You glare at her. “Wot? It was! Did you really think this’d be some kinda elfy haven?”

“It’s exactly what I thought it’d be. A very large stronghold with very thick walls. With a lot of humans trying very awkwardly to be polite, I might add.”

“That’s ‘cause of the grand ol’ Inquisitor. He told ‘em all to play nice. S’mostly talk.”
“I appreciate the effort, I suppose. It’s weird, but I appreciate it.”

“So, why ya havin’ trouble fittin’ in?”

“Mmm. I should expect it from something called the Inquisition, but people here are nosy. And I think Leliana’s eyeing me for something. It makes me nervous; I don’t really know what to expect from people like that.”

“Ooooh, Mistress Spymaster’s got her eye on you?”

“Saying it like that makes it even more terrifying, thank you.”

“Don’t worry too much about that one. She’s scary, yeah, but she’s a good eye for talent. If she pegs you for somethin’, it’ll be somethin’ you can do. If it’s somethin’ you can’t, she won’t peg you!”

That barely makes any sense, but it’s oddly comforting. Of course, you’re capable of quite a bit more than what you suspect Leliana has in mind for you.

“So, what do you do for the Inquisition?” you ask, as much to distract from yourself and your own thoughts as anything.

“I shoot things.”

“Well, you do have a bow. Is that why you were at the archery field?”

“Yeah, but I found somefin’ more interesting.”

“I’m flattered,” you say with a smirk. “If you shoot things for the Inquisition, you must be pretty good at it.”

She shrugs. “Maybe I just make it look good in shite company.”

You grin wickedly at her. “Show me.”
Connections

Another long night, followed by a short sleep and an early morning. It’s a good thing you’re used to not getting much sleep, or you’d be wearing yourself pretty thin. As it is, you’re just glad to be waking up in an actual bed. Remembering the uncomfortable bedrolls stuffed between cracks in cold caves, you can almost think that the Inquisition is worth the risk for the bed and walls alone.

Your mind floats back to the night before, and you smile. Sera was nice, at least so far. There was always a chance she was working for Leliana, a second try after Iron Bull had blown getting closer to you. But that was a risk you were willing to accept for more of the elf girl’s company. If Leliana sent her, than the Orlesian could have credit for sending someone more pleasant than Iron Bull.

She is, as it turns out, a hell of an archer. She makes you a little jealous, but you’re better at throwing daggers than she is. That’s another nice thing about her… She didn’t care why you knew how to threw daggers, where you’d learned, why you carried a dagger, she just accepted it all as a given and got competitive with you. As far as you were concerned, if she was an information gatherer, she could have that one for free.

You walk to the mess hall for breakfast with cheerful images of blonde elf girls dancing about in your head. Thea seems to notice your unusually chipper mood… unusual for the few days she’s known you for, in any case.

“Aright, what’s god you so happy, then? You make up with your Qunari boyfriend?”

Aaaand, there goes your good mood. You scowl at her. “Actually, I met a very nice lady the other night.”

“Oooooh,” Thea says, eyes going wide. “So that’s why you didn’t go for Iron Bull.”

“What? I… no! Maker’s breath, Thea, get your head out of the latrine! She just… she was nice. We talked. Her accent’s Ferelden, and it was kind of like being back home, I guess.” A lie, but as good a lie as any other. You don’t want to get into the details of why you enjoyed Sera’s company. You couldn’t, not really.

“Mmhmm.” Maker, the smirk on her face. She’s lucky you like her so much. You can put up with a bit of teasing, but Iron Bull is a sore topic. Fortunately, he doesn’t show up at breakfast, and you think you’re in the clear… But there he is, when you leave the mess hall for the library. He just stands across the courtyard; he doesn’t walk towards you. But he’s watching you, and he has to want you to know that he is.

You manage to get to the library, mildly shaken, but more than mildly irritated. You try to focus in on your work, and push the encounter with Iron Bull from your mind. Unfortunately, not an hour into translation, Dorian comes to pester you once again.

“So, I hear someone had some bad Qunari experiences.”

The quill you’re holding shudders and creaks as your grip tightens, but you force your face placid. “It was Seheron. I had bad everyone experiences,” you say bluntly.

“Look, Emma…” you glance up, and are surprised to see he looks mildly insecure, slightly guilty. “If I have made you… uncomfortable… I apologize. I hadn’t quite… Well, slavery isn’t really something that one thinks about much, in Tevinter, it just… is. I hadn’t thought of the after-effects, the, er, trauma, an ex-slave might have…”
You almost feel bad for what you’re about to do. Not bad enough.

“Oh, Dorian,” you say with a smile. “Don’t worry about that. I don’t think of you that way, no matter what Iron Bull says; you’re too-“

“Wait, what did Iron Bull say?” He snaps onto it immediately. You let your eyes widen slightly, then look down guiltily. You wouldn’t feel so badly about it if he was harder to manipulate. But you want Iron Bull off your back.

“Ah, um… I’ve, uh… I’ve misspoken. What I mean, is, um…”

As if divine providence wants this to work, you spot Thea heading towards the stairs, presumably for lunch, as her three square meals are the only time she’s ever not in the library. “Oh!” you say with a nervous laugh. “Look at that, Thea’s leaving for lunch without me. Bye!” You quickly scramble around the desk and dart to catch up with Thea, ignoring Dorian’s thunderous expression.

“Oh, are you actually having lunch today?” she asks, raising an eyebrow. “What’s the occasion?”

“Just a desire to be out of the library for a bit,” you murmur, walking a little faster.

To your surprise, you’re joined at lunch by Varric, not Iron Bull. Considering the dwarf had gotten in only half a dozen sentences before you’d made a bolt for it, you hadn’t exactly been expecting to see him again.

“So, I hear you have an interesting history,” he says, out of nowhere.

You choke on your bread slightly, then clear your throat and manage to swallow. “W-what?”

“Your history. Your past. Your ‘dramatic backstory.’”

“I… Well, actually, it’s quite boring.”

“Oh, come on! Slave girl escapes war-torn island? That’s not boring.”

“It’s not as exciting as everyone thinks. I got lucky, made a break for it. Does everyone in Skyhold know this about me now?”

“Not everyone no. Just the Inquisitor and his friends.”

This time you choke in earnest, face flushing as you damn near suffocate on your own tongue. Thea tries to pound on your back, but you wave her off, and eventually catch your breath. Tears sting the corners of your eyes. Surely you misheard.

“E-excuse me? The Inquisitor?”

“Well, maybe not him, personally. I can’t think of any reason Leliana would have to tell him. But we of his little entourage. Although, really, I think it’s just me, Tiny, and Sparkler. Maybe a few others.”

Okay, Tiny was Iron Bull, you remembered that. Sparkler? That had to be Dorian. Plus Solas, and Thea. That… that was a steadily growing number. You clear your throat. “And you’re all… personal friends of the Inquisitor.”
“Guilty as charged.”

The sound you emit could only be described as a whimper. “Maker have mercy.” So much for keeping a low profile. You’ve blown that so completely out of the water that there’s no recovery from it.

“So I guess you won’t be wanting to give me an interview, then?”

You glare up at him. “What?”

“You know, tell me your sordid history, that sort of thing. I know good book material when I see it.”

You stare at him, dumbfounded. Slowly, you turn to Thea, who’s nodding thoughtfully. Maker.

“Escape From Seheron: Elf Against The World! Still working on the title, obviously…”

“You’re not writing a book about me!” you snap. “What in the Maker’s name would make you think I’d want that?”

“Well, a little bird told me that you borrowed Hard in Hightown from the library…”

The glare you level at Thea could have razed mountaintops, but she’s looking pointedly away, refusing to meet your eyes.

“And about that you have a copy of Tales of the Champion in your room…”

“Everyone has a copy of that book!” you snap.

“If that were true, I’d be a very wealthy man,” Varric says with a chuckle.

By now, a flush has grown to cover your entire face. You feel like you’re absolutely radiating heat. “I am not giving you an interview, and you are not writing a book about me! That’s the last thing I need!”

“Oh, come on! Don’t you want to be the next Hawke?”

“No! Half his family is dead and all of Thedas knows who he slept with, when, and why!”

“You know, I may have lost contact with Hawke and Anders, but I still know where a few of the others are,” he says slyly.

You try to feign disinterest. “Well, I imagine you would. You knew each other for years.”

“Mmhmm… Merrill’s been babysitting the elves left homeless from all the fighting. Isabela’s back with the Raiders. Fenris is off killing slavers…” He pauses. Damn. Something in your body language must have given you away. Bastard was fishing.

“Speaking of which, you know Fenris was in Seheron, right?”

You did know that, and it was something you found rather interesting. He was someone with a life experience not too different from yours, although he would likely absolutely hate you if the two of you met. You delicately clear your throat. “Yes. Before me. Although not by much. Seems like a lot of slaves get ‘lost’ in Seheron.”

“Maybe he’d be someone you’d be interested in meeting?”
You meet the dwarf’s eyes sharply. He can’t possibly know the little crush you developed, reading about the broody elf in his story. And besides, that was just a silly, childish fantasy you, uh, used to keep you warm on cold nights. “I’m not giving you an interview,” you say flatly. “Not even for that. Besides, he’d have no interest in me, I’m sure.”

“Well, my offer stands, if you change your mind,” Varric says with a smirk. You simply glare.

They say don’t meet your heroes, but meeting Varric has been interesting, and meeting Fenris is tempting. It’s stupid, one of the stupidest things you’ve ever considered, and more importantly, the price is steeper than you can pay. You couldn’t even give Varric a made-up story, because it might contradict with things you needed to lie about in the future. But to actually meet...

“Have you got a thing for elves?” Thea interjects curiously.

“It’s not a thing for elves if I’m an elf, Thea,” you say darkly.

“Oh, I guess not. I kinda forget, you’re not very elfy.”

You try not to scowl too darkly or look as insulted as you feel. There’s really no good way to take that, and you want to be sarcastic at her. Should you bend and scrape more? Whimper around the human men? Or did she want you to mark up your face and run off into the hills? But you bite your tongue. You need friends, and knowingly or not, Thea had actually helped you with some of the stupid rumors she helped spread. You still want her on your side.

“Maybe I can bribe you with some insider knowledge. You have any questions about the book?” Varric says. His prodding would be annoying if it wasn’t for the fact you have a genuine interest in him.

“If you can’t bribe me with meeting Fenris, you can’t bribe me with anything,” you say firmly. “My past is my past. And it wouldn’t make for a very interesting story, anyway.”

“So you are interested in meeting him!” the wicked dwarf says with a grin.

You sigh, a little too exhausted to be properly annoyed. “There’s no way it would live up to the fantasy. What would I even say? ‘Hey, you know the worst part of your life? I went through some of that same shit! Let’s bond over our horrific trauma’? Past that, I’m a fairly boring person.”

“Stutter, no one who goes through all of that comes out ‘boring’ on the other end. Tell you what, tell me a bit about your experiences in Seheron, and I’ll write him a letter about it. See if he expresses any interest.”

You bite your bottom lip, considering. The story of your slavery in Seheron is apparently yesterday’s news. A few tales, real or made up… For a chance to indulge in a bit of shameless fantasizing? Was it a fair trade? “I decide what I tell you?”

“You always decide what you tell me, Stutter.”

You snort. “Nothing about sharing my past has been my choice since I got here. But fine. Meet me in the tavern tomorrow evening. Just the two of us, and you buy all the drinks. And I better not see these stories circulating. This is for a letter.”

Varric seems to think about it for a minute. “Alright, you’ve got yourself a deal, Stutter.”

“He’s good at this,” comments Thea.
Dorian is gone when you return to the library. You can’t help smirking a little bit to yourself… that man is too easy to manipulate for his own good. No doubt you’ll get an earful about it later, but for now, you have some peace and quiet. And if you play your cards right, you might be able to distract Dorian and Iron Bull with each other in a more long term manner, giving you a break from both of their endless prodding.

You cheerfully set back to work on your tome, but before you can get too much further in, you see a rather huffy looking Dorian coming in one of the doors. He doesn’t make a beeline for you, but he looks annoyed. It’s only a matter of time; you’d hoped he and Iron Bull would distract each other for longer. Had he even gone to talk with the Qunari, or just sulked around Skyhold? With an irritated sigh, you consider your options.

You wait until he begins hunting for a book, which by now you know from experience is a long, convoluted process that involves a lot of throwing, much to Thea’s eternal consternation. He chucks a tome over his shoulder. Soon, Thea will swoop in and begin nagging. Taking your chance, you pile up your paper, quills, and ink, balance the tome carefully, and quickly exit down the stairs to the rotunda.

Solas only glances at you as you enter, but does a short double take when he sees you laden down with what is essentially the entire contents of your desk. You begin carefully setting things down on the floor under the wooden platform near the wall, then plop yourself down onto the ground as well. It’s not as ideal as a desk, but the rotunda is well lit and more importantly, it’s quiet.

Solas says nothing, so you’re quick to get to work, laying on your stomach and propping yourself up on your elbows, feet waving slowly back and forth in the air as you continue your translation. After a few minutes, you kick off your shoes, letting your toes stretch freely in the cool air. There are no sudden protests… delightful. People looked at your strange if you went barefoot in the library.

You don’t realize how much time is passing until you run out of paper. You frown, stretching stiff joints, and look around. Solas is now sitting at his desk, nose buried in a dusty tome that you rather like the look of. It’s a shame it’s rude to read over someone’s shoulder. You stand, stiffly, not bothering to put your shoes back on. Your back is sore from so long on the floor, but that paper isn’t going to fetch itself. You take the stairs slowly, and are treated to quite a surprise when you reach your desk.

Supplies have indeed been provided for you. Fine, book quality parchment, necessary tools for binding, and a very nice set of calligraphy quills as well as… ooh, is that a set of colored inks? You glance around, then pick up a good armful of supplies and begin to head back downstairs. No one is stopping you! This is somewhat amazing; it never occurred to you that you could just up and move your station.

You bring the quills, ink, and a stack of glorious parchment—as well as cheap paper for translation work—down to the rotunda. Solas doesn’t even look up at you as you enter. That’s all the encouragement you need. You settle back down under the wooden platform, cheerfully outlining for a title page. You still have to finish the complete translation, but you just can’t put off playing with your new toys. You resist the urge to sign your name as translator, but instead work a mark into the design. You’ve been using it as a way to sign your work for years now. Sometimes it’s not safe to sign a name, and you’ve never signed your real name to any of your work, but your pride prevents you from letting anything go unmarked.

By the time you move again, by any great margin, hours have likely passed. The only light in the rotunda now is being provided by candles and lanterns. The only reason you shift is because you feel
the brush of magic against you. You glance up despite yourself, and find that Solas is doing something in the middle of the room with some bizarre looking shard of rock. The brush was likely accidental. You’d like to know more about what he’s doing, but of course, you can’t. You chew on your lip, equal parts curious and frustrated. If you even started to look, you’ve no doubt a mage like Solas would spot you in an instant. He’s not someone you want to test, and you’re in no position to be taking more risks.

Feeling something akin to sexual frustration, you turn back to your books sourly. His magic occasionally brushes up against you, and it is very distracting. After a particularly curious wave of magic rubs against your ass, you decide that enough is enough. The man’s hands are lightly glowing, you can probably say something at this point. You can’t focus on your work while you’re being absentmindedly molested.

You shift back up onto your knees, wincing slightly. Soon your body will be hating you for maintaining that position for so long. Solas doesn’t react to your movement, so you stand, walking a few steps closer. You can’t examine what he’s doing, not really, but you can at least look. Eventually, Solas seems to notice that you’re literally on the other side of the desk, and ends his spell, lowering the shard to the table.

“May I help you?” he asks, and you flush lightly, on purpose.

“Oh, sorry, I was just… curious. You were glowing, a little,” you say sheepishly. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.” You’re such a liar.

“Have you not seen much magic in your travels?”

Your travels? When did you mention traveling to him? “Erm… A bit, but more the, ah, horrific fire, ice and lightning kind of magic,” you say apologetically. “Were you, um… examining this?” You gesture towards the shard.

“Yes. It has some sort of magical property, but I’m having issue figuring out exactly what it is. It is a key, of a sort, but why and how remain a mystery.”

You run a finger along the edge of the shard, wanting very badly to investigate further. “I have to admit, I’m a little jealous,” you confess. “I’ve read stories telling of the magic of the ancient elves, and sometimes I feel a little less elven for my shortcomings in that area.”

He smiles, and your heart soars. Uh-oh. “The magic of the ancient elves was like nothing you might see today. Even were you a mage, you would still find yourself falling short.” OUCH. Oh, ouch! Arrow, right through the heart, and he hadn’t even meant it!

You smile through the pain, trying not to look wounded. “That sounds amazing.” You glance down at the shard, deciding a subject change is in order. “You said it’s a key? A key to what?”

“A temple, far to the west.”

You pucker your lips. There are more interesting things in this world than you will ever get to see.

“I notice you seem to have moved in,” Solas comments, interrupting the short silence and gesturing towards the little nest you’ve set up under the wooden platform. You grin sheepishly.

“I’m not sorry. It’s so much quieter in here. No one really bothers you, do they?”

Solas raises his eyebrows pointedly. True enough, you’re bothering him right now.
“Other than me,” you concede. “But that’s only fair. Everyone else is very concerned with bothering me.”

“They do seem a little preoccupied with you,” Solas says, but it doesn’t seem to be to you. He’s giving you that look again, like he’s on the edge of figuring something out. It involves a great deal of eye contact, and you get that same conflicted feeling: your brain going “NOPE better get out” and your body telling you the numerous reasons why it would be fantastic to just stay right there. “Iron Bull in particular. Do you two have some history?”

“Only in that we were both in Seheron. Not at the same time, I think.” Or you hope, anyway.

“And the other day, you commented on Leliana’s interest, as well,” he mused.

“She’s investigating me. I think she might want me for some more sensitive translations in the future.” You frown. “I understand her position, but it doesn’t make the situation any less uncomfortable.”

“Oh? Why is it uncomfortable?” Normally, this line of questioning would have you making an excuse and an exit, but in truth, you rather like the attention. Your stupid little childish crushes will get you in a world of trouble. They have in the past; it seems you still haven’t learned your lesson.

“I’m used to being a background fixture. It’s been my experience that when humans are giving me attention, it’s the direct precursor to something unfortunate. Plus, they have me thinking over memories from a very long time ago, things I don’t like to think about much.”

“I can certainly appreciate that,” Solas agrees, although you’re not sure what he’s referring to exactly. But surely an elven apostate knows all about the negative side effects of too much attention. His life can’t have been that much different from your own… and yet here he is, actively practicing magic essentially in the direct center what might as well be a Templar encampment.

“I still can’t believe the Inquisition… and the Templars, at that, just… leave you alone,” you say, shaking your head. “This whole war was about them wanting to chase down and capture or kill every mage in Thedas, but with one just sitting right under their noses, suddenly they don’t mind?”

“The Inquisition has shown them better ways to fill their time. Although I would be lying if I said I was entirely comfortable with the situation. Are you not fond of Templars, then?” His question is casual, but you know that style of casual. It’s the kind that comes with a barbed hook.

“I was pretty neutral on them, up until the war. I thought I could approve of anything they did to keep the rest of Thedas from looking like Tevinter,” you lie, “But then all hell breaks loose and suddenly they’re mowing down innocent people and anyone who even looks at one of the rebel mages. They murdered one of my neighbors, just for taking in a pair of kids who happened to be mages. So, these days, no, I’m not fond.”

“But surely you had similarly poor run-ins with mages during the war,” Solas points out. “Yet you seem to bear us no ill will.”

“Mmm… where I lived, mages were mostly on the run. There wasn’t a lot of out and out fighting, just a lot of Templars hunting. If mages had been lobbing fireballs, I probably would have gotten out sooner.” You sigh, sitting yourself down on his desk again and pulling your feet up off the ground. “But you make a good point. Perhaps a bit of lingering sympathy clouds my judgment.”

“I wouldn’t think an escaped Tevinter slave would be particularly sympathetic to mages.”

“No? Perhaps most wouldn’t be,” you agree, thinking back to the stories of Fenris from Varric’s
novel. “But… the propaganda used to justify slavery in Tevinter sounds eerily similar to that used here to justify the Circles. A slave is a slave, even if we wrap a bow on it and say it’s for their own good. I’ve seen some very nice circles in Orlais… but I couldn’t help notice they were full of the well-off and advantaged. I doubt the circles full of alienage elves were quite so permissive.”

You glance over at the other elf, and note with a chill that he’s looking at you quite strangely. Thoughtfully, even. You’ve been running at the mouth again. It would have been better to portray yourself as a silly girl who’d never given mages and Templars much thought until they started blowing each other up. But the idea of acting stupid around Solas makes you chafe.

_Idiot_, you think to yourself. _It’s your own damn fault if you get caught at this point._ You’ve never had this level of scrutiny aimed at you, and here you are blabbing away about mages. You sound like goddamn Anders! This is always your problem, every time. Dangle a bit of knowledge in front of your face, and suddenly you’re taking stupid risks. It doesn’t matter if he knows every damn word the elves ever spoke; you need to get a grip on yourself.

You clear your throat awkwardly. “I should probably get back to work. Sorry for disturbing your, erm… research.” You climb off the desk and brush yourself off, burningly aware of his eyes on you as you walk stiffly back to where you’ve been working. You try to get back to work, but it’s difficult. You really want to look over at Solas, to see if he’s still looking at you, but… what if he is? You can’t risk it. You try to focus on the paper in front of you, try to continue your translation. Eventually, you feel a flutter of magic against your bared legs and risk a look. He’s working on the shard again. You’re in the clear. For now, anyway.

With that in mind, you get back to work in earnest, throwing yourself at the translation as if to punish yourself for such a dumbfounding lapse in judgment. There are weirder things than an intellectual who sympathizes with mages; it’s practically a stereotype. But you’re becoming increasingly aware that you can’t treat the people of the Inquisition with the same lazy touch you’ve grown accustomed to.

You don’t lose focus from your work again until a shadow falls over your tome. You glare upwards, and are quite surprised to see Solas standing over you.

“It’s quite late,” he says mildly. “Do you sleep?”

You blink, unsurprised to find your eyes tired and a little crusty. How late had it gotten, without you noticing? You stifle a yawn and sit up. “I’m sorry, ser. I didn’t realize how late it had gotten.”

He surprises you by squatting down and picking up a few of your papers. He shuffles through them, looking mildly interested. “How long have you been working on this?”

“Since I arrived… a few days,” you reply, not quite sure what he’s getting at.

“Leave it here.” He says it so casually that you don’t even think to wonder why. Like the man upstairs, you just assume that if he’s asking, he’s got something to do with it.

“Alright.” You stand up and stretch. “Makes things easier on me. If you’re looking at it, don’t mix up the papers.” Your back pops, and you wince. Thank the Maker you’re about to climb into a bed. You’ll be stiff tomorrow as it is.

You leave him thumbing curiously through your papers and head towards your room. There’s a way to get there without leaving the building, you’re almost certain, but there seems to be a million ways to get anywhere in Skyhold. You brave the cold rather than risk getting lost.
Seems like the only people still up are guards and... whomever is in the tavern, which is as raucous as ever. Although even that is beginning to empty; there are a few people stumbling across the courtyard. You shiver as a fresh wind cuts through your clothing, and quickly bounce down the stairs, eyes focused in the direction of your bedroom.

Maybe because of the scare Sera gave you yesterday, your ears perk up at a sound to your left. On second thought, perhaps a blind elephant would have noticed the two drunken men lurching towards you.

“Heeeey, knife ear!” one of them slurs. Great. It’s gonna be one of those nights. “Jus’ what I need right now!”

You roll your eyes and keep walking.

“Wha? You think you’re too good for us, knife-eared bitch?” The man throws so clumsily that stepping out of the way of the haphazardly thrown bottle is almost unnecessary. You hear stumbling steps after you, and your hand twitches down towards where your knife is hidden.

“Hey! What the hell are you doing?!” This voice is completely sober, and completely pissed off. You turn, surprised, to see a woman storming towards the men. You almost don’t recognize her out of her armor, but you’ve a knack for faces. It’s Belinda, the woman you smacked in the head with a mug, apparently taking exception to people continuing to throw things. “You little shits are in for a world of hurt!”

“Y… you ain’t got no authority over us, Templar!” the braver (or stupider) of the two slurs back at her. The other one is already beginning to back away.

“Oh don’t I? Then I guess I’d better report this to the Knight-Commander! Now do you want to scurry back to your pit, or should we go wake him together?”

They both dart away, nearly tripping over their own feet in the rush. You stare at the woman, mildly dumbfounded.

“Sorry about those louts,” she says, rubbing at her nose and not making eye contact with you. “They don’t represent us... And I’ll make sure the Commander hears of this.”

“Th... That’s not really necessary,” you begin, but she shakes her head.

“Maybe they would have done something, maybe not. But I can’t risk those idiots actually hurting someone. I’ll leave your name out of it.”

You’re a little awed, and more than a little shocked. This has to be the first time a Templar has actually come to your rescue, and there wasn’t even a mage involved. Go figure. “Um... thanks.”

You could have handled the situation, no doubt, but she handled it with a lot less stabbing. You had to respect that. “I... really. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Really, don’t.”

You grin. “I’ll take it to the grave.”

You manage to get all the way to your room unmolested, and open the door with a relieved sigh. Another late night, but at least today was more productive. Just as well... tomorrow you have to spend your evening in the tavern. Perfect.
"Hey, there you are!"

You recognize the voice as Thea’s even in your half-unconscious haze. You groggily force your mind into the waking world, blink to clear your sleep-filled eyes.

"Where’d you get off to yesterday? I was a li’l worried."

"Nrrg," you grumble, attempting to sit up. "Was downstairs," you manage.

"Flirting with your apostate, were you?"

"Pff. Hardly." You rub at your eyes, run your tongue around your mouth to get the taste of sleep out of it. "I managed to get a whole evening of work in without a single interruption."

"I gotta ask," she says, sitting down on the corner of your bed. "Have you talked to him? How’d you convince him to let you work down there?"

"Yes, we’ve talked, and I didn’t convince him, I just showed up and he didn’t tell me to leave."

Thea gapes at you. Silence is a good look on her, but you know it’ll be short-lived.

"…Wow. I wish I had your bravery."

"S’not bravery. What do you think he’d do, set me on fire? He already doesn’t care much for me, I couldn’t very well move down on his list."

The red-headed woman shakes her head. "You’re frightened of Iron Bull, but the scary loner mage doesn’t even make you bat an eyelash. I’ll never figure you out, Emma."

"Good. Clearly my appeal is all in the mystery," you say sardonically. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"Nah, I had to make sure you hadn’t died first."

"Alright, let me dress, and I’ll join you," you say, stifling another yawn. You stretch slowly, wincing at the stiffness in your joints. You can hardly drag a desk into Solas’ room, and you don’t want to move back up to the library, so you’ll just have to deal with it. You frown somewhat sourly to yourself; the pressure of being around so many people is becoming palpable at almost a week in. Too many mages and Templars, too many people who might just notice if you slip. You can’t do things you’re accustomed to doing. It’s annoying, although you’ve certainly been in worse situations. It
just… makes you tense.

You shrug into a new day’s clothes. Fresh clothing is much akin to a bed: something you don’t miss until it’s gone. You try to keep those positive aspects in mind as you head towards the mess. The situation here seems to be deteriorating quickly, but there’s just enough that makes you want to stay. The chance to meet someone you admire, pestering Varric and Solas for more knowledge… Even the random kindness of strangers. Not a bad place, you decide, but a dangerous one.

Varric joins you and Thea in the breakfast hall when you’re about halfway done with your meals. You’re a little bit surprised to see him there; staff like you and Thea tend to get up earlier than those you serve.

“Varric,” you say, surprising yourself and everyone around you by asking the first question of the meal. “What exactly is it that you ‘friends of the Inquisitor’ do exactly?”

“Well, some of us, like Madame Vivienne, have resources they’re adding to the Inquisition. The Bull’s Chargers, the last of the Circle Mages, that sort of thing. Mostly, though, we’re the ones who actually join him in the field, when he runs off to kill demons and seal rifts, that sort of thing.”

That’s… damn, that’s actually kind of impressive. So, essentially, you’ve managed to catch the interest of the people you should have avoided altogether. If they were traveling with the Inquisitor, that meant they had to be pretty strong by themselves, and it meant they had pull… they could ask for personal favors from the leader of the fastest growing power in Thedas.

Aaaaand you’ve just sicced two of them on each other. Heh. Oops. Still can’t bring yourself to feel bad about it, though.

You pepper Varric with a few questions about his life as you finish your breakfast… Was Bertrand really still alive, what had he ever done with that lyrium idol, did it REALLY turn Meredith to a statue, that sort of thing. He’s the one who turns the conversation to Fenris, and that’s the story you’ll stick to until your dying day.

“Did… did he really just… kill his sister?” you ask quietly as Thea is cleaning up her bowl.

Varric sighs. “Yeah… Yeah, he did. I thought for a second Hawke was going to stop him. But… well, he didn’t.”

It’s one of many moments in the book that have you convinced that despite your repeated fantasies to the contrary, Fenris would not actually enjoy your company very much. Forgiveness does not appear to be his strong point. Even in escaping, you’ve done some questionable things in your life. You clean up your own bowl, say your goodbyes to Varric, and head outside with Thea. This time, there is no Iron Bull across the courtyard.

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Thea tries to convince you to come back up the library, but you politely (repeatedly) decline, citing the peace and quiet down in Solas’ rotunda. She pouts, but doesn’t even enter as you do, instead going the long way around to go up the other set of stairs. Does Solas really intimidate her so much? He seems rather amiable to you, even if he does appear to have an entire tree limb lodged firmly up his ass.

He’s sitting at his desk when you walk in, leaning back at his chair and reading off of some loose leaf paper. It isn’t until you sit down at your little station under the platform that you realize he must be reading some of your paper, because a rather large chunk of your translation is missing. You
glance up at him, but either he hasn’t noticed your entry, or he’s ignoring you. Either way, the first quarter of your translation is here, as is your fancier paper, so you begin outlining for the next page of the actual book.

Part of the fun is going to be duplicating some of the complicated anatomical drawings in the original tome. Thankfully, you’ve done this sort of thing before. Never with dragons, but duplicating an existing piece doesn’t exactly require having actually seen a dragon. After penciling out an outline and lightly lining the page, you reach for your ink and quills, and set to work.

You’re only halfway done with the page when Solas interrupts you. It startles you; he was so quiet, and yesterday hadn’t interrupted you at all. Fortunately, you have the iron control of your hands that only someone who regularly writes entire books can have, so you don’t muss up the page you’re working on.

“Did you translate this part correctly?”

You scowl at him. “I would hardly have translated it incorrectly, ser. Are you asking me to look at it again?”

“I’m asking you to ensure your wording is correct.” You glance at the line that has him fussing.

“Oh. Yeah, that was weird. I’m certain I got it correct, however. Unless they’re trying to say that High Dragons are resistant to cataclysm, which I sincerely doubt.”

“This is very interesting. I don’t believe this is common knowledge.”

“I’m afraid I’m the wrong person to ask about that. I have only a layman’s knowledge of dragons. It’s not been a subject of particular study for me.” You snort to yourself. “In fact, I’m probably not the best person for this project, but I suppose the Inquisition doesn’t have many contacts who are both dragon experts and fluent in ancient Tevene. Essentially all of them must live in Tevinter.”

“Are you as fluent in all the languages you profess to know as you are in ancient Tevene?”

Does he intend to be rude, or does shit just come out of his mouth that way? “With the apparent exception of ancient Elven, apparently,” you say with a frown. “Why?”

“It is impressive.”

You flush from the tips of your ears down to your bared toes. Fortunately, you’ve never been one to blush darkly. “Thank you, Solas.” To cover for your embarrassment, you grin. “I feel I would be more impressive if my Elven were improved however. But where, oh where, could a little da’len like me find a scholar in the ancient elves?”

He glances at you over the top of the paper. “Focus on your tome. I’m sure the Inquisitor is eager to get his hands on the translation.”

You try not to get your hopes up at the lack of a definitive no. “Why is he so interested in it, anyway? All I’ve heard is that there are ‘interested parties.’”

“I believe he is attempting to bribe a draconologist.”

“Wow. He doesn’t bribe poorly; this tome is a treasure.”

Solas begins to wander back to his desk, but before he can get too far, you risk an interruption of your own. “Erm… Solas?” He turns back towards you. “Ah… I know you’re doing me a favor
already, letting me stay down here, but I wonder if I might ask for another?"

"You may certainly ask."

You clear your throat delicately. "This might be rude to ask, but I presume you specialize in more… subtle magic?"

"I suppose one could say that," he says cautiously. You might as well just get to it.

"Would that happen to include healing?"

Solas frowns. "If you are ill or injured, we have medics-"

"I have read that such magic can be used to make bones and joints stronger… more flexible, more durable. I’m attempting to finish this as fast as I can, but I fear my body isn’t used to this cold."

He’s coming back towards you. "Do you do much reading about magic?"

"It comes up. I’ve been translating documents since I was a child. Despite what people seem to think, I don’t simply translate them and immediately forget the information I was translating."

"Stand up," he orders, and you find your legs are already moving. He, like Iron Bull, has a good voice for orders. He reaches out and takes your right hand into his, and your heart skips a beat. Maker, get a grip on yourself! He grasps your wrist firmly, twisting it this way and that to get a good look at it, and then you feel the deep, warm throb of unfamiliar magic. Gentle tingling fills your hand and wrist, and you shudder a little despite yourself. It feels odd, but familiar, a spell you’ve felt a thousand times cast by a new hand.

He lets go, and you flex your hand, sighing in relief. "That’s amazing," you say, not having to try to look impressed. It’s such a relief to feel that you could have kissed the man. "This is the real reason why I wish they didn’t keep all mages locked up except for wars. They’re too damn useful."

He raises an eyebrow, challenging your train of thought instead of letting a joke sit as just that. It frustrates you as much as it interests you. "You would see the mages freed?"

"I’m not going to see anything," you retort sharply. "I have as much say in the matter as a rock. But… some circles let mages leave, once they’ve proven themselves stable. More should. Every village could use the talents of a mage to help with everyday hurts and the fickleness of nature."

"You have… unusual thoughts on the matter, da’len."

"Don’t call me that," you say with a scowl. "Um… Please," you correct yourself. "Ser." You clear your throat awkwardly. "Thank you for your assistance. I will get more work done today because of it." You feel somewhat awkward, sitting down on the ground while he’s still standing there, but he seems to take the hint, and turns back to whatever it is he does all day.

With sturdy magic reinforcing once-stiff joints, you work like lightning. Your hand flicks over paper without so much as a tremble. Now this is more like it! Reveling in your stability, you craft page after page, deciding the translation can wait until the magic wears off. You note at one point that Solas has obtained food, somehow. The spell of spiced vegetables wafts over to you, but you wave it away and focus on your work; the spell on your wrist has yet to fade, and you want to do as much as possible before it does.
You are awed at how every part of you except for your wrist aches when you finally stop. A headache is beginning to throb behind your eyes, your back is threatening to revolt, and your stomach is tied in knots, but your wrist… Your wrist is fine! It’s almost ridiculous.

It’s the smell of food that does you in. The unmistakable smell of fresh bread and roast meat drifts over to you, and your stomach lets out a loud growl. You glance over at Solas, who is reading a tome while he eats, his plate sitting largely unguarded on the desk. A smirk on your face, you sneak towards his desk on hands and knees, staying close to the ground. His unwavering focus will be his undoing; he doesn’t appear to notice you at all. You slip against the far side of the desk, out of his line of sight, and dart a hand up. Your hand lands on something warm and soft, and you pull it back to you. A biscuit! Lucky grab. You don’t even bother to savor it, stuffing it down quickly but quietly, your stomach rejoicing at even a tidbit of food.

“You know,” Solas says, the sudden voice making you jump hard enough that you bang your head on the corner of the desk. OUCH. “The Inquisition does provide food. You don’t have to resort to petty theft.”

You poke your head guiltily over the desk, then grin sheepishly. “In my defense, they don’t deliver food to the help. And what we get in the mess doesn’t smell this good.”

Solas is giving you a look that Does Not Approve. You give your best pout, but cuteness has never been your strong point. “Ir abelas, hahren?”

“Abelas,” he says, seeming to automatically correct your poor pronunciation.

“Abelas,” you correct yourself, wrapping your mouth around it. “Ir abelas, hahren.”

He sighs. “You have a knack for being troublesome.”

“It’s a talent,” you admit. “Probably comes from growing up in an Alienage. Have you finished with those?” You gesture to a stack of your papers, still on his desk. He frowns at them.

“I wanted to ask you a question about the wording of a certain phrase, but you seemed rather… absorbed in your work.”

“Oh?” Your ears perk with interest. “Alright, but this is payment for the biscuit.”

He gestures vaguely towards the plate of food. “Finish it. I can always send for more.”

You don’t need any more encouragement than that, and fall upon the food with a vengeance. The roast rabbit is sinfully delicious after weeks of porridge, stew, and little else. As you eat, he questions you on a section that you found interesting as well, a rather in depth study of a specific high dragon that had been residing in a swamp. You answer his questions to the best of your ability.

“Well, the phrase used was ‘Draconis sub lutum,’ so I’m fairly sure that—“

“You remember the exact wording?” he interrupts.

You frown. You hate it when someone interrupts your chain of thought. “Of course I do. As I was saying—“

“Did this particular phrase stand out for some reason?”

“No, it’s actually a fairly straight-forward translation, as I was saying….” you say, the ire in your voice rising.
“This, over here,” he says, pointing to a completely different section of the book. “What was this in the original tome?”

“Propagines vescuntur -” you begin, but he points to another part, expectantly. “Tace, spicaurisger!”

He snorts. “That is not what it said.”

“No, but I don’t appreciate the prodding! What’s this about?”

“I find it interesting that you seem to know the entire tome,” he says, looking amused.

“Of course I don’t. But if you point at a particular phrase, it isn’t difficult to remember how it was in the original.”

“There are a great many ways some of these could be translated.”

“Yes, therefore it’s my job to know which one is correct,” you scowl. “Which is why I remember.”

“Most people would remember the ones that gave them difficulty, or the ones that were pleasing to them.”

“Most people don’t professionally translate ancient tomes, now do they?” you say snippily.

“Honestly. It’s just a combination of good memory and understanding the language. Don’t be such a…” You search for a proper word in the Common tongue, then give up. “Saputo.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Should I ask?”

“I wouldn’t tell.” You shove the last biscuit neatly into your mouth, barely bothering to chew before you swallow. “If you’re finished quizzing me, ser, I should get back to—ah, damn.”

Solas doesn’t have to ask the reason for your outburst; he simply follows your gaze over to the doorway, which is currently filled with the hulking mass that is Iron Bull.

“Hey, Solas. Think I can steal her for a minute?”

Solas makes some gesture between a shrug and a hand wave. You scowl. You’re not an item to be passed around, although being treated as such is hardly unfamiliar. Still, this isn’t a conversation you want to have in front of Solas, either, so you deign to follow Iron Bull outside onto the walkway.

“So, how far of a distance do I have to keep for you to call Dorian off?” he says once you’re both out on the walkway. He looks mildly amused, which is better than angry.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” you say with the blankest face you’ve ever produced.

“Uh-huh. I heard your background checked out with Leliana.”

“I think she might still be checking,” you admit. “Apparently when I disappeared off of Seheron, I did it a little too well.” You glare at him. “I don’t know whether to be proud of myself or worried.”

“You have a reason to be worried?”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” you say with a scowl. Then, abruptly, “When were you in Seheron?”

You don’t want to know. But you have to.

“I got moved away from Seheron about five years ago. I was there for seven years.” You look away sharply, knowing you’ve no hope of hiding your expression. Your heart pounds in your chest as you
try to keep panic from overtaking you again. **Tight cells, burning flesh, a fog thicker than darkness.** You force yourself to breathe.

“Fuck,” you say out loud, forcing a bit of joviality into your shaking voice. “I was hoping…”

“Yeah,” he says softly. “I know.”

You force a half-smile onto your face and look back at him. “Guess I should be thanking you?”

“Oh?”

“Check in with Leliana. It was a Qunari raid on my master’s base of operations that gave me the chance to bolt.” **Explosions only mean one thing; bloody screams, spear through the chest of your friend, idiot, idiot, why did you grab a sword. They don’t kill slaves, look small, look small. Run, don’t let them see you run.** Your legs threaten to give out; more than emotion is swirling inside of you. Get your shit together!

“I have to get to the tavern,” you manage to eke out.

“The tavern?” he sounds incredulous.

“I’m meeting Varric for drinks,” you say, trying to focus on that.

“Ah. I think I’ll run some training exercises, then hit the hay early.”

You glance up, meeting his eye. “……Thanks.”

- 

The fact that you manage to walk to the tavern without falling over is a small miracle. You spot Varric at the bar, and just sort of fall onto the stool next to him, letting your bones go limp as you melt across the counter.

“Bad day, Stutter?”

“I’ve had worse,” you announce directly into the wooden countertop. You manage to lift yourself up. “What do they have that straddles the line between ‘alcohol’ and ‘amnesiac’?”

He slides you a mug. “Why don’t you just start with some mead? Tell the nice dwarf all about it.”

You scowl at him, but you down about half of the drink to calm your shakes. “There’s nothing to tell. Besides, you’re interested in my history, not my day-to-day.”

“Those things aren’t that separate.”

You snort. “They should be. Alright. This is for a letter… Andraste’s breath, I don’t know what I’m supposed to say. ‘Hey, I’m a complete stranger but a big fan of your life story.’” You snort and take another drink. “This is ridiculous.”

“Why not start with how you got… caught?”

You think back with a shaky sigh. Any place you could trip up here? …Yeah, a lot. Keep it vague. “I was in Denerim during the Blight. Loghain was selling elves in the Alienage there into slavery to Tevinter to fund that stupid civil war of his.”

“Did your family get caught, too?”
You shake your head. “Orphan. I guess I should have mentioned that.”

“…Your life is kind of depressing, Stutter.”

You glare down at the dwarf. “I’m aware,” you say acidly. “Anyway, the Vints figured out I had a knack for languages, sold me as a linguist. Got picked up by a Magister by the name of Bruchus.” So far, just stuff Leliana already knew. **Wicked grin, too many hands, too many other kids. Why are there only kids?** “I was a good investment. He… I don’t want to go into how I learned Qunlat,” you decide, and Varric doesn’t press. **Sweet stench of blood and poison; you see yourself reflected in black eyes.** You take a deep breath, try to let the words keep flowing. “Eventually, I was off to Seheron, where I’d be the most use.” You pause. “You know, I don’t actually know why his ‘Danarius’ was in Seheron. Could you ask him?”

“Sure thing. Any fun Seheron stories for the audience?”

You laugh despite your quivering nerves. “I still get jumpy when a fog rolls in. Those fog warriors were the worst… Qunari, you see those coming. Fuck, you can’t miss them! But that goddamn fog rolls in and all you hear are screams.” You shudder, then down some more of the drink. The mug is almost empty. **My slaves, where are my slaves? Where’s Falon oh god where’s Falon?** “Make sure you tell him how I got away; it was apparently a good one. He… what, he got freaking left behind, didn’t he?” You snort into your mug. “Lucky asshole. Oh, don’t tell him I said that.” **Cover yourself in the blood, hide in the bodies.**

“You alright, Stutter? You’re looking a little worse for the wear.” He gestures towards your hand, which you’ve just noticed is shaking slightly. “You wanna talk about something else for a bit?”

“You’re the one who wanted to do this, Varric,” you say with a scowl. “I’m just trying to get it all out before my brain catches up and I realize I’m selling my history for a fan letter.”

Get outside, once you’re outside, get to the docks, you have a plan, stick to the plan!

“‘Ey! I’m right here!”

Air, fresh, warm, humid, sticky. **Freedom? No. Fog.** You open your mouth to talk, but are jolted out of your senses by arms around your shoulders and a loud voice. “’Ey, elfy!”

Your frayed nerves can barely handle it. “H-hey, Sera,” you manage.

“You look like shit! You bein’ mean to her, Varric?”

“I’ll have you know I’m buying her drinks,” Varric says, faking an exaggerated look of affront. “You know I am a perfect gentleman!”

You shake your head. Nooooo, no no no. This isn’t happening. Not nice, normal Sera. **You knew, you knew she was probably from Leliana.** “You… know each other?”

Varric turns back to look at you, and something in your face must betray how you’re feeling, because he looks alarmed. “Well… yes?”

“Is she one of your friends Varric? One of the Inquisitor’s friends?” Couldn’t you just have enjoyed a pretty face for a little longer? Pretend there weren’t any strings attached?

“’Ey! I’m right here!”

“It’s not like that, Stutter,” Varric is saying, but you’re already standing up, removing yourself from
Sera’s arms as best as you can without shoving her. You don’t want to do something you’ll regret, but if you don’t get out of here right now you’ll make another stupid spectacle in the tavern.

“What’s wrong?” Sera is saying, but her voice sounds like it’s coming from far off. You push your way towards the door, heart fluttering, thudding, skipping beats.

“Just need some air,” you mutter. “Just some air.” You manage to get the door open, push it out, let in the cool night air, step out, but when you open your eyes…

A fog’s rolled in.
The panic thrumming through you doesn’t leave much room for thought. You manage to keep the chaos inside; that’s about the most intelligent thing you can manage. It wants to come out, to burst out of you and swirl around, burn the mist away. Instead, you force it down, down, into the depths of your gut, and move swiftly along the side of building. Your mind is screaming at you to get to cover, but buildings aren’t viable; there are people inside of buildings.

The fog is so thick it feels like it’s choking you. Tight cells, burning flesh. You have a plan, don’t you? You always have a plan. You need to think, you just need ten minutes to freaking think!

“Screams from the fog, can’t see, can barely hear, thick and wet and muffles everything.”

Wait…

“That fog wasn’t real. This is. I can help.”

The voice isn’t coming from your own head. You panic when you first see a figure in the fog, the right size and shape to spell your death. You recoil backwards, hand flashing towards your dagger in a desperate attempt to defend yourself.

“I’m not them, and you’re not there.”

The man comes closer, and you pause. He’s certainly no Qunari, and he looks nothing like a Fog Warrior, pale skin and pale hair.

“I can help you,” he says again, and the panic gripping your heart seems to finally paralyze you, your legs giving out entirely. His hand outstretches as you sink to the ground, vision blurring.

“Eyes of the bluest skies, warm smile, she makes me feel alive, oh Maker.” Words like gentle waves wash over you, and you can feel Seheron slipping further away, banished back to bad memories. There’s no way this is just words. What’s he doing? “Four walls and a door with a lock, no one has any idea who I am.”

You don’t know how long you spend just listening to the soothing voice, but when you finally open your eyes, the fog doesn’t look nearly so thick. You glance over at the man, who you now realize is possibly more a boy. He’s tall, but his face betrays youth.

“Your mind got lost,” he says, as if explaining it to you. “I heard the hurt, came to help.”

“You… w-what?” You feel like you need to clean out your ears.

“You don’t glow like Solas, but you think like him,” the boy says, tilting his head, large-brimmed hat flopping to the side.

“Elfy! Elfy, you alright?” Sera. You don’t want to see her, don’t want to see anyone. You just want
to curl up on that little bed of yours and shut the world away. But you suppose you need to do
something resembling damage control.

“She likes you, not because she was told to, but because you’re you.” You stare at the boy
incredulously for a few more moments before turning towards the growing sound of Sera’s voice.
When you glance back, the boy is gone. Of course he is. Perhaps he was never there at all, and
you’ve finally lost it.

“There you are! Wha’ happened?” Varric is behind her, looking equally worried.

“I… n-needed some air?”

-  

After a few minutes of awkward explanation, the three of you adjourn to the second floor of
the tavern. You hear someone ask one of the Chargers where Bull is, and shudder to think how
much worse this could have been if Bull’d been around. You owe him for giving you space… And
for other things you don’t want think about right now.

“So, I get the fog thing, but why’d you freak out about me knowin’ Varric?” Sera wants to know.
You rub a hand against the back of your neck, not making eye contact.

“I’m sort of… I’m not used to attention from important people.” Sera makes a noise of protest, but
you cut her off and keep going. “I’ve got Leliana asking me questions, and multiple ‘friends’ of the
Inquisitor following me around and talking to me.”

“But it was all fine when you just thought we were some random people?” asks Varric, a little bit of
incredulity creeping into his voice.

“Well… you were never just a random person, Varric, but, yes, more or less. There’s a difference,
right, between when you talk to a noble and when you talk to a normal person. It’s like that, but
scarier, like if you found you’d been talking to the Empress of Orlais in disguise.”

“We’re not like that, though!” Sera interjects. “Alright, sure, the Herald is all important and glowy,
but we’re just people! People!”

You smile weakly. “I know what you mean, what you think you mean, but… you’re not, not
anymore. You’re all caught up in this swirling chaos. Like… Like a whirlpool, with the Inquisitor at
the center. The closer you are to him, the closer you are to the madness in the middle of it all.”

The two of them are staring at you. “…W-what?” you ask, unnerved.

“You mind if I use that?” requests Varric, finally.

“Wh…” And then the laughter comes. You’re not sure where it’s coming from… You’re a little bit
surprised every time you laugh genuinely, but this is a shock. It starts as a chuckle and grows out of
control, until you’re roaring with it, cackling and gasping for breath as tears burn in the corner of
your eye. Varric grins lopsidedly, and, kindly, he and Sera let you laugh yourself stupid.

“Too bad someone’s already got the nickname ‘Chuckles,’” Sera quips when you finally stop, tears
in your eyes and gasping for breath.

“I… I’m sorry,” you choke out, unable to keep mirth from dancing on your lips. “Yeah, Varric. You
can use it. But I expect you to sign my copy of Tale of the Champion.”
“You got it, Stutter.” He holds up a sheaf of paper. “You still wanna write this letter? We can do it later, if you still want to.”

You stare at the paper for a moment, a few conflicted thoughts running through your mind. Then you turn to Sera. “Hey, Sera. Ask me about my childhood.”

You get through it that way, haltingly telling Sera about your life in Seheron. Bits and pieces. You were the youngest slave that you ever saw there, and some of the others treated you kind of like a little sister. When you weren’t working, sometimes, late at night, you’d burn a stolen candle down to a nub as older faces eagerly watched you scratch out letters in chalk. A slave who could read was dangerous, because knowledge wants to spread, wants to grow.

Sera walks you back to your room, through the fog, close enough to you that sometimes her arm brushes against yours. Before she leaves, she turns to you and says, “We should see more of each other, elfy. Maybe we’ll make our own whirlpool.” At your speechlessness she adds, “You know… all… wet and… spinnin’ and… I’m jist’ gonna go now.”

You spend a lot of time that night thinking.

Sleep is starting to escape you. Not just because of late nights spent on roofs or in taverns, but the first sign of an inevitable decline. You recognize it when you wake before dawn after a few measly hours of rest. Soon, you’ll have to get out, get some proper exercise, or proper insomnia will set in. You shouldn’t have spent so much time in hiding before coming to Skyhold; now that you’re here, there’s no real way to leave and get out from under the prying eyes of the Inquisition without raising suspicion. You’ll just have to grin and bear it.

You stumble up out of bed… Thea probably isn’t even up yet. You get dressed as slowly as you can, putting off the inevitable step outside into the cold. When you finally do have to go outside, you rush across the courtyard as quickly as you can, and go into the rotunda from the side entrance.

You’re not surprised that Solas is still asleep, but you are surprised that he appears to have fallen asleep at his desk. You’re also surprised to notice that he’s placed wards… You don’t even notice until you nearly trip over them. In the condition that you’re in, you’d have to trigger them to have any chance of figuring out what they were. Even if you let yourself loose enough to examine them, that might set something off in and of itself, and then you’d be up a shit creek with no boat. You choke down your curiosity and stay close to the wall of the rotunda, skirting the far edge until you get to where your supplies are.

You wince as you lower yourself onto the floor to begin working again. Your back doesn’t appreciate spending all day every day in an awkward position on a stone floor, that much is certain.

You can’t help pausing before you actually start your work, eyes drifting over to Solas’ sleeping form. It’s kind of cute that he fell asleep at his desk, really. You wonder what on earth he was doing before he fell asleep that required him setting wards. You then realize you’ve been staring at a sleeping man for about five minutes, and decide now is really the time to start working on the manuscript.

Eventually, you’re going to have to take some of these pages back to your room to duplicate them. There’s no way you’re not keeping a copy of this tome for yourself (plus, won’t they want one for the library?) You’ll figure out that messy situation later, however. Might as well finish the first one
before worrying about more.

Work is a little bit slower without the enchantment on your wrist. You have to move more slowly, more carefully. You let your eyes drift over to Solas, who is, amazingly, still sleeping, only for a moment before redoubling your concentration in on your work. Stiff shoulders and sleepy eyes make for slow going, however.

Time passes slowly as you meticulously sweat over each letter. Your back cramps and you have to change position. You’re almost tempted to move back up to the desk in the library, but stubbornness and the knowledge that silence is more important to your ability to work than a desk keeps you firmly on the stone floor, your back curled over your work as you attempt to stabilize yourself against the wall, bare toes curling against the ground.

You keep your focus on your work and off the steadily growing pain in your back and rear. When you notice Thea waving wildly from the doorway—around lunchtime if your growling stomach is any indicator—you pretend not to notice her, hoping she might come in and set off the damn wards herself. Instead, she just gives up after a bit and wanders off. Maybe you should get up and follow her to lunch? You wound up skipping breakfast just by getting up so early and getting straight to work. Your stomach is complaining almost as loudly as your back, at this point.

But you don’t, mostly because you haven’t gotten enough work done to satisfy yourself. This is what you get for spending your nights goofing off! You should be further along with the tome than you are. You silently berate yourself as you work until a woman comes in, startling you so badly that you damn near spill your ink. It’s just someone bringing Solas’ food, however. You do note that it’s been a different person every time. Do they draw lots or something? How is everyone so unnerved by someone who sleeps at his desk until lunch? You choose to ignore the fact that you were intimidated by him as well, when you first arrived.

You watch with interest as she enters, wondering what will happen when the wards are finally triggered… but the woman hesitates when she sees him asleep. She looks around, seeming mildly panicked, and then finally sets the tray of food down on a table by the couch before darting off. Oh for… Well, you suppose you could have said something, yourself, to help her out. Or to trick her into triggering the wards. There was no way they were set to explode or anything like that; this was inside a building for pity’s sake. You just haven’t survived this long by fucking around with unknown magic.

When Solas shows no sign of getting up (seriously, how long was he going to sleep?), you decide that if he gets hungry later, he can send for food himself. You stand, stretching and wincing at the complaining your body does. How spoiled have you become, that just lying on a floor 12 hours a day for a few days is enough to have your body whining like a spoiled princeling? Ridiculous.

You skirt the line of the ward again, then throw yourself down onto the couch. Maker, it’s a really nice couch. You sink down into it with a moan, delighting in how it sinks around you and offers you support at the same time. This couch is better than most lovers! You glance over at the food… some light brown broth that smells delightful, bread that’s still warm, and… Maker, is that dried fruit? Your mouth is salivating heavily. You make a promise to yourself, then and there, to try and steal from Solas’ plates regularly.

The soup is onion based, and sinfully delicious. You dip the bread in it and eat it slowly, savoring the taste. You hold no grudge towards porridge, but there’s no comparison. You eat the fruits similarly slowly, letting each sweet bite burst into your mouth. How long has it been since you had dried fruit? Ooooh, Maker. You should drop hints at Iron Bull and Varric that you can be easily bribed with food. If you’re going to be pestered, you should at least be able to enjoy it.
“I fear you’re picking up bad habits.”

Solas’ voice makes you jump, and you nearly choke on a dried grape. It’s too far for you to feel him lower the wards, but you assume he either already has, or will shortly. Almost a shame you won’t figure out what they were for.

“In my defense, you were asleep,” you manage, after swallowing with some difficulty.

“Indeed I was, and yet here you are, making yourself quite at home.” It’s hard to tell if he’s amused or annoyed. He doesn’t exactly broadcast his emotions. You glance guiltily at the couch, and stand quickly. He’s an elf, and a mage, so it’s quite easy to forget he’s of significantly higher station than you.

“My apologies, ser,” you say, not wanting to get yourself removed from your new station in the rotunda.

“Come here,” is all he says, and your nervousness grows. He’d been rather amused at your food stealing antics yesterday, but perhaps he is the type to wake up grumpy? You walk forward anxiously, bare feet silent on the stone. You feel the wards before you cross them. Is that what this is about? He wants you to trigger them? You have to force yourself not to pause, to step down directly on the magic without wincing. You can feel it surge underneath you, but keep walking. Nothing explodes and it doesn’t seem to be searching you in any way, but you’re still nervous.

You reach the desk, then search Solas’ face for some hint at what he’s thinking. “Go to the kitchens,” he instructs you. “Pick up another meal, and let them know to bring two dinners. Don’t make the serving girl make two trips. Do I need to tell you where the kitchens are?”

You really wish the answer was ‘no,’ but in truth, you have literally no idea where they’re located. Near the mess, you imagine. You nod, glad you don’t blush easily. This is not precisely a scolding, but you still feel embarrassed.

“Go out into the hall, and through the second door on your left,” he instructs, picking up a stack of papers (your translation, you realize) as he speaks. “Down the stairs, through the servant’s quarters, to the last door on the right.” He looks up at you, and you catch a glint of amusement in his eyes. “Do try not to get lost.”

You don’t trust yourself to speak just then, so you don’t risk it, instead simply turning and walking stiffly out of the room. A few minutes on a nice couch wasn’t enough to cure your soreness.

You don’t like being in the Great Hall. You avoid it during the day, whenever possible. There’s a great deal of coming and going involved, and nobles often loiter in the Hall. You pass Varric at his writing desk, and he flags you down before you can find the correct door.

“Hey, Stutter. I hope you know, Sera, Iron Bull and I all went to the mess for lunch. We probably all felt like right idiots when Thea showed up alone.”

You smirk. “I feel absolutely horrible for you, Varric. Honestly, my heart bleeds for your plight.”

“Yeah, yeah, have a good laugh at my expense,” he grumbles, but without any kind of earnest displeasure. “If you keep it up, people are going to start going to interrupt your alone time with Chuckles.”

You snort. “Iron Bull already has. I think Thea’s the only one silly enough not to just walk right in.” You smile, a bit to yourself. “Don’t expect me to leave more often. He’s started feeding me. You know what happens when you start feeding strays.”
“Oh, this is really a thing, isn’t it? I should have seen it coming.”

“It’s not a thing. At least not the definition of thing I think you’re using. Frankly, I think he’s more taking pity on me than anything.” You hum lightly to yourself, considering. “I want to pick his brain, but so far he’s mostly been picking mine.” You share your head to clear your thoughts. “Anyway, I need to get going.”

“Oh? Where you heading?”

“Kitchens,” you say shortly, really not wanting to go into why. Varric raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t press. “That door, down the stairs,” he points out.

“Yeah, yeah…” you mutter as you head to the door. The flight of stairs in question is quite long… going back up with a tray of food is really going to try your aching back. Ah well, can’t be helped. You bounce down them, then wander through the servant’s quarters. You actually take the wrong door at first, and find yourself in a really amazing looking library that you promise you’ll check out later. You do, eventually, find the kitchen, full of bustling staff and a red faced human man yelling at a lot of elves. Grand.

You approach someone at random who doesn’t seem too terribly busy. “I, uh… I need a plate of food,” you say awkwardly, not sure what the protocol is. “For, uh, for Solas?” A rather flustered looking woman overhears, and frowns.

“Celia! You said you’d taken his food up, girl!” she snaps at a woman you recognize from earlier.

“She did,” you say quickly. “He, uh… has someone else there. He wants another plate brought up, and sent me to get it. He said he’ll need two dinners brought up later, too.”

One wouldn’t think so, but pointed ears let you walk into any place with a large staff without much trouble. Everyone will just assume you’re the new so-and-so, so long as you cringe when you’re supposed to. The woman scowls at you, but snaps at a few other people. Soon, another plate is put together, much the same as the first, although with what appears to be a bit of roast duck as well. You’re hungry all over again, just smelling it. She hands you a board to carry it up with, and you’re off. It’s been awhile since you served food; the board is awkward in your hands. You manage to remember the feel of it by the time you navigate your way back through the servant’s quarters. You pause at the bottom of the stairs, glaring up at them. Ugh. You take them slowly, careful not to spill the sloshing soup, and your shoulders and back scream in protest. You’ve gotten out of shape, you decide. You really need to rectify that.

You manage to get back across the main hall without smashing into anyone, by some miracle, and the worst that happens is the sly look Varric gives you as you head back into the rotunda. You don’t even notice the wards before stepping on them this time. New ones? These do feel invasive, the magic curling up along your legs and prodding at you. Rude. And you can’t even call him on it without giving yourself away.

You’re relieved to finally be able to unload the tray. Automatically, you find yourself removing the dishes and setting them on a clear corner of the desk. You’ve set the silverware down (in proper Orlesian order, at that) before you even realize what you’re doing. Solas is watching you with a thoughtful look in his eyes, and you feel a flush coming on again. Well, it isn’t as though an elf knowing how to serve is particularly unusual.

You gaze uncertainly at the tray, not quite sure if you’re supposed to run it back down to the kitchen.

“Set it down,” Solas instructs, following your gaze. “You can return it later.”
My, he is used to giving commands, isn’t he? Simple apostate mage your ass; this is man who knows what it is to be obeyed. You try not to grumble as you wander stiffly over to the couch and set the tray down against the side table.

“Now, this section on the effects of elfroot on dragonlings…” he begins, then pauses to watch you limp back over to the desk. “You walk like an elderly woman,” he observes, and you glower at him.

“It’s nothing,” you say with a scowl. “I’ve just gotten lazy over the years.”

“Mmhmm. And I suppose it has nothing to do with laying yourself out on stone all day?” He gestures towards a stool, or possibly a stepstool, that’s sitting by the wall. “Bring that here, and sit.”

Goodness, he just cannot get enough of telling you what to do today, can he? Silently simmering, you pick up the stool up and drop it next to the desk. Stubbornly, you don’t sit until he raises an eyebrow, as if to say, well? You sit, pouting. He pulls his chair closer, then actually has the audacity to grasp your shoulders and spin you around!

You’re all but spluttering with indignation, until you feel warm magic tracing through you. You quickly shift the hiding place inside of you, tighter, down, out of the way, where he hopefully won’t find it. This is getting dicey. “Um, Solas, this really isn’t-“ you begin, but the warm, soothing tingle that spreads through your back has your sentence trailing off into a sigh. Maker, that feels good.

“Your posture is terrible,” he scolds. “How does a scribe not know to sit up properly?”

“Do you suggest I pull in a desk? Peace and quiet is more important to my work than comfortable positioning. I could be sitting on a throne upstairs, and the constant fuss and pester would still keep me from working.”

He sighs. “Move to the couch, then. I hardly ever give it any use.”

“Ooh, you’re accommodating. You’ll never get rid of me now,” you say with a grin that turns into a gasp as a rather painful knot in your shoulder dramatically undoes itself. “Maker, you could sell this talent, Solas.”

“I’ve long since given up on being rid of you,” he says, and without seeing his face, you can’t quite decide what he means by that. “Now, about this elfroot…”

Your conversation trails from there, Solas eating after he’s finished magically unkinking every muscle and soothing every swollen joint. Somehow, you get through it without him bumping into anything interesting inside you. Luck, or talent? You like to think it was the latter. The conversation progresses from the effect of elfroot on dragonlings, and onto its various uses.

“Honestly, Solas, I translated a fantastic Orlesian tome on herbalism, and it was quite clear that bitter elfroot was the better solution,” you say, not looking up from the page you’re transcribing on a small corner of his desk.

“You would trust Orlesians with your alchemy?” Solas asks, and the incredulity in his voice makes you laugh.

“I’m lacking in any ancient elven scrolls on the matter, unless you care to share some with me.”

“I’m sure we have something upstairs that could correct the gap in your education.”

Oh, it is ON. “Let’s have a look then,” you say, narrowing your eyes and setting down your quill. “It is a resource to better the Inquisition, after all.”
The two of you bicker all the way up the stairs. You’re too aware of your surroundings to not notice the looks the two of you get. My, are they varied. Now if only you could pinpoint who was reacting to what. To Solas? To you and Solas, talking? To the fact that you’re clearly bickering?

“If I remember correctly… ah, yes, here it is.” Solas pulls a small book out from one of the shelves—damn, he found that fast—and hands it to you.

“An Elven Guide to the Plants of Fereldan?” you exclaim. “Where did the Inquisition get this?”

“This library is a hodgepodge of donations. I believe that particular book was part of a collection donated as a slight aimed at Solas,” comes Dorian’s elegant voice. He looks quite amused. “Or more precisely, the Inquisition, for sheltering him.”

“I suppose now I know why I haven’t seen you in the library, Emma.” He tuts gently to himself. “To think, I can’t even compete for your affections with a man who dresses like… that!”

You snort, half-distracted by the contents of the book. “Can I borrow this?” you ask Mahvir, raising your voice to be heard.

“Well, this is a library!” He gets bonus points from you for being sarcastic about it.

“Excellent I… Oh.”

Solas smile grows as yours sinks into a frown. “When available, use gossamer elfroot. Damn Orlesians.”

“What were you two fighting over, anyway?” asks Dorian curiously, moving to read over your shoulder.

“We were debating,” you say, forcing your voice to come out haughty and snobby, rather like his. “And it was about regeneration potions. My tendency to learn primarily from books I’m in the process of translating backfires yet again.”

“Did you mistranslate it?” Dorian asks curiously.

“It was Orlesian! I didn’t mistranslate it!” you say with a deep scowl. “More likely all of Orlais has been making subpar regeneration potions for a century.”

“My! Someone has confidence in their skills!” Dorian looks amused. So does Solas. Thea is watching from a few bookshelves down, eyes slightly wide.

“I would very swiftly be out of a job were I not,” you say flatly. “Not everyone is so eager to hire on an elf. Besides, Orlesian is my best language.”

“Oh? Better than the common tongue?”

“À partir d’un moment d’une extrême simplicité il ne faut plus espérer,” you reply. You enjoy the stunned reaction to your flawless accent—from Dorian and half of the library, though not Solas—as much as you enjoy speaking the language itself. Orlais. Whatever else you want to say about it, they have the prettiest everything, including language.

“From Hölderlin à la tour,” comes a familiarly accented voice from the stairs, and you freeze. “I was about to send someone to find you. It seems there is no need.”

You turn around, gazing slightly guiltily at Leliana. She could be inviting you to tea and you’d still
feel as though you’d done something wrong. Likely, because you had. It was just trying to figure out which one she’d caught you at. You wordlessly bow your apology to Dorian and Solas, and follow Leliana back up the stairs. She’s silent until she sits back down at her desk.

“I’m not particularly surprised at your fluency in Orlesian, given your activities there,” she says, steepling her fingers together.

Alright. There is a lot she could mean by that. You remain quiet.

“Alix Gagnon. You have quite the list of names.”

You remain still, even though inside, you’re screaming in relief. Alix. Alix’s actions are easy to account for. Alix was a proper young lady who never once got up to mischief. Well, at least not anything the Orlesians considered dramatic enough to call ‘mischief,’ in any case.

“I could hardly be a Nikolas for the rest of my life,” you say with a thin smile. “I was a growing young woman, after all.”

“And you worked for Comte Pierre of Halamshiral, at that!”

“I eventually worked for the Comte,” you correct softly. “I didn’t particularly trip into the position.” You sigh to yourself. “He was a good man. Willing to look beyond my ears.” You stand up a little straighter and clear your throat. “I did good work for him. I have nothing to be ashamed of from my time in Orlais.”

“Indeed, you seemed to do well for yourself in Orlais, Alix,” Leliana agrees. “You even did a custom translated tome of Tragedia Divina for Duke Bastien de Ghislain. What I wonder is why you left, and why you no longer go by the name Alix Gagnon.”

You sigh. “Alix was a very respectable woman, but more of a pen name than anything. Half of the people who ordered from me didn’t even know I was an elf. It was a relief to just be Emma again. As for why I left, one can only stay in Orlais and work for nobles for so long before getting tangled up in the Game. That is a poor state of affairs for an elven ex-slave. I was sorry to leave my position, but I made enough on commissions, at that point, to live in moderate comfort in the countryside. It was much less dramatic.”

“Have you little interest in politics?”

“I have significant interest in staying alive, serah, and Orlesian politics run directly counter to that desire.”

Leliana is quiet for a time, and then rests a hand on a small stack of papers. “I believe this concludes my investigation into your background, Emma. Everything seems to be accounted for. I hope you continue to do good work for the Inquisition. Focus on your current project, but in the future, I may ask you to lay it aside shortly to translate more urgent documents.”

You swallow, hard. This was news, good and bad. She wouldn’t trust you with anything particularly sensitive, you were sure, but it seems she really is in dire need of… whatever it is she wants you to be. Qunlat came up several times when you first arrived. Perhaps she has delicate documents, ones that cannot be trusted to the hands of Iron Bull, a Ben-Hassrath still loyal to the Qun? You bow and take your leave, mind still racing as you head down the stairs. No one intercepts messages in Ancient Tevene, and no other language you speak could give a Spymaster difficulty. Solas’ Elven is superior to yours, Orlesians and Antivans are a bit apiece. It must be Qunlat. Qunlat that Iron Bull can’t see… And it’s urgent enough to have her off balance.
Interesting.

Thea intercepts you as you come down off the stairs. You don’t mind; you don’t want to head down to the smugness that’s no doubt waiting for you downstairs in the form of a recently-proven-correct elven apostate.

“You and that Solas really are getting on, huh?” she asks, genuine curiosity in her eyes. “I thought he’d chase you out of there in a day.”

“Honestly, so did I,” you say with an easy laugh. “Something in that dragon manuscript caught his eye. I think he’s keeping me around just so I can get it done all the more quickly.”

“Is it so hard to work up here?” Thea crosses her arms, looking sour.

“It’s nothing personal, Thea,” you promise. “It’s just quieter downstairs. The library always has people coming and going. And downstairs, no one throws tomes at me.”

“I don’t throw them at you,” comes Dorian’s voice from behind a bookshelf. “It’s not my fault if you get into the book trajectory.”

“What was all that fussin’, anyway?”

You sigh, not having to pretend to be flustered or embarrassed about that.

“I was under the mistaken impression that Orlesians were an appropriate source to learn alchemy from. I said that bitter elfroot was the best herb for regeneration potions. Solas disagreed. And… he was right.”

“You look like you just sucked on a lemon.”

“I may have been very insistent about that bitter elfroot.”

Thea snorts. “This how elves flirt?”

“We’re not—I’m n… He’s… No!” You’re flushing slightly. The smug ass downstairs is starting to look like a better option. “I’m getting back to work,” you say firmly. “Don’t expect me at dinner, I’m using Solas as a meal ticket.”

“Lucky,” she sulks. “Bet he eats better than us common folk.”

“He does,” you confirm. “And I’m not even a little sorry for taking advantage.” You wave as you head down the stairs. “Promise to see you for breakfast tomorrow, though!”

Solas is looking at one of your finished pages when you return to the rotunda. You do wish he’d stop moving your things. “This looks very professional,” he comments as you gather up the paper you were working on.

“That’s good, seeing as how I am a professional,” you say sourly. “I have to actually get some proper work done now, although I enjoyed our… debate.”

“For a debate, you would have had to have a chance of winning.”

You scowl. “Alright, alright, don’t get prideful on me, Solas.” You gather up the last of your supplies, meaning to bring them over to the couch you’ve been given permission to work on, but Solas interrupts you.

“Do you want me to strengthen your wrist again?”
“Oh… if you don’t mind, yes,” you say, a little flustered. You hadn’t been planning on asking, after he’d gone to the trouble of fixing your entire back. You hand your wrist over, so to speak, and secretly revel in the warm feeling of his magic. You wanted to just latch onto it, to pull, but of course, you know better. It’s only going to get worse from here.

You thank him when he’s done, rubbing your newly enchanted wrist. Maker, it still feels marvelous. You suspect he’s doing it more for something to do than anything; mages get like that. If they don’t have an excuse to use their magic, they’ll find one. Well, you’re happy to be an excuse. The benefits are fantastic.

Seated on the gloriously comfortable couch, wrist strong and steady, you set yourself to perfectly duplicate a diagram of a dragon eye. The table by the couch is a little small, so you keep the original tome sprawled open on your lap as you work. The enchantment makes it easier, but it’s still meticulous work, as art doesn’t come to you as easily as language.

You work like that for a while, carefully inking the eye and labeling it, then beginning in on the text that will also be going on that page. You’re becoming quite proud of your work here. Three square meals, a warm bed, thick walls, intelligent company, and all the supplies you need to do some of your best work… Yes, it’s worth the risks.

You don’t allow yourself to become distracted until you hear the door open. It’s an elven woman, a single woman, attempting to balance a tray with two portions of food on it. She’s clearly struggling. You stand up quickly, scowling, and rush to aid her. Did these people want to avoid the apostate so badly that they’d let one lone, unlucky elf do all the work? Of course, she could have taken two trips… Ugh.

You help her to the table, help her unload the food off the tray as she murmurs thanks. You believe you’ll have a word with the kitchen staff, and you need to return the tray from lunch, anyway. You give your pardons to Solas and follow the woman as she leaves.

“Thank you for your assistance,” she says as the two of you cross the Great Hall. “Gaston says I need to work on my upper body strength.”

You roll your eyes. “Gaston’ shouldn’t send one woman to do the job of two.” You deftly remove the second tray from her trembling arms, stacking it on top of the one you’re already carrying. “Give your arms a rest, or you’ll lose all dexterity in them.”

“Thank you, miss. Are you Ser Solas’ serving girl?”

It’s only years of practice that keep your face perfectly neutral. You’re used to unkind assumptions, and this one is honestly perfectly understandable, but it irritates you nonetheless. “I suppose I’m taking on a function similar to that,” you say politely as the two of you descend the stairs.

“Is he a…” she glances around furtively, then lowers her voice and whispers. “Is he a blood mage?”

You snort. “In a castle full of Templars?” In truth, you have no idea if he is or not, and don’t particularly care, but this can be treated like the idle gossip it is. “Don’t be silly.”

“Well, it’s just, he’s a maleficar, isn’t he?”

“He’s an apostate,” you correct. “Not all apostates are maleficar, especially now with the Circles fallen.”

The two of you enter the kitchen together, and you make your ways towards the red-faced man who had been shouting the first time you arrived in the kitchens. You can only guess he’s “Gaston.”
“Excuse me, ser,” you say politely. “My name is Emma. I will be fetching Ser Solas’ food for the foreseeable future.”

The man looks irritated the second you start talking, but then seems relieved when you finish. “Thank the Maker!” he booms. “Now you skittish women can stop flitting about trying to avoid being the one who takes it up!” His eyes fall back to you, then eyes you up and down. “I don’t care who you are,” he decides. “But you’re doing me a favor. Here, take some of these up to your master.” He tosses a cloth into your arms and drops half a dozen tarts into it. The warm smell of peaches they exude is almost enough to soothe your irritation. You thank him, bow your head slightly to the elven girl you were speaking with, and then exit the kitchen.

You did it out of irritation, but it will also serve you well. Kitchens are a hotbed of gossip and rumor, and you’ll also be assuring yourself as a consistent “second” tied onto Solas’ daily meals. Plus, long trips up and down the stairs with heavy trays will start beating your body back into proper condition.

“What was all that?” Solas asks curiously as you re-enter the room. He’s already started eating, and you pull up your stool to join him, dropping the bundle of tarts unceremoniously on his desk.

“I lost my temper,” you say blandly. “They send one tiny elf up when it’s clear she can’t carry that much, just because they don’t like serving an apostate.”

“You lose your temper, and they send you back with dessert?” he comments mildly, unwrapping the cloth bundle.

You sigh. “I… informed them I’d be retrieving your meals,” you say with a delicate cough. “They gave me tarts, so overjoyed were they,” you add sourly.

“You what?”

“I know, I know,” you say, wincing. “It’s not exactly my place to decide. But I was tired of seeing terrified, unlucky women trip over their feet trying to get in and out of here without being cursed or something similarly insipid.”

You risk a look at Solas’ expression, and are relieved to see he looks quite amused. “I suppose the fact that this means you’ll be able to bring back two meals each time is just a side benefit?”

“A delightful side benefit,” you agree, allowing yourself to smile now that you’re sure he’s not displeased with your rash decision.

“Did you tell them you’d be bringing all of my meals?” he says, still looking entertained.

“Well… yes,” you answer, not sure what he’s getting at.

“Tell me, have you ever seen me eat breakfast here? I normally take the meal in my quarters.”

...Oh.

You actually do blush this time, the heat in your cheeks enough that you suspect he can see. “I… Um. Well.” You clear your throat. “I’ll have to, uh… clarify. …Ugh, Maker, I put my foot in it, didn’t I?”

“Perhaps a bit,” Solas agrees, his obvious amusement embarrassing you further now that you know its cause. There is a pause in the conversation as you both eat. “Leliana is quite interested in you,” he comments after a moment’s silence.
“Yes,” you agree. “I doubt she calls every newcomer up there to comb over their life history. I wish I knew what she was after.”

“You don’t?” he says curiously.

“I assume she wants me to translate more delicate documents, but I can’t figure out why she needs me, specifically, to do it. My skillset is prominent, yes, but hardly unique.”

“Where did you work previously?” Solas asks. “There must be something else that’s caught her interest.”

Maker, you hope there’s nothing else. “Antiva, Orlais,” you say, waving your hand vaguely. “Ferelden. …A lot of places, honestly. I’ve never liked staying in one place. Even after I was fairly certain no slavers were chasing me.”

“Was that a worry?”

“I was hardly irreplaceable, but I was a valuable investment, and I was never sure if my master survived Seheron. Apparently I disappeared well, however. Perhaps I never needed to worry. In any case, I’m more interested in your travels than mine. How did you avoid the Templars?”

“No, although it’s the only marketable skill I really have,” you say with a sigh. “Once I started linguistic work, I settled down more, out of fear of having to wind up a maid again. Did you not have trouble with wild animals and the like, when you traveled? I always stuck with merchant caravans for that very reason.”

“I mostly stayed away from civilization,” is all he says on the matter, to your displeasure. You can’t blame him for being secretive, but that doesn’t help your curiosity on the matter. “Did you always work as a linguist?”

“No, although it’s the only marketable skill I really have,” you say with a sigh. “Once I started linguistic work, I settled down more, out of fear of having to wind up a maid again. Did you not have trouble with wild animals and the like, when you traveled? I always stuck with merchant caravans for that very reason.”

“I suspect a mage might have slightly less issue than the average individual.”

“Ah… yes, I suppose so,” you agree, although inside you’re screaming bullshit. The average mage gets eaten by a bear just as easily. Of course, it’s quite likely Solas is no average mage. His enchantments stay longer than that of any mage you’ve met, at least, although that list is admittedly very short.

The conversation continues like that, with both of you subtly and not-so-subtly attempting to pry into each other’s histories. He’s even more evasive than you are; when pressed, you’re willing to simply lie about something. He won’t even give you that. Still, the dinner is good (delicious), and even unsuccessfully fencing with someone as clever as Solas is entertainment.

The tarts are, unsurprisingly, absolutely delicious. You’re pleased to discover Solas appears to have something of a sweet tooth, but say absolutely nothing about the fact that he ate three of the tarts rather swiftly. You do grab the last one, however, and momentarily excuse yourself. You head up the stairs, and quickly spot Thea’s bright red hair in the library.

“Thea!” you say cheerfully, heading over to her. She looks shocked to see you.

“Trouble in paradise?” she asks. You snort.

“Keep teasing me and I won’t give you this.” You wave the tart at her. “Thought I’d share some of my benefits.”

“Maker, where did you get that?” she demands, snatching it out of your hands. She bites into it.
“Mmm! Are those peaches?”

“Yes,” you say with a grin. “Won’t see that in the mess. They probably made them for some of the nobles here.”

“This what he’s feeding you? No wonder you like him.” You make a grab for the tart, and she skips back. “Alright, alright! Still, I’d fall for a man who gave me tarts.”

“I gave them to him actually, if you want to be technical. It’s a long story. Anyway, I just thought I’d apologize for never being around. I appreciate you helping me get settled around here.”

“Well, at least you apologize well,” she says through a mouth full of tart. “We still on for breakfast tomorrow?”

“Definitely,” you say with a nod. Breakfast… Why does that make you feel anxious? You brush it off, say your goodbyes, and head back downstairs to get some more work done. You gather up the dishes first, however, and make a quick run back downstairs with them. Running back and forth from the kitchen will get old, no doubt, but the gratitude in the eyes of the lady you hand the dishes to provides you some comfort. Their fear may be stupid, but you’re glad you can ameliorate it. The fact that someone sneaks you an apple helps, as well.

You jog back up the stairs, back into the rotunda, and settle back down onto the couch. Maker, this couch. It’s softer than your bed! You get back to work on the tome. The translation is still only three-fourths of the way done, thanks to Solas stealing your work, but you’ll have time for that after he’s finished pouring over it.

The enchantment on your wrist is still holding, and you feel quite comfortable, so you work well into the night. You have a poor internal clock, but you’re starting to get rather exhausted. Your lack of sleep last night isn’t helping you now. You’re a little tempted to just curl up on the couch and take a nap, but that’s unacceptable for a multitude of reasons. You push on, determined to finish one last page before you turn in for the night. You only stop to rest your eyes for a moment…

When you wake up, your tome and page have been moved onto the side table, likely to prevent you from drooling on them in your sleep. Maker’s balls, when did you nod off? How long have you been out? You rub your eyes and look around. The room is empty; Solas is gone. Probably off to bed, like all normal people. The tower is utterly silent, to the point where it almost sounds like its own kind of noise. You’re tempted to just roll over and sleep on the couch, but you’re embarrassed enough about falling asleep in the first place. You sit up, cap your inks, and head off towards your bedroom.

Of course, by the time you get there, all sleepiness is gone. You toss and turn for a while, but there’s no helping it. You’re in for another sleepless night.
Keeping Spirits Up

After too long spent tossing and turning, you give up and stand, changing back into something that could pass for clothing and exiting the building. You avoid the courtyard and the tavern, instead heading up long stairs to the ramparts. The guards look at you peculiarly, but no one moves to stop you, which is odd. Seems like it would be their job to stop this sort of thing. Perhaps they assume that because you’re coming from inside the keep, it’s fine? You shrug it off and begin walking the ramparts, eventually breaking into a jog, hoping to wear yourself out.

It’s a toss-up as to whether Iron Bull or Sera sees you and decides to interrupt you first, really. Iron Bull wins the coin flip. You don’t know if he saw you from below and decided to come up the stairs, or just happened to be heading up the stairs as you passed, but it does annoy you that he can keep up with your jog by taking long steps. Stupid tall people and their damn long legs.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks.

“That must have been very difficult for you to figure out. I bet it took every ounce of your Ben-Hassrath training.”

“ Heard from Varric that you had a bit of trouble the other night.”

Your feet stop the second they touch stone, your body stilling as if you’d never been moving at all. Your own narrowed eyes catch his. “Of course you did.”

“He seems to be of the opinion I could help, seeing as how we went through some of the same shit.”

“Of course he did. Idiot.” You’re too tired for this kind of crap. “Let’s get one thing very straight. We didn’t go through the same shit.”

“Yeah.”

“You- …What?”

“I was a warrior in a war zone. You were a child in a war zone. Anyone can do the math. You were, what? Eleven? Twelve?”

“Eleven,” you say shortly. “I was eleven. When I arrived.”

“Right. And they probably tried to keep you out of harm’s way, but there’s no ‘out of harm’s way’ in Seheron.”

"My slaves, where are my slaves?"

“But I do know one thing. The walls close in and suddenly you’re back there, right?”

No, don’t touch me, don’t fucking touch me, NO.

“The tastes, the scents, the feeling, it’s like you never left.”

I swear to the Maker, you will never lay a hand on any of us, ever again.

“Hey. Come back.” Fingers snap in front of your dilated eyes; your mind focuses back in on reality. “I can help. If you want me to.”
He’s squatting down, a little. You want nothing more than to strike him, send a giant brute reeling off balance, for once. The hate has to burn in your eyes, but he doesn’t react to it.

“You can help by keeping your distance.” Your voice is a strangled snarl. You don’t like the weakness it betrays. “I need a way to burn off this stress, not lessons from the fucking Qun.”

“I could help with that, too.”

Your eyes narrow again. “Oh?”

“Yeah, sure. Maybe a bit of… friendly wrestling?”

“You’d snap me in half.” You run a hand through your hair, frustrated. You didn’t pull it back before leaving your room. You regret that. “Even if I was the type for a …spar, I’d be better suited for someone like Sera.”

Iron Bull snorts. “Sera? She wouldn’t know what to do with you. She’s all smooth with the bow, but get her into close quarters and she’s a mess.”

You feel the corner of your mouth twitch. “Tell you what, if you ever feel like you want to stand perfectly still while a noodle-armed elf girl breaks her knuckles on your chest, let me know. I’m sure I have a few not-so-repressed issues with the Qunari I could take out on you.”

“I find things are generally friendlier after a beating. Bet the sparring rings are all empty.”

He’s not supposed to actually take you up on it; it throws you slightly off-balance. But surely, he’s joking. You’re not sure if you want him to be joking, or not. “Oh no,” you say, a grin forming. “You don’t get off that easy. You want to do this, we do it when I want to, where I want to. And I want the Chargers there.”

It isn’t a bluff, but he calls it anyway. “Alright. It’ll be good for morale, see the boss get beat up by a little girl. Do it sooner than later, though. You look more unhinged every day.”

You leave the conversation wondering exactly how you wound up promising to beat up a Qunari, and more importantly, how you’re going to get away with it.

You manage to get a few hours of sleep in before you wake in abject horror. It’s barely dawn, if the scant pink light coming in the tiny window is any indicator. And the thing you forgot, the thing that escaped your tired, stressed brain has returned with a vengeance.

You never told anyone else to bring Solas’ breakfast!

Panic gets you dressed and propels you out the door into the morning chill. It’s barely dawn, if the scant pink light coming in the tiny window is any indicator. And the thing you forgot, the thing that escaped your tired, stressed brain has returned with a vengeance.

You never told anyone else to bring Solas’ breakfast!

Panic gets you dressed and propels you out the door into the morning chill. You’re at the kitchen before you’ve really decided what, exactly, to do. How do you explain that you need someone else to bring him his breakfast? What can you say that doesn’t sound suspicious?

Unfortunately, the second you enter the kitchen, someone grabs you. You recognize the woman, vaguely, although that seems unimportant as she quickly loads you with one of those heavy serving trays and begins piling food onto it.

“That companion of his companion enough that he needs a second breakfast?” the woman asks you sharply.
“What?” you say, still slightly dazed. “No! Maker, no!”

“Alright. Try to be on time next time.” She pushes you aside, and you definitely recognize the girl who comes to your aid.

“Sorry. Breakfast is always a bit hectic,” Celia says. “Are you okay?”

“I can’t… I’m not supposed to actually—” you hiss, but you’re interrupted by someone plopping down some sweet smelling bread onto the tray with a wink.

“Thanks, sweetheart.”

“We really do appreciate this,” Celia adds. “Used to be an event every day.”

“I don’t even know where he sleeps!” you snap. “I can’t bring him this!”

“Oh, you don’t? Go up the stairs like you’re heading to the library, but take that side door out above the Hall, straight through and out the other side. He’s the next to last door on the right.”

“I didn’t want instructions; I wanted someone else to take this!” you say desperately. This is going very poorly.

Celia blanches, then throws her hands up. “Don’t look at me!” You watch her in dread as she scurries off.

Alright. Okay. You’ve done weirder things than this. Just bring the man his damn breakfast, you can get this mess sorted out later. You still have to meet Thea at the mess. If you bring this sweet bread, she might even forgive you for being late.

You try to keep Celia’s directions in mind as you climb the stairs to the Great Hall, arms screaming in protest. Across the hall, up another flight of stairs, through a door, and… Wow, that’s a really nice dress—Maker! You know that hat!

You swear to yourself and duck back through the door to the stairwell. Unless the horned hat has become all the rage in Orlais, which is admittedly quite likely, that is, in all likelihood, Madame Vivienne de Fer. You knew she was here, but had been hoping that you wouldn’t run into her, at all, ever. An entire Inquisition, and you have to cross the path of the only one here you know you’ve met before.

You take a deep breath. If you don’t panic and slip by quickly, you’ll be one more serving elf. She’s Orlesian. They don’t even look twice. But Madame de Fer is a clever one. How many times have you walked by Orlesian mages? They never even glanced your way, except for her. She’d checked you. Still, it had been years ago, and you were just one elf. You’re being paranoid. Lack of sleep has you stupid enough to be carrying Solas’ breakfast to him rather than let him go hungry or risk the ire of the kitchen staff. It has you stupid enough to act skittish around the First Enchanter. You take a deep breath, and then move, pausing only to bend your legs slightly in a facsimile of a curtsy when Madame de Fer’s eyes fall across you. She doesn’t even seem to see you. Of course. Another elf. You’re more relieved than you are annoyed.

You slip out the door on the other side, onto a balcony of sorts, a walkway. Next to last door on the right… You wander uncertainly up to it, arms complaining at the heavy weight of the tray. You eye the door cautiously. Your hands are beyond full, so you sort of kick at it, hoping that it passes for a knock, then wait. No response.

You sigh. You’re being ridiculous. Serving girls don’t knock and wait at the door to be answered.
You manage to maneuver one hand to twist the doorknob, then push the door open with your hip. You walk into the room backwards as you carefully slip the tray through the doorway, careful to avoid spilling. You almost drop the damn thing as you turn around, however.

Solas is waking up, likely due to the fact you were kicking his door. He rubs his head and yawns, not quite noticing you yet as he sits up, stretching, and you’re now free to tell all of the gossiping kitchen girls that their terrifying maleficar sleeps shirtless. You try to avert your eyes as the sheet falls, not wanting to find out if he wears pants to bed or not. You do see the surprise in his eyes as he notices you. He shifts his legs off the bed, and you see cloth out of the corner of your eye. Pants. Thank the Maker.

“You’re quite serious about this, aren’t you?” His voice is amused; you can hear the laughter just behind it.

“No one else would bring it,” you mutter sourly. You latch your eyes onto a table and walk over to it, feeling all knees and elbows. You begin laying out the food, and frown when you notice something. “Is this fresh juice? Maker, but they do spoil you.” You hear the floor creak and force yourself not to turn around.

“None for you?” Solas asks, and you go rigid. He is far too close for a shirtless man. Which, admittedly, isn’t all that close. You have a large personal bubble when it comes to half-naked people.

“I’m having breakfast in the mess, with Thea,” you say, glad that your voice sounds calmer than you feel. “And I’m taking this,” you add, grasping the sweet bread. “Maker knows I’m getting something out of this…”

You turn, and unfortunately, Solas is right there. Once you make eye contact, you try very hard to maintain it and look absolutely nowhere else. “I’ll… u-um.” Oh, no. Not now, stutter. Stay gone. “I- I’ll just l-leave you to e-eat your b-breakfast, then.” Damnit. The amusement is clear in his eyes. Bastard could at least put a shirt on.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay? I found a very interesting manuscript on Antivan dialects I thought might interest you.”

Is… is this man teasing you?!

“As I s-said, I have plans with Thea!” you snap, turning away quickly so that you can go straight from eye contact to facing the opposite direction. You stride out the door, with an amused “Thank you for breakfast!” from Solas following you out.

You’re flustered as you head back over the Great Hall, but not so flustered that you don’t notice Madame de Fer’s gaze lingering on you slightly. You walk a little faster, skip down the stairs, and head out to the mess as quickly as you can, cradling the sweet bread as if it’s a precious gem. It might as well be.

You’re late, of course, and Thea is halfway through her porridge by the time you find her with your own bowl.

“I’d accuse you of sleepin’ in, but I checked yer room. Where were you?” Thea wants to know.

“I will take that secret to my grave. But I brought a treat.” You wave the loaf in the air. “I think it’s some kind of sweet fruit bread. The kitchen’s still bribing me.”

Rather snatch at it, Thea stares at you for a moment. You can almost hear the effort in her mind. “You… You went and gave that Solas his breakfast, didn’t you? Then you came back here and ate
with me instead o’ livin’ it up with him! Aww, Emma…”

“You caught me!” you say with a grin. “That’s how much I like you, Thea. I could be having fresh squeezed juice right now!” There is no amount of juice, fresh or otherwise, that could have kept you in that bedroom. But Thea doesn’t need to know about any of that.

“So. What’s going on with the two of you?” Seeing your frown, she clarifies. “An’ I don’t mean like that unless it is like that. I’m just curious. One day you just up and move down into the apostate’s work area, now you’re bringin’ him meals and debatin’ herbs.”

It’s a fair question. One you probably should have asked yourself prior to this. You think it over for a moment as you tear off a junk of the sweet bread… oh, there’s dried fruit in this!

“Well… I went down on a whim. I was tired of being pestered—no offense—and I wanted some peace and quiet. If he’d thrown me out then, I would have kept looking until I found a cranny I could work in undisturbed. But he didn’t, so I just… kept on with it. It’s quieter down there, and I really enjoy the murals.”

“There’s more to it than that, though, right? You two are all friendly now.”

“I’m not sure if friendly is the right word,” you say honestly. “I’m just trying to squeeze some knowledge out of that bald head of his. His elven is better than mine, and I wouldn’t be much of a linguist if I didn’t jump on an opportunity to improve myself like that. I think he… tolerates me? Or is amused. Bit of both, maybe.”

“I think you’re sellin’ yourself short, Emma! You’ve already got Iron Bull all over you. Clearly, you’ve got something the men like.”

You snort, choking slightly on your bread. “Oh please, Thea. It’s not like that with Iron Bull or Solas. And you know it.”

Iron Bull would, of course, take that exact moment to burst into the mess and swagger over to the two of you.

“Emma! You give any thought to my proposition? You don’t want to give me enough time to reconsider, do you?” His voice is loud, and several nearby tables turn to look.

Thea gestures between the two of you, as if to say, SEE? Are you SEEING this? You cover your face with your hands and groan.

“Bull. Are you attempting to goad me?” you ask into your palms, teeth gritting.

“Depends, is it working?”

“No!”

“Hmm… I might have to try harder, then.”

“Maker, how do I make this stop?” you groan.

“Don’t suggest it if you’re going to regret it afterwards! What happened to working out your issues?”

“You’re giving me new issues!” you snap. “Besides, there are… considerations. I can’t break a finger, or Maker forbid, a wrist.”

“Maybe I should show you how to punch first?”
“MAKER, what are you two talking about?” Thea bursts suddenly. She looks so excited that you fear she might explode.

“I… We’re… Nothing.”

“Bullshit!”

“Don’t take Iron Bull’s name in vain, Thea,” you say dryly. She glares at you. “Whatever your imagination can come up with is doubtless far more interesting than the reality. And actually… yes.” You turn back to Iron Bull. “You should. Teach me to punch without shattering my hand, I mean. It seems like a skill I should have picked up before now.”

Iron Bull grins like you just told him he’d won a lottery game. You fear, momentarily, that he might pick you up and spin you around, or something similarly terrifying.

“That’s the spirit, Emma! Ataas shokra saartoh!”

You snort.

“What? What did he say?” Thea demands.

“Um… The nearest translation would be, when you are given struggles, strike them down.”

“So, what… He’s going to teach you to fight? Is this a Qunari courting thing?” Emma demands.


“You’re having me on!”

“No, she’s right,” Iron Bull joins in.

“Ugh, now I’m thinking of Qunari going at it,” you say, making a face. “It’s putting me off my breakfast.”

“That’s a little cruel, don’t you think?” Iron Bull asks as he sits down. “Hey, sweet bread! Where’d you steal this from?”

“She’s playing serving girl with that Solas,” Thea says with a smirk. “She gets food from the kitchen when she goes to get his meal.”

“Really?” You don’t like the look Iron Bull is giving you. You’re getting really tired of seeing that curious expression, because nothing good ever follows it.

“You better act fast, Bull, or she’ll get snapped out from under you!”

“That’s quite enough, Thea,” you say darkly. “I’m not getting snapped anywhere, by anyone.” The opens her mouth to say something else, something wicked, judging by the look in her eyes, but your glare cuts her off.

“You’re too serious, Emma,” she says, finally, sounding grumpy.

“I’m just serious enough.”

Your somewhat pensive mood carries you across the courtyard and into the Great Hall. Thea is,
possibly, not wrong about Iron Bull’s intentions. It’s hard to tell with him, thanks to that stupid Ben-Hassrath training. He’s claimed in the past that his interest in you is personal, and it seems, with Leliana’s interest somewhat satiated, that it could actually be the case. You would be flattered if you were fond of that sort of attention in the first place, let alone from a threat as big as the Iron Bull.

Your mind is so preoccupied with Iron Bull that you find yourself completely unprepared for what happens when you walk into the rotunda. Solas is already there, painting, which is a welcome sight. He turns as you enter, and the second his eyes meet yours, a cascade of images of him shirtless, sliding out of bed, flash through your mind, unwarranted and extremely unwanted.

You avert your eyes quickly and attempt to prevent yourself from blushing. You… what are you doing? Has it been so long since you saw an attractive elf half-naked that you’re swooning over it like a hormonal child? …Yes, apparently it has, since your mind is now adding embellishments. You’re fairly certain he was never standing as close as your mind is telling you he did, nor was his invitation to stay anywhere near that suggestive.

You shuffle silently over to your workspace, or what passes for it, considering you just work on a couch and a side table. If Solas has noticed your sudden, intense awkwardness, he doesn’t comment on it, praise the Maker. It really has been that long, you realize. You were rather flustered by Sera’s awkward come-on, as well. Well, you have a bedroom, with a door that closes. If it comes to that, you can deal with the situation yourself. It’s a little embarrassing, however, as you’re normally not one to get distracted by this kind of thing.

You turn your focus onto your work, banishing tantalizing images of naked elves away and focusing on wing development in adult female dragons. It’s not quite working, however, as you find yourself hyper aware of where Solas is in the room and what he’s doing at any given time. Normally, it’s easy to ignore him. You need to get a grip. Or excuse yourself for half an hour to take care of things.

“Sweaty, slippery, sinks into skin. Maker, it’s been so long; I think I might die.”

You jolt at the sudden voice, only instinct pulling your hand back from the paper and avoiding an unsightly blotch and ruined page.

It’s that goddamn boy again, this time sitting on top of the platform you used to work underneath. Before, you had given yourself pretty good odds that he had been a paranoia-induced hallucination, but now…

“Hello, Cole,” Solas says, looking up from his work at the desk.

“Cole?” you exclaim, a little too loudly. “I mean, um… You know him? He’s… real?” Maker, you sound like an idiot.

“Have you encountered him before?” Solas asks, seeming interested.

“I helped her, in the fog. She was scared.”

“And she remembers you,” Solas muses, seemingly to himself.

“Well, of course I do,” you say, confused. “Although, honestly, I wasn’t entirely sure I hadn’t imagined the whole thing. …Cole, was it?”

“Yes,” the young boy answers. You marvel at him. How did he get up there without you noticing? You have a tendency to get absorbed in your work, yes, but not so much as to ignore a stranger walking around. You set your book to the side and stand up, not taking your eyes off him, lest he vanish.

“I help people,” he says, largely unhelpfully. “I heal their hurts… Or I try. Your hurt is deep and dark, a pain that’s become a part.”

Your eyes narrow. “What…”

“Cole is a spirit,” Solas interjects, and you wonder why he didn’t mention that sooner.

“What do you mean, he’s a spirit?” you ask, your eyes sliding from the lanky boy over to Solas. “An abomination?” Your voice is incredulous. The fact that the Inquisition allows an elven apostate to hang about is unbelievable enough, but now you’re expected to believe they just allow an abomination to roam about? Ludicrous.

“No, just a spirit.”

“Spirits don’t look like that! …Do they?” You turn back to look, somewhat surprised that the boy is still there. “The demons I’ve seen, from rifts, they’re all… monstrous.”

“Cole is something of a special case.”

“A marionette with strings of sorrow. Terrified, trapped in a body that moves on its own; how could you do this to me?”

You jump, alarmed. “What’s he doing?”

“Only an ally can betray you; betrayal is always worse. I trusted only you.”

“Cole, stop!” you shout. To your surprise, he does. You turn to Solas, voice shaky. “What… just… what?”

“Cole is a spirit of compassion. He sees people’s pain and feels compelled to help them. He has a tendency to… think out loud.” He doesn’t seem to be alarmed at your shouting, and his sense of calm almost irritates you.

“I’ve never heard of a spirit of compassion…” you muse to yourself. You eye the boy… the spirit, cautiously. This is a new kind of danger. But it’s also fascinating, as is a man who knows more elven and has lived a life like yours but better. All sorts of curious things at this Inquisition. “I’m sorry I yelled, Cole,” you apologize. “You just startled me.”

“It’s all right. I frighten a lot of people. I want to help, but I don’t always say it right.”

“I understand, I think. Thank you for finding me in the fog. You really helped. Things… things could have gone very badly for me there.”

Cole’s eyes light up a little. “I’m glad. You just needed to know you were safe.”

You are never safe, least of all here. You can almost feel Solas’ eyes burning into the back of your head as he watches you calmly interact with a spirit. A normal person would probably be running away at this point. Fear of spirits is so ingrained in the public thanks to the Chantry. You shake your head, not believing the situation you’ve found yourself in.

“I’ve never… I’ve never met a spirit before, never talked to one. I’m sorry if this offends you, but you’re so… so normal.”

“No one’s ever called me that before,” he says, a little bit of awe in his voice.
“Well, you’re not exactly what I would expect, admittedly, but… What I expected was scarier. Cole, will you keep coming back to see me? I’d like to get to know you better.”

“Alright,” Cole agrees, then looks over at Solas. “Don’t worry; she’s still more curious about you. She wants to know what you know. Also, what you look like, without…” He pauses. “They come off?”

“Heh, um… Cole, why don’t you come with me to the kitchens? I need to pick up Solas’ lunch.” You glance furtively over at Solas, letting him believe your embarrassment at being sexually outed, twice, is leading you out the door. Well, that is pretty mortifying, actually, but you’ll have time to be humiliated after the immediate threat has passed.

Cole, to your surprise, actually does follow you, jumping down off of the platform and landing almost entirely silently. Being a spirit without a human body must be convenient in some ways. He comes with you out the door, across the Great Hall, and you wait until you’re at the base of the stairs to turn to him.

“Cole. I need you to listen to me. You look into my mind, you see my hurts, my memories. Right?”

Cole nods, meeting your eyes for only a second before glancing away again, staring off as if at something in the distance. “Yes. You’re scared, always scared. A terrified tension, constant and constraining. But if you told them, they wouldn’t-“

“I can’t, Cole. I can’t tell them. And neither can you. Listen!” you snap your fingers in front of his face, trying to pull his far-away eyes back into the moment. “If you do what you did in there, if you tell everyone my hurts, I could die. You don’t want to kill me, do you, Cole?”

“I, no, I… But…”

“Please, Cole,” you say, keeping your eyes locked onto his. “I need your help, but you can’t tell the others about me. I have to stay hidden. You understand that, don’t you? If everyone saw you, if everyone knew you, they would try to hurt you, right? They’ve done it before, haven’t they?”

Cole nods, silently.

“Just let me stay hidden,” you beg. “I’ll be safer."

“You won’t be happy.”

“I’d rather be unhappy and alive, Cole,” you say firmly, trying to hold his attention, gain his understanding. You need to know he won’t go talking about marionettes all over Skyhold.

“Hey! Knife-ear, what are you doing?”

Your head snaps around, and in that instant, Cole is gone. Annoyed, your eyes fix onto the human whose shouting interrupted you. You’re all alone; you picked this place specifically because it was quiet, out of sight of the main passageways. The things you could do and get away with… It seems the man is thinking the same thing. Something, however, dissuades him. Possibly the look in your eye, begging him to give you an excuse.

“Get back to work! Damn lazy knife-ears…” He grumbles as he wanders off again. Your fingers twitch, and you have to take a moment to get yourself back in control. You can’t lose your temper over something petty like that. You’ve been taking worse insults your entire life. Iron Bull is right; you really need to find a way to burn off all this stress. A few deep breaths later, and you’re on your way again, into the kitchens.
The food isn’t quite ready for you when you arrive, not like this morning, where they were practically waiting for you. You decide to join in, helping Celia and one of the other workers put the plates together.

“Two again today?” one of them asks. “He’s the last one I would’ve guessed to have company.”

“Two again,” you say, nodding, as you spoon some sort of pale, green colored bean onto a plate.

“Is it a lover?” Celia asks. “I didn’t see anyone in there when I came up. Just... you.” Three pairs of eyes fall to you. You clear your throat delicately, but say nothing.

The plates of food are made quickly as kitchen staff share knowing looks. Rumors of Solas banging the help will no doubt be making their rounds. Well, a little bit of humanization will be good for him, and everyone already thinks you’ve been bedding Iron Bull. Anything you try to do to dissuade the rumors will only fuel them, at this point.

Celia stacks the plates carefully onto your tray, adding some extra fruit with a wink. The damn thing is heavy, but you manage to make it up the stairs. Solas eyes you as you enter. He hasn’t moved from his desk, but he has cleared a space on it, no doubt for you to place the food.

“Where is Cole?” he asks mildly.

“Huh? Oh… I’m not sure.” You frown. “I was talking to him, and I thought I was doing well, but I… I don’t remember where he went. Do you think he’ll come back?”

“He may,” Solas says, and his eyes betray nothing.

“You have to tell me about him,” you insist. “There’s… there’s just a spirit, wandering around Skyhold? What’s he doing here? How is he here? Does the Inquisitor know about this? Do the Templars?” You balance the tray, with some difficulty, with one arm and one hip as you place plates on the desk. A little bit of help would not be unwarranted, but it seems like Solas is more than willing to let you struggle with the heavy tray.

“I have to confess, I’m a little… surprised, by your reaction. Most people would be alarmed by the presence of a spirit, abomination or no.”

You stare at Solas incredulously. “Most people are alarmed in your presence, Solas, or around any mage. I’m hardly superstitious. According to you, he is a spirit, outside of the Fade, who looks like a human. He is easily the most incredible thing I’ve ever seen. I was a little shocked at first, but I defer to the judgments of mages and Templars on the subject of spirits. You seemed comfortable enough with his presence.”

“You seem to know quite a bit about it all.”

You smile a bit. “Have you read Nertomarus’ Exponit Illud Phasmus?”

“I have.”

“I translated it. And others, while I worked in Orlais. I was very popular with the Circle in Montsimmard… Imagine, an Orlesian fluent in Ancient Tevene, whose pointy ears mean she works for very little.” You finally finish unloading the plates, and set the tray down with a sigh of relief. “I’m no expert, but I know more about the Fade than the average person for the same reason I now know more about dragons than the average person.”

You pull up the tiny stool and sit down at the corner of Solas’ desk. You’re not even that hungry, but
the food smells too good to ignore. “You say he’s a spirit of… compassion? I didn’t know there even was a such thing.”

“They are not particularly common. They rarely seek this world. When they do, their natures do not often survive exposure to the people they encounter.”

“And yet, here he is, in the world. How did he even get here? And how has no one run a sword through him yet?”

“The Templars don’t know of his nature. He saved the Inquisitor’s life, and so he’s allowed to stay,” Solas says shortly, and you’re surprised to hear poorly repressed irritation in his voice. What could be causing that? You decide that, perhaps, a delicate change of topic is due.

“You said before that you’re an expert in the Fade. Since we’re on the topic… would you mind if I asked you some questions? None of the mages I worked for previously were particularly open to discussing such things with a ‘rabbit.’”

“There are few hard facts, but I can share what I have learned,” he acquiesces, the irritation behind his eyes not really diminishing.

“What’s the difference between a spirit and a demon?”

“In all actuality, there is little difference. A demon is a spirit whose desires have become twisted, or who is reflecting an aspect of humanity that makes it dangerous.”

“Fear, hunger, pride,” you agree. “As opposed to compassion, joy, or wisdom?”

“Precisely. The Fade reflects the minds of the living. If you expect a spirit of wisdom to be a pride demon, it will adapt.”

“Couldn’t… couldn’t you wind up getting tricked, that way? Believing a spirit is of a better nature than it actually is?”

“Do you trust the nature of the humans around you?”

You pause, for a little longer than you should. “Ah… I see your point. I suppose people are no more inherently trustworthy than spirits.”

“People, as opposed to spirits?”

Oooh, you get a bad feeling that you may have just stepped in a bear trap. “Uhm… What I mean is…” You pause to consider. “…Fleshy people. The ones made of meat, running around, mucking things up.”

“And what separates them from spirits, precisely?”

“Well, bodies… No, I suppose spirits can possess corpses and have their own body that way. Being unable to be separated from a body, perhaps?” You tap your chin with a piece of bread thoughtfully. “Not without dying, anyway. I think. Perhaps a more concrete nature…? Although where would you draw the line?”

Solas is looking at you strangely. “What?” you say, mildly defensive. “You asked! And it’s not an easy question, when phrased that way. I can’t even say ‘which side of the Veil one calls home,’ now that I’ve met Cole. He… makes the line blurrier than I thought it was.”
“It’s interesting to meet someone who even acknowledges the difference may not be simple black and white.”

“Well, I honestly had never given it much thought,” you confess, untruly. “What makes a person people? I never really thought about it. Of course, I was fairly sure I’d never meet a spirit.”

“Anyone who dreams has the potential.”

That gives you pause. “…What, really? Not just mages?”

“With the exception of dwarves, we all dream in the Fade. Mages attract spirits the most easily, it is true, but anyone may do so.”

“I… I actually did not know that,” you say, stunned. “…Huh. Well, for now, maybe I’ll just try to befriend Cole. The way he keeps vanishing off, that will prove to be challenging enough.”

“Cole could use more friends, certainly, especially those who understand his nature,” Solas agrees. “As with all things, however, exert caution. Cole is still learning to understand this world.”

You’re a little surprised. “I think I’m in more danger from Iron Bull, honestly.”

“Do you still think he poses you a threat?” Solas’ voice is not judging, but curious. “Why?”

“I’m not hugely fond of Qunari on the best of days,” you admit. “And I don’t have good memories of Ben-Hassrath.”

“Those are reasons to dislike him, not reasons he may be a threat,” Solas points out.

You frown, not quite liking where this conversation is heading. “It’s… I don’t trust him. Or his intentions. I want to… He seems nice, not like other Qunari I’ve met. But I just… I can’t.”

“I don’t mean to challenge your decision. Only to question it.”

“You question everything,” you say with a weak smile. “It doesn’t bother me.” It should. But you find it really doesn’t.

Eye contact is maintained for about three seconds longer than you’re comfortable with, and you glance away. “I should get back to work… Let me take these dishes back, first.” You stand, gathering the empty dishes up, although you leave a small cloth napkin with fruit on it. “Don’t eat these, please. They’re for Thea.” Solas looks amused, but says nothing as you balance everything onto the serving tray and head back towards the kitchen.
The afternoon is spent in peace, long hours working on your transcript. It’s relaxing, and quiet, interrupted by nothing but the occasional echoing crow. You manage to clear your mind of wandering thoughts about Iron Bull, Sera, Solas, or the fact that you actually sent what amounts to a fan letter to Fenris, through Varric. You’re so in the zone that when the door to the rotunda slams loudly open, you swear, and again barely manage to keep from making a mess. You glare upwards, but the man who slammed the door open isn’t even looking at you. His eyes are firmly locked on Solas.

He’s such an average looking man that you don’t recognize him, at first. It’s only your tendency to never, ever, forget a face that allows you to realize: he’s the fellow you talked to, upstairs, your first night here. A spy for Leliana, you had assumed. From the way he’s speaking to Solas, however, you suspect you assumed wrong.

“Solas. There’s a situation in the Fallow Mire, one of my patrols has been taken by Avaar. I need to ride out and deal with the situation immediately. I may need magical support, and I’ve no desire to drag Vivienne or Dorian through a swamp.”

“Of course, Inquisitor.”

In… In… Inquisitor?!

“Excellent. We ride as soon as we have light to see. Make preparations tonight.”

Your mind is reeling from the information, but you can’t allow yourself to be distracted by that just now. The way Solas and the …Inquisitor, apparently, are looking at each other is rather telling. It’s a sort of barely-suppressed hatred covered over poorly with a thin coat of manners. At least, on Solas’ end… From the Inquisitor, it’s more like a shining beacon of “you-are-beneath-me.” It’s rather unpleasant to look at directly.

After a few moments of somewhat irritating back-and-forth between the two, the Inquisitor’s gaze happens upon you. You were pretending to work while you observed the two posture like angry cats, but despite not looking directly at him, you recognize the expression. He does not recognize you. It’s the look you received from Vivienne, the one a person gives to a piece of furniture. His eyes just glaze right over you. But then his gaze comes back, fixes on you. Perhaps he’s recognized you; you spoke only a week prior, and you are, technically, his linguist.

“Solas, have you finally found a companion?” The Inquisitor says, sounding far too amused. “I’m amazed you found an elf good enough for you. And I see she’s made herself comfortable... on your couch.”

You stiffen, but say nothing, force your eyes to remain on your tome. Does he not see the ink? The quills? Yes, you are laying on a couch, shoes off, but you are also very clearly writing something, not simply reading a book for enjoyment.

“Do you not recognize her, Inquisitor? She is your new linguist. You hired her on not a week ago,” Solas says, his voice filled with ice and venom. At this, you’ve no choice but to look up and introduce yourself. You stand, making something of a show of placing aside your quill and capping
your ink, and give a bow to the Inquisitor.

“Emma, your holiness. We met once prior.”

He has the good grace, at least, to look slightly embarrassed. “Ah, yes. I remember. I’m… pleased you’ve found a workplace that suits you better than the one provided.”

It’s all well and good for Solas to go pissing off the Inquisitor, but your tongue is going to get you in serious trouble at this rate.

“In any case, Solas, be on a horse and ready to go when the sun rises. I can’t leave this to my soldiers.” The Inquisitor turns and leaves the rotunda, and you close the door behind him with much more kindness than he had showed it upon entering.

You turn to Solas, eyes wide, and gesture wordlessly at the door behind you. Solas still looks angry, and he’s concealing it even more poorly now that the man has left. His knuckles are white from his clenched fists, his jaw is tight. The sight, combined with your new mental images of him shirtless, is doing uncomfortable things to you. Perhaps you should merely let the topic rest, and get back to work. It’s nearing dinner time; perhaps you can snatch something particularly sweet from the kitchen to help calm him.

But Solas sees your expression, and deigns to explain, albeit poorly. “The Inquisitor and I do not see things the same way,” he says, tight jaw making his voice hard.

You clear your throat, your growing embarrassment the only thing that keeps you from laughing at the colossal understatement. “And you are to accompany him on a journey of some kind?”

“Yes. It seems I ride for Fallow Mire in the morning. I will likely be gone for some time.”

A rock sinks to the pit of your stomach at the realization. “…Oh. How long, do you think…?”

“Weeks, likely. Perhaps longer, based on how the situation unfolds.”

Your own fists clench. You had just gotten comfortable, and now you’ll have to move again, up to the library with its constant distractions, or hunt for somewhere new. No Solas means no invisible shield to keep Thea and others away. It also means no fine meals, no excuses to go down to the kitchen to gather gossip. No enchantments on your wrist to steady sore and shaking hands. Your work will suffer for it. And so, you find, will you.

“…I see,” is all you manage to say. Fortunately, his own anger distracts from your distress. “I… I should go get dinner-“

“Miss Emma?”

You start, not expecting another voice, and certainly not expecting anyone to call you by name. You turn to see a man you don’t recognize.

“Message to you, from Mistress Lelianna. She says to get it back to her as soon as you can.”

A letter is pushed into your hands, and the man is gone. You frown down at it, then open it. It’s a missive, in Qunlat. You glance over it quickly, heart beginning to pound. Nothing jumps out at you right away, although it does seem to be a field report of some kind.

“Why me?” you murmur quietly to yourself, squinting at the message. You glance up to find Solas watching you carefully. You fold the message back up and tuck it away into your tunic. “I’ll get your
dinner before seeing to this, ser.”

“Retrieving my meals is hardly as important as your duties, da’len,” Solas says pointedly.

“Quite the contrary, hahren,” you say sourly. “Neither of us can be expected to be productive on empty stomachs.” Sweets to charm your newly soured stomach would be welcomed, something to wash down the bad taste the Inquisitor has left in your mouth.

You head out through the Great Hall, down towards the kitchens. This isn’t the first time you’ve worked for an unpleasant man, and it won’t be the last. He’s hardly the worst, but you find yourself irritated nonetheless. You expect humans to be rude to you; it’s become like background noise. But seeing him disrespect Solas put a dangerous and unpleasant fury in you. You rarely look at a person and admit to yourself that they are likely more intelligent than you, but you feel comfortable admitting that about Solas. At the very least, he is older, more educated. Deserving of respect. The image of the sneer on the Inquisitor’s face as he attempted to get under the apostate’s skin, use you as a means of goading him…

You feel a tingle in your hand; the handrail you’re grasping heats up slightly. You pull your hand back, quickly, swearing under your breath, taking deep breaths until you regain control, pushing swirling chaos back inside. You can hardly afford to lose your temper now, let alone at the Inquisitor. Whether you like him or not, he’s the best hope for overcoming the chaos that envelops Thedas. Not to mention, he’s a powerful warrior, and rumor has him training to become a Templar, as well. You need to watch yourself around him, since there is no longer hope of remaining beneath his notice.

In the kitchens, you help with the preparation of the plates for your and Solas’ dinners, milking the women there for information about his preferred foods. None of them have ever spoken to him, and yet they have bits of knowledge they don’t understand the value of. He often requests soup. Any time he is given Antivan cabbage, the tiny cabbages remain, untouched, while the rest of the food is eaten. And you know he has a fondness for sweet things. You make a few assumptions on his sense of taste from there, and make two separate meals, one for him, one for you. If the ladies suspect you, they say nothing, although there are a few winks when you ask quietly where the sweets are hidden.

You’re in luck. A visiting noble is known for having a sweet tooth, and the Inquisition’s chief diplomat had requested more cakes than could possibly be eaten by one woman. You certainly hope so, for you snatch no small amount of them when Gaston, the head chef, isn’t looking. Your suspicions about rumors are confirmed when Celia gives you a pat on the shoulder as you leave, and wishes you “good luck.” Maker. They really do think you’re seducing the man.

As if you could manage that with pilfered sweets.

The tray is distractingly heavy, which is good, as you need the distraction from your still-present irritation at the Inquisitor and your worry about Solas’ sudden trip. You’re not so distracted that you fail to notice the Inquisitor is in the Great Hall as you go through it, speaking with some Orlesian nobles, nor do you fail to notice him notice you, excuse himself, and head towards you. Uh-oh.

“Inquisitor.” You manage a curtsy despite the fact your arms shudder at the weight of the tray as you do. Thank goodness you had the foresight to put a cover over the stolen cakes. The Inquisitor directs you off to the side, behind a pillar, and, you note, out of sight of the nobles.

“What is this?” he says with a frown, gesturing towards the heavy tray. “Does Solas have you running errands for him? We have servants for this.”

Years of experience with this sort of thing keep your face perfectly placid. The Inquisitor is no grand
player of the Game. “Not at all, your holiness. Ser Solas allows me to share his work space.” The
way the Inquisitor stiffens at the title pleases you, and you continue. “He even allows me to take my
meals there, so that I may focus on translating the draconic tome more swiftly. It was my idea that I
fetch it myself, to avoid taxing the kitchen staff unnecessarily with my presence.”

“I… see.”

“I am, after all, making myself comfortable on his couch,” you add, unnecessarily. “It seems the least
I can do. If I may, your holiness? This tray is rather heavier than it looks.” You smile pleasantly, and
he shrugs you away, turning his attention back towards the nobles, likely glad they had missed the
exchange. You turn yourself, and see Varric staring at you, wide-eyed. You shake your head gently
and mouth “I’ll explain later” towards him, and then head through the rotunda doors.

“That’s quite the tray,” Solas comments, although he doesn’t rise to help you, Maker forbid. He
seems to have taken your absence as a chance to calm himself down. You’re certain the tingles of
magic still floating through the air, brushing against you, have something to do with it. If only you
had the freedom to express your anger so vividly.

“I needed something to cleanse my palate of the bad taste,” you say with forced joviality. You
carefully balance the tray with one trembling arm, sore after too long spend carrying too much
weight. You need to start doing push-ups or something. You manage to unload Solas’ meal in front
of him, and the surprised and mildly pleased expression on his face does wonders for your mood.
Clearly, your guesses at his tastes were close to their mark. You set down your meal on the corner of
the desk, taking up as little space as possible, and then lay out the tray of sweets.

“More pilfered goods for your friend?” he asks, already beginning to eat as you pull up your stool.

“Pilfered goods for a friend, at least,” you manage to say, although your voice catches. Are you
being too forward? Yes. You are. You clear your throat awkwardly. “I, um… They made a lot of
them, for some visiting noble, and I thought you might… That is…Well, I mean, since you’re
leaving tomorrow, you should have a good meal, right?” You take the lid off the poncy Orlesian
cakes, wondering how horrifyingly awkward this will be if it turns out he hates chocolate.

Solas stares at the cakes for a moment, and doesn’t say anything. Your nerves skyrocket, and you
shift uncomfortably on the stool. Then he smiles. “And you just happened to think I would enjoy
these?”

“Well… I may have noticed you have a slight sweet tooth,” you mutter.

He laughs. It’s short, but it seems to fill the room, echoing around the circular walls and bouncing
around you.

Maker, what a sound.

You’re so distracted by him that you almost forget the missive you’re supposed to be translating.
You pull it out of your shirt, opening it back up again and reading over it. It’s a simple translation,
really. And a simple document… You can’t quite determine why Iron Bull couldn’t see this. Perhaps
it’s just a test run, to see if you’re trustworthy, or if your Qunlat is good enough. You nab some of
Solas’ parchment, ink, and a quill, too lazy to stand and retrieve your own. You pop some meat into
your mouth and eat as you get to work, scribbling down a translation quickly but neatly.

You’re almost finished with it when something hits you… If this Ben-Hassrath report had come from
Iron Bull, would it not be translated already? Surely he isn’t just handing them literal pieces of paper,
still in Qunlat. Did this come from elsewhere? It’s just a report on movements of a Tevinter cult,
but… You chew lightly on the edge of the quill.

“Something interesting?” Solas inquires lightly. Clearly, your deliberating has distracted him from his normal dinner reading.

“Hmm… Perhaps,” you say, returning to scribbling down the translation. “Perhaps not. Something to think about, at least.”

You’re glad that Solas doesn’t question you further, because ‘I think our spies might be spying on our spy’ is not, when phrased that way, particularly tantalizing. Still, there may indeed be something there. It’s worth considering.

You finish the translation before you finish dinner. You cram the last of the food into your mouth--ignoring Solas’ judging look--before standing, intending fully to enjoy some of those ridiculously frilly cakes when you return. You chew quickly as you jog up the stairs, clutching both the original missive and the translation. You head up to the top floor… The man had said to give it to Leliana as soon as you had finished. Surely this was not so important as to need to be placed directly into her hands? Nonetheless, you spot her, talking to a few other people, and approach cautiously.

“And do it quickly, we can’t afford- Ah, Emma. I appreciate your swiftness on this matter.” Leliana holds her hand out, and you place both sheets of paper, folded, into her hand.

“It’s no issue, serah,” you say, allowing your confusion to show through a little. “I’m glad I could be of assistance.”

And that’s all there is to it. She waves you off, and you head back down in the rotunda, still uncertain as to what it was all about. But interesting possibilities are there. You suspect that Leliana may be getting her hands on Ben-Hassrath reports that aren’t coming directly from Iron Bull. Perhaps her setting him on you was deliberate, to alienate the two of you? Bards are tricky, and she certainly hadn’t gotten to be Spymaster of the Inquisition by playing a poor Game. It’s the sort of thing an Orlesian would do.

You come back to the rotunda to a beautiful sight: Solas is eating one of the little cakes… with a fork. They’re so tiny, one could simply eat it whole, but there he is, working his way through one, cheerfully. With a fork. Oh, this is just delightful.

You know you’re doing a poor job of hiding your mirth as you head back to his desk, but you at least manage not to laugh out loud. If the serving girls could see this, surely they would understand they have nothing to fear from Solas. You, personally, at least, cannot be afraid of a man who eats tiny Orlesian cakes with a fork.

You sit back down on your stool, pull a tiny cake over, and grab a fork, utterly failing to keep a straight face. Solas notices your quivering lips and looks at you, questioningly.

“I’m… g-glad you’re enjoying your cake, ser,” you manage, eyes beginning to water slightly from the effort of not laughing. It’s just so absurd. The cake is so tiny and… You stick your fork in your own cake dramatically, and bring the whole thing up, stuffing it into your mouth. His slightly disgruntled look as you chew and swallow nearly pushes you over the edge, but you manage to choke the cake down.

“Din'samahlen,” Solas says, with the tone of someone scolding. You work through the word quickly, then pout.

“…Did you just call me a brat? In Elven?”
“One should not protest being called childish while pouting,” Solas says mildly, which only makes you pout more, of course.

“Alright, just see if you get your breakf… oh.” You cut yourself off, expression falling. Right. Tomorrow, he’ll be gone, and quite possibly several others with him. An icy hand grips your heart as you imagine Sera, Varric, and Solas out in some godforsaken swamp, fighting barbarians and Maker knows what else.

Solas is not speaking, but he is watching you. His eyes on you cause your heart to tense, its beating becoming painful in your chest. You force a smile. “I don’t know what I’ll do without your wrist enchantment, Solas. My work will suffer.” If he notices the shallowness of your defense, he doesn’t comment upon it. You clear your throat. “Speaking of work, I should get back to it.” You stand, and begin gathering the used and empty dishes back onto the tray, leaving only the cakes and Solas’ fork, so that he can work his way through them at his leisure.

You make a point, upon leaving, to stop by Varric’s desk.

“There you are!” he whispers, pulling you close. “What was that? You know that was the Inquisitor, don’t you?”

“He was being an ass,” you whisper back, furiously. “You could have warned me the Inquisitor and Solas hate each other!”

“The Inquisitor was being an ass, so you decide to get catty with him? Are you insane?”

“Clearly!” you snap. “Now listen to me! I heard about the Inquisitor’s little outing to Fallow Mire. Who’s going with him? You said his ‘friends’ often go with him. All of you?”

“No, not all of us, not normally. Chuckles is going, I’m going, and I think the kid and the Seeker…”

“I have no idea who those people are, Varric,” you say through gritted teeth. “Is Sera going? What about Iron Bull? Dorian?”

“No, pretty sure they’re staying behind, this time. Iron Bull’s expecting… something, he wouldn’t say what, and even the Inquisitor knows better than to drag Dorian or Vivienne through a swamp.”

You let out a little sigh of relief. Sera, at least, will be staying… Although you could use the break from Iron Bull, frankly.

“What’s got you so worked up, Stutter?” Varric asks, curiously. “I can understand you being upset your boyfriend is leaving, but-“

“Don’t you start too!” you snap, and Varric even looks slightly taken aback. You sigh. “I’m sorry, Varric, it’s just… It’s easy to forget the people I’m meeting here are soldiers. Fighters. You… you go out, you kill people, you might get killed.”

Varric seems to understand the panic burning behind your eyes, then. He gives you an awkward pat on the arm. “Hey, Stutter, don’t worry. I’ll make sure Chuckles gets back in one piece!”

“I’m not… I just…” You sigh. “I need to return these dishes. And don’t worry, Varric; I’ll try to avoid the Inquisitor. I’ve no desire to be strung up or thrown out.”

Your mind is dark on the trip to the kitchen and back. The women there misread your mood; Celia gives you a comforting pat and says something insipid about men being fickle. You know she’s just trying to help, though, so you force a smile. Back in the rotunda, you have trouble concentrating on
your transcript, mind racing like a prized horse through thoughts of Solas’ and Varric’s imminent departure. Where will you work? Will their absence give you an opportunity to slip out of Skyhold? If Iron Bull was only going as well, you could truly take advantage, but he’ll no doubt be keeping an even closer eye on you.

For the first time since you began working in the rotunda, you consider leaving before Solas, putting the page you’re working on down with a frustrated sigh. But you need to squeeze out a little bit more work while you still have peace and quiet. You glare at frustration at the complicated depiction of a high dragon’s bottom jaw. There are half a dozen of these, comparing multiple skulls and their differences. It’s fantastic, beautiful, informative, and a huge pain in your ass. You should pester Leliana for a magnifying glass stand. How she expects you to get all of these details down while lounging on a couch… Although, you suppose, technically the couch part is your doing.

You glance over at Solas, and notice with a sinking heart that he’s packing things into a satchel… preparing to leave early the next morning. Perhaps you can go towards the exit, with the pretense of seeing them off, and slip out behind them? No, Iron Bull will certainly be there as well. You set the book down again, giving up on getting any more work done.

“Going to bed, da’len?” Solas asks as you stand. “I was beginning to wonder if you slept at all.”

“I just lay in bed for four hours and stare at the ceiling,” you say dryly. “No sleep required. I… I am normally up before dawn. Perhaps I will… will see you leave.” You clear your throat. “If not… Well… Be safe.”

Embarrassed, you leave quickly, heading out the Great Hall and across the courtyard. You pause there, for a moment, attempting to calm yourself. You’re not looking forward to tomorrow. Back to meals in the mess, back to constant interruptions from curious humans, back to sore wrists and tight muscles. You had enjoyed the last few days more than you realized.

“He will come back,” comes a reassuring voice from behind you. You startle, but relax when you recognize it.

“Cole!” you say, surprised, as you turn. “After you disappeared, I wasn’t sure…”

“Terror gripping tight, fear, flashes of fighting. Battlefields are dangerous. You know. But we’ll be okay.”

“…We?” Horror grips you. “Cole… Cole, are you going too? Are they taking you?”

“I’m good at not being seen.”

Shit. They drag a spirit into the middle of a battle? A spirit of compassion? Of course they do; what care do they have for him? …SHIT. He’ll be out there, with Solas, for weeks! Gently, you place a hand on each of his shoulders, gripping firmly, but not enough to hurt.

“Cole. This is important. I need you to promise not to talk about me to Solas. Don’t tell him anything. Do you understand me?”

“Solas would understand, if you-“

“Cole, please,” you beg, voice breaking slightly. “Maybe… Maybe he would. But I can’t… I’d have to be sure. It would have to be on my own time. Please. Promise me. Swear it.”

“A Alright…”
Your shoulders sag in relief. “Thank you, Cole. I’m sorry, I truly am. But I have to be safe.”

“Solas is similar, somehow. He sounds the same. Tell him. Trust him,” Cole urges, but you shake your head.

“I can’t.”

Chapter End Notes

Who got fan art? I got fan art!

Shout out to Wee for proof-reading this in record time.
Your night is spent, ironically, staring at the ceiling. You manage to drift off a few times, but it doesn’t stick; the sleep just slides right off you. Twice, you wake with your hand between your legs, the ghost of imaginary lips on yours. The second time, you decide to just get up. It will be dawn soon enough, and that’s when Solas and the others are riding off. If you head out now, you can look for a possible way to sneak out after them, or another way to get in and out of Skyhold undetected.

You dress and exit, quickly made miserable by the cold outdoors. There’s an ungodly freezing wind whipping through Skyhold. You hope Solas is at least bundled up for his impromptu trip to the marshes. At least it’ll be warm there. You walk the ramparts, and once again you’re largely ignored by the guards. They would probably quickly spring to action if you started to scale the wall, but it’s good to know that you can at least get this far. Unfortunately, the more you look, the more it seems that the only way out of Skyhold is across the main bridge.

Discouraged, you head down to the courtyard, and mill about there for a while. Eventually, you find an out-of-the-way, out-of-the-wind corner to huddle up in, near the main portcullis. At least you’ll have a good view of the Inquisitor, savior of Thedas, as he rides to… do whatever it is he plans on doing in Fallow Mire. Save a lost patrol, if what you overheard is correct.

You must doze off a little, although you don’t feel any more rested for it, just stiff, sore, and frozen solid. But the sun is beginning to peek over the horizon, and the bustle of another day of work is beginning. It was shouting that awoke you, and you soon see why… Sure enough, the Inquisition was riding out. Disorganized groups lined either side of the pathway as the progression headed out through the open portcullis… how were you not awoken by that opening? You could have, perhaps, slipped out before them, although you sincerely doubt it. Nor can you slip out with them; everyone is on horseback.

You’re left to play the onlooker, searching the line of horses for familiar faces. You spot Varric, sitting on a mount that straddles the line between horse and pony. He doesn’t look any more pleased about the situation than his “horse” does. Against your better judgment, you wave, arms high in the air. He spots you, smiles, and waves back. He has to come back alive, you think to yourself. He still has to sign your book, and he promised that. The unhappy tension that’s been with you since the day before climaxes in an icy stab through the chest as you spot Solas. He’s mounted on a rather beautiful palomino, although you’ve not much an eye for horses. He looks… striking. And watching him ride past is more of an agony than you’d thought it would be.

You’re shocked when his eyes glance over you, more shocked when they come back again, this time focusing on you. You see the smallest of smiles ghost his lips, and he raises a hand in a tentative, almost half-hidden acknowledgement. You raise your own, waving slightly, not the dramatic, full-bodied motion you had given to Varric.

Please, Maker, let him make it back in one piece.

When you can no longer see him from where you stand near the portcullis, you spin about, push your way through the crowds, and charge up onto the ramparts, watching from the tall walls until the progression of horses is out of sight. The stabbing in your chest intensifies, until you fear you might be overcome with it.
“Hey, kid.”

Ugh.

“I knew you’d be here,” you grumble, more to yourself.

“C’mon, let’s get some food. You know that girl of yours will be waiting there, like a lost puppy. You should see her face when you skip meals.”

You glare up at Iron Bull. You’re exhausted, sleep-deprived, worried, and reaching critical levels of sexual frustration. You’re a little concerned that if Iron Bull pushes too hard, you’ll wind up punching him before you have a chance to pretend to learn how to do it.

“Try not to worry,” he says, voice a little softer. “They know what they’re doing, all of them. They’ll come back alive.”

You’re really quite transparent, aren’t you? You let out a sigh. “Let’s get breakfast.”

The mess is as busy as ever, with an extra rush of people who’d been watching the progression. You do manage to spot Thea, however, and the two of you join her. She eyes the two of you, clearly wanting to say something, but also just as clearly able to read your mood. There’s a nigh-tangible wall of gloom around you.

“You’re, uh… developin’ some bags under your eyes there, Emma. Dramatic ones. Not sleepin’ well?” Thea finally asks.

“No, I’m not,” you say shortly.

“You know what’s a good cure for that? Vigorous physical exercise!” Iron Bull interjects. Thea snorts, then covers it by coughing. You glare at her, but it lacks vigor. You are rather tired, and coming to terms with the fact you’ll probably be sleeping with half of the Inquisition via rumor before you leave this place.

“Well, you know what I think ya need?” Thea says, and you cringe a little. “Oh, Maker…”

“A day off!” You blink. That went somewhere perfectly reasonable. Had Thea been possessed, perhaps? “All the serving girls get one. Hell, even I get one, though I take it once a tenday. Why shouldn’t you? You’ve been here o’er a week now!”

“What would I do with a day off?” you ask with a frown. “Loiter?”

“I bet you ‘aven’t even seen most o’ Skyhold!” Thea says pointedly.

“So, loiter, then.”

“I think Thea’s right on this one,” Iron Bull says. He looks thoughtful, which probably isn’t a good sign. “You could use a day off. You’re looking worse every day.”

You scowl at him in lieu of a response.

“Tell you what, give me an hour. If I can’t find something to hold your interest, you can crawl back to that rotunda of yours and bury yourself in work.”
The rotunda.

The thought of moving out of that empty place sends another sharp lance through your chest. “Alright,” you agree, just to postpone the inevitable.

Both Iron Bull and Thea look a little surprised that you agreed so readily. You merely return to sullenly downing your gruel. It’s pretty good gruel, as that sort of thing goes, but you know that, by lunch, you’ll be missing the fresh meat and warm bread that proximity to Solas had been providing.

After eating, you follow Iron Bull out through the courtyard. An hour of whatever passes for entertainment in Skyhold… Too early for drinks, so perhaps some sort of card or dice game? A relaxing stroll through the gardens that you’ve yet to see, but keep hearing about, perhaps? You’re surprised and a little confused when Iron Bull brings you to a series of large barns and a large, paddocked field. Horses? He’s brought you to see horses? Well, you suppose the stereotype of women and horses is a popular one. You, however, have never ridden a horse in your life.

He takes you into one of the barns, and you have to admit to some curiosity as to what, exactly, he’s up to. Perhaps he intends to show off a mount of his own? You amuse yourself by trying to imagine the giant of a horse that would be able to carry such a mountain of a Qunari.

“Hello, Bull. Who’s your new friend?” Your eyes glance away from the stable boxes and the horses therein to fix on the source of the voice, a grizzled looking older man with a rather impressive beard. Your eyes dance over him, picking up details. He moves a little stiffly, steps forward on his right foot. Old soldier, perhaps? Then, your eyes fix onto the symbol on his shoulder.

Grey Warden.

You’re a little in awe, despite yourself. You’ve only ever met Grey Wardens in passing, unless you count knowing the Hero of Ferelden before she was a Grey Warden, which you don’t. The Warden follows your gaze to his shoulder as Iron Bull answers.

“This is Emma, the Inquisition’s new linguist. Emma, this is Blackwall.”

“What’s a linguist going to do in a barn?” Blackwall says with a snort. You’d be irritated, but frankly, you don’t know either.

“It’s her first day off! Thought I’d show her around a bit.” Iron Bull keeps walking, past Blackwall, and you follow him. You and the old soldier share a look as you pass him. Suspicion is plain on his features, but you’re more curious than suspicious. Grey Wardens wind up in a lot of odd places. A barn is hardly the strangest.

You idly check out the horses as you walk. Each one seems grander than the last, and you pass both smaller horses, verging on ponies, and giant horses that must be eighteen hands high. And then, you see what you now suspect Iron Bull has brought you here for.

You have seen halla. You have even seen, in fleeting glances, harts, normally at quite a distance. This is your first time being so close. Your breath catches a little in your throat at the beauty of him. He’s a deep, reddish brown, with not a mane, but a thick coat of white fur on his head and chest. Gorgeous. Iron Bull steps close, careful not to entangle their horns—wouldn’t that be a sight—and you step closer as well, marveling at the size and the strength of the creature in front of you.

“And this,” Iron Bull says, sounding smug, “is Revas. Solas named him.”

You step up, better judgment utterly forgotten. You open a soft palm under the hart’s nose, giggle slightly as he breathes in and out on you heavily, then butts his soft, warm nose against your hand.
“…Did you just giggle?” Iron Bull’s voice comes from behind you, mildly incredulous. “I didn’t know you could actually make that kind of a sound.”

You ignore him, running your other hand gently along the hart’s face, then, carefully, down his neck, not wanting to spook him. He seems content, however, and leans forward to butt against your chest, very nearly clocking you with one of his massive antlers.

“He normally prefers elves,” Iron Bull says, and you can hear the amusement in his voice. “He seems to really like you, though.”

“Why didn’t Solas take him when he left?” you manage, although you cut yourself off a bit with a laughing gasp as Revas tongues at your hand, likely searching for a treat.

“The Inquisitor prefers that they match when they ride out. If Solas rode a hart, the Inquisitor would feel compelled to as well, and none of them much care for him.” The voice that speaks is unfamiliar, and you crane your neck around as best you can to see who speaks. It’s another human man, dark skinned and very nearly bald. “He likes you,” the man observes dryly.

“Well, I like him,” you say, grinning stupidly. You run a hand through Revas’ thick fur, and the hart grunts his approval. “I had no idea the Inquisition… where did you even find him?”

“He was a gift, likely from a group of Dalish, although I’m not entirely sure. We’ve managed to procure a few others, as well.”

“Horsemaster Dennet, this is Emma, the Inquisition’s new linguist,” Iron Bull introduces, since it’s quite clear you’re too distracted to do it yourself.

“Do you have any experience with harts, Miss Emma?” Dennet asks curiously.

“Essentially none,” you manage to say as you lean backwards to avoid being struck with an antler as Revas gets a little too curious about what might be in your pockets. “I used to own a mule.”

“A mule.”

“Yes. Her name was Bella, and she was the only animal I’ve ever owned,” you say, somewhat wistfully. “I tried to bring her with me, but Templars decided they wanted her. I only hope they kept her as a beast of burden and didn’t have her for dinner.”

“That’s…”


“What?” you and Dennet say in unison.

“I can count the number of times I’ve been on a horse on one hand!” you protest. Technically true, as you can count to zero using only one hand with ease. You’re uncertain if mules and ponies count.

“No better time to learn!”

“A hart is hardly a creature to learn to ride on,” points out Dennet.

“Aw, c’mon, that thing loves her!” Iron Bull points out. As if on cue, Revas attempts to stick his nose into your pocket, nearly dragging your pants down. You grasp at them desperately.

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“Fine,” Dennet says grumpily. “But first, you show her how to saddle it, and if she gets trampled, you explain it to the Inquisitor.”
Somehow, you manage to secure your trousers, and Iron Bull leads you over to where the tack is. You listen intently as he explains what each piece is—if you’re going to do this, you’re going to do it correctly and without dying. Normally, this is exactly the kind of tomfoolery you prefer to avoid, but… come on, when are you next going to have a chance to ride a hart? Probably never! You’re not going to pass this one up for fear of standing out or breaking a limb. Limbs heal, and you already stand out. Falling off of a hart repeatedly will probably help you blend in.

Still, as you struggle around an uncooperative Revas, attempting to get his bridle on while he repeatedly spits out his bit, you can’t help but wish you had gone for a more cooperative fellow for your first time. You somehow manage to get him properly saddled and bridled after several tries and a lot of dodging as he attempts to “accidentally” stomp one of your feet or brain you with his antlers. You desperately bribe him with carrots until he holds still long enough for you to show him to Iron Bull for tentative approval.

When you finally get the all clear, you come to the conclusion that you have literally no idea how to mount a hart. Riding a donkey was easy. You just got on it. But you’re short, and Revas is tall, and it’s difficult to even get your foot in the stirrup from a standing position. Eventually, you lead him over to the fence, climb the fence, and use the advantage of height to crawl your way onto the hart’s back.

Fortunately, Revas is used to being ridden, and doesn’t prove to be too terribly difficult, although you suspect he can sense your uncertainty. With helpful (and not so helpful) shouted instructions from Iron Bull, you manage to successfully navigate your way around the enclosure several times. Although at one point, something causes Revas to begin to gallop, and you only manage to last about ten seconds before flying off.

You fall off several times before you decide that your aching back and legs are unable to keep you in the saddle at all anymore. Following Iron Bull’s instructions, you manage to get the saddle and bridle off of Revas, and even brush him down, which is something you might pay to do again.

You reluctantly say goodbye to Revas as Iron Bull drags you off, declaring it time for lunch. You’ll definitely be coming by again, although you doubt Dennet will allow you to ride the hart without supervision. It’s just as well; you’d probably kill yourself. It’s a miracle you haven’t been trampled already, and you can feel bruises forming as you waddle to the mess behind Bull.

“So,” he says as the two of you sit down with your meals. “Do I know how to show a lady a good time, or what?”

The fact that you laugh shows how much your mood has improved from that morning. “Alright, alright. I had a good time. Thanks. I never thought I’d try something like that… and I’m sore, everywhere. But it was amazing.”

“Oh, Maker, there’s no way this is as good as it sounds,” comes Thea’s voice from behind you. You roll your eyes as she sits down beside you.

“Iron Bull took me to the stables—”

“Yeeeesss?”

You scowl at her. “And taught me to ride!”

At this, Thea explodes with laughter as you rapidly redden. “A hart! He taught me to ride a hart! Get ahold of yourself!”
“I’m sorry! Maker! I even knew what you meant, but you should have heard yourself…” She’s leaning on the table for support, nearly crying from laughing so hard.

“Must everything be perversion with you, Thea?” you say tiredly.

“Life’s more fun that way,” she says, a few giggles interrupting her as she catches her breath. “You should try it.”

“My life is plenty of fun, thank you,” you say snippily.

“Yeah, sure. What are you planning on doing this afternoon?”

“Getting some work done, of… stop giving me that look! I took the whole morning off!”

“Mmhmm.”

“Baby steps, Thea,” Iron Bull says mildly. “You should have seen her on that hart. I didn’t she could smile that much without breaking. She giggled.”

“Wha’, really?”

“I don’t know why I’m friends with you two…” you mutter to yourself sullenly.

It isn’t until you’ve left and are heading for the rotunda that you realize your slip. Friends? Well, it’s the kind of thing you would say on purpose, especially to Thea, but the fact that you said it without thinking worries you. You’re not the sort of person who keeps friends well.

You’re not particularly happy to be heading into the rotunda, either. You haven’t even decided on whether to head back up to the library, or go investigate the suspicious, half-hidden library you’d found down in the basement. You want to be convenient enough for Leliana to reach easily, but you also want to be left alone by essentially everyone else. It’s a difficult balance.

There is no Varric near the entrance, and no one to chide you over your hesitation. Eventually, however, you open the door and step inside. You frown at the emptiness of it, until you notice something you hadn’t before... No, it wasn’t that you hadn’t noticed it; it was that it had not been there. A desk. You walk towards it, frowning lightly. It’s an old thing, and fits poorly against the curved wall of the rotunda, but it has in front of it a comfortable, cushioned chair. And… your papers and tome have been moved from their station near the couch and placed here.

One paper in particular stands out, resting as it is on the center of the desk. Hands hesitant, you pick it up slowly. It’s written in a hand you do not recognize, and… in Elven.

Your heart pounds in your chest as you read, grasping for context at the few words you do not recognize (there is an Elven word for ‘desk’, who knew). The signed name at the bottom confirms it… a note from Solas. In beautifully written Elven script, the letter informs you that he had a desk brought in so that you would not feel tempted to use his while he was away.

You sink into the chair, legs threatening to give away at the unfamiliar sensation in your chest… stabbing, like before, but very different. He had simply assumed you’d stay in his rotunda, when good manners dictated you vacate. He’d had a desk brought in. He’d written you a note. You’re not quite sure this is something you can handle. You flip the letter over, senselessly checking for more. To your surprise, there is more. Written on the back is a…

It’s a pronunciation guide.
The butterflies die as your eye twitches slightly. You can just see the smug look on that ass’ face. Biting your lip and taking a deep breath to calm yourself, you gently set the letter to the side, not wanting to crumple or toss it despite your irritation. It’s still a very kind gesture, even if it is tinted with assholery. And it means that you can just... stay down here, doing your work where you’d grown comfortable. Without Solas, it’s likely that people will find their way down to interrupt you, but surely with less frequency than if you stayed in the library.

Since you spoiled yourself by taking the morning off, you set to work quickly, making use of the smooth, even surface of your new desk, the perfect height of your new chair. Solas has returned the entirety of your translation, so you take to that, deciding to finish the translation before scribing any new pages. Your body aches the longer you spent arched over your work, bruises developing in places you didn’t know you had from falling repeatedly from Revas. You idly imagine Solas’ warm hands and magic soothing your aches and pains as you whip through page after page of Tevene text.

You work straight through dinner and into the night, marveling at the lack of interruptions. The rotunda feels empty, without the constant presence of Solas hovering in the background, but it’s very quiet, and you get a great deal of work done. By the time your eyes are threatening to mutiny from staring at a book for so long, you feel that you will be able to complete the translation with a few more days’ solid work.

Without Solas there to chide you, you work until your body gives out from under you, eyes blurring with exhaustion until they can no longer focus on the page. Finally, you give up. You have no real recollection of crossing the cold courtyard and collapsing into your bed, but you must have, as you spend the night drifting in and out of dreamless sleep, staring blandly up at the dark ceiling above your bed.

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You’re out before dawn again the next morning, having caught perhaps a few hours of restless sleep. It’s going to catch up with you; you know it is. But you can’t figure out how to leave Skyhold, can’t find a corner of it that isn’t filled with people at all times. If only the Inquisitor had deigned to take Dorian or Vivienne, or both, with him. They and Solas were the only mages of enough talent to have you particularly concerned. Well, that and all the bloody Templars, you suppose.

You’re heading towards the Great Hall, figuring to get an early start on your translation, when Iron Bull ambushes you.

“Falling off a hart a few dozen times not enough to put you to sleep?”

You sigh. “I’m just an early riser.”

“Well, early riser, how about we get started on punching?”

“Wh-“

“C’mon, you had a good time yesterday with the hart, right? Let me show you how to throw a punch, maybe you’ll get worn out enough to actually sleep.”

You sincerely doubt that, but you do need to start dedicating some time to “learning to fight” if you want to be able to hand him a proper beating in the future. And you had wanted to start exercising more. You sigh again, rub your brow. “Alright, fine. You don’t get to beat me up as badly as Revas did, though.”

“I’ll be gentle,” he promises teasingly, and you just roll your eyes. A week ago, such flirtation would
have left you irritated, perhaps a little frightened. Now, you’re too tired to care. You’ll lose your edge the more exhausted you become… This is a problem that needs a solution, and soon.

You follow Iron Bull out into an unsurprisingly empty sparring ring. It’s a little too close to where the Templars practice for you to be very comfortable with it, however.

“Alright, let’s see what we’re working with. Make a fist,” he instructs. You can do that, at least, and curl your hand into a fist, thumb on the outside, avoiding the stupidest mistake one could make. When he asks you to throw a punch, however, you do so a little awkwardly, not shaky, but without any real force behind it. You do this a few times before he’s satisfied.

“Alright, first lesson,” he says. He catches your hand with his much larger one and your chest tightens.

Tight cell, see yourself reflected in black eyes.

You take a few deep breaths as he rearranges your fingers slightly. “You always want to punch with your middle knuckle here. It’s the strongest one. If you lead with your ring or pinky finger, you’ll find up with broken fingers.” You readjust accordingly, throw a few more weak punches at the air, waiting for the next tidbit you can add.

He corrects you a few times, teaching you how to twist your arm to avoid straining your elbow, how to throw more force into without hurting your shoulder. You spend most of the morning punching at a dummy, allegedly to get used to the sensation. A lot of people have a sort of block against striking others, which is why soldiers have to train. You don’t want to find out if you have what it takes to drive a sword through someone’s gut in the heat of the moment, if you can avoid it. You, of course, have no difficulty striking people, with a punch or otherwise. If anything, lately it’s been difficult to avoid it. But it’s better that you play the inexperienced woman with this sort of thing. There aren’t a lot of savory places where an elf can learn to fight.

You’re sweaty despite the chill by the time Iron Bull declares that you’re finished for the morning. The sun is resting low in the sky, but is definitely above the horizon, and your stomach is letting you know on no uncertain terms that it wants food, right now. You head towards the mess, and Iron Bull, of course, tags along. After you sit and begin to eat, the rest of your body begins complaining. Loudly.

“Ugh… Sweaty and sore,” you grumble to yourself. “Why did I think any of this was a good idea?”

“Ah, working up a sweat is good for you! There’s always the bath house.” You make a face. Public bath houses are not your favorite thing in the universe. People never comment on the crisscrossing scars on your hands and fingers—they look like the kind one could get from a simple housecat. But you’ve got a few other, more dramatic scars that always lead to questions, sometimes even from complete (nosy) strangers.

Iron Bull correctly reads your expression and leans in slightly. “Well, you know… I’ve got a private bath.”

“Are you two at it again?” comes Thea’s voice from behind you. “If you’re like this in the mess, I wonder what you’re like in private?”

“Lots of sweating, groaning, and swearing,” you say, your voice dripping sarcasm. “We’re probably lovers by Fereldan standards.”

“You’re actually not that bad,” Iron Bull points out. “You learn quick.”
“Okay, there’s no way this is as good as it sounds. What is it this time? More harts? Taken up nug wreslin’, maybe?”

“Punching, remember?” you say, gesturing with your fork towards Iron Bull. “Soon I’ll be able to break someone’s jaw without breaking my hand in the process.” Your mind is on that private bath as the banter continues, however. If you can figure out where it is, maybe you can sneak in when Iron Bull is out training with the Chargers? The idea of a nice, luxurious, possibly warm private bath is worth a few risks.

After breakfast, you head back to the rotunda, still thinking about baths. Did Solas have a private bath, hidden somewhere? More importantly, could you find it, break in, and use it while he was gone? You sit down at your new desk and re-read the note from Solas. Who writes a note about a desk in Elven, anyway? Who’s that fluent in an ancient language? Well, you, obviously, but even you wouldn’t leave someone a note in ancient Tevene. Well… Maybe Dorian. Alright, so you’re both kind of dorks.

You glance over the pronunciation on the back, cringing to note that your pronunciation really is awful.

“Nuvenin,” you mutter out loud to yourself. “NUvenin. NuVENin. NuvenIN. Nuvenin.” You wrap your tongue around a few of the other words. This isn’t exactly the way you wanted to learn Elven from Solas, but if you can use these to improve your overall pronunciation, you’ll at least have something to be smug about when he comes back.

If he comes back.

You push down the throb of painful panic in your chest, set down the note, and pull your translation towards you. Time to bury yourself in work until you suffocate the anxiety. It’s not the best strategy for dealing with stress, in fact, it might actually be the worst, but it’s always worked for you in the past. That and running. You’re really fond of running, but that won’t help this burning sensation of loss. There’s still too much here you want to stay for.

You blast your way through the translation, stopping occasionally only to stretch your hands and fingers or rest your strained eyes. You fully intend to work through lunch, but ultimately the choice isn’t yours. Iron Bull shows up around lunch time, and you hear him enter. You finish a line of translation with a sigh, and are surprised that he actually waits for you to finish. You turn, and are even more surprised to find that he’s already brought food.

It’s not a serving girl’s platter, by any stretch of the imagination, but you can smell fresh bread and a some kind of spiced meat coming from the large, open-topped basket he’s carrying.

“Figured you were missing your fancy meals,” he says with a grin. You have been missing them, as a matter of fact, but this is starting to look dangerously like courting. Better make this clear now.

“Look, Iron Bull, I appreciate you… whatever it is you’re doing. The hart, the training, the food. But, I mean… You know, what Thea says, it’s not really…” You flounder a bit, not quite sure how one does this. Turning down suits is not something you’ve done a lot of, in your life. “I’m not…”

“Hey, it’s alright,” he says, in that softer voice you’re coming to appreciate. “I’m not going to lie and say you’re not attractive to me, or anything like that, but if you’re not interested, you’re not interested. I’m just hoping I can give you some better memories with Qunari than whatever you’ve got banging around in there. Can’t hurt, right?”

You smile, and surprise yourself with the fact that it feels slightly genuine. Not entirely; the practice
of smiling when it’s socially appropriate is so ingrained into you that you’d have a hard time calling most of your expressions truly “genuine,” but… You felt like smiling, a little, before you did. That’s something.

“Alright, let’s, uh…” You look around the rotunda. Your desk is covered with work, and touching Solas’ desk feels anathema to you. “…Perhaps outside?”

Iron Bull has followed your gaze towards Solas’ desk and nods, heading out the way he came in, the courtyard entrance. You follow, and the two of you sit on the half-wall that serves to keep drunkards and the clumsy from toppling down into the courtyard. You feel like kicking off your shoes, a little, letting bare feet hang over the courtyard, but instead, you reach into Iron Bull’s basket, exploring what he’s managed to pilfer… although you suppose it’s not pilfering when he does it.

Meat between slices of bread… you’re used to the concept from Orlesian parties, but when they do it, the bread is light and fluffy, delicately cut, and, as is the case with most things Orlesian, tiny. This is something else, a large slab of meat between two equally rough cuts of bread. Well, you eat meat and bread all the time, this is just doing both at the same time.

As the two of you eat, you watch soldiers and Templars sparring and training in the rings below. Iron Bull makes some very interesting comments on Templar fighting stances that you hadn’t noticed, and could perhaps exploit in the future, if you ever found yourself fighting a Templar.

“That’s the problem with Templars,” you say absent-mindedly. “They expect a mage or a skirmisher, never both. During the war, I saw one fighting a mage who could turn her mana into a blade; he got sliced to ribbons.”

“You see a lot of fighting?”

“During this war? Mostly Templars really invested in killing anyone who looked at them cross. Most of the rebel mages were in Redcliffe, all the ones in Orlais were mostly hiding, trying to avoid the Templars and the civil war. But there were a few…” You take a drink of the sweet wine Iron Bull had brought, and sigh. “I stayed bundled up tight in my house, avoided strangers and gave anyone wearing a Templar uniform anything he asked for… until the Red Templars showed up. Then I ran.” You glance around at the sturdy walls, the army of armed soldiers that would, hopefully, be standing between you and any attacking force. “I could have done worse, I suppose.”

“How’d you make it through all that fightin’, elfy?” comes a familiar voice. You crane your head around Iron Bull’s bulk, and see Sera, standing where she had been previously blocked from your view.

“Poorly,” you say with a sigh. “Essentially none of my supplies… or my mule, for that matter, survived the trip.”

“Yer what?”

“Supplies?”

“Don’t be catty, I meant the donkey!” She sits down next to you, feet dangling down beside yours.

“I had a mule,” you say with a sigh. “Her name was Bella.”

“Maker, I’m imaginin’ you with a donkey…“
“She was a good companion! Until she wasn’t.” If there hadn’t been so many damn Templars… If you hadn’t been alone. Things could have been different. You really are quite unhappy about losing Bella. She had been your companion for over a year at that point.

“So, you two buddies now?” she asks, gesturing between you and Iron Bull.

“Eeeeh…” you say, waving your hand vaguely.

“Hey! Is that anyway to talk about your new trainer?” Iron Bull protests.

“Psssh. You’re teaching me how to throw a punch. You’re hardly a mentor,” you say with a snort.

“Really? But you-“

“It’s high time I learned,” you say, cutting her off with a pointed glance. “Even if I’m not entirely comfortable with Qunari, he was the first to offer.” You shove the last of your bread into your mouth, chewing as you stand. You wash it down with a last swig of sweet wine, then stretch.

“Alright. Back to the grind for me… Thanks for the meal, Bull.”

Iron Bull has a more innate understanding of one’s personal boundaries than Sera, it seems, as he accepts the cue to leave, whereas Sera follows you into the rotunda. Seeing her in there jars you slightly, but you head to your desk, certain she’ll get the hint eventually. She walks the walls in a long, slow circle, much as you had when you first entered, as you begin your translation again.

“Never been in here,” she says suddenly, jarring you out of your focus. “Stupid Solas is normally here, his head so far up the past… Oh,” she adds, seeing your glare. “Guess you like ‘im.”

“I respect his knowledge,” you say darkly. You try to get back to work, but in a matter of minutes, she’s prattling again, and when you turn around, she’s sat down on the corner of Solas’ desk. You clench your jaw a little, take a deep breath.

“Between Iron Bull and Solas, you sure got yer plate full, huh?” she’s saying, but you’re barely paying attention to the actual words.

“Sera…” you begin, your patience wearing quickly as she thumbs through one of Solas (likely old, likely valuable) tomes.

“Y’know, I could train ya! I got all kinds of interestin’ knowledge.”

“Perhaps,” you say, gritting your teeth together and standing. “It helps me to have scheduled time with which to socialize, so that I can focus on my work for the Inquisition.” You cross the rotunda in quick strides, gently closing the tome and removing it from her grasp.

“Ugh, you’re even startin’ to sound like him, a little!”

You want to say something catty, like what, you mean educated, but bite your tongue. So the two elves in your life aren’t fond of each other. You won’t be getting together for any elf parties, so sad. You can still enjoy her company.

“I should get you in the evening! Bet I could teach you tons.”

You sigh. “If I agree to meet you after dinner, will you let me work?”

“Yep! Meet me in the archery field, the one where we met!” she says cheerfully, and you’re starting to suspect she was annoying you on purpose. That doesn’t stop you from watching her rear sway as
You skip dinner, focusing instead on getting as much work done as you can. As more and more people realize Solas isn’t here to be grumpy at them, more people, much like Sera, will be walking right in. You suspect your work these next few weeks won’t be your best, or your quickest. If you can at least finish the translation, you can give a progress report to Leliana. You’d like to at least prove that they’re not wasting their resources on you.

Finally, a time that is inevitably “after dinner” comes along, and you can’t put off setting down your work any longer. You’re not happy about it, however, and grumble under your breath as you trudge out to the archery range. Sera isn’t the only person there, but she does have a second bow. Maker. On top of pretending to learn things you already know, it seems you’ll also be learning genuinely new things.

“Sera. You do know I’ve never picked up a bow, right?” you ask her as you walk over.

“Like it’s hard! C’mon!” she tosses the bow to you. You at least manage to catch it.

“I can’t help noticing that you’ve brought me, literally, just a bow and arrows. No vambrace? No chest guard?”

She snorts. “Y’don’t need one!”

You glance down at your chest a little dejectedly. It’s perhaps a little flatter than hers, but that’s just cruel.

“Besides, brought you a tab! See how considerate I am?”

You take the tab with a sigh. At least the little piece of leather will keep you from shredding your fingers with this tomfoolery. She points towards the target, and you scowl at her. “Are you even going to show me how to do it?”

“You need me to? You’ve seen me do it before. Here, watch.” Effortlessly, she notches an arrow, draws back, and releases, one smooth motion that lodges the arrow in the center of the target. “See?”

“…You’ve never taught anyone before, have you?”

“Wassat supposed to mean?”

“Alright… alright…” You try to mimic her stance as best as you can, manage to grasp an arrow and notch it. It’s not as though you’ve never seen a bow work before… But she tsks you as you begin drawing the string back.

“Yer holdin’ it all wrong!”

“Show me how to hold it, then!” you snap. “One of the key parts of showing me how to do something is actually showing me.”

“Alright, grumpy. Here.” And then her hand is on yours, fingers calloused, hand small, delicate looking… much like yours. She adjusts your grip, both on the bow and on the string, then stands behind you to raise your arms up into the correct position. Your breath catches in your throat as you feel the soft swell of her breasts against your back. It’s a small miracle you don’t accidentally release the arrow right then, but you manage to hold on to the string.
“Pull back further; I know ya got more strength than that,” she says, batting at your arm. “You’re stronger than ya let on, right? Can’t throw a punch, but you can climb a wall?”

You scowl at her. “Those are two very different skill sets.” You release the arrow, and cringe as it misses the target entirely.

“Wow, you suck.”

“Thanks, Sera.”

You continue until it’s well into the night. When it becomes too dark for you to shoot at (and miss) targets, you show her a few tricks for throwing daggers. It’s all in the wrist, and you’re amused by her lack of talent at it.

“I’m good with my fingers, not my wrist!” she protests when you point this out, and you shut your mouth quickly, lest you say something untoward. Sera is easy to relax around, easy to flirt with. She’s a bit like Iron Bull in that regard, except with one major difference: you’re actually attracted to her. But you know better than to let your libido get away from you. Oh, sure, it’s fun when you start out, but that way lies disaster, and you know it.

“Ugh, we’re all sweaty,” Sera says, wrinkling her nose. “We should go to the bath house.”

“We?” you say, raising an eyebrow. “That’s rather forward.”

“Oh, pshaw. S’more interestin’ than private baths! C’mon!” she says, grabbing your wrist.

“Alright,” you agree, consenting to be dragged along. “But I’m wearing a towel. Got to protect my girlish virginity.”

The shared bath is warm, steam rising from the waters, and you wonder why until you see the glowing sigils of a fire rune. Brilliant… They’ve got the place crawling with Templars, but still enough mages to give them basic comforts! Bloody hypocrites…

Sera all but throws her clothes off, sinking into the water with a long, loud moan that leaves you a little distracted. There are a few other women in there, as well, both human, and both staring at the two of you like you’ve grown second heads. This also isn’t the bath house you were instructed to go to, which is rather lacking in the fire rune department. Hmph. It doesn’t take a genius to figure out the situation.

You step out of your clothes, covering yourself with a towel until the very instant you sink into the warm, dark water. Maker, that feels amazing.

“Whoa! Nice scar!” Sera exclaims as you slide deeper into the water. “How’d you get that?”

You scowl at her, running a hand across your abdomen self-consciously. “It happened while I was escaping from Seheron,” you lie shortly. “I don’t like thinking about it.”

Sera nods in understanding, seeming content to let it drop, which is a little impressive, for her. Polite decorum is not exactly her strong point. But she saw your hands shake while you recounted some of your time in Seheron, including some details from your escape. Maybe even she knew when not to pry.

You soak in silence for all of 30 seconds before she chimes in again, chattering a mile a minute about
this and that. It provides somewhat soothing background noise, and all you really have to say is “mmm” and “aaah” at appropriate intervals. All in all, there are worse ways to spend an evening, helped by the occasional lingering side-glance at Sera’s naked body. You can’t get involved, but no one said anything about not looking, right? And you’re glad to know about the *nicer* bathhouse. If you were willing to give the Inquisition the benefit of the doubt, you’d say that this one was for the soldiers and Templars, and the one you’d been directed to, for the help, but after meeting the Inquisitor, you’re a little less likely to give the benefit of the doubt to anyone here.

You say your goodbyes to Sera, promising you’ll have another “training night” at some point, though you can’t afford to do them every day (you’re losing enough working hours as it is). You head back to your room, not even trying not to think about Sera naked. Solas shirtless, Sera naked… If nothing else, you’ll have new fantasies besides Fenris to keep you warm on cold nights after you leave this place.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I've done it. 50k of fic in under a month. This isn't even the only fic I was writing. I feel rather proud of myself.
Days Go By

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Megara again for no small amount of help with the Latin.

This chapter hated me. It beat me up and took my lunch money.

You spend the night tossing and turning, a combination of libido and insomnia keeping you up through the night. You’re certain you look like a mess by the time you roll out of bed, but you can’t bring yourself to care. You’re catching at least glimpses of sleep, and you’re confident that you can survive for a while like this. You’re just not happy about it.

You dress as lightly as you can, knowing you’ll just want to change out of whatever you’re wearing after spending the pre-dawn hours pretending to learn to throw a decent punch. All of the clothing is a size too big for you and fits poorly, the consequences of having an elven body in a human-driven Inquisition, but it doesn’t particularly bother you. It’s clean clothing. Anything short of being literally made of rashvine and you’d still wear it.

You head out to the practice fields, and are unsurprised to see Iron Bull already there, stretching. And damn is he stretching. You’re not even attracted to Qunari, but a muscled body stretching is a muscled body stretching, even if it’s unlucky enough to have horns on top. You likely wouldn’t have even noticed if you weren’t so pent up, but as it is… At least you’ll be able to work out some frustration punching things.

Iron Bull looks pleased when he spots you walking over. “Wasn’t sure you were going to show,” he says, straightening out with a grunt.

You shrug noncommittally. “It’s something to do before breakfast.”

He leads you through a few stretches, all of which burn fantastically. You’re tired, but pushing your aching body through its paces does feel good. After you finish stretching, you begin the “learning” proper, throwing a few punches at air, and then at a dummy, to make sure you’ve retained the information from yesterday. You have, of course. Let him think you’re a natural at this; you haven’t weeks or months to waste acting like you’re useless.

You spend the morning learning where to punch, Iron Bull demonstrating both on himself, and on the training dummy. He mentions differences between the races of Thedas in passing, since you’ve only a human-sized dummy and a Qunari to practice on. It’s mostly practical reach issues… It would be tricky for someone of your height to punch a grown Qunari male square in the throat, after all. You start putting a little more force into your punches, acting a little more confident in your ability to strike. Iron Bull seems pretty pleased with your “progress,” or perhaps with his own teaching abilities. What he should be pleased about is the fact you can be this close to him without hissing like an infuriated cat.

You stop when the sun rests contentedly on the horizon, fully risen. You feel like curling up into bed again, but know you wouldn’t be able to sleep. Once more, you’re sweaty despite the chill, and this time, you decide to get a bath.
“I’ll meet you at the mess later, Bull. I’m getting a bath, even if I freeze half to death in the process.”

“You sure you don’t want to use that private bath?” Iron Bull says with a wicked grin. You roll your eyes.

“Yours?” you ask with a snort. “No thanks; I’d probably drown in it.” You head towards the bathhouse you and Sera used before reconsidering. There are probably a lot of people in there right now, and you don’t want a scene. Best go to the one you’d been told about, even if it means a cold bath. All you really want is to rinse the sweat off and change clothes, anyway.

You do note that you only see pointed ears as you enter the bathhouse. It is as you suspected… whether intended by the Inquisition or not, there is, effectively, a separate, shittier bathhouse for elves. Pathetic, but hardly unexpected. You strip, again using a towel to cover yourself right up until the instant you sink into the chilly water. Without the fire rune, it’s much less pleasant, but water is water.

“Miss Emma?”

You start, covering yourself instinctively as you glance around the waters for the person who spoke. You’re surprised when your eyes fall on a familiar face. It’s Celia, the rather unlucky woman from the kitchen.

“Celia!” you say, not having to force the surprise in your voice. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I thought you might have traveled out with your ser!” she says, seemingly equally surprised.

You snort. “Me? I’d be dead within a week.”

“Well, we miss you in the kitchens. I do, at least. It’s nice to meet someone who doesn’t mind pitching in.”

You smile, the same practiced smile you’ve been using for years. “In truth, I hate standing around. If I’m not busy, I go mad.”

“You must be losing it, then, with your apostate gone,” she says, and there’s a slight teasing sound to her voice. Ah, yes… She likely thinks you’ve been sleeping with him.

“I… I try to stay occupied,” you say, letting your smile grow strained. “But I worry.”

“He’s lucky to have someone so… devoted.” She clears her throat politely. At least she has more decorum than Thea. “I’ll admit, I was a little intimidated by you at first, just because you seemed so… confident. Have you worked with mages in the past?”

“A little,” you say with the tone of an admission. “I was nervous at first, but in the end, a master is a master. They’re either cruel or they’re not; I find the magic has little impact in either direction.”

Celia shudders. “I would be so frightened! I get nervous enough when I have to bring food to Madame de Fer, and she’s a proper Circle mage!”

Your ear twitches with idle interest. “Have you waited on Madame de Fer in the past?”

“A few times… I have a tendency to lose at straws.”

You lower your voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “To be honest, she does scare me… The way she carries herself gives me chills.”
Celia nods vigorously. “She’s terrifying!” she whispers back. “And I just know she notices every little flaw… If I never saw her again, it would be too soon!”

By the time you leave the bath to head to breakfast, you’ve gathered a bit of interesting gossip on a number of subjects. It’s good to know that your connections in the kitchen aren’t entirely gone with the loss of Solas. It seems public perception of Solas hasn’t improved much, but that’s too be expected. That sort of project will take time. In the meantime, it seems like the mages with Vivienne’s so called “Circle” are a bit more respected and less feared than apostates like Solas or Dorian. Dorian’s easy-going personality and flirtatious charm make things a little smoother for him. Solas, frankly, has neither.

Luckily, Thea and Iron Bull are both still in the mess when you arrive, and you join them after you’ve gathered your food.

“Look at you, on time for breakfast again!” Thea teases as you sit. “Be careful! If you keep eating properly, you might stop looking like you’re starving to death.”

You make a face at her. A little meat on your bones wouldn’t be a terrible thing, you suppose, but you know it will go straight to your hips; it always does.

“We need to get a layer of muscle on you!” Iron Bull declares. “Make sure you eat plenty of meat!”

You snort. “There’s never ‘plenty of meat’ in here.” You gesture at your gruel to prove your point.

“I bet Bull could bring you mea-“

“Don’t start, Thea.”

“You never let me have any fun,” she says with a pout.

“If anything, I let you have too much fun,” you point out. “Don’t just live vicariously through me! You’re a redhead, too, you know.”

Thea grins wickedly. “Oh, I’ve already been on that horse, love!” she says, confirming your suspicions for you. “Why do you think it comes so highly recommended?”

You act appropriately flustered, then busy yourself with your gruel. It’s apparent Iron Bull is watching for your reaction as much as you’re watching for his, however. You feel a little bit sorry for Thea… involved in a game she has no idea she’s even a piece in. It’s pity, however, not sympathy. In truth, you’re glad to have someone largely guileless around. She gives you a nice break, if nothing else.

Thea continues to tease you as you walk towards the Great Hall together. You react as you should, but your mind is on other things. Hopefully she’s not perceptive enough to notice that your heart isn’t fully in your embarrassment, that your snaps lack force. You do note, however, that she breaks off before you enter the rotunda to go up the other set of stairs. Superstition? Habit?

You enter the rotunda, a genuine smile ghosting across your lips as you admire your desk. It still looks a bit out of place, to you, but you’re glad to have it. It… It almost makes you feel like you belong. Like you’ve been here longer than a scant tenday. You move to Solas’ desk, frowning as you straighten it slightly from where it had been mussed when Sera sat on it, playing with books and papers. It still feels a little empty in here, but at least it’s quieter. And there won’t be any distracting magic pestering you, unless Dorian decides to get frisky in the library.

You settle into your translation. You’re not making as much headway as you would if you weren’t
being constantly distracted by your “friends,” and it bothers you. Arguably, laying down lines of communication and information-gathering is significantly more important than the tome, but it’s hard to convince yourself of that. It’s such a very nice tome, and you’re too prideful to let your work seem subpar, although that admission makes you cringe.

Perhaps halfway between breakfast and lunch, another missive comes down from Leliana. Honestly, she’s right upstairs, she could practically drop it on your head. Perhaps fold it up and let it fly down like a note passed in a classroom. You accept it from the man who delivers it and unfold it with interest. Another missive in Qunlat… Surely she has other people for this? Or perhaps not. This is clearly more Ben-Hassrath documents, but this… This isn’t detailing the movements of an enemy or a cult. Your eyes widen slightly. This is the movements of Ben-Hassrath agents themselves! How did she get her tricky Orlesian paws on this?

You’re surprised she’s letting you see this… There are no dates or numbers on it, nothing to indicate if this information is current. Perhaps it’s old information, sent your way as a test? If she’s spying on the Ben-Hassrath, has some connection other than Iron Bull… She needs to know you’re trustworthy, and absolutely needs to know you won’t go running off to Iron Bull about it, especially now that you two are being seen together with regularity.

You put aside your tome and immediately begin scribing a translation. If it’s a test, you intend to pass. If not, this is likely vital information for the Inquisition. Either way, it deserves your full attention. You do, however, make particular effort to remember each word written. You can’t risk scribing off your own copy; if someone was to catch you with it, you would be dead in the water. But one thing no one can take from you is your own good memory.

As soon as the ink is dry and you’ve given the missive one last glance over to be sure you’ll remember it, you fold up both pieces of paper and head up the stairs. This time, when you move to hand the documents to Leliana, she dismisses the person she was speaking to, and turns her focus on you.

“Another swift response. Thank you,” she says. Her smile is a pretty one. You can practically see the poison behind it, however. Bards smile the way you do, muscle memory. “I saw you and Iron Bull in the practice court this morning.”

You sincerely doubt that she did, but a spy is a spymaster’s eyes, after all.

“He’s teaching me to punch,” you say, semi-honestly. “In the process, attempting to get me more comfortable with Qunari.”

“Is it working?”

“I’m learning how to punch.”

“I’m glad to see the two of you getting along,” she says, and then unfolds the missive, turning to read it and effectively dismissing you. You give a slight bow and exit down the stairs.

Is she concerned about the seeming friendship between you and Iron Bull? She ought to be, if there’s anything to these missives she’s having you translate. Still, if she wants to know you’re more loyal to the Inquisition than you are the fucking Qun… The only thing you’re less loyal to than the Qun are the bloody Templars. The Inquisitor may not be your favorite person, but, for now at least, the Inquisition is doing important work. You wouldn’t sell them out to the Qunari… Not unless there was something very, very good in it for you.

Back in the rotunda, you work more on your translation. How long will it take you to complete… a
few more days, perhaps? Depending on how many distractions come your way, both in the form of missives from Leliana and in elf- and Qunari-shaped packages. You try to get as much done as quickly as possible for the inevitable next distraction.

The inevitable next distraction comes in the form of Sera, unsurprisingly. What’s a little more unexpected is that she’s apparently decided to copy Iron Bull and bring you lunch. She doesn’t bother waiting for you to finish translating the current sentence to interrupt you. You sigh as you set your quill down. One of these days, you and she are going to have to have a talk about boundaries.

“C’mon! Let’s go eat up on the balcony!” she says, pulling at your arm when you don’t stand up immediately.

“You’re just worried that- Oh,” you say with a smirk, looking behind her. “Hello, Iron Bull.”

The scowl on Sera’s face is priceless. She was clearly hoping to get you clear of the rotunda before he showed up. And he has food, too! You’re starting to feel like the prettiest girl in the village. Iron Bull’s smirk mirrors your own; he sees the humor in the situation, too.

“All right, ladies, I’m sure there’s enough of me to go around,” you say amusedly. “The balcony sounds like a lovely idea, Sera.” She loops an arm possessively through yours as you head up the stairs, taking advantage of your shared small frames to walk side by side while Iron Bull tags along behind. As if this couldn’t get any more surreal, Dorian spots you as you’re walking through the library.

“Oh, are you having a picnic?” he says delightedly, noticing the baskets. “And you didn’t even think to invite me?”

“I’m willing to bet we have enough food for four,” you say, eyes glancing between Iron Bull and Dorian. Hmm… “You should tag along.”

He does just that, and somehow you find yourself eating on a balcony with three of the Inquisitor’s companions. Leliana looked amused as the four of you passed through, but said nothing.

It’s the exact kind of situation that you would never have seen yourself in, and yet somehow, you can’t quite place where everything went weird enough for you to wind up here. Sera doesn’t look particularly pleased about the situation, but before long, she’s distracted, bickering with Dorian about magic. It’s a conversation you’re content to stay out of, until she starts talking about “proper tools” and then it’s all you can do to keep a straight face.

“And the rebel mages?” she asks, clearly frustrated. “How many proper tools have they raised?”

You and Iron Bull have some practice in controlling your expressions. Dorian does not, and it’s clearly everything he can do not to burst out laughing. “That’s not...” he covers his hand with his mouth, lips trembling with suppressed glee. “I don’t think I can continue.”

“Right. Well. I don’t care how gifted you are. Don’t cram it where it’s not wanted!”

“Oh, Maker,” you squeak out loud, then cover your mouth to keep from laughing.

She turns to look at you. “Wot?”

“N-nothing,” you choke out. “Just impressed with your… assessment.”

She narrows her eyes at you. She likely knows you’re having a good bit of amusement at her expense, but isn’t sure what joke she’s the butt of.
“What about you, Emma? You work with Solas. Surely you don’t share our friends contempt for the arcane?” Dorian asks, putting you rather uncomfortably on the spot.

You clear your throat to remove the last of the giggles. “I don’t work with Solas, Dorian. I work in his vicinity.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I just don’t want you overestimating me,” you say simply. “As for magic…” You glance around at the company you’re in. A mage, a Qunari spy, and a very cute young lady who despises magic. There is no good answer. “When I was in Tevinter, it was just another terrifying weapon that other people had that I didn’t. After Seheron… I didn’t have any run-ins with mages until I began doing translations for a Circle. And they seemed like ordinary people. I… I don’t know. I never gave it too much thought, until this war started.”

Dorian blinks at you. “I think that’s the most words I’ve heard you string together in a row.”

“It wasn’t the sort of question that gets a one word answer,” you say pointedly, then bite into your loaf of bread. Wherever these people get their constant supply of warm, fresh-baked bread, you want a line directly to it.

“So, the elephant in the room,” Dorian says, swiftly changing gears. This man is as much of a chatterbug as Sera is. “What are you all doing together? Especially you two,” he adds, gesturing between you and Bull.

“Bull’s teachin’ her how to punch! An’ I’m teachin’ her how to… how to…”

“How to be a more well-rounded person,” you supply. “Considering I’ll never be an archer.”

“So, the new fad is Teach the Elf? A shame you’re not a mage, Emma, or I could join in, too.”

“It’s just as well,” you say, chasing the bread with some of the chilled cider Iron Bull had brought. “My days are filling up terribly fast.”

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It turns into a long lunch before you finally manage to escape back to the rotunda. At least you have something interesting to think about… Iron Bull and Dorian. Despite the fact that Sera and Dorian were both talking a mile a minute, Dorian and Iron Bull essentially said nothing to each other. Have you done any lasting damage, or are they normally like this? And more importantly, is there something there you can take advantage of? Dorian isn’t a hassle to you now that you’re out of the library, but Iron Bull… He’s the very definition of a hassle. A distraction for him would be good news for you.

You churn through more of your translation, working as quickly as you can without sacrificing quality. Most of the translations are fairly straightforward, and you have a good feel for the piece by now. You feel as if you’re on the homestretch, but it will still be a while before you can actually call yourself finished. Then it will be nothing but scribing new pages… joy. Your hand will be hating you for weeks… Unless Solas arrives back before then. The thought of his hands on your arm as warm, supportive magic fills you…

Maker, you miss that. No more shaking fingers, no need to stop and stretch every half-hour lest you cramp and ruin a page. You imagine warm hands massaging yours as you stretch your hand. Once, you had someone who would rub your hand like that, kneading stiffness out one finger at a time. It had ended poorly, of course, as all things do, but you do miss the massages.
You intend, of course, to work straight through dinner again. You have no guarantee you won’t be interrupted again, that Sera won’t come and try to steal you away (although if it involves seeing her nude again, you would probably go). When the door opens around dinner time, you cringe, expecting another attempt to get you alone from… Maker, someone. Anyone. At this point you wouldn’t be surprised to see the Horsemaster come through the bloody door.

You are surprised, however. It’s not Iron Bull, not Sera, not even Horsemaster Dennet… But Celia. And she’s carrying a serving platter.

“Celia?” you ask, confused, as you stand to help her. She seems fine, however, likely because it’s only a single serving. “What are you…”

“Oh, no one really cares where you take a plate of food, if it’s just one plate,” she says with a smile. “It wasn’t ‘til after I left that I realized you might not even be here… But you mentioned doing work in the rotunda, so I thought…”

“You brought that for me?” you interrupt, gesturing towards the food. Celia smiles.

“I thought you could use a little pick me up, with Ser Solas gone. Consider it a thank you from the kitchen staff. Especially me,” she adds with a laugh.

You’re a little taken aback. You honestly hadn’t expected something like this. In as many ways as this place lives up to expectations, with suspicious people and segregated bath houses, it circumvents them, with genuinely kind people like Celia or Belinda, helping you with, for all appearances, no ulterior motives.

“Celia, I…” you say, somewhat at a loss for words.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” she says, getting a little flustered. “It’s just a bit of extra food.” She lays the plates out on the side table by the couch, perhaps remembering you reclining there the first time she entered. “I hope your Solas comes back, Miss Emma, so we can start seeing you in the kitchen again.”

And with that, she’s gone, leaving you more than a little dumbfounded by the whole situation. You take a moment to be stunned, and then move to examine the food. It’s the typical fare that Solas would be brought. You smile slightly as you move the food to your desk, intending fully to enjoy the meal slowly while you work. The scent of warm broth and delicately sautéed vegetables reminds you strongly of Solas and shared meals. Isn’t it a little soon for you to be feeling nostalgic?

You delight in dunking bread in the broth and eating it slowly, maneuvering yourself awkwardly to be able to write while eating, without risking dripping on your papers. It’s something of an art.

You continue working long after you’ve finished eating and stacked the dishes on the side table. You burn a candle down to a stub before realizing how late it is. You’ll strain your eyes, working like this much longer, but you know you won’t be able to sleep, and a walk through the cold night air will only make your self-induced insomnia worse.

That’s when your eyes fall on the couch. The gloriously, comfortable couch that’s only a few feet from your work area. And something miraculous dawns on you… There is literally nothing stopping you from sleeping on Solas’ couch. You stretch out on it immediately, reveling in how much softer it is than your bed. Perhaps there will be some benefits to having Solas gone, after all.

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You have the barest ghost of a dream while you rest on Solas’ couch. It’s a warm dream, despite the
chill in the rotunda, and while you can’t quite make out any figures, rhyme, or reason, you wake feeling… heated, in several senses of the word. The sweat sticking to your skin gives you a chill in the early, pre-dawn air, and your hair is a disheveled mess, the result of falling asleep without letting your hair down. Your comb is, of course, in your room. As are your clean clothes. You really didn’t think this “sleeping in the rotunda” thing all the way through.

You attempt to fix yourself as best as possible, smoothing out wrinkled clothing, letting your hair down and combing it with your fingers before pulling it back up in a haphazard bun. You change clothing after your mornings with Iron Bull anyway; going in dirty clothes is, if anything, saving the laundry workers some trouble.

The doors to the Great Hall likely won’t be open this early, so you exit directly through the rotunda. There’s an unpleasant chill in the air and a blast of icy wind hits you straight away as you step outside. Ugh. This place is going to be hell in the winter. The wind is somewhat broken up by the walls as you head down into the rotunda, fortunately. You have a moment of sympathy for guards stationed on the outer ramparts.

Iron Bull likely notices that you’re coming from the direction of the rotunda, not your bedroom, which is in the opposite direction. If he does, however, he keeps any remarks on the matter to himself. You notice he has his own differences this morning, namely the fact that there’s a somewhat short, but stocky human man in the ring with him.

You were drunk out of your mind when you met some of the Chargers, but you still manage to peg him as one of them… Which one, and his name, utterly escapes you, however, despite the fact you know for a fact you’ve seen him wave to you at least once.

Iron Bull directs you straight into some stretches, which don’t burn nearly as badly after your night on what must be the most comfortable couch in all of Thedas. You keep eyeing the man, however, uncertain as to why he’s there, as well as if you should recognize him. You’re not often at a loss for people’s names, so the sensation is awkwardly chafing at you.

Eventually, Iron Bull deems you’ve stretched enough, and actually explains what the hell is going on. “So, now that you’ve got the basics of throwing a punch down, I thought I’d bring Krem in to demonstrate how to be a tiny little guy in a fight.”

“Gee, thanks, chief,” the man says sarcastically.

Krem. Alright. You have a… Oh, dammit, that’s the fellow whose lap you drunkenly sat in, isn’t it? Krem. That was his name. Fantastic.

He is a little on the shorter side, but he’s still several inches taller than you, and that’s where the physical similarities end. He’s thick, firmly muscled under his tunic, whereas you look like a stiff wind could pick you up and carry you off. Still, he’s closer to your size than Iron Bull is by a large measure.

“I thought I was just learning to punch,” you say to Iron Bull, playing the reluctant house elf despite the fact you’re eager for the excuse. Maker bless Iron Bull, he’s basically handing you legitimate places to point when someone asks you, “where did you learn that?”

“Part of learning to punch is learning when to punch, and how to get the opportunity. If your arms are pinned, it won’t matter how well you can break a jaw,” Iron Bull explains.

“Wait… are you going to be pinning me?” you say with a frown. “You’re twice my size!”
“You can use that to your advantage… as Krem will be happy to demonstrate.”

“Oh, I’ll demonstrate, but I won’t be happy,” Krem says darkly. His eyes are laughing, however. You nod and take a few steps back. It’s more than a little alarming to see the strength in Iron Bull’s body as he grabs Krem, locking the man’s arms behind his back. You do not like the idea of being grabbed like that, especially not by a Qunari. You can only tamp down instincts so much; even seeing it happen to another person has you wanting to bolt.

You force yourself to observe carefully, however, as Krem smashes and slithers his way out of holds and grabs. What he does limits what you can do; you only have excuses to mimic him. Fortunately, when it becomes time for you to be involved, Iron Bull has you practice with Krem, first. Being grabbed at by a human man is something any city elf has experience with, and it’s such a familiar situation for you that the hardest part of the morning’s training is only dislodging Krem in the ways you’re being told to, as well as not letting muscle memory take over and sending him flipping over the fence.

By the time the sun rests on the horizon, you’ve worked up a sweat, and Krem’s probably worked up a new set of bruises from where your boot connected with his shin a little too passionately. You even caught your heel against his crotch, once, felt the sole of your foot connect with something squishy, but the man took it like a champ, only wincing and readjusting himself as you apologized profusely. All in all, it was a good morning’s practice, even if your whole body hurts from twisting and being grabbed at. You do have one complaint, however.

“I was hoping our little training sessions would be more of a secret,” you say with a scowl. You know they won’t stay that way for long, but you’d like to at least put on the spectacle of spontaneity when you get to punch the crap out of Iron Bull.

“My lips are sealed,” Krem promises. “After all, if every serving girl thought she could get ‘private lessons’ with the chief, he’d never have a chance to sleep.”

You ignore the implications. It’s just as well. You sat on this man’s lap at some point; him thinking you’re interested in another man is, if anything, a blessing. And you’ve long since come to terms with the idea that half the keep assumes you’ve been shacking up with the freaking Qunari. Maker only knows what the kitchen staff think of you, with the clashing rumors of your sleeping partners.

“I appreciate your help, Krem, and your discretion,” you say. If anything, a few hours of grabbing and punching at each other removed any lingering awkwardness about your seating choices.

He and Iron Bull head off towards the mess together. You make your excuses and head towards the (elven) bathhouse again. The water is cool and doesn’t do anything to soothe your aching muscles, but it rinses sweat off as good as any water, and you’re relieved to change into fresh clothes. By the time you get to the mess to eat, it seems Thea has already come and left, and if Iron Bull and Krem ate here, they have as well. You eat alone, a few stolen moments of blissful peace, although not silence. No mess is ever silent.

The rotunda is where the real quiet is, and you’re happy to get back to work in your translation. Perhaps today will be the day you finally complete it, if you can get through without too many interruptions. The idea of informing Leliana that you had finished your translation was an appealing one… Technically speaking, aside from the two Qunlat documents you’d translated, and the information she found on “Alix Gagnon,” she had no real evidence you could handle this kind of translation. You could show her some of the pages you had already finished, as well, give her some kind of idea as to what the finished tome would be…

Your fantasies came to an abrupt halt, however, when your eyes traced across a completely
bewildering sentence. “Pervigilem superest spica herbis sopire draconem, qui crista linguisque tribus praesignis et uncis dentibus custos erat arboris aureae?” What the… And it just keeps going like that… “Parbarrum”? You’ve never come across that before… It happens, when dealing with ancient or dead languages. Perhaps something to do with dragons, specifically? You hunt the surrounding sentences for context, and fine none, largely because many of the surrounding sentences are things you need context to translate, as well. “Dura mater” could be telling you about a thick, helmet-like skull, or it could be describing more of the mothering habits of High Dragons. And this part is talking about wolves for some Maker forsaken reason… a comparison or metaphor, most likely. The most confusing thing of all is the sudden change in tone. Perhaps this paragraph is quoting another work?

You click your tongue against your teeth, frowning. This is going to require a bit more effort. Unfortunately, you’re not exactly in Val Royeaux. You cannot make a trip to the University of Orlais, lie or sneak your way into their library. There’s little chance the Inquisition will have anything of use. But… you suppose there’s no harm in looking. You yank your shoes back on and trudge sullenly up the stairs. This kind of a setback could really hurt your progress, and if you tell Leliana she needs to send off to Orlais for a tome on Ancient Tevene… how embarrassing.

You begin looking through the books, trying to get a feel for the layout of the library. There doesn’t appear to be much of a layout, however. It’s no organizational method you recognize, in any case. No wonder Dorian is constantly throwing books around in frustration.

Speak of a demon, it seems, and one shall appear.

“Looking for something, dear?” Dorian asks, stepping up to glance over your shoulder at the shelf you’re currently glaring at.

“I doubt I’ll find it,” you say with a scowl. “Do we have anything on ancient Tevene?”

“In this library? If we did, someone would have already been translating that tome of yours.”

You let out a groan of frustration.

“Troubles?”

“Do you know what parbarrum means?”

Dorian frowns, thoughtfully. “Not off the top of my head… I have a few books from my private collection here… perhaps they may be of assistance?”

The two of you eventually settle in the little corner of the library he’s claimed as his own, him sitting on his grand chair and you perched on the armrest, so that you can frown your way through the same tone. The sounds of your hushed bickering soon fill the library, conversations half in the common tongue and half in Tevene as you snap back and forth.

“Terrigenam Pythona? Are you trying to make a fool of me, Dorian? There’s just as much a chance they’re speaking of a blighted snake!”

“Yes, I’m sure every giant lizard in legend is just a blighted snake. They don’t all have wings, you know!”

“What idiot would describe a dragon as Pythona?”

“Have you been to Tevinter?”
You ignore the obvious comeback—the look of dawning horror in Dorian’s eyes tells you he’s realized it as well. “We’re going about this the wrong way,” you grumble, pulling the draconic tome, which you had fetched from downstairs, into your lap. “As best as I can understand, this line is about this thing being… either an enemy or a rival, or… a hated foe? Of dragons. Perhaps modern knowledge of dragons can help us narrow it down?”

“How much do you think I know about dragons?”

The two of you continue for longer than you realize, digging through tomes and bickering. You realize that you lost track of time only when a serving girl comes with a plate of food. “Oh for… Do all of you have your own private catering?” you say, irritated, as the women quickly sets the food down and scurries off. You grab a piece of bread before he can even reach towards the plate, tucking it into your mouth and chewing as you continue reading.

Dorian watches, a look of mild offense turning into amusement as you continue to pull more bread into your mouth as you chew. “You eat like a nug.”

You glare at him, but your mouth is too full for you to respond.

You steal bits of food off his plate as the two of you work. You’re certain Thea sees you, but for whatever reason, she leaves you alone, and after hours of pouring over books, and scribing notes, you have something resembling an answer.

“Okay, so we’re in agreement that they were probably a food source, more than a rival, and this guy is just being poetic, right?” you say, sitting at the base of Dorian’s chair. He’s still sitting in it; he’s only gotten up to get more tomes from his room. You’re nestled between his legs as he leans over to watch you write over your shoulder. With another person, it might have been awkward. Iron Bull would have sexualized it, and with Solas, you would have sexualized it. But Dorian reminds you more of your old assistant back in Orlais in more ways than one.

“Yes, and it’s definitely a quote from an older book,” Dorian adds, thumbing through a rather tattered book. “Here they use drakon, meaning “dragon” in a completely different dialect of ancient Tevene, much older.”

You scowl and your notes. “I think we’ve accounted for everything… even that ridiculous line about wolves biting wolves… except what ‘parbarrum’ means. I-“ You pause, squinting down at the book you were idly flipping through in between writing. It’s an old bestiary.

“Look! Look at this! Parbarrus!” you exclaim, pointing to a label under a small drawing. “What… what on earth is that… Is that a trunk?”

“Looks kind of like a snoufleur…”

You meet eyes with Dorian, trading a look of shared horror.

“Nooooo…” you groan, covering your mouth in horror.

“Dragonlings,” he says grimly. “Hiding in bushes to ambush their hated foe… snoufleurs.”

“Oh, Maker, why… Such a stupid answer!” You curse under your breath in a few choice languages. “We spent hours on this, and it’s a thrice-cursed snoufleur?!”

You settle your things back onto your desk, glaring daggers at the messy page of notes that contains
your translation for the stupid bloody paragraph, which contained, among other tidbits of useful information hidden in overly articulate metaphors, the knowledge that dragonlings ate the crap out of snoufleurs.

It takes you a while to resettle, and you’ll be sullen over snoufleurs for a while to come. You won’t finish the translation tonight, not after you spent half a day on one sodding paragraph. You fume as you begin working your way through the book once more, regaining your rhythm once the tome fails to throw anymore obstacles in the way. Normal declension and words you recognize soothe you as you churn out page after page.

Your stomach lets you know when it becomes closer to dinnertime. You intend to skip it and work—stomach be damned—but after a lunch of only stolen bits of food, your body isn’t particularly happy with your decision. You stand to stretch, taking a few steps away from your desk, bare feet chilled but comfortable on the smooth stone.

You have an instinct, so well developed you suspect it to be ingrained in your very bones, to look when someone shouts “think fast,” which is what causes you to suddenly look up and see something falling directly at you. You snatch it out of the air; it was falling slowly, dropped, not tossed. …An apple? You look up, bewildered, and see Dorian upstairs waving at you. Then he drops a few more, a pear, a plum. You stare up at him incredulously.

“A little birdy told me you tend to skip meals,” he calls down with a wicked grin. “You can’t afford to get any thinner!”

You scowl your way back to your desk, fruit in tow, but in truth, you’re glad that you’ll have something to calm your growling stomach. Thea could have run the fruit down herself… And she hadn’t come to talk to you while you were upstairs, either. Is she upset with you, for skipping breakfast? If Iron Bull and Krem hadn’t eaten there, she would have had no way of knowing why you weren’t there. Perhaps that’s it… if that’s the case, you’ll have to make sure you get to the mess at a reasonable time tomorrow.

You devour the fruit at an alarming pace and keep working. There’s no way you’ll finish the translation today, but if you make a lot of progress before you sleep, perhaps-

“Heeeey, elfy!”

Oh, Maker, why.

“Hope you didn’t forget about practice!”

You choke back a sound… whether it would have been a growl or a whimper, you don’t know. Sera. Of course it’s Sera. You couldn’t possibly escape her for long. This explains her absence at lunch, at least. You sigh. “I don’t suppose there’s any way to get out of this?”

“Not a chance!”

You sigh and finish up your sentence, capping your ink and standing with a wince. The day’s events have left you a little stiff despite your regular pauses to stretch. “Archery again?”

“Not this time! I thought of somethin’ more fun!”

“Oh, Maker…”

Sera leads you eagerly out into the courtyard, to a rather empty corner. You glance around, trying to figure out what she has planned. After she determines you’ve been confused long enough, she pats
the wall of Skyhold with a grin. “We’re gonna climb!”

“…The wall?”

“Yeah! S’harder than a building.”

“…Yes. In fact, I would even say that fortress walls are designed to be as difficult to climb as possible.”

“See? S’perfect!”

You stare blankly at her. She’s serious, alright. “Did you at least let the guards know, so they don’t see two elves climbing the walls and panic?”

“Ah, you’re overthinkin’ it! Just climb the wall!” Sera says with a snort. With a reluctant sigh, you kick your shoes off. If you’re to have any chance of doing this without falling and breaking a limb, you’ll need your feet free and not crammed into even your comfortable leather boots.

You’re not sure how good you should pretend to be at this. You’re decent at climbing, but this is just… solid wall. There are places to grab, you can see them, but…

You start your way up the wall, carefully, wedging toes and fingers into what crevices you can find. “Sera,” you grunt after getting a few feet up, “I am not climbing this wall alone.”

Sera starts up after you while you slowly work your way up the wall. As soon as she starts catching up with you, you find yourself moving faster, wanting to stay in the lead. It’s something that you feel comfortable enough with her to be competitive, but it’s not a good idea. You let her get further ahead, and focus on making sure your grip is strong and sturdy. You don’t want to fall and risk hurting yourself… Will Sera never suggest you do something safe?

At some point, you realize, partway up the ridiculous climb you have no chance of making, people have started stopping to watch. You hadn’t even noticed until you lost your grip slightly, sliding down the wall until your foot catches on a crack. You regain your balance quickly, but a sharp collection of gasps informs you that there are, in fact, people watching. You risk a glance behind you and see a gathering crowd of off-duty servants and guards. Maker’s breath, now you’ve got an audience.

You glance up. There’s no way you could possibly climb to the top of this thing, right? It’s not the tallest part of the wall, but it’s still the wall of Skyhold. Even if you can climb it, you probably shouldn’t demonstrate that in front of a bunch of people. You’re about to call out to Sera, let her know you’re heading back down before you break your leg, when you hear a loud voice from behind (and underneath) you.

“Filthy knife-ears… How completely unsurprising. Only women of that kind would act like that. Somebody should put them in their place.”

Oh, for fuck’s…

“Must be Dalish, they do nothing but climb their whole lives,” another voice chimes in, quieter.

Sera definitely heard that one; you see her stiffen from where she is above you.

“Sera, I’m heading back down,” you call up to her. “I don’t want to break my leg; let’s break that guy’s instead.”

“If that redhead wants to climb, I have a much nicer oak for her.”
At this point, you notice a few of the other people moving away from the two shouting men. Even humans are often uncomfortable with this kind of blatant bigotry, and the sexual innuendo can’t be helping things. You’re just sort of staying where you are on the wall, waiting for some kind of sign for what to do from Sera. After a moment’s pause, she keeps climbing, and you wince. Maybe she can get to the top of this wall, but…

You start heading down. You can stand an embarrassing encounter with a couple of racists much more than you can handle falling off of a wall. You grit your teeth as the rather loud gentleman comments on your “filthy Dalish ass.” What are your chances of getting away if you simply stab the man? Probably zero.

You’re almost to the bottom when you hear another voice, louder, and angry cut through the racial slurs.

“What is going on here?!”

Your body goes rigid and you thud down the last meter or two, bare feet slamming onto the ground. You spin around quickly, mildly horrified by how authoritative that voice sounds, and are surprised to see a furious man heading not towards you, but to the small crowd. The few people who hadn’t already left bolt, leaving only one man who doesn’t seem to realize that everyone else has run.

“Th-these knife-ears are climbing the walls, Commander!” You recognize the voice as the one who spoke first.

Commander?

The man glances over towards you, eyes glancing over you and then up, probably to Sera. You see him shake his head, almost imperceptibly, and arch your neck to see what he’s looking at. You can’t see where Sera has gone. When he speaks, his voice is low, and threatening. “You know damn well that language is unacceptable, recruit.”

“Sir? I mean, um, yessir,” the man flounders, the wind suddenly taken out of his sails.

“To my office, recruit. Now.” The man salutes and scurries off, and to your horror, the Commander turns to look at you. You should have bolted when you had the chance, no matter how guilty that might have made you look. You glance around wildly.

Where the fuck is Sera?

“Climbing walls?” he says mildly, the irritation gone from his voice, but not the hardness. “What’s your name?”

“E-emma, ser!” Your voice comes out a bit too high pitched. You clear your throat. “I’m the new linguist.” You’re willing to bet a name-drop might help you get out of this, if Sera is in any kind of good graces with the Inquisitor. “I was, ah… I was with Sera, and…”

“Say no more,” the man says, and your shoulders relax slightly as he chuckles. “That’s an explanation in itself.” He clears his throat, and then says, a bit more authoritatively, “My apologies for the soldier, Miss Emma. I guarantee you won’t hear anything like that from him again.”

“Oh, no, it’s… I… Th-thank you, ser,” you stammer awkwardly. It doesn’t seem as though you’re going to get in trouble, but your heart is still pounding in your chest from the adrenaline. The man turns and leaves, likely heading back to his office to deal with that asshole. Once he’s out of sight, you allow your strained legs to collapse under you. You hadn’t been that nervous when you were being catty towards the Inquisitor himself! It’s much easier to be courageous when you’re angry.

“Sera!” you call out. “Sera, are you up there?”
There’s a pause, and then, “Yeah, I’m here. Why’d you go back down?”

“Because I can’t climb an entire wall, Sera!” you say, a little more dramatically than you had intended.

“I figured you could!”

“You over-estimated me. What… What the hell was all that?”

“Well, I was gonna shoot that prat, but Cullen showed up first.”

“You were going to… WHAT?” Maker, and you thought YOU were the one with a violent temper!

“Maybe just a little!” she says, sounding defensive. “He was being a right ass!”

“Oh, Maker… Why don’t we do something that’s not climbing walls?” you suggest. “And not archery. How about horses, Sera? Everyone likes horses.”

Eventually, you talk Sera down off the wall, so to speak, and the two of you head towards the stables. You likely won’t get any kind of permission to take the animals out for a ride, but you steal some oat treats as you enter the stable, planning on bribing Revas with them.

“Ugh, a hart? Kinda… elfy, don’t you think?” Sera says, wrinkling her nose slightly as you stop by Revas’ stall.

“Well, I don’t know if you noticed my ears, Sera,” you say dryly, “but I am actually an elf, not just an oddly proportioned human.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you’re all…” she waves her hand vaguely. Your feet twitch inside their boots, knowing exactly what she means despite her lack of communication skills.

“I just like the hart, Sera,” you say flatly. As if to emphasize your point, he headbutts you in the chest, then mouths at your hand, hungry for the treats hidden in your fist. Sera laughs, despite her seeming hesitation about the hart. “His name is Revas,” you tell her, and she rolls her eyes.

“Alright, alright, so you’re elfy with your little halla. I guess I can overlook it,” she says. Her tone is teasing, but it still annoys you somewhat. To Thea, you’re not elf enough. To Sera, you’re apparently a little too much elf. Neither seem particularly content to understand that while it not be your only identifying factor, it’s certainly one of them.

You let your anger simmer down while you feed Revas. It’s impossible to be mad around the lighthearted hart for long, and eventually, you even talk Sera into approaching him, running a hand through his thick fur. She even, after a lot of coaxing, feeds him a treat. The two of you manage to have a pleasant evening, despite the bumpy start (and middle), but when you finally retire to your bed, you find you’re not relaxed at all.

Chapter End Notes

This is what I imagine "eating like a nug" looks like
Breaking Point

Chapter Notes

This was originally going to be part of a longer chapter, but I decided that it hit harder as its own stand-alone piece.

Trigger warnings this chapter for PTSD, flashbacks, and dissociation.

You spend the night angry. At first you’re angry at the men who ruined Sera’s little outing. Even if it was a terrible idea to begin with, you have no doubt that without the crowd and the slurs, it would have been an enjoyable evening of stealthily looking at Sera’s butt while she climbed. You even pass through being angry at Sera for her reaction to your perceived “elfiness.” What the hell was that about? In general, however, you’re just… angry. Frustrated. Sleep-deprived, relief-deprived, with more pent-up chaos than you know what to do with, and no end in sight. You get very little rest, and when you finally give up and rise, you’re greeted to a fog that’s rolled in overnight.

Immediately, you’re on edge, frayed nerves coming undone a little further. Logically, you know that Skyhold gets foggy sometimes, especially at night, and that this is normal fog, not the magical or alchemical thickness summoned up by Fog Warriors. But some things go deeper than logic.

You consider, briefly, skipping training with Iron Bull. You could head straight to the rotunda, bury yourself in work, and refuse to go out until sunlight burns away the fog. At the same time, however, you really want the stress relief that comes with physical exertion, and Iron Bull always seems to know just how you need to stretch. You head towards the training yard, and nearly jump out of your skin when you see a horned outline through the fog. It’s obviously just Iron Bull—he has a very distinct outline—but the sight still jars you. It’s too familiar. You’ll feel better once he’s closer, once you can see his face.

And you do, a little. Iron Bull is becoming disparate, separated from other Qunari in your mind, which was no doubt his goal with spending all this quality time together. Ben-Hassrath tricks. You’re not sure how you feel about it. It’s no doubt good to not be panicked every time you see a Qunari that lives in the same fort as you, but you dislike the idea of Iron Bull inserting himself into your mind as someone you can trust. You need to keep in mind, that however kind he appears to be, all Qunari are loyal to the Qun first. And you and the Qun have never gotten along.

If Iron Bull notices that you’re more on edge than normal, he doesn’t comment on it, instead starting you on some stretches. You feel like you’re hyper-focused in the silence, so you talk, just to create noise.

“Is Krem not joining us today?” you ask, voice strained with effort.

“Nah. He’s already going to be black and blue from the beating you gave him yesterday.”

You snort. “If he bruises that easily, he shouldn’t be a mercenary.”

“You hit harder than you think, Emma. Which is one of the reasons that, from today, you’ll be practicing on me. I don’t bruise easily.”
You pause mid-stretch and stare blankly at him. “What?”

“You can only get so good punching at air and dummies. You need to practice on a real person, and I can’t really ask Krem to come out here and get beat up by you every morning… besides, he said no.”

“Well… I suppose punching you was the end goal, to begin with,” you say hesitantly. You’re not too confident about the idea of actually hitting Iron Bull, when it comes right down to it. You can’t quite convince yourself that he isn’t going to punch you back, and a single right hook from him would probably knock you unconscious.

“It’ll also do you good to practice grappling with a larger opponent.”

Oh, Maker. If you had thought you might freak out when Krem grabbed you… Your horror must show on your face, because he quickly adds, “Don’t worry. We’ll take it slow. We can take breaks when you need to, and if you get to stressed out, you can calm down by pounding me in the stomach a few times.” That is kind of tempting.

You finish up stretching, then, with Iron Bull walking you through every step, you line up to punch a Qunari in the gut. You’ve had dreams like this, often somewhat unpleasant ones; it feels surreal, and the fog isn’t helping the dreamlike sensation. When you take a deep breath and strike, you’re surprised by how thick and tough his skin is. It isn’t like punching a human. Humans have more give. It helps you feel like you’re punching a statue, a bit, as you swing into a second strike.

If Iron Bull feels the strikes, he certainly doesn’t react to them, he just corrects your posture, and you continue much in the same way you would if you were fighting a practice dummy. You find you’re getting a bit more into it, however. You do have a bit of a violent streak in you, and the sounds and sensations of violence are pouring adrenaline into your body. Iron Bull seems to be reacting in a similar manner… Or perhaps his increased breathing is more of a side-effect of being punched repeatedly. He does seem to need a break after a while, and suggest that you practice the same hold escapes as you did the morning before, only with him. Without even stopping to think if it’s a good idea, you nod in agreement, perhaps a little eager for the chance to do more than just punch.

At first, you’re doing fine, although Iron Bull’s sheer size throws you, a little. You wouldn’t say you failed to notice how large he was before—you were always acutely aware of that. But it’s different when that bulk is coming at you. You find yourself relying more on your small posture to twist out of the way than striking at sensitive places to escape. You don’t know when it switches from training to fighting, in your mind. You don’t even realize it happening until Iron Bull moves into the next grapple, pinning your arms behind your back, and your adrenaline-filled mind and body both go insane. You snap away automatically, but of course the grapple holds.

Thick fog, choking. This isn’t supposed to happen. Wrong place, wrong time.

With a strangled cry, you writhe desperately, smashing the back of your head uselessly against your captor’s chest. It serves only to disorient you.

War horn, too close, sounds of flesh being torn in the fog, bursts of sickly red all around you. “My slaves, where are my slaves?”

And then, a miracle… the grip loosens. You hear the Qunari say something, behind you, but the second you have even an instant of slack, you wrench yourself free, nearly dislocating your shoulder in the process.

Oh, Maker, where’s Falon? Spear through his chest, bleeding out on the ground.
The second you gain traction, you kick off, intending fully to run, though you don’t know where to go. Anywhere but here. Then an arm wraps around you again, and you scream.

**Strong arms grip you, wooden bar of a spear tight against your neck. Fuck, this is it, this is how you fucking die.**

You thrash uselessly as a larger body wraps you up, one arm successfully pinning both of yours. You scream again, terror and rage and righteous fury, and feel power starting to leak out of your skin. No, you have to keep it under control, if the Qunari sees…

**Dragged off, where are they taking me, oh god.**

At a third scream, a hand presses over your mouth, not cutting off your air, but silencing you. You can barely thrash at this point; every time you find a new muscle to wrench, it’s forced still. Panic screaming behind wild eyes, you sink your teeth into the hand over your mouth, feeling the Qunari tense behind you.

”Don’t struggle, child,” in the common tongue. “We’ll take her to Salit,” in Qunlat, *they don’t know you understand.*

You bite as hard as you can, shaking your head in a useless attempt to tear skin as thick as leather. You chew, you gnaw, but the hand holds fast. Unable to break free, you slowly begin to recognize the sounds from the Qunari as speech. His voice is gentle, such a sharp contrast to the strength of his body that it confuses you.

“Hey, it’s alright. Breathe. Breathe.” Instincts are all you have at the moment, and you find yourself breathing deeper automatically. “Good. Focus on where you are.” All you see is fog. “You’re in Skyhold. See the walls?” …Yes. Walls. Walls keep enemies out, so why is there a Qunari here? As your desperate struggle stops, your muscle slacking as you attempt to make sense of your situation, the Qunari’s grip loosens. When you don’t immediately bolt, he releases you further. As soon as you can, you break up away, but instead of running, you twist to see your captor. He doesn’t look the same as you remember.

**Grey skin and sweeping horns. Tight cells, burning flesh.**

“Emma.” It knows your name. “Do you remember me?”

And you find you do.

“…Bull?”

“That’s right. Come on, Emma, deep breaths. We’re gonna work through this.”

“Th… The fog…” your voice doesn’t sound like yours, too high pitched, strained.

“Don’t focus on the fog. Look straight ahead. Focus on me.”

You don’t want to. Something, someone, could come behind you, a spear through your back, just like Falon. He was fifteen, just a boy and just a slave, but what would those Qunari savages care?

“Come on, look at me.” He steps backwards. Unbidden, you follow him, feet silent on the damp ground. It’s a strange sensation; you feel like you’re chasing him. He continues to back up, and you continue to advance, not actually closing any of the distance between the two of you, but keeping up. The panic isn’t gone, and you feel no more connected to your body, but you’re starting to remember
that you had been striking him not long ago. You want to be doing it again. Your eyes narrow slightly, watching his movements intently. You stalk after him, matching each of his longer strides backwards with several small, light steps of your own. Waiting for him to start running, or to lunge. But he does neither.

You’re not sure when he reaches the wooden lean-to, pushed up against the side of Skyhold’s outer wall, but when he enters the open building, you follow him in. When you realize there are walls around you, you panic, slightly, but the open doorway soothes you. The fog is out there. You’re in here. And there’s an open door if you need to escape. You turn your focus back to the Qunari… Bull. Iron Bull. It seems important that you remember that.

“Emma. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

You narrow your eyes, looking for the trick. You shift your body so that you’re between him and the exit, in case he intends to bolt.

“Talk to me, Emma.”

You reach for your voice, but find your throat muscles so tense and tight that your voice comes out as a strangled gasp. You try again. “You’re… not them.” Are you trying to ask? Trying to convince yourself? You aren’t even sure what the words leaving your mouth mean. “But you’re like them,” you add, eyes narrowing.

“How am I like them?”

“You’re both those things. Does that make me like them?”

“Yes!” you snarl. Then, quieter. “No… I don’t know. Maybe.” Your fists clench and unclench by your waist. Memories, unbidden, and flashing through your mind.

*They told you about them, the Ben-Hassrath. They can change your mind, with words and drugs. Make you a slave, make you not-you.*

“You look like you want to be hitting something, Emma.” The quiet voice makes your ears twitch. You do. You want to be burning this pathetic hut to the ground with him inside it. With both of you inside. You want to just burn the whole fucking world down. But you know all of that is unwise.

“Me and the boys back in Seheron had an exercise for dealing with stuff like this.” He begins to move, and your muscles tighten, preparing to run, or to pounce, depending on what he does. He moves slowly, deliberately, and you watch him through dilated eyes. Only the looseness in his own muscles keeps you rooted where you are, uncertain whether the situation calls for fight or flight. Slowly, he nudges a stick towards you. It can’t even be called a staff… more like a broom handle. You stare down at it, then up at him, uncomprehending.

“Better than bloodying up your fists,” he suggests. “Can’t have you breaking a hand.”

You eye it, and him, for a moment longer, before snapping it up in the same smooth motion as you charge him. He drops into a defensive stance, and you crack the stick down, across his raised arms. A hiss of satisfaction escapes you at the sound.

“I didn’t want to be there!” you shout, uncertain as to why. “I didn’t ask for any of this bullshit! None of us did!” You strike with the stick, blindly, as rising tears burn in your eyes, blurring your vision. “And then you! You stupid fucking Qunari! You thought we were all just goddamn Vints,
couldn’t tell the slaves from the soldiers!” **Wham!** Another strike emphasizes your screaming. “You only fucking picked me up because I was a kid! No little girls in the army!” **Smash.** “Even you stupid, motherless Qunari know that!” **Crack.** “And you stick me in a cell with some fucking monster and I didn’t fucking ask for this!”

Another crack, louder this time, as the useless stick shatters, breaking into shards against Iron Bull’s side. With a strangled cry, you launch yourself at him, all flailing limbs and old hatred. You bloody your knuckles on him after all, striking at his chest and arms until you lose sensation, until you’re not sure if you’re seeing his blood or yours. At some point, he falls backwards, and you follow him down, kneeling on his stomach as you burn your energy, rage, and panic against the wall of his body.

Eventually, your arms are too heavy to move. They hang uselessly, resting against Iron Bull’s body. And you’re aware, once again, that this is Iron Bull, and that he’s let you beat him, as promised. But the realization comes through a fog, and your body, suddenly as heavy as your arms and mind, collapses against him, breath coming in gasps and wracking sobs.

You’re aware of arms wrapping around you, of the world shifting as you’re lifted up, but you’ve no strength to fight, and no desire to. You’re halfway to unconsciousness already, your wretched, sleep-deprived mind sinking towards the Fade.
You dream. It’s such a welcome, soothing sensation, that as you slip in and out of consciousness, it feels like you’re dreaming the whole time. It has to be a dream, because you remember Iron Bull carrying you to his room, bundling you up in warm, soft blankets. Then all is lost in a hazy field of soft voices and warmth, none of which you believe is real.

When you wake, it’s not with a start, but the slow, easy waking of someone coming out of a genuine sleep. The first thing you notice is a sense of comfort and warmth. The second thing is a distinct lack of tension inside you. Your eyes snap open; when you passed out, you must have lost control over yourself, or perhaps you’d lost it earlier. Either way, you’re exposed. You swear, gathering the dancing chaos back inside of you with some difficulty—after so long inside, it wants to be free, burns with the desire. If Bull had been a mage, you would never have woken up at all. He would certainly have killed you in your sleep.

Speaking of Bull… You’re in his room, again. It alarms you that you’ve been in his bedroom enough to recognize it. The man himself, however, is nowhere to be seen. How long have you been here? The bright sunlight streaming in from the window informs you that it’s been hours, at least. You’re nervous about having been discovered, but fairly certain that the fact you’re still alive and not in chains proves that your secret remains intact.

You spot your hands, then, and realize with mild horror that they’re bandaged, from your fingers up over your wrist. Suddenly, and all at once, memories from the morning come crashing down on you as if dropped from a great height. They crash through your mind in waves, leaving you reeling. Oh, Maker. You fucked up. You really fucked up. Against all odds, somehow, you lost your mind and survived to have to deal with the aftermath.

Panic begins clawing at your chest all over again as you remember quietly stalking Iron Bull across the courtyard. You completely lost it! It’s a miracle you didn’t burn the damned shed down. And Iron Bull… had you dealt him any serious injury? Thank the Maker your ridiculous flailing likely didn’t give away any combat training. Ugh… Alongside the growing panic is no small amount of mortification. You’re supposed to have a better grip on yourself than this! Did years spent in the Orlesian court imprint nothing onto you? You feel like the rash child you were in Rivain.

You hear the door open, and twist yourself quickly towards it, tangling yourself in the thick woolen blankets. It’s Iron Bull, of course, carrying a tray of something with one hand. Your panic must show on your face, because as soon as he sees you, he stops, raising one hand up as if to indicate he’ll come no further.

“Hey. How you feeling?” The kindness in his voice just makes you feel more guilty. Had you really beaten him with a fucking stick? Maker… You had covered the man in your blood, possibly covered yourself in his, and he’s talking to you like you had an accident. You bury your head into the thick blankets tangled around your knees, wrapping your arms around the back of your head and groaning. You want to be on the next merchant cart out of here, just to escape the embarrassment, but as soon as you think of it, the image of Solas flashes into your mind. You can’t leave. Not while he’s gone. Not while you don’t know what’s happened to him.

“Emma. Talk to me. What are you feeling?” Iron Bull says again. You can tell from his voice that he hasn’t moved… The nicer he is, the worse you feel.

“Mortified,” you whine into the blankets.
“You don’t need to be. Everyone who was in Seheron has episodes like that.”

You look up, hesitantly. “Really?”

“Sure. How do you think I knew what to do?”

“I… Bull, I… don’t think I can apologize enough,” you say, trying to function through the acute humiliation. “It was… the fog, and the fighting, and I…” You run a hand through your hair, mortification intensifying to find it loose rather than pulled back as you normally keep it.

“It’s alright,” he says, with so much emphasis that you can almost believe it. He’s approaching now, and you don’t stop him. Rather than sitting down on the bed, he kneels next to it, and the motion brings another surge of guilt through you. He looks… battered. Despite his claims about not bruising easily, his silver skin is beginning to mottle dark blues and purples along his arms and chest.

His eyes follow your horrified gaze. “Oh, please,” he says mildly. “I’ve looked worse than this after sex.”

His words are so absurd that you can’t help but laugh, a short bark that alarms you as it escapes your throat.

“I’d be less confused if you were cross with me,” you confess.

“Be confused, then. Be disoriented. It’s normal; you’ve had a hell of a day.”

“I’ve had a hell of a day? Look in the mirror!”

“You’ve had that coming a long time, Emma. I’ve known ever since you bolted out of the mess hall. I’m just glad I was there when it happened.”

You shake your head, slowly, only to be taken by a surge of dizziness, the chaos in your chest surging in irritation at being imprisoned after so short a freedom.

“Drink,” Iron Bull instructs in a tone that allows no argument. You find a mug has been placed in your bandaged hands, and you drink the fresh juice with some difficulty. It isn’t until you start drinking that you realize your thirst, and you quickly drain the whole cup, the juice soothing your twisting stomach. “You’ve had episodes like this before?”

You shake your head. “Not often. And never that much… that.” You’ve panicked, in the past, flashed back to Seheron and thought you were there, but you had always ridden it out. As years continued to pass, the attacks became less and less frequent. Until Skyhold, with its curious faces and their probing questions. And, of course, the presence of Iron Bull, the first Qunari you had seen in years.

“No wonder you’re freaking out. It happens, to people who have been in wars, or any kind of traumatic bullshit. Most of the boys in Seheron got them at least once.”

“I… I’m really sorry,” you say weakly. With your panic receding, and without the energy that had previously escaped to buoy you, you’re beginning to become aware that you hurt. A lot. Especially your hands, which feel like you got in a fight with a cheese grater. How are you going to write like this?

“It’s fine. I kinda expected that to happen when we fought. I’m just as glad it happened in private instead in front of the guys.”
“…Oh, Maker, that would have been a nightmare.”

“Yeah. So. You wanna talk about it, or are you good?”

You find yourself actually pausing to consider his question, which once would have automatically had you scurrying for the nearest door. That alone has you rigid with horror as you realize it. You’ve come to trust Iron Bull more, or perhaps you’re in a vulnerable position. Either way, it could be another Ben-Hassrath trick. He could have… could have fought you in the fog, knowing, the whole thing could have…

You shake your head slowly, heart pounding in your chest. You don’t know what to think, right now. “I don’t know if I can trust you, Bull,” you say, and to your surprise, it has the cadence of an apology. “I don’t know if I ever can.”

“When you can, I’ll be here,” is all he says. You find you can’t say anything in response.

Instead, you gesture uselessly at your hands. “What am I going to do?” You’ve mauled yourself on him, and you someone who depends on their hands for their livelihood.

“Go to the healers,” he suggests.

“And tell them what?” you hiss quietly. “That I got in a fight with a wall?”

“Well, they’ll know you were hitting something, just from the injuries,” Iron Bull points out, and you curse. He’s right.

“I doubt they ask questions when the men come in with injuries from fighting, Bull, but they’ll wonder when the linguist does!” You take a few deep breaths, trying to calm yourself. You’ve gotten yourself out of stranger situations. Alright. The Commander already knows there have been some less-than-kind soldiers hovering around you. It would be easy to blame the injuries on needing to fend off a more-than-amorous would-be-suitor. It would likely never even reach his ears. These things happened every day with no Commander any the wiser.

“Alright,” you say out loud. “I know what to do.”

“It’s something to watch your mind work,” Iron Bull says, sounding amused. His eyes had stayed on you as you went from panicked to determined, and it had been a fun thing to watch, from the grin on his lips. You frown at him.

“You’re… you’ll be discreet about this, yes?”

“Do you mean, will I go blabbing around Skyhold that you get jumpy in the fog? Or bragging that I had a pretty lady sit on my chest and try to break my face?”

“Bull!”

“I’ll keep it to myself,” he says with a cheeky grin. “I’m a spy. We’re good at that.”

Amazingly, your thrown-together plan goes off nearly without a hitch. You make a wilting flower of yourself before you enter the healer’s tent, a long thing pitched in the courtyard, near the training yard. You’re already a mess, it’s only a matter of removing the bloody bandages from your hands. You wince to see the state of yourself. It doesn’t seem like you’ve broken any fingers, but your knuckles are all a bloody mess. Only one other thing…
It hurts, wrenching your own ankle out of place, and it hurts worse limping across the courtyard on it, but it gives you a believable limp. The rest will be covered by the bruises Iron Bull unwittingly gave you around your chest, arm, and shoulders when he wrestled the flight out of you.

You make your way slowly into the tent, and seize upon the most likely man you see, a stern looking man with a holy symbol of Andraste hanging around his neck. He takes one look at you and frowns.

“Maker’s breath, child, what happened to you?” The alarm in his voice makes you fear you won’t have the apathy towards your “situation” that you need.

“I, um… had an accident,” you lie, poorly and purposefully. The skepticism in his eyes is clear.

“I see. An accident has wrenched your ankle and bloodied your hands?”

“Can… Can you heal me?” you say, cringing. As much as you loathe playing the cringing elf, this practiced victimhood has served you well your entire life. A tiny slave girl, a doe-eyed young lad, dirty and starving, a simple maid, one rabbit among many… You have always excelled at being small and forgotten. Pitiable, but in the same tired way that all weak are pitiable. “I work with my hands, I… I can’t…”

The man sighs. “I will have the truth out of you. Have you been fighting with another servant? The Inquisition will find you out eventually, if you go starting trouble!”

His scorn soothes your worries. Blessed are the self-righteous, hateful of the weak, for in their ineptitude, your safety is ensured. “N-no! It… There was a man…”

You watch with suppressed glee as the man’s eyes go flat. A story told throughout time. “I see. Let me have a look at you, girl.”

His rough examination no doubt confirms his suspicions. A long, painful bruise wraps its way around both your arms, you have a torn lip (from your own savage gnashing at Iron Bull’s hand, no doubt), your ankle is brutally twisted and swelling, and your knuckles are the bloodied, fleshy mess of punching injuries.

“I take it by the look of you that the man escaped in worse shape than you,” the healer says with no small amount of disapproval.

“Y…yes. I fought him off.”

“Then there will be no need for you to take this further. Be still, child, and I will fix your hands and heal your bruises.” The man is as good as his word. He fixes your hands, reduces the swelling and color of your bruising, although the pain remains. You gaze down at your ankle, hopefully, but his scorn only intensifies. Ugh. You picked one a little too pious. You thank him with a wince, and limp your way out of the tent. That’s what you get for injuring yourself to make your story more believable. He likely only healed your bruises to avoid trouble if another saw the state of you. A woman bloodied up with defensive injuries and bruises on her arms means only one thing, but a woman with a twisted ankle could merely be clumsy. Your bruises are no longer as visible, but they ache as if he hadn’t touched them. No matter, a badly twisted ankle will not impede your work. Climbing the stairs up the Great Hall is a misery, however.

When you finally limp your way into the rotunda, it’s a relief to flop down at your desk. You don’t even notice the missive sitting on it right away, and when you see it, you emit what could only be called a whimper.

All those stairs…
With a groan, you open it. A note is affixed to it, declaring that it is not urgent, but to do it at your earliest convenience. Ugh. You glance over it. More Ben-Hassrath reports, this a post-mission report. It details the personal affairs of some Fereldan noble… What on earth are the Ben-Hassrath doing in Denerim? Hmm… You make a point to memorize it as you translate, in case this turns out to be important as well. You still don’t know what Leliana’s game is, but you know that there IS a Game. There always is, with Orlesians. Even the commoners wish they could play.

You translate the note quickly, a little sour about the situation, but also furious with yourself for not being in your designated spot when you were needed. What if it had been urgent? You could not have a reputation for being flighty. Worse, what if Leliana’s messenger had hunted you down, found you bloody and battered in Iron Bull’s bed? You could not have devised a fictional assailter to save you from humiliation then. Perhaps you could have played it off as sexual perversion, although you’ve no reason to believe Iron Bull would go along with that. Sex was one thing, but a reputation for violence in bed could genuinely sully his name.

It was no matter. Several times today, you had narrowly dodged situations that could have left you compromised or dead. If you dwell on it now, you’ll throw yourself off balance. There will be time for self-flagellation when less is at stake. You scribe off a translation, triple check it for accuracy—this is the sort of thing where accuracy can save lives—and then stand with a shuddering gasp. Your fist clenches around the missive as weight falls on your injured ankle. That quickly, you had forgotten. The stairs will be agony.

It’s only your pride that keeps you from dropping to hands and knees and crawling up the stairs. As it is, when you’re certain no one is looking, you sort of hop one-leggedly up them, clutching onto the railing for balance. You are, of course, spotted as you limp through the library and towards the second flight of stairs. You spot alarm in the eyes of both Thea and Dorian, but only Dorian rushes towards you.

“What happened?” he demands.

“Hello to you too, Dorian,” you say dryly, continuing to limp towards the stairs. He steps in front of you and crosses his arms, pointedly. You sigh. “I fell. I wasn’t expecting our mistress to call me upstairs, or I would have wrapped it.”

“You fell? What, down the stairs? Maker, take that boot off; let it breathe. Don’t you know where the healer’s tent is?”

You roll your eyes. “The ones who deal with wounded soldiers? I’m not wasting their time with this. If it will make Mother Tevinter happy, however, I’ll elevate it whilst I work. Honestly, it’s not broken, Dorian. I just twisted it.”

Dorian’s clearly unhappy, but you move around him to get to the stairs. “You should go to the healers,” he says firmly as you try to walk up the second flight of stairs as normally as possible. “It’s what they’re there for, and you’re not helping anyone by limping around like a martyr.”

You continue up the stairs with much difficulty. Dorian’s concern, while misplaced, is a little flattering. It’s nice to know that he would be concerned if you injured yourself. You try very hard not to think about what Solas’ reaction to your injury would be. You’re starving for a mage’s attentions enough without thinking about Solas’ soothing magic filling you. If you imagine his warm hands on your bared ankle, you’ll… Ah, and there you go. You have no self-control at all.

You force your mind back into reality as you crest the top of the stairs. Thank the Maker that Leliana is always easily found. You force yourself to step down normally despite the screaming agony in your ankle, not wanting a curious spymaster investigating what you’d been up to all morning. You
simply drop both messages off on her desk. She pauses in her reading, and glances up at you.

“Ah, Emma. I’m glad you found time for it.”

It was the kind of comment that might carry barbs, but you refuse to let something so obvious get to you. The note had said it wasn’t urgent. “Of course, serah. I am, as always, at your disposal,” you say politely. She eyes you curiously, but says no more, and when she goes back to her reading, you take that as your leave.

Heading down the stairs is less of an agony than going up was, but it still strains your poor ankle. You ignore the stink eye Dorian gives you as you go through the library, and sink down to your desk. As soon as you’re seated, you yank your cursed boot off, swearing as your ankle throbs and flames anew as it’s released. It’s turning an unpleasant purple and is very clearly swollen. Your punishment for being a little too determined to get out of the mess you made with your reputation intact.

You prop the leg on the stool you sometimes sit on, and pull your tome into your lap so you can work on your translation half-sideways. It’s a little awkward, but you manage to get the hang of it, and continue work on your translation. Again, no hope of finishing it today… You spend too much time playing around Skyhold like a child. The old you could have this done in a week, perhaps a week and a half tops. Look at you, faffing about like a child when there’s work to be done…

When dinner time rolls around, there is no question that you’ll be staying to work through it, even though your stomach screams for having eaten nothing all day. Self-loathing keeps you rooted in your chair, however, until you hear uncertain boots entering your rotunda. You glance up, half-expecting to see Celia, Iron Bull, Sera, Dorian… any number of people chase after you these days. You’re quite shocked to see Thea, however. You’ve never once seen her step foot inside this rotunda, even after Solas left.

“Thea?” you say, surprise no doubt showing on your face.

“Well… you ‘aven’t been ‘round lately, and… well, I see you with Dorian, but you been away from the mess…” She’s mumbling; you can barely make out what she’s saying, but you get the gist of it. You realize, belatedly, that you’ve not been to the mess in two long days.

“Were you worried, or are you mad at me?” you jest with a practiced grin. You’ve neglected human friends in the past in your distraction. Neediness is annoying, but expected. You know how to deal with it.

“If you got hurt, I was worried. If you were jus’ bein’ an ass, I was mad,” she says sourly.

“I’m fine,” you say, gesturing down towards your miserable looking ankle. “It’s just twisted; I fell on the steps because of the stupid fog. And I was being a bit of an ass. I was late to breakfast yesterday, and skipped it altogether today.” Her scowl shows her opinion of you skipping meals hasn’t changed any.

“And I bet you skipped dinner, too!”

“Nooo… How long could I possibly go without food?” you say with a laugh. The look she gives you is highly skeptical. “I’m sorry, Thea. I wasn’t avoiding you, I promise.”

She sighs. “Alright. But stop skipping meals! And get that ankle to a healer. S’what they’re for. I’m gettin’ out o’ this spooky place. Dunno how you work in here, all alone. Even more so when that mage of yours is home.”
“It’s peaceful,” you say with a slight eye roll. “Solas has yet to throw *anything* at me.”

“Give ‘im time!”

She heads back up the stairs, and you turn your focus back to your work. You do manage to get a goodly amount of work done, despite the steady ache of your ankle and the painful twisting of your stomach. How you manage to get through the day without anyone else checking on you is something you may never figure out. It isn’t until the night chill has your fingers stiff and your ankle throbbing with agony that you finally decide to rest.

It’s extra cold tonight, and you find you really don’t want to go outside. It would be a cold night on the couch, with no blankets to warm you. You think with fondness at the comfortable woolen blankets Iron Bull had wrapped you in, much softer than your own scratchy cotton throw. With a sigh, you throw yourself down on the couch anyway. Perhaps you’ll be frozen over by morning, but at least this way, you don’t have to walk across the courtyard on your swollen ankle.
Safe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Was it insomnia or cold that kept you up through the night? It hardly matters now. The angry swelling in your ankle has reduced only slightly, despite the elevation, and aches brutally in the bitter cold. You give up on sleeping some time before dawn, struggle with your boot until you manage to wedge your swollen foot into it. The pain only intensifies. You limp your way out of the rotunda, and moan pitifully at the frigid wind outside. It’s still Solace for the Maker’s sake! Curse these mountains to the Void!

You remove yourself from the worst of the wind when you go down into the courtyard, but it’s still colder than you’re comfortable with, and your ankle is in absolute agony. You spot Iron Bull in the training ring and limp over to him automatically, even though training is the last thing on your mind.

He spots your limp. “Okay, you didn’t have that when you left my room,” he says, pointing down at your leg.

“Sssssh!” you hiss, despite the fact there’s really no one out there to hear him. “I twisted it. I didn’t want to go back to the healer right after I got bloody knuckles healed.”

“Well, you can’t learn anything on that. Let’s go get it healed,” he says, standing up out of his stretch with a grunt. “I’m a little surprised you showed, actually. Thought you might need some time off after yesterday.”

“When I woke up, I came out without thinking,” you say honestly. “I’m not keen on going back to the healer’s tent, however. Particularly not with you. After the story I told last time, they might think you twisted my ankle yourself.” You pause. “Or killed the man who did.”

Iron Bull raises an eyebrow. “Oh, I gotta hear that story sometime. I’m not worried about my reputation, though. Come on. Walk there, or I’ll carry you again.”

The idea of being picked up and tossed over someone’s shoulder while actually conscious is even worse than the knowledge it happened when you were black-out drunk. You quickly begin shuffling towards the healer’s tent. You glance over at Iron Bull. Where is the pang of fear you normally get whenever you think about how you lost your mind.

The lingering doubt about Ben-Hassrath mind tricks comes back to you, sending tingling fear shooting through your body. You’re afraid, because you’re suddenly not afraid of Iron Bull. It seems foolish, when phrased that way, but you’ve seen what a Ben-Hassrath can do to a person.


He eyes you cautiously. “You sure you want to know that, kid?”

“It’s like it was with knowing when you were there… I don’t want to know, but I think I need to,” you say, uncomfortable with the amount of honesty you have on display. It’s an unfamiliar feeling.

“I would say… I was similar to what Leliana is, here.”

“A spymaster?”
I suppose. I handled the information, commanded squads of men…"

Just what you didn’t want to hear, of course. You sigh, and shake your head. Iron Bull was likely the cause of the deaths of many of your good friends, and it’s entirely likely he has heard of you, just hasn’t connected the memories from Seheron to the you in the present. You’d like to keep it from him.

“You don’t look too happy,” he comments.

“I’m not. I don’t know how to balance the fact you seem like an alright guy with the knowledge that you’re likely indirectly responsible for the deaths of most of my friends… or the knowledge that you’re likely directly responsible for the raid that allowed me to escape slavery.” It’s such a bitter lie that it almost burns your tongue coming out. You had all but forgotten what guilt feels like. Iron Bull’s decisions may have put you through hell in Seheron, but no one’s responsible for the deaths of your fellow slaves but you.

You manage to look at Iron Bull’s face, but it does you no good. You can’t read his expression. You sigh again. “Come on… let’s get me fixed up so I can work out my issues with violence like a normal person.”

“Harder! You’re couldn’t disorient a squirrel with a hit like that!”

You slam your fist into Iron Bull’s stomach harder, wincing and trying to ignore the jarring, trembling pain it sends up your arm. When he tightens his muscles, it’s like punching a goddamn wall. No wonder you bloodied yourself on him yesterday.

You were hesitant, at first, nervous that striking him again might send you back into the foggy hell of Seheron. Not to mention your guilt at the bruising he still displays... But Iron Bull found a good way of motivating you without reminding you of Qunari long past: pissing you off. Every insult he hurls your way has you striking harder and faster. You’re not thinking about Seheron. You’re not thinking anything, other than how much you want to wipe the smirk off that damn face of his.

It’s a rogue swing that does it, after a particularly galling insult towards the stature of elven women burns your pointed ears. Aimed up, instead of across, catching the man off guard. Most Qunari would not begin to guess that a slight elven woman could strike them in the face, and, in truth, you have to jump into your uppercut to manage it. But the swearing--Qunlat is a language that lends itself well to curses--and flow of blood from Bull’s nose is worth the effort.

“Oh my!” you say, faking surprise. “What’s this?” You’re unable to keep from shaking your hand from the force of the impact… it feels like you damn near broke a finger. “It seems as though my delicate elven hands have done you harm!”

“Ow, you little shit,” he says, but the glint in his eyes is more amused than angry. “I think you broke my nose!”

You pause. “What, really?” You lean in, curiously, to his doubled-over form. “Let me see.” He moves his hand, as if to let you see his bloodied nose, but in your distraction, you don’t see his mischievous look until it’s too late. An arm wraps around your chest as Bull drags you over in a headlock. With a shriek, you lose your balance, knocking the both of you into the grass. He rubs the top of your head with the knuckles of his other hand as you squeal, writhing in his grasp, alarmed, but not panicked.
“Ow! Son of a bitch!” you swear, but there’s laughter in your voice. “You’re getting blood in my hair! Ow! OW! Faccia di stronzo! Salaud! **Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo!**”

“Wow, you swear attractively,” Iron Bull says, laughing.

“Fuck! Ow!”

“Call me a fucker in Tevene, it’s hot.”

“Get off me you horned bastard!”

Iron Bull, still laughing, consents to release you, and you collapse into the grass, shoulders trembling with suppressed laughter. You can’t hide the grin on your face, though, especially when you see the state of his face. “Ow, **wow,** I might have broken your nose!”

“Sure as hell feels like it!” he says, wiping off his bloody hands on the grass. “So, what’s all that Tevene you said mean?”

“You should ask Dorian.”

The healer gives you a look that could cripple as the two of you stand before her once again, both covered in Iron Bull’s blood.

“Technically, ser, he’s the only one who needs healing. I’m fit as a fiddle.”

“And how did your… friend… get injured so quickly?” the older lady says, eyeing the shirtless Qunari. “So soon after he takes you in for healing, at that?”

You take a deep breath. “Well, you see, serah, we were walking along, innocent as you like, when my tall friend here spotted something glinting upon one of Skyhold’s many rooftops. Well, when he pointed it out to me, I thought, for the betterment of the Inquisition, we ought to see what it is! But even my Qunari partner, tall as he is, could not quite reach it. So, of course, he gave me a boost up, but I’m afraid that in the process of reaching for the alien object, I struck him quite violently in the face with my shoe.”

“Oh, Maker…”

“And, of course, startled, he fell, and in the tumble, we both got quite bloody! I’m fine, though. If you could be so benevolent, however, as to repair my friend’s… face…”

Thank the Maker for Iron Bull’s perfectly neutral face. The healer rolls her eyes exaggeratedly, mutters a prayer up to the heavens, but deigns to heal poor Iron Bull.

The two of you manage to get away from the healer’s tent before laughter overtakes you again. Iron Bull slaps you on the back as he thunders with glee.

“Where’d you learn to lie like that, you little snake?”

“There isn’t an alienage rat alive who doesn’t know when to lie to a hahren,” you say with a snort. “Besides, my story was more believable than me breaking your nose.”

“No wonder you and Varric get along,” he says with a snort. “That sounds just like something he’d
The comment soberes you, slightly, bringing your mind back to Varric’s and Solas’ absence.

“So, it’s a bit late, but do you wanna get some breakfast?” he asks after you’re quiet for a moment.

“Oh, no I’m-“

You’re rudely interrupted by a loud, long, and extremely audible roar from your stomach, reminding you that you’ve not eaten since the day before last.

“Ah… perhaps some breakfast, before work…”

You do, finally, get to your rotunda, and as soon as you do, you settle down for a long day of working, hopefully without interruption. You really need to get this work done. Weeks of nonsense have delayed you enough. You tear through the translation, willing your sore body to obey you. When hunger makes your hands shake, late in the evening, sheer force of will stills them. You don’t stop, other than to stretch tight muscles to prevent cramps, until the sun has sunk over the horizon. Not to eat, not to rest, not even to relieve yourself. Not until you throw your quill down in brutal satisfaction, and cry, aloud, “Finished!”

Part of you wants to take the papers right up to Leliana, but you know you need time yet. They must be organized, then tied together, at least loosely, and you also need to decide which finished pages to take, to show off what the finished product will look like. You can do it in the morning. For now, it’s time to reward yourself. You had taken a day off, previously, at your friends’ insistence, but now you exit the rotunda to take rest time out of your own desire. A huge, ancient Tevinter tome, translated in two weeks. You are still, unquestionably, the god of linguistics.

You find yourself heading to the stable with quick steps. You don’t see the horsemaster as you enter, although you do spot Blackwall, sitting under a lantern and carving some piece of wood with a knife. You give him a slight bow as you pass. “Ser Warden,” you say politely. He only grunts in response, but doesn’t move to stop your entry.

Deft fingers pocket snacks for Revas as you move through the stables. It’s quite a shock for you when you find him already attended, more of a shock when you see by whom. Jealousy fills your heart at the way the elf is stroking your beloved Revas, although you know quite well that you’re being silly. He’s a friendly hart, and he likes elves, in particular. But to see him butting his nose gently into the hand that belongs to a Dalish? It fills you with distaste as much as the sight of the man himself.

The vallaslin is, however, faded. It’s likely this man is no Dalish, even if he was raised that way. You urge yourself to stave off judgment, even with distaste churning in your stomach. You wait for the man to notice you, which doesn’t take long, as Revas quickly swings his head towards you, whuffing his excitement. Despite the fact that you don’t want to be overly close to the Dalish, you walk towards Revas as the hart strains against the wall of his stall in an attempt to get closer to you.

“He likes you,” the Dalish man says, sounding pleased. The marks on his face dedicate him to Ghilain’nain; you find yourself unsurprised.

“Thank you.” You feign politeness. “I was lucky enough to ride with him earlier this week.”

“Oh! You must be the linguist. Dennet told me about you. I should have recognized you; I saw you falling off Revas from the upper levels of the barns.”
It’s lucky that your default expression is severe, or the man might have noticed how displeased you were by his statement.

“You did very well for your first time!” The man is cheerful, and seems completely unaware of the burning passion of your scorn. Only Revas butting you in the chest can break your glare, and you move to gently stroke the playful hart.

“You should visit to ride him more,” the Dalish continues. “The harts here never get enough socialization or riding. The Inquisition keeps them, but rarely takes them into the field. If you’d like, I could give you lessons?”

“My plate is quite full up of lessons,” you say, keeping the acid from dripping into your voice. Even your dislike for this man can’t keep you from wanting onto Revas again, however. “…I believe Sundays are my rest day, however,” you admit. “And I would like to ride him again.”

The man positively beams. “Excellent! My name is Belassan, by the way. What’s yours?”

“Emma,” you say shortly, paying the majority of your attention to Revas and his wandering lips and nose. He’s searching for the treats he knows you have hidden away, and you have to be careful not to get knocked into by one of his horns. Even Belassan steps away as they swing this way and that.

“Where are you from, Emma?” the man asks. You wish he’d stop trying to make small talk.

“Ferelden,” you say, dodging your head backwards to avoid a rogue horn as Revas attempts to fit his snout into your pocket. You finally relent to slip him a treat, if only to save yourself from getting a busted nose to match Bull’s.

“Oh, really? Me too!”

You eye him. “I was unaware that Dalish were really ‘from’ anywhere. Was your clan in Ferelden your whole life?”

“More or less. I was from Clan Sahlinan.”

“Ah.” That explains a lot. “Was?”

“Yeah, I, um… Left. A while ago. Anyway, I was young when all that craziness with the Blight was going on.”

“As was I.” This is turning into the opposite of relaxing. You give Revas a last fond pat, determined to come back when this man is somewhere else. “I should be going,” you say, not bothering to say it politely. You could punch this man in the face and he would probably still be smiling. Sera would delight in your hostility towards the other elf, no doubt, and the thought chafes you slightly, but it’s no use. You simply don’t like him. Clan Sahlinan didn’t have your hostility in particular. They had done well in the fifth Blight. But Dalish always chafe at you. Perhaps if you can get over yourself long enough to get his story out of him, you’ll find he left for a good reason. Perhaps he found his kin as insufferably smug as you did.

You’ll find out another time. You bid the man farewell and stalk out of the barn, not bothering to acknowledge the unfriendly Blackwall. You’re actually relieved when you see Iron Bull in the courtyard. Ugh. What are you now, to go from hating a man to being happy to see him in a single day? Despite your fresh self-loathing, you walk towards him, cheered slightly when he sees you and waves you over.

“Your face looks more sour than usual, kid! What were you doing in the barn?”
“Visiting Revas,” you say shortly. “I finished my translation of the tome; thought I’d take some time off for the rest of the evening.”

He cuts you off. “All I’m hearing is celebration. You should come to the tavern!”


“What if I promise not to give you any more Dragon Piss?”

“No way!”

“Awww, c’mon. You broke my nose; you owe me!”

“I most certainly do not!” you snap, despite the fact that his joking jabs remind that you do, actually, owe the Qunari quite a bit.

“Me and the guys are gonna be playing Wicked Grace. You could join in, maybe have a few drinks…”

Hmm… You do enjoy a chance to swindle drunk mercenaries out of their pay. It’s practically a hobby. “…Maybe just a few hands,” you relent.

“That’s the spirit!” Iron Bull exclaims, clapping you around the shoulders and leading you towards the bar. Ah, well… What’s the worst that could happen?

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A goodly number of drinks and a large pile of gold later, and you’re beginning to question your self-control. Oh, the Chargers and, in fact, the whole tavern, are having a good time, drunk and laughing at the luck on display from the bookish elven lass. Which is good, as you’ve accumulated the majority of their coin. You’re getting a bit deep into the drink yourself, however. People keep handing you things. Mugs, mostly. There has been more than one joke about you possibly throwing them at a Templar. You threw a mug at the last fellow to make one.

Despite your attempts at remaining more sober than last time, as your mood improves, you become freer with the drink, and as you drink, your mood improves. It spirals out of control rapidly, until you find yourself largely unable to walk.

The men have all gotten up to return to their quarters, the night’s celebrations largely done. There’s a lot of jovial back-slapping and laughter. When you stand up to leave, however, you suddenly and dramatically notice you’re even more intoxicated than you thought, and promptly fall over. Luckily, or unluckily, depending on how you look at it, Iron Bull is there to catch you.

“Aaaah, yooouuu,” you slur at him as you drape your weight effortlessly over him. “Lookit you, catchin’ me. I think you like it.”

“What happened to ‘one or two drinks,’ kid?” he says, with a smile that’s much more handsome than you remember.

“Was havin’ a good time. Wanted a distraction. S’not like I’m gonna get any sleep, ‘n’ soberin’ up awake s’a bitch.”

Iron Bull frowns, trying to steady you on your feet. You don’t cooperate, flopping loosely against him. “Still can’t sleep?”
“S’no helpin’ it,” you say with a wave of your hand. “S’just a pro’lem I have.”

“Can you seriously not walk, or are you just being a brat?” asks Iron Bull, and his words remind you of Solas with a sharp, bitter pang. “Did being mildly bratty get you far in life up until now? Din’samahlen.” You say nothing, just continue to flop uselessly.

“If you don’t walk, I’ll pick you up,” he threatens, likely expecting your pride to carry you onto your feet and out the door. Instead, you stick your tongue out.

“Well, do it then! E’ryone knows you wanna!”

With a grunt, he sweeps you up, one arm on your back and the other under your knees. You whoop like a child being tossed into the air; your head spinning the way it is, that’s certainly how it feels.

“Wow! So this’s what the climate’s like so high up!”

“If you’re pleased with yourself, tell me where your damn room is,” Iron Bull growls, though if there’s vitriol in his voice, you’re too far gone to notice it. You wrap an arm around his neck, pulling your face next to his and pointing dramatically forwards.

“Onwards, towards adventure!” You then collapse back into his arms in a fit of giggles.

“Oh for…”

“Forward, mighty steed!”

“I’m going to drop you.”

“Bidonista!” you exclaim, wrapping your arms around his neck in preparation.

“If you’re going to swear at me, at least have the courtesy to use Tevene. I can close my eyes and pretend you’re some Tevinter lady I’m sweeping off to bed.”

“I could be a Vint,” you say with a scoff. “Speak it better than most ‘em.” You raise yourself up again to hiss into his ear, “Odi et amo. Quare id faciam, fortasse requiris?”

“Oooookay, we are getting you to a bed, any bed. If Krem hears you talking like that, poor man might not be able to control himself.”

“Onwards and upwards!”

You cling to him in the chill of the night, uncertain as to where you’re going and largely unconcerned. You rather enjoy the sensation of being carried, and if you close your eyes, you can almost forget about the disconcerting horns.

You recognize the room he carries you into. “Thank the Maker,” you slur. “You’ve got blankets.”

“The Inquisition didn’t give you any?” The concern in his voice, banked slightly by irritation, makes you smile.

“One; an itchy mess of a thing. I hate the cold.” You’re moving about on your own volition now, so Bull sets you down. All you do, however, is stumble over to his bed and flop into it.

“I’ve only got one of those, you know,” he points out sourly. You’re already cocooning yourself in the warm, soft blankets you missed so sorely last night. “Alright, I’ll take the floor,” he says, walking over. “At least give me one of my own blankets, e-“
You attempt to grab him by the wrist and pull him off balance. It probably would have worked on Sera. Iron Bull is, however, significantly larger than you, so your mighty tug does little more than make him look at you funny.

“S’a big bed, stupid,” you mumble, already feeling half-asleep. “Yer not gonna try anything.” You stifle a yawn against your shoulder.

“I’m not sure that’s-“

“Y’ain’t got nothin’ I haven’t felt pressed against my ass in the mornin’. M’not gonna put you out on the floor, but I’m not sleepin’ on it either. S’too cold fer that bullshit.”

He sits down on the edge of the bed, seeming hesitant. You toss a blanket at him, clobbering him right in the face, tiredly delighting in how it tangles in his horns. “I like you, Bull,” you admit. “I don’t like that I like you. Can’t stop worryin’ the fact I like you is some fuckin’ Ben-Hassrath trick. But… Yer fun to be around, and you got my back. Can’t say that ‘bout most people. So I’m gonna try to stop worrying about you bein’ Hissrad, and try to enjoy you bein’ Bull.”

“…Thanks, kid.”

You have a vague recollection of the way the bed creaks as he gets in, before your world fades to blissful, dreamless black.

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun writing this one. I hope Iron Bull fills the void in your hearts Solas’ absence has left. Don’t worry, he’ll be back eventually, I promise.
You wake up in a haze of confusion and pain. Your head is pounding, a sure sign that you fucked up the night before. You hadn’t drunk as much as the first time; you at least have memories. You kind of wish you didn’t, however.

You’re not even surprised to realize that you’re using Iron Bull’s outstretched arm as a pillow. It seems like “brutal mortification” is your new normal. Mercifully, the giant Qunari appears to still be asleep. He appears to have gone to sleep in his clothes—fair enough, so had you—but you DO note that both his leg and shoulder braces have been removed. A brutally nasty scar on his shoulder, not too different from the one on your abdomen, reveals part of why he wears that brace.

Watching him sleep feels like watching a sleeping dragon. How is possible that someone can look more dangerous when asleep? His default, sleeping expression is not a kind one. You sit up slowly, your head spinning and throbbing violently despite the gentleness of your movements. You were trying not to disturb him, but it seems the absence of your weight on his arm is enough to stir Iron Bull from his sleep.

As he begins to shift, you quickly give yourself a once-over. Your clothing is all still on. You rather suspected it would be... But it never hurts to be sure. Remembering your words from last night, you have to smirk to yourself a little bit. Didn’t even wake up with a cock against your ass… You’ve woken up in more compromising positions than this. You’ve even woken up in more pain, although the waves of nausea beg to differ.

As Iron Bull wakes, it’s like watching walls fall away. The look on his face actually sends a bolt of fear through you, at first, but as he recognizes you, and his surroundings, both his face and his body relax. He shifts to glance out the window. “Up before dawn. You really are an early riser.”

Ugh, every sound is like being punched in the side of the head. You wince and try to stabilize your spinning head. It doesn’t help.

“Morning after regrets?” he asks with a smirk.

“So many of them,” you groan. “Why do I feel the need to drink everything people hand to me?” You rub your forehead. It doesn’t help, either. “How many apologies do I owe you now? Half a dozen? I’m losing count.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I’ll get it out of you in sweat and tears in practice today.”

“…Practice? …Today?”

“What, did you think you were getting a day off? You already got time off from your real job.”

“C-c’mon!” you protest. “You’re joking, right? It was your idea to go to the tavern!”

“Yeah, and you’ll notice I’m going to be right out there with you. You wanna trade places? I could punch you instead.”

“No! And… I mean, I don’t have to go,” you point out. “You can’t make me.”

“Nope. Sure can’t.”

There’s a moment of silence while you wait for him to say something else. He doesn’t. “W…well,
then…” Well, then, what? Are you going to go nap on Solas’ couch? Pretend like you’re not just flaking out of something you suggested because you don’t feel like it?

“…Alright,” you sigh. “Get me some water and a bucket, or the puke’s going on you.”

“That’a girl!” Iron Bull says, blessedly refraining from giving you a slap on the back—it would no doubt cause the contents of your stomach to become the contents of his bed.

“Come on! Is that all you’ve got?”

“Maker, not so loud,” you whine, wanting to clutch at your aching head.

“Hit me hard enough to shut me up, then!” Iron Bull bellows. Weakly, you swing into another punch, which he, of course, blocks. He had picked today, for some gods-forsaken reason, to start teaching you about blocks. As if you’d be absorbing any of this information. The movement jars the contents of your stomach, and you rush away from Iron Bull to retch into what you’ve affectionately titled the “Death Bucket.” You kind of want to keep it; it seems a shame to waste something that could be used so well for so many terrible things.

When you’ve finished emptying your stomach and dry heaving, you down some of the juice Iron Bull had brought out, just to wash the awful taste out of your mouth. Your stomach churns with displeasure, but frankly, throwing up the juice in ten minutes is better than dry heaving. You turn miserably back towards Iron Bull.

After he’s proven his point and you’ve vomited more times than you care to count, Iron Bull calls training a little early. Thank the Maker.

“Good hustle out there, kid!” he says, opting to tousle your hair instead of smacking you on the back. He’s managed to get this far without being puked on, no need to change it now. Just the gentle back and forth of his hand on your head causes more hair to fall lose from your haphazard bun. You shrug away from him and pause to recollect your hair. It always falls about, especially when you’re moving around a great deal.

“Good hustle? I didn’t land a single blow,” you say with a scowl as you yank your hair back into proper order.

“In your condition, I would be amazed if you had. I was watching for another rogue uppercut, though.”

“Ugh, just the thought of jumping that high makes me sick…”

“Tell you what, we’ve got some time before breakfast… Why don’t you get a bath?”

You’re not sure why he’s suggesting it, but the idea is appealing. You’re no doubt a disgusting, smelly mess after marinating yourself in alcohol, snuggling up to a Qunari—who don’t smell phenomenal on the best of days—and then running around sweating and vomiting everywhere. The thought of the cold bathwater is unappealing, but it’s better than being disgusting.

“And then meet up for breakfast? I should probably at least try to make the meal on time; I think Thea’s getting sour with me.”

“Well, I can walk you there, at least.”
You roll your eyes. “To the women’s baths? I’m surprised you’re allowed within fifty paces.”

“Nah. I said I have a private bath? Why not use it.”

“W… No, that’s fine, I…”

“It’s enchanted. The water comes out hot. Some kinda… fire magic, I guess. I wouldn’t offer, but I figure if you’re comfortable enough to share my bed…”

“Sssshhh!” you hiss sharply, glancing around, although few people are up and about, with the sun barely beginning to peek above the horizon. “Fine! But if I catch you taking a peek, I’ll take one of your damn horns as a trophy.”

“I’ll be the picture of chivalry,” he promises. You snort.

“Don’t say that. I’ve met chevaliers.”

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The bath is, as promised, magnificent.

“How did you get this?” you call into the other room. The bath is large… probably, two elves could share it rather handily, although you suspect it gets crowded quickly with a Qunari in it.

“It came with the place! Skyhold actually has a couple of them. Dunno how old that enchantment is… gives me the creeps, a little.” Iron Bull’s voice is coming from the other room, where he’s staying, rather politely, while you take a bath. Oh, he’s probably thinking about you naked and soapy, but you don’t really mind that sort of behavior as long as it stays in his head. You’ve certainly envisioned Sera in much more compromising positions since you bathed with her.

“Gives you the creeps?” you ask, running a hand along the bath cautiously, searching for enchantment. Just because Iron Bull’s the only one around doesn’t mean you can be careless. You find it on the spout, and examine it in wordless wonder as Iron Bull grumbles about mysterious ancient magic from the next room. It’s a modified fire rune… How has it lasted this long? Remarkable. The steam coming off of the water speaks for how well the old enchantment still works.

“Where does the water come from?”

“Look, if you want to study the damn thing, you should have asked Solas if you could have a look at his. Just get in the tub!”

“Solas has one?”

Iron Bull lets out a frustrated groan.

“Alright, alright…” You quickly strip out of your dirty clothes. A hiss of satisfaction escapes between your teeth as you step into the tub, sinking your leg in nearly up to the knee. That water is delightfully hot. You pause, a slightly disturbing thought just now occurring to you. “…Bull?”

“Yeah, kid?”

“How many times have you had sex in this thing?”

“Sooooo many times, Emma.”

“Oh, Maker.”
“Hey, just think about how many people have had sex in the public bathhouses. At least that water is fresh.”

“Oh, MAKER!” you groan. “Now I’ll never be comfortable in that damn bath again!” You sink into the water sullenly, but even the disturbing mental image of Iron Bull and some redheaded maid rutting against the side doesn’t prevent you from enjoying the steaming water. You can feel muscles relaxing that you hadn’t even realized were tense.

“You might as well go get breakfast, Bull, because I’m going to live in here from now on.”

You do eventually leave the water, around the time it starts cooling off. You change into clean clothes and head towards the mess with Bull in a daze. Despite the soak, your head is still throbbing, and the concept of food fills your stomach with renewed dread. The now-risen sun isn’t doing you any favors, either… each sunbeam feels like an angry dagger stabbing you in the eyes.

You sit miserably in the mess, each loud conversation making your head pound more. How you long to just soak in that bathtub for the rest of the day. Thea is pleased to see you, which is nice, but her loud, teasing conversation is not. Still, you don’t want to alienate her further, so you try to smile along and talk when absolutely necessary.

By the time you get to your desk in the rotunda, your stomach is in an unpleasant knot and your head is still throbbing. You just sort of… lay your head on the desk, for a moment, staring sideways at the tome whose translation you finished the day before. You’re in no condition to ink anything… Instead, you work on ensuring the translation papers are in correct order, and then loosely binding them together, a task which takes you most of the morning.

When it’s getting towards lunch, and your translation is in order and tied neatly together, you grab it and a few choice pages, including the one with the eye diagram you’re so proud of, and climb the long steps up to what you’ve come to think of as Leliana’s lair. Her face when she sees you is amused, which is mildly disconcerting. It’s no wonder, however… If she’s a spymaster worth any salt, she already knows you and Iron Bull have been… growing closer. Likely, it looks like even more than that, from the outside looking in.

“I’ve finished the initial translation, serah,” you say politely, placing the transcript on her desk. “If you wish to look over it. I also have a few initial pages to show you what the final tome may look like.”

The surprise on Leliana’s face is priceless. “That was very fast. Perhaps the praise of Alix Gagnon was not high enough.” She thumbs through the translation, eyes the pages with satisfaction. “Your work seems excellent, Emma. You are ahead of schedule. I believe I may feel more comfortable distracting you from the tome with other duties.” She glances up at you, eyes sharp, but your face is a polite mask.

“Whatever you need, serah. I’m pleased that my skills are being put to good use.”

“You seem to be adjusting to life here, as well. That’s good. I’m certain you’ll come to be an asset to the Inquisition, Emma.”

You thank her with a bow, and she hands back your papers, dismissing you. Seems as though you might be seeing more Ben-Hassrath reports… or perhaps something else entirely. You’re still not sure what she’s playing at.
You’re feeling better, your stomach less twisted and your head no longer feeling as though there is a spike being driven through it, so you head to the mess for lunch. Skipping meals will only serve to make your queasy body worse, at this point. Iron Bull sees you as you’re heading towards the building. You spot him, as well; he’s running the Chargers through some sort of drills. Krem sees him spots you, and ribs the Qunari in the stomach as Iron Bull shouts that they’ll break for lunch.

Several of the Chargers eat with you and Iron Bull in the mess. They reek of sweat, and it twists your delicate stomach slightly, but you still manage to down a bit of gruel.

“You know what I miss?” you say, to no one in particular, although Krem, whose seated next to you, perks up. “Escabeche. It’s an Orlesian dish, and the perfect hangover cure.”

“Orlesian?” Krem questions, wrinkling his nose.

“I think it may have come out of Rivain, originally… But the Orlesians have done wonderful things with it.” You sigh wistfully. “It’s this… fried fish, marinated in a spicy, acidic mix, normally with peppers and pickled vegetables.”

The entire table has paused in their eating to stare at you in horror.

“What?” you say defensively. “It’s good! And it’d knock me right back onto my feet and out of this miserable hangover.”

“Sounds like it’d knock me straight on my ass,” Krem says, looking disgusted.

“Like it’s hard, Krem?” Iron Bull says with a snort. “You still can’t block a shield bash!”

The conversation continues on, but you’re still thinking about escabeche. You’ve never been more nostalgic for your mother’s cooking.

- You feel much better when you get back to your desk. The gruel sits in your stomach like a stone, but your headache is gone. You’re well enough to get back to outlining pages, at the very least. You remind yourself to ask Leliana for a magnifying stand as you squint at a nightmare of a jaw diagram that you’re going to have to duplicate at least once. You say at least once, but there’s no way you’re doing it twice. The Inquisition has to have a mage who knows duplication spells. At the very least, Varric has to know a mage with duplication spells. He hardly wrote every single circulating copy of Hard in Hightown.

You find yourself mildly lonely as the day turns towards evening and dinnertime looms. The room feels empty. The peace and quiet is nice, certainly, but you had just as much silence when Solas was around, with the added comfort that having another elf nearby granted you. As much as you’re coming to appreciate Iron Bull, and the understanding that your somewhat-shared experiences grant, it’s not quite the same. You can’t engage with Sera, Iron Bull, or Thea in a debate about… Well, anything much at all. And where you can get in a grand old row with Dorian about, the two of you lack shared experience that draw you towards Sera and Bull.

Solas… Well, you and Solas have a lot in common. By now, he’s been gone longer than you knew him, but you still find it stings to think about his absence.

You sigh and place your quill down. It’s time to get dinner. Your sensitive stomach won’t abide by you skipping meals today, and you need to clear your mind.

You’re alarmed by how chilly it’s getting. You realize, with no small amount of horror, that
tomorrow is the first day of August. You’re beginning the slow descent into winter, and in the mountains, at that… and you with no fireplace or means of heating your tiny room. You sigh miserably as you quickly cross the courtyard. Perhaps this is just a cold snap, and not indicative of the normal August weather in this area, but… you doubt it. It’s probably going to be awful. In Orlais, you had a rose garden. Here, you’d be lucky to grow arctic moss! You’ll certainly never forgive the Templars for this one.

You sulk more as you sit alone in the mess, sullenly eating whatever stew the Inquisition is feeding its masses. You suppose you should be grateful you’re somewhere safe, being fed, but you had safety and food in Orlais, before this mess started. Although what’s really amazing is that it took the mages of Thedas this long to rebel. The red Templars were a surprise, though.

“Hey, elfy!”

The sound jars you out of your sullen thoughts.

“Yer cute when you sulk, anyone ever told you that?”

“Hey, Sera,” you say, not having to force a smile. She really did light up a room. “Let me guess, you’ve figured out another lesson?”

“Sure have! And this one’s good! Finish up your soup and let’s go!”

You are a little trepidatious… Her last “lesson” had gone very poorly, and you would really like to avoid going to the healer’s tent again. But she avoids walls and archery ranges today, and instead takes you down to a part of Skyhold you’d never seen before and hoped never to see again: the prison.

“Uhm, Sera… why are we here?” you ask nervously. Prisons have always made you skittish. You’ve spent your entire life avoiding prisons of one kind of another, and the only thing you fear more than imprisonment is death.

“Don’t worry! S’mostly empty. We’re here cause this is where all the best locks are.”

“…The best… locks?”

“Tha’s right! S’not a person in this world who can’t benefit from learnin’ how to pick locks! Look!” She pulls out a little leather pouch. “I gotcha your own set!”

You’re… you’re actually quite touched. This is a useful lesson… you’ve no doubt your skills have gotten quite rusty, and you were never particularly talented at picking locks in the first place.

“Sera, that’s actually quite brilliant,” you say as you accept the lockpicks.

“Hey! Don’t sound so surprised about it!”

The two of you find a likely candidate, a cell door for a cell that has a large hole in the back wall. The lock on the door still functions, and that’s all you really need. Sera begins walking you through it as you fumble with your tools, trying to remember skills you haven’t used in years.

“Y’done this before?” Sera asks curiously as you swear at the lock in Tevene.

“I grew up in the alienage in Denerim… all the kids tried to learn how to pick locks. None of us were much good at it.”
“You grew up in Denerim?” Sera sounds shocked. You’re not sure why.

“You grew up in Denerim?” you curse as you fumble with the lock. “I’m worse at this than I thought…”

“...I grew up in Denerim, too.” Sera’s voice is quiet, but what she says jars you so much that you drop the pick altogether.

“You what?”

“I was in the orphanage for… a while. Didn’t stick around.”

You stare at her. “...I was in the orphanage too.”

There’s an awkward moment where you just stare at each other, both at a loss for words. Finally, you break the silence.

“I don’t remember a Sera, off the top of my head, but…”

“I was only there til I was like ten!” she says with a huff. “I was outta there before the Blight hit!”

You shift awkwardly. “It was actually Denerim where I was sold into slavery,” you confess. “I was there until then.”

“How did we not realize this before?”

You have to laugh. “Neither of us talk about this shit, Sera!”

And it’s true. One of the things you like about Sera is her complete lack of interest in the past, both the short term past, i.e. yours, and the long term past. It’s not a take you necessarily share; someone who studies ancient languages is, by nature, curious about the past. But it’s a very nice trait to have in a friend when there are things in the past you’d rather not discuss.

“Maker’s breath,” you say with a chuckle. “You must’ve been out before the whole thing turned to shit, then.”

“You mean the riots? I kinda heard about them.” She looks guilty, but you don’t press. However she got out of the Alienage, she did it at a good time. You didn’t and nearly died in the ensuing “riots,” then got sold into slavery by a deranged teryn. You don’t care if she had to prostitute herself to get out; she did well.

“Yeah… It was ugly. Y...Y’know everyone’s dead, Sera. The orphans who made it out were the first ones rounded up by Loghain’s men.”

“Wot, everyone?” she exclaims, face contorting in horror. “Even little Dirth’len?”

You swallow, hard. So she remembers after all. Your life with the Inquisition is one ridiculous “almost but not quite” after another.

“....Yeah,” you say, after pausing for too long. “Even Dirth’len.”

“Fuckin’ shits!” she exclaims hotly. “Those bloody pissbags! I can’t believe…”

“Hey, at least I made it out, right?” you say with a joking air. “And you made it out. Maybe some of the others did, too.”

The look of guilt on her face is clear, now. “And... you went through all that shite, first. Seheron and
“Hey, you had nothing to do with it,” you say gently, reaching over to pat her on the shoulder. “It was bad luck and stupid shems, right?”

She makes a face. “Don’t go thinkin’ just cause we grew up inna same place means you can go all elfy on me.”

You make a face right back. “You don’t wanna start our own little Alienage? We already have a separate bath. We can start calling Solas ‘hahren’ and raiding the Inquisitor’s kitchen.”

Sera shudders and glares. “Tha’s horrible. You should feel bad.”

“I don’t. Not even a little.” You pick your picks back up and turn towards the lock, trying to remember a little blonde elfkit named Sera. You were in the orphanage for years, and you were the exact kind of brat that other little brats flocked to. You could hardly be expected to remember all of them. But you were the first one whose livelihood she’d asked after… Little Dirth’len, a name long dead. If you were the first one she asked about, the two of you must have been close, or perhaps you were merely someone she admired. The sort of ridiculous nonsense Sera got up to now was not that different from the foolishness you’d get the other orphans to do in the streets of the Denerim alienage.

You do, eventually, manage to pick a few locks, and thank Sera profusely when she says you can keep the little kit of lockpicks. You do intend to keep practicing with them. Like Sera says, you never know when you’re going to need to pick a lock. She invites you back to her room in the tavern, but you turn her down, citing the need to get some more work done. The reality of the situation is threefold: you don’t want to go into that damn tavern again; you do have something you want to do; and you don’t trust yourself to keep it professional if you’re alone in a pretty elf girl’s bedroom. It takes very little for you to get carried away… your silly little one-day infatuation with Solas after seeing him shirtless was proof enough of that.

But that little incident had given you one thing… the knowledge of where you could likely find warm, soft blankets and, possibly, an enchanted bath that absolutely no one would be using until Solas came back. You smirk to yourself as you steal off towards Solas’ room. No more scratchy cotton blanket or cold, segregated bath for you! And Sera had given you the last little piece, a set of lockpicks and a refresher course. It seems that the world had decided you’d had a bad enough time lately that it was going to hand you this one for free.

The best way to sneak anywhere, is, of course, to march right in. You know maids must regularly come and go from the chambers nearby, so you simply adopt the unassuming but confident gait of housestaff and stroll right past Madame de Fer, whose regular presence on the balcony seems to serve largely to make you uncomfortable. She seems content enough to leave you alone, however. After you get out onto the walkway, you listen carefully for any sign of movement from within the other doors. The last thing you need is someone stepping out to you picking a lock. It seems relatively quiet inside, however--perhaps no one wants to room near the elven apostate--so you quickly get to work on Solas’ lock.

Cleverly, you check for magic first, but sense none. With a last check around to make sure no one’s approaching, you kneel down to work on his lock. It’s a simple thing, much more straightforward than the locks down in the prison, and you make short work of it. You ghost into his room with a wicked smirk on your face--an apostate should know better, but you suspect he simply has little of value that he would leave behind in his room. In any case, you’re not here to snoop; it’s quite possible he would enchant a chest containing his actual valuables with any number of unpleasant
things. Instead, you make a beeline for the wardrobe near his bed, running a hand over it to check for spells or wards, then upon finding none, opening it. Inside is a small but beautiful stack of blankets. You run your hand over the one on top and find it suitably soft and thick. You yank it into your arms, careful to preserve the delicate folds, then close the wardrobe and exit the bedroom, locking it behind you.

The stolen blanket is a treasure. You drape it over yourself as you sit at your desk, working, and it keeps the chill off, allowing you to work longer into the night. You burn a candle down to a stub and light another before your eyes are finally too heavy. It isn’t until you sink onto the couch with your stolen treasure that you begin to feel a little strange about it. This very blanket had likely once been wrapped around Solas’ half-nude body. It had probably been cleaned since then, but the thought still makes you feel like a stalker. Still, Solas’ blanket is very warm, and with its help, you drift off to sleep, finally warm and comfortable, on Solas’ couch.

You awake hours later, brutally confused. Had you… dreamed? In your state, it shouldn’t be possible, and you couldn’t quite remember. You did feel significantly more well-rested than you normally did upon waking up, however, and you’d barely tossed and turned at all during the night. You’re surrounded by the gentle smell of elfroot and old books. The smell, you realize with a sudden jolt of horror, of Solas.

You positively ricochet off of the couch, staring at both it and the blanket in horror. The best sleep you’ve had with the chaos locked inside you, and the cause might well be the comfort of a man’s blanket?! You had rested warm and content in Iron Bull’s bed, knocked into unconsciousness with the help of copious amounts of alcohol, and had not slept this well. The difference… the blanket? That it was Solas”? You shudder. No, there will be absolutely none of that. You’ll be back to your own bed and own horribly scratchy blanket tonight.

You realize, when you step out of the rotunda, that you’ve slept in. That’s… not a thing you do. It’s still before dawn, but barely. You can almost feel the presence of the blanket and it’s implications looming over you. You quickly jog down the steps and head towards the sparring rings. Iron Bull is there, working through some practice routines of his own on a practice dummy. You approach guiltily.

“You finally get some sleep?” he asks, sounding genuinely curious.

“...Yeah, I guess,” you mutter. It’s the last thing you want to talk about. “I slept in. Sorry.”

“Eh, it works out. You getting some actual sleep is more important; you’re practically unhinged as it is. And I was planning on giving you the morning off anyway.”

You blink in shock. “You were? This from the man who wouldn’t let me take a day off yesterday when I needed it?”

“You didn’t need it yesterday, you wanted it,” he says. It’s so pedantic that you want to punch him recreationally.

“Besides, it’s Sunday. I thought maybe we could go to the stables.”

Oh. It is Sunday, isn’t it? The idea of riding Revas again fills you with excitement. Then, the idea of tolerating Belassan and his Dalish nonsense fills you with dread. Well, perhaps the two will cancel
each other out. And if Iron Bull is there, you can pretend like you’re not being taught by a Dalish… your pride couldn’t handle it, otherwise. Either way, you can’t resist the desire to be on Revas again. You nod eagerly, and the two of you head off towards the stables.

Blackwall is there, of course, and does his normal glowering as you enter. Is that, perhaps, his default expression? Is he just a suspicious person? Perhaps it’s a Grey Warden thing.

“Back to visit with your hart again?” he asks as you pass by.

“Revas is hardly my hart, ser Warden,” you say politely.

“Oh? And here I thought one of your… friends must have purchased him for you by now.”

You’re bristling internally, but your face remains placid. “Of course not, serah. It’s not a matter of ownership. We merely enjoy each other’s company.” The subtext here is thick enough to cut with a knife. Does he believe you sleeping your way up the ranks of the Inquisition? Well, he likely won’t be the first or the only.

You sweep past him and head towards Revas’ stall. You notice Iron Bull glancing between you and Blackwall, but you pointedly ignore it. There’s no way Bull hadn’t realized the consequences that rumors of your promiscuity might have. Perhaps he just didn’t think the Grey Warden the kind of person to buy into it.

The sight of Revas cheers you immensely. You sweep up to the hart, cooing happily as he seems just as pleased to see you, nuzzling the side of his head against yours.

“Oh, good, you came!” Even the sound of Belassan approaching can’t kill your good mood. You happily bury your face in Revas’ fluff, breathing in his woodsy scent to kill the remnants of Solas’.

“Hey, boy,” you say softly into his ear. “Want to knock me into the dirt a few more times?”

“The two of you really get along. An outsider would swear you were Dalish, you know!” This time, you’re unable to ignore Belassan. You stiffen, bite back a sharp retort. You have a dozen of them. Revas notes the change in your posture, tilts his head slightly and snorts. You give him what you hope is a comforting pat.

“They would be wrong,” you say, as politely as you can, not wanting to give away your distaste to Bull, if not Belassan. “Would you mind if Revas and I went out into the pasture?”

“You manage to get Revas saddled and bridled, noting for the second time his distaste for the bit. You doubt that Dalish use them, in all honesty, and the saddle appears to be little more than a modified horse saddle. Knowing the Dalish, however, they probably ride bareback and bemoan any saddling as “caging the wilderness” or some such ridiculous nonsense. You never see a halla with a saddle, just a lot of bruised Dalish from falling off repeatedly.

Not that you have a lot of room to throw stones in that direction… You manage an undignified crawl onto Revas’ back, utilizing the fence again, and the awkward process begins again. You can stay on him easily enough when he’s walking around, but the second Belassan urges you to move him into a run, you’re bouncing around like a moron. You do manage to stay on, however, only falling off when Revas stops unexpectedly, sending you soaring over his horns and into the dirt.

You’re still riding around in circles when you see Blackwall approach Iron Bull. You can’t really
eavesdrop from a moving hart, but the Warden’s posture is relaxed, casual… nothing like the way he looks at you. He’s gesturing towards the gates, Iron Bull is nodding… What are those two up to? Then Iron Bull points at you and Blackwall frowns. You definitely see a “no way” gesture thrown around, but Iron Bull is arguing back. Now you’re really curious. Then you see Sera approaching… No, scratch that, Sera and Dorian.

Sera listens to Blackwall for a moment, then laughs. The Warden only looks more irritated. You begin to worry… is there word from the Inquisitor? Are the rest of your “inner circle” friends to run off to war as well, now? Despite your better judgment, you bring Revas around to the gate to see if you can find out what’s happening.

“Like she ever wasn’t coming, beardy! Get real,” Sera is saying with a scoff. “M’not goin’ into the woods with three stinky guys for an hour.” She notices you and waves, then lifts up a basket. “So, I had a great idea, right-“

“We had an idea, I think you mean,” Dorian says pointedly.

“Shut it! Remember eatin’ on the balcony? That was fun, right? Well why don’t we do it again, except instead of the balcony, we find a nice place outside Skyhold? You like ridin’ horses, so we can all go for a ride and have a big meal and a good time!”

You’re at a loss for words, for a moment. “…You want me to go… on a picnic?”

“Yeah!”

“With you and Dorian?”

“Wif all of us! Blackwall’s a riot; you’ll love him!”

“Blackwall’s a… riot. I see.” You clear your throat delicately. “Well, I would love to join you, Sera. It sounds like you’re putting more thoughts into ideas since ‘climbing a wall.’”

“’Ey! That could’ve been golden, yeah?”

“If you like healer’s tents visits from falling injuries,” Dorian quips, causing you and Iron Bull to glance at each other momentarily. Healer’s tents visits. Sure would be silly to do something like that.


“Alright, you just keep ridin’ around like an elf princess! I’m gonna go get a normal horse,” Sera declares, sending a pointed glare at Belassan. You’re a little impressed at his placid smile. Perhaps it’s not that he’s stupid, and more that he’s just used to barbed comments.

In either case, you’re a bit more eager to hear his advice while the others amble off to the stables to get mounts. This will be your first time out of the pasture on Revas. The hart isn’t prone to bolting, according to Belassan, but you’ll have to watch him to ensure he doesn’t headbutt the horse in front of him. You nod along as he describes the mechanics of staying in your saddle on steep upwards and downwards climbs. You just hope you don’t fall off a cliff, at this point.

The other start coming out the stable on their mounts, and it’s almost humorous how well suited each horse is. The question of what kind of a horse could carry Iron Bull is quickly settled… a mountain of a horse, easily eighteen hands, thick and broad and a beautiful cream color with dark mane and tail. Dorian, in turn, is riding a horse that could only be described as coiffed, all streaming mane and tail with a delicate gait. Blackwall is on a beast of a horse, solid black and powerful looking. And Sera is riding about on a slight, spirited brown and white painted horse.
Well, you have a *hart*, so yours is automatically better. Solas would have ridden a hart, probably. You are nervous the second the gate was opened, but Revas doesn’t suddenly bolt or anything. You fall in next to Sera fairly effortlessly, and breathe a sigh of relief.

“You ride a lot of harts, elfy?” She asks, eyeing you and your mount up and down. You laugh.

“Oh, please. This my second time, ever. And before you ask, no, I’ve not ridden a horse before, either. If I live to see the inside of that barn again, I’ll do better than I expect to.”

“Well, we’re not going far. I got a nice place out of the wind, near a hot spring!”

“There’s a hot spring?” It’s really a shame the two of you aren’t going alone. No one’s going to be up for co-ed bathing, you least of all, but there are worse things than another hot bath with Sera for company.

“Don’t get any ideas! If Blackwall gets in, he’d clog it.”

“I heard that,” calls Blackwall from further on ahead. “As if any of us would be interested in bathing with two scrawny elves.” The teasing in his voice shocks you… Apparently he is less of a stick in the mud around people who aren’t you. What a joy.

“Speak for yourself,” says Iron Bull. “I have a hard time thinking of something I’d want more.”

Sera makes an exaggerated, disgusted face and a few gagging noises, and you can’t help but smile.

“How the Inquisitor’s loyal inner circle _often_ go on picnics together?” you ask Sera coyly.

“Well, not if you say it like that!” she says with a scoff. “But we do stuff together, yeah? Why not? We wind up together more often than not, so might as well not hate each other.”

You can’t argue that… It’s essentially the same logic you used with Iron Bull. If you can’t avoid someone, try to at least get to a point where you’re not actively stabbing each other in the face. The thought causes you to eye Blackwall, who’s having a rather animated conversation with Iron Bull. Perhaps the source of the strange look Iron Bull had given him earlier was that his behavior towards you was out of character? You had, in all honesty, assumed him either a suspicious individual or a racist. Perhaps it was something else.

Unfortunately, for most of the journey, you’re too busy trying not to slide off Revas’ back to give Blackwall’s sullen distaste towards you much thought. You do manage to stay on, and it is a miracle… or certainly feels like one, in any case.

The place Sera picked out is as pleasant as promised. The soothing sound of a babbling stream fills the background, and it’s far enough down the mountain that there’s essentially no snow. You wouldn’t call it warm, exactly, but it’s comfortable enough that you don’t hate yourself for coming.

The five of you dismount and tie up your horses, or, in your case, hart. Revas doesn’t seem too keen about being tied to a tree, but you soothe him with gentle whispers and pats, and compromise by sitting close enough that he can headbutt and nuzzle at your back. The others settle around into the clearing as well, and you find yourself in a rough sort of circle with four of the Inquisitor’s most trusted companions. Life is a strange thing.

Iron Bull and Blackwall are having a rather amusing and lively debate on the pros and cons of axes versus swords. Perhaps dismemberment is not the most traditional light dinner conversation, but the two of them seem to be enjoying themselves. It’s not something you can really join in on, having never used either weapon. You’re more of a “single dagger where it needs to go and then get the
fuck out” kind of person, but you don’t share that tidbit.

“You know, Blackwall, I’ve been teaching Emma here how to fight,” Iron Bull says, and you find yourself suddenly the center of attention.

“Oh, really? The linguist needs to fight?” Blackwall asks, his voice dripping sarcasm. “I suppose you’ll take to training the maids next?”

“If anyone needs to know how to fight, it’s the maids,” you say with a slight scowl. “Or do you think every man in the Inquisition to be a gentleman as kind-hearted as you?”

Blackwall stiffens visibly, and his visage darkens. “I’m certain that if anything like that were to happen within the Inquisition, our Commander would ensure the men responsible punished enough to discourage further… ungentlemanly behavior.”

“He kept that one guy from gettin’ an arrow in the face, though,” Sera points out through a mouthful of pheasant.

“I still can’t believe you were going to shoot him,” you say with a smile. “He was just running at the mouth!”

“What’s all this, then?” Dorian inquires curiously.

“Oh, just a run-in with some of the ungentlemen Emma was talkin’ about,” Sera says with an eyeroll. “Cullen showed up before I could solve it the fun way.”

“See? The Commander puts a stop to that sort of ridiculousness,” Blackwall says, vaguely gesturing with a fork.

“I can’t argue,” you admit. “He was very… Wait, his name’s Cullen?”

“Huh? Well, yeah. D’you think his name was Commander?” asks Sera with a snort.

“It’s such an ordinary name!” you laugh. “He’s such a tall, intimidating fellow, but his name’s Cullen.” You snort to yourself.

“Intimidating? Cullen?” Iron Bull says with a laugh. “Alright, I can see you being scared of me at first, I’m a big guy with horns. But you have met Cullen, right? He has no fangs around a pretty girl.”

“Seeing as how I’m hardly a pretty girl, Iron Bull, I’ll continue with my skittish nature. I’ve no desire to see whether our Commander has fangs or not.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Emma,” Dorian says casually. “Maybe let your hair down, dress in something that isn’t oversized cotton…”

“You should come to morning practice sometime,” Iron Bull says with a smirk. “She can’t keep that hair up to save her life.”

You scowl at Iron Bull, absentmindedly checking the state of your hair. “My hair is quite fine up, thank-you-very-much.”

“If y’don’t like it blowin’ around, cut it short, like mine!” suggests Sera.

“Maker, no, not like yours,” says Dorian, sounding horrified. “What did you cut it with, a rusty dagger? Besides, if anyone here needs a haircut, it’s Blackwall. A bath wouldn’t hurt, either.”
You withdraw from the conversation as they bicker around in circles, concentrating on eating as much of the packed bread and fruits as you can. Let the men of the Inquisition feast on deer meat until they’re gorged. You’re more concerned with not getting scurvy. Focus turns back to you, however, as you pull a certain fruit out of one of the baskets.

“Hey, a banana! Man, they’re so much smaller here than they are in Par Vollen!” exclaims Iron Bull. You pause mid-bite. “They’re just plain bigger there. Firmer. You really have to stretch your mouth around them.” You close your mouth with distaste as Blackwall snickers.

“Wot? You not gonna eat it?” asks Sera curiously as Dorian rubs a hand over his face.

“I’ve lost my appetite,” you say dryly, glaring up at Iron Bull.

“Well, I’ll eat it!” Sera says, reaching for the already peeled banana.

“Don’t give it to her, she’ll have no idea what to do with it!” chortles Dorian.

“Wot are you talking about? S’a banana!” Sera says with a scowl.

“We can’t all be experts at bananas, Dorian,” you say darkly. “Perhaps you and Iron Bull could give us a demonstration?”

Iron Bull roars with laughter, but Dorian looks flustered. You bite into the banana with satisfaction while they’re distracted.

“I don’t get what all the fuss is over one stinkin’ banana,” Sera grumbles.

“Oh, that reminds me, Dorian. You speak some Tevene, right? What’s “pedicabo” mean?” Iron Bull asks curiously, causing you to nearly choke.

Dorian does choke, coughing and clearing his throat as you quickly avoid making eye contact with either of them.

“What? Why would you ask me that?”

“Well, I suppose I could tie down one of the Venatori and ask them, but this seemed easier.”

“It… Never mind what it means!” Dorian snaps. “Where did you even hear that?!” Iron Bull gestures over towards you, and you blink as innocently as you can.

“Emma!” Dorian says, sounding shocked. “Did you put him up to this?”

“I have no idea what either of you are talking about,” you say, taking another bite out of your banana. “Keep me out of your pillow talk.”

“Seriously, someone tell me what it means,” interjects Iron Bull.

“Ask your filthy-mouthed paramour!” Dorian snaps.

Four sets of eyes turn expectedly towards you. “Hmm, I seem to be lacking in any sort of ancient Tevinter dictionary,” you say, exaggeratedly patting at your pockets. “Perhaps you can catch my near my workplace, and ask then?”

“Was it really that bad?” Iron Bull asks Dorian.

“Filthy. And I find myself simultaneously curious about the context and suspecting I’m happier not
knowing,” he adds, glaring towards you.

“You lot are *weird*,” chimes in Sera.

The ride back from the picnic is just as difficult, and you continue to nearly slide off Revas’ rump, but you’re in a good mood nonetheless. Blackwall certainly hasn’t warmed up to you any, but it was enjoyable (and informative) to see how the Inquisitor’s companions interacted. Dorian gets along with Sera, and likes Iron Bull more than he lets on, but honestly and genuinely dislikes Blackwall. Iron Bull and Sera, it seems, get on fine with anyone. Now if you only knew how each one genuinely felt about the Inquisitor, you could have some actually valuable information on your hands.

You give Revas a thorough brushing and a lot of praise when you finally make it back to the barn, although you notice that you and Blackwall are the only ones who don’t simply hand your mounts off to the stablehands. You give the hart a final, loving stroke on the nose, and turn to head towards the rotunda.

“Wait, are you headin’ up to *work*?” Sera exclaims when she sees where you’re heading.

“I thought Sundays were your day off,” comments Iron Bull. It seems as though Sunday is a lot of people’s day off, considering that the four of them are more or less loitering, seemingly not having anything better to do.

“I spend a great deal of time during the week with you lot, rather than working,” you point out.

“Don’t lump me into this!” says Dorian. “You *never* come visit me.”

You ignore him. “I spend mornings with you, Bull, and some evenings with Sera. Every week so far you’ve managed to even drag me off to the tavern.”

“He *has*?!” fumes Sera. “You wouldn’t go with me!”

“My point,” you say slowly. “Is that I’m perpetually behind on work because of you very charming fellows. I need to play catch-up.”

“Yer full of it!” snorts Sera. “I heard Leliana sayin’ that you work fast, *real* fast.”

“Because I have dedicated myself so fully to the Inquisition,” you say dryly. “On that note, I’m going to go work now.”

You do, eventually, make to the rotunda, despite your friends protests. You like them well enough, but a full day in such rambunctious company would leave you exhausted. You enter the rotunda to a note on your desk, likely another missive from Leliana. You open it with a sigh, and are surprised to see it’s a handwritten note requesting your presence in the library, of all things. Confused, you head up the spiral stairs, wondering what on earth this could be about.

You head towards Thea, but the moment she sees you, she calls over Mahvir.

“Oh, there you are!” the elf says. “Thank goodness. I hate the first of the month… I keep thinking I’m going to get mugged,” he says with a shudder. “Here, take this.” He thrusts a small satchel towards you. You accept it, confused.

“Um… What is this?” you ask, shaking it slightly. It jingles.
“Your pay, of course, although I suspect you’ll eventually be paid through upstairs instead of the library,” the distracted man says with a slight frown.

“They pay the first of the month, every month,” Thea explains as Mahvir rushes off. “’S’pro’ly a little short, since you came in halfway through Solace.”

You barely hear her; you’ve opened up the bag and are staring inside at quite a good bit of silver. “Wait. Three meals, clothes, shelter… and they’re paying me this much?”

Thea peeks into the bag as well and whistles. “Maker! Linguists are rollin’ in it, huh?”

“More than I thought, apparently,” you murmur. It’s nothing compared to what you made translating tomes for the court, but it’s significantly more than you had thought. You had expected to make barely anything, serving the Inquisition as best you could in return for a safe place to lay your head and walls to keep the Red Templars outside. This is Leliana’s doing, no doubt. Between this and the coin you’d won from the mercenaries, you could buy… Well, something. Perhaps you can procure yourself some better clothing, or a better blanket, somehow.

You make your way back down to your desk in the rotunda, and somehow do manage to get some work done. You skip dinner, not out of any devotion to your work, but because you had eaten way too much at lunch. No one stopped you, so you had wound up eating two small loaves of bread, the majority of a pheasant, and no small amount of fruit. If you ate dinner on top of that, you’d likely explode.

It’s around sunset that Sera bursts into the rotunda. Even if you hadn’t already had an iron will and steady control of your hands, you would have obtained them since coming to the Inquisition… it seems people will constantly be making loud, sudden noises while you’re working on delicate things.

“I had the best idea for training, Em!” Sera exclaims excitedly. You try not to sigh.

“Not more lockpicking, I take it?”

“So much cooler than that! Iron Bull was telling me about those Fog Whatevers…”

“Fog Warriors,” you say cautiously. “And I don’t like where this is going.”

“And he says they were good at urban combat or whatever…”

“There are a lot of whatevers happening here, Sera.”

“Shut it! And it reminded me of stuff me and my friends used to do, running along rooftops and that sort of thing! We should do that! Here!”

“You want me to… to RUN… on roofs,” you say, slightly dumbfounded. “After what happened with the climbing?”

“Well, we’ll be moving! No time for dipshits to make commentary! And besides, you were doin’ fine before you pussied out!”

“This… this sounds like a recipe for disaster, honestly,” you say, rubbing your head. “I fall off of horses. I’m not exactly the most graceful, athletic person, Sera.”

“We’ll go slow, then! Come on, it’ll be fun!” She grabs your hand with both of hers, and in that moment, you realize you’re a very weak person.
“Well… Alright… But let’s try not to go anywhere too dangerous.”

Sera’s idea of not too dangerous turns out to be along the ramparts. That’s all well and good, at first. You’ve run along the ramparts before. Well… jogged. Sera runs, and you wind up running along after her, trying to keep up. It feels good, in an absolutely terrifying way. Then things start getting interesting. She jumps up onto the half-wall that serves to keep drunken guardsmen from falling off the wall into the courtyard and begins running along that. You stay on the ramparts, until she jumps onto the tavern roof, at which point you’re forced to jump up on the divider and then over onto the roof. You scramble after her as she whoops with joy and slides down the side of the building, catching windowsills to slow her descent. You’re not up to jumping off of buildings, so you just dangle yourself off the edge of the roof from the tips of your fingers until your feet are close enough to the ground to warrant letting go.

Off she tears through the training yard, leaping over fences and spinning around training dummies. Now that you have two feet solidly on the ground, you start getting more into it, enjoying the sensation of throwing yourself over a rope fence with one hand on a post and the rest of your body in the air. Before too long, the two of you are whooping and hollering your way across the courtyard, bouncing off of anything that will hold still long enough. The rush is similar to what you get when sparring with Bull, but different. The excitement is there, but instead of aggression, the feeling is freedom.

The two of you dart back up onto the ramparts, and this time, when she jumps up onto the half-wall, you jump after her, racing across the stone. You come to a break where a set of stairs leads down into the courtyard, and Sera leaps dramatically across the gap, flying beautifully through the air. You move to mimic her, but as you kick off the stone, part chips away, sending you sprawling out into the air much, much less gracefully. Where she landed safely on the stone half-wall, you go soaring out over the stairs.

You twist yourself in midair like a cat. You catch yourself with one foot on a step, but your momentum is just too much. You hear a crunch in your leg and continue moving, smashing into the stone steps repeatedly as you fall. You thrust your leg out desperately to catch yourself, and manage to twist it into a corner, wrenching yourself still before you smash your skull on the steps. You can feel the twisting wrench shoot up your leg, slamming bones out of the proper place. You feel, more than hear, the loud pop! and collapse onto the stone.

“Emma! Emma are you okay?” Sera is shouting, darting down the steps after you.

“I’m fine!” you say through clenched teeth. You can’t move your leg. “Okay, not fine, but not dead! Andraste’s tits, that was stupid!”

Sera rushes over to you. “Are you o- Ooooh, your leg… your leg don’t look right.”

“Fenedhis, merda, qulaba, figlio di puttana-”

“Stop saying things and tell me what to do!” Sera exclaims. “The tent, the healer’s tent, I should get you…”

“Ugh, I think they’re going to ban me from there,” you say with a groan. “How bad does the leg look?”

“Well… I’ve seen worse,” she says, which isn’t very comforting.

“Alright. Alright. I’m just going to drag myself to the healing tent and come up with a perfectly good reason for this on the way.”
“Why would they care?”

“Because I’ve been there three times in three days, Sera, and this will make four,” you say sourly. “Even I would start denying myself service.” You start to drag yourself forward and nearly pass out from the sudden explosion of pain in your leg. The world does go black for a moment.

You must have screamed, or made some kind of unhappy sound, because Sera is on you in an instant. “Em? Maybe I should carry you. I… can pro’ly carry you, yeah.”

“You would drop me, Sera, and we both know it.”

“I would no-”

“Maker’s breath, what is going on out here?” Both you and Sera freeze like spooked halla, looking up the stairs.

“U…um… nothin’?” Sera says, sounding the least convincing anyone has ever sounded.

“Are you getting the linguist into trouble again? Why is she… Maker, what happened to your leg?!”

You twist around to face the man who you’ve recently learned is “Commander Cullen.”

“I may have had a… slight accident…ser. It’s no issue. I’ll just… be out of your way…” Pure adrenaline and the power of your desire to be literally anywhere but right there powers you halfway into a standing position. Unfortunately, as you straighten, your damaged leg flops uselessly and sends agonizing pain shooting through you, causing your vision to go dim. You thump back down against the steps.

“Stop moving!” the Commander says in, frankly, a commanding voice. You freeze. “You, soldier, get this woman to the healing tent! Now!” The authority in his voice allows for no questions or excuses, but you still try.

“Oh, no, ser, that’s really not-” you try to say, but the tall human man has already turned on Sera. He looks pretty pissed, and you’re just as glad he’s yelling at her and not you.

You’re distracted from what he’s saying as you’re suddenly, but carefully, lifted up onto someone’s back. “Don’t worry miss, I’ll get you there in one piece,” promises a light, female voice.

“This is all very unnecessary,” you wheeze. “I just fell, is all…”

The soldier snorts. “From where, the sky? Hold on tight now, we’re going down the stairs…”

You’re a little amazed at how the soldier prevents you from jarring much as she heads down the stairs. But then, you suppose a soldier would have experience with carrying the wounded. Not that you’re wounded… You’re probably not even injured that badly. It’s shock, surely. You twist your head around to try and look at your uselessly dangling leg… It’s hanging all wrong. Maker, what did you do to yourself?

“Shit,” you say out loud.

“What?” asks the soldier. “You okay back there?”

“Just realizing that I make abysmal life choices when attractive women are involved.”

She snorts. “Don’t we all, miss. Alright, here we are… let’s get you in.”
The healer’s tent bustles into action the second you’re dragged in. They get you laid out on a bedroll, both a surgeon and a mage looking you over, if their clothes are any indicator. Then you realize, with horror, that you know that mage, the old lady who you keep running into in here. She healed your ankle, and Bull’s busted nose. Her face is serious as she looks you over, however.

“The hip is dislocated,” the surgeon says finally. “We’re going to have to put it back in.”

You begin swearing in a multitude of languages. You don’t plan on stopping until this is over.

“Where’s that Qunari of hers?” the older lady says. “We need someone with more muscle than I’ve got.” She scowls down at you. “Honey, I see the appeal, but you should really give your anatomy more consideration. Your body can only take so much.”

Oh for… “Bull didn’t do this!” you nearly shout through gritted teeth. “I fell!”

“Didn’t you fall on your ankle, and your man’s face, not that long ago?” she says pointedly.

“He’s not my… Oh, Maker. Ask the Commander! I fell.”

The woman looks largely unconvinced, but you won’t have the chance to try and persuade her further, because another surgeon is approaching, this one a man, and stronger looking. You know where this is going. You can’t say you’ve ever dislocated your hip before, but your shoulder, certainly. This is going to hurt. As if in confirmation of your fears, the first surgeon slips a piece of leather between your teeth. You bite down, hard, swearing between clenched teeth.

The man grabs your thigh, and twists. You feel the warm spread of magic in your leg, likely healing what other damage there is, or perhaps attempting to lessen your pain. It doesn’t distract from the agony, and you scream through the leather. You suspect the Inquisitor can hear you, all the way in the Fallow Mire.

You may have blacked out a little, because the next thing you can make out is Sera looming over you. She looks close to tears. “Em? Em, you okay? Talk to me, elfy!”

“M’okay,” you croak. “Oh, Maker. That was stupid, Sera. We’re stupid. We’re really, really stupid.”

“Yeah, maybe we make each other a little dumb,” she admits. “You really okay, Em?”

“I think so…” You twist, slightly, and your leg moves, thank the Maker, although it aches.

“Maker… Sera, you tell everyone who’ll listen I fell off a freaking wall while being an ass. That lady thinks Bull fucked me into the healer’s tent!”

“Wot? Really?” Sera says, grinning wildly. “That’s hilarious!”

“It is not hilarious!” you snap. “It’s mortifying!”

“And hilarious!” she chortles. “I’ve been sayin’ for ages, how would him ‘n’ elves even work?” She eyes you, a bit of caution in her amused eyes. “So, you two ain’t…?”

“What? Oh, Maker, not you too!” you exclaim. “No! We’re not… no! We’re just friends. Not even friends, we’re just… we’re whatever!”

“You goin’ around sayin’ you’re ‘whatever’ s’why people think what they do,” Sera points out.

“Fine! Then we’re just friends! He’s just… He’s teaching me how to fight. You’re teaching me how to get horribly injured, no one thinks we’re involved.”
“They might think it, a bit!” Sera protests. You flop your head back onto the mattress and groan.
I'm really sorry about how long this one took. I've been very dramatically ill, but hopefully things will pick back up a little now.

If you haven't already, I recommend you all check out the tie-in Solas PoV fic, Curious. It's a fun little thing I'm doing to show his side of things a tad. It's 100% optional; the story will be complete and understandable only reading this fic. All else is optional tie-in for enjoyment's sake.

You refuse to spend the night in the healing tent. There are too many people around, and too many of them think that you fucked yourself into serious injury. This is a rumor that actually needs to be counteracted, but it’s the sort of thing that picks up steam the more you deny it. A spicier rumor to distract would work, but you’re not sure what you can come up with that’s spicier than “that oxman, I hear he plowed that knife-eared linguist into the healer’s tent!”

The healers advise you to stay off your leg, but you limp stubbornly across the courtyard, towards your room. According to the spirit healer, you hadn’t torn any muscles, just wrenched your stupid hip right out of its socket. In other words, you’re fine, at least by your standards. Life would continue as normal, with another irritating rumor floating around Skyhold about you and your perceived sex life.

“Can’t even so much as talk to a man without them pairing us,” you mutter sullenly to yourself as you stumble into your room. “Who’s next? Dorian?” You scoff and fall onto your bed. “Perhaps he, Bull and I will become involved in a ménage a trois? Ugh.”

Your hip aches in the cold, and your scratchy blanket offers little comfort through the night. You find yourself thinking longingly of Solas’ soft, giant couch, seemingly designed to be slept upon. And that soft, brown blanket, and the inviting scent that still lingered on it…

Stop.

You really need to end this childishness. These pathetic crushes will be the death of you… They’ve gotten you into trouble before. Remember Aimée. Remember how that ended, you think furiously to yourself.

Solas is no Aimée, your mind whispers back, traitorous as ever. You angrily roll over as if you can give your own thoughts the silent treatment. It’s a long, miserable, uncomfortable night. You doubt you sleep even a single wink.

You rise long before dawn, finally unwilling to spend even another minute tossing and turning in bed. You dress, sullen and stiff, before wandering out into the courtyard. Your hip is more unwieldy than painful now, and you make a beeline towards the training yards. You really need to hit something, after the evening and night you had. Your hip can take another one for the team.

You’re relieved to see Iron Bull in your regular training circle. Alone, no prying eyes to spread creatively altered tales of what the two of you got up to in the wee hours of the morning. The ache in
your chest only intensifies when you see him, however. You almost immediately throw yourself into beginning to stretch, but it seems Iron Bull isn’t going to let you stretch in contented silence.

“I hear you damn near broke your hip yesterday. Is your hair faded because you’re going grey?” Iron Bull quips at you.

“Don’t make me punch you before I’ve stretched,” you say with a grunt. “I fell down the goddamn stairs, if you must know.”

“That’s not the version I heard.”

“Oh, no…”

“I heard you and some Qunari were fooling around, and—”

You let out a long, loud, frustrated groan. “How popular is the story?”

“The whole tavern heard it. There was cheering.”

Your groan turns into a bit of a whimper. “Oh, Maker. How long before it goes away?”

“I give it a couple weeks, as long as you don’t do anything else hilarious,” says Iron Bull with a shrug. “Don’t worry too much; I’ve been involved in colorful rumors before.”

You glare up at him. “Rumors like this can have bad side effects for elves, especially elven women.”

You sigh, then begin stretching again. “I’d best learn how to punch better, then.”

Your finish your stretches in peace, and then the sparring begins. When did it become sparring? Once, this had just been you striking at a dummy, or at Iron Bull. Now he blocks, and intermittently he’ll try and place you in a hold. What was once simple training is now a dance of striking and dodging, trying to land a hit and avoid being grabbed. If you stop to think about it, you might freeze at the thought of fighting a Qunari, but in the moment, it feels joyous, especially when you manage to twist around and land a strike on Iron Bull’s unguarded stomach.

It’s not all easy, however. Soon, Iron Bull’s blocks turn into block-and-shoves, and you wind up with your ass in the dirt more than once. By the end of it, you’re dirty and exhausted, although you’ve no hope of catching some sleep.

“Wasn’t this supposed to be about me beating you up?” you pant, leaning on a fence post. “I feel like we’ve lost sight of that.”

“We can still do that whenever you want,” he says with a grin. “You know I won’t deny you a chance to turn some of that inner rage into outer rage.”

“Fine, then. Let the Chargers know and find us a reasonably private place this afternoon,” you say with a smirk. “Maybe I can put these rumors to rest if I knock you down enough.”

He snorts. “Little thing like you? You won’t even be able to knock me over once.”

“Oh? You didn’t seem that tall when I broke your nose.”

The two of you continue to banter at each other as you walk to the mess, get your meals, and sit down next to Thea. Her eyes dart between the two of you.

“I just worry about you losing face in front of your men, Bull,” you’re saying when you catch a glimpse of the look on her face. “…What?”
“Well, you know, Emma, I’ve known you long enough to think twice when I hear a weird rumor…” Thea says, haltingly. “But…”

You place your head in your hands and lean against the table. Not this again.

“'S just… Hard to tell, with you two!” she protests. “I mean, the way you’re goin’ on right now…”

“Fighting, Thea,” you say through gritted teeth. “We’re talking about fighting.”

“We’re talking about a lot of things,” interjects Iron Bull with a smirk.

“You shut up,” you hiss. You turn to Thea, trying to remain even-voiced. “Whatever you heard, Thea, is obviously not true.”

“Well, you are walkin’ pretty good for someone with a messed up hip,” she muses.

“I did injure myself yesterday, but it was from falling down the stairs,” you say tensely.

“What, really?” she asks, looking concerned. “Are you alright?”

“I am. The rumors hurt worse than the injury, honestly,” you say with a sigh. “I suspect they’ll last longer, as well.”

She gives you a comforting pat on the arm. “Don’t worry too much about it, love. I suspect the worst you’ll get are snickers. It’ll pass.”

In truth, you don’t notice even that as you make your way up the stairs and through the Great Hall. You’re still as invisible as always. Whatever rumors may be floating around Skyhold, they’re still not enough to make you recognizable. You’ve often thanked the Maker for the pointed ears that make you beneath notice, and you find yourself doing so once again. Being an elf can be a curse, but you’ve long since found that it can be a blessing, as well, if one knows how to use it.

You never make it to the rotunda, however. Your pointed ears cause you delay once more, as none other than Madame de Fer snaps her fingers as you pass her.

“You… elf.”

Your blood freezes in your veins as you halt, and it feels like it takes you an eternity to turn on your heels to face her, the blank expression of servant on your face. “Yes, my lady?” you ask with a submissive bow of the head.

“I require assistance with my wardrobe. You don’t look busy. Come with me.” Her imperious tone is one you’re used to hearing, and you curtsy in deference and follow her brisk pace up the far stairs, avoiding the rotunda.

Her room is near Solas’, you note with some amusement. That must positively steam her, though in truth her quarters are much grander than his, if only due to her effort in decorating them. You wonder if she, too, has one of the enchanted baths. There is a human woman waiting for her, Orlesian by her accent. As bundles of fabric are shoved into your arms, it becomes apparent that she is a seamstress. You have never once in your life been to a seamstress, as customer or helper, but you don’t find the role difficult to grasp. You’re more or less a prop, holding things that need to be held and following orders to grasp this or buckle that. All the while, Enchanter Vivienne yammers on about this function and that Marquis. You keep your pointed ears perked to every word as you help the seamstress with measurements, every inch of you hanging with royal sea silk and fustian velvet.
At the very least, this puts to rest your fears that Madame de Fer might recognize you. If she has not by now, she’s not going to. You utter only “yes, serah” and “at once, my lady” as you focus both on completing tasks competently enough to remain nearly unnoticed, and on hunting through Vivienne’s words for something of use.

You learn little that you didn’t already know. Dear old Duke Bastien is ill, an honest shame. Grand Duke Gaspard is still up to his tomfoolery… You bear no love for that man, or his foolish war. You’re not as stupid as your city-dwelling brethren—you know things had been improving for elves in Orlais, in small steps, before Gaspard decided to make elves the center point of his idiotic, ill-conceived dance for power. Empress Celene had, in fact, been oh-so-slightly soft on the elves—and you suspect you know why. Not that she could be forgiven for using elves as a political pawn any more than Gaspard. If the both of them died tomorrow, your only grievance would be that it would send Orlais into chaos at the worst possible time.

After the first few hours, your hip begins to ache fiercely… too long on your legs after an admittedly severe injury, though you would never confess that aloud. The burning ache reminds you of your first year in Orlais, however, and combined with the barked orders from the seamstress and cold arrogance from Madame de Fer, you find yourself feeling nostalgic. Vivienne is tight-lipped in comparison to many of the nobles of Orlais—an elf was furniture, and no one cared what the hat rack overheard. You still have enough dirt on Comtesse d’Argent to ruin her life if it ever strikes your fancy. To do that, and with so many elven boys! At once! Sympathetic to the plight of the elves, indeed. She made the Empress’ questionable trysts look chaste in comparison.

It’s around lunch when you’re sent out to fetch something, but you get no further than the hall outside the door. Dorian is there, looking around with the air of a man hunting for something. His eyes latch onto you.

“There you are, Emma!” he exclaims. “What on earth are you doing here? I’ve been looking ev…”

He pauses. “Is that sea silk?”

“You’re not paid to chat, rabbit!” comes the seamstress’ voice out of the door, and Dorian puts two and two together. He all but shoves you aside to stride into the room.

“Vivienne!” he snaps. “Did you honestly just grab the first elf you saw, and assume she was a servant?”

Ah, Maker’s balls. You come in after him. “Dorian, it’s fine, I-“

“It’s not fine!” Dorian says with a scowl, crossing his arms. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“If you could explain yourself, Dorian, I’d be ever so grateful,” Vivienne interjects, glancing between the two of you. “Is this elf yours?”

“She’s not mine! She’s a linguist for the Inquisition! She’s not a handmaid!” Dorian exclaims, throwing his hands up in frustration. “You, of all people, should know better than to make assumptions based on appearance!”

“My dear!” Vivienne says, with all the unconvincing horror of any Orlesian noble having been called out on a purposeful slight. Perhaps she had recognized you after all. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“You seemed to need assistance, my lady,” you say with a curtsy. “And it was an educational way to spend my morning.”
Dorian looks between the two of you, eyes narrowing. “Is this some sort of Orlesian nonsense?”

“Only in the sense that I was, once, a handmaiden, Dorian, and I know when a lady is in need of assistance,” you say politely. “Good help is so hard to find, is it not, Madame de Fer?”

“Indeed, my dear!” the older woman says with a smile. “Let me know if you ever tire of… linguistics, was it?”

You respond with a full bow, and then make your exit with Dorian, who looks bewildered. “What did I just witness?” he demands.

“Orlesian nonsense, Dorian,” you say, a faint smile ghosting across your lips. “It can be found across Thedas.”

As it turns out, Dorian had been looking for you because he’d fetched lunch again. By some miracle, neither Iron Bull nor Sera shows up, so the Tevinter has you more or less to himself. You pretend not to notice when he clumsily tries to be sly about inquiring after the nature of the relationship between you and Iron Bull. It’s hard to believe how different Tevinter nobles are from Orlesian nobles. The arrogance is there, and the taste for needlessly expensive things that all nobles across Thedas share… But you suppose Tevinter politics are more brute force and blood magic rather than clever political machinations. Bruchus had certainly not been particularly clever, and he was a damned Magister. Danarius, as well, sounded like a fucking fool from what little you knew of him.

Perhaps you and Fenris could compare notes…

You brush the idle thought out of your mind and focus on what Dorian is saying. Waxing poetic about Minrathous. You suspect you remember it rather differently than he does. You would go to visit if it weren’t the damn stupidest thing you could possibly do.

“Orlesian sweets really don’t compare,” he’s saying, picking at a pastry with exaggerated sadness.

“If you’re so nostalgic, you should arrange a visit,” you say dryly, idly chewing on a piece of hard crust. “I’m sure they’d be overjoyed to see you.”

Dorian snorts. “Nearly as pleased as they would be to see you, I expect. Perhaps we should visit together.”

The thought makes you snort. What a pair the two of you would make—some exiled noble and an escaped, knife-eared slave. In truth, he would be an excellent cover if you ever did need to return to Tevinter for whatever Maker-forsaken reason. An elf alone is an oddity. An elf accompanying a Tevinter countryman is invisible. You file that thought away; it might be useful later.

After lunch, you finally make your way down to the rotunda. Your hip is one giant ache, and you suspect even Solas’ healing could do little for it. Your spar with Iron Bull will be interesting, both because of your hip, and because everyone there will have heard about your hip. Iron Bull will be expecting you to favor it. But not favoring could result in another injury, and you’re not sure getting a sucker punch in on him would be worth it. You’ll have to see how it goes.

In truth, you get little accomplished before it’s time to head out to the training yards. You’re too busy thinking over every little detail of your encounter with Vivienne. Did she know you as Alix Gagnon? And how much did she know about dear old Alix, exactly? Amusingly, the first person she might go to with such information, Leliana, already knows. She likely doesn’t have as much over you as she thinks she does.
You set your quill down with a sigh. Time to amuse yourself and a gaggle of mercenaries by going toe-to-toe with a Qunari. Fortunately, you trust Iron Bull, at least with this, or your paranoia that he would strike you back would prevent you from ever getting in the ring. You enjoy your morning sessions with him, but all they really do is reinforce just how much stronger he is than you. In a fair fight, you would be unconscious in less than a minute.

You try to psych yourself up a little bit as you head towards the training yard, but it isn’t until you see Iron Bull’s horns sticking out the top of a crowd of the Chargers that you start feeling a little burst of adrenaline. Krem grins when he spots you and waves you over. True to his word, Iron Bull has found a fairly isolated training yard and cleared even the surrounding area. The group is just the Chargers.

“Emma! I thought you might chicken out!” Iron Bull says with a grin.

“Chicken out?” you snort. “Of me beating you back into the healer’s tent? Or did you forget your broken nose that quickly?”

A cheerful round of “oooos” rise from the assembled Chargers, more to humor you than anything else, you’re sure. It’s bravado, on your part, since your nerves are starting to play up. As much as you like the idea of taking out your frustrations on a Qunari, Iron Bull looks a little too into this, and the nagging fear that he might just lay you out on the grass returns to nag at the back of your mind.

“Alright, boys!” Iron Bull calls out, and his booming voice actually makes you jump a little. You had thought he’d raised his voice to you in the past. You were wrong. “Here’s the rules! Our little elf lady here is going to try to lay me out! I can dodge and block, but I can’t hit back, or this would be a pretty short fight, right?”

There’s a chorus of chuckles from the group. You cross your arms, but say nothing. He’s right, and your pride isn’t so great that you’d take a punch from a Qunari to preserve it.

“Can she even throw a punch, boss?” Krem calls out, despite the fact that you know damn well that you can… possibly to egg you on, or just to keep things rolling.

“Well, you’re about to find out, aren’t you?” you interject loudly, although your voice simply doesn’t have the same ability to carry as Iron Bull’s, or even Krem’s. You make something of a show of stretching, flowing easily into some of the exercises you’ve been doing before morning practice with Bull. The crowd seems to like the confidence, if only due to the humor of that kind of arrogance coming from a knife-eared librarian.

Krem counts the two of you off, and you launch towards Bull, catching him off guard immediately by spinning into a kick instead of starting with your fists. He grunts in surprise, barely catching your shin before it collides with his side. He grabs it and holds tight, a grin forming on his face, but this isn’t the first time someone’s grabbed at you. You let the momentum from the first kick carry you into a second one, lifting your weight onto the grappled leg. It would never work if he weren’t so strong, and you weren’t so light, but you’ve been fighting larger men your entire life. The second kick is higher as you twist around, aimed just under his left horn, but your sore hip carries less momentum. He doesn’t drop you so much as he throws you forward, away from him, and you hit the dirt palms-first with a grunt before hopping back up and turning to face him again.

The crowd is whistling and whooping, but they fade into the background as you and Iron Bull take sights of each other again. He looks a little surprised, but also excited, and you’re not sure you like what you see. Perhaps some women relish it when a man looks at them with hunger, but you’ve never enjoyed it, yourself. You tell yourself that mercenaries, that Qunari, just enjoy fights, and pray that’s all it is as you fling yourself into a simple punch routine that Bull himself “taught” you. There’s
no way he’ll fail to block them, but you’re just stalling. After a few blocked strikes, you aim high again, but Bull jerks his head back out of the way. Looks like you won’t be bloodying his nose the same way twice. You ignore shouts of advice from the Chargers (although “kick him in the balls!” tempts you, admittedly) and push closer towards Bull, using the knowledge he isn’t allowed to just knee you in the stomach to press for space. When he steps backwards, you sweep your leg in an attempt to trip him. In reality, however, what you wind up doing is kicking him painfully in the back of the calf, catching that stupid leg brace of his.

“Ow, fuck!” you exclaim, detangling your leg.

“That might have worked on someone a hundred pounds lighter, kid,” Bull says with a laugh, and you scowl. He’s right… You’re normally pretty good at knocking people over, but Bull just has too much weight. No wonder he specified that your goal was to knock him down… It would be incredibly difficult to do without seriously injuring him.

Well, that was his goal for you. Your goal didn’t necessarily have to be the same. You just want to hurt him a little, work out some frustrations, and enjoy the sensation of beating up a Qunari. You let yourself think back to the Qunari in Seheron, and all the things you’d do to them if you got the chance now. Payback for every dead slave, every night spent in shaking terror. Revenge for every elf, dead-eyed with qamek, laboring in their fields. The thought sends you into a powerful left hook that nails Iron Bull right in the gut. You hope it hurts him as much as it jars your arm.

You let yourself speed up as the “fight” continues, although you never move as fast as you can. Some things are just beyond believable for a scrappy little elf. You want to make a spectacle, but not too much of a spectacle. You stick to tricks taught to you by Bull or Krem, throwing in a few things you can blame on Sera when you want to catch the Qunari off guard. You are favoring your hip, however. You can tell, and so can Iron Bull. If you can just force it into action… You swing into another spinning kick with your right leg, this one aimed high. Unfortunately, Bull sees this one coming and raises his arm, only to snap it down, pinning your shin.

With a grunt, you wrench your leg, but he’s got it good, trapped between his arm and his side, locked in his armpit. You spin yourself up again, as you had at the beginning of the fight, but instead of kicking at his head, you wrap your leg around his neck, squeezing only tight enough to grip, rather than tight enough to choke him out. It’s an uncomfortable position, your knee locked around the back of his neck, and your hip screams, but he releases your leg to grab at you. The second he does, you pull yourself upwards (by his neck, poor bastard) and grab onto his horns, using them to pull yourself up. He grabs you by the other ankle, but by then you’ve got your arms wrapped around his horns. When he yanks on you, he’s jerking his own head and neck.

“You’re pretty good at bull riding! Ever been to Antiva?” a voice shouts from the crowd. “Parlo Antivan! Io giro il toro!”
The uproar that causes effectively ends the fight, with some of the Chargers doubling over in laughter. You suppose the two of you must make quite a sight, with your legs locked on either side of his head. Quite the view from up here, though. So this is what it’s like to be tall. Deciding to push your luck, you unlock your knees, supporting yourself on Bull’s horns as you shift downwards to sit on his shoulders.

“Maker, why did I never think to do this before?” you marvel. “I think I can see my house in Orlais from here!”

“Har, har,” Iron Bull grumbles. “Get down from there, or I’ll really take you for a ride.”

“What if I want to move in? The air is so fresh and clear up here!”

“Off.”

Fortunately, Krem comes to help you get down. Your legs are shakier than you care to admit after all of the shit you just pulled to put on a good show. You really don’t recommend clinging to a flailing man’s head using nothing but a recently-dislocated hip, horns or no horns. Krem supports you as you lean against him, however, effectively hiding your poor, trembling limbs.

“Thanks,” you mutter to him under your breath.

“No problem. The men will be talking about this one for years.”

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You’ve no chance to recover or calm down from the spar; you’re immediately swept off to the mess by the Chargers. You find yourself eating with the lot of them at a single, long table. You’re frequently smacked cheerfully on the back, to the point where you suspect you’ll have a bruise. But the sheer sense of glee and camaraderie has you smiling nonetheless… or maybe that’s the endorphins. Either way, you don’t even argue when the party moves from the mess into the tavern, drinking and cheering with the rest of them (although significantly less than the others).

“Right in the back of the head! And then… and then… She sat on his lap!” Dalish is animatedly telling the story of the first time you got pants-pissingly drunk in Skyhold. Krem has the dignity to look embarrassed, at least, since his lap was your second victim, right after the back of Belinda’s head fell prey to your mug.

“I thought he was a chair,” you say with a smirk, downing the last of your drink. You’ve avoided getting too sloshed this time… you hope. “S’not my fault if he’s so… brown and wooden lookin’.”

“Wooden?” Krem says, sounding slightly injured.

“Brutal, Da’nan!” says Dalish with a grin. “Can’t you tell when a man has a crush?”

“Dalish!” Krem protests. “I do n… Shut it!”

“What’s that you keep callin’ her?” interjects another Charger… Stitches, you think his name was. Maybe.

“Da’nan,” Dalish answers. “Little vengeance! Think it suits her, don’t you?”

“An elven nickname,” you say with a snort. “I’ll never hear the end of it from Sera.”

“With ears like that, you’re the elfiest elf I’ve ever seen,” comments Stitches. “You should join the
Chargers, I bet those things could pick up enemy movements from leagues away!"

“I would make a very poor mercenary,” you laugh. “First combat and I’d be hiding behind Bull, crying, mark my words.”

“You’re not a bad fighter though,” Dalish interjects. “Where’d you learn to spin around like that?”

“In truth,” you say with a sheepish grin. “Both Iron Bull and Sera have been teaching me.”

“Boss! So that’s where you’ve been getting off to in the mornings!” says Dalish, grinning wickedly.

“We all thought you were having a torrid affair!” adds Krem with a cheeky smile.


You don’t flush easily, but you decide to bury your face in your drink momentarily just in case, as the Chargers hoot and holler. The rumors will be put to rest with them, at least. They’ll understand how a mentor/student relationship could be misinterpreted. As for the rest of Skyhold… Well, baby steps.

Around the time the Chargers are getting belligerently drunk, you stealthily make your exit. You’re certain Iron Bull sees you go, but he doesn’t stop you. You stumble across the Courtyard, the cold August chill not enough to sober you, and make your way to the side entrance of Solas’ rotunda. You stagger through the door and collapse on the couch, yanking the soft, woolen blanket over your chilled body. It smells of Solas, reminds you of the warm tingle of his magic.

You hate yourself. You hate yourself for coming here, you hate yourself for being unable to leave. Most of all, you hate yourself for curling up on Solas’ couch, hate yourself for burying your nose in a blanket that smells of him. When you drift off into rare, blissful sleep, you do so with utter self-loathing. You know where this leads. You just can’t convince yourself to care.
Dangerously Comfortable

You catch half-wisps of dreams again that night. You can’t remember any of them upon waking, but when you do wake, wrapped up in sweet-smelling warmth, you genuinely consider just rolling over and going back to sleep, something you almost never do. When you do roll over, however, a throbbing pain shoots up your hip. Ow. OW. OW!

You sit up, telling yourself your watering eyes are due to the fact you just woke up and not the pain you’re suddenly in. You twist your hip experimentally, and it aches, but you can move it. You doubt you injured yourself in your sleep… You’re just sore, probably from over-exerting yourself yesterday. You stood for hours, then fought a Qunari, twisting your hip this way and that… It’s your own stupidity and bull-headedness (har har) doing you harm again. You’ll be fine after a bit of stretching, surely.

You slowly make your way out into the courtyard. It’s pre-dawn, but you only have an hour, at best, before the sun comes up. A goodly amount of sleep for you, especially in the state you’ve been in as of late. Your hip isn’t the only thing that needs a good stretch, but the only time you’ve been outside of Skyhold has been with an entourage of the Inquisitor’s closest companions… including a mage. Perhaps now that you’ve been seen leaving on Revas, however, you can sneak out with him… Or even alone, on foot.

All of that will have to wait, however. Right now, you know Iron Bull will be waiting for you in that practice field. Despite the fact that you sparring with him was supposed to be the end point of training, you find that you want to continue. You’re learning new techniques and every day getting more excuses for where your existing skills could have come from. Also, you’re just… You’re enjoying his company, lately. Maybe you’ll find another excuse to climb onto his horns. That was a blast.

Unfortunately, that kind of an opportunity doesn’t present itself. The day is alarmingly dreary— not foggy, but so overcast that you can’t see a single star—with a chill wind whipping around the walls of Skyhold. Iron Bull picks today, of all days, to decide that you need to learn defense as well, since you “clearly have a firm grasp on offense.” Your punishment for riding him like the bull he is, you suppose. Still worth it.

You have to remind yourself how “worth it” it was as you’re repeatedly knocked into the dirt. Iron Bull is faster than he has any right to be and has something like two hundred pounds on you. When you can’t dodge out of the way fast enough, you find yourself sprawled out on the grass pretty quickly. There’s no hope of “blocking” someone over twice your size.

“I don’t feel like I’m learning at my full potential, here,” you say from the dirt, staring up at the stormy sky.

“Maybe you’d like Krem to come out here and hold your tea for you?” the Qunari mocks. “Get up.”

You sit up with a groan. “No one holds my tea for me anymore… what has my life become?” You stand back up and stiffly move into the defensive stance Iron Bull showed you, only to wind up in the dirt not two minutes later.

That’s when it starts to rain.

You just sort of lay there as the drops start falling on you, until you get a nudge in your side from Iron Bull’s foot. You normally dislike the rain—it makes for miserable travel—but this time, you’re
happy to see it. Anything you can use as an excuse to stop getting knocked into the dirt is a godsend. Unfortunately, Iron Bull doesn’t seem to feel the same way.

“You planning on getting up, or are you just going to lay there and wait for me to start kicking you?” Iron Bull asks pointedly. “We’re not done.”

You stare at him, dumbfounded. “I… What? In the rain?” you protest, gesturing vaguely upward.

“What, were you under the impression that all fights take place on nice, sunny days?” Iron Bull says with a scoff. “Be glad it’s happening now, while you’re still learning. Makes it easier on down the road.”

If you thought your hip was unhappy with you before, once the damp and the chill begins to set in, you know true misery. Your hip aches, and you can dodge around Iron Bull’s shoves and trips even less once the dirt starts turning into mud. The repeated falls onto the slippery, cold ground leaves you sore and frozen, and it’s so overcast that you can’t even tell when the sun is going to come up, or if it already has. You certainly feel as though you’ve been out there for hours.

By the time Iron Bull decides he’s beaten on you enough, your hair has fallen from its bun completely, and your entire backside is utterly caked in mud. The cheerful slap on the back he gives you does nothing to soothe your bad mood, or your pain. As many times as you had been knocked in the mud, you’d managed to trip him only once.

You detour only long enough to grab a change of clothes from your bedroom, and then head immediately to the limited comforts of the cold elven bathhouse. There are few people there—most are still at breakfast—which is just as well, because you’re disgustingly dirty. The cold water does nothing to soothe your chilled bones or your aching hip, but you can at least work the mud out of your hair.

When you leave the bath, it’s still rainy, still cold, and still miserable. You dart to the mess as quickly as you can, but you’re still wet by the time you get there. Ugh. You hate days like this. You’re going to eat breakfast and then lock yourself in the rotunda for the rest of the day.

Bull is still there, and when you get your meal you sink into the seat across from him despite the fact that you’re still a little sullen about getting knocked around so badly. You don’t see Thea, unfortunately… she’s probably already eaten. It’s difficult for you to tell time with the sun is covered like this.

“You look clean,” Iron Bull says with a grin. “Didn’t want to use my tub this time?”

You glare at him. “Please. I’m going to get enough sideways looks since I’m walking funny. I don’t need to make it any worse.”

“Well, don’t worry too much about it. The Chargers like you, and they’re the only ones who really matter.”

You snort, but you are glad to have endeared yourself to a group of mercenaries. There are worse allies to have. Worth the sore hip, you remind yourself. If you keep telling yourself that, maybe it’ll hurt less. “Speaking of which, how are the boys recovering from last night’s adventures? When I left, Krem had just cracked open a keg of… of something, Maker. Smelled like shoe polish.”

“Most of them are sleeping it off,” Iron Bull says with a smirk. “For now. Krem’s got it the worst, though. He hit that Black Scythe hard. If I know him, he’ll be sick most of the day.”

“Poor bastard,” you say, although you’re grinning. “I’m telling you, if he had some escabeche he’d
be right in no time at all. I wonder if the kitchens here can even make it?”

“Maybe you should make it for him,” Iron Bull urges. “Pretty girl bringing him horrible fish? That would definitely be confusing enough to get him out of bed.”

You laugh, but the idea does have some appeal. Krem is Bull’s second in command, and probably knows the most about the Qunari of anyone in Skyhold. Being second in command also makes him a good person to butter up if you want the Charger’s further in your pocket. Should you cash in the respect you’ve been growing in the kitchen to make Krem a meal?

“I might not be able to make him Escabeche,” you muse out loud. “But I could get him something…”

“Wait, are you serious?” asks Iron Bull with a grin. “Oh man. You’ve gotta let me come with you. I need to see this.”

“I have no idea where he bunks, so I think you’ll have to,” you say with a shrug. “You can’t come with me to the kitchen, though. You’d either terrorize or seduce the staff. Not sure which would be worse, but either way…”

The two of you make your way to the kitchens. You leave Iron Bull outside, and head into the kitchen to wheedle and charm your way into a meal.

There’s not really a way you can get Krem proper escabeche… As you feared, there’s none already prepared, and it’s the sort of thing that takes time. But they do have pickled herring—there’s no other way to eat a herring, in your personal opinion—and from there it’s only a matter of convincing the chef to let you have the few ingredients you want.

You’ve never been to the Anderfels, personally, but you’ve had katerfrühstück before… on a dare. It’s no escabeche, but it will do. Pickled herring wrapped around pieces of gherkin and onion… enough to wake the dead, and certainly enough to cure a hangover. You wrap it up, pleased, and make sure to thoroughly thank the chef before you exit the kitchen.

Iron Bull is waiting for you outside, and eyes the covered plate expectantly. “Come on, you’ve got to tell me what’s under there.”

“My Ander is not nearly good enough for me to try and pronounce it,” you say with a roll of your eyes as you lift the lid. Bull wrinkles his nose.

“Ugh! It seems like someone died in a pickling vat!”

“Don’t be dramatic,” you say with a sigh. “This is a fantastic hangover remedy, and the closest thing to escabeche I could put together on such short notice. It’ll get Krem back up on his feet.”

Iron Bull leads you to where Krem and, in fact, most of the mercenaries and no small number of the soldiers are housed: the barracks. You find it hard to believe your own accommodations are superior to the Chargers’, but there it is. You, at least, have four walls and a door.

Krem is still in bed, and shifts to cover his head with his pillow when he hears you approaching. “M not getting’ up, boss. Can’t make me,” he grumbles into his mattress.

You clear your throat and adopt your best bedside voice. “Krem?” you ask, squatting down next to his bunk. “It’s Emma. I heard you weren’t feeling well, so I brought you-“
Krem sits up as if struck by lightning, nearly striking his head on the bunk above his. “Boss!” he protests. “You… I…” He stops, then presses a hand to his temple, his headache seeming to catch up with him. “Cruel joke to play on a sick man.”

“You’re not sick, you’re hungover,” Bull says pointedly.

“It was my idea,” you confess. “We were talking about hangover cures the other day, and, well, I thought…”

“I appreciate the, um… Thanks. I… wait.” He eyes the plate with apprehension. “Is that… that… thing, you were talking about before? Eswhatever?”

“Oh, no,” you say, a little dejectedly. “It takes forever to make.”

The man seems to sag in relief. “Oh, okay. Well, thank you. I’m sure whatever you made is, um… is great… Stop looking at me like that, boss!”

You glance back at Iron Bull, who has one hand over his mouth in a poor attempt to hide his mirth.

“You should be kinder to your men, Iron Bull,” you say with a smirk. “Some things require a more gentle touch.”

Bull laughs, and Krem blushes, and you’re beginning to think this was a fantastic idea after all. It seems mercenaries are the same the world over. Easier to win over than a handmaid, and less discerning to boot. The idea of having an entire mercenary company in your pocket is a very appealing one, and it seems it might not be too far off after all. At the very least, they’re growing fond of you.

“I’m not going to embarrass myself by trying to pronounce it,” you say, turning back to Krem. “But I met a Grey Warden once who swore up and down this could cure any hangover. He was staying at an estate in Orlais where I used to work.” You uncover the plate, and Krem pales visibly as the scent hits him.

“W…what…”

“Pickled herring, wrapped around gherkin and onion,” you explain. “I know it sounds awful, but it does the trick.” Krem looks positively ill, and you scramble to salvage the situation. “Just try one,” you urge. “I brought some chilled wine to wash it down.”

“U… umm…” Krem seems a little green, although you know it’s just the acidic smell.

“Come on, Krem, you don’t want to hurt her feelings, do you?” Iron Bull eggs him on.

“Oh, shush, Bull,” you say with a scowl. “He doesn’t have to have one if he doesn’t—“ Before you can finish, however, Krem’s grabs one of the little wraps and crams half of it into his mouth. He chews and swallows quickly.

“Oh Maker,” he swears. “That tastes foul. Quick, quick, give me the wine.” You thrust the wineskin into his hands, and he pounds back a few swallows before stopping. The three of you wait, apprehensive, and then his stomach makes a loud, long gurgling sound.

“How are you feeling?” you ask cautiously.

“Well, he’s not vomiting everywhere; that’s a good sign,” interjects Iron Bull.
Krem finishes the wrap and washes it down with more wine, making faces the whole time. “Is this the sort of thing they eat in the Anderfels? I’m never visiting,” he says with a groan.

“I’ve never been,” you confess. “But they made Pumpernickel, so they can’t be all bad.”

“I feel… a little better,” Krem says.

“You don’t have to humor me,” you say with a frown.

“No, really!” he insists. “Although I’m not sure I’m willing to have more.”

“They grow on you,” you comment as you take a bite out of one, since there’s no chance he’ll eat the whole plate. Krem and Iron Bull watch as you eat it, faces a mix of horror and awe. “What?” you say around a full mouth. “It’s really not as bad as it smells. If you think this is something, ask me to make a Dales oyster next time.”

Your antics with Krem leave you late to start work. You snack on the last of the katerfrühstück as you start outlining the next page of the manuscript. Despite shorter work hours than you might prefer and constant distractions, the book really is proceeding nicely. You can’t help but notice, as the hours roll by, that even though Solas has been gone for some time, people still rarely disturb you in the rotunda. Perhaps it’s simply habit for most folks to avoid the area? Whatever that says for Solas’ reputation, you enjoy the privacy.

As you shift papers around while working, a sheet out of place catches your eye. You grasp it, intending to sort it into its proper place—no book was ever made by a disorganized scribe—only to realize it’s the note Solas left you on the desk. Idly, you read over the note again, enjoying the crisp perfection in Solas’ Elven script. You hunt for tiny errors in his handwriting, when two letters flow together, decreasing legibility. You’re pleased to know that your handwriting is neater, but a little more sullen than the informal, familiar hand he uses when writing Elven. Another reminder how much more familiar the language is to him, when compared with you.

Your tome lays forgotten as you begin to read the note out loud. “Ir annal… Ir… Ir annala…” you mutter to yourself, then, without thinking, flip the paper to gaze at the pronunciation guide. “Ir annala ena. Ena… Enas…”

That’s how you lose your morning, work set aside to muse over your lackluster Elven pronunciation. When you master the words in the letter, you begin to extrapolate, correcting decades of poor word usage into what you hope is the correct pronunciation, or at least closer. The few words you had correct are words your mother taught you when you were very, very young. Ir abelas you can say, but you stumble to learn enasal. You wonder sourly if your emphasis has been off your entire life based on the way Solas has instructed the word enansal be pronounced. Harel and din’an come naturally to you at the same time your lips twist to guess at samahl.

By the end of it, you feel you’ve learned the correct way to say a few choice phrases that you wish to repeat to Solas. Perhaps if he sees how much you can learn from a simple note, he’ll finally relent to teach you more. You amuse yourself with the thought of his expression when he returns… If he returns.

That thought sobers you, and quickly. The vapid, dreamy little smile on your face evaporates, and you tuck the note away under a stack of paper. You need to get back to work, anyway, not wonder at questions you have no answers for.
You work your way through lunch, stopping only when a missive comes for you. Again, you have
to roll your eyes at her use of a messenger… you are literally down the stairs. She could tie a rock to
it and drop it and it would get to you just as effectively. You thank the man and accept the papers. As
expected, the main part is recognizably Qunlat. You glance over it quickly, then frown. It’s nigh
incomprehensible, a jumble of words and syllables that are clearly Qunlat, but disorganized and
messy.

There’s a note in the common tongue attached, identifying the scrambled letter as a ciphered
letter, asking if you’re at all good with ciphers. If not, the letter continues, she has a man upstairs whose
skilled with ciphers but knows not a single word of Qunlat; perhaps the two of you together could
translate it? You scowl and toss the note down onto your desk. As if you’d waste your time. Asking
a man who cannot read, write, or speak the language to translate a cipher… You might ask well ask
an illiterate nug. The cipher seems simple enough. You’ll translate it yourself.

You spend the next few hours on it, slowly narrowing it down. At first you think it’s a full-word
code, due to the fact that the words look like Qunlat, but that falls through quickly. Eventually, you
struggle through it… It turns out to be a very clever dual substitution, a polygraphic cipher over top
of a keyword cipher. You’ve seen more complicated codes in Seheron, but only just. Whoever wrote
this not only didn’t want non-Qunari to read it, they likely didn’t want to risk it falling into the hands
of someone who knew Qunlat, either. Tal-Vashoth, perhaps? Or is this a report out of Seheron or
Rivain, where Qunlat is somewhat more common?

The answer becomes apparent as you translate the note into Qunlat, and then into Common. It seems
as though the Qunari have been taking children out of Llomerryn. You can hardly blame them;
Llomerryn is a shithole. You can’t honestly say that the children are better off, however. You have
too many reservations about the Qun. It’s more interesting that it’s a breach of the peace treaty,
although Rivain has never taken those treaties particularly seriously.

Translation finished, you pick up the attached note again to see if there’s anything else Leliana needs
from you. A scowl forms on your face as you read, then deepens. “Please scribe several copies and
deliver them to the following…” What are you, a messenger?! She has people for this, goddamnit!
Ugh… She’s likely trying to reduce the number of eyes who see this. She’s putting trust in you, you
remind yourself. You need to show her that she can do so safely. Sullenly, you begin scribing
additional copies of the translation.

Your disapproval deepens when you glance over the names and vague instructions on where to find
the people you’re looking for. Bringing a copy to Leliana is easy enough, but you’re not sure which
is worse: trying to find this “Crassius Servis” fellow—a Tevinter name, just fantastic—or delivering a
copy of this stupid message to none other than Commander Cullen Rutherford.

You opt for finding “Servis” first. It will be harder than finding the Commander, almost certainly, but
anything that puts that off for a little longer is worth it. The note instructs you to begin your search
near the mage’s quarters, but you doubt you’ll find him there. He’s presumably a mage (or else that
bunking decision was the poorest in history), but Circle mages from Tevinter are very much not like
Circle mages from Orlais, Ferelden, or the Free Marches. You go anyway, although the thought of
being so close to that many mages makes your skin crawl. She might as well have asked you to
deliver to the Templar barracks.

He’s not there, as you suspect, but after asking around a little, you manage to hunt him down to the
dusty library you’d found near the kitchen. He’s got a Templar breathing down his neck, looking
equal parts frustrated and bored, and you feel a slight pang of sympathy. You’d loathe being
watched like that, by anyone.
“Servis?” you ask politely. “Crassius Servis?”

The man looks up from the book he’s idly flipping through, gives you a bored, up-and-down glance. “I suppose you’re one of the Nightengale’s then? Does she finally have something interesting for me to do, or am I to continue skipping about with an armed escort?”

Ah, Vints. They come in two flavors: sardonic and “MAD they called me, MAD! I’ll show them MAD!”

“I don’t presume to know, ser. I was only told to give you this.” You place the translation down in front of him, and his eyebrows raise.

“Oh… so that’s what she was talking about. Hmm…” he picks it up, glances it over, and you suspect you’ve done your part, even though you’re more than a little curious as to his connection to Leliana. What’s a Tevinter mage doing here? Your questions will have to wait, however… It seems you have nothing to use as an excuse to keep you from delivering your message to the Commander.

You leave Servis muttering to himself as he reads over the note and head towards the Commander’s office. You know where it is; you fell down the stairs right next to it not that long ago, after all. You head towards the exit, only to find that it’s still raining outside… in fact, it’s pouring. You frown at the long walk across the ramparts, knowing you’ll be well and truly soaked by the time you get there. With a long, drawn out sigh, you tuck the message down your shirt, then you double over and bolt through the rain.

You dart across the walkway, up to the Commander’s door, and then, stupidly, stop to knock. You can’t just… just charge in. You spend a good ten seconds getting absolutely drenched before you hear a voice call, “Come in.” You probably would have just walked in… But you would rather get drenched or have to scribe a second copy on the spot than make a rude faux pas in front of the Commander.

There’s a guard speaking to him when you enter, but they seem to have just finished. The guard nods to you as he walks by you to exit, and you’re left alone, nervously eyeing the Commander at his desk. He finishes reading whatever it is the guard gave to him and you just sort of… stand there, waiting for him to be done. Maker, you haven’t felt this awkward in a while. Meeting the Commander of the Inquisition’s forces would have been nerve wracking under any situation, but you’re keenly aware that he knows you from two rather embarrassing incidents… Both of them Sera’s fault, come to think of it. At least you have someone to blame.

He finishes reading and looks up, and you find some small comfort in the fact that he looks startled by your presence. Or perhaps he’s just amazed to see you when you’re vertical, uninjured, and not being actively threatened by racists. You clear your throat softly.

“A message from …” you stumble momentarily over Leliana’s title. “Mistress Leliana.” Your strides up to his desk are even. If you can walk towards Solas over unknown wards, you can approach an ex-Knight Commander. You place it in front of him with a slight bow, then turn to leave, but he holds up a hand. You freeze in place as he glances over the missive.

“Ah. So this is what she meant.” He turns his gaze onto you, and it’s a testament to your willpower that you don’t shift uncomfortably, or, in fact, make any kind of expression at all. “Why are you delivering this? I thought you were our linguist.”

“Our” linguist. Well, you suppose that he’s high enough in rank to use such phrasing. “I am. I was the one who translated the missive. Leliana requested I scribe extra copies and deliver them myself.”
“Getting you drenched in the process, I see,” he says with a light smile. Ah… You are sort of dripping all over his floor, aren’t you? He sets the missive down, turning his full attention onto you, although you really wish he wouldn’t. “Have you recovered fully? I’m surprised to see you up and about so quickly.”

You frown slightly. “Of course, Commander. I was injured two days ago and, thanks to you, given immediate attention by the healers. I would be an embarrassment if I wasn’t back to work by now.”

The Commander chuckles—actually chuckles, to your shock—and comments, “I wish my soldiers had that kind of work ethic.” You want to comment that your work is hardly as intensive as a soldier’s, but the day after your injury, you wrestled a Qunari, so you keep your mouth shut. “Well good, I… Oh, I don’t believe I ever caught your name.”

You had, in fact, told him your name the first time you met, but it’s something of a relief that he doesn’t recall. “I’m Emma, ser,” you say with a bow.

“Just Emma?” His voice isn’t sharp. He doesn’t have the tone Solas, Leliana, or even Iron Bull would, asking that question. But his casual tone and expression don’t fool you. He’s as much searching you for information as anyone else since you’ve arrived. You shove aside the rush of panic and answer smoothly.

“Just Emma, ser.”

He seems satisfied by that, and for a moment, you think you’ll finally be able to exit what’s rapidly turning into an interrogation. No such luck, however.

“I was informed this was in cipher. Do you know who managed to decode it?”

Oh, Maker’s balls. No point in lying; he’ll just hear it from Leliana later. “It was I, in fact, ser.” You rush on, trying to ignore the surprise in his eyes. “I’m unsure if you know, ser, but I was… stationed… in Seheron for some time. I’ve seen similar codes from Ben-Hassrath reports there.”

“I see. Well, Leliana certainly wasn’t overstating your usefulness. Thank you, ‘Just Emma.’” He says the last words with a smile, and you feel a flush coming on. You bow quickly and make your exit before he can think of any other questions to ask you. You never thought you’d be relieved to be outside in the rain again, but compared to staring down a Knight-Commander… Even if he is “retired.” Do Templars ever truly retire? You can’t unlearn those talents. A Templar can no more retire than a mage.

You realize, upon darting back into the rotunda, that you were holding your breath. You breathe in big, gasping gulps, heart pounding. Not embarrassment or fluster, but fear. You’d thought you were done with this kind of mortal terror after the incident with Iron Bull, but it seems the Inquisition has no shortage of truly terrifying people to throw into your path. Leliana may be the truly dangerous one, between the two, but the Commander fills you with mortal dread nonetheless. Leliana or Solas may be the most likely to discover you, but the Commander is the one most likely to bring down the blade.

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It takes you some time to calm down enough to feel comfortable walking up the long steps to Leliana’s perch atop the tower. You can’t be shaken when facing her down; she’ll no doubt have questions about your ability to translate the code, as well. There’s nothing suspicious about your skill with codes, when you come right down to it—your whole existence as a slave was translating intercepted missives from the Qunari. That required an in-depth knowledge of the language, yes, but
also the ability to crack a code.

And yet, everyone here has the tendency to react to each new fact learned about you with barely-repressed glee, as if any glimpse of knowledge is a victory. You suppose it’s just the nature of curious folks. It doesn’t help that you’re constantly paranoid that each concession of knowledge will be the one that spells your undoing.

Eventually, you find the courage to climb the stairs. You can’t really put it off. When you reach the top, you wait until Leliana is absolutely free—you know this isn’t something you’ll get away with dropping on her desk.

“Serah? I translated the missive you sent me,” you say when the Spymaster has a moment. “I scribed the additional copies as requested and delivered them to Crassius Servis and the Commander.”

Leliana smiles, almost smugly. “Somehow, I imagined you might be able to do it yourself.”

“Indeed… I saw similar codes used in Seheron. If you would like, serah, I can write down an explanation of the code, in case your codebreakers need to translate the same or similar codes in the future,” you offer.

She taps a finger against the side of her face, considering. “Yes, actually, I believe that would be most useful. I will spare you attempting to instruct my men to their face, however… A written explanation will do. Excellent job.”

“Thank you, serah. Ah… If I may? You said before to inform you if I had need of anything…”

“Of course, Emma. What do you need?” she asks, steepling her fingers. You wish she wouldn’t.

“A magnifying stand, to duplicate some of the finer work of the original tome. They can be… difficult… to obtain and transport. Mine stood no chance of surviving the trip here.”

“Of course,” she says with a nod. “Our arcanist has something similar. I will see that one is obtained for you. Is that all?”

“Yes, serah,” you say with a quick bow. “Thank you.”

You can’t help thinking that it went better than expected as you head back to your desk. Perhaps you over-reacted to the Commander’s curiosity? You suspect you may have been doing the same with Iron Bull, frankly. Solas had you blathering about magic like a damned moron just by being attractive and intelligent. You revealed worse to him in the course of a single day than you ever had with Bull. You chalk it up to paranoia and get back to work on the tome.

You work through dinner, despite the discomfort of damp clothing. You intend fully to work late into the evening, given how much of your day you flitted away with missives and mercenaries. Of course, it’s never that easy; not anymore. Sera appears sometime after dark, popping into the rotunda dripping wet. You have to laugh when you notice her forming a puddle on the stone.

“No practice today, surely?” you say with an amused smirk, setting down your quill. “I’ve been drenched twice already today, and by the looks of it, you’ve fared badly as well.”

“I was gonna have us explore outside of Skyhold some, but look at this weather!” Sera says with a scowl.

“Oh, Maker, I’m heartbroken! I’ve lost another opportunity to horrifically maim myself for your pleasure!” you say dramatically, pressing the back of your hand against your forehead and
pretending to swoon.

“Oh, shut up, you. S’miserable out. Everyone’s all locked away in their quarters, workin’ late so they don’t hafta go through the rain. The whole place is a depressin’ mess!” She crosses her arms. “We gotta do somethin’.”

“Must we?”

“Yeah! And I’ve got just the thing, too…” You already know this is going to lead someplace unfortunate.

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It does, in fact. It leads to the corridor where Solas’ and Vivienne’s rooms are. Somehow, Sera’s convinced you that what this miserable, rainy day needs is a few good pranks. You’re not entirely sure how she did it, either. Your last clear memory is of her placing a hand on your shoulder, almost on your neck, bat...
“Yeah,” you say with a nod. “When she… or her servants, I suppose, go to lather it up, nothing at all will happen.” You frown. “You don’t suppose she actually has servants wash her, do you? I don’t want to get anyone in trouble. Except you, maybe.”

“Not unless she brought them from Orlais,” Sera says, wrinkling her nose as she opens the bottle of polish. “Servants are at a premium here.”

You snort. “That explains a lot, actually. No, no, not like that.” You grab her hand—she was about to overturn the whole bottle onto the bar of soap. “See the brush? Just… Here, like this.” You brush some of the polish onto the bar. “We just have to make sure we get the whole thing.”

It’s a painstaking process, intermittently interrupted by giggles, but the two of you manage to cover Vivienne’s expensive soap with her expensive nail polish. A victory all around. You quickly put the bottle and the soap back where they were, then quickly exit the premises, locking the door behind you. You breathe a sigh of relief when it’s all over. Hopefully, if there’s any blame to be given, it’ll go directly to Sera. At least now, you can—

“Alright, who’s next?” Sera asks excitedly.

“…What?”

It’s a miracle you don’t get caught, honestly. You manage to rein Sera in somewhat, convincing her there’s no point in pranking any of the people who are gone (this madwoman wanted to prank the Inquisitor!), but she still runs about Skyhold leaving delayed-blast havoc in her wake. You sincerely hope the stone underneath the Commander’s desk doesn’t irritate him too badly, and you very much regret showing Sera where the kitchen throws their waste. Lady Montilyet will likely never be the same.

When she talks about pranking Leliana, however, you know it’s time to get out.

“She’s not that scary!” Sera protests.

“Yes, Sera, she is. So is the Commander. So is Madame de Fer. And Lady Montilyet could probably destroy me in any number of creative ways, as well. But this? No way, Sera. There’s no way,” you say firmly. “She’s the Inquisition’s spymaster, and also my boss. I don’t want to die.”

Sera rolls her eyes dramatically. “Yer a pansy! There’s no harm in havin’ a little fun!”

“If only that were true… I hate to play the “horribly mangled leg” card again so soon, Sera, but…”

“Awright!” she says, throwing her hands up in the air. “I guess we got enough people today anyway. You think about what I said ‘bout Dorian, though! Prissy pants needs a good prank, and he’s always ditherin’ around with those books…”

“I’ll certainly think about it,” you say dryly. Think about what a terrible idea it is, anyway. As if you’d take a book apart and put it together again just for a petty prank. That’s just too much work, and you’re in a state of perpetually not having enough hours in the day, despite essentially never sleeping.

You return to the rotunda, after finally convincing Sera you’ve no more entertainment to offer her, and continue work on your poor, patient tome. In your quiet cottage back in Orlais, you’d know doubt have made twice the progress. You have no magical back-up with Solas gone, and the distractions are becoming more frequent every day. You hope that Draconologist—and the Inquisitor
—is patient.

When it gets late, there’s no question of returning to your room. It’s still raining outside, and you’re a filthy little addict. The thought of a cold, wet, restless night is so unappealing compared to a cozy, soothing night in Solas’ domain. Plus, your hip is still slightly sore, likely due to the cold and damp. When your eyes can no longer focus on the work in front of you, you stumble the few steps onto the couch, wrap yourself up in Solas’ warm, sweet-smelling blanket (how, oh how, does it still seem to smell of him after so many nights?), and, miraculously, drift off into sleep almost immediately.

You dream, that night. Not vividly… not even whatever perversion has enabled you to sleep in the first place could make your dreams clear and bright in the condition you’re in. But you do dream, and you dream of Solas. It’s no surprise, really. You’re in his rotunda, on his couch, under his blanket. You dream of warm hands, of soothing, tingling magic. You dream of rain and thunder, a memory from a childhood long past. In the hazy reverie, you huddle, frozen, in a cave as a thunderstorm much like the one outside rattles and shakes the skies. Within the desire-tinted fog of the Fade, however, you’re not alone in that cave. Solas is there, lighting a magical fire to warm you both. That’s how you know it’s a dream—in reality, you had sat in that frigid cave all night, shaking and slowly losing feeling in your feet, too cold to sleep. Now, Solas wraps that stupid, warm, perfect blanket around your trembling shoulders, wipes away tears that threaten to freeze solid on your cheeks. He runs a thumb across your cheekbone idly, and you close your eyes momentarily, wondering how much different your life would have been with a companion…

His fingers continue their idle explorations, running along the length of your long, pointed ear. You feel breath on your neck, and—

You force yourself awake with a jolt, bursting through the restraints of sleep to sit bolt upright on the couch. You have a moment of panic when you can’t move your arms, but quickly realize it’s only because you’ve rolled yourself up in the blanket. With some difficulty, you toss it off, then yank on your boots as quickly as you can.

You thrust yourself into the frigid, pre-dawn air, eyes wide with shock and embarrassment. All the danger posed to you by an ex-Templar, a Ben-Hassrath, a wicked Orlesian spymaster… And yet you’re beginning to think one elven apostate is more of a threat to you than the lot of them combined.
The rain has stopped, you realize, but the courtyard and the training areas are something of a mess. Large puddles are everywhere, the damp grass is easily being pulled up by the trampling boots of soldiers and merchants, and the training areas are exceedingly muddy. After getting beaten up in the rain, however, you’re quite certain Bull won’t call off the training due to the less than stellar state of the training yard.

Sure enough, he’s there in the same training yard you always use, despite the fact that parts of it are entirely mud. You gaze forlornly down at your leather boots—you own only one pair of shoes, and you’re not looking forward to wrecking them with mud. Perhaps if you clean them off right away…

Your first fall into the mud happens before you even start sparring… The ground is so damn slippery that you lose your footing while stretching and slide into the mud. You let out a groan while Iron Bull laughs, but a swift kick to the shin sends his feet slipping out from under him as well. Finally, a situation in which you can use his bulk against him.

Stretching is more or less over after that, as the two of you start in on fighting routines. Your footing is terrible; it’s clear that Iron Bull has much more experience fighting in these sorts of conditions. Frustrated after too many falls into mud, you decide to compensate by getting off the ground. The next time you slip, you use the force of your fall to slide through the mud between Bull’s legs, then grab onto that shoulder brace of his to yank yourself up onto his back.

“Oh, not this squirrel shit again!” he swears as he bats at you. “I will fall on you, I promise!”

“What’s one more trip to the healer’s den?” you ask as you dart up his back, yanking one of his horns to pull yourself up. “Oh, fuck!” you swear as he actually starts to tip backwards. You start wrapping around his shoulders to avoid being crushed, but it was a bluff. He grabs one of your legs and you swear again, wrapping your arms around his horns and locking them into the crook of your arms. This has the unfortunate effect of plastering you to his face as he yanks at your legs in an attempt to dislodge you.

“You can’t tell me this has never happened to you before, Bull!” you call out as he tries to remove you without re-dislocating your hip, no doubt.

“Yeah, but anyone else tries it and I can just stab them,” he growls. “Which I’m CONSIDERING. Although the view is nice.”

It’s a testament to your self-control that your grip doesn’t loosen—your chest IS kind of directly in his face… He gives you a last good yank, but your mud-covered boot slips right off. The lower half of your body swings back down, colliding with Bull and sending both of you careening down into the mud. You’re on top, for a moment, but you take too long untangling your arms from his horns and he twists you into a headlock. As it turns out, however, you’re slippery when wet. As coated in mud as you are from your repeated falls, you slither out of his grip.

The morning practice turns into grapple escapes, with the amusing twist of you both being ridiculously coated in mud. Despite his superior strength and size, Iron Bull just can’t keep a grip on you, whereas his leather braces and horns give you something you can grip, and your smaller size lets you bounce up from falls more quickly. All in all, it’s a riot, and you wish the Chargers had been
there to see it. By the time the sun is up, you’re more mud than woman, and Iron Bull is similarly filthy.

“Maybe we should go bathe off?” he asks, his wicked grin confirming your suspicions about his meaning. “It’s such a large tub after all…”

“Oh, shut up.” You roll your eyes to emphasize your point. “You don’t take sexy baths when you’re actually dirty; that ruins the point entirely.”

“Oh? Does that mean you’d be interested in a sexy bath if I was clean?”

“I… Y… Shut up!” You flush slightly, but it’s likely covered up by all the mud. Small blessings. “I’m going to get clean! Good luck—there’s nothing in this world that could get you clean.”

“No cure for a filthy mind!” he agrees cheerfully as the two of you part ways. You begin heading towards the elven baths, but pause. You’ve got a mercenary group pretty firmly behind you, and you’ve endeared yourself to no small number of the higher-ups at Skyhold… Perhaps now is the time to cause a stir? You shouldn’t. You know you shouldn’t. Just like you shouldn’t have pranked half of the Inner Circle with Sera last night. Just like you arguably should have left weeks ago. But you’ve always had a bit of a rebellious streak in you, and the thought of those cold baths is just so unappealing when you’re caked in mud.

If you’re going to be an elf in a human bathhouse, you might as well be a disgusting, filthy little *elven’alas* in a human bathhouse.

You get a change of clothes (stuffed in a bag to keep them from getting muddy) and positively strut into the “human” bathhouse that you had gone to with Sera. Without her alongside you, the stares and even glares you get are much more obvious, but you’re willing to bet not a soul will say a word to you. It isn’t as though this is officially a humans-only bathhouse. Any repercussions will come later.

You manage to peel out of your horrifically muddy clothes and shake and scrape the worst of the dirt off of you before getting into the bath. You soak luxuriously as a few bathers move to shift away from you, looking away and pretending not to see your pointed ears. You smirk to yourself. You might lose points of favor with the human staff for acting out, but the warm bath is worth it. As is the indignant looks on human faces… It reminds you fondly of your youth, before you were scraping and simpering your way through Orlais.

After your political statement of a bath, you head to the mess. You spot Thea and sit down with her, and she seems pleased to see you. You’ll be happier when you can start fetching meals from the kitchen and bribing her with stolen morsels. Of course, that means you’ll be back to eating every meal, more or less. Skipping meals is such a regular thing with you that you suspect the regularity with which you’re eating (and bathing, come to think of it) will have you gaining weight. Too bad you never gain it where it’s sorely needed... For instance, your less-than-ample chest. You glance towards Thea’s more… generous endowments despite yourself. Even Sera has a nicer bust than you. There’s small-because-you’re-an-elf and then small-for-an-elf. You’re the latter.

You and Thea walk together to the Great Hall, but part ways when you enter Solas’ rotunda, as per usual. She had come in there once… Perhaps it was just a sign of how worried she’d been about you, because she hadn’t set foot in the place since. One of these days, you really need to ask her why. Solas isn’t there anymore, and if most of the staff have some kind of persistent paranoia about him that goes so deep as to seep into the very rocks of Skyhold… Well, it’s something you need to know about. You had assumed all the paranoia about Solas stemmed simply from him being a mysterious, quiet elven apostate, but if there’s more going on, you need to know it before you can
combat it.

You begin work on the tome, but before even an hour is up, you’re beginning to sag. Despite a few night’s rest thanks to Solas’ blanket, or couch, or whatever ridiculous obsession was allowing you to sleep, your exhaustion is starting to catch up with you. If anything, it’s almost making it harder to stay in control, even as it helps slightly with the physical effects of your insomnia. You need to get out of Skyhold. Not in a month, not next week, now. But how can you get in and out without suspicion? Perhaps you can talk Belassan into allowing you to ride out on Revas. The man seems nice enough (perhaps he left the Dalish for a reason), and is actively encouraging the growing fondness between you and the hart. You just need a few hours… Perhaps this afternoon.

For now, you try to redouble your focus onto your work. It only helps so much, and you spend hours frustrated at your own inability to focus both your mind and your eyes. You light up your desk with candles despite the daylight streaming in, hoping more light will help you to see clearly. There’s nothing you can do for the shakiness in your hands other than write slowly and take frequent breaks.

During one of those breaks, someone enters the rotunda. Immediately, you expect another missive from Leliana. Maker, please let it not be another code… You’re in no state. However, not only is it not a code, it’s not even a messenger. To your surprise, Krem walks through the door of the rotunda. He’s carrying a basket and looks mildly annoyed, which is explained quickly by the other Chargers that pile in after him.

“Krem?” you say, clearly confused. “And… Dalish, and Rocky, AND Skinner? What’s the occasion?”

“I wanted to thank you for, uh… Well, you know,” Krem says, throwing a side-glance full of venom at the rest of the Chargers. “These asses saw me walking across the courtyard and had nothing better to do.”

“I wanted to know where he was going with all that food,” says Dalish with a grin.

“And I was hungry,” adds Skinner.

Krem looks annoyed—it’s likely he was intending this to be more of a private event—but you’re quite pleased. You want as many of the Chargers to like you as possible, and these are a few of the ones you know best. You’re especially fond of Skinner, although you’d never tell her that to her face, no more than you’d try to debate the ridiculous Dalish standards of dealing with mages with Dalish.

“Did you bring enough for everyone, Krem?” you say with a grin.

“No,” he says pointedly.

“Well then, we better pop back down to the kitchens and get more, eh?”

The five of you wind up eating on the floor of Solas’ rotunda, the food spread out on a blanket between you. Krem gets over his sourness relatively quickly, and you work to endear yourself to everyone present. You ask questions to Rocky about the explosive powder he’s working on (you know more than you care to admit about Gaatlok), jokingly ask Dalish for “archery tips,” and while the others are distracted jesting and joking, share a quiet moment with Skinner in which you talk about the events leading up to the Hero of Fereldan slaying the Bann’s son. Despite your focus on Krem due to his position of second-in-command, if you had to pick a Charger to spend any amount
of personal time with, it would be Skinner. She… understands.

The meal is over too soon. All five of you linger shamelessly, but duty can only be ignored for so long. You see the Chargers off, wait a good ten, fifteen minutes, and then head towards the barn as quickly as you can. You see Blackwall—is he ever anywhere else?—but ignore him, instead hunting down Belassan. It’s not hard; he’s with one of the other harts, a beautiful white and brown creature.

“Belassan, hello,” you say with as charming a smile as you can muster. “Who’s this handsome fellow?”

“Ah, he doesn’t have a name, not technically,” Belassan says, patting the hart affectionately on the neck. “But I’ve been calling him Sulevin.”

You make small talk about the harts, not letting your eagerness get the better of you. You wait for the conversation to turn to Belassan complaining about the hart’s lack of proper exercise (it was only a matter of time, really), and only then do you get to the point.

“Perhaps I could take Revas out for a little? He seems a bit restless—“ Of course he does, you’re paying attention to another hart and not him. “And I could use a bit of fresh air myself.”

“By yourself?” Belassan says, looking concerned. “Ah… Meaning no offense, your riding isn’t exactly…”

“I’ll go slow, and carefully,” you promise. “Revas is a sweetie. He won’t take off unless I ask him too.”

Belassan nods, slowly. “Alright. Don’t go far, however. Mythal only knows what all is out in those woods, and I’d hate to be responsible for anything happening to you. I’d go with you myself, only…”

“You’re very busy,” you finish for him with a smile. “Taking care of all of these harts singlehandedly. I understand. Perhaps another time? For now, Revas and I could both use the exercise.”

Belassan watches as you saddle Revas up, making sure you do it correctly (you do), and sees you off before getting back to his duties. You’re elated… You can’t believe you actually managed to talk the Dalish man into letting you take off with Revas. Is he an idiot? You could charge off now with an incredibly valuable creature. But you suppose that’s unlikely—where would you go with just a hart, after all? Still, it seems overly trusting to you. You are, however, more than willing to take advantage of that kind of an honest nature, and you quickly head out across the bridge of Skyhold.

You actually make it a little ways out into the forest before realizing you’re being followed. Not subtly, either… A glance behind you and you see Iron Bull on his wall of a horse, riding to catch up. When he sees you spot him, he waves cordially. Fuming, you wave back. Son of a horned bitch…

“Where you off to, kid?” Iron Bull says once he’s within shouting distance. His cheerful expression doesn’t lighten your mood one bit. Just because you’ve been getting all friendly with him and some of the other residents of Skyhold doesn’t suddenly mean they’re not a threat to you, and this is an unpleasant reminder of just how tricky the Ben-Hassrath is.

“Just going for a ride,” you say, not letting your dark mood show through in your voice. It had to be Bull, too… Anyone else you could hope to lose or overpower. Well, he’s not a mage, or a Templar, so you can at least relax your grip on the chaos. You had slept exposed around him once before,
when you’d had that “episode.” If he hadn’t found you out then, he wasn’t likely to do so now. But it still kept you from doing anything visible.

“By yourself? Not the smartest thing you’ve ever done,” he chides.

“I’ve traveled alone my entire life, Bull,” you say with a sigh. “Worst case scenario, I can climb a tree.” You turn Revas and head into the woods, with Bull following along behind. Cautiously, you let your control loosen, let the swirling chaos out a little at a time. The slow release is difficult—it’s been locked up a very long time—but you manage it. And, of course, Bull utterly fails to notice. Small blessing, considering it’s now whipping around and begging to be used. That’s something you certainly can’t do in front of Bull. If he wasn’t here…

You sigh.

“Bull, I’ll be honest with you.” Haha. Sure. “I sleep better outdoors. A life of traveling, you know? You know I’ve been having trouble sleeping… I came out here to try and catch a few hours of rest.”

“So, you came outside of Skyhold… to sleep in the woods?” Iron Bull says incredulously. “The woods. Where there could be bears and bandits.”

You could have perfectly well handled that if he wasn’t here. But instead of saying that, you just sort of shrug. “We’re still close to Skyhold. How likely am I to run into either of those things, really? I know the Inquisition sends out patrols… One of them spotted the group I was with and escorted us in. I doubt they’re just out there keeping an eye out for refugees, right?”

“Still seems like a stupid risk just to get some sleep.”

You level an acidic stare at him. “Spoken like a man whose only sleep-deprivation has been out of fear or need. When you genuinely cannot sleep, it’s not something you can brush aside that casually. Either way, unless leaving Skyhold for a nap has suddenly become a punishable offense, I still intend to do it.”

Iron Bull rolls his eye dramatically, no doubt mocking your tendency to do the same. “Fine. But I’m keeping an eye on you. Can you imagine what Leliana would do to me if you got eaten by a bear?”

He has a point, one you can’t argue with. Even if you could, it would look strange if you did. You merely give him an appreciative smile and continue along until you get to an appropriate looking clearing. It’s close enough to Skyhold that you can justify it being safe. Not exactly the kind of place you’d go were you alone, but it’ll do for your purposes. The Inquisition doesn’t seem to use Templars or mages for things so routine as patrols… With just Iron Bull here, you should be safe to sleep, at least.

It will help your exhaustion. It won’t help you be rid of the ever-growing chaos. But you still won’t say no to the prospect of a few hours of genuine sleep. You tie Revas to a tree and sink down into the grass.

“Are you seriously just going to sleep in the middle of a meadow?” Iron Bull interjects. “Pff… elves.”

“Well, with you watching out for me, nothing bad could possibly happen,” you say with a scowl. “So I might as well be comfortable. Otherwise, I could sleep in a tree.”

You dislike sleeping in front of people. You always have. Who doesn’t? Even Solas put wards down when he fell asleep in his study that one time. Despite that, however, and despite the whipping of
your power around you, finally loose from its containment, you drift into sleep almost instantly. Your dreams are strained and stressful; you have nightmares of your time in Seheron. Despite horrific imagery that might jolt you awake on another night, you remain unconscious. That’s just how tired you are, how much you’ve been lacking for proper sleep.

When you finally do awake, the sun is beginning to set over the horizon. Your body feels fantastic… Even a few hours of sleep has helped your physical exhaustion immensely. On the intangible side of things, however, you’re even worse. The chaos is so desperate to be spent that your fingertips are actually hot to the touch. It takes several long minutes to lasso it all back together and wrap it up neatly inside you for the journey back to Skyhold. You can feel it in there, red-hot and angry. This can’t go on much longer.

Once it’s secure, you sit up. Iron Bull is leaning against a tree, sharpening a long greatsword that gives you chills just to look at. A giant weapon for a giant man… If you saw Bull coming at you with that on a battlefield, you’d turn tail and run, no question. You suppose that’s the point.

“You’re a damn lively sleeper,” Iron Bull reports. “Also, you snore.”

“I do not!” you protest.

“Well, it’s more of a… whine-snort than a proper, manly snore, I suppose, but—”

“Oh, shut up. We should get back to Skyhold before it gets dark. I… appreciate you taking the afternoon off just to babysit me, Bull, even if it was unnecessary.”

“Anything to keep you from going off the edge again,” Iron Bull says with a grin. “I finally healed up from last time.”

It’s a joke, but the reminder makes you cringe a little bit. In the state you’re in now, losing it in that manner would end much, much badly for both you and Bull.

After the two of you put your mounts back in the stables, and you’ve attended to Revas to your satisfaction, you and Iron Bull head to the mess together. You try to eat, you really do… But the chaos is tight in your stomach, raging and twisting. You’ve no appetite—in fact, you feel slightly nauseous. You pick at your food, and when Bull comments, use the large meal with the Chargers as an excuse for your lack of hunger. It should work… you skip meals often enough for people to think you don’t eat much, although in fact, given access to a constant supply of food, you’d probably never stop eating.

Thea frets over you, telling you that overworking, but your brush her concerns off as best you can without coming across as rude. You head with her back towards the library, parting ways in front of the rotunda despite her obvious displeasure that you’re just heading back to work. You sit down at your desk, frustration growing. There has to be some place in this castle where you can be alone enough to get rid of this… But you suspect your window for a controlled burn has passed. Now, the slightest spark will likely result in a wildfire, metaphorically speaking. This can’t be within the walls of Skyhold. You have to get out. But you’ve no chance of sneaking across that long bridge at night… Even if you managed to get out, getting in would be an impossibility.

It will have to wait until tomorrow.

With that in mind, you do your best to focus on your work. The long nap allows you to work long into the night, which helps cope for the fact you’re working more slowly. You manage to get a
decent amount done before your eyes grow tired enough that you flop down on the couch. You
don’t drag the blanket on, however… at this point, sleeping will only make things worse.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of a short one this time, I'm afraid! But things should heat up (haha I'm so funny)
next time. :)
You spend the night hopping back and forth between the desk and the couch, working when you’re too restless to even attempt resting. By the time you head out into the courtyard for your morning session with Bull, you’re damn near a nervous wreck, about to explode from the inside. But there’s no question of skipping training to attempt to escape Skyhold… not only is it still too early to make it out without suspicion, if you miss your training, Iron Bull will know something is up.

Fortunately, the proper sleep from yesterday has your body, at least, in better condition. You’re able to strike and dodge with more accuracy and control than you have been as of late. That’s not the problem, however… the tangled mess of chaotic power you have locked up inside you is the problem. It responds eagerly to violence, struggling to break free of your control. You’re so distracted trying to keep it from bursting free that the physical benefits of getting some proper sleep might as well not even be there—you trip and stumble due to your lack of focus.

You’re so distracted trying to stay in control, in fact, that Iron Bull manages to pin your arms behind your back, something he hasn’t done since the day you had your meltdown. Perhaps you should be angry with him, or proud that he has more faith in your self-control than you do, but you have no time to think. Your mind soars with panic at the sensation, and the hold you have breaks. You can feel the seething, raging chaos, ready to crack across Bull like a whip.

You don’t know how you manage to get a hold on it… luck, skill, perhaps a combination of the two combined with panic and adrenaline. But you do. You grapple with it much the way Iron Bull grapples you, fighting its every movement, struggling with it until it submits.

Iron Bull lets you go when you stop fighting, but you can’t do the same with the chaos. You just flop down into the grass, panting and trying to regain your calm. Iron Bull may never know how close he came to death. As for you, you’ve got a terrible case of the cold sweats at just how close you came.

You have to get out of here.

The panic has to show in your eyes, because as you turn back towards Bull, fingers digging into the dirt, you see he has his hands up, much like he did when you had broken down before. The idiot thinks this is another episode about Seheron. Of course he does; why would he think otherwise? But you have to think, use this to your advantage. You can’t have him babying over you again today.

“I’m fine,” you choke out through a tight throat. “Just, need to breathe.” Graciously, Bull lets you gasp for air, and just stays back. You manage to get the raging, rolling power just underneath your skin under control, and take a moment to glance around. There’s no one… no mages, no Templars, no one to recognize how close you came to losing it.

“You’re really not good at dealing with that pin,” he says, by way of apology.

“I’m okay,” you repeat, to yourself more than to Iron Bull.
“You’re making a lot of progress, Emma. I wouldn’t have tried if I was sure you would panic again.”

“I’m very proud of us both,” you choke. “Believe me. I’ll be glowing with it in a moment.”

“Sarcasm is good! Means you’re feeling yourself. It’s when you stop being a brat that I’ll worry.”

_Din’samahlen._

Another surge of emotion, but not anger. You’re still in control. “Do you mind if we stop here for today? It’s almost breakfast time anyway.”

“Sure thing, kid. You wanna go to the mess…?”

“No, I’m gonna… Just gonna walk around for a little.”

Iron Bull gives you an understanding nod and heads towards the mess. You walk in the opposite direction, towards the tavern and some of the other training yards. Now’s your chance… if you play your cards right. You can’t take the time to get Revas, there’s too much of a chance of Bull or someone else noticing. But you can’t just walk out of the gate, either…

As you approach the gate and the long bridge out of Skyhold, you see your opportunity, as clear and beautiful as if it was surrounded in glowing light. There’s a merchant’s cart beginning to pack up. You give yourself a once over… You’ve been around Skyhold too long to depend on no one knowing your face or your faded red hair. How many redhead elves could there possibly be in Skyhold, for _all_ the guards to mistake you for a stranger? No need taking the risk. You walk quickly to your room and drag the bundle you’d brought with you to Skyhold out from under the bed. No time to change properly; you just throw the dress on over your dirty clothes. You yank your hair out of its trademark bun, run a comb through it a few times to get the worst of the dirt off. Off come your prized leather boots, on go some sensible but cheap flats. Finally, your thick traveling cloak wraps around it all, a hood ready to be pulled up to help you avoid detection. You wish you had a mirror to look into, wish you had some way to mark up your face. But it’ll have to do.

By the time you get back to the merchant’s cart, they’re finishing packing it up. You grab a few boxes and begin helping the workers load, listening closely for any shouted names. Bernard. Mistress LaVey, likely the merchant. Donald. You commit them to memory, just in case, as you finish loading the last crate into the back of the cart. Red hair frames your face, and as the carts begin to pull out, you hop onto the back of one and pull your hood up. Men and women alike scramble to do the same as the trail of carts begins to move out, a man shouting orders from the front. You keep your eyes down, not wanting your face nor your over-large elven eyes to give you away. You needn’t bother… as you had suspected, not too many guards are interested in what’s going _out_ of Skyhold.

You don’t breathe, don’t relax, until the caravan clears the long bridge and you feel the comforting rattle of wheels over rough dirt. You glance back towards Skyhold. It’s such a striking thing to see from outside, but you’re happy to see it shrinking into the distance. You stay on the cart for maybe twenty minutes before hopping off. When a man glances at you questioningly, you make a somewhat obscene gesture, indicating your need to relieve yourself. The man flushes and glances away… Fereldans, bless them.

You walk calmly into the woods, but once you’re out of eyeshot, you bolt. Out comes the chaos, and this time, you sing with it. _Soon, soon, soon,_ you promise yourself. You just need to find… ah! As perfect as a picture, a frozen pond. The ice doesn’t look very thick; you’d never attempt to walk on it. But it serves your purpose as well as anything else. You force yourself to wait a few more minutes, to be sure you’re absolutely alone, not even a raven flying overhead. Then, with the power
singing loudly in your mind, you thrust your hands against the ice and let loose.

If you weren’t so full to the bursting with mana, you would have more control, but as it is, you just let it pour through you into what comes naturally to you—fire. Burning heat rushes from your hands, arcing through the ice like lightning. You control it just enough to give it some carrying power, creating a rippling blaze that shoots out across the surface of the lake in an arc. Ice hisses and melts in a giant cloud of steam; the water near your hands starts to bubble. You send a silent prayer skywards for any fish you’re boiling, but continue pouring raging, screaming power out of you and into the water until the writhing calms, until your aura is less a raging beast of chaos and more the sedate glow most mages would be used to seeing. Then a bit more… draining yourself is unpleasant, but if this incident has taught you anything, it’s that opportunities to spend yourself will come less often than sleep. You drain yourself down to nearly nothing… Enough that you’re not completely spent, enough to last you in an emergency, but not much further. You’ve no doubt you’ll be resting before you have the chance to do this again.

The chaos spent and back to normal, albeit tired, swirling magic, you flump backwards, intending to fall into the snow, only to find you’ve melted all the snow within a meter of you in every direction. Instead, you flop into a puddle. Ugh. Thank the Maker for your cloak. You stand up and brush yourself off as best you can, then take notice of your surroundings. You don’t know exactly where you are, but your footprints are plain in the snow. It would be an easy thing to retrace them back to the road, but it’s too soon to head back to Skyhold. You do head a little closer to the road, however, not wanting to risk a new coat of snow coming down, or a sudden thaw, either of which could ruin your little trail back.

You climb a tree perhaps twenty paces back from the road, enough that you can see it, but caravans or guards on the road would be hard-pressed to see you. You feel better than you have in weeks… months. Most mages hate the sensation of being low on mana, but after so long of trying to wrangle your bucking aura into obedience, the sensation is fantastic. Plus, most mages don’t have your skills in self-defense to fall back on, depending on their magic to do everything for them. You lean back in the tree and stretch, a grin spreading across your face. Freedom. Short-lived… But you’d forgotten what even that felt like. You idly amuse yourself by creating sparks and little bursts of light, fire, and electricity in colorful patterns. A parlor trick, but the ability to use your power as you please is a rare one when you live in a stronghold of goddamned Templars.

Eventually, even that begins to bore you, and you shift to the sturdiest, thickest branch you can find, and lean against the trunk. A nap won’t kill you… you have to figure out how to get back into Skyhold, yes, although if Bull or Leliana notices your absence, they might send out a search and save you the trouble. If they find you asleep in a tree, well, Bull already has an explanation for that. You drift off into a blissful sleep, aura out and free to dream.

Your dreams are pleasant, filled with memories of other times you spent your mana so well and truly. Most would perhaps not thinking a burning ship a pleasant dream, but the smell of burning pirates, like so much cooking pork, brings a smile to your lips even in a dream.

It’s the sound of crying children that rouses you from your deep slumber. The shouting of adults, you could have ignored, but screaming children invade your dreams, the memory of guards rushing the orphanage. You couldn’t burn them then; you didn’t know you could, didn’t have the power. You jar awake, hand already on your dagger as sleep fades from your dream. The source of the sound isn’t a fade-tossed nightmare, but a huge caravan heading down the road… refugees. You spot flat wagons of injured, bare feet turned bloody on the rocks and snow. All the gods must be smiling on you today, for such luck. You scramble down the tree, wait at the tree line for a chance, and then--
hood up, and aura wrapped neatly inside of you--join the refugees.

What you see makes you cringe. Where they’re from, you don’t know, nor what caused the extent of their injuries. There are burns, yes, but mostly weapon wounds... swords and arrows. Then your eyes fix upon a group towards the back of the progression, the source of some of the crying that had roused you from your sleep. A crowd of children with only a few grown men and women watching them… Pointed ears betray why they’re walking while most children are on what few wagons there are, or being carried by exhausted parents.

You keep with the main progression, but your eyes stay on the elves. You pass inside Skyhold with no one the wiser. You’re almost impressed by their lack of ability to recognize you, considering the Commander is on the scene, shouting orders to scrambling soldiers. You slip away to the side almost as soon as you’re within the walls, stripping out of your cloak and dress and tucking them into a safe, hidden corner to be retrieved later. The wrap tied around your wrist goes back around your hair, a tight, practical bun. Just like that, you’re Emma again.

On light feet, you travel back towards the refugees. The Commander and a woman you don’t recognize are alternatively poring over a sheet of parchment and shouting orders at soldiers and guards. You head towards them.

“We don’t have enough space—” the woman is saying, but Commander Rutherford cuts her off.

“We’ll make space. Empty the nobles out of the Great Hall; send them to their quarters. We’ll bring out bedrolls and line the place.”

“There’s still only so much—”

“Use the tables,” you interject. “Bedrolls underneath, bedrolls on top. Double your space that way.” Before they can react, you’re moving with purpose towards the huddled refugees. Sure enough, the elves are huddled off to themselves, being largely ignored. You grab the arm of a passing soldier who’s directing the wounded towards the healing tent. He glares at you, but the look you give him is long practiced and has cowed better men than him.

“Are you blind, soldier?” you say acidly, gesturing to the group of elves, several of whom are injured. “Get them to the tent. Now.” You wait only long enough to ensure it’s being done, to give encouraging nods to the few elves who are nervous about going off with an armed shem. People are rapidly being sorted into areas. The Great Hall’s spaces are filling up, as are the remaining barracks and servant’s quarters. You hiss under your breath in frustration. Must the Inquisition be so disgustingly transparent? The Commander is an idiot; he’s not specifying which groups should go where other than “men,” “women,” “children,” and “injured.” If he doesn’t specify “elves,” they will be left with nowhere to go. You eye the remaining elves, mostly children with only a spattering of adults. Fuck it. You raise your voice to a shout, trying to echo as loudly as the soldiers barking orders all around you.

“You lot! Yes, you! You little runts! Come on, with me.” You march them directly past the Commander, herding them like deer into a tiny pack to avoid getting them run over or separated. “Commander, I’m taking these into the rotunda,” you inform him. He blinks, and it’s anyone’s guess whether he’s more shocked by what you’re saying or by the fact that it’s you saying it.

“The rotunda? But…”

“But? Have you already stationed another group there, ser?”

“Erm,” he glances down at the parchment. “No.”
“Then we’ll be in there. They’re cold and frightened, but not severely injured enough for the healers.”

“Very good,” says the woman, scribbling something onto a rather phenomenal device that could only be described as a portable desk; candle and wax included. You want one, but now’s not the time. “Thank you, Miss…”?

“Emma,” the Commander interjects, the expression on his face chilling you to your core. Curious. They’re always curious. But excuses can come later. You know humans, and you know them very well. If you don’t bring these elves to warmth and food, they will be left to freeze and starve in the stables. You herd them up the steps and into the Great Hall, then into the rotunda. They stay bundled up, staring around with wild, terrified eyes. You pull aside the few adults you have… Just three plus you to watch over two dozen children of varying ages.

“Keep them on this floor and away from the doors,” you order. “Don’t touch the items on either desk; I’ll clear them off when I get the chance. Have those with hurt feet sit on that couch, or any chairs you can pull together, and I’ll be back with bandages and blankets.” They nod, eyes wide and still in some amount of shock, no doubt, but they move to obey you, checking the children for less severe injuries.

It’s easier said than done, really… Everyone’s looking for bandages and blankets. You have to throw your weight around more than you’d like, and at one point you simply corner a maid and “relieve” her of her delivery of blankets to the Great Hall. You dart around the castle, intimidating, begging, lying, and even flat-out stealing when nothing else works. You bring everything you can use that isn’t nailed down into the rotunda in small bursts.

In the end, you don’t have as many supplies as you’d like, but you have enough to scrimp by. A final stolen pile of bandages in your arms, you re-enter the rotunda. One of the adults and two of the teenagers have already begun bandaging swollen wrists and bloody feet. You drop the bandages off with them, glad you’re not the only one who knows when action is necessary. You quickly clear off your desk, piling everything up as best you can, and then, cringing, you do the same for Solas’. It’s in the middle of the room; there’s literally no way the children won’t climb on it. You pile his things onto your desk and beg the Maker for forgiveness; you’ll beg Solas for it later when he inevitably notices his things are out of place. You have no idea how he’d feel about you filling his rotunda with elven refugees, but fortunately, he’s not here to object.

Once the desks are clear, you begin laying down the bedrolls and blankets you managed to procure. Still short… That’s when a thought strikes you like lightning. Where had you pilfered your blanket? Solas’ room, from a cupboard full of blankets, towels, linens… You’re off again like an arrow, darting your way through the crowded halls of Skyhold. You don’t even particularly mind when a maid sees you as you finish picking the lock on Solas’ door. If she needs excuses, you have dozens. You quickly stride through the room, stripping even the blanket and pillow off his bed. It’s not as though he’s using them. Arms full to the bursting with stolen blankets and sheets, you lock the door behind you as you leave and totter unevenly back towards the rotunda. As you’re exiting back into the Great Hall, you pass Madame de Fer, the last person you want to see right then, but you only have to suffer through lingering eye contact—she says nothing.

With the addition of the stolen blankets and pillows from Solas’ room, you manage to cover over half the floor in bedrolls and pillows, with enough sheets and blankets left over to keep the children warm, hopefully. There are some bandages left over after patching up all the children, so you dart to deliver them into the hands of someone who can bring them to the healer’s tent or wherever they’re needed.
By the time you have everything settled, you’re exhausted, and some of the more frantic running about in Skyhold—by the refugees, at least—has settled. Food is now beginning to make its rounds… Maker, another thing you’re going to have to do for… Or perhaps not. You have some pull in the kitchens. Gaston is an ass, but you know enough of the serving ladies, particularly Celia, to at least get *some* food brought to the rotunda. It’s worth a try.

You curse your overcompensation—was it really necessary for you to change your shoes?—as you head down the stairs to the kitchen. It is, of course, a frantic bustle, but you manage to pull aside Celia.

“What do I have to do to make sure my people are fed, Celia?” you ask her seriously. “I’ve got maybe thirty mouths that need food, mostly children.”

“I’m sure they’ll be gotten to—“

“They’re elves, Celia, probably orphans. They wouldn’t even have a roof or blankets if I wasn’t doing it myself. *How do I get them food?”*

Celia’s mouth forms a firm, serious line. “I’ll spread the word… tell the other girls.” She taps her ear to indicate she means the other elven girls. “Where are they?”

“The rotunda. I’ll grab some now… Gaston will have to throw me out by the tail. But we will need more.”

“I’ll do what I can, Emma. We’ll see that those children have *something* to eat.” You don’t like the desperation with which she says ‘something,’ but you’ll take whatever she can give. She heads out the door and you dart further into the kitchen, grabbing a large basket directly off someone’s arm. You ignore the cry of protest and begin rapidly filling it with anything that holds still long enough; loaves of bread; bottles of cheap, thinned wine; entire cans of pickled vegetables; any single fruit you can snatch. You’re finally chased out of the kitchen by a shouting Gaston, around the time you grabbed an *entire* roasted chicken, burning your hands in the process. Into the basket it goes as you flee the kitchen, the Orlesian man’s screams about pilfering little knife-ears following you out.

You charge up the steps and across the Great Hall with the large basket, then into the rotunda. The elves are settling in, with children perched upon every conceivable surface, including, as you suspected, all over Solas’ desk. You shoo a few of them off of it so you have a place to set down your basket. The smell of bread and chicken is beginning to waft through the rotunda, and children are staring at you with the kind of unbridled hope that breaks your heart.

“There will be more coming,” you promise. “So make sure you share this, okay?” You plop the chicken directly onto the desk, cringing slightly. Oh, Solas… You’re so sorry. You yank your knife out of its hiding place in the small of your back, causing no small number of gasps, but you use it only to cut through the thick bread and begin sheering off chunks of chicken. The food goes quickly, but you suspect it’s more than the children have had for a while.

True to her word, Celia somehow organizes a small train of elven serving girls, one after another sneaking you food and simple wooden bowls on their rounds. Between a pot of porridge, pilfered loaves and biscuits, even some of the less favored supplies such as pickled meats, you manage to get all the elves fed. After they’ve all eaten their fill, you stuff yourself with any leftover scraps. You skipped breakfast, slept through lunch, and after all that running about, you are *starving.* Not so much as you imagine the children were, however.

The elves are avoiding you somewhat, and in all honesty, you can’t blame them. You’re a mysterious figure who swooped in out of nowhere, shouting at shems until they submitted. If you
were in their position, you wouldn’t be comfortable with you either. You manage to strike up a conversation with one of the older elves, however, and work to pry information out of her. They had come from an Orlesian village closer to the base of the mountains… It had been sacked by bandits after the noble overseeing the land had fled to the capitol, likely due to the war. They had been left with no defenses. It was really only a matter of time before this sort of thing happened.

You’re not sure what starts the first child crying. Perhaps a tummy ache, from eating so much after too long without good food. Perhaps the trials of the day catching up with them. A woman rushes to comfort the little girl, but soon, other children are joining in, the young ones wailing openly, those slightly older crying the silent tears of those who have learned it’s safer not to make noise. It shreds at your heart like nothing else. Sometimes it seems that you’ve been surrounded by crying orphans for much of your life… From the orphanage in Denerim, to the slaves of Seheron, and even in Antiva, Rivain, and Fereldan… You always find yourself surrounded by the lowest of your people.

But it means you know how to comfort them. You reach over to your desk, grab your long, tapered candle and its holder, and place it on the floor in front of where you sit on Solas’ couch. You light it with a match, and the flash of fire gets the attention of a few of the children.

You tuck your feet up under your knees, and smile broadly. “Come gather by the fire, and let me tell you tales of our ancestors!” Such a cheesy line, but you’re rewarded by slightly less crying and a few confused hiccups. “Who here has heard of the Emerald Knights?” There’s a long pause, and then one of the teenagers hesitantly speaks up.

“Th… they were the guardians of the elves, back when we had the Dales… right?”

“That’s right! Tonight, I’m going to tell you about Mathalin and his brave squire Sulan.” Tentative feet move towards your makeshift “campfire.” As you continue your tale, more children, and even the adults, move to listen.

“And after Sulan and his brave wolf saved Mathalin’s life, the old knight handed his precious sword, Evanura, forged in the heart of Halamshiral, to his bold squire. This began the tradition of passing down the ancient sword, all the way down to brave Lindiranae. And rumor has it that Evanura is still out there, and always finds its way into the hands of courageous elves, to this very day.”

“But hahren, aren’t wolves scary?” asks a young voice. Your heart aches. Hahren? Really? Do you carry your years so poorly? You hide your displeasure, however, to answer the child’s question.

“Elves have long been friends to the wolves as much as they’ve been friends to the halla,” you inform her gravely. “That doesn’t mean you should run out and pet one, though! Wolves are wild creatures, proud and strong. But so are we Elvhen. Some Dalish still practice the path of the ranger, and befriend animals such as wolves and bears to fight alongside them… Like the Fereldans and their over-large Mabari.”

“Tell us another story, hahren!”

“I want to hear one that has a girl in it!”

“Okay, okay, settle down,” you say with a smile. “Why don’t I tell you the story of Tanaleth, the brilliant smith of Halamshiral who worked to rediscover the lost arts of Arlathan?”

Children begin drifting off as you tell as many stories as are requested of you—you certainly won’t run out anytime soon. Not only are you a linguist with a desperate thirst for knowledge, you’ve been that way your entire life. Many of these stories were told to you by your own mother. As the children fall asleep, the adults tuck them into bedrolls and cover them in large, warm blankets. Finally, there’s
only a handful left, sitting around you on the couch, huddled close with Solas’ warm, brown blanket wrapped around the lot of you. You’re reminded of late nights hidden in Seheron, and you teach the children a few words of ancient elven as their eyes grow heavy. *Ma lath, da’len.* You are loved.

They’re the last to drift off, and you don’t have the heart to move them. You shift only enough to lean back, and try to rest as well, the frantic events of the day finally catching up with you.
What Needs to be Done

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

You wake up in only mild confusion. You didn’t sleep through the night, because of course you didn’t. With children to distract you, your disgusting little crush on Solas couldn’t lull you to sleep. The kids slept like rocks, however, likely due to their exhaustion and newly full bellies. But it’s just as well… You haven’t time to sleep. You slip out from between the children, tuck them into Solas’ blanket a little more completely.

Bull will understand you missing today’s training, you’re sure. All of Skyhold will be a chaotic mess with all of these empty mouths to feed and injured to tend to. Not to mention the fortress can’t hold them for long… No doubt the Inquisition’s diplomats are working out a place to send them as soon as possible. But for now, these elves are your responsibility, and if you don’t go kick some teeth in, they won’t have breakfast.

Gaston isn’t happy to see you when you walk in, but you use the fact dinner was stolen away to you by the kitchen elves to your advantage.

“Thirty mouths, ser, and I had a chicken to split between them!” you lecture. Your stance is aggressive, your tone that of an angry mother; it throws the man, who has likely never been spoken down to by an elf in his life. “I will have porridge for them this morning, and food to give them every meal until they leave.”

“I barely have enough to go around! They’ll get food when everyone else-”

“Clearly they won’t, ser, or I wouldn’t have had to swipe their measly dinner last night!” you interrupt. “Porridge for thirty, delivered to the rotunda… You know… Ser Solas’ rotunda. When are the Inquisitor and his companions due back, by the way?”

“I… you… they…”

“Don’t forget the bowls, ser,” you say icily. “If it’s not there by an hour after sun-up, I’ll be back, and I’ll be far less cheerful about it.”

You hear him swearing in Orlesian as you leave. ”Fucking rabbits, she’s as bad as her master.” You smirk as you head towards the stairs. You’ll take that as a compliment.

It doesn’t take you long in the courtyard to figure out the Commander’s plans. Work is already started on wagons and an armed escort to get the refugees… somewhere. That doesn’t seem clear yet. But the Commander does seem to want them out fast. Even this early, the whole of Skyhold is alive with work being done. You chew on your lip for a moment as you watch soldiers and servants alike rushing to and fro. It would be easy to go back to the rotunda, keep an eye on the children. But you don’t think that’s where you’ll be the most useful. Your heart doesn’t melt for the human refugees. Not the way it does for the elves... but you can hardly see the orphans out to safety by themselves. For them to be safe, the whole caravan will need to be able to move swiftly.

So you interject yourself where you’re not wanted. A requisition agent is determining what number of wagons will need to be constructed; you ensure there will be room for the orphans. They will not walk down the mountain on bare feet. Work is being done to give all the refugees warm clothes for
the journey; you’re rather insistent that you need two dozen warm outfits for children. Those extra wagons need extra horses. You go directly to Belassan and Dennet; you wheedle, whine, and beg your way into four strong horses to pull the elves’ wagons. You find who you need to in order to muscle dried meat and grains for the road, to ensure the elves will be fed.

“By whose order?” they all want to know.

“By mine, and delivered to Ser Solas’ rotunda,” is what you tell every single one.

You’ll really have to apologize for dragging his name into this when Solas returns. It might be that this is you finally overstepping and overreaching. If he returns while this mess is still ongoing, you’ll be in quite a fix, and if not, it may be too much for you to brush under the rug when he does return. You’ll likely be out of that rotunda on your ass. But nearly thirty elven lives are more important than your thirst for knowledge and your foolish little crush combined. It took you most of your life for your mother’s teachings on the value inherent to an elven child to sink in. It’s not something you’ll forget easily now.

When you’ve made all the preparations you can for the elves, you begin working in a more general manner, running messages and items from place to place, holding nails, even, at one point, running about a pen catching chickens for the slaughter. You do whatever tasks Skyhold requires of you until the sun is high in the sky, and stop only then because one of your friends tracks you down. It’s Sera who finds you covered in feathers, standing in the Undercroft where you’re delivering no small amount of iron to be turned into nails and axles.

“I’ve been seein’ you all day, runnin’ around like a chicken with yer head cut off… You’ve even got the feathers,” Sera points out.

“Plenty of work to do,” you say tiredly.

“For those elves, right?”

You stiffen a bit at her tone.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s nice, what you’re doing… You’re focused just on them, though. ‘Cause they’re orphans?”

“Because they’re elves! Because they’re elves and I’m an elf!” you snap. “Where did you live after the orphanage that you forget how much that matters, Sera?!”

She looks taken aback, likely because she’s dragged you through petty pranks and broken limbs and you’d never once taken that tone with her. You shake your head. “Sorry, I’m just… I have work to do.”

She takes a moment, seemingly to compose herself, or remember why she came in the first place. “You need to eat, Em. You do still need food to live, right?”

“Only because I’ve yet to reach the next level of elfiness,” you say with a grin, and she seems as willing as you to take it as a joke and let the moment pass. You let her take you to the mess and stuff you with food, although you eat quickly to get back to work sooner. If she notices, she doesn’t comment on it, and she parts ways with you when she realizes you’re heading back to the rotunda.

When you enter Solas’ workspace, you find it’s still populated with your elves--thank the Maker--and that you’d successfully intimidated Gaston… Not only had they had breakfast, they’re now eating lunch. Not the best food, but probably more or less what the other refugees were getting. The children are antsy, being locked up in one room all day, but you insist with the adults that they stay
indoors and on this level. You’re overextending what little pull you have in Skyhold as it is.

After ensuring that the elves are fed and sheltered, with clothing coming in, you head back out to see what use you can be. Before long you find yourself in the stables, simply because you’re not much use at assembling wagons and there are no more chickens to be chased. You set to work preparing horses for a long journey; the Inquisition got prime horses for a cavalry from Dennet, but the horses they were using before (IE, walking flea machines who you personally would be uncomfortable tying to a plow) are still around. Those are the ones the refugees are getting, and they need some help. You don’t know how to shoe a horse, but you know how to groom and kill ticks, and you consider yourself something of an expert in the art of scooping poop. You find things to do.

And so you work. There are worse ways to spend your evening than ankle deep in horse shit (not many, but still), and you feel like you’re helping. You only break when you realize you need to ensure that the children have gotten dinner, and then you’re right back in the stables. The sun has set by the time someone interrupts you with anything other than a new task. To your surprise, it’s the Grey Warden, Blackwall. If that startles you, his reason for being there absolutely floors you.

“You’ve been here all afternoon and evening. You’re no good to these refugees dead. Eat.” The bearded man thrusts what appears to be the leg of a turkey into your hands. It’s not exactly what you’re used to being handed, and the fact that it’s him doing it has you off balance. You’re caught between the polite little linguist and the woman who has two dozen orphans to protect, and your brain stalls like an overweight donkey.

“I… I don’t… The… What?”

Eloquent.

“Eat,” he says again, pantomiming as if you’re a Maker-damned idiot. Perhaps you seem that way. But you do take a bite of the turkey leg--you hadn’t realized how hungry you had gotten until you got food in your mouth. You tear into it like a beast, both out of hunger and out of a desire to get back to work. Those horses (although you use the term loosely) won’t clean themselves.

“I was under the impression you were a linguist, not a stablehand,” the Warden comments off-handedly as he watches you absolutely destroy the turkey leg.

You bite back a sharp retort and swallow a mouthful of food before replying. “Are these refugees in dire need of having something translated, ser Warden?”

“Still, you must be out of your comfort zone here.” He gestures vaguely around the barn.

“It needs to be done,” you say with a shrug.

“As simple as that?”

“Should it be complicated?” you exclaim, tossing your hands into the air in frustration. What is it with people today? Between Sera’s obliviousness and Blackwall’s… whatever the hell this is, you’re going to wind up punching someone. This is what happens when you skip practice with Iron Bull, clearly… too much punching energy built up. “There are refugees in our halls! There is a long list of things they need, ser Warden, and ‘linguist’ is not on there!”

“You’re doing good work, with those elves. Sera told me.”

You search for the barb, for the catch, but can’t find it. “It… needed to be done. That’s all.”

“Is it? Elf or no, there aren’t a lot of people who would do what you’re doing.”
“I know. That’s why I’m doing it. If I thought someone else would, I needn’t have bothered,” you say shortly.

Blackwall is silent for a moment, then nods and reaches out, resting a large hand on your tired shoulder. “The Inquisition will always need people like you, linguist.”

You’re not sure what he means, exactly, but he chooses that moment to turn and leave, so you decide to just shrug it off and finish the turkey leg. If you’ve given him cause to dislike you less, than that can be a side benefit to the work you’re doing. You would never have guessed it, but with a mercenary group and a growing list of the Inquisitor’s Inner Circle coming to enjoy your company, you’re getting into a good position here in Skyhold. You’re willing to blow that to help these elves, but perhaps that won’t be necessary. Now if only you can think of a good excuse for Solas.

After you do everything you can in the stables, you find yourself working with some of the requisition agents. You’ve always been an organized individual, so secretarial work and making order out of chaos come naturally to you. Plus, working to assign purposes to the wagons rapidly being constructed in the courtyard means you can ensure that the ones you bullied into use for the elves remain theirs to use.

Later, you assist in packing wagons tight with supplies, food, blankets, and bandages, ensuring every single one is crammed as tight as it can be. You throw your weight around less in a crowd full of stubborn, serious, mostly Fereldan men, phrasing your commands and orders to be seen as suggestions, even tricking the occasional officer into thinking that it was absolutely his brilliant idea to tie a spare wheel onto the bottom of each wagon. Whatever needs to be done to ensure the safety of these refugees. Even cowtowing to some fragile male egos.

It’s late in the night by the time you collapse. You do so literally. One second, you’re carrying a box of canned food to a wagon, calling back to the man shouting orders, and the next, your legs give out from under you and you find yourself in the dirt. You clutch the box against your chest as you fall, to prevent it from breaking, but find yourself unable to stand. Your legs are useless, crumpled beneath you. Someone takes the box from your arms; they almost have to pry your fingers off of it.

You attempt to stand again, but your body just isn’t cooperating. It feels as if someone’s severed your spine and your legs can no longer respond. Someone comes to help, bless them, wrapping one of your arms around their shoulders and helping you stand. They lean you up against a wall, and you see that it’s a rather jovial-faced man as he pats you somewhat condescendingly on the cheek.

“You’re overworking, rabbit. Get some rest; the world will keep moving without you.”

You have no desire to rest, and are certain the world WILL continue to move without you… and without the elven orphans you’re attempting to assist. But your body is making a stand—after working hard all day with minimal food, it’s done. Somehow, you manage to crawl up the stairs (nearly on hands and knees) and make your way shakily into the rotunda. The children are all already asleep, although a few stir as you pass. The couch is packed with sleeping elves, so you climb onto Solas’ desk and pass out almost immediately into a dreamless sleep.

- 

You awake before dawn, as is your tendency. Awareness comes to you slowly as you attempt to remember why, exactly, you are curled into a ball on Solas’ desk, surrounded on all sides by sleeping children. The memories return to you in a rush… the refugees, yesterday’s work, the work still left to be done today. Your body doesn’t feel much better than it did when you collapsed; the sleep you got was a poor facsimile of the real thing, and being immobile on a hard wooden surface for a few hours did nothing for your soreness. Every muscle in your body burns as you slide off the desk and slip out the rotunda door, but you know forcing yourself to work is your best option.
Work on the caravan is still ongoing in the courtyard; it likely never stopped. How long were you out for? Three hours? Four? You spare only a few moments to stretch before diving back into the thick of things. The wagons are all completed now, and most are packed. The Commander is up (had he slept?) and in the thick of it; soldiers and requisition officers swarm around him like bees. It makes him easy to avoid as you check on the status of the elves’ wagons.

Miraculously, people are still operating with the knowledge that those are wagons for the elven children, and even more miraculously, the supplies you bullied your way into getting are being delivered to the rotunda. You manage to requisition a few people to assist you in packing the supplies into your wagons, making sure you leave enough space for all of the orphans to sit. Even if no one else in the caravan is willing to share supplies with the elves, they’ll have enough to get them to where they’re going.

And you do learn where they’re going, eventually… To your delight, House d’Argent is taking the refugees onto their land. There may be more your “specialized talents” can do to help these refugees after all. But first, you need to ensure everything is set for their departure. Commander Rutherford is sending soldiers as guards to ensure the caravan’s safe passageway to d’Argent’s lands.

First, you ensure that the two elves’ wagons were assigned guards. They were. The real trouble is when you see the two men who were assigned to your people. You recognize one of them, in the worst possible way—he was a man you first met when he was shouting about the things he’d like to do to your “filthy Dalish ass.” He was not, in fact, the one that the Commander had caught and punished… He had been smart enough to run. You would not, you could not leave the protection of your people to this man. Your girls would be in more danger from him than from bandits.

The lieutenant you try to speak to about switching guards is having none of it, however; diplomacy quickly falls through.

“You’ve got two damn wagons just for the elves, woman, just how much special treatment do you want them to get?”

“Two wagons for the elves and two dozen for the humans!” you snap. “I’m fighting for every scrap they get, and I’m telling you, all I need is a different guard! Put him up front on the opposite end of the progression and give me someone else.”

“I don’t take orders from you, you-” His hand raises as if to backhand you and you take a quick step backwards—a strike from an iron gauntlet can do quite a lot of harm. The blow never lands, however—another gauntleted hand wraps tight around the man’s wrist, causing him to shout in pain.

“Lieutenant, go oversee the workers near the kitchen.” The Commander’s voice is, as always, one that demands obedience. The lieutenant practically runs off towards the kitchens, and Commander Cullen turns his attention to you. Just where you didn’t want it. “You have a knack for getting into trouble, Miss.”

“My apologies, Commander,” you say with a full bow. You had hoped to avoid this for a while longer. At least until the elves were safely on their way.

“Let me guess… You were asking something for the elves, and my Lieutenant didn’t want to bother?”

He has taken notice of your actions then. No surprise; how could he miss them? You only procured two entire wagons full of supplies. “It’s that guard, my Lord.”

“I’m no Lord-” he interjects, but you press on.
“His name is Lawrence Underhill, according to the roster. He… Ah…” You clear your throat. “He and I met just before you and I did, ser.”

“I don’t s… Oh.” You can feel the relief flood through you as understanding dawns on the Commander’s face. It’s cut off by the fact understanding is quickly followed by anger, however, as he turns towards the man in question. You step in front of him quickly, half expecting to be shoved out of the way or struck, despite the fact the anger is arguably on your behalf.

“I don’t want trouble, ser. I only want him moved, perhaps traded to guard another wagon?” you begin desperately.

The Commander’s face is still an angry storm when he turns his gaze back to you, and you can feel yourself shrink under it. “How can you-”

“Very e-easily, ser. I don’t care what he s-says to me--I just d-don’t want him near my girls. Ser.” It’s taking much of your willpower to maintain eye contact, although you’re starting to shake a little. Angry Templars are up past “angry Qunari” on the list of things you run when you see. You watch carefully as the Commander’s fist clenches and unclenches. Then he sighs, and you remember to breathe. He grabs a passing soldier--literally, he just grasps the man’s arm.

“Corporal, move Underhill off the job. Put Wille in instead,” he says, voice tight with irritation.

“Yes, Commander,” the unfortunate corporal says before scurrying off.

“Th-thank you, ser,” you say meekly. “I’ll, ah… I’ll just be…”

“Emma.” You freeze. “Don’t think your work with the elves has gone unnoticed.” You swallow, hard. You rather doubted it would be, but couldn’t he let you hope for a few more days? “I… That is, the Inquisition… appreciates it. Your work.”

You blink at him, as confused by what he’s saying as the awkward manner in which he’s saying it.

“It’s easy for the smallest people to get swept under the rug in a rush like this. You’ve made sure they didn’t, when your job had nothing to do with it.” He clears his throat. “You made sure they got what they needed. I’ll take care of the rest.”

A dismissal you can understand, so you bow and wander off, dazed. You can’t shake the feeling like there’s a sword looming over your head, but it has yet to drop. There has to be some consequence for the shit you’ve been pulling. You’d feel better if people would stop reacting positively and react in the “uppity elf, I’ll show you!” fashion of the lieutenant. Someone will feel the need to put you in your place, and you’d like to get it over with.

But it looks like the preparations for the caravan are winding down, and you’ve got a few more things to do before you send your little elflings on their way. You head back into the rotunda, and enter to a crowd of sleepy-eyed orphans downing porridge. It’s a good sight, but you head to your desk rather than basking in it, and immediately begin drafting a note. You write quickly but professionally, and then fold it up and drip some wax from your candle to seal it. Then you find the oldest elf there, a woman likely only a few years older than you.

“Your caravan is traveling to House d’Argent,” you inform her. “After you arrive, go to the castle and find a serving man by the name of Onfroi. Give him this letter, do not open it. Tell him this, exactly this… Banal’ras is calling in their favors.”

The woman nods, eyes wide.
“Say it back to me.”

“B...Banal’ras is calling in their favors,” she says nervously. You nod.

“Good. He will deliver it to the Comtesse. She will see the lot of you taken care of. Do not leave the castle until Onfroi returns.”

You drill the woman on her task until you’re certain she knows what to do. The Comtesse will, in fact, take care of these elves. They’ll likely fare better than the humans. How well they’re treated will inform of you of whether or not you need to make certain indiscretions on her part public knowledge. You had been saving those favors in the off-chance that you needed them in the future--House d’Argent owes “Banal’ras” quite a bit--but this is worth the expenditure of that particular debt.

As you see the elves loaded into their wagons--wagons you procured--and sent off to a better life because of you, you find yourself practically glowing with pride. It’s not often that you can say you’ve done good. Most of your life has been a series of sacrificing others to ensure your own survival. But this… This is good. This time, this one time, you can be proud of your actions.

Iron Bull finds you on the ramparts, watching as the caravan fades into the distance.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” he comments. “I heard you adopted some kids.”

You smile, genuinely. “A little bit, maybe.”

“I also heard you collapsed from exhaustion not six hours ago, and yet here you are.”

You wave him off vaguely. “A few hours rest and I was right as rain, obviously.”

“Uh-huh. So tell me, how much have you eaten in the last twenty-four hours?”

“...A turkey leg and… and… Well, I had lunch of some sort yesterday, I don’t remember what.”

“Yeah. Okay. I’m dragging you to the mess now, and you’re going to eat until I’m satisfied you won’t be collapsing again,” Iron Bull tells you flatly.

“I really should get back to the rotunda, I have to-“

“You know how this works, Emma. You can walk, or I can carry you.”

“I can escape most of your grapples now,” you say with a scowl.

“And you really want everyone to see us wrestling our way across the courtyard?”

“Alright, alright… I’ll go eat,” you say with a sigh, raising your hands in surrender. “No need to get physical.”

Breakfast does make you feel a little less shaky. You did everything but eat, sleep, and work on your manuscript yesterday. You can’t exactly sleep the day away, and you have work to do before you can sit down to the manuscript, but at least you can eat.

The thought of the work you have to do makes youantsy, however. The rotunda is a mess, and the only thing worse than the thought of Solas returning to a rotunda full of baby elves is the thought of Solas returning to a rotunda that is a mess and sorely lacking in baby elves to use for evidence as to why. Iron Bull seems to understand that getting you to sit still and eat a meal is a miracle in and of
itself, and doesn’t try to hold you up any further when you make your excuses and head towards the rotunda.

The rotunda IS a mess, but it isn’t as bad as it could be, all things considered. Perhaps out of gratitude or just a sense of cleanliness, the elven refugees had straightened up a bit before leaving, but there’s still a lot to be done. You take a deep breath and then get to work, beginning by gathering up all the wooden bowls and plates the elves had been using and bringing them back to the kitchens. Then the blankets and bedrolls… Most are easy, you simply gather them up and take them to the laundry. But Solas’… you can’t risk the laundry losing even a single one; you would never forgive yourself. Perhaps they’re all simple blankets provided by the Inquisition… but what if they’re not?! That’s not a risk you’re willing to take.

Instead, you borrow a bucket of water, a washboard, and some soap. Dragging the bucket up the steps outside Solas’ rotunda is a task, but you manage it, somehow. Then it’s simply a matter of washing the half-dozen blankets and sheets you “borrowed” from his linen closet. You wash all except the brown one you’d been using… You could make any number of excuses, but the reality of the situation is that you don’t want it to lose that Solas-y scent. That realization causes no small amount of self-loathing… You really are pathetic.

You also air out the pillows, and finally, string it all up outside to dry. If people find it comical to see blankets flapping the wind over the ramparts near the entrance to Solas’ rotunda, no one says a word to you. Only Solas’ brown blanket remains (how is it so easy for you to recognize it out of so many?), strewn over the back of the couch.

After the worst of the clutter is gone, there’s still a matter of the floor and furniture. The thought of pestering the maids to do it barely flutters through your mind--it’s your mess, after all, and you’d called in more favors than you’d earned just taking care of the refugees. You simply steal a brush, then use the soapy water from the laundry to scrub the floors.

It’s tiring work, and it fills your mind with less-than-fond memories of your childhood. There’s nothing glamorous about cleaning a floor… but everyone had to start somewhere, you suppose. You scrub the damn floors until you suspect it’s cleaner than it’s been since before the Inquisition moved into Skyhold. Then you take advantage of the fact that Solas’ desk is clear to give it a thorough scrub down as well.

Somewhere in there you wind up skipping lunch, and you only notice when your stomach begins to growl. Well, it can wait a little longer. You clean every exposed inch of the rotunda before you’re satisfied, and you only refrain from cleaning the walls because you’re paranoid you’ll damage the murals. You put all of Solas’ belongings back on his desk and attempt to arrange them something like he had them. Somehow you still feel like he’ll be able to tell you slept on it just by glancing.

You pace around the room a few times before deciding that you really have cleaned everything that can possibly be cleaned. The only thing left to do is attempt to get back to the actual work you’re supposed to be doing here… the tome. Another loud grumble from your stomach changes your plans however… It’s almost evening. An early dinner won’t hurt you, and you did skip lunch.

Heading out early allows you to avoid most of the people who might seek you out at dinner, such as Thea or Iron Bull, but as you exit, a familiar arm loops around yours.

“All done playin’ house, elfy?”

It says something about how attractive Sera is that your earlier irritation at her melts away almost instantaneously at the sight of her smile. How many sticky situations has that pretty face gotten her out of? You can certainly relate.
“Finally,” you say with a smile of your own. “I’ve cleaned that rotunda top to bottom, and yet I still feel like Solas will know the second he walks in.”

She chuckles. “Yeah, I kinda like that you up and housed them right in his place. I bet they got sticky fingers all over his dumb books.”

You shudder. “Maker, I hope not. I’m still amazed I’ve gotten away with everything I did, so far. If there’s a single page out of place, he might just light me up on the spot.”

Sera snorts. “I don’t like that Solas much, but if he had tha’ kind of a temper, you never would have been able to set up in his place to begin with. He’ll like that you were takin’ care of the elves,” she adds, although she wrinkles her nose. “He’s all about elves, that one.”

“Ma serannas, lethallan,” you say dryly.

“Don’t you start!” she exclaims, batting you on the back of the head. “I can’t lose you to that nonsense!”

“Che dire di Antivan?”

“Wot?”

“Fortasse Tevene?”

“Allright, you’re just fuckin’ with me. How many languages do you even know?”

“Tel’abelas, lethallan. I know six,” you say with a smirk.

“Stoppit! Just speak normal!”

“Alas… all of my knowledge of languages, but I’ve never learned ‘normal,’” you say forlornly. “Perhaps you could teach me?”

“Oh, I’ll teach you something, alright,” she says with a scowl. “Prat. Why do you even know six languages?”

“Because the more languages you know, the more books you can read,” you say with a shrug. “I wish it was more complicated than that, but it’s really not.”

“I guess you’re what Solas’d be if he didn’t have his head stuck so far up his ass,” she says, still frowning. “Don’t you get all… all “elvhen glory” on me.”

“Not much risk of that. No one wants ancient elvhen documents translated, and there aren’t many to translate to begin with. I’m more likely to wax poetic about Tevinter history than elven.”

“Don’t do that, either! S’boring!”

You roll your eyes, but with a smile. “So, where are we going? I can’t help but notice you’ve been leading me towards the tavern.”

“We’re not goin’ in, so don’t start fussin’. Did you know that the Commander’s been workin’ almost non-stop with these refugees in?”

“I’m not surprised,” you say with a shrug, not adding that you’ve been doing the same.

“Mmhmm. So I have it on good authority that right now… he’s takin’ a nap.”
Her wicked look makes you stop mid-stride. “...Oh Maker, but... Sera, it’s not even dark!”

“Tha’s why it’s so perfect! There’ll be more guards out at night, there always are! Specially ‘round where important people sleep. But the guards here are like clockwork, just like their Commander... They’ll be at all their normal stations.”

“And he’ll be in that loft of his, alone,” you say, shaking your head as you realize what she’s thinking. “But how are we even gonna get out the front door?”

“Well, the way I see it, we’re gonna either sneak out an’ then hope that no one wonders why we’ve got a ladder, or we’re gonna run like hell.”

“Why am I at the top of this thing?” you hiss down at Sera as you desperately unhook the ladder from its connections to the floor of Commander Cullen’s loft. You keep staring up at his bed, where a shape that can only be the Commander of the Inquisition tosses and turns. Your realization that you successfully unhooked the ladder connecting the loft to the Commander’s office comes when it begins to sway backwards. Fortunately, Sera has been waiting for just that, and stabilizes the ladder long enough for you to scramble down.

“You know, Sera,” you whisper. “Just because you can’t get in trouble for this shit doesn’t mean I can’t.”

“Shush and help me lean this over!”

The two of you fumble momentarily with the ladder until you get it horizontal, with her carrying one end and you and the other. She checks at the door, then gives you a quick nod before throwing the door open. The two of you dart out, then down the stairs, before any guards show up. Once you’re at the bottom of the stairs, the two of you go more slowly, trying to look casual.

“It really bothers me that we haven’t been caught yet,” you comment to Sera as the two of you walk, unchallenged, across the courtyard--just two elves with a ladder. “What if we were... assassins or something?”

“Ladder assassins?”

“You know what I mean! Shouldn’t he have guards?”

Sera shrugs. “Takes more than some McKnifey with a bit o’ poison to take out someone like Cullen. Besides, they’re pretty careful about who gets in.”

You’re not sure how much you believe that... you got in, after all. Of course, you’re also not the kind of person who could successfully assassinate a knight-commander, either.

Sera leads you across the courtyard, back to the tavern, and then around behind it, before stopping. “Alright! Here we are!”

“What, we’re just hiding it behind the tavern? Here I thought you’d have us drop it out of the Undercroft.”

“Nah. We don’t want him stuck up there forever! Besides, I wanna go back on the roof, and you don’t have the best track record with climbin’,” Sera says, beginning to lean the ladder against the side of the building.
There are worse ways to spend your time than up on the roof with Sera, watching the sun finish setting over the horizon. The two of you sit side-by-side, idly chattering back and forth. Sera supports herself on her arms while you sprawl backwards across the dark roof still warm from the sun’s heat.

“Y’know, it was Dirth’len who taught me to climb buildings,” Sera says with a sigh. “Can’t believe it… I mean, I guess I kinda knew but… I thought if anyone woulda gotten out, it woulda been her.”

Gloomy subject, and not one you really want to think about. Hearing Sera reminisce about you in third person might be good for your ego, but really, Denerim isn’t a place you like thinking about.

“I’m better at climbing trees,” you lie.

“Pff, I’ll believe that when I see it. We really should get outta Skyhold one o’ these days, get some priv-”

“There it is!” a male voice echoes from below. “By the tavern!”

“Oh, shit!” exclaims Sera. “No, no, stay down,” she adds as you jolt upwards.

“Is someone up there?” the same voices calls.

“Cheese it!” Sera exclaims, grabbing your hand and pulling you along the roof, staying low enough to avoid being seen. You think for a moment she’s diving off the side, and begin to expect another dangerous run across Skyhold, but instead of jumping, she hangs down, dragging you along with her, and swings into an open window in the tavern.

You land with a grunt, tangled up and on something soft… in darkness, at that. It takes you a moment to realize, but you’re on a bed, of sorts, your legs all tangled up in Sera’s. You’re practically sitting in her lap. She’s looking out the window, waiting, and pulls you down onto the bed when two men carrying Commander Cullen’s ladder pass by. Your heart is pounding, both at nearly being caught and at being on a bed in a dark room with Sera pushing you down against the mattress. If you were in any condition to dream, you’d wonder if you were asleep.

“I think they’re gone,” she whispers, turning her head from the window back to you. It’s then that she seems to realize how close the two of you are, just how much of your bodies are touching. Your hair has come loose from its bun and strews across the bed underneath you. You feel as much as you see the breath hitch in her throat. “I, uh… I…”

She leans closer, slightly, and your own breath speeds up. Large elven eyes reflect your own as you lift yourself up towards her-

“The Inquisitor’s party is here! The Inquisitor has returned from Fallow Mire!”

The voice bounces in from outside, repeatedly shouting the news through the courtyard, interrupting your little ill-thought-out moment and causing you both to draw back slightly and glance towards the window. It’s only then that the news properly registers.

The Inquisitor.

Solas.
So, this just about ends the outline I have already done, which means another long pause while I hammer out a detailed outline for the (in-story) next week or so. I hope ten chapters without Solas haven't been SO unbearable! :)
Chapter Notes

A little something to hold you over while I finish writing the outline for the next week.

My mother finally left, so hopefully I'll get to writing more regularly now. :) Thanks for being so patient with me during this tumultuous time!

You all but shove Sera off of you in your rush to the door. Down the stairs, out the door. Your hair streams behind you as you dart across the courtyard; your hairband lays forgotten on Sera’s bed.

There’s already a large crowd by the gates. You push your way through, twisting between people until you get up to the front. The Inquisition’s away team is dismounting; there are people taking their tired-looking mounts towards the stables. You quickly scan the crowd of soldiers—there are healers taking the wounded towards the tent, and you stare at that crowd especially hard. You spot the Inquisitor as he removes his helm, but your gaze skips right over him and the woman beside him to settle on the person half-hidden behind them, removing some things from his horse’s saddlebags. They move away, and your eyes stay fixed on the man their movement reveals.

Solas.


You take three quick steps out of the crowd, towards him, before you realize that you don’t actually know Solas well enough to embrace him in relief, as was your first instinct. Instead, you freeze awkwardly in place. You spot Varric as the dwarf sees you, as well, and he raises a hand to wave. Hugging him would probably be inappropriate too, so you… wave. It feels lackluster. You just sort of stand there, hand hanging in the air, uncertain what to do with the surge of emotions inside of you.

That’s when you see Cole.

Appearing out of nowhere really seems to be his speciality; you only notice him a few moments before he sweeps you into a warm hug. It’s stiff, a little awkward, as if he understands the concept but not exactly the reality of how to embrace another person. The little control you had over your emotions vanishes and you throw your arms around the spirit, burying your head in his shoulder to hide your shuddering breath and tear-brimmed eyes.

You had been so worried. Perhaps you hadn’t even consciously realized the extent of it. Part of you had been quite certain you’d never see your friends alive again. And they were your friends, you realize, if only now. You’ve never been this relieved over the survival of contacts, or even allies. Only friends. Seeing everyone, alive and unharmed… You could collapse from the sudden surge of relief, and Cole helps to support you while you recover from the unexpected swell of emotion.

When you’re ready, you pull back from the hug, sigh in relief, and even smile a bit. Then, remembering where you are, you glance around in mild horror. The eyes of the crowd are glazing over you as if you’re not even there--Cole’s effect, no doubt--but there are four sets of eyes glued straight on you: Varric’s, Solas’, the Inquisitor’s, and his companion’s.
“She wanted a hug,” Cole explains, a bit lamely in your opinion. You clear your throat. As relieved as you are to see Cole and Varric, your eyes keep coming back to Solas, as if you need to be reassured he’s actually standing there. “She wanted a kiss, too, but I think she only kisses elves.”

“Thank you, Cole,” you say through slightly gritted teeth. He really has no filter between his head and his mouth. Fortunately, Solas doesn’t seem to be paying attention; he’s already removed his bags from his horse and is beginning to head towards the--

SHIT.

THE ROTUNDA.

“I’ll, um… I need to… I’ll see you guys later,” you say in a rush as you turn to chase after Solas. You hear Varric’s amused chuckle as you dash off, as well as a Nevarran-accented voice ask, “who was that?” You have no time to deal with either.

Fortunately, you catch up with Solas just on the other side of the crowd. How are you going to explain the fact his blankets are all strung up outside his workplace? Oooh, Maker, no no no… You don’t think you can lie your way out of this one.

“I thought your reunion would take longer,” Solas comments as you fall into step beside him.

“I can talk to them later,” you say, fidgeting nervously as he begins to climb the stairs in front of the Great Hall. “I, um…”

He seems distracted. He’s not looking at you, and he doesn’t appear to have noticed the nervousness in your voice. “Did the rotunda serve you well while I was gone?”

If the Maker would strike you down right now, you’d call it a favor. “W…well… I… Maker, Solas, I have to tell you something.”

He had been half-ignoring you before, but at this, he focuses on you immediately. You wish he wouldn’t. When he sees your expression, which is probably guilt-riddled, he stops, just outside the doors to the Great Hall. He crosses his arms as he faces you.

“Alright,” is all he says. You could kill yourself on the spot, you really could. Perhaps you should give up and self-immolate.

“I… Um… Well… “ You wish he’d interject, but he doesn’t, just fixes you with a level stare while you trip and fumble over your words. “I’m s-sure they’re telling the Inq-Inquisitor, b-but we had some r-refugees while you were gone,” you stammer uselessly.

“We received word of that, yes.” His words help you find your own, and you push on.

“W-well, um, th-there were some elves… o-orphans, j-just kids, really, a-and, I noticed they were, ah… B-being ignored. S-so I, um… put them in your rotunda,” you say with a wince.

“Aah.” He seems a bit disappointed, perhaps frustrated. You wish he was easier to read... You’re considering simply jumping over the railing. He turns and heads into the Great Hall, going straight for the rotunda. You dart after him and keep talking, wanting to get it all out and then get to the fallout.

“And, well, there w-weren’t enough blankets so-I-kind-of-took-some-of-yours,” you say all in one breath. “And I may have dropped your name a little m-more than I necessarily sh-should have while… convincing people to give them f-food and supplies for the road,” you add.
At this point he’s reached the rotunda, he’s opening the door and... well, at least it’s clean. He seems to have been expecting a mess. His eyes trace over the room, as if surveying the walls for damage, the he turns to you. “And? Is that all you have to confess?”

Oh, fuck. You can tell by the tone of his voice. He knows, he knows, by some wicked magic he knows. You clasp your hands together, wringing them, as words catch in your throat. “A...ah... W-well... I... I-slept-on-your-desk! Ir abelas! I’m sorry! I-I was exhausted and the couch had ch-ch-children on it and, I... Emma ir abelas; I have no excuse, Solas.”

You stare straight down at your feet, too scared to look up and see his expression.

You hear him sigh and you flinch. “So, your confession is that you housed orphans, provided them with blankets and food, and then, by the looks of it, cleaned the room from top to bottom? And yet you look as though you expect me to strike you.”

Well, when he says it like that, it sounds stupid.

“You left out the parts where I broke into your room, stole your linens, and used your name about Skyhold as if it was mine to use,” you say with chagrin, risking a slight glance upwards. You can’t read the expression he’s viewing you with, but he doesn’t seem too angry.

“If my name could feed children, you used it better than I have,” he says, breaking his level gaze to turn and walk towards his desk. He runs a hand over the surface, newly smoothed by your frantic scrubbing. Your eyes follow his long fingers. “You expect me to be angry. I’m not. Although I would like to know how it was you entered my room.”

“I expected to be electrocuted, a little,” you confess. You reach down the front of your pants and he has the courtesy to at least look startled, but you simply pull from your waistband one of the lockpicks Sera gave you. “Sera has been giving me lessons. I’m sorry; I just... remembered seeing a linen closet when I was there before, and, well... You weren’t using them,” you say sheepishly.

“I never warded my rooms; I didn’t expect anyone would actually wish to break into them,” he says, and now he sounds amused. “Perhaps I should correct that.”

“Ir abelas, Solas,” you begin, but he cuts you off by raising a hand.

“You can stop apologizing.” He drops his bag onto his newly cleaned desk. “One of the first things I ever saw you do was steal food straight off of my plate. If anything, you’re moving up in the world.”

You wince again, but resist the urge to apologize. He’s taking it as well as you could hope... better than you could hope, in some ways.

“Is that all you have to tell me?” he asks again as he begins to unpack the bag.

You take a deep breath. Now’s as good a time as any. “...Emma enasal ma garas arla, hahren.”

He pauses, then glances up from his desk. He looks surprised, for just a moment, and then you see the slightest smile flash across his lips. Your heart soars; you don’t even try to stop it. “I take it you got my note.”

“Did... did I say it right?”

“You did, as a matter of fact,” he says, and you grin broadly. “Although you still have an accent. I suspect that will go away with practice.”
“I’m sure if I had the right teacher...” you say, trailing off hopefully.

“How’s that tome of yours coming?”

You grimace, both at the reminder and the fact he changed the subject. “The translation is finished, but I’m not as far on the actual Common tongue copy as I’d like to be. I’ve become very popular as of late.”

“Oh? You did mention Sera had been showing you how to get into even more trouble.”

Now that was the understatement of the century. If Solas hadn’t returned the second he had, you and Sera might be getting into all kinds of trouble right now in that dark bedroom. You need to watch yourself around her; your libido has the tendency to do all the thinking whenever you’re with her.

“It would take me the rest of the evening to list all the trouble she’s gotten me into these last few weeks,” you say with a sigh. Angry racists, dislocated joints, childish pranks, and no small amount of flirtation... Yeah. The two of you got into trouble, alright. “What about you, Solas? How was the Fallow Mire?”

“Damp, unpleasant, and absolutely full of the undead.”

You shudder. “The undead? Maker. Sounds like I had a much better few weeks... I m... The rotunda was empty without you. And people come to bother me when you’re not around.”

He chuckles, and you become sharply aware of how fast your heart is beating. Leftover butterflies from the close encounter with Sera, you tell yourself. You know you’re lying. Leftover butterflies from that little smile earlier, more like.

“As we returned from the swamp, we passed through Redcliffe,” Solas says. “While there, I found a rather surly dwarf attempting to pawn all manner of books in a village that no longer contained any mages.” That explains the books he’s unpacking onto his desk. “Most of it was uninteresting, but I found one or two worth purchasing.”

One or two? Looks more like a dozen. You step closer, hesitant but curious.

“Mostly, it simply served to remind me of how woefully under-equipped the library here is,” he adds as you inch towards the growing pile of books on his desk.

“Is that...” You slide a little closer. “Is that The Botanical Compendium?”

“Volumes one, four, and seven,” he says with a frown. “All the man had in stock. I remembered you mentioning the author during one of our... conversations.”

“Ines Arancia,” you say, fingers twitching towards the books. “Much better than Bouchard, as it turns out,” you add with a scowl, remembering how incorrect you’d been on the subject of elfroot thanks to him.

“That’s not the most interesting thing, however,” Solas says, and gives your hand, which is slowly reaching out towards the books a sharp rap with a small, black tome.

“Ouch!” As you flinch your hand away, however, he presses the black tome into it. Surprised, you look at the cover. It’s unmarked... simply black. There’s no author, either. Curious, you flip to the first page. Your eyes go wide. “An Introduction to Rare and Elusive Spirits. Somehow, I doubt this is about alcohol.”
“I thought you might find this particularly interesting,” he says, flipping through the book until he comes to a certain page.

“Compassion!” you gasp, running a finger across the words. “A shy spirit, drawn to those who are hurt… You don’t say. Maker, Solas, this is fantastic!”

“I thought you might enjoy it,” he says, and when you glance up, you see his lips are stretched into a wry smile. “Your education on the matter is rather lackluster, after all. Consider it a gift.”

Your eyes widen further. “A gift! Solas, I can’t… I… I just got finished telling you how I broke into your room!”

“Yes, please refrain from that in the future,” he says, still smiling. “But it seems as though it was for a good cause. If you had meant to put my belongings back, however, I’m afraid you missed one.” He points over your shoulder, and you turn to look.

Oh.

The blanket on the couch.

“W-well… To be honest, I haven’t actually gotten any of them back in your room,” you say sheepishly. “The refugees just left this morning, and I spent the day cleaning… They’re still hung up outside.”

“That one isn’t,” he points out.

You swallow, hard. “I, um… Well… I…” You grasp desperately for an excuse, any excuse. “That was the one I was using. I, erm… slept in the rotunda, while the children were here.”

“And you left it because…?”

“I… thought I might sleep in the rotunda again,” you say with a delicate cough. “I didn’t know you’d be returning, and your couch is more comfortable than my bed, to be entirely honest.”

“Tell me,” he says, sweeping past you towards the couch. “Why this blanket, in particular?”

“I… it was just the one I happened to use,” you say, wondering with growing apprehension if you’d grabbed something important on accident, that first time you snuck into his room.

“You have odd luck,” he says, picking the blanket up off of the back of the couch. “Of every blanket in my closet, you elected to use the one with the sleeping enchantment.”

Your brain splutters and stalls out entirely. “The… the…”

“Sleeping enchantment. Sometimes my journeys into the Fade require a very deep sleep. Sometimes in less than ideal conditions. I’ve enchanted this blanket to help me sleep deeper, be less easily woken, even travel into the Fade more easily.”

....Oh… Oh for fuck’s sake…

“I… I see…” is all you manage to say. You need to sit down. All this time you’d thought it was a ridiculous, stupid crush on Solas that had been easing you into the Fade against all possibility. A sleep enchantment! Why hadn’t you noticed it? But you’d never bothered to examine a blanket for magic! Who would? And with your aura bundled up tightly inside of you, you would never pick up on something like that idly. You drag a hand down across your face.
“That… explains a lot, actually. I thought the children slept more deeply than a child had any right to… And I…”

“Children?” Solas says sharply. “I thought you used this blanket?”

You flush slightly, and not because you were caught in a lie, but rather because you were caught in an embarrassing truth. “There were a lot of children. Some of them fell asleep as I was telling them stories, under the blanket, and I didn’t have the heart to move them.”

Solas has an odd expression on his face… Perhaps wondering the effect of a sleeping enchantment on tiny children; it’s what you find yourself wondering, in any case. “I, um… Well, if that’s the worst thing that happens out of stealing from a mage’s bedroom, I’ll count myself lucky, I suppose,” you say with a guilty grin.

“Indeed,” Solas agrees. “I suspect if you had broken into Enchanter Vivienne’s room, you wouldn’t be so lucky.”

“…Haha… Yeah, that would be… pretty stupid.”

Solas gives you quite the look, but you manage to keep your expression neutral. It takes a lot of effort. “Have you and she met?” he asks.

“Heh… Yes, actually. She mistook me for one of the maids. I spent a very interesting morning assisting her seamstress. It didn’t seem worth the trouble to correct her.”

Solas shakes his head slowly. “It seems you have had quite the time while I was away.”

Oh, he has no idea. “It could probably fill a book,” you admit. “I should gather the blankets from outside and return them to your room… Or have them returned, if you prefer,” you add. It would be quite reasonable for him not to want you anywhere near his room after you admitted to picking the lock.

“You know better than to bother the maids with your antics,” he chides. “I’ll accompany you, if only to spare my lock from being picked again.”

You’ll never live it down, for certain, but you were expecting far less than gentle scolding. You’ll take any verbal lashes he wants to give you gladly, out of relief at the lack of any real ones. You’re not quite sure what the Inquisition’s punishment for theft is, but you imagine it’s not overly kind, especially not for elves.

Solas waits inside, thumbing through the first volume of The Botanical Compendium, while you dart outside to pull down and fold all of his blankets. You pull down the rope you used as well; it isn’t as though you intend to regularly dry clothing here.

It’s in the middle of folding that a lock of hair falls down into your face and you realize that your hair had fallen down and you’d never put it back up. You flush with embarrassment, then quickly grab a short piece of rope to tie it back with. It will do until you have time to get a proper hair tie… For now, you need to focus on folding these blankets.

After you finish, you totter into the rotunda with a stack of blankets tall enough that you can barely see over it. Perhaps you shouldn’t have folded them so much? You can’t quite see Solas’ reaction, but you hope he looks amused when he places the last blanket and the pillows you swiped from his room on top of the pile, effectively blocking your view entirely. You make a sour face into the tower of blankets, then crane your neck around in an attempt to see.
“Are you going to say something like ‘follow the sound of my voice’?” you ask dryly.

“I thought perhaps by now, you could even find my room blindfolded.”

Alright, you deserved that. “If you think I can climb stairs blind, I’m flattered by your faith in me.”

“Oh? Is it misplaced?”

“It absolutely is. But I can climb stairs backwards,” you quip with a smile you know he can’t see.

You crab-walk towards the stairs so that you can see where you’re going, then head up them backwards, twisting your neck around so that you can see where you’re going. Fortunately, no one’s heading down the stairs. You’re not surprised; the stairs from the library to Solas’ rotunda seem to be used almost exclusively by you and Solas. You’ve only ever seen Leliana’s messengers come down this way. Navigating your way through the library without dropping anything proves slightly more difficult, and you see Dorian looking intensely amused at your awkward tottering. You manage to find the door, however, and head out across the balcony above the Great Hall. Fortunately, Madame de Fer is nowhere to be seen. Thank the Maker for small blessings.

On the pathway leading to his room, Solas slips by you to open his door. It’s funny, somehow, to see him using something as mundane as a key in a lock. Dorian probably magics his door open, every single time. Vivienne probably has a Designated Door Opener who handles all her keys.

You try very much to ignore Solas’ room and focus on getting his linens tucked away safely into the closet you stole them out of. You even make sure that the brown blanket you pilfered first is on top, easily accessible for when he needs it. Maker… You still can’t believe it was enchanted. You’ll be embarrassed by that for the rest of your goddamned life. Still, it’s something of a relief, in some ways. It wasn’t a crush, the fact the blanket smelled like him, or even sleeping in his rotunda that lulled you into sleep. It was magic. Simply that.

“Did… Did you actually take the sheets from my bed?” Solas’ voice breaks you out of your reverie. You pause in loading the blankets into the closet to glance over. Solas is standing next to his bare mattress, and, fortunately, looks amused.

“…You weren’t using them…” you mutter, more to yourself than to him. You finish loading the closet, keeping a few sheets and blankets with which to make his bed. Maker, it would have been so much nicer to do this when he wasn’t here. It’s your own fault, however, running off with Sera the way you had. Still, if all he wants from you is a bit of acute humiliation, you’re more than willing to put up with it. He’s not angry when he has every right to be. That’s enough for you.

Even so, you try to make his bed quickly. He does you the favor of not simply watching you work, instead stacking a few of his newly purchased books onto his desk, and unloading some of his packed clothing.

“Were you a maid for much of your life?” Solas asks from his desk just as you’re tucking in the corners on the last blanket on top of his bed.

The question startles you, but you suppose it must be somewhat obvious to him by now that you’re used to serving. Perhaps as obvious as it is to you that he’s used to being served.

“On and off, I suppose,” you say with a shrug as you finish making the bed. “I was a maid for a few years in Orlais. That was the first I had any real, formal training with it, but I took to it well. I probably would have wound up doing that for the rest of my life if Comte Pierre hadn’t noted my skills with linguistics and decided to give me a chance,” you add with a sigh.
“What a waste that would have been,” Solas comments, and you can’t help but smile.

“I appreciate you saying that... I rather think so myself, but it’s considered arrogant if I bring it up.” You glance around the room. “I believe things are as they were before I pilfered your linens, ser. I... That is, you’ve been... Um.” You clear your throat. “I should... get some actual work done.” You step sideways towards the door.

“I believe I’ll turn in for the night. The journey from the Fallow Mire was... tiring.”

“Atisha’hamin, Solas,” you say after a moment’s consideration.

He looks a little surprised. Perhaps because you said it correctly. But you heard your mother say it enough times to know that, at least.

“Atisha’hamin,” he echoes after a moment. “Whenever you decide to rest.”

You almost give a bow as you exit Solas’ room, before you remember his dislike of being bowed to and stop yourself. It’s something of a reflex... so easy to fall back into your old Orlesian habits.

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It’s only when you return to the rotunda that you see the black book set on the corner of your desk, and realize that he successfully distracted you from refusing his “gift.” Sly bastard... You ran a hand across it with a sigh... Well, it can’t hurt to read it. But not just now, you have work to do.

And you do manage to get a little bit of work done. You don’t really want to go back to your room, but sleeping on the couch is out of the question now. It’s unlikely Solas would rise earlier than you and catch you at it, but the risk of that is enough to propel you out of the door and to your own, assigned bedroom when you finally find you can work no longer.

You sink into your bed with a hurricane of emotions still spinning in your mind. Neither your brain nor your heart have any idea how to start processing the events of the day. The refugees, on their way to safety. Solas, Varric, and Cole all safely returned from Fallow Mire. And Sera... Maker, she almost kissed you! What would you have done if she had, exactly? Or perhaps you were reading too much into it? And Solas, he hadn’t been angry at all, even if he had teased you somewhat. Commander Cullen hadn’t been irritated either. Someone should be be upset at you, damnit. These people never act normally.

You spend most of the night thinking, and very little of it resting.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly I'm not sure I've ever wanted to see something drawn as much as I'd like to see Emma's expression when Solas tells her about that sleep enchantment... xD Priceless.

Emma enasal ma garas arla = I'm happy you've come home
Atisha’hamin = have peaceful dreams (essentially "good night")
Perseverance

You know, on some level, that the lack of sleep will get to you after a while. The immediate concern is passed thanks to your lucky little escape into the woods, but the physical effects of being unable to properly rest will weigh you down over time. A few hours of blessed rest in the woods, stolen glimpses of the Fade thanks to Solas’ enchanted blanket… It’s not enough to compensate for over a month of self-inflicted insomnia.

You try to remember the longest you’ve gone with your aura wrapped up inside of you all day and all night. Surely you’ve gone for months before… Yes, when you had to stay at the Circle in Montsimmard to finish translating that Tevinter tome on obscure magical techniques. That was what… two months… ten weeks… Something like that? Admittedly, the last half of that book was kind of a blur.

Either way, it was longer than now, and you hadn’t gotten any relief for the entire time. And you had been surrounded by mages and Templars all day and all night. That was a hellish situation. You never would have put yourself in it if you hadn’t needed to get your hands on that damn book. Compared to that, life in Skyhold is a vacation. At least that’s what you tell yourself while you get repeatedly knocked around by a Qunari.

“Distracted fantasizing about your long-lost lover, returned from the war?” Iron Bull says with a smirk around the sixteenth time you fall over.

“Oh, shut up,” you groan into the dirt, allowing yourself to lie still for a moment longer before pushing yourself off of the ground. “You’ll start another rumor. I can’t even keep track with all the people I’m supposed to be sleeping with, at this point.”

“Well, I heard one of the kitchen girls refer to Solas as your ‘Master’; that was pretty interesting.”

“They think I’m his servant… A handmaiden of sorts,” you explain as you dust yourself off a bit before quickly darting forward to strike at Bull, hoping to catch him off guard. You fail, of course, but you feel like it was a good effort.

“I think if I asked four people what you actually do for the Inquisition, I’d get four different answers,” Bull says as he blocks your strikes; you barely manage to get your hand out fast enough to avoid being grabbed.

“And none of them would have ever asked me,” you reply as you try to circle around him. “It’s not my fault people have a tendency to make erroneous assumptions about me. They see an elf carrying food; they think maid. They see an elf delivering messages; they think messenger. Doesn’t matter if I’m eating the food or if I wrote the message.”

“See, that kind of attitude is exactly why you’d make a good spy.” You jump backwards to avoid a lunge, then resist the temptation to scramble up his over-extended arm like… what was it? A rabid squirrel. Instead, you duck under it to deliver a jab to Bull’s armpit; one of your few successful hits of the morning.

“Being unremarkable I get, but surely it takes more than that to be a spy,” you say with a snort, skipping back away from him. “Otherwise everyone would be signing up.”

“Well, you’re not a bad liar,” Iron Bull muses, hooking a foot out in an attempt to trip you. You jump over it.
“If I said ‘I’m a terrible liar,’ convincingly, that wouldn’t do much good, would it?” You shake your head. “I’m not a good liar, though. I’m good at keeping my mouth shut. There’s a difference.”

“You’re right. Both are important for a spy, though.”

“Are you trying to recruit me, Bull?” you ask sardonically. “I’ve had quite enough of that for one lifetime, thanks.”

“To the Qun? Nah. Although if you’re interested in joining the Chargers, I bet Krem would be overjoyed.”

That makes you laugh, right in the middle of a punch. He takes advantage of your momentary distraction to grab your arm. “Ugh… Cheating,” you grunt as you try to twist your arm away. “Krem would disapprove.”

You’re split between trying to get your arm free and keeping him from grappling you any further. “It works on him, too,” Bull comments. “Yesterday, Dalish brought you up in training and he got so flustered she managed to trip him.”

You stomp on Bull’s foot, hard. It’s more of a full-bodied jump, but it does the trick. His grip loosens just enough for you to wrench your arm out of his grip. “Good job with those orphans, by the way,” he adds.

He hadn’t mentioned your missed practices, which you appreciate. Some things just take priority. “Someone had to do it,” is all you really have to say on the matter.

After a few more minutes of sparring punctuated with only grunts and the brutal thud of fists striking flesh, Iron Bull strikes up conversation yet again. If he’s trying to distract you, it’s working.

“Now that Solas is back, looks like I’ll have some competition.”

You don’t even try to read the meaning of that one; that’s what he wants you to do. Instead, you aim a blow just below his sternum. He knocks your arm to the side at the last moment. Damn, so close.

“I mean, he’s got his own magical bath tub and everything. Now you can just go to his room when you want a hot bath.”

There’s a delayed reaction caused by your train of thought skipping to Solas’ room, then to Solas’ bath, then to Solas in the bath. Your mind stutters and then stops functioning entirely for a moment, and you trip, nearly falling straight into Bull. He steps out of the way and you wind up flat on the ground instead. You’re almost grateful; a face smashed into the ground is preferable to a face smashed into a person, particularly a shirtless person.

“I’d say you’ve fallen down enough for one day,” he says with a laugh as you push yourself out of the dirt. “Breakfast?”

“You go on ahead,” you say, wiping off your face. “I’ve got something I need to take care of first.”

You aren’t bringing Solas his breakfast every day. That is just… just not a thing you’re going to do. So rather than putting a dish together in the hustle and bustle of the kitchen, you pull Celia to the side.

“Oh, here to get your master’s breakfast?” she asks. “We haven’t put it together quite yet…”
“Say, Celia… How much do they pay you for a month’s work here? A few silver? I can’t imagine it’s much… after all, you live here, eat here.” You ignore the confusion on her face and slip two silvers into her hand. Her eyes widen; she opens her mouth to protest, but you cut her off. “Two silver for every week you deliver Solas’ breakfast to him.”

“How can y-“

“One is for delivering it, the other one is for not asking why and not telling anyone,” you say pointedly.

“This is kind of-“

“How much could you do with an extra eight silver every month, Celia?”

You can almost see the calculations behind her eyes. “Well… But… How can you afford…?”

“I’m really good at Wicked Grace.”

“I… I suppose…”

“Consider it a favor, Celia,” you say, giving her a pat on the shoulder. “I like to have my mornings free.”

A bit of understanding dawns on her face, her mouth forms into an “o” shape. Whatever she thinks she’s figured out, you’re more than willing to let her assume it’s correct. She already thinks you’re in love with your boss; it’s not as if her opinion of you can get much lower.

“I’ll still be getting his lunches and dinners,” you assure her. “This is just for breakfast. Thanks, Celia.”

With one of the things you’d been most worried about off your chest, you head towards the mess. It will be good to have at least one meal a day with your friends; they’d no doubt gotten used to your presence at meals over the past few weeks.

Friends… You were acquiring quite a few of those. You don’t trust most of them as far as you can throw them, of course, but that’s hardly a requirement for friendship. Sera, Solas, Cole, Varric, even Iron Bull… if any one of them died, you’d be devastated. It’s not something you like to think about, given that this is war and every last one of them is something akin to a soldier. Even Sera, apparently. Even Cole. Although, admittedly, Cole should be very difficult to kill. Can he be killed? What would happen if he got stabbed? Would he just… go back to the Fade?

You make a mental note to ask Solas as you sit down to breakfast. Despite your attempts to put Solas and Cole out of your mind, Thea brings one of them up almost immediately.

“So, your ‘special friend’ is back from the Mire, eh?”

“Who, Cole?” you ask, startled.

“What? I meant that Solas! Jus’ how many men d’you consider special? Who’s this Cole, then?” Thea asks, looking joyfully scandalized.

“Well, he’s certainly special,” Iron Bull says with a snort. “But if she’s doing anything like that with him, I’d be amazed. Although if anyone could manage it…"
“Oh, shut up, Bull,” you say through gritted teeth. “My reputation doesn’t need any help. Cole is just an… agent, Thea. Solas introduced us; he’s a very unique person; certainly deserving of the descriptor ‘special.’”

“Mmhmm,” she hums, with a world of meaning behind that little sound. She turns to Iron Bull and pats him rather sympathetically on the hand. “I’m still rootin’ for ya, Iron Bull.”

You find that you can’t roll your eyes with the force required for such a ridiculous sentiment. “Don’t let Krem hear you say that, poor guy might cry,” Bull says with a smirk. You decide it’s time to just focus on your oatmeal and ignore your two “friends.”

Nothing can dampen your mood on Sunday mornings, not even Thea and Bull teaming up to tease you. You feel light as air as soon as you step into the stables, free as a bird when you climb up onto Revas, despite the fact you’re still riding in a fairly small area.

You’re even starting to learn to tolerate Belassan better… The idea of learning from a Dalish will never stop chafing you, but Belassan himself is friendly to a level that’s almost frightening in its determination. Thinking about it, being an ex-Dalish elf has to have some serious drawbacks. Those vallaslin don’t exactly wash off, after all, and humans hate the Dalish more than they hate regular elves.

You’re curious about what caused him to leave the Dalish, but you don’t pry; it would be hypocritical if you did, really. You certainly aren’t jumping to fill him in on your history, with the Dalish or otherwise. Instead, both of you focus on your riding.

“Harts don’t run like horses,” Belassan is informing you as Revas trots around the corral. You’ve gotten comfortable enough with his gait that you aren’t in danger of falling off, at least. “See how high he’s lifting his front legs? Harts will walk, trot, and gallop, but it doesn’t feel like a horse.”

“I wouldn’t know,” you say, voice shaking from how Revas’ trot is bouncing you. “I’ve never ridden a horse.”

“Really? You’re a bit of a natural at this, then,” Belassan says, sounding pleased.

“I’ve been on a mule,” you mutter to yourself. You suppose there’s not honestly much overlap between a mule and a hart, though.

“Now, we’re going to try getting him to gallop for you, but watch out. Once Revas gets going, he has a tendency to want to bound.”

“Bound?” you repeat nervously.

“It’s exactly what it sounds like. It’s a fourth gait that harts have that you’ll definitely never see a horse doing.”

“Oh, Maker…”

“Alright, just give him a bit of a smack on the rump, there you go.”

You really don’t have anything with which to compare Revas’ energetic gallop, but every time your ass leaves the saddle, the whipping wind leaves a taste like freedom in your mouth. Belassan must see something familiar sparkling in your eyes when you finally slow Revas down, because when you meet his gaze, he grins.
“You’ve got a taste for it now,” he says with a cheeky grin. “The library’ll never see hide nor hair of you again.”

You laugh, an excited, genuine sound that almost surprises you. “I’ve still got a job to do, Belassan. Even if I am tempted to start taking more mornings off. You know… We really should go for a ride sometime, you and me. Whenever I ride with others, they take horses.” You’re surprised to find that you honestly mean it. Belassan seems a little surprised, too.

“Yeah, I… I’d like that. I mean, it would be good. For the harts. They never get to go out together.”

You grin as you slide off of Revas—another thing you’re getting better at. “Two elves riding through the forest on harts? Let’s not invite Sera… she might explode.” You both laugh, and although you suspect you should feel bad for having a laugh at Sera’s expense, you really don’t. You’re sure she’s had a few at yours.

“By the way,” Belassan comments while you’re dragging off Revas’ saddle and hanging it up where it belongs. “I wanted to thank you for all your help here, with the horses for the refugees. It was pretty chaotic; we needed all the help we could get.”

“Those horses needed all the help they could get,” you say with a snort. “It’s funny to think of the Inquisition riding around on some of those farm horses, now that you’ve got Horsemaster Dennet’s finest.”

“And… for helping out the orphans,” he adds, quietly.

You pause. “That’s really gotten around, huh…” You grab a brush and begin to rub Revas down, Belassan is nice enough to give you some quiet to think in. You knew your antics with the elven children would make its rounds, but you’re surprised it’s gotten you more gratitude than trouble, so far. But honestly, between the feathers you ruffled there and your repeated trips to the “human” baths, there has to be some resentment brewing, somewhere.

When was it, exactly, that you’d gone from “keeping your head down” to “purposefully starting trouble?” Well, you’re known now; there’s no taking that back. All you can really do is keep building up your connections… But perhaps you should focus more on the little people… More names and faces amongst the maids and kitchen staff, maybe. If you’re becoming known for helping elven orphans, perhaps you can leverage that with the elves amongst Skyhold’s workers, and…

Your train of thought is interrupted by Revas licking at your ear. It tickles, and you shake your head away from him with a grin. “I’ll stop by sometime for that ride, Belassan,” you say as you give Revas a final pat. It’s getting to be time to leave. “Don’t forget.”

You change tunics before swinging by the kitchen to pick up Solas’ (and your) lunch. It seems the polite thing to do; the tunic you had been wearing was covered in dirt, fur, and hart slobber. Celia avoids eye contact with you when you come to pick up lunch. You wonder if it’s lingering awkwardness from the bribe you gave her, or guilt. She had delivered Solas’ breakfast, hadn’t she? You were in for a world of scorn if he’d gone unfed.

“Ah, there you are,” Solas says when you enter the rotunda with a heavy tray of food. “Getting into trouble again?”

“Something like that,” you say with some effort as you balance the tray on one hand while unloading it. “On Sunday mornings, Belassan… you might know him, he’s the Dalish—or ex-Dalish, I
“You’re certainly picking up teachers quickly,” Solas quips as you finish unloading the tray and sit down on a conveniently placed stool—had he left it there for you?

“I really am,” you agree. But not the one you really want, unfortunately. It’s a shame he’s not more vulnerable to peer pressure; you’re the hot new thing, apparently.

“So you were off riding harts all morning? I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised… You certainly smell like you’ve been rolling in hay.”

You flush bright red, judging from the sensation of heat radiating from your face. It seems as though simply changing your tunic was insufficient. You scoot a little bit further away from Solas, not wanting to spoil his appetite. “Ah… Y-yes.” You clear your throat. “In all honesty, I’m curious as to where and how the Inquisition picked up a Dalish, or even ex-Dalish elf.”

“He took note of a hart while some of Leliana’s men were bringing it in,” Solas says, glancing up as if to help him remember. “As I recall, he more or less followed it back to Skyhold, then offered his services. The Inquisition isn’t in the practice of turning away help, no matter what the form it takes.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” you say between bites of biscuit.

“You make enough trouble for yourself without any assistance.”

“I notice that you have a tendency to ask questions without actually asking any questions,” you quip back smartly. Solas just raises an eyebrow. You sigh. “I stepped on no small amount of toes in a very short period of time. I bullied, I begged, I lied, I stole. I housed nearly thirty strangers directly underneath the Spymaster, in a space that’s not even mine to use. To say I over-reached would be a ridiculous understatement. And the longer I go without any backlash, the more convinced I am it’s going to be ugly when it happens.”

“You seem to think your charity is something to be punished.”

“I’ve noticed that you have a tendency to ask questions without actually asking any questions,” you quip back smartly. Solas just raises an eyebrow. You sigh. “I stepped on no small amount of toes in a very short period of time. I bullied, I begged, I lied, I stole. I housed nearly thirty strangers directly underneath the Spymaster, in a space that’s not even mine to use. To say I over-reached would be a ridiculous understatement. And the longer I go without any backlash, the more convinced I am it’s going to be ugly when it happens.”

“Is that experience talking?”
“Yes,” you say bluntly. “Taking care of the lowest dregs of society is only something people consider admirable for as long as it doesn’t actually affect them.”

Solas quiets after you say that, and you hope that the discussion is over. You hardly want to get into “charity” you’ve given in the past. If the orphans get to where they’re going and your blackmail works without backfiring, this will doubtless be your most successful endeavor in the name of others.

After the two of you finish lunch, you gather up the dishes and bring them back to the kitchen. Before returning to the rotunda, however, you swing by the baths—the human baths. If you’re going to be making a nuisance of yourself, might as well do it in a way that benefits you, as well. Despite Bull’s opinion on the matter, you have no desire to use anyone’s private bath. That doesn’t mean you enjoy a cold bath either, however. The “human” bathhouse is a good compromise. Plus, you love the smell of indignant shemlen in the morning.

You return the rotunda, hair still damp and in fresh clothes, but if Solas notices that you took a bath, he doesn’t comment on it. You just hope you’re a little less offensive to the nose now. You’ll have to make a point of bathing after your morning excursions with Bull. It didn’t matter as much when you were working alone, but you certainly don’t want to fill Solas’ rotunda with the smell of your sweat while he’s trying to work.

You get right to work on your tome, but, ridiculously, after two weeks missing his presence in the rotunda, now that he’s here you find you’re having trouble focusing on your work. Part of that is because he’s not just holding still at his desk; he’s walking around the room. A quick glance behind you has you thinking that he’s probably laying down wards or runes of some kind, but you can’t tell any more without going up and examining it, which is possibly the single stupidest thing you could do. So you try to focus on your work. And you fail.

Every time he walks by you, you can practically taste his aura, likely because he’s actively casting. You’re reminded sharply of your repeated fantasies about how nice his magic felt on your sore back, or strengthening your wrist. You can’t help thinking about how much you spent yourself… Drained yourself nearly dry, as a matter of fact, and you’re reacting to the tingle of Solas’ magic in the air like a hungry Mabari. You do manage to refrain from literally drooling, at least. And you keep your aura firmly in its place. It’s not easy; every time Solas’ energy brushes up against your skin, your aura surges in that direction, and you have to wrestle it back down into your core.

All in all, it’s not a very conducive work environment.

Eventually he gets whatever wards or runes he was working on completed and starts doing something in the middle of the room. You can’t tell from here, and you do your best to ignore it… At least, possibly thanks to the wards, his aura is no longer poking you in the back. You manage to get some work done, but you quickly become frustrated again, and this has nothing to do with Solas. You need more resources. With a sigh, you set down your book and head up to the library.

You wave a greeting to Dorian, but you make a beeline for Thea. She looks a little surprised.

“Thea, does the library have any resources on dragons?” you ask with a distracted frown.

“For your work, huh? Well, sorry to say we haven’t got much… I think I’ve got a bestiary where dragonlings are mentioned. That’s about it,” she says apologetically.

You sigh. “I suppose that’s why the Inquisitor is trying to obtain a Draconologist. Damn.”

“Problems?”
“Minor frustrations, really. I’m not the best person for this job; I’d like to supplement my translation with other works, just to make sure I’ve got the details right. I know I’ve seen some Nevaran and Orlesian tomes that would be of use, but I’ve no way of getting them, out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“You could always put in a requisition order?” Thea suggests. “It can take them a while to actually fill, since books are pretty low on the priority list, but…”

“I suppose,” you say with a sigh. “It’s better than doing nothing. Thank you, Thea.”

Of course, that does nothing to help you now. With no small amount of frustration, you head back downstairs and try to work on the pages you’re most confident in. You can organize them later.

Dinner time comes too soon, but in a way, you’re almost relieved for the break. Solas has been working on whatever spell he’s doing for hours. He looks like he’s asleep in his chair, although you suspect he’s actually meditating… Who could fall asleep sitting up like that? You’re not sure if you should disturb him by fetching dinner, but surely that would happen when the kitchen workers brought his meals? In any case, if you bring him an evening meal and he starts letting it get cold, you’ll be more than happy to eat it for him.

Solas stirs from his… meditation, or sleep, or whatever, when you return with dinner. Almost a pity; seems you won’t be getting to eat two meals after all. It would be worth it for the look on his face upon realizing what you’d done. Ah well. You stop short of the wards he placed; you have an excuse for noticing them this time. They glow. Solas does… something… with his hands and the floor ceases its runic glowing. You step forward, cautiously, your aura just beneath the skin of your feet. You don’t feel anything… whatever magic he was using is gone, or at least suppressed. If you didn’t know any better, you’d say he was taunting your curiosity.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything important,” you say as you step up next to his desk. “But you seem to appreciate timely meals.”

“I wasn’t getting anywhere,” Solas says, and he sounds mildly frustrated. Whatever he was doing, then, didn’t go as planned.

“I’d ask what you were doing, but I doubt I’d understand,” you say with forced modesty. Although it might be as much honesty as modesty… It’s not as though you’ve had a formal education. Or any kind of education, really.

“Oh? You know more about magic than the average person, certainly.”

You snort as you walk away from his desk. This time you place your own plates on the table near the couch. Let him think it superstition at being so near recently cast magic, if he wishes. In reality, you just want a bit of space. “How difficult is that, really? What the average person knows about magic could fill a thimble. Less if you strained out the blatant falsehoods.”

“Admittedly, this is true,” Solas agrees. “But you do seem to have a thirst for learning.”

“I always have,” you say with a nod. “Since I was a child. That’s why I wound up translating Qunlat instead of… Maker, whatever they normally use child slaves for in Tevinter. I don’t really like thinking about it.” Not that your intelligence spared you from all of the unpleasantries of being a young girl who happens to be a slave in a war zone. Just… enough of them.

“Even now,” Solas continues, and you realize he’s going somewhere specific with this. “You learn
lockpicking from Sera, riding from Belassan… and likely more. You and Iron Bull, for instance, seem rather more friendly than when I left.”

When had he seen…? This morning? It had to be, during practice or breakfast. But, no, surely he was still abed at that hour? You realize, belatedly, that you’ve been quiet for too long. “Um…” Oh… Maker, no, surely he hadn’t heard any of the rumors?! Your dignity can’t take it if he thinks you’ve been… That you and Iron Bull are… You clear your throat. “The Iron Bull has been teaching me as well,” you say, a little stiffly. “How to defend myself should the need arise. This *is* a war… it seems it will come up sooner than later.”

“It *seems,*” Solas says with a thin smile. “That there is nothing you’re uninterested in learning. Where do you find time for it all?”

“The Iron Bull and I practice in the mornings, before breakfast. I ride Revas on Sunday mornings. Sera… Sera kidnaps me on an irregular basis.” You pause. “…Solas, if you’re concerned that this is interfering with my work, I believe you’ll find I’m still moving forward at a –”

“I’m not concerned. Merely impressed.”

He’s probably lying, but you still feel a rush of heat and a twinge of pride.

“I believe the Inquisition will be good for you, Emma. There are many people here who can teach you many things.”

“Mmm… It can be difficult to convince people to part with their hard-earned knowledge,” you say pointedly.

“True. Fortunately, you don’t give up easily.”
It takes you a while to get your head back on straight after that very interesting conversation with Solas. You’re still half-dazed as you wander back towards the rotunda after dropping off your dinner dishes to be cleaned. Fortunately, perhaps, Varric offers you a bit of a distraction, catching your arm just outside of the rotunda.

“There you are. I have something I think you’ll be interested in, Stutter,” he says, and his shit-eating grin has you suspecting it’s trouble.

“Oh?” you say warily. “Well, as long as it doesn’t dislocate my hip.”

“What…”

“Never mind. What is it, Varric?”

“I got a letter in the mail,” Varric says, holding up a piece of parchment with a flourish. When you don’t immediately react, he continues. “From a certain broody elf.”

Your heart leaps into your throat. “N… no way…”

“Aww, so little faith in me? Fenris loves getting letters. A little less fond about writing them, admittedly, but he’s working on it.”

You lunge forward, grabbing at the letter, but Varric skips backwards out of your reach. He’s spry for a dwarf.

“Uh-uh, this isn’t all for you. He does reply to you, however. I take it you want to hear it?”

“Maker’s balls, Varric, either read it or hand it to me!” you exclaim, reaching for it again.

“All right, all right, settle down. I can’t read it with you jumping at me.” He clears his throat and you back off slightly, wringing your hands together nervously. Short. It’ll be short. Maybe a sentence acknowledging you. Still, it’s incredible that he even knows you exist.

“As for the woman, Emma, tell her that it’s pleasant to find someone else who escaped from Tevinter’s clutches. She sounds quite charming. I’d like to know more about how she escaped and what she did afterwards. Perhaps you can introduce us while I’m at Skyhold?”

You can’t breathe. You can’t breathe. All your blood has rushed to your face; you must be bright crimson. You let out a strangled noise, perhaps a squeak or a whimper, then open your mouth to speak. No words come out.

You must catch Varric off-guard, because he doesn’t dodge out of the way when you drop down onto your knees and yank him into a tight hug. “W-whoa, there, Stutter,” he says, sounding shocked, before relaxing slightly and giving you a somewhat awkward pat on the back. While he does, you steal a quick glance at the letter in his other hand. The lettering is large and perfectly spaced and the paper is marked repeatedly with crossed out words—it reminds you sharply of secret lessons in Seheron. One word in particular catches your eye… Hawke. But you don’t see much else before Varric gently pries you off of him.
“Maker, I’m sorry, Varric, but… Thank you. Thank you. I can’t believe… I mean, he’s kind of a hero of mine, and I just, I… Thank you,” you blather.

“It’s alright, Stutter. The look on your face alone is worth it. Not to mention his.” He gestures to his right, towards the doorway, and you turn to see a rather nonplussed looking Solas. If it was possible for you to blush any brighter… You scramble to your feet.

“I, um… He… That is… How long have you been standing there?” you ask nervously.

“Long enough for it to be hilarious,” Varric quips. “So, Stutter, do you want to write him back?”

“Write him back? I… Erm…” You glance nervously at Solas. “I’d like to, yes. Some… other time?”

“Meet me in the tavern after you finish working tomorrow,” he says with a grin. “We’ll get your letter written.” Varric gives you a last pat on the arm before absolutely sauntering off, leaving you deal with Solas.

“I, um… He… Well, that is…”

“It seems you weren’t exaggerating when you stated you were becoming more popular,” Solas interjects with a faint smile.

You clear your throat and will your face to cool down. “Yes, well. I should… I should get back to work.”

Solas steps to the side and gestures for you walk by him. You quickly scurry past him into the room and sit down at your desk. You check the door to ensure he hasn’t followed you in, then lay your face down flat on the desk, covering your head with your arms. You’re just going… just going to sit like this, for a minute.

- You spend most of the evening wiggling, rather than working. As Solas is now just sitting at his desk reading, you’re probably distracting him as much as he was distracting you earlier. Unfortunately, you simply can’t sit still. You sold your history for a fan letter. And you are seriously happy that you made that stupid, stupid decision.

Never in a hundred years did you suspect you’d actually ever meet any of the “characters” from The Tale of the Champion. You knew they were real… Honestly, you picked up the book specifically because you wanted to know what the hell had happened in Kirkwall. But it was really easy to forget those people actually existed in the world, and were still wandering around Thedas… even though “casually running into Fenris” was one of your most repeated late night fantasies.

But now that fantasy was actually coming true, albeit slowly. Fenris is coming here… here. Why? What business does he have with the Inquisition? And you saw Hawke’s name in that letter… You chew on your lip as you think, leaning yourself against the back of the chair and resting your head back to stare up the tower. There’s something going on here, certainly. But you’re having trouble thinking it through, because every five seconds your brain floods with SWEET ANDRASTE I’M MEETING FENRIS and you lose your train of thought.

“Are you a fan of his, then?” Solas says finally, interrupting the flood of hormones that’s passing for your thoughts.

You start, nearly tilting the chair over backwards, but you manage to lean forwards in time. Thank the Maker for small blessings. “Huh?” you say distractedly, trying to get your mind back in the
“This Fenris. I take it the two of you haven’t actually met, but you seem… exuberant,” Solas says pointedly. You likely had been distracting him, then. You flush slightly.

“Something like that. I read about him in Varric’s book, and… the two of us have similar histories. He was a Tevinter slave who escaped in Seheron. Although his prior owner bothered to chase him down. I had no such difficulties after I escaped. In any case, he’s… Someone I admire. I know that’s foolish, as I’ve never met him.”

“And now he’s coming here.” Solas sounds like his mind is going down similar paths to yours… minus the vibrating excitement, anyway. Varric was kind enough to let you know Fenris was coming, but not kind enough to tell you when or why. Both were nagging at you.

“I assume he has some business with the Inquisition, and this is all a happy coincidence,” you say, giving some voice to your thoughts.

“Maybe he’s coming just to see you?” Solas says, and you stare at him for a long moment.

“Are… are you teasing me?”

“Would I do that?” Solas says, but the corner of his mouth quirks upwards in a slight smile.

“Apparently,” you say with an exaggerated pout, crossing your arms. The sight of you seems to amuse Solas even further, as he covers his mouth lightly with his hand. He can’t hide the way his eyes wrinkle at the corners, however. “Yes, yes, have a good laugh at the da’len,” you scoff, although it’s getting difficult not to smile, yourself. “Maker knows Varric’s having a good chortle at my expense about now, as well.”

Solas manages to compose himself. You suppose that’s what passes for him losing control… a smile and a joke. Still, it’s… satisfying, somehow. “Perhaps you should go wrestle a Qunari until you’ve burned off the excess energy?” he suggests.

You throw your hands into the air. “If I wanted to be sassed, I’d still be working next to Dorian!” you exclaim.

“I heard that!” Dorian’s voice echoes down from the library. “Don’t drag me into your lover’s quarrels, elf.”

You groan, dragging a hand down over your face. “This is bullying, Dorian,” you call up to him. “You’re bullying me.”

“I’m Tevinter; it’s what we do. If I start pretending to be nice, that’s when you get worried.”

Not much you can say to that… It’s true. Instead, you glare vaguely upwards and turn back to your work.

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You do manage to get some work done, after Solas incidentally clears your head with his light teasing. There’s a deeper meaning hidden behind Fenris’ trip to Skyhold, you’re certain of it. But you’re also certain you’re missing pieces of the puzzle. Hawke is part of it, to be sure, but you just don’t have enough information or knowledge about the people involved, or even the Inquisition itself and its goals. And you’re sure as hell not going to go compare notes with Leliana.
Instead, you do your damn job until Solas leaves for the night, only pausing to remind you to blow out the candles before you leave. You stay for perhaps another hour, working on the dull but soothing task of writing word after word in a neat, even hand. It lets your mind wander.

Eventually, however, you can’t fight off exhaustion any more, and you head for bed for another sleepless night. You don’t actually make it all the way there, however… a few steps into the courtyard has a familiar face at your side.

“I didn’t talk to Solas about you, but I talked to him about not talking to him about you,” Cole says, the words coming out all in one rush.

You rub your tired eyes as you attempt to parse his meaning. In the meantime, he looks mildly panicked. “Calm down, Cole. It’s alright.”

“You’re not upset?”

“No, no, of course not. It was kind of you to agree not to talk to him about me in the first place. But I should probably… I should explain. I was scared, but that doesn’t justify just giving you that kind of a blanket order. Do… Do you have time? I can try to… Try to clarify.” Of course, you’re exhausted and kind of want to just… lay down for a few hours. But it isn’t as though you’d actually sleep even if you did, and this is important. Especially if Cole actually told Solas he wasn’t supposed to talk about you. Might as well hand him a glowing, lyrium-rune sign that reads “SHE HAS A SECRET.”

You take Cole up on the roof of the inn. You’re not sure why, exactly, but it’s a good place to have some privacy and it relaxes you… likely due to your fond memories of Sera and that roof. You kick your shoes off before you climb. Cole doesn’t so much climb as he appears by the time you reach the top.

“Wish I could do that,” you say with a smile.

“You probably could. Solas can do something like it. He could show you. If you told him,” Cole says, a little pointedly.

You sigh. “Right. About that. Could you just maybe not tell anyone anything about my magic?”

“You don’t glow,” Cole says, frustrated. “Not all the time. But you can. Can they all turn it off? Why don’t they?”

“They could probably learn, if I showed them,” you say with a shrug. “Or maybe it’s just something I can do. I don’t know. Most mages are already caught by the Circle before they can learn control of their magic. The Circle wouldn’t teach them how to hide. And Tevinter mages, like Dorian, why would they ever want to? I bet witches can do it, and I’d be willing to bet Solas can too. How else could he have stayed hidden from the Templars his whole life?”

“Solas always glows,” Cole says firmly.

“Well, his secret’s out now. If I could, I’d walk around free as a bird, too.” Cole opens his mouth to interject. “But I’d rather have my personal freedom. You’ve heard the Inquisitor, haven’t you? He’s said, publicly, that he thinks the Circles should be reformed. And he’s rebuilding the Templars. I’m not going to be locked up in a Circle, Cole. I’m not. You… you can see what I’ve done to avoid it… can’t you?”

Cole is silent for a moment, then nods. “Stench of charred flesh, blood boils when burned, who knew? They can’t hurt me anymore.”
“Yes. That’s… probably another thing you shouldn’t tell anyone.”

“They’re not all like that, you know,” Cole adds softly.

“I know, Cole, don’t worry,” you say with a forced smile. “I’m just more careful now, that’s all. I trust you.”

“You should trust Solas,” Cole insists. “He would understand.”

“Cole, no offense, but I don’t even like that you know. The more who know, the more likely it is that something goes wrong. And we’ve both seen the only way I know how to get out of a situation like that.”

“If you tried that here, they’d kill you,” Cole says solemnly. You wince.

“Yeah… Trying to avoid that, tesoro.”

“Tesoro, tesorina, because if I say her name, that makes her real.”

You sigh. “That’s the sort of thing you can say. Just nothing about my magic, or anything tangentially related to it.”

“You are your magic. You gather the glow, gilded with glamour. Pluck the power like you’re playing, but a scheme or a song?”

“And we’re back into things you shouldn’t talk about territory,” you say dryly.

“I understand what you want; I think I understand why. I don’t like it.”

“Will you do it anyway?”

“…Yes.”

You must have been up there for hours, making sure Cole understood what not to say. You’re exhausted by the time you sink into bed, but you know sleep won’t come. At least Cole is taken care of. You’re confident he won’t say anything to accidentally expose you, although Maker knows he’ll probably say plenty of other interesting things you’d rather keep private. But, as you well know, if you let people know a few grudging secrets, they get so distracted with the sense of accomplishment that they don’t keep prying. Like Leliana. She thinks she has you pegged well enough because she discovered a few paltry secrets you’d rather no one knew. A technique an Orlesian will always fall for; they hoard secrets the way a magpie hoards shiny baubles.

You stare blankly up at the ceiling for a long while before giving up on sleep entirely. With a sigh, you open the tiny chest by the foot of your bed and pull out the unmarked book on spirits that Solas gave to you. If you can’t sleep, at least you can learn a little something about your new friend.

Just because the effects of your lack of sleep are purely physical now doesn’t mean they aren’t still a fucking pain. Sometime before dawn, you stumble into leggings and a loose shirt before staggering outside and towards the fighting ring. Iron Bull is there and waiting for you, more than willing to knock you into the ground until you wake up.

His training doesn’t help you sleep better, which was arguably his original intention, but the little
adrenaline burst it gives you every morning can normally keep you going until lunch, at the very least. You are getting awfully tired of hitting the ground, however. Thanks to your overly pale skin, you tend to bruise easily and dramatically. Your back is probably just one giant blue and black splotch at this point, and it’ll be trouble if anyone sees it.

Your opportunity for revenge comes so quickly that you almost miss it; the chance to move fast enough (but not too fast) to get a drop on Iron Bull. He lunges just a little too hard, likely because your normal means of escape is jumping backwards. If you did that, he’d still have you. Instead, you dive to under one of his extended arms, rolling over your shoulder and coming quickly back onto your feet. You slide a little as your feet hit the ground and you reach your hand out to catch the training area’s fence, to prevent yourself from crashing into it. That’s when you see your chance.

Without pause, you grasp both hands onto the fence behind you, letting your momentum swing you into the air. Then, with every ounce of strength you have, you throw yourself back towards Bull, legs straight out. Two boot-clad feet connect firmly with Iron Bull’s spine and he topples, still slightly off balance from lunging forward. Down he goes with you on top of him, and you try desperately to maintain some balance. You manage to keep your legs underneath you as he falls, but stumble when he hits the ground. You windmill your arms dramatically but are unable to keep your balance, and fall forwards as well. An ankle tangles on one his large horns and you trip, smashing your face into the ground.

Well. You still made him fall over.

“Oof,” you hear him say as he reaches up to unhook your foot from his horn. “What did you hit me with?”

“One hundred pounds of pure flying elf,” you groan into the dirt. “Using myself as a projectile… not my most inspired moment.” You roll over onto your back, but you decide against getting up for the moment. Your legs feel like rubber.

“You know, I think the point of fighting is to incapacitate the other person more than yourself,” Iron Bull says as he stands. You note with no small amount of satisfaction that he’s wincing slightly.

“Oh please, Bull. If I ever got in a real fight with you I’d be dead in under ten seconds,” you say with a snort. “This is just me seeing how much I can kick a tame dog before it bites me.”

“…Did you just call me a dog? A tame dog?” He actually looks offended.

You sit up with a groan. “You’ve got teeth, but I’ve yet to see you use them,” you say with a cheeky grin.

“You asking for a demonstration?” Bull asks, crossing his arms.

“On me? Fuck no. I like having an unbroken spine.”

“You sure? It’s been days since you were last in the healing tent. They’re probably worried about you.”

You laugh, and find that laughing hurts a little. You run a hand over your ribcage and wince. Some new bruises for your growing collection, no doubt.

That’s when your eyes latch onto something out of place. Behind Bull, up on the walkway between the rotunda and outer walls of Skyhold. Seeing someone up there at all is something of an oddity… No one goes between the rotunda and Cullen’s office except for you and, on rare occasion, one of Leliana’s messengers. Everyone else avoids Solas’ rotunda like it’s got the Blight. That’s one of the
reasons you like this practice area; it’s only visible from that walkway and, possibly, Cullen’s bedroom. Two very unpopulated areas.

How odd, then, that there should be someone up there. Someone watching the two of you spar, perhaps? A tiny little elf girl fighting a Qunari in the pre-dawn hours is something that would make anyone stop and look. But you have sharp eyes, and you recognize the man on the walkway. He’s dressed like a messenger, carrying papers; no doubt you’re intended to assume him one of Leliana’s men. And he is, yes. But you’ve never seen him delivering messages. Only up in Leliana’s little bird cage, taking orders and, possibly, delivering reports.

One of Leliana’s spies is watching you when you’re with the Iron Bull, possibly other times as well. The thought isn’t surprising, but it sours your stomach. Bull follows your glare upward and sees the man walking towards the rotunda with the fumbling urgency of Skyhold’s many messengers. If he mirrors any of your suspicions, he doesn’t voice them.

You stand and brush yourself off, unable to summon back your joviality from a moment earlier. No one enjoys being spied on, even if you would be concerned if Leliana didn’t have someone keeping an eye on Bull. Or yourself, you admit grudgingly. Especially both of you together, considering the nature of the documents she has you translating. But just because you can respect it from a professional standpoint doesn’t mean that you have to like it.

“Come on,” you say with a sigh. “Let’s get breakfast before I manage to break myself in half trying to knock you down again.”

- Any thoughts you might have had about mentioning your suspicions about the man on the bridge are washed away by the time you sit down for breakfast. Both Thea and Varric are there, to your pleasant surprise.

“Thought you might need a reminder about our date this evening,” Varric says with a laugh when you express your surprise at seeing him up so early. “So. What’s up with this?” He gestures between you and Iron Bull with his fork. “I leave for two weeks, come back and everyone in the Herald’s Rest thinks you two are playing hide the happy. Then you show up for breakfast together?”

You choke into your oatmeal. “Maker’s breath, Varric! Hide the… He’s just teaching me how to throw a punch! We practice before breakfast!” You wipe your mouth off and cough a few times to get out the last of the inhaled oatmeal, trying to ignore the way Bull is chortling and Thea is grinning. You glare around the table.

“I’m just saying, you seem to have made quite the impact all of a sudden,” Varric says with a shit-eating grin. You regret that Bull is the only one you’re allowed to punch. “Even the kid was talking about you in the tavern last night. Mind you, when he does it’s more like mumbling creepily to himself and less like actual talking, and I’m only mostly sure that he was talking about you.”

“The kid?” you say with a frown. You don’t really want to know how much your so-called sex life is discussed by drunken humans in a bar… That’s a whirlwind of trouble whipping up right there.


Cole was talking about you in the tavern? Of course he was.

“I didn’t even know the two of you were acquainted before he decided to give you a hug,” Varric says. “Most people don’t remember him.”
“I have a very good memory for faces,” you say into your oatmeal, although you’re quite certain that Cole could make you forget him if he really wanted to.

“You on the run from anything in particular? He was talking about hiding and secrets.”

“I doubt he was talking about me, Varric,” you say with a sigh. “It could have been anyone.” He opens his mouth to speak again, but you interrupt. “Why do you call him a kid?”

“Well, he is, y’know. He hasn’t been here for very long. He gets confused easily.”

You want to snap that he’s not a child, he’s a spirit. That Cole sees and understands things that would have a dwarf’s head exploding. That you don’t want to hear about Cole “confusing easily” from someone who’s never even seen how different the Fade is from the world of mortals. But that’s a rant better saved for Solas, who at the very least won’t look at you like you’re a lunatic. Or, better yet, no one, because there’s no better way to out yourself than rambling about spirits and the Fade.

Instead, all you say is, “You certainly like your nicknames, Varric.”

“I have a natural talent! Like with you, Stutter. Had you pegged from day one, didn’t I?”

“I don’t actually stutter that much,” you say with a scowl.

“Just when you’re nervous,” Varric says with a chuckle.


“I try regularly to forget,” you say with a scowl.

“See, she didn’t start stuttering when you were talking about the two of us…”

“Hiding the happy?” Varric interjects.

“Yeah, that. But watch.”

You should have been expecting something. You really should have. The topic at hand, combined with your little barbed insult and you knocking him down during training… Of course he’d try something. Still, you’re caught off guard when he reaches across the table and snatches your jaw into his hand, angling your head upwards and, you can’t help but notice, exposing your neck. Blood rushes to your face as your eyes latch on to face and horns, you see yourself reflected in dark eyes. Let me go.

You react automatically, jabbing your fork into his arm, hard. He snaps his hand back with a laugh, rubbing where you stabbed him.

“Wh-wh-what the fuck, Bull!” you exclaim, hand rushing to your neck. You’re fine, of course… he hadn’t even grabbed hard enough to hurt. Still, your heart is pounding heart enough that you think it might break your bruised ribcage. Having your eyes dragged onto his like that…

“See?” Bull says to Varric with a grin.

Varric puts his hands up. “Don’t drag me into this! I didn’t ask for a demonstration, and I’m definitely not asking to be part of whatever she subjects you to in revenge.”

“You didn’t ask for a demonstration, but she did,” Bull says with something of a smirk.
“I believe that I specified not on me,” you say with a scowl. “For a Qunari, you’re shit at following instructions.”

“I’ll visit you when she puts you in the healing tent,” Varric interjects.

“That’s like foreplay for them, though,” Thea comments through a spoonful of oatmeal. With a sigh, you stand, your own food not even half finished.

“I think that’s my cue to go start my workday. I’ll see you at the bar tonight, Varric.” You begin to walk away, forcing yourself to ignore Thea’s “aw, now you scared her away” and Bull’s indignant “me?” Your heart is still pounding and you can still feel Bull’s hand firm on your chin. Right now, what you need is peace and quiet.

Knowing that subjecting yourself to Solas will do the absolute opposite of calming you down, you instead opt for soaking in the bathhouse. Too tired for judging glares, you sink into the cool waters of the elven baths rather than soaking your sore muscles in the hotter human bathhouse. Unfortunately, today, that doesn’t spare you from stares. It takes you a moment to realize why, but once you give yourself a once-over, you figure it out. Your arms, torso, and from the feel of it, your back, are all a mess of black and blue bruising. Looks like you’ll be wearing long sleeves to the rotunda today.

You cut your bath short and dress quickly. Between the knowledge that both Cole and, apparently, half the tavern were gossiping about you, and the memory of the spy on the walkway, you’re feeling hyper-exposed as you walk to the rotunda. Iron Bull’s little show of teeth isn’t helping things either… You can’t shake the feeling of being followed. Ghosts of the many people you’ve run from in your life glint at the edges of your vision.

You almost slam the rotunda door closed behind you. Only the sight of Solas at his desk keeps you from sinking onto the ground. Here, at least, you can feel a little more safe. No one comes in here. Not when Solas is here. Yes, the library and the spymaster are right up the stairs, but here, at least, you can have the illusion of privacy.

“You look fraught,” Solas comments as you slide into your desk chair.

“It’s been a fraught morning,” you say, and find your voice is shaking slightly.

“I admit, I’m pleasantly surprised to see you before lunch.”

In ordinary circumstances, you know you’d latch onto that ‘pleasantly’ and get a nice little rush of warmth, but you’re too jarred to focus on it. “Sundays are my day off,” you say distractedly, glancing at your papers and trying to remember what you’d been doing the night before.

“Off? You spent the majority of the day here, working,” Solas points out.

“No one’s stolen my Sunday afternoons yet. Might as well get some work done.”

“You have quite the work ethic,” Solas says, and you hear a “but” coming. You sigh.

“Perhaps, but in all honesty, it stems from my line of work. I’m accustomed to a few weeks of twelve to eighteen hour workdays as I rush to finish a project for a client, then months of a lot of nothing while I wait for someone else to hire me.” You shuffle a few more papers idly as you try to figure out what work you can do. More lettering, no doubt. Mm… You should try to figure out how requisition requests actually work.
“What did you do when you weren’t working, then?”

You glance over at Solas. He isn’t looking at you… He’s flipping idly through the first volume of *The Botanical Compendium*. Light conversation? That strikes you as odd; he was more than content to sit in silence in the past. Still, you could use a bit of a distraction.

“Any number of things. That much spare time let me indulge in several hobbies… once I was making enough to support myself, anyway. I even had an herb garden.” You sigh. “I miss my mule the most, but that garden is a close second.” You glance back towards Solas again. “What about you? What do you do for fun?”

“I enjoy exploring ancient ruins and battlefields. Places where the Veil is thin. In some places, spirits press so closely against the Veil that I can slip through with but a thought.”

Maker help you, his voice is like melted butter. Perhaps that’s why, somehow, you spend most of the morning talking with him, about everything and nothing. Idle conversation. Background noise, almost. But… Talking to Solas is actually a pleasant distraction in a way. Even an hour after Bull grabbed your face, you can still feel the imprint on your skin. His skin is rough, thick. Not like a human’s. You thought you had gotten used to it, but… Your hands are still shaking, only slightly, but still too much to get much accomplished when the number one skill required for your job is “really steady penmanship.”

It’s easy to relax around Solas, to forget that he’s prying more and more information out of you. He’d make an excellent spy… Which inclines you to believe he’s something similar. Aimée was like that, easy to talk to… And look how that ended.

Still, you find yourself continuing the conversation even as you begin lettering. It’s a dull, repetitive task, and as long as you’re careful, you can talk and listen while you write.

“And honestly, I appreciate the pay, but being unable to just make a trip into town to pick up the supplies I need is a bit of a chore,” you say with a sigh as you finish a sentence with a flourish. “Of course, I could hardly do that back home right now,” you add darkly. “It was quite on fire when I left.”

“You mentioned the conflict was what caused you to seek out Skyhold,” Solas comments. He’s reading while the two of you talk, something you’ve never quite mastered. “And that you saw more of the Templars than you did rogue mages. Was it they who set fire to your home?”

“Their crimson counterparts,” you say with a sigh. “Even Templars wouldn’t burn down a whole village of innocents… a house here and there, absolutely, if they thought there were mages hiding inside.”

“Speaking from experience?”

You make a face. “I lost a few neighbors that way, yes. I just kept my head down and gave the Templars any supplies they asked me for.” Including no small amount of poisoned goods. They can’t go around robbing people and not expect a few deathroot laced loaves of bread, honestly.

“Did no mages go to you for help?”

“I…” You’re quiet for a few beats too long. “No. Lucky, I suppose…” Luckier still that you had endeared yourself to the villagers so well that none of them had taken the opportunity to share the rumors that you were a “witch” with the Templars. Your hand had been on your dagger the whole time those Templars had been in your house. “Perhaps I’m just not very approachable,” you say with
a forced chuckle.

“Says the woman who’s made friends with half of Skyhold in two weeks?”

“Three weeks and hardly all of Skyhold, but I acknowledge your point.” A low grumble in your stomach reminds you that you barely ate any breakfast. It must be getting on towards lunch. “I miss my water clock,” you say with a sigh. “I hate having to guess the time based on how much candle I’ve burned through.”

“Wondering if it’s time for lunch?” Solas asks, still not looking up from his book. “I was wondering that myself.”

That’s your cue. You finish the line you’re working on and stand up, stretching stiff muscles. Your back and ass are absolutely killing you from the combination of bruises and sitting. It’ll do you good to walk around some.

The Great Hall is bustling when you make your way through it… no doubt in response to the return of the Inquisitor. You’re content to ignore it, although you do walk a bit more slowly than usual, ears pricked for any interesting gossip. Skyhold is never without gossiping nobles of one kind or another.

“I’m surprised the Inquisition has such a right.”
“It’s not the first time he’s passed judgment.”
“I was here for the first… he recruited some Tevinter thug. Hardly justice.”

Oh ho, what’s this now?

“All of these people are gathering just to watch? That seems… morbid.”
“Wait until you see the crowd if he actually decides on public execution.”
“But the Inquisitor isn’t even here yet!”

Oh, now this is something. You dart down the stairs and gather Solas’ food leisurely while you gather more gossip in the kitchens. Sure enough, they’re abuzz with the news as well.

“It’s about time. He’s been rotting down there long enough, taking up good food that could be going to our soldiers.”
“Oh please, nothing about what we send to the prisons could be called ‘good.’”
“Still food, innit? We haven’t so much to spare.”
“I heard the Inquisitor’s going to execute him.”
“How could you possibly know that? The trial hasn’t even started.”

Maker, how did you miss hearing about this in the baths? Well, you suppose you might have been the more interesting gossip there, considering how bruised up you’d been. Since you’re taking your time anyway, you make extra sure to tailor Solas’ meal to what you know of his preferences and grab some extra fruit tarts for good measure. If anyone will know what the Inquisitor is up to, it’s Solas. Perhaps you can lure some gossip out of him, for once, since you spent the whole morning idly gabbing about yourself.

Coming up through the busy Great Hall with a tray loaded to the tipping point with food makes you begin considering mapping alternative routes to the rotunda, but you manage to get there without dropping anything. The tray is pushing painfully into a bruised part of your arm, however. You quickly unload the food onto Solas’ desk, your left arm trembling as weight pushes into your bruise. Ouch. That you manage to unload it all without dropping anything is a testament to your Orlesian trainers. Although if they had seen the tremor in your arm, you would have gotten a lash across the knuckles to be sure.
“Solas, there’s something going on in the Great Hall,” you say, pulling up a stool to dine with him at his desk. The fact that he doesn’t seem to mind you doing so gives you a slight flush of pride. You may not have gotten his knowledge out of him yet, but you’ve done a fine job endearing yourself to the prickly elf. “Do you know anything about it?”

“Mm, the Inquisitor will be publically sentencing Knight-Captain Denam this afternoon,” Solas says, sounding patently disinterested. “Have you had much opportunity to read the book I gave you?”

“A Knight-Captain?” you exclaim. A little rudely, in retrospect. Solas raises an eyebrow, and you clear your throat. “Erm, I mean… Yes, Solas, I was reading it just last night. But, um… He’s judging a Templar? I thought they were the Inquisition’s allies.”

“This particular Templar is somewhat responsible for the state of the Templar Order,” Solas says with a sigh. “Knight-Captain Denam helped indoctrinate the Templars with red lyrium. He was captured some time ago… I believe the Inquisitor’s intent was to let him stew.”

You shudder. You saw a little bit of that red lyrium, in your travels, and got too many close looks at what it did to the Templars. You may not feel pity for them, but you do feel fear. Regular lyrium has a delicious glow to it that you can barely ever resist, but the red stuff… Now that was scary. What it did to the Templars was scarier.

“Are you planning on watching the proceedings?” you inquire after taking moment to get over your sudden-onset heebie-jeebies.

“Not particularly, no. But I judge from your curiosity that you are?”

“Maybe from the balcony… It’s getting awfully crowded in there, and the Inquisitor isn’t even present yet. It would be something to see that throne in use… it’s awfully gaudy. Or perhaps I shouldn’t say that about the Herald of Andraste’s throne?” you add with a chuckle.

“You seem Andrastian. Do you believe him to be the Herald?” Solas asks. You have to refrain from glaring at him; the man is always turning the conversation back onto you.

“I believe that’s the sort of question that could get me into trouble, Solas. Didn’t you once tell me to keep my clever tongue out of mischief?”

“You didn’t take my advice then. Why start now?” Solas says with the smallest of smirks, half-hidden behind his cup.

“Perhaps I’ve only now begun to appreciate your wisdom, hahren,” you snort. “After all the trouble I’ve dragged myself into, it seems wise to try and avoid the obvious traps.”

“Now you accuse me of attempting to trap you?” Solas asks, fake hurt dripping from his voice, so over the top that your snort turns into full-fledged laughter, echoing up the tower and back down again.

“Yes, clearly your motives in asking all these questions are completely pure,” you say after you regain the ability to talk. “You’re as transparent as swamp water, Solas. But… No, I don’t believe the Inquisitor is divine. Not in the way some people think. I don’t know what that mark on his hand is, or how he can seal rifts, but I don’t think he’s a god. Besides,” you cast your eyes towards the door to ensure you don’t have one of Leliana’s spies watching you again. “Men with power affect the world more than gods do, these days.”
WOW I SURE AM SLOW AT UPDATING. Sorry guys! I keep trying to get back up to speed. Also, a general thanks to everyone who leaves comments; you have no idea how much they mean to me. Your comments are definitely what keep me writing! <3
Solas does, eventually, steer the conversation back towards his gift, although not after prodding at you for more information on your religious beliefs of all things. After having presented him with more than enough information regarding the intersection of your beliefs and the Inquisitor, you politely dodge the next few questions until he brings it back around to the book. You’re willing to be more open about a lot of things with Solas. Religion isn’t one of them.

“Last night, after you went to bed?” Solas is saying in that mildly curious tone of his.

“Yes. I’m keeping it in my room, lest it be mistaken for a library book,” you reply.

“I’m beginning to wonder if you do ever sleep.” The comment seems innocent enough, but the look in his eyes is anything but. You repress a shudder… Does he know something, already? Has he perhaps been talking to Iron Bull? Or worse, has his magic granted him some insight? When you start walking down that road, there are a seemingly infinite number of ways for you to accidentally out yourself, ways you have no way of even knowing about.

“I sleep,” you say with a laugh. “Perhaps not as much as you, ser Early-to-Bed-Late-to-Rise. But I do sleep.”

He doesn’t seem to believe you, but he at least lets the matter drop. Maker… you’re going to have to have some excuse for your insomnia for him, before your evading becomes too obvious. It’s at times like these you really wish you had a mage you could trust. That would make fooling everyone else (particularly other mages) a lot more straightforward.

“I can’t imagine you managed to read much of it before sleep took you, then,” Solas says, eyes still far from the playful look he had when teasing you.

“Only a little,” you admit. It’s a bald-faced lie; you’d read for hours, right up until you rolled out of bed for your daily beating. “I started with the section on Compassion. It’s informative, but… Cole is different… at least, he seems to be. Admittedly, I’m hardly an expert.”

“Cole is unique. Normally, spirits cannot take a physical form or exist solidly outside the Fade without a host. Cole defies both of these facts.”

“Are all spirits…” you tap your head, unable to find the proper word. “…Odd, like Cole is? The way he talks and thinks is different.” It’s frustrating to hold a conversation in which you genuinely want to learn while lying about the knowledge you already possess. Much like your early training with Iron Bull, it’s more about pretending to learn things you already know. Annoying when it’s fighting, but when it’s something you have a genuine curiosity about? It’s agonizing.

“Spirits mimic aspects of life that they see through the Veil. They’re not always accurate, and they don’t always see nuance or… ‘shades of grey,’ as it were. None act quite like the humans they seek to mimic. Cole is, again, unique. He is here. He is learning.”

You’re quiet for a little, simply eating as you process Solas’ words. Cole certainly is a treasure… both in his rarity and in the simple fact that he’s a kind-hearted individual who seems to genuinely care about you. That’s some bitter poetry… You always hoped that one day you’d meet someone willing to look past your flaws and failures, and genuinely care about you. It just took you meeting a
spirit whose sole purpose is caring about people.

“He must be popular,” you muse out loud.

“Quite the contrary. Most cannot even remember they ever saw him, and of those who can, most fear or dislike him for his ability to see even their deepest secrets.” Was it just you, or did that comment seem barbed? Well, Cole did say he’d mentioned to Solas that you’d requested Cole’s silence. Under the same circumstances, you would be positively erupting with suspicion.

“I wish I could say that sounds anything but typical,” you say with a sigh. You gnaw idly on a particularly chewy piece of crust. “I wonder why I remember him? And I wonder if I’m actually remembering all of my encounters with him. Maker, that’s a weird thought.”

“You may not be,” Solas says with a chuckle. “I’ve witnessed him make a mistake while trying to comfort someone, only to make them forget and then immediately try again.”

“That’s… alright, I guess that’s a little frightening,” you admit. “But as long as he doesn’t have me forgetting anything important, I suppose it’s worth the risk.”

“What’s worth the risk?”

“Cole. Getting to know him. He’s… I mean, yes, admittedly, he’s unique and fascinating and an anomaly and all of that. I doubt I’ll ever get another chance to talk with a spirit like this. But he’s also… genuine. Kind-hearted.” You pause for a moment as you chew and think. “I find myself thinking more about what you said before… about spirits being people,” you confess.

“Oh? Have you come to any new conclusions?” Solas has long since finished eating, and you’re only gnawing on hard-to-chew scraps at this point, but he’s yet to go back to reading.

“Cole is the only spirit I’ve met. I’m not sure if I can really make any conclusion just based on him, but… If anyone tried to tell me he wasn’t a person, I think I’d be offended. I’d think them an idiot, certainly.”

Solas smiles, and your eyes latch onto it. Such a broad smile from Solas feels like a summer sunrise. He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to; you can practically feel the approval. To cover for the sudden spread of heat to your face, you quickly begin fumbling with the dishes. “I… better take these back to the kitchen, then,” you mutter pointlessly, gathering them all up in a heap and skedaddling out the rotunda door.

The crowd has been moved evenly to either side of the Great Hall when you exit the rotunda. You quickly see why… there’s a man being brought up the middle of the hall in chains, with armed guards on either side. Seems like you spent a little too long conversing with Solas.

You’re hardly going to dart across, so you just sort of stand there, awkwardly holding a stack of dirty dishes and tableware. The crowd doesn’t even move out of your way, but instead pushes and bumps you around. You wind up nowhere near Solas’ door by the time you hear the Commander’s voice ring through the hall.

“Knight-Captain Denam, Inquisitor. He awaits judgment for serving the Lord Seeker at Therinfal Redoubt. I knew some of the knights who died there… I asked to oversee his sentencing.” You barely repress a shudder… you’re quite glad you can’t see Commander Cullen from your place in the crowd, although with the rate you’re being shoved around, that may change. His voice is cold, hard, and angry… everything you’ve learned to fear in Templars.

“Denam knew the dangers of red lyrium,” Cullen continues. “He murdered the knight-vigilant and
corrupted his brothers and sisters.

You hear the Inquisitor’s voice then, just as cold, but slightly bored-sounding, as if he has better things to do. “We'll find a suitable punishment for the good captain.” You can’t help remember that the Inquisitor has been training as a Templar as well. You have no sympathy for the man in chains, but you are very glad you’re not in his position. If you’re not very careful, it’s quite possible you will be one day.

A voice cries out, cutting through the murmurs of the crowd. “I only did as I was told!” That must be Knight-Captain Denam, then, mounting the classical “not my fault” defense. You suppose there’s not much else he can say, in these circumstances.

The fury in the Commander’s voice as he cuts Denam off sends a chill through you. “We found everything! The corpse of the knight-vigilant, even papers proving you knew red lyrium was poison!”

Ah… so that’s what the man had gotten up to. No wonder rumors are circulating that the Inquisitor will sentence him to death.

“There is a greater power walking this world!” the Knight-Captain explodes. “I wasn't fool enough to deny it. None of you would have. I demand justice!” A greater power…? Is he talking about that… thing, that they were saying destroyed Haven? You’d thought that to be no more than rumor. Red Templars would be enough to blow through a small town’s petty defenses. Are the Templars perhaps delusional, or is there really more going on here?

The Inquisitor waits for the murmuring to die down before speaking in a clear, clipped voice. “I didn't suffer at your hands. That was your knights in the Templar Order. Let the remaining Templars judge the man who failed them.”

Poetic, you suppose. The penalty will most certainly be death, or at least, that’s what the screaming Knight-Captain seems to think. You watch as he’d dragged back through the hall. Interesting… will the Templar put on a show of their own, or merely run the man through? It will probably be a more private affair than this, in any case. After Denam’s screaming fades away, you push your way through the crowds as best you can. They’re not dispersing quickly, although they are spacing out a bit, which enables you to get to the door that leads to the servant’s quarters and kitchen.

As you enter the door, not only Celia but several others workers suddenly swarm you.

“You’re not even recognize. “Did you see what happened? Has the Inquisitor judged him yet? We heard a fuss in the courtyard!”

You blink in surprise as the dishes are quickly unloaded from your arms. “Um… Yeah, I got caught in the Great Hall while it all happened…”

“I knew it!” exclaims Celia, then clears her throat awkwardly as you stare at her. “Well, I just figured, you know, since you work up in the rotunda, you’d be able to see…”

“What happened?” demands someone else.

“The Inquisitor handed the Knight-Captain over to the Templars. It seems to be expected that they’ll execute him for treason against the Order,” you explain. There are gasps around the kitchen. You note with some amusement that even Gaston is listening in, although he’s pretending to sharpen a knife and ignore his surroundings.

“That’ll make the Templars happy…”
“I wonder if there’ll be a public execution?”
“What is it with you and executions?”

It’s actually quite a while before you manage to escape the kitchens. The girls want to know every last detail of the trial, since they couldn’t see it themselves. You find yourself a little swept up in it, but as long as the Commander never knows you had a pot placed on your head while you acted out his role in the trial, you should be fine.

“Aaargh! Noooo!” you exclaim dramatically as you pretend to be dragged out of the kitchen by two cooks playing the role of the guards. “You can’t do thiiiiis!”

“Was he really so dramatic?” wonders one of the serving girls who’s enjoying your impromptu re-enactment.

“Justice has been served!” you shout out, throwing your voice across the room and speaking in a poor facsimile of the Inquisitor’s voice, deep baritone and very manly. “Nooooooooo-“ you cry out, switching back to the voice you’re using for Denam as you’re dragged out the door and around the corner.

The applause surprises you a bit, but you dart back into the doorway to take a quick bow before Gaston yells out, “Oh, alright, get out of here, malin lapin!” and waves his knife vaguely at you. You give a little Orlesian curtsy to him before darting off. The laughter of the kitchen staff follows you, echoing through the hallway.

“You’re the oddest messenger I’ve ever seen.”

You’ve never run into anyone other than servants on your way to and from the kitchen, so the voice, with it’s clear Tevinter accent, makes you jump. You stare into the somewhat shadowed archway where the voice came from… it’s the Tevinter mage you delivered a missive to, once, complete with his Templar escort. …Servis, his name had been. Crassius Servis.

“Can I help you, ser?” you ask after you’ve composed yourself.

“Oh, no; I’m just attracted to the sounds of merriment,” he says dryly. “I take it the next fellow didn’t fare so well as I under the Inquisitor’s judgment.”

“You’re… Oh.” You clear your throat delicately. “That explains the Templar, then.” The Templar merely glares.

The Tevinter mage snorts. “Did you think all mages of the Inquisition were leashed like this?”

“This is the South, ser,” you say wryly. “All the mages have leashes.”

“Not anymore,” he says, his eyes glinting. “Not since the rebellion. Even here, in the stronghold of the Southern Templars, I see mages running around without a Templar guard following them. Why, even one of my countrymen, free as a lark.”

“Did you want a second showing of my performance, ser, or can I get back to my work?” you ask as politely as you can manage. You may prefer mages to Templars, but Vints will never be your favorite people, despite the best efforts of both Dorian and Krem. Even if you do enjoy their sarcastic nature sometimes.

“I can think of a great number of performances I’d like to see you do,” the man says with the sly grin of a snake. “But far be it from me to keep a woman from her duties! …Whatever those may be.”
You give the man a bow in the Tevinter style, one a servant might give to an Altus. The look of surprise on Servis’ face when you rise from it is worth it. You grin your own serpentine smile at him before you head back towards the rotunda.

- “That took you quite a while,” Solas comments as you (finally) make it back to the rotunda.

“Maker, tell me about it,” you grumble. “I got caught in the Great Hall for the proceedings, then the girls in the kitchen wanted to know what happened, then I got quizzed by a Vint mage. Mondays…”

“Can you not even make across Skyhold without trouble?” asks Solas, sounding amused. “I shudder to think what happened while I was gone.”

“If you can imagine it, it probably happened,” you say, sinking down into your desk chair. “Well, at least now I can finally-“

“Hey! Psssst! Elfy! Hey!”

Fuck.

You glance over to the door, where Sera is utterly failing at being subtle.

“Elfy! Over here!”

“Sera, you know you can come in,” Solas says mildly.

She glares over at him before opening the door the rest of the way. “I’m just here for Emma,” she says stubbornly, crossing her arms. “She’s got trainin’.”

“So I hear,” Solas says, leveling you with a long, pointed look.

You sigh. This is so not the elf sandwich you’d like to be involved in with these two. “You’re a bit earlier than usual, Sera.”

“Thought I might have trouble pryin’ you two apart. Might be obsessin’ over some old book or sommit.”

You don’t know what hurts more, the derision or the accuracy. “My job is obsessing over old books, Sera,” you say with a sigh as you stand.

“Don’t you have work to do?” interjects Solas.

“Hey! This is work!” Sera protests. You raise your eyebrows; Solas must do something similar because Sera makes a face at the both of you. “Too much elf in this room! C’mon, Em.”

You give Solas an apologetic look as you follow Sera out of the door onto the walkway above the courtyard.

“Ugh,” she says as the two of you walk towards the outer walls. “I dunno why you work with him, Em. Such an ass.”

“I don’t work with him, I work near him,” you correct. “And I doubt you’re actually curious about my reasons.”

“Ugh, definitely not,” she says with a gagging noise. “Watchin’ that old perv flirt with you just-“
“Maker, Sera, what is your problem?” you snap.

“It’s that Solas!” she snaps right back. “He’s too elfy! He-“

“I don’t know if you missed this, Sera,” you exclaim, pointing at one of your pointed ears, “But I’m an elf!” You shout this perhaps a little more loudly than intended… a passing guard looks over, startled.

“So am I! But we’re not weird about it like he is! S’not all we are!” she protests right back.

“Solas and I share an interest in Elven history,” you say through gritted teeth. “As well as many other forms of history, as my job is translating ancient texts. I like that you see past my ears, Sera. Really. It’s one of many things that I love about you. But that doesn’t mean the rest of the world doesn’t see them! I-“

“Wait, love?”

You flush, a combination of embarrassment and anger. “I… don’t get semantic on me! I just… I mean… You know, the rest of the world treats us differently because we’re elves. You have to know this! You were on those posters!”

“What the hell was on those posters that has anythin’ to do with this?”

“You know, ‘An Inquisition for All’?”

“It is! For the little people, you know! Not just the big, stupid ones.”

You pause, eyes widening in mild horror as you realize the implications. She doesn’t know. “…Sera… The Inquisition only hung those up in alienages and stores that elves frequented, from what I saw.”

“They… wot?” She looks confused, then shocked, then angry. “They wot?! Those little shits! They told me that was to get the little people more comfortable with the Inquisition! I thought they were full of it, but then you showed up, and… Maker, and you’re an elf! I’m going to kill them. Oooooh, that Eugene prat is history; I’m going to cram an arrow right up his-“

You cut off her rant, catching her shoulder as she turns to leave, probably to shove an arrow someplace unpleasant. “Sera, I’m sorry. I, um… thought you knew.”

“Well, I didn’t! I never would’ve agreed if I knew they were turning into some weird, stupid elf thing!” she snaps.

“Yeah, that’s shit… Although you probably shouldn’t actually shoot anyone…?”

“Ugh!” She throws her arms up into the air in frustration. “Stupid bloody pissbag nobles think they just…” You follow after her as she storms across the ramparts. She doesn’t seem to be going anywhere in particular, but you do want to make sure she doesn’t try to shoot the Inquisitor. Especially not because of something you said. You just let her rant as she paces, try to keep up, and offer occasional platitudes.

Eventually, near the tavern, she slows. “I didn’t bring ya out here to argue, y’know,” she says with a sigh.

“I know… And I am sorry. I really didn’t know that you… didn’t know,” you say lamely.
“Eh, I’m sorry too. I’ll deal with his Inquisitorialness later,” she says with a scowl. “I actually thought of somethin’ fun to show you, and I’m not letting a bunch of assholes ruin it.”

“What did you think of?” you ask, relieved to have something to distract her with. It’s not like you to lose your temper… Okay, yes, it is. But you’d rather not lose it at Sera.

“Well, you’re good at throwin’ knives, yeah? So I was thinkin’ about neat stuff I’ve seen people do with knives, and that made me think of this!” She reaches into a nearby barrel—that’s why she was going towards the tavern, presumably--and pulls out a potato.

“…Knives made you think of potatoes?”

“Not potatoes! Jugglin’!” she says cheerfully.

“Oh… That makes much more sense.”

“Oh, shut it, you.”

Despite its rocky start, your afternoon with Sera passes pleasantly. You actually really don’t know how to juggle, although it seems like the kind of thing you would have picked up somewhere. Sera is right; your natural dexterity lends itself well to this sort of thing, although by the end you’ve probably dropped more potatoes than you caught. Sera even tries to show you two-person juggling, where you use six potatoes and toss them back and forth. She gets hit in the face with a potato for her trouble. You only stop when the sun begins to get low in the sky, and you remember you still have duties.

You don’t want to see how sour Solas will be if you’re late with his dinner because you were fooling around with Sera.

You don’t tell Sera that’s where you’re going, however. Whatever her issue with Solas is, you don’t want to exacerbate it. “Hey, sorry, but I have to go play house-elf to that person you hate” would probably exacerbate. Instead, you make your normal work-related excuses, and head towards the kitchen. You’re expecting any number of things when you arrive, but Cole determinedly carrying an entire sack of turnips out the back door is not one of them. You hold the door open for him and watch as literally no one appears to take notice of the young man carrying the giant turnip bag. You watch as he crosses the courtyard, then slowly shake your head. He has a good reason… probably.

You pull together a dinner for you and Solas, and find that the kitchen has returned to being happy to see you after a few days of sourness over how you procured food for the orphans. If you’d known it was as simple as making a fool of yourself for their amusement, you might have tried it earlier. Either way, you’re certainly not complaining when one of the chefs points out a tray of chocolates for one of the Orlesian dignitaries.

They won’t miss half a dozen, surely. You put them on a plate and tuck it under a cover for good measure. No point in advertising your theft.

“I was beginning to worry I would be missing dinner,” Solas comments as you enter the rotunda.

“Sorry if I’m a bit late,” you apologize. “But I’ve got something to make up for it.” You place the covered plate down on the desk, but hold it closed when he reaches for it. “Uh-uh. After dinner. Haven’t you ever heard to eat your vegetables?”

“Desert then, I take it? More cakes, pilfered from the decadent Orlesians?” Solas says wryly.

“Clean your plate first,” you say with a wink, placing the rest of his food in front of him. You unload
your food as well, and sit down on your little stool at the corner of his desk. Interestingly, it always seems to be there when you arrive with Solas’ food, but you never notice it while you’re working. Is he honestly moving it so you have a place to sit? The thought makes your heart beat a little harder.

“So,” Solas says after a moment of just eating. You note that he appears to be skipping over the turnips in his salad… One more thing to remember for future meals. “What sorts of things is Sera ‘training’ you in?”

“Whatever she happens to think of,” you say with a laugh. “She tried teaching me to shoot a bow, but I’m useless at it. Climbing walls, picking locks, acrobatics… Typical roguish talents, I suppose.”

“Climbing walls?”

He would latch on to that one.

“Mmhmm. Amazingly, I didn’t actually get injured that time.”

“That time?” His eyebrows shoot up.

“Aha… Yes, well, you know. Accidents happen.”

He looks remarkably unconvinced, but you’re definitely not going into any of the details. “Today, she was showing me how to juggle.” You pause, waiting for him to take a drink, then add “I’m terrible at it, of course, but I got to hit her in the face with a potato.”

Solas chokes on his drink at that. You feel quite satisfied. You smile as he coughs to clear his throat, patting himself on the chest. “It’s a shame you two can’t stand each other, really.”

“I promise you,” Solas says as he wipes off his mouth delicately with a napkin. “The distaste is purely one-way. I have no particular issue with our… friend.”

The way he pauses before he says “friend” catches your ear, but it has so many possible meanings that you don’t dwell on it. He may suspect you and Sera of being more than friends—not an entirely baseless assumption—or it could be any other number of things, ranging from harmless to telling.

“In the end, it still means the only one I have to ride harts with is Belassan,” you say with a laugh. Solas quirks an eyebrow upward. “Is that an invitation?”

“Do you want it to be?” Two can play the “answer everything with a question” game, damn it.

Solas doesn’t answer, merely looks at you, and the silence stretches out as the two of you maintain eye contact for far longer than you’re comfortable with. You’re the one who chickens out first, glancing down to your plate and deciding to stare at it for a while, instead. So much for beating him at his own game… or even successfully playing it for longer than two minutes. Thank the Maker you never ran into anyone like Solas in Orlais.

It’s ridiculous, honestly, and you find yourself filling with self-loathing as you glare pointlessly at your turnips. You’ve been able to stare down men and women far more attractive than Solas. This is just… objectively stupid. You’re a fully grown woman, goddamnit, not a bitch in heat! You have self-control!

You take a deep breath and look back up from your plate. Solas is resting his chin against the back of one hand, leaning against the desk, fork dangling from his hand. More importantly, however, he’s still looking at you. You feel a bolt of heat straight through your body. Self-control, dammit!
“Did you honestly get that tome from a dealer in Redcliffe?” you say, opting for changing the subject entirely. Solas gazes at you for a moment longer before going back to eating like nothing had happened.

“That is what I said, is it not?”

“It is. I suppose he was hoping to sell it to the mages there… That book has to be black market. There’s no way the Chantry wouldn’t ban it.” You pause to chew for a moment. “Of course, I’m in possession of a children’s book that’s been banned by the Chantry. Hard to take them very seriously when they ban children’s books, honestly.”

“I thought you were Andrastian?”

“I am. That doesn’t mean I have to approve of everything the Chantry says. The Divines are human. Amara III is a person who existed and was likely completely insane, as much as the Chantry likes to forget about such things… as was Theodosia II, well known for her divinely ironic statements on the importance of chastity among the servants of the Maker. I suspect that if you took a poll, the majority of the Chantry would say that an elf can’t be Andrastian. Renata I declared via divine writ that elves had strayed further from the Maker than mankind, and therefore have no place in the Chantry, or, indeed, in the faith at all. Paradoxically, if I were to restrict myself and live by everything that the Chantry said, I would have to cease to be Andrastian… therefore I would find myself no longer needing to listen to the Chantry, and would be free to be Andrastian.”

Solas is smiling again, ever so slightly, and you’re really not sure why. “So if not loyalty or faith in the Chantry, what fuels your belief?”

You tsk gently at Solas, wagging your finger. “I believe now is when I distract you from the topic at hand before my tongue pulls me into trouble.”

“Oh? And how do you intend to distract me?”

Another rush of heat from your core to the tips of your ears. Purely accidental, you’re sure, but Maker did that sound suggestive. You simply reach over and pull the cover off the small plate of chocolates. Solas’ eyebrows rise with the lid.

“How did you pilfer these, da’ahlras?”

“By being my charming self, of course. I’d love to know where the Inquisition got the cocoa. Can’t afford enough blankets to go around to refugees, but they can import delicacies from Par Vollen for spoiled Orlesians,” you say bitterly.

Solas takes one of the elaborate chocolates from the plate and bites into it… You would be once again amused by his tendency to take small bites out of tiny things were you not so enamored by the face he makes. His eyes slide shut as he savors the taste, seemingly letting it melt in his mouth before popping in the rest of the chocolate. You stare at the melted chocolate on his fingers for entirely longer than is appropriate. Fortunately, he’s still savoring, so you have time to wrestle your filthy mind back into control… Just in time for him to lick the bit of melted chocolate off his fingers.

Maker’s breath.

You had originally been planning on eating half of the chocolates yourself. Now you’re considering just sitting back and watching him eat them all. The sight has you drooling more than the smell of the cocoa.

“Delicious,” he says after having sufficiently savored the flavor of a single small chunk of chocolate.
You hang onto every syllable before attempting to shake some sense back into yourself. You probably would look like a buffoon if Solas was bothering to pay you any mind at all.

“Well,” you say, a little weakly. “Consider yourself distracted.”

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You wind up eating only one of the six chocolates, and that only because Solas noticed that you hadn’t eaten any and invited you to have the last one. It was nearly as sweet as Solas simply saying the word “delicious,” and it had nothing on the sight of him licking chocolate off of his fingers. That will fuel your imagination for years to come, no doubt.

Fortunately, you remember your tavern date with Varric before you can make any more of a tit out of yourself, and rush the dishes back to the kitchen before heading to the Herald’s Rest. Varric has secured the two of you a little table off in a corner, and as it’s still early, the tavern isn’t very crowded. He slides you a mug of ale as you sit down across from him.

“Maker, this has been a long Monday, Varric,” you say after taking a long drink from the mug.

“You certainly look… flustered. Been thinking about Fenris?” he teases gently.

You roll your eyes, but his words making you think about Fenris licking chocolate, and you find you really need to submerge yourself in cold water and possibly say a few prayers.

“Past the description in your book, I have no idea what he even looks like,” you point out. Not that it’d stopped you from fantasizing in the past, of course. “Now… what was it he said he wanted to know, again?”

“I thought you might have trouble remembering,” Varric says with a grin. “So I had one of the mages copy this for you.” He slides a small piece of parchment across the table towards you. Your face begins flushing red the second you lay eyes on it… It’s a magical copy of the part of Fenris’ letter that Varric had read to you… the part about you.

Your fingers curl gently around the paper as you read Fenris calling you “charming” in his own handwriting. Maker’s breath… “My life is good,” you mutter aloud, face now quite pink. Then you clear your throat. “Alright. How I escaped. Hmm… I suppose it’s only fair. I know the story of his escape, as does most of Thedas.”

You glance around the bar. No one of particular note is in here, and no one you recognize as one of Leliana’s. You still wind up lowering your voice and leaning in to talk quietly with Varric, however.

“This is just for Fenris, Varric… I don’t want to hear this around Skyhold. And under no circumstances are you allowed to share any of this with Iron Bull, do you understand?”

Now he just looks more interested, but he holds up a hand. “Dwarf’s honor.”

“That’s an oxymoron,” you say dryly. “Especially for you Merchant’s Guild types.”

“I’m hurt, Stutter!”

“You will be, if Iron Bull gets wind of this,” you say with a scowl. “Now, listen closely, because I’m only going to tell this story once.”

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*Emma was only twelve when she escaped slavery in Seheron. Does that seem young? She says she*
only knows that because when she hit the mainland, she learned that it was her thirteenth birthday. But more on that later.

She worked in a Tevinter stronghold, built partially into the side of a mountain. She was kept away from the action, but apparently her few encounters with Qunari and Fog Warriors in skirmishes while traveling across the island were enough to put fear into her. She was convinced she’d be run through by Qunari immediately if she tried to escape the stronghold.

Perhaps it’s ironic, then, that it’s the same Qunari she feared so much that gave her a chance to escape. To hear her tell it, it was all luck, but to me, it sounds like quite a bit of quick thinking and no small amount of bravery... especially for a twelve year old girl. I think you’ll agree.

There was a raid on the stronghold. Somehow, the Qunari had learned of its existence and of its relative lack of armed soldiers. They hit it, and hard. It was chaos from the word go. The screaming woke her, but her door wouldn’t open. She slammed into it until it eventually opened, and by then, the screaming had passed. It was a dead body that had been blocking the door... and the hall was full of them. She was covered in blood in short order. She says she thinks that’s what saved her. She started running. Whenever she heard Qunari coming, she would play dead, even hide among the dead bodies... some of which she recognized. Covered in blood the way she was, they assumed her one more casualty.

She managed to make it outside, although she had no idea what to do... Everyone she knew on the island was back in that stronghold, probably dead. And to make things worse... a fog was rolling in. Somehow, the Fog Warriors had learned of the location at the same time, probably through the same leak, and Emma realized it was about to be a threeway massacre.

She’s convinced some of the Fog Warriors must have seen her out there. But, well... she was a twelve year old girl covered in blood. They left her alone. She made it to the docks, somehow, and convinced some rather unsavory Antivan pirates to take her aboard. She neglected to give me the details of how; she was pretty deep in the drink by that point. I suspect the whole “twelve year old girl covered in blood” thing played into it again.

I hope that sates your curiosity some, friend. It took her a lot of ale to get through the whole story. But trust me, she’s looking forward to meeting you. Speaking of which...

- You’re already drunk by the time the Chargers enter the bar, around when you were purposefully leaving out the “and then I set them on fire HA” part of your life story. That effectively ends the interview with Varric. You even manage to escape the bar after sharing another drink or two with the Chargers... You suspect Iron Bull can tell that you’re not exactly in the mood for a party.

You stumble out the door to the tavern and into the cold air, determined to make it to bed and pass out, whether you can properly sleep or not. Unfortunately, well... “lone elf woman drunkenly staggers across courtyard” is the sort of thing that a certain kind of man takes note of.

“Hey there, knife-ear,” a slimy voice leaks into your ear.

Maker, this day never ends.

You turn around slowly, eyeing the man up and down, as well as taking as much stock of your surroundings as you can in your inebriated condition.

“Where you heading? Seems like you could use a bit of company,” he says, complete with
accompanying leer.

You sigh. He’s taken care to do this when you’re almost to your quarters. You’re too close to the wall for a passing guard to notice you, unless he happens to be directly above when you scream. It’s late. There aren’t a lot of people around. And you’re drunk. This man might have terrible taste in victims in this particular case, but it’s clear he has at least a passing notion of what he’s doing.

That’s when you recognize him. One of your first nights here in Skyhold… One of two drunken men who’d propositioned you, the one who ran off when the Templar showed up. No Templar around right now, though. You eye him up and down… are you too drunk to incapacitate without killing? Do you even care? Your hand slips around to your back, where your knife is hidden. If you miss and hit an artery, well… No real loss.

“Friend of yours, Emma?”

Your hand freezes a few inches from the hilt of your dagger. The man freezes as well, his sleazy grin melting into surprise. Iron Bull walks a bit closer, then leans casually against the fortress wall.

“Not at all, Bull,” you say, eyeing the man coldly. “I believe he was just leaving.”

The man takes the escape you give him quickly, not running, but walking as quickly as he can in the opposite direction. You watch him leave, then sigh.

“I’d scold you for following me if you hadn’t just saved my ass,” you grumble.

“Eh, you probably could have taken him,” Bull says with a grin.

“Sober, maybe… which I’m decidedly not. Although I feel a lot more sober than I did five minutes ago.” You run a hand across your head, absent-mindedly checking your hair. “Maybe I should hire the Chargers. Apparently I need an escort just to get into bed intact.”

“Most of the guys around here are all talk,” Bull says, giving you a comforting pat on the shoulder. “Tell ‘em to fuck off. And if that doesn’t work, break his nose.”

You grin. “If I punch him as hard as I’m used to punching you, I’d probably break something important, huh?”

“That’s the spirit! Now let’s get you to bed before anyone else notices the pretty, drunk elf girl,” he says, gripping you by both shoulders and steering you towards the door.

Chapter End Notes

Edited to add: Okay, guys, I have a srs question. Most of you are probably aware of Curious, the Solas PoV tie-in fic. I’ve been working on the second chapter, but here’s the question. Would you rather multiple very short chapter updates as we work through this upcoming in-story week, or one large one towards the end of it? Please let me know!

Forgot my translations.
Malin lapin (Orlesian) = clever rabbit (could also mean evil rabbit)
da’ahlras (Elven) = little thief
Passing out from alcohol doesn’t actually help you get real sleep. It just lets you be unconscious for a while. It’s just as well, you suppose… if it did let you sleep, you’d probably be a proper alcoholic by now, instead of someone who consistently makes bad decisions around large quantities of hops. Fortunately, though you were drinking to numb the pain of old memories—the escape from Seheron is rather high on the list of things you might consider asking Cole to make you forget—you didn’t actually overdo it too much. You feel a little dried out and dizzy upon waking, but not significantly hung over.

It’s just as well, since you have to go get knocked over by a Qunari now. Maker, your daily rituals are absurd. When you get there, however, you’re pleased to note that the Chargers must have taken it light on the alcohol as well, since Iron Bull is standing next to a much smaller figure… Krem.

You’re pleased to see him, although admittedly that’s mostly because if he’s here, that means you probably won’t be sparring with Iron Bull. Thank the Maker… You’ve come a long way from the days where you would simply practice punching him. Admittedly, this is better; you’re actually learning new things now, but… Your sore body is hating you for it lately.

“Hey, Krem!” you say with a grin as you jump the fence into the ring. “Iron Bull finally get so tired of brutalizing me that he had to call in help?”

“Wow, so many innuendos to make… I can’t pick,” Bull muses to himself, tapping his chin as if deep in thought. You and Krem roll your eyes, nearly in unison.

“The boss wanted to see your progress on someone closer to your own size, so…” he gestures vaguely to himself. “Here I am.”

He’s dressed similarly to you, trousers and a casual shirt, although his pants actually fit. You note that he has leather greaves and bracers, however, likely because he’s expecting to have to take blows repeatedly. He’ll try to redirect you onto his forearms, then, to avoid the kind of painful bruises you’re covered in. You size him up while the three of you stretch. Bull has been sticking to grapples and trips, but with Krem here, he might take this opportunity to teach you how to block or avoid actual blows. Krem doesn’t run the risk of rupturing your insides with a misplaced punch, after all. And if Bull does decide that? That means you have to take a bunch of punches to demonstrate that you don’t already know how to do this. Ugh.

Krem isn’t even half a foot taller than you. You’re average for an elf, making Krem a good bit shorter than the average human man. You know from your grappling session (and a few drunken sit-ups) that he’s solid, however. You resolve not to underestimate his strength, and to expect him to be faster than Bull due to his smaller size.
Bull doesn’t give you any instructions, just tells you to go for it, so you assume he briefed Krem ahead of time. Well… No point in dragging this out. After a few seconds of shifting your weight from one foot to another, watching Krem to see if he plans on taking a swing at you, you dart forward. He blocks your basic one-two punch with ease, and you bounce backwards onto the heels of your feet as he makes a grab for your collar. He almost gets you; damn this loose clothing. The outstretched arm gives you an idea, however.

You dart in for another punch, not giving him anything new yet. When he goes for another grapple, you swerve to the side, reaching up and twisting your right arm around his as he lunges forward with it. You see the beginnings of surprise on his face as you hook your arm around his, but you allow his own momentum to carry him a bit further past you. Then you place your arm on his shoulder and jump, carrying his grappled arm up with you as you hook one leg under his right armpit and throw the other up over his left shoulder. You’re effectively riding him the way you had Bull, although it’s a bit less dramatic since he’s close to your own size. You’re using his arm--now twisted back and up uncomfortably--for leverage, since Krem is inconveniently lacking in the “giant handlebar horns” department. Despite that, however, the general concept is the same, as well as the effectiveness.

Unfortunately, Krem is stronger than you. You have him off guard and in a compromised position, but he reaches up blindly with his left arm and grabs a handful of your shirt, yanking you forward. You cling as tight as you can; your shirt tears slightly, but more importantly, the sudden jerk forward sends him off balance as well. The two of you topple forwards; he goes to roll on his left shoulder and you follow the momentum, ducking your head to avoid smashing it against the ground. Both of you roll over, eventually coming to a stop on your backs, your legs still around his chest.

The two of you just sort of lay there for a moment/. Krem, likely because you’re clinging to him like a desperate flea. You, because you just slammed your bruised back into the ground with 150 pounds of solid muscle on top of you, and you… you just need a minute. You’re not crying; your eyes are just watering from the shock, that’s all. Ow.

After a few seconds you have the common sense to stop clinging, and Krem, mercifully, rolls off of you. You stay on the ground for a little longer.

“Geez, she really took that squirrel thing and ran with it, huh?” Krem says, wincing as he rubs his shoulder.

“Seems so. I don’t think she’s quite mastered the art of hurting her opponent more than herself, though,” Bull says, walking over and nudging you in the side with a booted foot. You make a vague, whining noise.

“Oh, shit,” Krem says, kneeling down next to you. “I landed on top of you! Are you alright?”


“Don’t look guilty Krem, for fuck’s sake,” Bull says, sounding exasperated. “She just spun you like a top!”

Krem offers you his arm and you latch onto it, letting him help pull you up. Your torn shirt is gaping open somewhat, and you catch both men looking down it. Krem at least has the courtesy to look away quickly, staring upwards as if suddenly fascinated by the pre-dawn sky. You tug at the shirt and sigh. “ Barely fit me anyway… I have to get some better clothes.”

“You can always put in a request with the--” Krem begins.

“The requisition agents, yeah, I know. I’m going to have to drop a stack of requests on their desk at
this point. I’d prefer to just buy my own, since I doubt they’ll get anything that even begins to fit me properly. But I can’t exactly run into town from here.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of the downside to the whole ‘isolated fortress in the mountains’ thing. But hey, less Venatori knocking down our front door, right?” Bull says with a chuckle. “You wanna get another shirt or something?”

“Nah,” you say with a shrug. “No point. It’s not like any of the others fit me any better.” In truth, if the way Krem’s eyes flitting about are any measure, this will give you a bit of an advantage. You doubt he’ll underestimate you twice after getting climbed on like that.

And indeed he does not. Even with the advantage of him trying not to stare down your shirt, Krem is just plain stronger than you. You might be a little faster, maybe, if you felt comfortable moving as fast as you know you can… But there’s no way you can do that and get away with it, so you have to content yourself with moving more slowly and getting your ass kicked.

Fortunately, the Iron Bull doesn’t decide to introduce being punched into your daily routine, thank the Maker. You manage to get the drop on Krem a few more times, once by saying something rather off-color about “grappling” in Tevene to startle him, quiet and close enough to his ear that Bull can’t hear it. The morning practice ends when Krem manages to not only lock both your arms behind your back, but hooks both arms with one of his, leaving his other free to get you in a headlock.

You’re never good with the sensation of someone pinning you from behind, and the second that arm goes up against your neck… **Strong arms grip you, wooden bar of a spear tight against your neck.** Blood and fog flash before your eyes, and you give one violent thrash, but Bull quickly intervenes before you have the chance to completely flip or start screaming. He gives some kind of hand gesture to Krem, something you don’t even begin to recognize, and Krem immediately releases you. You collapse into the dirt, hand desperately clasping your neck despite the fact Krem didn’t put any pressure against it. The tears in your eyes are most certainly not from exertion this time, but both Iron Bull and Krem give you a moment to compose yourself. You can hear the Vint panting behind you, nearly as out of breath as you are.

You don’t give yourself time to fully recover, not wanting to lose face in front of Krem or have an awkward explanation on your hands. You make a show of wiping off your face to hide removing the tears; you get up while your limbs are still shaking. Fortunately, Bull declares it time for breakfast. It’s just as well… you and Krem are looking a bit worse for the wear. Both of you are sweaty, covered in dirt, and just generally disgusting. That doesn’t stop all three of you from heading straight to the breakfast hall, however.

The walk over gives you a little bit of time to clear your head, but when the Iron Bull rests a friendly hand on your shoulder at the end of one of his jokes, you flinch. To his credit, Bull doesn’t make a fuss or jerk away, just removes his hand normally and walks a little bit further away to give you your space. If he weren’t a Qunari, you could kiss him for his skill at handling you when you’re panicked. Of course, that would be a terrible idea for any number of reasons.

Krem seems concerned, but he’s doing a decent job of hiding it. The normal teasing back and forth between him and Iron Bull soothes you. By the time you’ve all gotten your breakfast and grabbed a seat, you’re feeling a bit less shell-shocked. You sit directly next to Krem--across from Bull--and the solidity of Krem’s hip against yours helps keep you in the present. Technically, he should freak you out more than Bull, being Tevinter, but humans just don’t have the same dramatical physical differences as Qunari. You can’t tell a Vint from a Fereldan until they open their mouths. Plus, if Krem was a soldier there’s a very good chance he was only a few rings above you on the Tevinter social ladder.
“I’m surprised how good she’s gotten in a few weeks,” Krem is saying to Iron Bull. “I bet she’s black and blue under those clothes, though.”

“Oh? You wanting to see under her clothes, Krem?” Iron Bull asks with a smirk.

“I… what? No! I mean… That’s not what I said!” Krem protests, and his uncomfortable squirming makes you laugh, nearly the first sound you’ve made since your near-miss in the ring.

“Right, like you weren’t both looking down my shirt. Bull still is,” you say with a grin. “I’m not blind. What you were looking at, I’ll never know,” you add, patting yourself on your rather flat chest.

Krem’s ears start turning bright pink, and you laugh again, joined by Iron Bull’s jovial chortle.

“I just… I just meant that Iron Bull’s pretty rough—”

“Yes. Yes I am,” Bull supplements, and you collapse into laughter again.

It feels good to be able to joke about this sort of thing. The Chargers understand there’s no relationship between you and Bull (at least, you’re pretty sure they do), which really takes the pressure off. The teasing makes everything seem a lot less serious, less dire. You can forget that there might be serious side effects to the rumors of your promiscuity, at least for a little while.

“I’m pretty banged up,” you admit to Krem. “I think I scared the ladies in the bathhouse yesterday.”

“If it gets too painful, you can stop by the healer’s tent—” Krem begins, but stops, confused, when you and Bull start laughing again.

“Oh, Maker, can you imagine?” you say through your giggles. “I can just tell them I fell down the stairs again, they’ll definitely believe that three times, right?”

“Three times?” Krem says, sounding dumbfounded.

“I actually did fall down the stairs, that’s the worst part,” you say, managing to catch your breath. “Well, I fell, and there were stairs involved, anyway.”

“Is this about the time you dislocated your hip? Bull said you fell down the stairs, but we all thought he was just being an ass.”

“I really did! No one believes me,” you say, still giggling slightly. “Anyway, not only do the healer’s have more important things to do than repeatedly fix me up, I’m terrified of what they think of me at this point.”

“You know, you should come to training with the Chargers,” Krem says. At the look on your face, he rushes onwards. “No, really! You could train with more people your size there, and it’s not uncommon for us to have to drop by the healer’s tent afterwards now and then… especially if Skinner gets too excited.”

“Thank you, Krem, but I’m no mercenary,” you say with a laugh. “Despite Bull’s best attempts at recruitment, of course.”

You have a million excuses, but in reality, it’s quite tempting. It would provide you face time with more of the Chargers, and practice with more people means more ways to make excuses for things you know. Plus, you might actually learn something. In the end, however, you can’t justify it. You really shouldn’t show that much interest in violence, and you do actually still have a job to do here.
And so, after breakfast, you bathe and change your clothes quickly, then head immediately to the rotunda. You’re determined to get some actual work done, perhaps find out how to fill out those requisitions you need. Perhaps Solas can help you? If not, surely Dorian or someone in the library will know--

You never get the chance, unfortunately. When you enter the rotunda, you’re shocked to see that Solas isn’t alone. Oh, he’s there, yes, working at his desk and politely ignoring the other person in the room, whom, you note, is standing by your desk. A messenger from Leliana? But Maker, why is he just loitering in Solas’ rotunda?!

Horrified, you walk over quickly. “What are you doing?” you hiss to the messenger. “You can’t just--”

“Leliana requests your assistance with a matter of extreme importance,” the messenger interrupts. “I was told to wait here until you arrived.” You let out a groan of frustration.

“She could have just left a note… I’ve always given her work the utmost…” You turn to Solas. “I apologize for the intrusion, Solas. I’ll get this taken care of.” You glare back at the messenger. “Well? Let’s go. Clearly, this is very important.”

You’re quite irritated as the messenger leads you up the stairs. You’ve always done Leliana’s work promptly, even when she used you as a glorified sending pigeon. Whether Solas was bothered by the intrusion or not, you were. You’ve tried very hard to make yourself as convenient and unobtrusive as possible, especially since he returned and learned of your little stint with breaking, entering, and stealing. Now he has messengers lingering in his workspace because of you.

Therefore, you’re not at your most compliant when you crest the stairs to Leliana’s little bird nest. The spymaster’s nest is even more busy with activity than usual, but to your surprise, she shoos everyone she was talking to away when she sees you, and stands from her desk. The messenger even leaves as soon as Leliana walks up.

“Good, I was afraid I’d have to send someone after you,” she says, and her tone is serious enough that you decide your irritation can wait. “I won’t lie to you; this is very important. I need this translated as quickly as possible, and then immediately delivered--orally, do not write any additional copies--to myself and a few others.” She hands you a small, folded up piece of paper. “It’s not the same code as before. I’m hoping you’re familiar with it and can save us valuable time.”

Your eyes must be wide as saucers by now. “I… This seems rather important for someone of my… station, serah,” you manage to say.

“I know the two of you have become… close,” Leliana says pointedly. “But the Iron Bull is first and foremost a Qunari. He gives me his reports before he sends them off to the Ben-Hassrath, yes, but I’m under no delusion that he gives me all of them. For this, I need you.”

“W… would Iron Bull not be a better person for this task?” you ask, wincing deliberately as you say it, but keeping your voice quiet enough that no one else can hear. After all, you and Bull only have one thing in common: Qunlat. “He speaks the language; he’s more likely to be familiar with the--”

“You swallow, hard. “Yes, serah. W… would Iron Bull not be a better person for this task?” you ask, wincing deliberately as you say it, but keeping your voice quiet enough that no one else can hear. After all, you and Bull only have one thing in common: Qunlat. “He speaks the language; he’s more likely to be familiar with the--”

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Back in Orlais, you would have positively jumped at a chance like this. Trust, practically handed to
you on a silver platter. It’s important or it’s a test. Either way, if you complete it quickly and quietly, you win. But there’s a reason you retired to the Orlesian countryside. This sets your hackles to rising. There’s trouble here, trouble you’d rather avoid. But duty summons, it would seem.

“I will begin work at once, serah. Who will I be delivering it to?”

“Myself first. If it is as significant as I expect, then you will deliver an oral report to Commander Cullen, Lady Josephine Montiliyet, and the Inquisitor.”

Ah. There’s the trouble.

“Yes, serah,” you say with a bow, quickly tucking the paper into your breastband and heading down the stairs. You can feel her eyes on your back as you go.

You pause at the base of the stairs to Solas’ rotunda, lining up your lies in your mind. How much are you allowed to tell him? She merely said not to tell anyone what you were working on. Solas had been gone for long enough that he likely would not know you’d been working for Leliana regularly. You take a deep breath, then imagine some less-than-pleasant scenarios with Iron Bull until your limbs have a convincing tremble. One last imaginary flash of Bull holding you down, hand around your neck, sets terror into your eyes enough for you to convince anyone.

Shaking limbs carry you to your desk, your breathing coming in the quick, sharp inhalations of someone mid-panic. You’ve no doubt Solas notices.

“What did Leliana want?” he asks mildly, as you knew he would.

You’re silent for a time. “The Inquisitor’s spymaster is very good at digging up information,” you say finally. “She... Forgive me, Solas, I... I would like to simply work.”

“Of course,” Solas says, the picture of politeness. He’s likely curious--when isn’t he--but he won’t pry. Not now, anyway. You’ve seen him press you quite rudely when he knows you’re withholding something he wants to know, but it seems he’s grown fond enough of you lately to not actively intimidate you when you’re already frightened. You’d been counting on it, since it seems very little stops Solas when he’s curious enough. He’ll pry later, when you’ve calmed down, and you can have a nice heart-to-heart if you’d like, or simply lie out your ass.

More interestingly, whatever source Leliana has for getting these Ben-Hassrath reports, it has nothing to do with the Iron Bull. And, as you suspected, she does not trust him. Not fully. Of course, she doubtlessly doesn’t trust you, either; you’re just her only option.

You slip the message quietly out of your breast band as you shuffle papers on your desk, unfolding it quickly. This is Ben-Hassrath, to be sure. A similar code to last time, but different. To your glee, however, you recognize it after only a few minutes of examination. While you’ve not seen this precise cipher, you’ve seen ones like it, used for compressing information. It’s informal, used between Ben-Hassrath agents in the field, not a formal report back to superiors.

You can translate this.

You write with the careful brushstrokes of a scribe, just in case Solas is observant enough to be suspicious of frantic scribbling when you had previously been doing nothing but lettering. You dislike deceiving him, but should you need to come clean, you can lay the blame squarely on Leliana’s feet while still being able to justify your apparent fear. He doesn’t need to know how skilled a liar you are.

You work as quickly as you are able, but it still takes you most of the morning to work out the details
of the cipher, translate it into plain Qunlat, and then translate the Qunlat into Common. The whole thing is made slightly more tricky because you’re attempting to write as little as possible due to Leliana’s emphasis on secrecy.

The end result is… interesting. The Qunari are, for reasons not made clear in this missive, investigating five individuals connected to a Nevarran Duke. This one has information on a supposed dragon hunter. It seems rather inconsequential to you, but you weren’t told to judge the information, only to translate and deliver it.

You tuck the parchment you’d been working on into a stack of pages from your translation, then grab the lot. To Leliana, then. With any luck, this will turn out to be a dud, and you won’t need to face the Inquisitor. Solas doesn’t challenge you as you exit the rotunda, your entire translation tucked into your arms. You take the long way up to the library and then head up the steps to Leliana’s lair.

Unfortunately, she doesn’t appear to be there. You pause, uncertain of what exactly to do. You were told to report to her first… Should you simply wait here? You’re significantly uncomfortable with that.

“Emma?” you turn to see an unfamiliar woman.

“…Yes?”

“The Nightingale asks for you to bring your report to the war room,” the woman says.

“The… the what?” you say, a bit stupidly.

She gives you directions, so rapidly that all you can do is commit them to memory. “You can deliver the report there.” Then the woman simply… turns and walks away.

Trouble. You knew this was going to be trouble. You head down the stairs, once more avoiding Solas’ rotunda, and head in the direction you were told. Whatever the “war room” is, you’re quite certain you won’t like it. But hopefully, she’ll be there and you can deliver the report quickly and be done with it. The report is obviously a fragment of a much larger whole. You doubt it will be significant enough to deliver directly to the Inquisitor, of all people.

“The war room” is through a rather impressive office, down a hallway (a hallway containing several guards, all of whom ignore you) that’s missing part of a wall and then, presumably, through the intimidating doors in front of you. You hesitate in front of them, then nervously rap your knuckles against the wood.

You stand there, feeling a fool, for a few moments, before a smaller door within the giant oak ones swings open. You recognize the woman who opens it only because you never forget a face; she was the one with Commander Cullen when the refugees arrived. The one with the jealousy-inducing portable-desk device.

“Leliana?” the woman calls out behind her.

Leliana’s head pokes into view. “Ah, yes. Emma, come in.”

You do so with extreme reluctance now that you know Leliana isn’t alone. Sure enough, you appear to be interrupting something important. The room itself is as large as the doors would imply, and the centerpiece appears to be a large, thick table dominated by a large, detailed map. It is, in fact, a war room. Around the table stand Commander Cullen, Leliana, and the Inquisitor. Maker damn you straight to the Void. She intends for you to simply give the report to them all at once. Here, where they doubtlessly make all the important decisions that resonate throughout Thedas.
You stare desperately at Leliana as the woman who opened the door for you walks back towards the table, but the spymistress merely says, "What do you have for me?"

You clear your throat to soothe your nerves, shuffle to the page you'd written on to ensure you don't forget anything due to nervousness, and then begin. "Ah… yes… It read: 'Information on the hunter, brothers. Although dragons were rare until quite recently, she has slain four. Those who have seen her fight say that seldom does one see anyone so tall as she move so quickly.' I’m uncertain of the context. However, the language used to refer to the woman makes me believe they're speaking of a Tal-Vashoth. They imply she's female, but they refer to her the way one might refer to an object or an animal. Qunari usually have more respect for a dragon slayer." You clear your throat nervously. There are too many important eyes on you right now. "The next part is written in a different hand. 'When I asked why the apostate had not joined the circle, I was told she declared the Chant was for humans and meant nothing to her.' I doubt this one is a Vashoth, as they're more concerned with bucking against the Qun than the Chant. I suspect an elf."

You take a deep breath and risk another glance around. All four look as if they're deep in thought. Whatever that report was about, it clearly has some impact, despite its relative pointlessness to you.

“I think she’s right about the apostate,” the Commander says, breaking the silence. “No one would ask a Qunari why they weren’t in the Circle. I believe we can safely assume the Tal-Vashoth is the dragon hunter.”

“Does that do us much good?” asks the Inquisitor, rather grumpily. “We still don’t know who the spy is. Leliana, why is this information coming from the linguist?”

“It needed to be translated,” Leliana says smoothly.

The Inquisitor eyes you, and you try not to look petrified while also trying not to look disdainful, as you’re a bit of both. You give him a bow for good measure.

“She certainly does a great many tasks,” the Inquisitor says. Sounds like you’re not the only one feeling a bit disdainful. Commander Cullen looks somewhat confused, perhaps because he knows well that you’ve been translating stolen Qunari messages for a while now. He likely wonders, as you do, why Leliana isn’t being a bit more forthcoming about your duties. Well, Orlesians will never cease to be tricky, and you’re just as happy with the Inquisitor thinking you’re less important than you are.

“Could I have your papers, Emma?” Leliana requests. You immediately hand the one you’d written on over to her. She eyes it for a moment, likely taking in the fact you’d clearly done most of the translation in your head, then tucks it away. “Thank you for your assistance, Emma. Please, return to your regular work,” Leliana says, and you bow again and immediately scurry out of the war room. You’re in such a hurry to get out of there and back to the Great Hall that you nearly slam straight into the person standing only a few feet from the door. You skid to a stop and look up from your papers to apologize.

Ah fuck.

It’s Solas.

Chapter End Notes
It would have been longer, but what kind of person would I be if I didn't end you on a cliffhanger?
Solas is giving you quite the look. You feel somewhat like a dog that’s been caught peeing on the carpet, despite the fact you’ve done nothing wrong. You also can’t help but feel a surge of panic. It would be easy enough to tell Solas the truth were it your call, but will Leliana be cross if you do? Tell no one… Why, for the love of the Maker? The information seemed pointless. Did she suspect spies inside Skyhold? Did she not want news reaching the Iron Bull? Why couldn’t you even tell Solas?

You shuffle a bit to the side, hoping against hope that Solas has business in the war room. His eyes merely follow you. Despite the fact he’s hardly blocking the entire hallway, his crossed arms feel like a barrier you’ve no hope of crossing. You cast a nervous glance behind you at the closed door. Even if you were going to tell him the truth; you sure as hell weren’t doing it here.

“I, um… I’m late with your lunch, aren’t I? Let me… Let me get that for you. And then we can… talk?” you say hopefully.

“Certainly. I do hope you’re not taking on too many tasks, da’len,” Solas says. His voice is mild, but the way he says da’len carries several pounds of meaning.

“*Ir abelas, emma shem’garas,*” you say, slipping into Elven without thinking due to his use of da’len and your own nervousness. You slip past him and practically run back to the Great Hall, slipping quickly by nobles to dart into the rotunda. You drop your papers on a heap in your desk and then scurry back across the hall and down towards the kitchens.

Maker bless Celia, she has his lunch ready. You don’t bother pausing to make your own; you simply grab it and charge back up the stairs. You have to walk more carefully to avoid the risk of spilling, but you still move with the kind of speed and grace Iron Bull could only wish you’d demonstrate during your spars. Even so, Solas is seated at his desk by the time you return, as if he’d never left. Fortunately, as fast as you ran to the kitchen and back, it gave you enough time to come up with a plan.

Breathing through your nose to avoid panting--although your chest is heaving--you place his food down in front of him.

“None for you?” Solas asks.

"*I’m not hungry,*” you reply, in Elven and to the best of your ability. You’re aware your pronunciation needs work, but hopefully he’ll at least be able to understand you. "*Only you and I speak Elven?*"

It’s surprise that forms on Solas’ face, pretty as a picture. "*You are correct,*” he replies, also in
Elven. Even such short words hold a grace that make you feel like you’re butchering the language. Perhaps you are.

You struggle for the words to communicate your meaning. "Lady of the shadows gave me a task. She did not give me an option to refuse," you say, plainly struggling, although Solas doesn’t look confused. Hopefully he understands. "I was ordered to be silent."

"This required your presence in the--?" he says something you don’t understand. You assume he means the war room.

"Yes. She wanted me to speak it… No writing." You resist the urge to pantomime to help bring your meaning across. He seems to be able to understand your awkward phrasing, and you don’t want to help anyone who might be listening in.

Solas seems to be considering this, then gets a look on his face that you’ve seen on Sera’s all too frequently… mischief is on his mind. The way he smirks makes your legs go a little weaker. Mischievous is a good look on him… you’d pull pranks with him any day. "You remember the words," he says. Uh-oh. At your silence, he continues. "You never forget. You remember it all." Ahahaha… fuck.

"N… not… all?" you stammer.

He speaks rapidly in Elven then, quickly losing you among long syllables and words that flow like a smooth river. You stare, more than a little panicked.

"S… slowly?" you request, desperately.

Solas leans his chin onto his knuckles, considering you again. That spark of mischief hasn’t left his eyes. You get the dreaded feeling it will be the death of you… But my, it’s an attractive death. "Go get yourself food. When you return, we will resume speaking the human tongue. Then, we will go somewhere private, where we may speak plainly."

You nod, then turn quickly to leave. You doubt you could keep anything down; your stomach is full of butterflies. But an order is an order.

"I appreciate your clever tongue," Solas comments as you leave. It sends a shiver down your spine. Maker, that sounds equal parts delightful and filthy in Elven. You wish you were better at understanding, so that you could parse his meaning a little more precisely. You simply have too little practical experience with speaking Elven.

You get a few strange looks for showing up in the kitchen again so soon, but no one questions you as you quickly grab a bowl of broth and a loaf of bread. You take your time returning to the rotunda, if only to calm your nerves. You feel like you’re walking a very narrow, very high cliff. Leliana is not someone you want to displease, but then, neither is Solas. You don’t really appreciate her putting you in this kind of position. It’s not your fault if she doesn’t trust her allies, damnit.

True to his word, Solas resumes speaking the Common tongue when you enter the rotunda. If anyone was listening to you speak Elven, they might be suspicious… At the very least, they’ll have no idea what the hell you’d said. As for you and your “clever tongue” accompanying Solas somewhere “private,” well… You believe the word is “ambivalence.”

Solas quizzes you about your progress on the Tevinter tome while you struggle to get your food down--and keep it down. You suspect that Solas would be less than amused if you got sick in his rotunda… or anywhere near him, for that matter. Unfortunately, anxiety and fear have a tendency to
make you ill, and right now you have both in spades. You applaud him for his calm; you would never guess that he was planning something clever while casually chatting about your progress on your work versus your newly discovered social life. You attempt to emulate his casual demeanor, but every now and then you see a glint in his eye that sends a chill straight down your spine… followed, of course, by a rush of heat. Because nothing in your life is allowed to be simple.

Solas, in that slow way of his, turns the conversation towards magic. It’s not a conversation you’re comfortable with having on your best of days. You’re not sure what he’s playing at, but you suspect that it spells bad news for you. You just play along as best you can while trying not to regurgitate your soup back into the bowl.

“You mentioned once prior that most of the magic you’d seen had been destructive,” Solas comments as you focus on eating your bread without becoming ill.

“Yes,” you agree. “Although technically, as I recall, you were asking specifically about magic seen during my travels. I saw slightly more benign magic while living in Orlais, on a few occasions. Although there was still a bit too much fire for my personal tastes.”

“Oh? What did you see?” Solas asks, his faked curiosity indistinguishable from the real thing… or perhaps he is genuinely curious, considering your general reticence on the subject of magic.

“As I’ve mentioned, I did work for Circles in Orlais several times. In one particular case, the tome involved was so volatile that I was required to stay in the Circle for the time it took me to write a translation. It was there that I obtained nearly all of my ‘experience’ with magic, if you could call it that.”

“You stayed in a Circle? I had no idea the Templars allowed non-mages to do such a thing.”

“I believe the Circle in Montsimmard, where I stayed, is rather… liberal… with regards to the containment of mages. I sincerely doubt I could have done something similar in Kirkwall… nor would I have particularly wanted to. As it was, I was more restricted than most of the mages there. They had a Templar watching me all day and all night… It was… unpleasant.”

“Perhaps that’s why you tend towards the sympathetic when dealing with mages,” Solas suggests. “You’ve felt their plight first hand.”

You snort. “Please. I was guarded by a scary man for two months in one of the most luxurious Circle in Thedas. That’s hardly experiencing the mage plight. If I made a mistake, or they caught me sneaking around, I would have merely been fired. I ran no risk of possession, death, or Tranquility. The Templar could not do as he wished with me, safe in the knowledge that his word would be taken over mine. I didn’t have to fear a mysterious, deadly test as the apprentices in the Circle feared their Harrowing.” You eye the remains of your soup sourly. “I didn’t experience any plight in Montsimmard. Admittedly, however, being watched by an armed man while I slept did nothing to enamour me with the Templar Order.”

Solas is watching you silently, eyes slightly widened in surprise. You clear your throat, a little awkwardly. You had gotten off on a bit of a rant there, hadn’t you? “To answer your original question… I saw some of the more entertaining aspects of magic there, despite the fact that I wasn’t allowed to attend any of the formal lessons or practices. There was a man there… An Antivan, thrilled by my knowledge of the language. He had been in Circles his entire life. Despite the ability of mages in Montsimmard to apply for a secondary place of living, he never had because he knew no one outside of the Circle. He took a fondness to me and often snuck into my room while the Templar guarded outside. He showed me some of the more gentle, delicate sides to magic, although hardly anything practical.” You smile to yourself, a little, the memory soothing your nerves slightly. “He
could make colored sparks and fire dance through the air. Silly, I know, but it was beautiful. Before that, magic had always been something destructive, to me.”

You glance up from your soup at Solas, only to see him smiling. The sight sends your heart thudding again, your momentary calm quickly lost. “If you enjoy demonstrations, perhaps there’s something I can show you. Come with me.”

An excuse to go “somewhere private.” You know that’s what he’s doing. You tell yourself that repeatedly as both of you stand and he leads you out of the rotunda. It’s no use; your libido has taken over and simply isn’t listening to your brain at the moment. Solas is leading you off somewhere, perhaps to show you magic. You’re not helped by your memories of some of the less clandestine activities you and the Antivan had gotten up to while the Templar stood guard outside. He hadn’t been sneaking into your bedroom just to show you magic tricks, after all.

Your heart nearly stops when you realize where Solas is taking you. By the time the two of you pass Enchanter Vivienne, who’s lounging out on the balcony, you fear your heart may actually burst out of your chest.

Is he taking you to his bedroom?

Surely enough, he leads you straight to the door… and then keeps walking, one door further. You blink in surprise as he unlocks the door that is—disappointingly enough—not to his bedroom, and gestures for you to go inside.

The room in question mimics the general shape of his bedroom, as well as Vivienne’s, but a giant hole in the roof explains why there’s no bed. Instead, it’s been largely cleared out. A cabinet rests against the far wall. Your eyes, however, latch onto a small box resting on a shelf. Whether it’s full or not, that is a box specially designed to safely carry lyrium.

You hear the door close behind you, and then a latch slide shut. Your mouth goes dry.

“I imagine the Circle mages have their own space, but since I am hardly welcome among them, I’ve repurposed this space for myself,” Solas says, his voice a little too close behind you. You swallow hard, then again harder when he grips you by your shoulders and pushes you gently into the middle of the room. You follow compliantly, mind too spinning with adrenaline to do anything else.

“Stand here,” he says, and you stand where he leaves you as if you’re a statue. “I need to place wards.”

You’re so off balance that you don’t even notice what he’s doing… until you suddenly realize that you can no longer hear the sounds that had been echoing down from the hole in the roof. There’s only silence. Solas finishes his spell, then turns to you, and you can’t keep the awe from your face.

“Is that… does that work both ways?” you ask, reaching up as if you could touch the ward. Your aura surges beneath the surface of your skin, pushes against the inside of your palm. It’s desperate to run up against the surface of the spell, to explore its mystery.

“You catch on quickly,” Solas says with a pleased little smile. “Yes. The spell blocks magic, but also sound. No one outside this room can hear us. Or see us, for that matter, if someone happened to be climbing along the roof.”

“Amazing,” you murmur, pacing over towards the door.

“Careful,” Solas warns, but you keep your hand out in front of you. It hits an invisible yet solid surface a few inches from the door. You run your hand along it, although you don’t risk prodding it with your magic. It’s too complicated for you to understand without proper study, but the power thrumming through the ward thrills you. “We may now speak plainly,” Solas informs you, and your mind snaps back to the real reason he brought you here. He no doubt wants an explanation. How
much can you tell him?

“This is brilliant, Solas,” you say, before sighing and delving into a bit of uncomfortable honesty. “While you were gone, Leliana had me translate several documents. In this particular case, however, she was rather... insistent. I was told in no uncertain terms that I was not to speak to anyone of what I was doing. I would have preferred not to deceive you, but she gave me very little say in the matter. She even specified ‘not even Solas.’”

“Interesting…” Solas muses. “I can’t imagine she has much she wishes to hide from me. The document couldn’t have contained Elven.” He glances over at you, but you say nothing. It seems your face says enough, because he continues. “More likely she thought me the one you were most likely to tell.” Well, considering you told him in like, two hours… She certainly wasn’t wrong. “The Nightingale surely has others who can translate most languages,” Solas continues. “Not Elven. You speak only ancient Tevene, and I doubt she’s intercepting many messages in a dead language. No… Qunlat.”

You wince. “I believe that’s exactly why she didn’t wish me to say anything. It’s not difficult to come to certain conclusions.”

“And she has you give an oral report to minimize the evidence.” Solas laughs then, and the sound startles you, echoing loud inside the soundproofed room. “Little does she know, you have an excellent memory. Well, then... What do you intend to do?”

“Do?” you ask, genuinely surprised. “I don’t intend to do anything. I did what she asked of me. Except for the part where I immediately turned around and told you. But I’m hoping she never learns of that.”

“Going to try to keep secrets from an organization called the Inquisition?” Solas says, clearly amused.

What, like it’s hard? is what you want to say. You resist. Technically, you haven’t even kept your secrets for a month, and you’ve had several near misses. There’s still a lot of room for things to go badly. “Honestly isn’t always the best policy,” you say dryly. “In any case... the information was... To me, it seemed useless. It clearly had great meaning to the Inquisitor and his advisors, but I can’t even imagine what it would be.” You sigh. “I was not expecting this kind of nonsense when I came to work for the Inquisition. I retired to the countryside for a reason. I’ve no desire to get pulled back into this... courtly intrigue nonsense.”

“Back into?” Solas says with a smile. You scream internally, a little. This is what happens when you go into a situation nervous. You say something stupid. Fortunately, Solas doesn’t press. “I suspect you’ll have little say in the matter. Leliana is clearly grooming you for something.”

You make a face. “I don’t want to hear that...Um, Solas?”

“Mm?”

“...Thanks for not being cross with me. Again.”

“The deception was not your choice, and it was short lived,” Solas says with a fluid shrug. Maker, he has nice shoulders. Which reminds you, you’re locked into a soundproofed room with him. “In truth, I’m flattered that you trust me enough not to inform Leliana you broke your word.”

“Technically,” you say with a wince. “She told me not to tell anyone what I was working on. I didn’t... you figured it out on your own.”
Solas smiles. “Semantics, Emma?” he says, a little patronizingly.

“Whatever keeps me out of the dungeons,” you reply with a nervous laugh. “In any case, again, the choice for whether or not to be honest was removed from me. I was between a rock and a hard place the second you caught me coming out from the war room.”

“There were many lies you could have told to explain that,” Solas points out.

“Would you have believed any of them?” you counter. “And how many lies would I need to make later, to cover for that one? No… I had the opportunity to be honest without too much risk, thanks to our shared languages, so I took it. Thank you for tolerating my apparently terrible Elven, by the way.”

“You have an amusing combination of a larger-than-average vocabulary and a complete lack of proper pronunciation.”

“...Yes. Well, I’m glad I can at least be amusing,” you say sourly. “Have I satisfied your curiosity on the matter?”

“Ah, yes,” Solas says, beginning to move towards the edge of the ward. “I imagine you’re eager to get back to work—”

“Solas, wait,” you say quickly. He turns to look at you, expression rather neutral considering all that had transpired. “While we’re here… Well… I understand if offering to demonstrate some magic for me was simply a cover, but… Um… If you wouldn’t mind…?”

Solas smiles, and your heart soars. Yes, yes! He reaches a hand in front of him, and without so much as a snap of his fingers, a bluish-green flame erupts in his palm. You jump back slightly before regaining some composure. You’re used to conjured fire being much more… explosive. You wish you had the kind of control he’s demonstrating.

“It’s not burning you,” you marvel. You reach your hand out towards it, slowly. It is generating heat; it’s not simply an illusion. “Why is it that color?”

“This is veilfire. It is a form of sympathetic magic mastered by the ancient elvhen. It is not true flame, but the memory of it.”

You wave your hand over it, mildly enthralled. It doesn’t give off as much heat as a fire of that size should. You still suspect you might burn if you stuck your hand into it, however. “Incredible. What did the elves use it for?”

“Many things. Most mages these days use it for little more than a showy form of lighting, but at the height of the Elvhen empire, it was used for writing complex runes, woven into spells… I have a book, if you are interested.”

“You’re a tease,” you say accusatorily.

Solas merely smiles. “Before I lower the wards, is there anything else you wish to tell me?”
That gives you pause. You look into Solas’ eyes for a few beats too long. Embarrassingly, you find yourself honestly and genuinely considering just… just giving it up. Breaking down right there on the spot, telling him… if not everything, just enough. You feel as if a long path opens up before you, a path to a different world. A world where you trust Solas enough, a world where you can trust anyone that much. A world where you confess your magic to him, where he keeps your secret as well as you do. Where he teaches you his own secret, how he remained safe from discovery all these years. A world a little larger than the one you lived in before. You remember your dream of Solas in the freezing cave with you. How different would your life have been with a companion?

You break eye contact, look away. The path winks out of existence, your world is back to the safe, familiar, small world of one. “I don’t believe so, Solas.”

He pauses for a moment longer, but you continue staring determinedly at one of the walls. “Very well, then,” he says, and the sounds of Skyhold come rushing back in.

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Your eyes keep trailing back to the tome as you try to work.

Solas had handed it to you without a word when the two of you arrived back in the rotunda. You can't stop looking at it, even as you try to focus on lettering yet another page.

Veilfire: A Beginner's Primer with Numerous Teachings, Exercises, and Applications. You could probably actually learn to summon the stuff with this. If you got a moment alone, away from all the bloody mages and Templars, you could copy the book magically. As it was, you'd likely have to spend your sleepless nights copying it by hand. You won't be able to learn this sort of thing around Skyhold, obviously, but you'll be damned if you won't figure it out when you have the freedom to do so.

But all of that is off in the future. You really wish you could stop your eyes from dragging away from the page you're working on and back to the tantalizing tome. Perhaps you wouldn't be so distracted could you do something other than endless lettering. But you need a magnifying stand for the remainder of the art pieces, and a few sources on dragons to help check your work before you can do the more interesting sections.

Still, you’re bored and having trouble focusing. That normally means it’s time to do something else for a little while. You’re capable of forcing yourself to simply work through, of course, but the quality of your work—as well as the speed—tends to diminish. With a sigh, you stand and head towards the stairs.

“Emma.” Solas’ voice freezes you to the ground as surely as if he’d used magic. “If you’re heading up to the library, might you bring something to Dorian for me?”

What? Is hahren too old to climb the stairs? You think it, but you most certainly don’t say it. You really, really want to, though. Instead, you walk over to his desk compliantly. “Certainly, Solas.”

He eyes you as if he can somehow sense your derision, but simply hands you a rather dramatically large and heavy tome. It has the symbol of the Imperial Chantry embossed on the front. You imagine Solas was likely borrowing this from Dorian. The damned thing is heavy, but you head up the stairs with it in any case. It’s been too long since you stopped by the library to visit with Dorian and Thea. Since Solas returned and you now take your meals with him, Thea only ever sees you at breakfast, and Dorian less than that.

You give Thea your friendliest nod--your hands are full of giant tome at the moment--as you come
“You really must learn not to play servant with everyone who asks, Emma,” he scolds teasingly.

“Yes ser. I’ll just let all the mages know that I, the tiny elf wench, am too important to cater to their whims,” you say dryly.

“You could at least try. The way you run around for mages, I’d think I was back in Tevinter.”

“Old habits die hard,” you say pointedly. Dorian cringes a little at that. It’s probably rude for you to bring up the whole “Tevinter mages enslaved me” thing so frequently with Dorian, but what’s the point of a life of tragedy if you can’t use it to make other people uncomfortable?

“Well… Thank you for returning this so promptly. I would thank Solas, but,” He raises his voice to shout over the balcony. “That would require him actually coming up himself instead of sending his adopted elf.” He places the tome onto a rather dramatically growing stack of books. The book he placed it on top of catches your eye, however, and you move the returned book in order to pick up the one underneath. There’s no title on the front or side, but there is a rather telling image of a skull of some sort. Curious, you open the book.

“Dorian…” you say with a sigh. “Please tell the scribe responsible for this nonsense that there’s no point in leaving a tome untitled if you put a skull on the front.” It’s a book on necromancy. Because of course it is.

“Subtlety has never been the strongest trait for my countrymen,” Dorian says dryly.

“Tevinter, then, not Nevaran?” you ask, flicking through the pages. You’ve only passing interest in necromancy, and that only because you have a passing interest in all forms of magic.

“The Mortalitasi are not the only practitioners of necromancy in Thedas, as it turns out,” Dorian points out. You’re barely listening; you’ve already gotten absorbed into a description of the practice of using fear spirits to terrify enemies. “You can borrow that, if you want.”

You glance up from the book. “Are you kidding me? Walk around with a tome with a giant skull on the front? There are rumors about me enough in Skyhold.” With a reluctant sigh, you close the book.

“Oh, just tell anyone who asks it’s a dragon skull or something,” Dorian says with a careless wave of his hand. “It isn’t as though you can make any practical use of anything in there.”

You run a finger along the front of the tome, considering. Perhaps if you cover it with something… It might have interesting information about spirits, and if you get the book to yourself, you can make some notes. “Oh, and if you’re going back downstairs,” Dorian adds, fishing around in the pile of books to his left. “Might as well give this back to Solas.” He holds a small, leather-bound tome out to you. You stare at him incredulously, but he doesn’t seem to notice. With a sigh, you take the book.

“Dorian, do you know of any tomes on dragons here in Skyhold? Even in a personal collection.” You did actually come up here for a purpose other than running errands for lazy mages.

“Hmm… You might consider asking Cassandra. She’s a Pentaghast, you know, and enjoys reading more than she lets on,” Dorian suggests.

“I should just walk up to a Pentaghast, introduce myself, and ask to borrow any books she has on dragons?” you say dryly.
“You asked if anyone had a tome on dragons, not for practical life advice.”

You sigh. Looks like you’re sticking with the requisition plan. You know the name Cassandra Pentaghast… that’s the Right Hand of the Divine, or was, anyway. She’s not known for her approachability. You had heard in Orlais that this whole Inquisition business was her doing, and yet you hadn’t actually seen her in Skyhold. And you certainly haven’t lacked in meeting the important people… you’ve even met the Inquisitor on several occasions. Perhaps she’s elsewhere? In any case, you certainly won’t be getting any dragon books from her.

You glance around for Thea, but she seems to have disappeared… Peculiar. Perhaps she’s avoiding you again? No, you had just seen her at breakfast. More likely she’s just busy. A little dejected, you head down the stairs and return to Solas’ rotunda. You set the leather-bound book from Dorian down on the corner of Solas’ desk. “I’ll never understand those upstairs bothering with messengers for these sorts of things,” you comment. “There’s a giant hole through the middle of this tower. Has no one ever simply dropped something down to you?”

Solas looks up at you with a strange expression on his face.

“What?” you say, a little defensively. “Dorian dropped fruit to me last week.”

“Somehow,” Solas says, sounding amused, “I doubt you’re joking.”

“He did! Maybe I’ll have Thea drop something down; you’ll see how convenient it is,” you insist as you meander back towards your desk. You’re not looking forward to more long hours of lettering. “Mm… Solas?” you say, running a hand along the paper you were working on.

“Yes?”

“Do you think you could do that… thing, again. To my wrist?”

“Ah… Certainly,” Solas says, pushing his chair back as he stands. You would have gone to him. He walks over, gestures for you to sit in your chair. Your mind had honestly been on your work, on how much faster the lettering would go with Solas near-miraculous enchantment on your wrist. But then Solas grasps your wrist, pulls it upwards for a better grasp, and your pure intentions fly out the window. He rolls up your sleeve slightly and you feel the warm, tingling sensation of his magic. Thank the Maker that you have as much control over your aura as you do. With it as depleted as it is thanks to your trip to the frozen lake, it jumps at the place where Solas’ magic permeates your skin like a starving wolf. You wrestle it back under control with little effort; if it were that easy for you to lose control, you would have been found out years ago.

Solas releases your arm, and you flex your hand, twisting your wrist this way and that, relishing in the sturdy feel of it. “Thank you, Solas… I had forgotten how much I missed this. Perhaps I can make up for lost time.” You shoot a disparaging look towards your papers. “Lettering. Then more lettering. And tomorrow? I suspect more lettering.” You sigh. “This is the bulk of my work, but always the dullest.”

“I have no doubt you will persevere,” Solas replies. He seems to be turning to leave, when his eyes fall onto the book on the corner of your desk, the one Dorian had lent you. His eyebrows raise, and he gets an amused look on his face. “You’re certainly taking an interest in the arcane.”

“Hmm? Oh, that. I don’t actually know that it’ll be of much interest to me, but I’ve never seen a Tevinter tome on necromancy… and I thought it might have a different take on spirits,” you admit. “Why do you look so amused?”
“Ah, forgive me. It’s just… You strike me as someone very concerned with appearance, yet I doubt you could have selected a more suspicious book if you had tried.”

“…Yeah, admittedly,” you agree begrudgingly. “I’m thinking I should get some sort of cover for it if I plan on taking it out of this room. Or perhaps I should leave it as is, to brandish at Sera the next time she frustrates me.”

“Trouble in paradise?”

You glare at him, but without any ardor. “We have… differing views on certain things. She’s delightful, really, but sometimes I want to grab her by the shoulders and shake.”

Solas chuckles. “Yes, I believe I’ve experienced that particular sensation around Sera myself. She can be… stubborn.”

“Right, whereas you’re just the perfect image of pliability,” you say with a snort. Solas gives you quite the look and you raise your hands in surrender. “Yes ser, I’ll shut up and get to work, ser.” You twist your chair back around to face your desk and set in to work on your papers. You hear Solas’ chair legs scrape against the ground as he sits down and pulls it back to his desk, but you resist the urge to look over your shoulder. Now is the time to focus.

As it had been before Solas left, you find his wrist enchantment almost ridiculously useful. Any tremor or shake you had before is gone, even the bruises on that arm seem to hurt less. The lettering is still monotonous, but the letters come more quickly and more smoothly than they had been. You settle into a steady pace and focus on the beauty inherent in each perfect letter.

That’s how you spend the remainder of your afternoon. Solas refrains from casting any magic directly behind you, so you manage to churn through over half a dozen pages before you’re interrupted by a delicate clearing of the throat from behind you. You glance over your shoulder, and Solas is still sitting at his desk, reading. You’re momentarily confused before you take a moment to actually consider how long you’ve been writing. It must be past time for dinner. Your tendency to forget meals yourself is doing you no favors here.

Wordlessly, you finish up the line you were working on, cap your ink, and then stand to head towards the kitchens. You’re almost impressed with yourself when you reach the kitchen without incident. These days it seems you can barely walk ten meters without something happening. You take your time in the kitchen, fishing a bit more blatantly with the chefs and serving girls for Solas’ likes and dislikes. Unfortunately, most of what you learn is that he isn’t particular except with his tea. You’ve seen him leave food on a plate because it wasn’t to his tastes, however. You know he has preferences. It seems you’ll just have to discover them through trial and error.

You snatch a loaf of sweet bread, freshly out of the oven, although that’s as much for you as it is for Solas. Thin strips of mutton, a thin broth because you know Solas prefers that to heavy stews… Bit by bit, you put together two meals. As you work, you notice that Celia seems to be tired, or perhaps worried. It could be nothing, but after the orphans, you’re feeling a little hypersensitive. You’re paying Celia and you obtain information from her… She’s one of yours now. If someone has been bothering her, it’s your business.

You resolve to simply keep an eye open and an ear to the ground. There are plenty of men in Skyhold who would hurt an elven serving girl, as you’ve already experienced. Most women, like you, know how to brush off the more mundane frustrations, but if something serious has happened… Well, you’ve no evidence of that. She might simply be feeling unwell.

You head back up to Solas with the meals. Between your training with Iron Bull and the constant
You re-enter the rotunda to find that the stool has once again been pulled up near Solas’ desk. He really has been pulling it up to the desk for you to sit on… Between that and the little magic demonstration earlier, you’re starting to feel like you’re really making progress. At this rate, perhaps you’ll be learning Elven from him within the next few months. You’re fully capable of being patient if it gets you what you want in the end.

You place Solas’ meal down in front of him, watching his face carefully as he glances over the food. He would never be so convenient as to simply tell you if he didn’t like something. You had a master like that in Orlais. He was a notoriously picky eater, but rather than simply tell new chefs and servants his likes and dislikes, he simply refused to eat anything that wasn’t to his tastes. Solas, at the very least, wasn’t that picky.

“Are you making better progress on your tome?” Solas inquires after you’ve set down your own food and settled down to eat.

“Yes, thanks to you,” you say with a smile, flexing your still-painless wrist cheerfully. “It would be something if I could do this myself. I could probably charge double.”

“If you were a mage, you would still be a scribe?”

“Well… I suppose I have no way of knowing what life would be like as a mage,” you lie handily. “I suppose I would have been locked up in a tower somewhere… or, if I had been in Tevinter at the time, I suppose I may have been freed--a Liberati--in which case, yes, I’d almost certainly be a scribe,” you say with a frown. “My old master would have just loved that. I would never have gotten away, if...” You shudder, then glance down at your food, appetite suddenly gone. You’ve gone down that line of thought far too many times before. “On second thought, I take it back. I’ll just keep begging you for enchantments and demonstrations.”

“Oh? You wouldn’t learn magic, were it possible?”

“I…” You sigh. “That’s a very loaded question, Solas. I believe everyone wishes they could do magic. Except maybe Sera, I suppose. But who wants the burden that comes with it? The increased risk of possession, the lack of freedom, the small-but-significant chance that you’ll just accidentally light yourself on fire if you don’t learn how to handle yourself properly?”

Solas’ expression gives nothing away, which frustrates you. You’re probably displeasing him with this line of thought, but you’re hardly going to say you wish you were a mage. In truth, you’d never give up your magic, even if it did nearly kill you or others on occasion.

“In any case, it’s a moot point. I can no more become a mage than a mage could un-magic themselves. My wrist and I will just have to be dependant on your good graces,” you say with a winning smile. Hopefully you haven’t soured him too much. It can be a bit hard to tell, with Solas. The term “microexpression” was made for a man like him. It’s what makes it so blindingly delightful when he smiles or laughs fully.

Dinner passes without much more incident, Solas smoothly allowing the topic to change back to your work. You take the dishes back to the kitchen before getting back to work on your tome, but it seems Solas’ quota for leaving you in peace has been used up for the day. Not long after you settle back in to work, Solas begins to watch over your shoulder.
It’s his right, of course. You are in his rotunda, at a desk he was kind enough to provide, working thanks to a spell he placed on your wrist. You tell yourself that repeatedly, because someone watching over your shoulder is one of the sensations you absolutely hate the most. It drives you insane. You just want to take your quill and jab him in the fucking eye… But you refrain. Fortunately, after a few minutes of watching you meticulously shape letter after letter, he seems to bore of it and wander off. You breathe a small sigh of relief. Hopefully he doesn’t make a habit of that.

What he does do, however, is retrieve his paints and begin work on the rotunda wall again. You’re rather pleased; the small bit of the rotunda that is painted is absolutely gorgeous. Does he paint other things? You’d love to see them… One more thing to beg him for later, you suppose. With Solas no longer looming over you, you’re free to get back to work, and the two of you fritter the evening away with your respective tasks.

Solas, as always, leaves for the evening before you do. The spell on your wrist is still going strong, so you continue working… That is, until you remember that you had wanted to look into filling out requisition requests. You frown, looking at the candle you use to help you keep track of time. It’s late, but perhaps Dorian is still awake? The requisition requests almost feel like a waste of time, but you suppose that the sooner you get them in, the sooner you might actually get some of the things you need to do your job. With a sigh, you climb the stairs to the library.

It seems you’re shit out of luck, however. The library is all but deserted; Dorian’s fancy armchair is empty. You frown and pace the wide circle of the library. Perhaps there’s something here that can help you? You eye a stack of papers on a desk, but you’re not quite sure ruffling through them for information about requisitions is the wisest idea.

“Do you require assistance?”

The voice sends a horrified chill down your spine. You turn slowly, and your eyes confirm what your ears heard… You’re being addressed by a Tranquil. The brand on her forehead proves it.

You had seen a few, carrying messages across Skyhold or doing… whatever it is the Inquisition uses Tranquil for. And you had avoided them like the plague. You would rather be speaking to literally anyone, anything else. The Tranquil unnerve you the way you suspect they unnerve many mages: for what they signify. They barely even qualify as human anymore, just an empty husk to be… used. Like the viddath-bas. The only thing you fear more than death.

“I… no,” you reply quickly, taking a step back away from the blank eyes of the Tranquil woman. “I was only looking for information on filling out a re-requisition. I sh-should have r-realized no one would b-be here so late. I’ll… I’ll l-leave. Right away.”

“If it’s information on requisitions you seek, I can assist you,” she says, her monotone voice making you feel slightly ill. Who was she before the Templars savaged her? Just someone too scared to face down a demon for their Harrowing? A blood mage? Or just someone who was a little too forthcoming with radical thoughts? “I was in fact just completing some requests. I have extra forms you can use if you wish.”

You hesitate. Well… It can’t hurt to accept forms from the woman. It’s not as if she’s contagious, and although you know she couldn’t care less, you don’t want to be overly rude. “Um… S-sure. I m-mean, yes. Please. Th-thank you.”

She turns to the desk you’d just been eyeing--Maker, was it hers?--and pulls a small stack of papers out from the rest. She holds them out to you and you take a few nervous steps closer to take them from her. That brand on her forehead keeps you from pretending she’s just a very bored-looking
individual. You glance down at the papers and… Wow, Maker, these are complicated. You frown at them. Well, you have all night to try and figure it out, and you can always ask Dorian in the morning if you can’t--

“Would you like me to assist you?”

Every word the Tranquil says is like dripping poison. You swallow, hard. “Oh, n-no, I wouldn’t w-w-want to int-interrupt,” you stammer uselessly. “I’m s-s-s-sure--”

“It is no bother. I will be bringing my own to the Quartermaster tonight. If you would like, I can drop off your own as well.”

You hesitate yet again. You know Threnn, while not the Quartermaster, works with requisitions. You’d like to avoid seeing her, or her knowing these belong to you. They’ll likely wind up in the trash if she learns they’re from you. “I… w-well. If y-you don’t mind,” you manage. Now if you can just keep your hands from shaking enough to write.

She pulls a chair out for you at the desk, and you sit down with a cringe. She pulls up a chair beside you--you scoot over a little. You suspect she’s not so far gone that she doesn’t notice your abject terror of her. But as a Tranquil, she’s not capable of caring. Somehow, that makes it even worse.

You manage to focus as she walks you through the admittedly complicated process of correctly filling out the requisition form. She even makes some suggestions when you mention what you need.

“Do you have m-much knowledge of dragons?” you ask curiously as you write. You hate to use a Tranquil as a resource, but…

“Not specifically, but I research many animals for the Inquisition,” she says in that horrifyingly dull voice of hers. “I do have some dragonling scales that the Inquisitor brought in, however. Would you like to see them?”

“I… Yes, actually,” you say. “If you d-don’t mind.”

She shuffles off to retrieve them… Maker, you hope you didn’t just accidentally send her across Skyhold. You focus back on the task of filling out the requisition requests until she returns with a small, gilded box in her hand. You accept it from her with thanks and open it. Sure enough, several glistening dragonling scales.

“I have requested the Inquisitor bring me scales from a fully grown high dragon. So far, he has been unable to comply.”

Amazingly, you find yourself laughing. “No, I imagine not! You know, I’m translating the tome he plans to give to a Draconologist. Perhaps afterwards, he’ll go off dragon hunting to bring you your supplies.”

“One can only hope. You have filled out this part incorrectly,” the woman says, pointing to a section of your paper.

“What? Oh, shit… How do I…?” She sits back down next to you and begins to assist you again. The two of you actually have a somewhat pleasant conversation, if awkward and a little stilted. Between her dull monotone and your nervous stuttering, were there anyone else in the library, they’d likely be throwing things at the two of you. Eventually, however, you finish requisitions for several books as well as one for better-fitting clothing. You sign your name to the paper reluctantly, worried that the work you and the Tranquil put into them might be all for naught if Threnn gets ahold of them and recognizes your name. Not that the two of you had a formal introduction while you were
screaming at her for her loyalty to the monstrous Loghain.

“I will bring them along with mine,” the woman says as you finish and stand.

“You’ve been so m-much help. Thank you…” You pause. “Umm… I suppose we never properly
introduced ourselves. My name is Emma.”

“I am Helisma Derington.”

“Well… Th-thank you, Helisma. I appreciate y-your help. I hope that they m-manage to find both of
our books.”

“You are welcome. I appreciate your associating with me despite your fear.”


“It is fine,” she intones. “Many mages share your distaste.”

“Oh, I’m n-not a mage,” you assure her. “J-just a scribe.”

“Ah. I had assumed that your fear stemmed from magehood.”

“No, j-just… r-regular, old-fashioned, irrational f-fear,” you say with a forced smile. “Sorry, again.
And, thank you. A-again. I’m just… I’ll g-get out of your way now.” You don’t sprint out of the
library, but you do walk quickly. Your ears are flushed with embarrassment. You know Tranquil
can’t actually feel hurt or offense, but you’re slightly ashamed of yourself despite that. You’re even
ashamed that you feel the need to get completely out of the tower, away from Helisma and the things
that the brand on her forehead represents.

You head for your room, slightly shaken and more than a little embarrassed. You just want to get to
your room and blockade your door, as if that could keep the concept of Tranquility out. You never
get there, however. Halfway across your frantic bolt across the courtyard, a familiar shape steps out
of the shadows.

“No one knows. Your secret’s still safe.”

“Cole,” you breathe with a sigh of relief. “I… I know. I’m just…” You glance over your shoulder, as
if you’re being chased. Ridiculous. This isn’t even a reasonable fear, like your skittishness around
Qunari. Qunari can kill you. Templars can kill you. Mages can kill you. Tranquil? They’re utterly
harmless, yet their presence unnerves you as much as that of Qunari. “Would you mind keeping me
company for a little?”

“I don’t mind,” Cole replies, and you lead him back up onto the roof of the inn. The raucous sounds
from inside help soothe you, remind you that the world isn’t the terrifying grey existence you fear the
Tranquil live.

You talk… at Cole, more or less, because he doesn’t respond. “I can’t stand seeing them,” you say
with a shudder. “They’re just so… empty. You look into their eyes and there’s nothing there. What
do you hear when you listen to them?”

“…Nothing. You’re right; they’re empty inside.”

You choke back a bit of a sob and pull your knees flush against your chest, wrapping your arms
around your legs until you feel less vulnerable. “They’re wretched. And I know it’s not their fault.
Every one of them is a victim. But I look at them and I see… I can see…” Cole places a hand on
your shoulder, hesitantly.

It’s as if a dam breaks. You lean up against him, body wracked with withheld sobs. “I c-can’t… I can’t,” you whisper. “This is why no one can know, Cole. I can’t risk… They’ll…”

“‘Why are we even bothering?’ The man snaps it, sharp, angry. He brandishes words like his sword, both deadly. You can hear them, but they act like you’re not even there.”

“Shut up, Cole,” you whimper, but there’s no acid in it. “Just shut up.”

Mercifully, Cole is quiet, and lets you rest against him until the crying stops. You don’t know how you’ll climb back into that library tomorrow, knowing she’ll be there. But you fight with a Qunari every day. Maybe it’s just a matter of the same thing… forcing yourself to face your fears until you become numb to them. But even the thought of one day being able to stare into that placid face with an expression just as neutral fills you with horror.

As you did the first time you met Cole, you feel your anxiety slowly melting away, soothing down into calmness as he brings you down out of panic through whatever ridiculous spirit power he possesses. How specific… Perhaps your book on spirits has something written about it?

You’re not sure when you go from laying against Cole to laying down on the roof of the inn, but the spirit is still beside you, and that’s enough to keep you calm. You focus on the brim of his ludicrous hat to keep from slipping back into panic. Then you let your eyes wander upwards. There’s a clear night sky above Skyhold, marred only by a few dark, passing clouds. The stars look so bright, so large… You would believe you could reach up and touch them.

You don’t know when you drifted to sleep. But there are Templars, now, surrounding you. One holds your arms pinned behind your back. You struggle against him, desperate, but you don’t have the strength to break free. Your body feels beaten, battered, heavy. Out of the ring of Templars surrounding you, one steps forward.

“Might as well do the Rite now.”

This never happened. This never happened. A nightmare, a nightmare, a nightmare. You tell yourself over and over. Time stretches thin as the woman steps slowly closer. No, no, no anything but this, it’s a nightmare, it’s a nightmare, it’s a nightmare.

You’re underwater, thick, viscous liquid pushing you downwards, threatening to drown you. You swim desperately upwards, lungs burning, until you break the surface. The world twists around you and you feel ground beneath your hands; you choke and cough up the thick liquid, wipe your burning eyes so that you can see--

You’re drenched in blood, and the room around you is filled with it, pools and puddles, inches deep on the floor. Mutilated body parts are scattered about, bodies destroyed so thoroughly you can’t even tell if they’re man or woman, human or elf. You wretch, but all that comes out of your throat is more blood. A nightmare, a nightmare.

Blood begins dripping from the walls, pouring from the ceilings. You try to cover yourself, but it’s no use; you can feel it filling the room. A nightmare.

With sheer will you wrench yourself awake, forcing your mind back into your body and out of the Fade. But when you open your eyes, you’re still drenched. Blood still falls from the sky.
Chapter End Notes

Now enjoy shouting at me in the comments until I update again! <3

Ir abelas, emma shem'garas: I'm sorry, I'll come/go quickly.
You shouldn’t have been able to sleep. You shouldn’t have been able to dream. Perhaps that’s what makes it so real when you awaken to find yourself still drenched, sticky, wet. Blood still clinging to every inch of your skin. Perhaps that’s why it takes you so long to understand what’s happening.

It’s dark. You flail for your bedstand, desperate to light a candle, but you’re not on your bed. Where are you? Fuck, where are you, what’s happening? Why are you wet? Confusion gives way as you see covered flames in the distance and realize where you are… Skyhold. You’re in Skyhold. You recognize the walls. Where in Skyhold? You’re… you’re on the roof of the tavern. A brief check reveals that all of your limbs are intact. Your aura is clenched down inside of you in a tight little ball, compressed as if you’d been pressing it inwards forcefully in your sleep. Likely you had. And you are wet because it is raining. Not blood. Just water.

You take a deep, soggy breath.

You fell asleep on the roof. It began to rain. The sensation of being wet, being rained on, perhaps even being mildly drowned, influenced your nightmares.

That’s all.

It was a nightmare.

Of course, that doesn’t answer the question of how you were able to dream in the first place. It’s not impossible for you in this state, just difficult. And your dreams are rarely even that coherent. You suspect Cole has something to do with it. But you can ask him later. Right now, you’re sitting on the roof of the tavern in a thunderstorm.

You slide down off the roof, hanging from bricks and window sills until your feet thud against the ground with effortless grace. It’s so easy when no one is watching you. If only things could always be that way.

Despite your realization that there is no blood, just water, your mind is still a spinning, chaotic mess. If you were on your own, you’d punch a tree until you felt better. The side of your house in Orlais had a dent because of your tried and true “punch the feelings away” technique. But this isn’t Orlais, and you don’t have a wall. But dawn is coming, and you have the next best thing.

The Iron Bull doesn’t comment on the wretched state you’re in when you climb into the practice ring. Wearing your work clothes, hair a drenched, tangled mess… You must be quite the sight. He’s already stretching when you arrive, and you join in wordlessly. You push yourself further into the stretches than you normally do, chasing after that painful burn to remind you that you exist. It’s the same theory as punching trees, really. Violence gives you adrenaline, helps you wake up. Pain brings you back into the present, gives you something to focus on.
Your long sleeved tunic wasn’t meant for this kind of thing. With the addition of a few gallons of water, it clings to your skin, pinching and making it hard to move. You can barely stretch in it, let alone actually spar. Plus, you don’t want to ruin any more of your clothing, especially not the ones you use for work. With a frustrated snort, you stop stretching and just peel the damned thing off of you. This leaves you just in your breastband and admittedly underwhelming undershirt. It’s one of the few things you had on you when you left home, and it has seen better days. It was sleeveless to begin with, and over the years the sleeve holes wore out until they basically left half of your side revealed. But it means you’re not training in nothing but your breastband, and without your tunic, you can actually move.

Your apparel would probably have poor Krem bursting at the seams, but the Iron Bull is a bit more… well, professional really isn’t the word. Restrained, maybe. You hang your tunic on the fence. You can’t keep it from being soaked, but you can at least keep it out of the mud. You turn back to Iron Bull, who’s stopped stretching as well. The two of you still haven’t said anything… Perhaps he can tell your mood simply from your tense body language. He is Ben-Hassrath, after all.

It’s been a week since that bothered you, but the reminder shoots a flair of hot, indignant fury through you. You don’t have a Templar to beat; you never will. But a Ben-Hassrath makes a good substitute.

You hurl yourself at him without warning, but he is, of course, prepared. He blocks your strikes as if this were mere training… and maybe it is. It might as well be; he refrains from striking back. He lets you burn yourself out on him, and you have to admit, it’s much, much more satisfying than punching a tree ever had been. After you’ve managed to land one or two decent blows, he begins fighting back, moving to trip and grapple as you’ve become accustomed to. It doesn’t bother you. Perhaps it should, given the state you’re in, but if anything, it makes you enjoy yourself even more.

As you jump over a swept leg, he simply shoves you in midair, a hand pushing against your chest to send you hurtling backwards. You hit the mud with a satisfying thud. The pain that shoots through you reminds you of where you are. It proves your existence. In dreams, hurt doesn’t feel like it does when you’re awake. Your body will never ache like this in the Fade.

The bulk of Iron Bull looms over you as you gasp for breathe in the mud. “How you feeling?” he rumbles, the first words spoken by either of you.

You stare up at him. “Like climbing back onto those ridiculous horns,” you say after a moment’s pause.

He grins and offers you a hand, which you use to help you stand. It’s raining hard enough that the mud immediately begins rinsing off of you. “I’d like to see you try.”

You spend the rest of the morning alternating between trying to land a punch and trying to grapple Bull well enough to scramble back up onto his shoulders. You get as far as a hand on one of his horns, but trying to grapple him from the front was a bad idea. He grabs you around the waist with both hands, and you’re quite alarmed to find that his hands can go all the way around your waist. His grip is tight enough that it hurts, although in your bruised-up state, that might not be saying much. He doesn’t even have to yank or twist or whatever he’d been planning; in your alarm you immediately release his horn. Even more alarmingly, he doesn’t drop you as the entirety of your weight drops into his hands. He holds you like you weigh little more than a feather, then sets you down onto your feet delicately.

“Merde!” you swear out loud, clutching the front of your shirt as if you could grasp your own pounding heart. “I know I’m not that large, but seriously, Bull!”
“Pfff, little thing like you? I could lift you with one hand, easy,” he says with a snort.

“Don’t try,” you say warningly. “I finally calmed down.”

“What was eating you, anyway?” Bull asks. “Haven’t seen you looking that bad in a while.”

“Bad dreams,” is all you have to say on the matter. You tilt your head to look upwards, and the force of the rain immediately pushes your hair back out of your face. “Maker, it’s really coming down. Do you mind if we go ahead and call it a morning? I’d like to get some breakfast before I drown, and I have to clean up and change before I start working.”

Bull has no objections, so the two of you head off together towards the mess. You almost forget your tunic entirely; fortunately, you see Bull grab it off of the fence. He can drop it off to be cleaned as easily as you can, honestly. You have no intention of putting it back on for breakfast, even if you are closer to “indecent” than you’d like to be. No one but servants will be in the mess this early, anyway. At this point, the rumors about you won’t be severely worsened by a single meal in a skimpy shirt.

Unfortunately, you get no further than sitting down with your meals before a woman—clearly a maid—bursts into the mess, glances around, and then immediately makes a beeline for you. Oh, Maker, what now? She had better not be one of Leliana’s messengers. You and that damned spymaster are going to need to have words at this rate. She is, as it turns out, a messenger… but not one of Leliana’s.

“Miss Emma? Are you Miss Emma?” the woman says anxiously, wringing her hands together.

“I am, yes. Can I help you?” you say cautiously.

“I almost didn’t recognize you, miss! I’ve got a message, from Celia. From the kitchens? She’s taken ill; she can’t leave bed.” Now that alarms you. Was it illness you had noticed yesterday? Or was something more sinister happening? Why would she call for you? “She said you’d want to know.” Your mind flashes to a dozen different reasons before settling on the obvious. “She paid me a whole ten bits to tell y-”

You stand bolt upright, color draining from your cheeks. Solas’ breakfast. What time is it now? Still early enough to get to the kitchens and have a meal prepared, surely. If you hurry. Without thinking, you reach into your pocket and pull out a few coppers for the woman. You press them into her hand absent-mindedly.

“Bull, I have to go,” you say quickly. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

You quickly dart back out into the rain and towards the kitchens. You shake off as best you can by the outer door to the kitchen before going in. Once inside, you stand as close to the ovens as possible to dry off while calling for Solas’ meal to be prepared. You let the kitchen workers prepare it for you rather than take the time to do it yourself. You’re in a rush, and you need to dry at least a bit before charging up to Solas’ room. You wring out your clothing and focus on drying your pants as much as possible. If you drip water through the Great Hall, you will hear about it from someone.

You manage to beg a hair band off one of the kitchen workers and pull your hair back as best you can. This is what you get for thinking you can ignore presentability for even a minute. If you showed up wet to deliver food to an Orlesian, any Orlesian, you probably would have been strung up. You grab the tray of food as soon as it’s finished being prepared, pray that you’re dry enough, and then dart out to begin the climb up to Solas’ room.

You get quite a few stares as you walk quickly through the servant’s quarters, the Great Hall, and up
the stairs to Solas’ room. Fortunately, the little outdoors walkway to his room is covered, so you run no risk of being drenched again. You take a deep breath in front of his room before giving the polite, short rap on the door reserved for any sort of servant. Then you simply open the door and step in.

The Maker has blessed you, because Solas is just now getting out of bed. He’ll have a hot breakfast, and you’ll keep some respect. You can check on Celia later, to make sure she’s fine. For now, you’ve averted your first small crisis of the day.

From the look on Solas’ face, however, he was very much not expecting you. His eyes widen as he takes the sight of you in, his jaw even slacks slightly. You must have caught him off guard. He’s wearing naught but trousers, and that’s the most genuine look of shock you’ve ever seen on his face.

“Emma?” he even sounds shocked, although regardless of tone, your name formed by his lips send a slight chill through you.

“Yes, ser… Sorry, the other girl got sick unexpectedly. But I have your breakfast.”

“Yes, ser… Sorry, the other girl got sick unexpectedly. But I have your breakfast.”

“Um… yes.” You swear you’ve never seen him so off-guard, not even the first time you walked in on him with his breakfast. You shakes his head, as if to clear it. “Thank you. However, wouldn’t the kitchens simply send one of their own workers?”

You freeze next to his desk, hand on one of his plates. How to explain that little detail? Your eyes slide to his desk, and you decide to take the third option: ignore the question entirely. “Ah! You’ve been reading The Botanical Compendium!” you say cheerfully. You smile down at the page. “Arbor blessing. Notoriously difficult to cultivate. Do you know, I’d finally gotten some to grow on the side of my house when red Templars decided the whole place would look better on fire.”

“…Yes,” Solas says, standing and approaching the desk. Would it kill the man to put a shirt on?! The sight Celia must receive every day… Either you should be paying her more, or she should be paying you. You can’t quite decide. “I’m impressed with the tome’s thoroughness.”

“Arancia doesn’t fuck around,” you say with a chuckle. Solas moves the book to the side so that you have a place to set his food, so you begin unloading your tray. “I’m glad she has your approval, however. I was afraid all of my botanical knowledge would prove to be inaccurate.”

“What need did you have of arbor blessing?” Solas asks as he sits down to start his meal. “Oh, it was mostly a point of pride… To prove I could make it grow,” you admit. “I’m not exactly an alchemist, although admittedly, I did dabble. The villagers didn’t mind a rabbit on the edge of town nearly so much once it turned out I could give them a little something to help their aching back or urge the cow to provide milk.”

“What other sorts of things did you grow?”

Solas just so happen to stumble upon one topic you’re more than happy to talk about. It should come as no surprise; your first debate had been about elfroot, of all things. Before you know it, you’re leaning up against his wall, nibbling a biscuit while the two of you go back and forth on the uses of crystal grace.

“I swear to the very Maker,” you say with a chuckle. “I saw her lob one! It smashed open and it made the stickiest mess you’ve ever seen. Then she started putting blood lotus in. Ugh, the smell! It was almost caustic, and the effect it had on metal... It never would wash out of clothes, either. They made us stop when the clothing we burned started producing this awful, thick smoke. I still think we were on to something. Could load it into… I dunno, catapults or something.”
Solas doesn’t seem as uncomfortable as he had been when you first entered, and admittedly, you’re less uncomfortable than you could be, given that he’s not wearing a shirt. You just spend a lot of time looking at the wall. In all honestly, you almost forget about it… Until he stands up, that is. When you’re at face level with his bare chest, it’s much harder to ignore his nudity. It isn’t until he stands that you even realize that he’s done eating. You flush slightly.

“Ah… I’ve overstayed my welcome. Let me at least get those plates out of your way…” You say it like an apology.

“When has overstaying your welcome ever deterred you?” Solas says with a chuckle. “Regardless, you have not. I enjoyed our conversation.” His eyes slide over you and you see a twinge of something on his face, almost like he’s wincing. Perhaps you’re muddy… You haven’t had much of a chance to look yourself over, honestly. You gather up his dishes quickly.

“You’re too kind,” you say with a quick smile. “I’ll see you in the rotunda. I should… wash up, first.” You remember not to bow as you leave, although you get part-way into one before stopping and just sort of awkwardly straightening yourself. You’re relieved to shut the door behind you, and carry the dishes back down to the kitchen. Perhaps now you can get a bath and actually…

Oh.

Oh, Maker.

Suddenly the awkward stares and shock on Solas’ face makes a bit more sense.

You never put your tunic back on. You’re just wearing this stupid, ratty undershirt. You nearly drop the dishes when you realize, but you manage to get them near a sink before shock overtakes you. You’d just stood in Solas’ bedroom, arrogant as you please, and damn near half-naked yourself! You run a hand over your face. You need to get a bath and a chance of clothes. Now.

- 

You’ve never been so relieved to be clothed in your life. Well, that’s probably not entirely true, but you’re certainly overjoyed when you pull fresh clothes over your newly cleaned body. In the process of bathing, you discovered another thing that may have alarmed some of the people who saw you… You’re still rather bruised up. You don’t think they could see your sides or back well enough, but your arms still have splotches of dull browns and yellows from being grappled and yanked around. Fortunately, your arms don’t look as bad as they had the day before. You don’t look too terribly beaten, although if your back’s tenderness is any indication, your entire backside is probably a red and purple mess. Too many falls, and your hard mattress isn’t doing you any favors. You’re the kind of person who can wake up with a bruise from sleeping on a rock wrong, honestly.

You’re hesitant to meet with Solas again… should you apologize for your attire? Explain, perhaps? You decide to only do so if he brings it up. After all, you weren’t very professional looking, yes, but you aren’t actually a maid. It’s not your job to look good. You take a few deep breaths before pushing open the door to the rotunda.

Solas glances up at you as you enter, and you half-expect some sort of quip about it being nice to see you clothed--although you could say the same right back to him, considering he didn’t seem to believe in wearing shirts between midnight and eight. He says nothing, however, simply goes back to reading. You head for your desk and try to get straight to work. You decide against asking Solas for a wrist enchantment, out of sheer embarrassment. Your wrist can take one for the team today.

You hope those stupid requisitions go through. You’re used to being able to simply walk or ride into
town to pick up supplies you need. But if your trip here was any representation, there are no cities reasonably close that you can go to. Relying on Leliana or this shaky requisition system to get what you need displeases you quite a bit. You’re running low on some of your colored inks, you still need that magnifying stand, and what kind of Inquisition doesn’t have any tomes on dragons, anyway? It’s only a matter of time before someone starts asking the Inquisitor to kill a dragon. You read *Tale of the Champion*. Dragon slaying seems inevitable.

Despite your frustration about the lack of convenience, you do manage to get a good bit of work done. Even without Solas’ wrist enchantment. Maker, for a world where you could just do that yourself without immediately signing your own death warrant. Not for the first time and doubtlessly not for the last, you’re bitterly jealous of Solas and his superior situation. How the fuck had he managed it? You would, quite literally, kill to know how he’d pranced through life without so much as a single incident with Templars. It’s possible he’s just lying, but the fact of the matter is, he’s here, openly practicing magic and even somewhat respected--feared, at the very least--by the people around him. Meanwhile, you spend your days in exhaustion from the effort to keep yourself concealed, and your nights in terror from the fear of failing. It’s extremely clear who has the superior position.

You try not to be too bitter. It won’t do you any good to envy the success of other mages. Of course, swing too far in the other direction, and suddenly you’re Anders. “For one of us to be free, we must all be free.” That stupid manifesto. Who writes manifests?

For all your enjoyment of *Tales of the Champion*, for all your hero worship, the fact of the matter is that damn near all of Varric’s friends would have freaking hated you.

You sulk your way through the morning, lettering aggressively, if such a thing is even possible. You flip-flop between hating other mages for being better off than you and hating yourself for being better off than other mages. You pout your way through four pages before you feel that irritating twinge at your shoulder. Someone is watching you work. You take a deep breath before looking up, knowing that you can’t risk snapping at Solas.

“Your dedication to your work is admirable, Emma, but some of us like to eat,” Solas comments when you look up at him. You glance at the candle on the wall guiltily. You really miss your water clock. Or even working in a room with windows. Not that windows would help today; you can still hear the storm raging outside.

“Ir abelas,” you say with a sigh. “I wasn’t paying attention. I’ll get it right away.”

“You could always allow the kitchen workers to bring them,” Solas points out.

“Of course not. I’ve spoiled them now. Do you know how hard it was to even find someone to bring you breakfast?” you say with a strained laugh. “I’ll do better in the future.”

You quickly cap your ink and stand. A light meal for you today… You want to eat quickly and get back to work. You successfully worked out your stress on your friend/portable wall, but after exerting yourself so much so early, you’re left feeling a little drained. You suspect that you have a limited amount of time to work before exhaustion sets in.

While you’re in the kitchen putting together your meals, you poke around for a bit of gossip about Celia. Is she seeing anyone? Has anyone been giving her a hard time? It seems, however, that Celia is by and large a person who keeps her head down. The kind of person you had tried and utterly failed to be. She speaks rarely, and even then only to the other elves. You can appreciate that, but if she’s been having any difficulties, no one in the kitchen knows about them. You can’t help smiling to yourself a bit as you work. Shy, a bit isolated, easily overlooked. She’s exactly the kind of person
you would have pounced on in Orlais. It seems your senses haven’t failed you entirely.

You bring the food back up to the rotunda. If Solas notices that your meal consists only of a bowl of stew and small loaf of bread, he doesn’t comment. You had planned on eating at your own desk, but you can’t resist the sight of that little stool, sitting so innocently by his desk. No matter how tired you get, the knowledge that he bothers to pull up a stool so you can eat with him will always thrill you. Instead, you bring the page you were working on over to his desk and continue lettering while you eat and talk. Slow going is better than no going at all.

You contort yourself carefully to avoid spilling on the page. It’s almost second nature to you. Scribes have to eat, but nothing’s saying they have to stop working in order to do so. This sort of thing is how you got a reputation for being one of the fastest, after all.

“Your ink pot is getting quite low,” Solas comments and you let out a soft grunt of frustration.

“I know,” you say around the piece of bread half-hanging from your mouth, squinting to at your translation as you write. “I’m going to wind up robbing someone, at this rate. I put in requisitions like everyone told me, but I have no idea how long it will take to get anything.”

“It depends on what you have requested,” Solas informs you. “There are tomes I requested months ago that they’ve yet to obtain.”

You let your head fall back and groan upwards towards the uncaring sky. “Maker. If there weren’t a war on, I’d grab a mule and ride to the nearest city myself.”

“If it’s something like ink, you should receive it relatively quickly,” Solas says, possibly attempting to comfort or placate you.

“Ink, yes… Also a magnifying stand, tomes so that I can double-check my work, new quills, and, if they want to spoil me, clothing that isn’t designed to fit a human man,” you say with a sigh. “All of which I’d be willing to buy out of my salary, if I only had a place to spent it.” You think of the growing purse of coins hidden in your room with some sourness. Between your largely-than-expected pay and a few nights of Wicked Grace, you’re starting to accumulate enough coin for your own private shopping spree. What you wouldn’t do for an Orlesian bookstore! Or hell, even Ferelden. You’ll take used books that smell of dogs. You’ll take anything.

“Are used to having these sorts of things provided?” Solas asks curiously.

“Maker, no,” you say with a sigh. “But I’m used to being in a location in which such things are easy to obtain myself. I’ve never worked for an army before. And the last time I worked in a fortress was… Well, it was a very long time ago.” You glare down at your work. “Damn Templars, getting themselves… all… red…” you grumble under your breath.

Solas lets you grumble and work, the two of you talking only intermittently. It isn’t until you’ve finished your own slow work on your stew that you realize his own plate is lying empty. You finish the word you were working on with a soft sigh, then stand to take the dishes back to the kitchen. Your overworked arms don’t particularly want to lift the heavy tray again, but you make them. It’s your own fault for overdoing it during morning practice.

By the time you get back to Solas’ rotunda from the kitchen, your arms have a slight but pronounced tremble to them. It’s not enough to keep you from writing entirely, but you’ll have to go very slowly. When you return to the rotunda, you notice that the stool has been placed back by the wall, and your documents moved back to your desk. Rather nice of him, honestly. You enjoy your little mealtime conversations with Solas, but working on a tiny corner of his desk is a bit difficult. You run a hand
over the corner of your desk as you sit down, remembering the flood of emotions you experienced when you first saw it. Three weeks ago, if someone had told you Solas would give you a desk in his workroom, you would have laughed them out of Skyhold.

Perhaps it’s because you just ate, perhaps it’s because of your overexertion in the rain, but for whatever reason, in the hour following lunch, you begin to sag more and more. Your whole body feels heavy, keeping your eyes open and focused on your papers is a struggle. You have to write more and more slowly to ensure you don’t make any mistakes. About the third time your tired limbs cause you to nearly tip over your ink pot, it apparently becomes too much for even Solas to overlook.

“Are you alright, Emma?”

He sounds genuinely concerned. It feels like a jolt of electricity directly to your chest.

“I’m… fine,” you lie. “I may have overdone it a little in practice this morning, that’s all.”

“Practice… this morning? With the Iron Bull?” Solas sounds surprised. “It was pouring rain when I awoke.”

“It was pouring rain when I did, too,” you say grumpily. “Bull’s yet to take that as a good excuse to cancel, however. It hardly matters… as hard as it was raining, I was going to be drenched just walking to the mess.”

Solas is silent, and you don’t want to see his expression. You continue to slowly agonize over each letter of your work. The going is slow that you might as well not be working at all.

“Perhaps you should rest?” Solas suggests after being quiet for some time.

“It occurred to me,” you admit. “But I’d rather not walk back across the courtyard in this rain. It would take me an hour just to get dry again.”

“Feel free to use the couch,” Solas offers, and you go rigid. He knows that you slept on it at least once. Is he mocking you? You glance over your shoulder towards him, but he’s not looking at you. It’s hard to tell his expression from here. “That is, after all, what’s it for… More or less,” he continues.

“It is?” you ask, a bit confused. You had thought the couch was ridiculously comfortable. Maker, if you find out he put some kind of freaking sleeping enchantment on it, you’re going to-

“When I need to enter the Fade for short periods of time and don’t wish to leave the room, I use the couch,” he informs you.

“There’s not magic on it, is there?” you ask warily.

“No. It is simply comfortable.”

You eye the couch. There’s no risk of you actually falling asleep, you don’t think. And you’ve slept around mages before, in any case. They never noticed anything odd. The idea of resting on that gloriously soft couch again is almost too much to resist. In fact, it is too much to resist.

“Well,” you murmur, to yourself as much as to Solas. “I suppose a short rest can’t hurt.” You kick off your boots before plopping down onto the couch. As tired as you are, it feels like you’re sitting on a freaking cloud. With a soft groan, you lay down and stretch out across it. Maker. You’d missed this.
You don’t sleep. You just lay down and rest your eyes, but in any case, it feels fantastic. You find yourself sorely missing Solas’ blanket, for its warmth and softness more than for its magical sleeping properties.

In any case, you do feel better when you sit up, maybe about an hour later or so. The sound of rain still pounds outside… You really hope it lets up before nightfall. Although a mad dash through the rain certainly ensures no one will bother you in the courtyard.

“Feeling better?” Solas asks as you rub the exhaustion from your eyes.

“Yes, much. Thank you,” you say, and it’s only a slight exaggeration. You do feel better, but you still feel like you could stand to hibernate for about three months. You don’t really feel like jumping straight back to work… you feel like you might be at risk for dozing off at your desk. “I’m going to just… walk around for a bit,” you say, stretching luxuriously. Aaah, your back feels great after just laying on that couch for an hour. Solas should rent that thing out.

You’re not lying, not really. You are walking around. You’re just walking directly to the servant’s quarters to hunt down Celia. Hopefully she really is just ill… You’re not in much of a position to help her here, not yet. You don’t have enough favors or enough pull, since you only decided to start making an effort here like… a week and a half ago. But she’s yours, so you’ll have to do something.

You manage to track her down, although it takes a bit of doing. She really doesn’t socialize with the humans much at all--it took you finding another elf to figure out which room was hers. You knock, but there’s no response. You open the door cautiously. The room is dark, and, you note, nowhere near as nice as yours. Your room is essentially a closet someone put a bed in, but it’s yours. It looks like Celia shares this room with three other people, judging by the number of beds.

You hear a cough come from a lump on one of them. She must really be sick, then…

“Celia?” you ask out loud. “Do I have the right room?” The lump flails a bit.

“Emma? Is that you?” a hoarse voice asks. You see Celia’s hand fumble for the candle on her nightstand.

“Yes, I wanted to--”

“I’m so sorry! I tried really hard not to get sick but I-” A painful sounding, wracking cough rips through her, cutting her off. “If you want your money b-” Another long series of coughs.

“Maker, stop trying to talk!” you exclaim, walking closer so that you can help her shaking hands light the candle. “I don’t want my money back. I just came to check on you. Thanks for sending the message, by the way… I got Solas his breakfast without any incident.” Well, without much incident, anyway. “Have you been to a healer?”

“I’ll be fine,” she rasps, reminding you very much of yourself. Well, she knows her own limits better than you. “Just need a day or so to sweat it out… Oh! You shouldn’t be here. You might get sick!”

“I’ll be fine,” you echo with a quiet chuckle at your own humor. No one else is going to laugh--you might as well.

“Are you sure you don’t want the mo-” Again she’s cut off by a painful sounding cough. You wince.

“No, no. It’s not like the Inquisition stops paying you when you get sick. Surely I can afford the same luxuries. I’m just as glad you weren’t coughing on Solas’ food. Rest. I won’t die from bringing
him breakfast for a few days.” Although, you add to yourself, I’ll be clothed next time.

“Ugh, you’re so nice,” Celia says with a pronounced wheeze.

“Don’t say it like I just admitted to eating babies,” you laugh. “It’s not like anyone else in Skyhold would take the offer, anyway.”

“Why do you want your mornings free so badly? I mean, I know you said not to ask, but…”

You sigh. “It’s… complicated. Just focus on getting better, okay?”

“Alright. ...Thanks for coming to see me, Emma,” she says. You just smile in response.

“You hear her blow out the candle as you leave. You can’t help but be a little relieved. She is just sick. You don’t have to call in any favors or… threaten to shank someone, or something like that. The money really isn’t an issue… you’d rather have her paid, happy, and silent. You’re not particularly looking forward to missing your breakfasts in the mess, though.

- 

Maybe it’s all in your head, but you do feel a bit better, after having rested on Solas’ couch for a bit. You’re still exhausted, mind, and after an hour of writing, the shake in your arms comes back. You don’t want to admit it to Solas long enough to get that spell of his… He’s glancing over at you enough as it is. You spoil yourself a little by playing with the idea that he’s concerned about you, but in all reality, he’s probably more concerned that you’re going to spill ink and wreck the desk or your work. Not to mention that concern, while nice, gets you into a lot of trouble.

You spend the afternoon hunched over your desk, left hand steadying your right as you eek out one letter at a time. Tomorrow will be better. You won’t have any nightmares tonight because you won’t have any sleep. One hour of laying down had you feeling better for two, so six hours of laying down will have you feeling better for twelve. Simple math.

You can get through this. You’ve gotten through a hell of a lot worse.

It’s thanks to your struggling that you’re perfectly on time with Solas’ dinner. You were practically jumping at the chance to get up and do something else for a little. You grab another light meal for yourself… your stomach still feels queasy: the nausea of the sleep-deprived. In the tower, it had gotten to the point where all you could stomach was bread or crackers and juice. But you’d gotten that done, hadn’t you? And a copy of that delightful little tome had made it back to your private collection, at that. Perseverance always has its rewards.

You don’t even try to work on your tome over dinner; you just sit down on the stool Solas always seems to provide by his desk. He engages you in light conversation about Arancia and her Botanical Compendium. You’re more than happy to answer questions about someone else’s life for once. However, your “he only cares if I spill the ink” theory takes a hit when you see Solas watching the way you pick at your food. You force down every drop of soup and even manage to eat half a fruit tart before your stomach cramps painfully. Well, you’ve proved your point. If Solas is concerned about your well-being, for whatever reason, hopefully you can assuage his fears by doing better tomorrow.

After returning the dishes to the kitchen, you take a trip up to the library. You see Helisma working diligently at her desk. She doesn’t look up. You don’t draw attention to yourself. Instead, you glance around the rest of the library. Dorian is nowhere to be seen, but you’re on the hunt for someone else
entirely. You see her and then make a beeline straight for Thea. She looks mildly unimpressed to see you.

“Skipping meals again?” she asks sourly. “I see you rarely enough as it is.”

“Well, you know how it is with the boss back in town,” you say cheekily. “But that means my benefits are back.” You hold out one of the fruit tarts. “Unless you like my company at breakfast more than my treats.”

“I do,” she says as she snatchesthe tart from your hand. “But that don’t mean I’m turnin’ down the benefits, neither.”

“I love a woman who’s easy to bribe,” you say with a grin. You hold your hands up when she glares. “I mean, a woman who has a relaxed and forgiving nature, of course!”

She snorts. “You can turn a phrase, I’ll give ya that. Turn that charm on one of the boys in your life, eh? I’m thinkin’ about gettin’ a bettin’ racket goin’.”

“Oh, please,” you say with a snort. “There’s nothing to bet on.”

“The Void there isn’t! I’m losin’ track. ‘Course, smart money’s on Bull, but long odds for the big money is on his little friend.”

“Pretty sure Bull and his ‘little friend’ would be the same bet,” you say, rolling your eyes towards the heavens. The stupidity you have to put up with…

“Nah, that second in command of his. Short one! No one thinks he has a chance, wot with Bull bein’ all… Bull. Course, I won’t darken yer ears with wot some of the more creative types are sayin’…”

You flush, part embarassment, part indignation. “Leave Krem out of those stupid rumors!”you hiss, and Thea looks a little taken aback. “I get it, rumor has me pegged as the newest entertainment in Skyhold. I can shoulder that. But Krem deserves better than hearsay saying he’s some sort of… consolation prize! He’s a nice guy!”

“Oh? Maybe his odds aren’t so long after all…” Thea says. Her tone is teasing, but you feel like smacking the sly grin off of her face.

“Oh shut up, Thea,” you snap, far too loudly. This is a library. You run a hand through the hair that’s fallen loose from your bun.

“I was jus’ jokin’...” Thea says, looking a little abashed. “You norm’ly jus’ fluster a bit, then we have a laugh. No one’s really bettin’, I promise.”

“I know, Thea. I know. I’m just…” You let out a long sigh. “I didn’t get much sleep last night. Sorry.”

“S’fine. But… What’s this with Bull’s second, now?”

“He’s a friend. A really good one. And he strikes me as the kind of person who would actually be hurt by the kind of rumors that might be circulating around me right now.” You rub a head against your burning forehead. You’re developing a headache. “Just… enjoy the fruit tart, Thea. I’ve got… I need to get back to work.”

You head quickly towards the stairs, shouldering past Dorian--who’s just come up the stairs--before he can stop you for another exhausting chat.
Bull has already shown his willingness to shrug off rumor. Solas is too disconnected from the rest of Skyhold to even know if rumors are circulating about him. And besides, next to the whispers of blood magic, a rumor that he’s banging the help is almost a positive. But Krem? You like Krem. Even though he’s a Vint, he’s a good guy. And unless your ability to read people has left you completely, he’s not only got a crush on you, but he might be a virgin, to boot. Just the kind of young man who deserves better than to get involved with you.

You storm back down to the rotunda, throw yourself into your chair, and furiously begin working on your tome again. Friends. People whose well-being you care about beyond what they can do for you. That’s what got you into trouble in Orlais.

*No, Aimée is what got you into trouble in Orlais.*

Same fucking thing.

*First Solas is Aimée, now Krem? You’re jumping at shadows. Why not the Iron Bull, too?*

Bull is different.

*Why? No feelings for an oxman? Not like he’s had your back since you got here. Oh, but you can’t have someone who actually treats you well, can you?*

You bang your hand down on the desk. Ink pots clatter, the sound echoes up through the tower.

“Emma?” Solas sounds shocked.

“Sorry. I… slipped. I think I’m falling asleep at my desk,” you lie. You don’t even care if it’s a good lie.

“Pardon my saying, but you look terrible,” he says bluntly.

You laugh, but it sounds like you’re in pain. “Yeah. I probably do.” Your eyes slide over the couch. Maybe after he leaves. “Life goes on, though. I think I can get a few more pages out of tonight, yet.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to rest?”

When Bull is prodding at you too much, it’s okay to punch him. You wouldn’t mind being able to do that with Solas. You sigh. “No. I’d prefer to keep working.”

Blissfully, Solas has nothing more to say on the matter. You shove the nagging little doubts to the back of your mind and pour your concentration on the work at hand. You can apologize to Thea later. There’s nothing immediate you can do about the rumors, and there’s no reason to believe they’d do any damage to your connections with the Chargers. Fretting over it won’t do you any good. You soothe yourself as you write. This is nothing you can’t handle. This has just been a shitty day all around. But there’s always tomorrow. You’ll do better tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one took so long coming! I don't even have a particularly good excuse.
I actually have an excuse for being late this time: college orientation! I wonder what my excuse for next week will be?

You leave the rotunda before Solas does this time, more to appease him than anything. You simply curl up in bed with Solas’ Veilfire book, however. You can sneak some supplies into your room sometime when Solas isn’t breathing down your neck, and begin copying down some of the more interesting parts of the tome. You won’t always be stuck in Skyhold, after all, and you’ve never been one to let knowledge slip through your fingers.

You do, eventually, try to sleep. Perhaps it’s the exhaustion, but you manage to slip into unconsciousness. You wake in the morning with the profoundly uneasy feeling that you’d had nightmares, but no ability to remember them. Well… you’re still off to a better start than yesterday. The vague, unsettling feeling of being watched is preferable to waking up half-drowned and terrified.

The rainstorm from yesterday has finally passed, thank the Maker. But the shining puddles on the ground give you something to look at that you haven’t seen in a while… your reflection. It’s too dark for any accuracy, but you… you look rough. You’ve probably gained a few pounds since you’ve been in Skyhold, but you’ve got dark bags around your eyes dramatic enough that you can see them in a puddle reflection.

You kick the puddle to disrupt the reflection and sigh. There’s simply no helping it. You’re getting enough sleep to stay alive; you can still function and do your job. Sulking over it will do you no good. Sleep is, quite bluntly, a luxury you cannot afford.

You’re not surprised when morning practice with the Iron Bull turns into muddy wrestling. Frankly, the advantage turns to you once you’re slippery. You repeatedly wriggle and slide out of Bull’s holds, but the rough texture of his horns gives you a place to grab where your hand doesn’t simply slip off. You spend more of the morning than not with a hand around at least one of his horns. It’s a little amazing to you that he tolerates it. Surely this is demeaning for a Qunari?

Your suspicions that what you’re doing is a bit on the degrading side is confirmed when Iron Bull reaches up yet again to try and dislodge you from his back, only to grasp one of your long, pointed ears, and yank.

The cry you let out could pass for one of pain, and nothing else--if no one was paying particularly close attention. You release Bull’s horns to slap your hands over your mouth, as if you can pull the groan back in and prevent anyone from hearing it.

Elf ears are sensitive. Bull has to know that; he’s fucked dozens of elves and, unless the Ben-Hassrath got nicer when you weren’t looking, probably tortured dozens more (now there’s an unpleasant thought). Not everyone responds positively to them being touched, in any situation. It takes a very specific kind of elf to make a sound like that when one was roughly yanked. You flush a deep red under the mud, humiliation and indignation both.
Bull’s turned to face you, but you find you can’t just take this one as a lesson learned. He’ll smirk that stupid grin at you to let you know he’s come out on top again. This time, you want to end on top. As he turns, you jump, latching on to the place where one of his broad horns turns upwards. You use it to wrench yourself upwards, yanking Bull’s head down and sideways in the process.

Iron Bull is sturdy enough not to fall down into the mud, but you have him off balance. Your other hand grabs his other horn, pulling yourself further up and continuing to wrench his head. He acts fast; his hands wrap around your waist, but with a twist and a wiggle, your muddy hips slip from his grasp. Your leg goes around his neck and you jerk, using his horns to twist his head down again.

You feel his balance fail, the muddy, slippery mess of the ground allowing to do what you never could on an ordinary day. Of course, now there’s a Qunari three times your size falling... towards you. You twist out of the way as best as you can, but your legs will certainly be caught underneath him. You pray for soft ground.

You needn’t have wasted the prayer; Bull catches himself on his arms a few inches above the ground, preventing the entirety of his weight from crushing you. You release his horns and move to wriggle out from underneath him, but he shifts his weight, capturing your arms and pinning both your legs into the mud with one knee.

“Nice try,” he says with a grin.

“Knocked you down, didn’t I?” you say with a scowl.

“Yeah, with you underneath. You still don’t have the ‘hurt them worse than yourself’ part down.”

“It’s a work in progress,” you admit.

Bull keeps you pinned for a moment longer, then releases your arms, allowing you to slide out from under him. He rolls to sit down in the mud with a grunt; you don’t bother getting up either. It’s only after he releases you that you realize the full implications of what just happened. You’d been pinned… **underneath** a Qunari, arms and legs both held down, and you hadn’t panicked. If anything, your reaction had been a bit in the opposite direction. You’re more than willing to blame that on his ill-advised earplay, however. Your ear is still smarting, and the last time someone had touched you there… Well, it’s been a long time. None of your past lovers particularly utilized your sensitive ears; there’s a reason it features so heavily in your more… questionable dreams.

Either way… not panicking is progress. Progress towards what, you’re not entirely sure. You’re not sure what Bull’s endgame is here. You’re not even sure what **yours** is. You want the Chargers in your pocket, and they’re not going to get in there without Bull. And there are worse things than practicing your fighting skills. This is a war, and you’re locked in a fortress with Templars and soldiers alike. It’s going to be necessary, sooner than later. Past that, however, you have no idea where either of you are going with this.

“You been sleeping?” Bull asks. When you look at him questioningly, he gestures towards one of your eyes. “Those get any darker and it’ll look like you’ve got two black eyes to match the rest of you.”


“You slept like a rock outside the walls. You want to ride out again, get some rest?”

The thought is… tempting. But with the Inquisitor and Solas back in residence, the risk is just too high. When Solas was gone, there was no one to particularly miss your presence in the rotunda.
Now, if you vanish for a day, it will certainly be noticed, and you don’t want to have to explain. Not to mention the risk of being found out, whether by one of Leliana’s ever-present spies, or simply by someone (like the ever-curious Solas) happening across you.

“No, but thanks, Bull. If I don’t make myself get used to sleeping in Skyhold, I’ll be perpetually exhausted.”

“You’re already perpetually exhausted,” Bull points out. You shoot him a tired glare. “But, I take your point. Breakfast, then? Or do you have another emergency?”

“Not an emergency, but something that’ll have me skipping breakfast nonetheless,” you say with a sigh. Iron Bull looks curious, but you decline to elucidate any further. You’ve got a breakfast to make. Of course, now you’re completely freaking covered in mud. Fortunately, you have enough time for a (very) fast bath to rinse yourself off.

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Solas looks slightly relieved when you walk in, likely because you actually wore a shirt this time. Your hair is still wet, but it’s pulled back properly. You are, at the very least, presentable.

“The ‘other girl’ is still sick?” Solas asks pointedly. He’s putting a shirt on, Maker bless. Although that does make you wonder if you’re perhaps a bit late with his breakfast. You try to focus on setting his food on his table and not on watching him dress. Somehow, it makes you as embarrassed as if he was stripping.

“She is, yes,” you answer, a little belatedly.

“And without her, there’s no one willing to bring my meals?” he sounds a little amused.

“Oh, I’m sure they would if I made a fuss or insisted… It’s their job,” you say with a sigh. “But it’s much easier to simply do it myself. Celia won’t be sick forever.”

“You seem to enjoy keeping busy,” he says mildly. You step away from the desk quickly as he steps towards it. He hasn’t put on that woolen tunic he tends to wear… somehow, seeing him in his undershirt is almost as embarrassing as seeing him shirtless. Turn about is fair play, however; you’d subjected him to the sight of your underclothes the morning prior. “As if Leliana weren’t giving you enough to do, you make time for kitchen work and… training with Iron Bull.”

There’s a slight hitch in his voice when he says “training.” You dearly hope none of the rumors have gotten back to him. He hasn’t said anything outright, but… “When did the two of you begin that?”

Oh, Maker, he totally has heard some of the rumors, hasn’t he? You fight not to flush, since that would only seem to confirm them. “Shortly after you left, ser. I believe it started as more of a joke than anything, but… Well, there is a war on. I was helpless when the red Templars destroyed my home. If I run into them again, I’d like to be on better footing.”

“That seems wise. Do you have similar motivations for your training with Sera?” He’s already sat down at his desk and begun to eat, but he doesn’t seem ready to let you leave. You withhold a sigh and fold the heavy tray under one arm; you don’t feel comfortable setting it on his floor.

“That was more to humor her, although I think I’ve used the tricks she taught me more than the ones Bull has,” you admit. Indeed, you picked his lock not a day after Sera had given you the lockpicks.

“And you’ve several books you wish to read…”
“I’m a fast reader.”

“Not to mention the harts…”

“Bull’s idea.”

“At this point I’m surprised you haven’t taken to cultivating a garden in the courtyard.”

“Oh, is there a place for that?” you say, surprised. “I haven’t seen-”

Solas stops eating to give you a very pointed look.

“Ah… yes, well. I take your meaning,” you say with a sheepish grin. “I suppose I do prefer to keep occupied.”

“When do you find time to eat or sleep?” Solas asks, and you realize that the question isn’t rhetorical.

“Well, I eat with you,” you point out.

“You certainly don’t sleep with me.”

Solas seems to realize the implications of what he just said at the same time as you do. To his credit, he just seems momentarily embarrassed, whereas you can feel a crimson blush race across your cheeks.

“I, uh… No, I don’t. I, um…” You fumble for a way to make the conversation change to another topic, any other topic. “I make do,” you say lamely. “I, um… I should… go get my own breakfast. If that’s alright with you?”

“Of course,” Solas says with a nod. You manage to leave politely and close the door gently behind you before sinking down against the stone wall and letting out a quiet whimper. Maker’s breath. Between Iron Bull’s rough handling and Solas’ unfortunate implications, it’s seems you’re destined to spend today as wet as you were yesterday… if in a different way altogether.

- You don’t actually go to get breakfast… You couldn’t make eye contact with Iron Bull in this condition, let alone Thea. You also resist the urge to make a beeline for your room to relieve yourself. At this point, you’re frightened of what fantasies might pop into your mind. And you’ve just had a bath, so that’s out of the question. In the end, you find yourself sitting at your desk in the rotunda, idly lettering the next page of the tome. If nothing else, it serves to drag your mind out of the bedroom.

After perhaps half an hour, Solas still hasn’t entered the rotunda. You had been hoping to get a wrist enchantment today, although in retrospect, that might not be the best idea. In the end, you decide to just take a walk. Perhaps Solas will be here by the time you get back. He’d mentioned a garden here in Skyhold… might as well explore and try to find it.

In the end, it doesn’t actually take you long to find it; Solas was speaking of the area his balcony overlooked. You hadn’t actually been paying particularly close attention despite how many times you walked by that area. That’s a little out of character for you, but in your defense, Solas and his bedroom are both very distracting to you.

The area is surprisingly green here… and somehow it feels warmer, more humid, when compared to the rest of Skyhold. That could be because it’s completely surrounded by walls, but you suspect there
might be a magical component to it as well. It wouldn’t surprise you… This place is old, and has old magic. The mysterious bathtubs are evidence enough of that.

You slip out of your shoes, if only to feel your bare feet in the grass. It’s soothing, although you can almost hear Sera’s derision of your elfiness in the back of your head. Still, there are few enough people out here, so early in the morning, that you feel comfortable enough to walk barefoot through the garden. You idly identify plants as you pass them, pausing only when you see a particularly unusual specimen. And there are several of them. How, pray tell, had they gotten vandal aria to grow this high up? It should be impossible. Magic, then, almost certainly.

Your relaxing stroll through the garden is interrupted when you hear familiar voices echoing out of what appears to be a gazebo of some kind. Intrigued, you sneak a bit closer. Sure enough, the Commander of the Inquisition is talking to the Spymaster. Oh, Maker, this could be interesting. You ease a little closer, largely out of sight. You squat down, pretending to admire a flower in bloom, as you strain your ears to pick up the details of their conversation.

“That piece wasn’t there a moment ago.”

“Such accusations, Commander!”

You pause. Not exactly a conversation on foreign diplomats, then. You suppose you shouldn’t be surprised; no spymaster would have that sort of conversation in a public garden.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll win any--Emma?”

You jump straight up, from squatting to bolt upright in half a second. He’d seen you that fast--and recognized you. Now that’s alarming.

“Y-yes, ser?” you stammer quickly.

“It is you,” he says, sounding surprised. “I’m amazed you take enough time off to enjoy the gardens.”

“So am I,” adds Leliana, turning in her chair to eye you.

“S-sorry, I’ll get back to work immediately,” you assure them both with a cringe. “I had just heard about the gardens and wanted to see—”

“That wasn’t a chastisement,” Leliana assures you. “After all, the Commander and I are doing the same.”

“Speaking of which,” the Commander says, “I believe that’s checkmate.” You hear the familiar clink of stone hitting marble.

Leliana turns to face Commander Rutherford again. “...Well played. I expect a rematch.” She stands to leave, and you risk taking a small step closer. Sure enough, as Leliana steps out of the way, you see the familiar sight of a chess table. You can’t help but smile… the leaders of one of the new world powers, playing chess together.

“Do you play, Emma?”

It takes you a moment to register what you’re hearing. You stare blankly at the Commander, and he gestures towards the board. Is he…?

“I… I’m familiar with the game,” you admit, if only because your fingers are twitching to grasp the
pieces. It’s been years since you last played. “I didn’t realize Skyhold was so well-equipped.”

“It was a pleasant surprise for me, as well… I believe the Inquisitor had it installed.” You watch as the Commander runs a gloved hand fondly across the edge of the stone table. This is the first time you’ve seen him without gauntlets, although he’s still wearing some light armor. “Would you like a game?”

He is. Time to cut and run; you can sneak back to play with the board yourself, later. “Oh, I couldn’t-” you begin, but he cuts you off.

“Do me the favor,” he insists. “It would give me an excuse to put off work a bit longer.”

That’s dangerously close to an order, although you doubt he realizes it. Either way, you’re not going to be refusing. You’ve spent most of your life learning exactly when you can get away with saying ‘no,’ and when you shouldn’t push it. With a man as powerful as the Commander, you prefer to “push” as little as possible. Wordlessly, you yank your shoes on and then climb into the rotunda.

Without the entirety of his armor, or perhaps due to the fact he’s sitting down, the Commander seems a bit smaller than usual. At the very least, he’s not looming the way you’re accustomed to. He’s still rather broad… Solas is broad at the shoulders as well, particularly for an elf. Perhaps it’s just your lot in life to be surrounded by men with nice shoulders. What’s attractive in Solas, however, is intimidating in the Commander.

You sit across from him and move to set the board, but you only get as far as picking up a pawn. It feels so natural in your hand… you can’t help but smiling down at it. “A marble set. I learned to play on one like this,” you confess, feeling more than a little nostalgic. Positive nostalgia is an unusual sensation for you.

“When did you learn?” Cullen asks, and you realize that this is a conversation fraught with potential pitfalls. That makes your smile fade quickly.

“When I was a child,” you say, as shortly as you can without being rude. “What about you, Commander?”

“I learned as a child. My sister was fond of it; she enjoyed repeatedly trouncing my brother and I. The look on her face when I finally got good enough to beat her, though…”

So the Commander has siblings. No surprise there… If he’s from a noble family, the only reason he’d be a Templar would be because he had a handful of siblings between him and the holdings. And if he’s not a noble, well… you don’t meet a lot of human commoners who only ever had one child.

“Did you play with your siblings, as well?” the Commander is asking as you finish setting the board. You’re almost amazed to find that there’s someone in Skyhold who doesn’t know the details of your history.

“Oh, no, I was an orphan,” you say, almost without thinking. The Commander makes a face like he’s just walked in on someone completely nude.

“Oh, I, um… At the… orphanage, then?”

A nice attempt to regain his footing, but he’d caught himself from tripping only to fall off a cliff.

“No, in Seheron,” you say with a thin smile as you begin the game by moving a pawn forward.
You have to keep yourself from laughing… Perhaps it’s because you’re seeing him out of uniform, but he looks less like the Commander of the Inquisition and more like the sort of awkward person you’d imagine being named “Cullen.”

“Did you play with the other… um, the others?” he asks nervously.

“No,” you say with a sigh. “With my master.”

The awkwardness was almost palpable, and the game continues in silence for a while. The clink of the pieces on the marble board brings you right back to Seheron, not in the horrific way you’re used to.

“It’s one of my few fond memories from there,” you admit quietly. “My master often complained of being surrounded by simpletons… I suspect he played with me simply because I had to do as he told me. Who else would have time for chess in an active war zone?”

“Were you, um… fond of your master, then?” Cullen says with increasing awkwardness. You almost feel sorry for him.

“Oh, no, I hated him,” you say matter-of-factly. “Maker, how I hated him.” You move your knight into a more aggressive position and then take a moment to stare off into the gardens, momentarily lost in memories. “But he was clever. Brilliant, to a child of ten scant years.” You drum your fingers gently on the table. The clink of stone on marble informs you that the game is still going. “He found some entertainment in teaching me… I think he was a little charmed by my sharp mind, or perhaps I was simply the only thing there amusing to him at all,” you continue as your move to block Cullen’s bishop. Despite his embarrassment, he’s playing well. That’s good; it will make losing easier. “He often complained of being surrounded by dullards. He’d tell me I was special, clever.”

Cullen seems to have given up on changing the subject. “I’m surprised there was time for chess.”

You chuckle. “We made time for whatever the master wanted to do, really. But my primary duty was translation, and that could never have taken up all of my time. I was used for miscellaneous duties, yes, but my master wasn’t above simply using me for… companionship. I think he favored me, but I hated it. He had a painful way of showing his ‘favor,’ sometimes, and the other slaves resented me. …But I enjoyed the chess.”

You look up, and Cullen is staring at you an abject horror. This time, you can’t help it, and burst out laughing.

“Are… are you having me on?” he demands as you attempt to cover your laughs with one arm.

“No, no, it’s all true!” you assure him, still laughing. “Just… the look on your face. Are you regretting asking me for a game, Commander?”

“You’re picking on me,” he complains, and you laugh even harder. He’s grinning, thank the Maker. He has a sense of humor… Good, or else you’d likely be in a world of hurt.

“I am sorry if I’ve brought up unpleasant memories, however,” he says, a little more seriously.

“Oh, no… If anything, chess is one of my few pleasant memories from Seheron,” you say as the giggles finally subside. “I missed playing.”

“As did I… I’ve not seen my sister in many years. I wonder if she still plays…?”
You let the conversation stay on his family as the game progresses. You suspect the Commander is attempting to allow you to win, or at the very least, going easy on you. He plays averagely, but will occasionally make a brilliant move. It’s an interesting game, with both of you attempting to lose. In the end, however, you win at losing… Perhaps you were simply more dedicated to it.

“I believe I have this one,” the Commander says as he moves into checkmate.

“I suspect you could have had it ten moves ago,” you say with a chuckle. “But thanks for humoring me.”

“Not at all,” Cullen says with a smile. “You gave me an excellent excuse to be a bit lazy.”

“This is what passes for lazy with you? And they say I work too much.” You begin to set the board again, although you’ve no intent to play another game. It just seems rude to leave it a mess.

“You do have an… admirable work ethic,” the Commander says. Something in his tone makes you look up. He’s rubbing the back of his neck; he looks a bit awkward. Again, you’re sure it’s just because you’re seeing him about of full armor. Easy to forget Templars once they’re out of armor, but that’s not wise. You can never forget, not if you want to stay alive.

“I’ll have to actually get to work if I want to keep that reputation,” you say, sitting up from the chess table.

“Oh, yes, of course,” the Commander says, standing as well. “I, um--”

“Thanks for the game, Commander,” you say with a smile, cutting him off before he can do something stupid like ask you to play again sometime. You exit quickly, making a beeline for the Great Hall rather than stopping to admire more of the garden. Today, you’ve been reminded of the dangers of exploring.

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It’s a relief to get back to the rotunda. Sitting at your desk working is as simple as your life gets these days, even with a mysterious elven mage futzing about in the background. Speaking of whom, Solas has indeed come to the rotunda while you were absent. You’ve had time to forget his morning faux pas, hopefully he has too… Although the sight of him, bent over one of those odd shards, hands glowing slightly, is enough to put you right back in that moment.

No, you certainly aren’t sleeping with him. And your life is complicated enough without that.

He looks so busy that you don’t want to interrupt him, but he looks up when you enter, in any case. If he’s wondering where you’ve been, he doesn’t ask… a nice change from the interrogation of the morning. He simply goes back to whatever it is he’s doing with the shard.

You had been wanting that wrist enchantment, but you can’t bring yourself to disturb him any further. Instead, you simply head to your desk. You can do without, for now… you can always ask him after he’s done with whatever magic he’s working.

Magic with no protective wards turns out to mean that you’ll be spending your morning being lightly molested by stray bits of magic, however. The sensation isn’t unpleasant, per se, but it is distracting. Every time you taste a bit of magic whisking by you, you practically salivate at it. Your aura stays locked obediently inside of you, however. It’s still small enough to be controlled easily, thanks to your expenditure at the pond. You’ll be fine unless you actually need magic to defend yourself any time in the near future.
You grit your teeth as a slip of mana brushes against your back. What in the Maker’s name is he even doing back there? Something with one of those shards, again… You’d love to get a good look at one yourself, as well as seeing that temple in the desert that they’re apparently for. You try to redouble your focus on your writing, and you do manage to get some work done.

You manage to stay on top of things, today, and get up at a reasonable hour to fetch Solas’ lunch… in part, this is just because you skipped breakfast and you’re kind of hungry. You’ve spent your entire life ignoring the cramping sensations of hunger. It’s hard for you to really associate the sensation with needing to go and get something to eat… But you’re not an old dog just yet. You can still learn new tricks.

Celia is still absent from the kitchens. You resolve to check on her again that evening, make sure her illness is getting better, not worse. You’ve no desire to force someone to the healer against their will— it would be massively hypocritical of you. But you’re certain you could guilt her into it if you needed to… Or even just threaten to have Solas take a look at her. That would almost certainly frighten her to the healing tent.

You fetch a normal meal for Solas and another light meal for yourself… You’re feeling better than yesterday, certainly, but the flushed feeling won’t leave your face and your stomach is still a bit queasy. You privately suspect the heat in your face might be thanks to Iron Bull and Solas, but you’d almost rather be ill.

Your pleased to see your stool by Solas’ desk when you re-enter with his food. It’s the little things that make you so content here at Skyhold. You can sit at the desk of an elven mage and have stimulating conversation over a delicious meal. It’s enough to almost make you forget you’d played chess with a Templar Knight-Commander that morning. Almost. Not quite.

“So,” you begin, deciding to steer the conversation yourself rather than waiting for another interrogation. “I was reading the book you gave me, the one on veilfire. I have a few questions…”

The conversation is exactly as delightful as you’d hoped. Solas seems happy to answer your questions about veilfire, although you have to stick more to practical questions and stay away from instructions on how to summon it. There’s only so much you can explain away with idle curiosity, after all. It’s only a shuffling sound at the door to the rotunda combined with Solas glancing at something behind you that distracts you away from the conversation at hand.

You turn around to look as well, and see a familiar dwarven face poking around the corner of the door. Rocky quickly darts back out of sight, and then you hear a bit of muttering from behind the door. There’s a pause, and then the door opens, with Krem more or less being shoved through.

“Hi, um, Emma! And Solas,” he says awkwardly, leaning backwards against the hands pushing against him. “I, that is, we were wondering if you’d like to have lunch, but, uh, you seem… busy…”

You cover your smile with a hand, trying hard not to laugh. That’s Dalish behind him, shoving, and you think you can see Skinner standing off behind them, looking rather put-upon. You turn back to Solas, a voiceless question in your eyes. He holds up his hands, looking as bemused as you feel. “I hardly have a claim on her.”

You grin your thanks before gathering the rest of your food up and heading towards Krem. He looks surprised, and very relieved. Sure enough, a few of the Chargers are there with him: Rocky, Dalish, and Skinner.

“Look at that, you won her over, Krem!” Dalish says with a wicked grin. “You don’t have to worry about the extra competition.”
“Oh, shut up,” Krem grumbles. You can’t help grinning as you follow them outside. The five of you settle under a tree in the courtyard to eat, chatting idly. They’re as playfully cheerful as ever—except Skinner, of course. But the day she starts cracking jokes is the day you run for the hills. You can’t even imagine it.

“I can’t believe you four were scared to go into the rotunda,” you laugh around a piece of bread. “Why on earth would you be superstitious? I mean, Dalish is a m… elf,” you correct yourself at the look she gives you. Dalish is the worst kept secret in all of Skyhold, honestly. Her joking nature about her magic makes you almost wish you could sign up with the Chargers. They’ve certainly got her back.

“It’s not that,” Skinner points out. “It’s the way the two of you were talking.”

Dalish nods in agreement. “Yeah, like there was a wall between you ‘n’ the rest of the world.” She elbows Krem teasingly. “But we knew you’d make time for Krem here. Who wouldn’t? He’s such a charmer.”

You’re glad for their joking; it helps to cover your embarrassment. Is that how the two of you look to an outside eye? No wonder there are rumors. Still, the thought pleases you somewhat.

“You got a crush of your own, don'tcha?”

You try to keep your face neutral, but your cheeks flush against your will.

“She does!” chimes in Rocky. “Better watch out, Krem! You can’t lose out to an old man like that; what would the boss say?”

You and Krem share a pained look as their teasing continues. Unrequited crushes might be painful, but they have nothing on the Chargers’ brutal puns, it would seem.

Chapter End Notes

As an added bonus, here's a drabble (requested by the lovely teklacat) that I actually kind of like:

http://hobaglavellan.tumblr.com/post/121987961679/yay-emma-x-solas-lalochezia-sphallolalia

Tune in next time for more Solas with a dash of Cole!
Lunch with the Chargers is fun, but their endless joviality distracts you so much from eating that you feel you may have eaten too much. Your stomach twists uncomfortably, and your face is hot despite the lack of stimulus. You’re also getting tired… the tremble in your arms is coming back. Well, you’re not going to let it affect your work today. You try to steady your shaking as you walk into the rotunda and head straight for Solas’ desk.

He’s busy at work, or what passes for work with him… reading some dusty old tome. You envy him more than a little; he seems to spend his days doing research and little else. People leave him more or less alone; you get more visitors to the rotunda than he does. The people who do come in—Sera, the Inquisitor—mostly serve only to antagonize him, rather than offer any form of friendship.

“Solas?”

“Mm?” He barely even glances up from his tome. You shift uncomfortably. Are you interrupting something important?

“Would you mind enchanting my wrist again?”

He glances up again, and for a moment, you almost expect a curt refusal. It is perhaps somewhat presumptuous for you to ask, but he’s never refused before. He leans back with a sigh and sets the tome, still open, onto his desk. You shift nervously, wondering if you’re about to get a lecture, but instead, he simply waves you over. He doesn’t offer you a place to sit, so you just stand awkwardly by his chair. He grasps your wrist with one hand and pulls your arm out somewhat, probably for a better grip.

He must see something he doesn’t like, because he frowns. The sight chills the very blood in your veins. What have you done now? Perhaps he notes the way your arm is trembling, although you’re fighting with it to be still. With a single swift movement, Solas grabs your sleeve with his other hand and yanks it up, revealing your forearm. You’ve a nice, fresh bruise there that you hadn’t even really noticed. Courtesy of Iron Bull resting his weight on your arms that morning, no doubt; it’s almost a handprint. The looks Solas gives you manages to be simultaneously judging and concerned. You received similar looks from the hahren in the Denerim alienage when you were younger.
“I get a bit bruised up in morning training,” you explain. At least Solas knows Bull’s teaching you to fight. It means you don’t have to come up with a creative lie to explain the bruise. Solas isn’t frowning any less, however. “It’s nothing, Solas.”

“Bruises, new and old,” Solas grumbles, twisting your arm a bit to look at it. You wince. “You want me to enchant your arm because it’s shaking... perhaps for the same reason as those circles under your eyes.” His mouth twists into a scowl, and your legs begin shaking as if they no longer want to hold your weight. You struggle to command them to behave. “Ironic you should borrow a tome of necromancy from Dorian; you’re beginning to look like the undead.”

You flush slightly. “It all looks worse than it is, I assure you,” you say. You delicately try to shift your arm away, but his grip is firm. Not firm enough to bruise, you note.

“Why not go to a healer?”

“They’ve more important things to do. I’d have new ones every other day anyway; I bruise easily.”

“You bruise easily, but your solution is to simply be battered, rather than find a healer or cease the training?”

Now your flush is deepening, but out of frustration, or perhaps indignation. It doesn’t help that he’s still got a grip on your arm. Has he forgotten he’s holding it? And what business is it of his, exactly, even if you were being beaten stupid each morning? You want very much to snap at him the way you would at Bull if he was prying or prodding too much. You don’t, however; you’re still trying to coax some of Solas’ knowledge out of him, after all. It won’t serve to antagonize him, even if he’s being an ass.

“It’s just a bruise, Solas. If I was seriously injured, I would go to a healer.” You have several times already, as a matter of fact, although you don’t tell him that.

Solas doesn’t seem very placated by this, but he runs the hand not gripping you over your wrist, and you feel the warm, soothing tingle of magic. It takes you unawares; your legs very nearly give out. Maker, had it always felt this good, or are you just oversensitive today? No, you realize, he’s being tricky. You watch in mild awe as the bruises fade under a rush of tingling blue magic. You bite your lip to cut off any sounds growing in your throat.

Then comes the familiar rush, the strengthening sensation as Solas’ bolsters your weakening muscles with delightful magic. He releases you, finally, and you flex. You’ll never get used to it... just like that, the pain gone. The bruises too, although you know you’ll simply have new ones there tomorrow.

“Thank you, Solas,” you say quietly, uncertain what else there is you can say. Your irritation at his prodding was washed away by the pleasing flood of magic. All you can seem to remember now is how well he treats you, when he’s no reason to do that, either. Your eyes linger on him, but he’s already picking up his tome, seemingly unaware of your sudden rush of emotion. Just as well. You take a few steps back, then turn and walk quickly to your desk. Work. You got your enchantment, so now you need to make the most of it.

Before you can get so much as a word onto the paper, however, a familiar voice softly echoes through the rotunda.

“She sleeps, but she doesn’t rest.”

You turn to glare around the room, eyes coming to rest on Cole, sitting up on the wooden platform.
where he enjoys perching. Not something that you asked him to keep secret, true, but he doesn’t need to be giving Solas any hints.

“Hello, Cole,” Solas says, setting his book back down. It seems like life is going to keep interrupting him.

“She’s mad at me, but I’m helping,” Cole says reproachfully, and you run a hand over your hot forehead, sighing. Solas’ lingering gaze on you seems to say that he can relate to what Cole’s saying. Both of them likely have your best interests in mind. Damn meddling types, the both of them.

“I won’t lie and say I don’t need your help,” you say finally. You could never do anything to send the spirit away from you. “But for right now, I’m fine. I just want to work.”

“You should let more people help you,” Cole chides. You must have glanced away for a second, because suddenly, he’s not there. You blink.

“That’s disorienting,” you complain to no one in particular.

“He gives good advice,” Solas comments before going back to reading his tome. You can’t help sighing again. You’re being double teamed here. You turn your focus back to your work, determined to get as many pages done as possible before dinner.

You work steadily through the afternoon, pausing only to stretch slightly to take the pressure off your bruised backside. The heat in your face doesn’t subside, nor does the ache in your body, and it’s almost amusing to see the shakiness of your left hand when compared to your right. But thanks to Solas’ enchantment, you tear through lettering, completing several pages before the candle on the wall informs you that it’s time for Solas’ dinner. You complete the line you were working on, and set your quill down regretfully. You hate stopping when you’re on a roll; if it were not for your duty to Solas, you likely would have skipped dinner to continue working.

No helping it… Hopefully today, he eats quickly, so you can get back to work.

Stopping by the kitchens reminds you that you’d intended to check in on Celia. You don’t see her in the kitchen, so she’s likely still ill. You’ll need to take some time away from your work to check on her, as much as you itch to get back to the rotunda and put more words to paper. You’re almost tempted to simply drop of Solas’ food and see to her while he eats, but you have a nagging suspicion that he would be displeased to see you skipping a meal. Besides, he always pulls that stool out for you… the idea of shunning that small invitation is too much for you to bear.

Wary of the way your stomach twisted into knots at lunch, you grab nothing but broth and bread for your dinner, although the roast pork you fetch for Solas makes your mouth water. You hunt through the kitchen for something special to bring Solas as thanks for enchanting your wrist... and maybe as apology, too. Although apology for what, you’re not quite sure. Being you, you suppose.

You manage to nab some fresh fruit. Maybe you’ll even be able to stomach some yourself if the broth goes down fine. The fact that Skyhold even has fresh fruit, all the way up here, is somewhat mind boggling. You’re certain that it’s thanks to that diplomat, Miss Montiliyet, attempting to appease what nobles dragged themselves out here to the middle of nowhere. Well, thank the Maker for spoiled nobles, if it means you get to eat an Orlesian apple.

You return to Solas’ rotunda and present him with his food as well as the fruit. He seems pleased, starting with an apple rather than his actual meal. You wish you could join him, but you force
yourself to focus on the broth. Your stomach groans in protest, threatening at once to return the broth upwards, but you manage to keep it down.

Solas, blissfully, keeps the conversation off your small meal and questionable health. You manage to have a somewhat pleasant conversation about how much work you’ve gotten done—thanks to him.

“You finished four pages in that time?” Solas says, sounding surprised. “That is remarkable.”

Mmm, compliments. When it comes to your scribing capabilities, you’re more than capable of taking them. “I’m good at what I do,” you say as modestly as you can. “There is a reason an elf was able to make a name for herself in Orlais. I did so by being the best…and by having a suitable pen name.”

“Oh?”

“Mm, yes. Alix Gagnon. Orlesian enough to have its own wine.” You sip idly on your juice. You’d tried a light wine at lunch, but even that small amount of alcohol had threatened to make you ill. “A nice, respectable name to put on their documents. By the end, I did so much of my work at a distance that I suspect many of my clients never even knew they were hiring an elf.”

“Why didn’t you continue to use that name here?” Solas inquires.

“Because it’s not my name,” you say with a grin. “Outside of Orlais, I’ve little use for it. And besides… I read the posters. ‘An Inquisition for All!’ Surely they would find little problem with an elven scribe.” You sigh gently. “I was right about that, at least. I have a good position here. Better than I could have hoped.”

You glance around the half-painted rotuna and smile. A good position indeed…and a great view.

- You check on Celia after dropping the dishes off at the kitchen. She tries to assure you that she’ll be feeling better tomorrow, but you’re not really having any of it. She looks damn near as bad as you feel; the only difference is that you’re vertical.

“Really, Emma, I’ll be back to work tomorrow,” she informs you, voice still hoarse and occasionally breaking.

“I’m not saying I don’t believe you, exactly…” you say delicately, trying to think of how someone could successfully convince you to stay in bed. “Just that it won’t be an issue for me to retrieve Solas’ breakfast tomorrow. Think of it as…one less thing you’ll have to do, if-”

“When!”

“When you go into work tomorrow.”

Celia sits up on her elbows, scowling at you from the bed. Her eyes are puffy and swollen, but she does look slightly better than yesterday. “You’re not fooling me.”

You grin at her. “And you’re not fooling me. Get some more rest, okay?”

She thumps back on the pillow and groans. “Elgar’nan, I hate this.”

Her usage of the Elven deity gives you a start. You carefully mask the shock on your face despite the fact she isn’t looking at you. Does Miss Celia have more background than she lets on? No wonder she keeps her head down. “Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll be fighting fit in no time,” you say
dryly. “But for now, I’m sure the nobles all prefer not to have a sick elf handling their food.”

She grumbles something nonsensical into her pillow and waves you vaguely away. You take that as your cue to leave. You like her when she’s sick, honestly… Either she’s too busy feeling shitty to bother with the bend-and-scrape routine, or she’s becoming more comfortable with you. You’ll take either.

Solas notices you as you return, and does a double-take. You try your damndest to walk normally… had he noticed the awkward gait your bruised back has given you? You're simply sore, but you’ll never hear the end of it if he thinks you’ve injured yourself again. Or… more. You see annoyance flicker across his face and your heart damn near stops. You shuffle quickly to your desk and sit down as quietly as possible. If you’re annoying him, you really, really need to watch your step. No more requests for arm enchantments for a while, then, and you’ll have to try to work as quietly as possible.

You immediately set back to work writing, back hunched over to try and make yourself as small as possible, as if you can physically shrink the amount of space you take up in his life. You hear Solas exhale slowly out through his nose… The sound only serves to make you tenser. The feeling of his magic supporting your wrist now only gives you guilt as you try to focus on putting word after word onto paper. What had you done, exactly? Your mind races through your actions at dinner, picking apart every word you said for something that could have given offense. Or was it earlier?

Solas clears his throat, and you abruptly straighten as if someone had shoved an iron rod up your spine. “Emma.”

“Y-y-y-yes?” Maker damn you and your stupid fucking stutter.

“You’ll be bringing my breakfast tomorrow.”

You honestly can’t tell if that was a question or a statement, but your reaction wouldn’t change either way. “Y-yes, ser.”

He falls silent after that, and you go back to sweating and stewing over your work, wondering what in the Maker’s name you’d done wrong. You’re still not good at predicting Solas’ moods or emotions, and it frustrates you. You hadn’t predicted he’d be cross with you for being bruised up. You wore long sleeves to cover the bruises, yes, but that was purely for the sake of presentability. You weren’t ashamed of what you and Bull got up to in the mornings--Maker, that made it sound bad.

It’s no use… You can’t think of why he’s cross with you. Well, that’s not entirely true, you can think of a dozen reasons, but you have no way of knowing which one’s correct. It’s doing you no good to fume. You simply attempt to focus on your work and on being as quiet and unobtrusive as possible.

You leave early again, just to get out of Solas’ way. This time, you swipe some materials to bring with you, a single quill, some parchment, and a small pot of ink. You suspect Solas notices, if only because he comments for you to “actually sleep” as you leave the rotunda. You cringe a little, but simply bid him a good night. As soon as the door to the rotunda closes behind you, you sprint towards your room like a spooked rabbit.

You spend the rest of the evening frantically transcribing bits of the borrowed Veilfire tome. The sooner you can return this, the better. Perhaps, at some point, you’d crossed a line into overstaying your welcome. If you can skip backwards back over that line again, you might be able to avoid gaining any more of the man’s ire.
You sleep that night, a little. You have flashes of dreams, none pleasant. Still, you’re glad you managed to get a bit of rest. You crawl out of bed regretfully during the pre-dawn hours. You wouldn’t mind staying in bed for a few more hours, but you have things to do.

You only become aware of how uncomfortably cold you feel when you step outside. Well, it’s August in the mountains… Cold is to be expected. Still, you regret the fact that you have to wear light clothing to practice with Iron Bull. By the time you jump over the fence into the practice yard, you’re freezing. Hopefully, the training will warm you.

You expect Bull to be warm or even hot to the touch given how cold you feel, but if anything, he feels cool. You suppose that the wind is mostly to blame for that. He’s got more mass to him, yes, but that doesn’t mean he can magically keep warm when it’s cold out.

You start training feeling already weary, but eventually the endorphins catch up with you. It’s what makes getting repeatedly knocked to the ground worth it… after fifteen minutes or so, you start actually feeling alive and awake again. It’s like a fog lifting from around your head. You’re just starting to get into the swing of things when you see the absolute last person you want to see: the Inquisitor.

What is he doing here? Bull mercifully doesn’t take advantage of the fact that you freeze in spot. Instead, he follows the path of your gaze to the steadily approaching Inquisitor.

“Hey, boss!” he says, his tone casual and his body relaxed. Go figure. Everyone you know seems to be on a goddamn first name basis with the Inquisitor. You knew Iron Bull was part of his Inner Circle, but seeing it kind of stings. You’re trying to get the Chargers in your pocket, which means you are, in a sense, trying to get them out of the Inquisitor’s.

“You’re up early, Bull,” the Inquisitor comments lightly, but his gaze is going straight past Bull and right to you. Thanks the Maker for Ben-Hassrath training; Bull seems to pick up on the tension right away, but doesn’t react to it.

“You know me, Boss. Late to bed, early to rise. What about you? You hate mornings.”

“I received word that the soldiers we saved in Fallow Mire are coming up the mountain. They should be here in a few hours,” the Inquisitor says with a long sigh. “Seemed pointless to go to bed after that.” He gestures towards you. “I see you’ve met our ever-popular linguist.”

You try not to bristle visibly.

“Oh, Emma? Yeah, she’s real friendly,” Bull says, placing a too-familiar hand on the back of your neck. You don’t know whether you want to kiss him or kill him. Half of Skyhold already thinks you’re a whore, the Inquisitor included. It’s the perfect way to assuage his obvious suspicions. It’s just also a bit humiliating.

“So I’m learning,” the Inquisitor says dryly. His eyes draw slowly down your body, as if he’s just now taking in the relatively scant clothing you’re wearing. You want to slap him, but instead, you avert your eyes to stare determinedly at a pole. Let him draw as many false conclusions as he wants. Better he simply continue thinking you’re banging your way through Skyhold than start wondering why you’re learning how to fight from a Ben-Hassrath.

“Do try not to break her, Bull,” the Inquisitor says, and you can hear the smirk. “I still need her to finish that translation.”

“Gotcha, boss,” Bull says with a grin, and the Inquisitor turns to continue his early morning stalking.
about the grounds of Skyhold. You let out a light sigh of relief.

“The boss doesn’t think much of you, does he?” Bull asks when the Inquisitor is out of earshot. He sounds amused.

“No, he doesn’t,” you agree. “His first… well, second, technically… introduction to me involved Solas.”

“Ah, say no more,” Bull says with a chuckle. “You’d think Solas giving him a castle would help to soften things between the two of them, but I think those two will hate each other until the day they die.”

“Mm… Bull?”

“Yeah?”

“Get your hand off my neck.”

You call off training early yet again in order to bathe, change, and still have time to bring Solas his breakfast in a timely manner. You’re nervous thanks to his clear irritation the night before, and you take time to make sure as many of his favorites as possible are involved with his breakfast. Perhaps a good meal to start the day will soften his mood.

Vivienne is already awake and enjoying a disgustingly fancy looking breakfast on the balcony. You amuse yourself by imagining simply walking up to her and pushing her over the railing. The way she’s positioning herself for power, throwing other mages gleefully under the boots of the Templars to gain it… Ugh. You can take some small comfort in the fact that she, at least, is a worse person than you.

You take a few deep breaths outside of Solas’ door before rapping the polite knock of a servant. You enter as quietly as you can, expecting Solas to perhaps still be in bed.

You don’t know whether he’s up early or you’re just running late, but Solas is already awake. Vigorously awake, as a matter of fact. You open the door to the sight of him pushing himself off the ground and back up onto his feet. He’d been doing some kind of… stretch, although you’ve never quite seen someone bend that way on purpose. He’s shirtless, because of course he is, but you can’t seem to make yourself avert your eyes.

“Good morning, Emma.” You find you can’t find the words to respond. You stare for longer than is technically appropriate as Solas stretches his shoulders before turning to fetch a shirt. That snaps you out of it; Maker, you can’t just stand here and watch the man dress.

“Good morning, ser,” you say, extremely belatedly, as you quickly move to begin placing his food on his table. You’d just been telling yourself you’d be less of a nuisance, and here you are, practically drooling on him. Maker, get a grip!

You finish unloading his food around the time he gets a shirt on. You turn to leave, but Solas, somewhat predictably, stops you. You’ve not been able to simply deposit his food and leave yet, after all. But the manner in which he stops you is something of a shock.

“Emma, remove your tunic.”

You freeze mid-step. …Clearly, you misheard.
“P-p-pardon?”

“You tunic,” Solas says, his matter-of-fact voice now suddenly chilling to you. “Remove it.”

You turn slowly to stare at him, still not quite believing that your ears are correct. “My… tunic?”

“Yes.”

“I… you… the… what?” Eloquent. Highly eloquent.

Solas lets out another slow exhalation through his nose, and you feel a bolt of fear jolt through you. He’s irritated. Why is he irritated? Why does he want you to strip? You stand rooted to the spot as your mind rushes through possibilities. There’s the obvious, of course, but Solas… Surely, Solas isn’t the type to… And he’d just gotten dressed…

“I… I can’t…”

“It wasn’t a request, nor a suggestion,” Solas says curtly, and you bite your lip, fighting against churning panic. There’s something here you’re not understanding. It’s as simple as that. Hands shaking with nerves, you undo the ties on your tunic and slip it off over your head. You clutch the crumpled cloth in front of you like a shield.

Solas waves you towards him—towards the bed—and you go with halting steps. Should you run? You didn’t lock the door behind you. But what would be the point? You work in his rotunda. If you piss him off, any chance of gaining his knowledge will be gone. He gestures for you to sit on his bed and you do so, shoulders slumping in surrender. You can deal with this. You’ve dealt with it before.

He sighs and sits down next to you. You don’t move, don’t look at him. You’re already staring off into space, prepared to go to another place until it’s over. “—even worse than I thought.” You realize, belatedly, that Solas is talking, but you can’t seem to make yourself listen, because he’s lifting your shirt up.

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to take this off,” Solas says, and he sounds… apologetic? You lift your arms obediently to let him peel your undershirt off of you. You hear a sharp intake of breath; it’s not yours.

“Fenedhis,” Solas swears under his breath. He places a hand on you and you flinch. “Be still,” he says, and you obey. There’s nothing else for you to do.

Imagine your sudden surprise—and alarm—when you feel the familiar, tingling warmth of magic seep through your skin. You whip your head over to stare, disbelieving, at Solas. He merely glares in response. “I said, be still.” You turn your head back to stare blankly at the wall. You turn your focus inward, to grasp control of your aura and yank it down out of the way as his magic seeps into you.

“You’re a wretched mess.” Solas is scolding you, but you still haven’t quite caught up to what the fuck is happening. “I thought your arms were bad, but this... What exactly were you hoping to accomplish?” He runs hands gently infused with magic down your bare back and understanding finally dawns on you. He’s healing you. And he’s... taking objection to the number of bruises you’ve obtained over the weeks?

“I…” you say, trying to get your mind back into a state where it can form sentences. “I’m… fine?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Solas snaps. “Any sane person would have gone to a healer days ago.”

“I’d have gone if it was serious!” you protest. “It’s just bruises, that’s all.”
“Your 'just bruises' are quite serious.” Solas raps a knuckle against your back; you cry out in surprised pain. “You have too much blood built up under the skin here. It’s making you ill. Unable to eat or sleep properly, dizzy, feverish. I believe you have the beginnings of an infection, as well. If that had seeped back into the rest of your blood, you would have been in serious trouble.”

You stare blankly at him, uncomprehending.

“How long have you let Iron Bull brutalize you, only to forego healing entirely?” Solas scolds. “I can appreciate your desire to learn from the best, but your distaste for healers is pure stupidity.”

Solas continues to lecture you as soothing hands cure the deep ache in your back. You try to pay attention to what he’s saying, but you’re still in shock. The fact that you’re in naught but your breastband doesn’t help. The words “dressing down” were no doubt designed for this exact scenario.

Eventually, he seems to have healed you enough for his own satisfaction. He lets out another long, irritated sigh. “I’ve done what I can. You’ll be tired after so much healing, and hungry. Get breakfast--actually get breakfast.” He pulls your shirt on back over your head; you quickly move to get your arms through the sleeve holes. “I hope this frankly embarrassing encounter sticks with you,” he continues to scold. “Take proper care of yourself, and we won’t have to repeat this.”

“Yes, ser,” you say meekly as you yank your tunic back on. You’ve barely spoken throughout the whole ordeal. “Sorry, ser.”


He shooes you out of the room and closes the door behind you. You just sort of stand blankly outside for a moment.

What…

What the fuck just happened?

Chapter End Notes

Wow, I bet you guys need something cute after that! I can help. Here, have some beautiful artwork from the glorious Uhtsceatha (check her out on Tumblr!), part of a series I'm getting in order to do a character page for the OCs of the story.

Also, the Solas-does-yoga-in-the-mornings headcanon is proudly brought to you thanks to Sircatherine's (check her out on Tumblr too!) beautiful art:

https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/80557590/solasyoga1.jpg

You're welcome.

(PS, I write non-canon, requested drabbles on my own tumblr, hobaglavellan. Those of
you without Tumblr, would you be interested in seeing me post those to AO3, or should I just keep them over on tumblr?}
We can always remember chapter 30 as the chapter I uploaded from the hospital. (Don't worry, nothing serious! But feel free to admire my dedication.)

On an unrelated note, a certain elf features a bit in this chapter, so I thought now would be a good time to share these:

I hope that helps you picture everything a bit more clearly. |D

You take a few more moments to compose yourself and attempt to process. You’re not quite sure what to think at first. You walk dazedly towards the door to the Great Hall. Solas had been irritated, that much was clear. But it was at your own lack of interest in your own health. That was… confusing. Of course, the idea that mere bruising, when repeated enough, could turn into something so serious was also confusing. You’d honestly had no idea. You will have to figure something out about that, because you definitely don’t want a repeat of this.

You’re fairly certain that if you stop long enough to process the fact you’d been sitting half-naked on his bed—*half-naked on his bed*—you’ll stop functioning entirely. You stumble past Madame de Fer without really seeing her until she speaks up.

“My goodness, dear, you look wretched!”

You turn to stare at her, unable to comprehend this on top of everything else that’s happened.

“Dear, you know you don’t have to put up with that sort of thing,” she says with a properly Orlesian pout. “The Commander has been very firm on the subject of men taking… liberties… with the staff.”

You’re not a master of self-control on the best of days. You can admit this about yourself. And right now, your nerves are absolutely fried. Between the Inquisitor and Solas, you have absolutely put up with your maximum amount of shit for one day. That’s your excuse for the red that flashes in front of your eyes, as well as for the words that fly unbidden from your mouth.

“Liberties?” you say slowly, your voice low and dangerous. The corner of Madame de Fer’s lips curl upwards; she knows she’s touched a nerve. “Ah… yes. Well, Madame de Fer, as you know, I worked in Orlais for some time. I’m quite accustomed to men taking liberties.” Her smile flickers somewhat, and you press on. “I even worked for Duke Bastien for a time. He was quite fond of liberties, as I recall. But then… you know all about his liberties, I’m sure.”

Her smile is gone now, and the steely look in her eyes reminds you of why she was nicknamed the Iron Lady. But you have fire in your own eyes, and you know when iron melts. You smile thinly. “Thank you for your concern, Madame de Fer.”

You stalk off, and this time, the enchantress doesn’t move to stop you.
You steal a quick breakfast from the mess, utterly unwilling to disobey Solas’ orders after the little show he’d put on. Afterwards, you head out into the courtyard. You aren’t going to the rotunda. That much is obvious. You were stressed and strained by the Inquisitor, driven slightly mad by Solas’... whatever the fuck that was, and Vivienne de Fer had put you in a frightfully foul mood. You decide that now is the perfect time to take Belassan up on his offer for a ride outside of the walls. You need to clear your head, and Belassan is nothing if not an excellent Dalish punching bag. If you need to sharpen your tongue on someone, he’ll likely tolerate it.

He seems surprised to see you when you storm into the barn. “Emma! It’s not Sunday!” You note immediately that he’s shirtless, because today is just your fucking day for half-naked elven men, apparently. He’s shorter, and slighter than Solas in build and shoulders, although he has a thicker layer of muscles. His dark skin would make a phenomenal contrast to Solas’ pale white; you get distracted for a moment imagining them standing next to each other, both shirtless. Maker, you’re such a mess. What had Solas called you? Wretched. Yes, that sounds about right.

“Forgotten about your promise already?” you say. You attempt to make your voice light and playful, but it comes out strained. You’re feeling the effects of all that healing magic now; your limbs are heavy and you desperately want to crawl into bed. But you can’t actually sleep it off, so you might as well try to ride a hart. That’s technically sitting down.

“Oh!” says Belassan, looking shocked. “You actually… Well, um… If you don’t mind waiting me to finish up my morning chores…”

“I’ll help,” you say, in a tone that brokers no argument. Belassan, being Belassan, tries anyway.

“Oh, that’s really not-”

“I’ll. Help.”

“Yes, um… serah?” Your sudden voice of authority no doubt confused him, but you can’t bring yourself to care. Your cover isn’t going to be blown by speaking authoritatively to one stable elf. Besides, thanks to your various stunts with Madame de Fer, amongst others, that ship has long sailed.

You pick up a pitchfork and immediately begin going to town on the barn. Your entire body screams in protest, and if Solas caught you, he’d probably tan your hide (now there’s a mental image), but the movement feels almost as good as the thrill of rebellion.

Belassan doesn’t seem to know quite what to do with you. You throw off your tabard within the first few minutes of working, almost as if defying the world with the bared flesh that had terrified you not an hour earlier. You attack the dirtied hay as if each individual straw has insulted your mother.

“...Needing a day off?” he asks after a while, somewhat hesitantly.

“Maker, yes,” you say emphatically. Something about the way you say it makes him laugh.

“Well, I’m happy to assist. With two of us, we’ll be done in no time, and then we can ride out. You’ll feel better once you’re on Revas.”

You can’t help but think he’s right. It’s hard to feel caged in with freedom between your knees.

The two of you finish the chores quickly and saddle up just as fast. You’re riding Revas; there’s no...
question about that. Belassan mounts—bareback, of course—a beautiful white hart with dark grey fur on its head and down its chest. You have to admit that the two of them are very striking together, and as you ride out into the mountains, you can’t help but notice Belassan moves as if the hart were simply an extension of his body. You really shouldn’t be staring, even if you have the excuse of studying the way he rides. Ugh, that sounds just as bad. Well, at least he put on a shirt.

“Keep your balance with the hart,” he advises as the two of you ride. You’re clumsily attempting to mimic the natural way he holds himself. “Always keep your body upright, no matter whether he’s climbing up or down.” You shift awkwardly; he makes it look so damn easy. Still, just in mimicking him you feel like you’re quickly picking up tricks he might not think to actually tell you.

The two of you ride out decently far into the woods, and the conversation inevitably turns to the druffalo in the room, so to speak… the Dalish.

“You’re so natural on a hart,” Belassan compliments you, despite the fact that next to him, you feel about as natural as a hurlock with four knees. “You said you grew up in Denerim… but did you ever consider running away to join the Dalish?”

“Oh, not really… By the time I was old enough to think about running away, I’d already done it once, from Tevinter,” you lie with a thin smile. “And there aren’t a lot of Dalish in Antiva.”

“Tevinter?” Belassan says, sounding shocked. You’re just as surprised.

“I just assumed everyone knew… I’m too used to being friends with nosy people. Yes, I was a slave. Loghain sold a good number of us to fund his civil war. I escaped when I was still young and caught a ship to Antiva.”

Belassan whistles. “You’ve had an interesting life.”

“I’m not the one with face tattoos,” you say with a snort. “I think I’m probably fairly average, by elven standards.”

“You seem far from average to me,” Belassan comments slyly, and you grin.

“Keep complimenting me; it’s working,” you say with a laugh. “I feel better already.”

“That’s thanks to Revas, not me,” Belassan says with a chuckle of his own. “Still, I’m glad I could help.”

-

By the time the two of you arrive back to Skyhold, you’re feeling a great deal more relaxed. Belassan is a pleasant person, once you get past the whole “Dalish” thing. He brings it up a bit too much for your comfort, admittedly, but what Dalish doesn’t? He’s not so obnoxious about it that you wind up wanting to deck him. That’s your standard reaction to the Dalish, honestly. The fact that you can tolerate him is impressive; the fact that you’re beginning to enjoy his company is flat-out incredible.

You still have trouble climbing back up to the rotunda, however. Will Solas be able to tell you haven’t rested? Will he scold you again? You try to look suitably chipper and un-injured as you walk through the doors.

Solas does give you a once-over as you walk in, but you seem to pass inspection. “One of Leliana’s messengers left something on your desk,” he informs you.
Ah. It’s going to just be one of those days.

You head to your desk and unfold the note and missive from Leliana. This one isn’t as dire, it seems, but she still wants it translated and delivered by the end of the day. You grind your teeth in frustration; you are not a messenger. But apparently you are, because you’re certainly not telling Leliana you won’t do it. You eye the missive idly. Qunlat and a cipher you recognize. Time consuming, but not impossible. You would love to know how she’s getting her hands on these. Ben-Hassrath reports are notoriously hard to intercept, largely because traitors to the Qun are such a rarity. If a Qunari goes rogue, they run into the hills and become Tal-Vashoth. They don’t stick around as an aid to the enemy.

And, of course, if she didn’t have you, chances are all her efforts on intercepting the messages would be in vain. You’re a very specific resource for someone who wants to spy on the Qunari… something Tevinter and your master knew very well. You saw his dead and mangled body with your own eyes, and even then you sometimes still have trouble believing that Tevinter isn’t still after you.

You hear the sound of shuffling from behind you, which brings your mind back to the present.

“You smell of hay,” Solas says, and you’re immediately mortified. You had bathed before breakfast, so the idea of bathing again after going riding hadn’t even occurred to you. You turn to look at Solas so that you can judge whether he’s offended by your stench. But, of course, his expression is neutral. Why couldn’t Dorian be the one with all the secret knowledge? He couldn’t hide an expression if his life depended on it.

“I… went to the barn…” you say hesitantly. “After breakfast,” you add quickly.

Solas sighs. “So much for resting. I suppose if you started actually obeying, I’d have even more cause to wonder about your health.”

Your mouth twitches into a half-smile. Is he cracking jokes? Please, Maker, let him be cracking jokes. You can’t take another lecture just now. “I just had so much boundless energy after eating such a large, hearty breakfast,” you say sarcastically. “I simply had no other option.”

Solas snorts. “Mouthy brat. I suppose that means you’re feeling better. Best get to work, then.”

You flash him a grateful smile and turn back to your desk. His humor does wonders to calm you down. He’s no longer cross with you, and you can practice a bit of civil disobedience without getting another lecture. What a relief, on both counts… You turn your focus to the missive and the attached instructions. The list of names on it has you quite sour. Cullen Rutherford isn’t a surprise, but Cassandra Pentaghast? You could go your whole life without ever meeting a Seeker. You’re not even entirely certain as to what they are. Pentaghast may be an “ex” Seeker, but in the same vein as Cullen is an “ex” Templar. You’re not convinced there’s a such thing.

Nonetheless, you work on deciphering and then translating the missive. It’s a multi-step process, and you half-expect you’ll be required to burn your notes afterwards, so you simply write down as little as you can. Unfortunately, Solas hadn’t been joking about your tendency to take on a lot of responsibilities, and you’d flitted about most of the morning riding with Belassan. It’s lunch time before you finish the translation.

You jot down a few notes so that you don’t forget what you were in the middle of, and then rise to get Solas’ lunch.

“Is that not important?” Solas asks as you rise, clearly aware of where you’re going.
“It says ‘by the end of the day,’” you explain. Plus, you have priorities. As much as you want to endear yourself to the Spymaster, you want to endear yourself to Solas more, especially after the fright you’d had that morning. You feel terrible, in retrospect. Honestly, how could you have thought he’d be one to take advantage of you? And in the end, all he’d been trying to do is help. You’d be actively beating yourself up over it if he seemed at all cross. Fortunately, it seems he got out all his irritation in the morning’s lecture.

Won’t hurt to make sure you get him a good lunch, though…

At the kitchens, you snatch and steal bits and pieces of delicacies for his plate. There aren’t any confectionary chocolates for you to steal today, but you snatch some candied fruit. You make sure all of Solas’ food is piping hot and fresh, and grab a loaf of bread so fresh from the oven it burns your fingers. For some reason, you’re ravenous… must be the healing magic, like Solas said. You’ll need to try not to overdo it though. You don’t want to make yourself sick.

Nonetheless, between the food for you and Solas, the tray is extremely heavy, and you have no small amount of difficulty with it. Hadn’t you only begun doing this because you’d seen Celia struggling under the weight of two meals? You are, above all else, a massive hypocrite.

Fortunately for you, Celia is seemingly just as much of a stubborn workaholic as you are… You see her as you’re leaving the kitchen. She seems to note the way your arms are shaking under the weight of the tray, and grabs a few of the plates off of it.

“Let me help,” she says. Perhaps she’s feeling better, but her body language is demure once more. “It’s the least I can do, honestly…”

“I won’t say no, if you’re willing to brave the drake den,” you say with a chuckle. “Maybe after seeing Solas shirtless so often, you’re willing to overlook him being an apostate?”

She flushes bright red, not the slight pink tinge your cheeks get when you’re embarrassed. “I’m not… I never… It’s not my fault the man doesn’t believe in shirts!”

That makes you laugh aloud, your shoulders trembling from both mirth and the heavy tray. “Maker, don’t I know it! Alright, let’s get Messere Solas his food before he becomes cross with us!”

Solas looks quite surprised when Celia walks in the door with you. She’s half-hiding behind you, and her bravado seems to stall out quickly as you approach his desk. She stands firmly by the door, as if she can’t force herself any closer to Solas’ desk. Ah well, she’s done you a great favor just in helping you get everything up the stairs. You unload the plates on your tray, and then retrieve the plates she’s carrying and place them on Solas’ desk as well. As you’re doing so, Solas strikes up light conversation… poor Celia.

“I see your friend is feeling better,” he comments, his eyes flicking over Celia. She looks like she’s about to jump out of her skin. How difficult breakfast must be for her! At least you’re paying her well.

“Much to my infinite relief,” you say, your lips curling into a smirk. “If you scold me again, I can simply run upstairs and cry to Dorian.”

Celia is staring down at the ground, but you get the sense she’s listening carefully. That sobers you slightly; anything you say in front of her may well be part of Skyhold’s newest rumor. “Thank you for your help, Celia,” you say to her, unwilling to sit at Solas’ desk while she’s still there. Not that there’s anyone else here for him to be sharing this meal with, and the stool at his desk is… telling.
“Not at all, serah,” she murmurs, and quickly flits out the door to the Great Hall, shutting it gently behind her.

“If Dorian saw the state of you, he’d scold as well,” Solas says, sounding amused, and you realize he’s probably right… Dorian had been cross with you when you’d been limping up the stairs to Leliana. Iron Bull had practically forced you to heal that same sprain, and Sera had been in a panic when you’d been injured. Cole always showed up whenever you needed him most.

You have… people who care about you here. Arguably, they wouldn’t if they knew anything at all about you. But still… the thought is both heartening and terrifying. You’d had people who cared about you before, and it never ended very well for them.

“I’ll endeavor to give you all less to fret about in the future,” you say finally. You sit down on the stool to enjoy a leisurely meal with Solas. The damn missive can wait.

You manage to avoid gorging yourself at lunch, but only out of a sense of dignity… you’re starving. Solas must notice you eyeing his leftovers, because after a moment he simply dumps them onto your plate. You want to protest or be embarrassed, but instead, you just eat. Perhaps if you give your body enough fuel, you won’t suffer any ill effects of being unable to rest after so much healing.

After you’re done eating every scrap of food available to you—in between talking to Solas about herbs in general and your garden back home in specific—you gather up all the dishes and cart them back to the kitchen. That was a wonderful little break, but now you really do need to finish translating that missive for Leliana. You get right back to it as soon as you return to the rotunda, and don’t stop until you have a viable translation in front of you. Leliana requested an oral report again, so at least you don’t have to scribe off a bunch of copies.

Normally, you would save Commander Rutherford for last, but you’re dreading meeting Cassandra Pentaghast even more than seeing him again. The Commander is, at least, a known quantity.

However, your trip to his office proves fruitless… to your surprise, he’s not there. You ask a nearby guard where you might find him, and they direct you back towards the gardens. Is he perhaps giving Leliana that rematch she requested? Seems odd he’d be doing it in the middle of the afternoon, though…

Your questions are quickly answered when you get to the gardens. He is indeed at the chess table… But not with Leliana. Your stomach seems to drop to your feet when you see the Inquisitor sitting across from the Commander. You immediately step backwards away from the Inquisitor’s line of sight. The Inquisitor wasn’t on the list of people you needed to deliver the report to, so you have every reason to wait until he’s gone. Perhaps you should try to seek out Pentaghast first, after all?

The Commander and his sharp senses get the best of you once again, however. “Ah, Emma! Excellent timing once again. I believe that,” the Commander says, and you hear the clink of stone on marble. “Is checkmate, Inquisitor.”

Oh, goodie, you arrived just in time to see the Inquisitor bested at chess. You’re certain he won’t hold that against you at all.

“I’ll win next time,” the Inquisitor says, and to your relief, his voice is relaxed, not angry. “The Trevelyans will have their revenge!”

The Commander waves you over and you reluctantly approach the gazebo. The Inquisitor eyes you
quite sourly. You’ve never seen a face so plainly say “you again?” before.

“So, I’m not surprised to see Skyhold’s favorite pet,” the Inquisitor says lightly. You keep your face neutral as you bow, but note that the Commander seems surprised by the Inquisitor’s words.

“I’m here to deliver a missive to the Commander, your holiness,” you say as politely as you possibly can.

“Far be it from me to stand in the way of the working man!” the Inquisitor says gaily, rising from the chess table. “I hope to see you tonight, Commander.”

You try not to be visibly relieved as the Inquisitor leaves. You also try not to be visibly scared when he swoops by you. He passes so close to you that his cloak momentarily batters against your leg before sliding off. You take a quick second to compose yourself before stepping up onto the gazebo.

“Good afternoon, Commander. I have a missive from Leliana. She requested I deliver it to you orally,” you say to him as neutrally as possible.

“Of course,” the Commander says with a nod, gesturing for you to sit across from him. You would prefer to remain standing, but you fear that would be taken as rude, so you sit. You deliver the report in a quiet voice, uncertain if you should be doing this in such a public place. The Commander seems to be fine with it, however, so you just recite the whole thing. It’s about Templar movements, although you’re honestly uncertain whether they mean Templars or red Templars, and say as much to the Commander.

“Red,” he says, resting his chin onto his hand, clearly thinking. “It doesn’t match the movements of any of ours, and we have nearly all the Templars united with us now.”

They do?

Great.

You neatly fold the missive and tuck it back away, but of course, it’s never so easy as simply standing and walking away.

“Do you have time for another game?” Cullen gestures to the chess board.

“I… I should deliver this to Serah Pentaghast,” you say hesitantly. It’s getting close enough to dinner as it is. You won’t be late with one of Solas’ meals.

“You won’t have much luck,” the Commander says. “She’s out on training exercises with the men. She won’t be back until the evening.”

Goddamnit, Spymaster, get your shit together. Had she meant to send you on a wild goose chase? And now you have no convenient excuse to turn down the Commander, who’s looking at you expectantly.

“Al… alright then,” you say, trying not to look like you regret it. You want to appease Solas. The Commander is someone you must appease. You set the board quickly. You’ll have to try to lose quickly, but not look like you’re attempting to lose. It’ll be an entertaining enough challenge, at least.

“Are you getting used to delivering these reports?” Cullen asks as you move your first pawn forward. He moves his own pawn out directly in front of it.
“I’m just glad this one wasn’t delivered to the entire war room,” you say with a chuckle, as you move another pawn up in position to be taken by his. The Commander takes it almost without a second thought.

“Oh? Not fond of public speaking?”

“Not when it’s to a room full of some of the most powerful people in Thedas, no.” You move another pawn up to be taken; he takes it, paying more attention to what you’re saying than the board.

“I suppose it must seem like that, to most people,” he says with a rueful laugh.

“Ditches would have been a waste of your skills,” the Commander says, eyeing the board as you finally stop his pawn’s rampage with your other bishop. “Starkhaven gambit?”

“Is that what they call it?” you say mildly.

The Commander makes small talk while you bounce around the board, playing an aggressive game. You capture his queen early in a daring raid with your knight, but he shows himself willing to play hard and fast with his king, using it in surprising ways to capture pieces. You sacrifice just enough, and at the end of the day, he has you… he sacrifices his last rook to finally capture your queen, and then, with two bishops left, handily chases your king into a checkmate. At the end of the game, he seems quite pleased with himself; you played well enough to amuse him.

“I should let you get back to work,” he says with some chagrin as you reset the board. “And I should return to my own, as well. Thank you for another pleasant diversion, Emma.”

It will never stop chilling you when he says your name. He won’t forget you, even after you leave Skyhold. Here is a Templar who will never forget your face. Is that sacrifice really worth what you gain by being here in Skyhold? You should take the next merchant cart out of here, and you know it. But where would you go? There’s nowhere else safe enough in this war. Orlais is an absolute mess; Ferelden is full of rebelling mages. There’s no way out for you.

And that means smiling at a Templar and praying to any gods who might be listening that he remembers you only for your charm and skill at chess, and that after you leave Skyhold, you never cross paths with Commander Cullen Rutherford again.

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By the time you manage to escape the Commander, it’s a little past time to deliver Solas’ dinner. You rush down to the kitchens and find Celia is already halfway through constructing Solas’ meal. You throw together something for yourself and allow her to put together Solas’. You’re trusting her to put together his breakfasts every day, after all. You do give it a once over before cramming both meals onto a tray. Celia offers to help you again, but you wave her off. This isn’t the small feast you’d carted upstairs for yourself at lunch time. Besides, it’s good arm exercise.

It’s just as well… As you’re carrying the tray towards the stairs up to the Great Hall, you catch sight of a pair of eyes watching you from a shadowed corner. You keep yourself from visibly double-taking, but note that it’s almost certainly Crassius Servis. Well, you can’t honestly say you’re surprised. By bowing to him in the Tevinter style, you practically dangled yourself in front him like a cut of meat before a cougar. A bored Vint is very similar to a starving wildcat in a lot of ways, really.
With that Templar leash, however, you doubt there’s much he can do. Everyone knows taunting a caged animal is stupid; they all do it because it’s fun.

You manage to make it back up the stairs and into Solas rotunda, although you damn near drop the tray when you balance it on one hand to get the door open. Your body is still weak from the healing. Still, you’re happy to struggle with it. Solas’ newfound concern for your wellbeing doesn’t extend far enough to actually open doors for you. There’s something comforting in that.

You place Solas’ food onto his desk and sit down on what you have now officially decided is “your” stool. You’re the only one who ever seems to use it.

“You seem… distracted,” Solas comments, around the third time that you absentmindedly leave your bread sitting in your soup.

“My mind’s in a hundred places,” you confess. “It’s been a very strange day… I’ve just come from playing chess with the Commander of the Inquisition.”

Solas chuckles. “I’m not surprised. Cullen will challenge anyone who holds still long enough. I didn’t know you played, however.”

“Mm? Oh, yes. I learned in Seheron,” you say, mind miles away. “One of the few good things I can say about the place.” The note Leliana had given you didn’t say anything about where to find Seeker Pentaghast. Perhaps you can catch her as she’s returning with the men? You don’t really want to spend your evening running around Skyhold, hunting for a single woman. This sort of thing is exactly why there are people whose entire job title is “messenger.” Of whom you are not one, you might add.

Solas is talking. No matter how distracted you might be, his voice cuts through the fog and demands your attention. “You learned in Seheron?” he sounds amused, perhaps surprised. You turn to look at him, and he’s wearing a faint smile.

“Yes, my master taught me.” His smile disappears as if it had never been there at all. You can see the question ghosting behind his lips, the question everyone wants to answer. “I hated him. But my intelligence was an asset, the reason I was in Seheron and not back in Minrathous as yet another young elven pleasure slave,” you say bluntly. “He taught me many things. Chess was one of them.”

“You don’t find much pleasure in playing then?” Solas says. Is that… sorrow? Disappointment? You wish he weren’t so difficult to read.

“Actually, I enjoy it,” you admit. “Even in Seheron, it was one of the few things I could take honest pleasure in.” You smile. “The Commander was worried, too. Thought he might have brought up some long-dead trauma. In honesty, I was overjoyed to see a chess set in the gardens. Now, if I can only manage to go to it when the Commander isn’t there.”

“You know, I have my own set,” Solas says, and you light up like the White Spire itself.

“You do?” You’re utterly unable to keep the excitement from your voice. Solas plays? Not only does he play, he has his own set? Maker, is that an invitation?

“I do. A travel set, one I don’t get much use out of,” Solas says, looking well and truly amused at your elation. You might as well be a small, yappy dog at the moment.

“I’m envious! I’ve never owned my own set. No one to play with, and no spare money with which to purchase something I might never use. Just as well; most of my possessions are ash now.” Even that thought can’t damper your enthusiasm.
Solas never does get around to out-and-out inviting you to play a game or examine his chess set, unfortunately, but the two of you do have a fantastic conversation about chess strategies over dinner. You mention your earlier usage of the Starkhaven gambit; he speaks of his fondness for the Verison attack, and everything just sort of spirals out from there.

The two of you talk long after both your plates are cleared. The conversation moves from chess to reading when you mention a chess book you once owned, and from there you find yourself discussing Ines Arancia once again. Solas has already finished volume one; you can’t say you’re surprised. But it does give you an interesting idea. It also reminds you that you have an actual job to do.

“Ah, merde,” you swear. “I still have another missive to deliver. Ir abelas, Solas.” You stand and begin gathering the plates to take back to the kitchen. No matter how much of a hurry you might be, you can’t very well leave Solas with dirty dishes cluttering his rotunda.

An idea strikes you as you’re dropping off the dishes, however. You don’t see Celia, but you grab one of the kitchen workers at random. “Excuse me, but do you know where Seeker Pentaghast might be?” No one knows where to find someone like the one responsible for delivering their meals.

“Seeker Pentaghast? I think Lilah just dropped off her meal not a quarter hour ago. Lilah! Hey, Lilah!” The worker calls over another woman, and you repeat your question to her.

“Oh, Miss Pentaghast? Yes, she spends most of her free time in the loft above the smithy. She’ll be there if she’s not in the training yard or with the Inquisitor,” Lilah informs you matter-of-factly. “I just brought her meal to the smithy not long ago.”

You thank the both of them, allow yourself to pointed towards the smithy, and head out. Fetching Solas’ meals from the kitchen was the greatest idea you had since arriving at Skyhold, honestly.

You head out of the kitchen and down across the courtyard until you find the building that could only be the smithy. Nothing else generates that kind of heat, or that kind of clanging. You walk in cautiously, but fortunately, everyone there is too busy working to pay you any mind.

You climb up the stairs, feeling distinctly like you’re somewhere you shouldn’t be. But there is a woman in the loft, sitting in a chair and avidly reading a book with a cover you recognize. Swords and Shields? Well, what a woman reads in her alone time is none of your business. You have a copy of the Randy Dowager in your own quarters for similar reasons.

She notices you as you crest the stairs and immediately slams the book down behind a crate. You keep your face perfectly neutral. To your surprise, now that you can see her face, you recognize the woman. She was the companion with the Inquisitor that you didn’t recognize, the day Solas had returned to Skyhold.

Her eyes widen in recognition as well. “It’s you!” she exclaims. Her voice has a heavy Nevarran accent. You freeze with your foot on the last step.

“P...pardon me?” you stammer. That kind of reaction from a Seeker makes you want to leap out the nearest window; it’s all you can do not to bolt.

“You’re the girl whom Cole embraced!” she says, standing. “I had been wondering who you were. When I asked the Inquisitor, he… Well, it doesn’t matter what he said.”

Oh, you can just imagine what he must have said. “Ah… yes, my lady, that was me,” you admit.

“Why did he do that? Do you know what he is?” the Seeker demands, stepping forward. Unbidden,
you take a step backwards down the steps.

“U...um... Yes, I know what he is, or at least, I think I do,” you say nervously. This is going very, very badly. “I'm... I'm just here to deliver a message, my lady.”

“Of course,” she says, gesturing you upwards, although she doesn't back away. You step up onto the landing nervously. “How did you and Cole become acquainted? Has he done anything... odd?”

“I'm sure he has a different standard for odd than I do, my lady. I... This is to be an oral report, my lady, from the Spymaster?” you say, desperately trying to turn the conversation back to your job, so that you can deliver your report and run.

“You work for Leliana? Odd that the Inquisitor wouldn't mention--”

“I work in the library, my lady. The Spymaster occasionally has me translate things for her.”

Cassandra eyes you. It’s a look of appraisal. She eyes you up and down quickly, taking you in. You bite your lip and try to keep your knees from knocking; it’s about all you can do.

“Very well then. What’s this about?”

“Qunari, my lady,” you explain, and then launch into the same report you’d given the Commander. She listens along, nodding.

“The Commander will want to speak to me about this,” she mutters, seemingly to herself. “Thank you. Now, about Cole.”

“Well, my lady, I really need to be--”

“Sit,” she says. You drop down onto the ground where you stand, legs tucked underneath you. She has a very commanding voice. “On a chair,” she says, sounding amused. You scoot backwards and climb onto a chair nervously. “Don’t look so frightened. I’m only curious. You’re not in trouble.”

“Yes, my lady. Thank you. Cole and I met shortly after I arrived in Skyhold.”

“Which was?”

“Nearly a month ago, my lady. Solas informed me of his nature.”

“Solas?” Seeker Pentaghast says, her eyebrows rising.

“Yes, my lady,” you say. This is one subject on which you do not want to go into more detail on, although the fact that you work with Solas is certainly common knowledge among most of the Inquisitor’s Inner Circle.

“Why did he embrace you?”

“I, uh... I was relieved to see the Inquisitor and his party’s safe return,” you admit. “Particularly Master Tethras.” Cassandra Pentaghast has a somewhat expressive face, and at the mention of Varric, her visage darkens noticeably. Her eyes dart back to the crate that hides Swords and Shields. You decide not to mention that you’re a fan.

“And?”

“Well, I... I suppose I wanted a hug, my lady,” you say, flushing slightly. “And, Cole, well, he has that way of knowing what you need.”
“I see,” she says, tapping her chin with a long, scarred finger. “Do you know why you can remember him? Most cannot.”

“No, my lady. Solas said it was unusual as well. I don’t even know if I remember every encounter I have with him… But I see him, now and then.”

“Are you a mage?”

The question chills you to your very core, but you actually manage a realistic laugh. “Me, my lady? Maker, no! I’m simply a scribe.”

“Hmm... Well, thank you for the missive, and your time, in any case,” the Seeker says, nodding.

You don’t even say goodbye; the second she dismisses you, you scramble up, bow, and dart down the stairs. You don’t even breathe again until you’re outside the smithy.

Maker! You could kill Leliana for that! Templars and Seekers, Seekers and Templars! What a fucking day!

You head back towards the rotunda, but you never even get across the damn courtyard. There’s some sort of hubbub at the tavern, and you find yourself accosted the instant you walk by.

“’Ey! Emma! S’Emma!” a familiar voice slurs. You turn in alarm just in time to see a rather inebriated Dalish wrap her arms around your shoulder. “C’mon, someone get her a mug, maybe she’ll throw it at the Inquisitor!” Maker damn it all to hell.

She drags you towards the tavern as you struggle to break her grip. “Really, Dalish, I have work…”

“Don’t gimme that! Boss! Boss, come gitcher girl, she’s misb.. misbeh… bein’ bad!” Dalish shouts out, and you see a familiar face poke out of the door.

“You go for a piss and bring back a lady! Now that’s being a Charger!” Bull says with a laugh. Dalish shoves you towards him, and he drags you the rest of the way into the tavern. Fucking fuckers fuck! When is this day going to end? Drunk mercenaries… When has there ever been any arguing with drunk mercenaries?

When Bull drags you into the tavern, however, you’re greeted with a sight that melts your irritation away and makes everything worth it: the Inquisitor is standing on the bar, mug in hand. There’s cheering and dancing and the Inquisitor is standing on the fucking bar trying to dance and clearly drunk to the point of damn near falling over.

“Oh, Maker, this is beautiful,” you say out loud, grinning. Too bad the whole tavern is seeing this, or it would make for the funniest blackmail ever. “Bull, what in the Void is happening here?”

“Boss’ soldiers made it home okay!” Bull hollers over the din of the tavern. “We thought we should celebrate, and once the Inquisitor joined in, it turned into a real party.”

“S’not a party til the elf throws a mug” Shouts someone that you, embarrassingly, don’t even recognize. Someone thrusts a drink into your hand. Has this… has this sort of thing ever ended well for you? You should really just…

And then you see the Inquisitor topple backwards off the bar.

“Fuck it, I’m not missing this,” you say out loud, and then down the drink in your hand.
Things spiral out of control from there, of course. At some point between your fourth and fifth drinks, someone makes a derogatory comment about the comparative anatomy of Qunari and elves. You throw your mug at him. This probably would have been more humorous if Dalish hadn’t been handing you cast iron mugs the entire night. As it is, the healers can probably fix that guy’s face in the morning.

You stay to the edges of the tavern, avoiding the Inquisitor while still putting yourself in a position to watch his antics. It’s probably good for morale, to see the Herald of Andraste goofing off and celebrating the survival of his troops. It’s certainly doing wonders for your morale, although maybe not for the intended reason. If he’d just fall off one more chair, you wouldn’t even mind taking a pay cut.

That doesn’t mean you get to stay to yourself, however. There are more than a few people attempting to get you to throw a mug at the Inquisitor, often by reminding you that he is a Templar, sort of. As if you only throw things at Templars. And you certainly won’t be throwing anything at the Inquisitor. You keep that in mind as you get drunker and drunker, until when Krem stumbles up to you--just a deep in the drink as you are, by the looks of him--just about all you manage to mumble is “not throwin’ a mug.”

Krem laughs and throws a jovial arm around you. You’re at once reminded of how strong he is despite his similar height. Dalish is so far gone that you suspect she’s probably already passed out by now, but a few of the other Chargers note the two of you. They have an instinct for excitement, it seems, and always gravitate towards the most interesting section of the party. Apparently, that’s now you and Krem.

“Hey there, Da’nan!” They use Dalish’s little nickname for you. The fact that they can drunkenly slur elven is kind of impressive in its own way. “Got yer eyes on another Charger, eh?”

It’s a sign of how deep in the drink you are that you laugh at this. “‘Nother? How many Chargers ‘m I suppos’ta be after a’ this poin’? ’M losin’ track!”

The raucous teasing continues as they steer the two of you towards a long table where Bull and most of the other Chargers are sitting. They’re damn near out of chairs; half the Chargers are sitting on each other. The Iron Bull, in fact, has a woman who is very decidedly not a Charger sprawled out on his lap as if it were an armchair. You can’t help notice that her red hair very nearly mimics your own. Well, you know he has a thing for redheads.

When Krem sinks down into a chair towards the other end of the table, you follow him down, sitting down his lap and kicking your boots up on the table. This gets a round of cheers from the Chargers, and you can’t help grinning. Maybe mercenary life wouldn’t be so bad. You bet that’s how they get half of their recruits… just get ‘em drunk enough to sign the papers. You rest your head back on Krem’s shoulder--Maker, that’s comfortable. He’s just the right size, damnit.

Krem angles his head to look down at you, and you can see his blushing… Or is that just redness from the alcohol? You’re way too drunk to tell. He leans his head down, just a little closer. You tilt your head to the left, back further, until your faces are damn near touching. He’s definitely blushing now, and his lips part ever so slightly. Damn, that look on his face… Really makes you want to…

“Hey, Krem! Getting a taste for Bull’s sloppy seconds?”

Krem’s head almost ricochets away from you, and he scoots back suddenly away from the table. You feet stay on the table; your ass leaves his lap. You crash onto the ground in an undignified heap.
The ringing leaves your ears just in time for you to hear Krem say “as if!” You watch from the ground as he storms off, then your eyes slide over to the man whose teasing had ruined your little moment. You stand up with the help of the table, calmly brush yourself off… and sock the loud-mouthed Charger square in the jaw.

That’s the last thing you remember.

Chapter End Notes

Wow! That was eventful.

Check out this badass art that someone drew of the scene at the end of CH 29: http://hobaglavellan.tumblr.com/post/122379918859/hi-there-ive-been-lurking-around-keeping

Also check out Emma's icon, totally based on how shitty she looked when she dropped of Solas' breakfast in her unders that one time:

And also this porn which seems incredibly relevant right now: http://hobaglavellan.tumblr.com/post/122641606319/im-back-after-reading-chapter-2-of-tiny-secrets

If you haven't already, feel free to check out "Tiny Secrets" for (mostly) non-canon drabbles: http://archiveofourown.org/works/4198335/chapters/9483666
You’re growing too accustomed to waking confused and hungover. As if sensing your complacency, the world decided to throw a curve into your traditional morning-after regrets. You open your eyes slowly, light stabbing into your dried-out eyes like red-hot knives. A large, brown, furry face looms into your vision. A gentle whuff covers your face in hot breath.

You blink slowly.

That’s Revas.

Why is Revas in your bedroom?

You shift, and realize that Revas is not in your bedroom. Rather the contrary; you appear to be in his. Somehow, you’ve come to rest in his stable in the barn.

“Emma?”

As if the morning weren’t confusing enough, you see Belassan leaning over the stable’s gate. Your dazed mind seems to fix upon his pointed ears and little else.

“Iras ma?” you say bewilderedly, tongue sticking to your mouth like sandpaper. “Falon, ma isala min.”

“I, um… I don’t…” Belassan begins, looking slightly embarrassed. You belatedly realize you weren’t speaking Common, and that you look like a racist asshole.

“How did I get here?” you manage, actually speaking the proper language this time.

“You were dragged,” Belassan replies promptly. “After a night of reveling, I suspect.”
You groan, you move to run a hand over your head, only to realize you’re wrapped up in a saddle blanket. You shift out from under it. “Don’t tell me… Sera?”

“You are correct.”

You cover your eyes with your hand to try and block out the light. Revas lips at the back of your hand questioningly. “I can’t even be cross with her. I’ve woken up worse places.” Like Iron Bull’s bed. Maker, why do you always do this on Friday and not on Saturday when you have a morning off the next day?

That thought energizes you as surely as a bolt of lightning. “Merde! What time is it?”

“Don’t worry, it’s still an hour before dawn--” Belassan attempts to comfort you. You shoot up and nearly fall over. The only reason you don’t is because Revas moves into the way and you collapse against his side. The world spins around you. “Be careful!” Belassan exclaims.

“I have to get to training, or being hungover will be the least of my worries!” you explain. You swear a few times in a few different languages as you untangle yourself from the saddle blanket. You pause to give Revas—who looks as concerned as Belassan--a few loving strokes and a quick kiss on his soft, warm nose, then simply vault over the stable door. Another day of waking up hungover but with all your clothes on… at this rate, you’ll set a new personal record.

You manage NOT to fall over when you land, although you stumble a bit before Belassan grabs your arm to steady you. “Are you sure you should-”

“The training is with the Iron Bull, Belassan,” you say dryly.

“Ah,” he chuckles. “Say no more. May Mythal bless you… you’ll need it.”

You grumble something vague about Elven deities as you wobble out of the stables. You need Mythal’s blessing even less than you need the Maker’s. The sound of one, at least, can protect you from the mortal implements of the Chantry. What can Mythal’s name protect you from? Irritable Dalish?

Iron Bull is already in the practice yard when you arrive. He grins when you clumsily climb over the fence. You’ll probably puke once your body actually catches up and realizes you’re running around and jumping.

“That’s what I like to see!” he says as you double over momentarily to try and get the world to stop spinning. “Dedication!”

“How are you not sick?” you groan towards the ground. “You were already drunk when I started.”

“I can handle my drink better than you,” Iron Bull says pointedly. “Well, that and the fact Qunari just process faster,” he adds offhandedly. “How much you remember?”

“Too much. But at least I have the memory of the Inquisitor falling down… Maker, so many times,” you chuckle weakly. “Totally worth it.”

“If his suffering makes you feel better, you should know he has a meeting with his advisors in… oh, an hour or so.”

Your chuckling turns into full blown laughter as you’re overcome with beautiful schadenfreude. You couldn’t say the Inquisitor had a worse night than you, and sitting in a meeting was nothing like being beaten by a Qunari, but the thought of his suffering brings a genuine smile to your face.
“We gonna need another bucket?” Iron Bull wants to know.

“Oh, probably,” you say as you stretch slightly. Your tunic is going to have to come off again… another day of practicing in your undershirt. It’s your own fault for constantly falling asleep with your clothes on. You yank the tunic off over your head.

“Whoa! What happened to you? Finally decide to give in and go to a healer?”

You glance down at your bared arms, pale in their unmarred perfection. Your collarbone as well, free of bruising. You begin to flush, and then as the memory of the morning before fills you, keep flushing until you feel you’re producing enough heat to warm all of Skyhold.

“Alright, now I’ve got to know,” Iron Bull says firmly, an amused smirk on his face.

“It was, um… Solas,” you mutter under your breath.

“What was that? Didn’t quite hear you. Did you say that our own grumpy elven mage did that?”

You could smack the grin off of Iron Bull’s face. In a few minutes, you’ll definitely be trying. “Yes. Don’t look so cheerful, Bull; I don’t think he’s particularly happy with you, either.”

“Fortunately, unlike you, I don’t actually care,” Bull says with a laugh, starting to stretch. You join in. “Why’d he do it, anyway? You cover ‘em up pretty thoroughly during the day.”

Now there’s a subject you really, really don’t want to get into. You don’t want to admit that Solas saw you in your undershirt. You don’t want to admit he’d seen you in just your breastband while he was healing you. Didn’t want to remember the way his hand had slipped gently underneath said breastband during the course of healing. And most importantly, you didn’t want Iron Bull to know how badly you’d been injured. He might feel responsible, when it was really you and your own ignorance that had put you at risk.

“He saw the bruising in the process of enchanting my wrist,” you lie, finally. “Occasionally I have him strengthen my arm with magic to speed along the scribing process. As for why, I have no idea.”

Iron Bull grunts in acknowledgement as the two of you stretch. What a talented little liar you are… How many lies have you told this Hissrad? And they’re experts at lying, being one of the only agents of the Qun to actually do so. You’re a little bit proud, past all your nervousness. ...Okay, you’re a lot proud. But you’re smart enough now to know not to revel in it.

“When did all this happen?” Bull wants to know, though you’re not certain as to why.

“Yesterday morning, when I brought him his breakfast,” you say, seeing no reason to lie. Iron Bull makes a vague humming sound, but says nothing more on the matter.

You strain your way through stretching, stomach churning and head spinning. It only gets worse when time for actual sparring comes. Bull isn’t going easy on you at all. You’ll have all sorts of new bruises for Solas to frown at in a few hours, of that you’re certain. You don’t really know what to do about it… regular trips to the healing tent are out of the question, and you would sooner throw yourself from the battlements than ask Solas to do it. You’ll just have to try to keep as much of hidden from Solas as possible. If you can sneak out of the walls, you might try to fix it yourself, but your skills with healing have always been… questionable to nonexistent. You’re as likely to make it worse as you are to make it better.

Fortunately, Krem appears to save you from getting even more of an ass-kicking then you already are, only perhaps fifteen minutes into sparring. You’re dry heaving over a fence when he appears,
which is probably the one thing you want him to see you doing least. From what you remember of last night, you nearly made a rather dramatic mistake. You should be thanking the loud-mouthed asshole of a Charger. You hadn’t thanked him, though. You had, in fact, punched a mercenary directly in the face. You don’t remember much of what happened after that, but the fact that you hadn’t been given a mercenary beat-down is a bit curious. Bull and a few of the other Chargers have your back, certainly, but not against another Charger.

Either way, Krem is the last person you want to be seeing right now. ...Well, maybe not the absolute last. That would be the Inquisitor. But Krem is a close second.

“H-hey, Emma,” he says as he gets closer, and you note that he’s carrying something. Something that smells.

You glance around, only to find that Bull has apparently made himself sparse and is pretending to examine the sturdiness of Skyhold’s walls, some distance away. You’ve never been so cross with someone for being polite before.

“Um… Hey, Krem,” you say awkwardly, trying to stand up straight and not puke on him.

“I, uh… got these from the kitchen…” He holds up the wooden bowl he’s carrying, and you realize that’s what the stench is… Krem’s brought you pickled herring. “I didn’t know how to make that stuff you made for me, but I definitely remembered this was in it.”

You can’t help smiling. You’re not sure if eating straight pickled fish will be good for you, but you’re sure as hell going to try. You pull yourself up to sit on the fence around the practice ring, and Krem hops up to sit next to you. You sit in slightly uncomfortable silence for a moment as Krem watches you eat the pickled herring with something akin to awe in his eyes.

“So, I, uh… Seem to recall you nearly kissed me, last night,” he says awkwardly, staring down at his intertwined hands.

“And I seem to remember you objecting rather strongly to the notion of my being ‘Bull’s sloppy seconds.’ By dumping me onto the ground.”

Krem winces. “…Yeah.”

“What are the chances we can both just say we were drunk, eat some shitty pickled fish together, and forget it happened?”

Krem grins sheepishly at you. “I think I’d like that. But…” He points down at the bowl. “There’s no way I’m eating one of those.”

You burst out laughing, then shove him gently on the shoulder. “Don’t make fun of my fish. I’m the one who has to get pummeled by Bull while hungover.”

“I’ve had my fair share of that,” Krem says with a snort. “Once he starts, he doesn’t let up. Might as well give in and sign up with the Chargers now.”

Bull must see the two of you joking and laughing, because he’s sauntering towards you. “Hey, does this mean you’re getting married?” he bellows over. “Because Dalish will want to be a bridesmaid-”

It’s Krem who throws the first pickled herring at Iron Bull. You’ll go to your grave with that story. But both of you wind up hurling the tiny, malodorous fish at Bull, laughing and shouting as he dodges out of the way. Krem, in his eagerness to please you, had grabbed way more than you could ever eat, so the two of you have plenty of ammunition. The Battle of Herring ceases abruptly when
Bull—who now smells rather unpleasantly of vinegar and fish—gets close enough to tackle the two of you off the fence. All of you go sprawling into the training ring, and all of you wind up covered in pickled herring.

Of course, that turns into an impromptu threeway wrestling match, complete with alliances (as you and Krem each try to pin one of Bull’s arms) and betrayals (as Krem abruptly switches sides while you’re trying to throw your entire body weight onto Bull’s leg). By the end, all three of you are filthy messes, covered in dirt and tiny fish. Krem even pulls one of the herrings out of your hair, which has long since come loose.

“Maker’s breath,” you wheeze, out of breath from laughter and exertion. “You’re both children with the strength of adult men.”

“I’m not the one who threw fish!” Bull points out.

“I’m blaming Krem for that one,” you say.

“You’re the one with the penchant for throwing things,” Krem protests.

“Mugs, not fish,” you say, turning your nose up as if offended by the comparison. “I have standards.”

It isn’t until Bull mentions breakfast that a horrible realization strikes you… You never actually confirmed with Celia that she’d be bringing Solas’ breakfast in the morning. You’d like to be able to make the assumption, since she was at work yesterday, but… The thought of a misunderstanding on your part ending in Solas going hungry is beyond consideration. You make your excuses and quickly leave, tying back your hair and brushing yourself off as you go. That’s how you wind up in the kitchen, disheveled and smelling vaguely of fish.

Fortunately, Celia is there and has already brought Solas his breakfast, leaving you free to head to the baths. You march pointedly straight into the human baths. You’re greeted by an extra potent series of glares and horrified stares given how dirty and… fishy you are. You sink proudly into the water as human women scoot away from you. You almost don’t care if they see the scar across your stomach, at this point, although you still do your best to keep it covered.

After soaking for longer than is entirely necessary and changing into fresh clothes, you head up to Solas’ rotunda.

“My breakfast was dull without a conversation partner,” Solas comments over the top of the rather large tome he’s reading as you enter.”Meaning no offense to your friend, but she acts as if my room were actively on fire.”

His second comment makes you snort enough to hide the rush of heat the his first one brings on. Maker, you know he’s just being nice, but the way he talks sometimes... He’s so blunt most of the time and yet so damn smooth at other times… It’s unfair, and it’s part of what makes him so hard to read.

“I was busy tumbling around with several men,” you say sarcastically. “I’m sure you’ve heard all about my antics by now.”

Solas’ eyebrows raise, making you wonder if he hadn’t, in fact, heard the rumors. “I wasn’t fool enough to believe the majority,” he says, and you breathe an inner sigh of relief. Thank the Maker. “Although I can’t help but wonder if the hart keeper was involved,” he adds slyly. “He is often seen shirtless, after all, and you have been smelling of hay lately.”
“I see you shirtless more often,” your smart mouth says before you can stop it. You slap a hand over your mouth, horrified, but Solas laughs.

“And the Iron Bull, I suppose. You must be desensitized to it.” Not even a little bit, Solas… Not even a little bit. “Perhaps it’s simply a love of the outdoors that drives you to the barn so often,” he continues.

“A love of Revas, more like,” you say, privately enjoying the double-meaning to your words. “At this point I suspect I’m just making excuses to ride him.”

“I’m surprised you’ve taken to each other so well,” Solas says. “There are other harts with gentler natures in that stable.”

“I’ve never had a problem with his temper, although he occasionally tries to headbutt people. He’s a softie with me.” You move towards your desk to sit and begin your day’s work. You’d not really gotten any work done yesterday, having been utterly sidetracked by Leliana’s missive. Speaking of which… She hadn’t asked you to burn the papers, but you probably should.

“No wonder Belassan has taken such a shine to you,” Solas comments. “He adores anyone whom the harts adore, and Revas is fickle with his affections.”

“Are you and Belassan acquainted?” you ask hopefully. It would be nice to have two elven friends who didn’t actively deplore each other.

“Only insomuch as he is often the one who handles my mounts. I can’t say we’re familiar.” Solas’ mouth twitches downwards into a frown… Anyone else might have missed it, but to you, it reads as disapproval or annoyance.

Damn it.

“He seems friendly… We went on a ride yesterday, into the woods,” you say cautiously, watching him carefully for a reaction.

There it is, just a flash, but enough. Irritation, definitely. You need to be careful; you don’t want Solas to be cross with you. “Oh?” he says, and his voice sounds a bit sour. “I suppose even elves who grew up in the cities are rather enamored of the Dalish.”

You manage not to snap at that, but it takes a great deal of self-control. “That has nothing to do with it,” you say, trying to hide the irritation in your own voice. As if you’re one of those pathetic elves who worships the Dalish as if they’re the Elvhen of old reborn!

“You’re enamored with him for other reasons?”

“I enjoy riding!” you say with more force than entirely necessary. “He’s skilled at it. I can learn from him. That’s all.”

Solas eyes you as if he’s not entirely convinced. The thought of him thinking you little more than a promiscuous little strumpet, off to ride the stable-elf, stings more than it should. “Who else is going to ride out with me?” you insist. “You?”

“Why not me?” Solas asks, and it stuns you.

“I… you… well…” As always, your words dazzle when you need them the most. “You’re… so busy.”
“As are you,” Solas points out. “I can certainly afford a morning off if you can.”

“Would… would you like to go riding?” you ask, hesitantly. He’s all but said as much, yet you still feel presumptuous asking.

Solas eyes the large tome he was reading for a moment, then sets it down on the desk. A strip of soft cloth serves to mark his place as he closes it. “I suppose so,” he says, as if he hadn’t all but suggested it himself. “It’s a nice enough day out.”

You stand, somewhat dazed, your own work utterly forgotten on the desk. It can fucking wait. If Leliana can put you off your work with stupid tasks, you can take your own time off for this.

You lead Solas down to the stables. Your mind feels hazy, and you find yourself checking for the telltale markers of the Fade. But this is no dream. How had you come to this point, exactly?

Belassan’s visage visibly brightens when he sees you enter the barn. “Emma!” His smile falters somewhat when he sees Solas directly behind you. “And… Ser. What brings you both to the stables?”

You open your mouth to deliver as polite an explanation as you can, but Solas speaks first. “We wish to take advantage of the good weather while it lasts.”

Belassan’s eyes dart between you and Solas for a moment, and then he smiles. You don’t know him well enough to say, but you’d be willing to suspect there’s a difference between the smile he’s giving you now, and the smiles he gave you yesterday. Why do all of the elves in Skyhold seem to hate each other?

“I’ll get your mounts ready,” Belassan offers, but you’re already shaking your head.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” you say with a glance back at Solas. You don’t know about him, but you’re not about to stand around like some noble prick while Belassan enjoys Revas’ company for you. “I can ready Revas myself.”

Belassan turns politely to Solas. “Will you be requiring a saddle and bags today, ser?”

“Not necessary, thank you,” Solas replies. So damn polite; you could punch the both of them. You almost prefer Sera’s in-your-face rudeness. You want to shout at the two elves to just lay them on the table and compare, but you doubt their bristled posturing has anything to do with that. As with Sera and Solas, you suspect there’s some sort of history here that you just don’t know about. Solas seemed disdainful of the city elves’ hero-worship of the Dalish. You can’t say that you disagree, but you didn’t come to that conclusion overnight. Perhaps he had some similarly unpleasant encounters with the Dalish. Perhaps even some that mirrored yours? It wouldn’t surprise you; in fact, it feels almost inevitable.

Solas follows you as you approach Revas’ stall. Revas bangs on the wall with a horn impatiently as you approach. He thuds his head against your chest as soon as you’re close enough, pushing up against the stall door hard enough that it creaks slightly. He whuffs hot breath in your ear; you giggle delightedly, rubbing your face into his rough fur.

You pull back enough to see Revas giving Solas the stink eye over your shoulder.

“You know,” Solas comments dryly. “He used to like me.”

Revas blows a snort of hot air at Solas, but when the older elf approaches, Revas allows him to run a gentle hand down the hart’s forelock.
“See? He still likes you,” you say with a grin. “He just has a new favorite.”

Revas rubs his face against you firmly, nearly knocking you off balance, and Solas grins. “He’s marking you. I suppose we should both be grateful he hasn’t decided to urinate on your shoes.”

“He’d better not!” you exclaim. “These are my favorite boots!”

Just then, Revas nuzzles at your ear, enveloping it between his furry lips. You make a rather undignified noise, and whatever face you make has Solas covering his mouth in a failed attempt to hide his obvious mirth. You carefully, carefully remove your ear from Revas mouth. You glare at Solas, whose shoulders are trembling with suppressed laughter.

“He likes you,” Belassan quips, and you shoot a glare in his direction as well. “You’ll have to forgive him; there aren’t any more… eligible females nearby for him to flatter.”

“Oh good, I’m the last option of a desperate man,” you say dryly. “That’s what a lady likes to hear.” You run a hand fondly over Revas’ neck. “It would never work out between us, ma lath.” Revas blows a hot breath into your face, then proceeds to nose at your pockets for treats.

Belassan has brought the same white hart that he rode yesterday. “Your second favorite, ser,” he says to Solas. “Since our Revas seems to have a new mistress.”

“So it would seem,” Solas says with a smile, and you thank the Maker that the three of you seem to have something in common. Perhaps it’s not a lost cause after all. “Thank you.” It’s then you realize that the hart has no bridle or lead, Belassan is simply guiding him with a single hand on his neck.

Ugh. If that isn’t the elfiest thing you’ve ever seen, you don’t know what is. Damn Dalish and their weirdly specific skill sets.

You hop over the gate into the stable with Revas, and Belassan hands you his tack. You’re able to set him up fairly quickly, and before long, you and Solas are leading both of your mounts out of the stable. You can’t help but notice that Solas guides the white hart without the use of a lead, either. You wonder if Revas would follow you without a lead… you rather doubt it.

You mount Revas in your normal half-clumsy manner, and watch as Solas pulls himself up onto the white hart with graceful ease. Is everyone better at this than you? Where had Solas even learned to ride a hart? You were under the impression they were somewhat rare.

The two of you ride out over the long bridge out of Skyhold, and as you admire the way Solas’ larger-than-elven-average frame compliments the musculature of the white hart, you’re struck with a powerful wanderlust. You want to take these harts and run. Just the two of you, and just… off. It’s a very stupid thought, and you chastise yourself immediately. Solas barely knows the first thing about you, and if you think about it, you barely know the first thing about him. The two of you have no reason to run off, particularly not together.

He urges his hart into a gallop, and Revas follows suit. You have to fight the yearning sensation that rises in your chest, threatening to overcome you. Fortunately, Revas provides you with ample distraction. He seems to take poorly to being behind someone, and you have to pull him away from prodding the white hart’s rump several times.

Solas leads you into the woods, and you’re reminded that your clothing is poor protection from the cold. You’d had your cloak when you’d snuck out before, and even that hadn’t really provided sufficient insulation. Even with the trees blocking the worst of the wind, you’re quickly chilled. Perhaps this is why Solas wears so many layers.
The path widens slightly, and you bring Revas up to trot cheerfully alongside Solas’ white hart.
“Does he have a name?” you ask, gesturing towards the hart.

“Not particularly, no,” Solas says, running a hand along the hart’s neck. Once more you marvel at how he steers the hart with no bridle or bit, stays on with no help from stirrups. You’re glad Sera is around for you to compare yourself to, or you’d feel like an utter failure of an elf next to Solas and Belassan. “Belassan does not appear to name them, and I named Revas on a whim.”

“I’ve been thinking of him as Ashi’lana,” you say with a chuckle. “Although that might make Revas jealous.”

“Ashi’lana,” Solas echoes with a faint smile. “It suits him. He’s a prideful beast.”

“Belassan mentioned yesterday that he fusses if he doesn’t get regular baths.” You can’t help laughing. “Prideful. He suits you.”

Solas sends you a sidelong glance.

“Emma revas?” Solas suggests. “Your names go well together, as well.”

“My name goes well with nearly everything when you say it like that,” you point out. “Emma revas. Emma mahvir. Emma solas.”

“Mahvir,” Solas corrects you, as if automatically.

You start. “What, really? But, Mahvir in the library…”

“Mispronounces it, yes,” Solas says dryly. “It’s actually quite common amongst modern elves… Elven words mangled into names in an attempt to invoke old glory. It’s this way even amongst the Dalish.”

“That’s one of the reasons I never did seek out a Keeper to assist with my Elven,” you say with a sigh. “Every Dalish I’ve met speaks with a slightly different dialect, if they speak it at all. I had no way of knowing which was correct, if any. In the end I simply assumed I was the correct one. Ma solas.”

Solas stiffens slightly, and you quickly flush as you realize the multiple ways what you said could be translated. You clear your throat awkwardly. “In any case… It sounds… right, when you say it. I will get you to teach me,” you say firmly.

“Do you not yet have enough teachers?”

“Until I have you, I will always need at least one more,” you say in no doubt mangled Elven. Solas laughs aloud… not quite the emotion you were hoping to elicit.

“I cannot even begin to count the number of things wrong in that sentence,” Solas says between chuckles.

You pout. “You are a cruel man,” you protest.

“I never claimed to be otherwise,” Solas responds, his smooth, perfect Elven making you shiver for reasons unrelated to the frozen air.

The two of you ride in silence after that, your mind full of spiraling, tumultuous thoughts. It feels hard to keep yourself in the real world. Despite the fact you know this is reality, you find yourself
repeatedly checking for signs of the Fade. It *feels* dreamlike. The thick snow on the ground muffles all sounds; the chill makes you numb, as if your body isn’t quite your own.

After a long while of silence, Solas slows his hart. He reaches out and places hand on Revas’ neck; to your shock, the hart slows. Great. Solas can even control *your* mount better than you can.

“The Iron Bull came to talk to me yesterday,” Solas begins, and your eyes widen. Do those two talk often? Was… Maker, it wasn’t about you, was it? Why else would he bring it up? “He tells me you suffer from a chronic inability to sleep. He is concerned, and wanted to know if I could assist you.”

**Fuck.**

You say nothing, and Solas continues.

“I was surprised, to say the least. You certainly know that I could help with such a thing. The existence of the enchanted blanket you used alone would confirm that. So why would you not seek my aid? Embarrassment? Perhaps the same misplaced sense of pride that left you wincing around Skyhold rather than see a healer?”

Solas pauses, but you keep your mouth firmly shut, mind racing for an appropriate series of lies.

“And yet, you would confide in the Iron Bull, who could do nothing for you, but not someone who could help with the matter. I find myself wondering… why?”

There’s an obvious lie… That you’re closer to the Iron Bull, that you trust him more. But it turns to ash in your mouth. There are some lies in this world so brutally false, so hurtful, that even *you* can’t speak them.

“I… your throat is dry. You’re suddenly aware of how the wind has chapped your lips and face. “It was because you could help,” you say, confirming his obvious suspicions. “I… Please understand, Solas. I was in Tevinter for a good number of my formative years. Magic there was… was a tool used to terrify. An incomprehensible power that only served to cement how much… how much higher our masters were. When I escaped, I… sought to understand it, to own my fear. Curiosity and the desire not to be a fool lead me away from my initial terror, but… Magic that… that touches the mind, I…” You clear your throat, as if this is difficult for you. It is, but not for the reason you need Solas to think. Tears are in your eyes, yes, but tears of regret for the bitter lie you’re concocting. He will think less of you for this.

You let out as long, shuddering breath. “*Emma ir abelas,* but it scares me, Solas. I didn’t tell you because I thought you could help… and would try.”

You risk a glance over at him, and your heart aches bitterly as you read sorrow and disappointment on his features, clear as the sun in the sky.

“You are correct. I could almost certainly assist in this,” Solas replies slowly. “But I won’t force it upon you.”

The two of you ride in silence for a moment longer as you struggle to blink the tears back from your eyes without looking the fool.

“You…” Solas says finally. “The… healing, the other day. If I… frightened you, I…”

You sit bolt upright on Revas. “*Banal! Ir banal!*” you exclaim with so much force that it almost startles you. It certainly startles Solas. He stares at you with widened eyes. On him, the expression of shock almost shouts. “Don’t… “ you clear your throat to keep your voice from breaking. “Don’t
think that your past assistance has ever been anything other than a blessing, Solas. Please.

“This is… superstition, and nothing else,” you say, not having to fake the self-loathing in your voice. “The thought of magic touching my mind chills me. But that does not mean I am some Chant-screeching fool, clutching the symbol of Andraste and cowering before magic.” Your grip on the reins is too tight; Revas knickers in concern, prancing slightly and jarring you in the saddle.

Solas doesn’t comfort you. He doesn’t say that he doesn’t think less of you, because he almost certainly does. But he looks slightly less like a kicked dog, and that will just have to be enough. This sort of thing happens often. Your lies mean you absolutely must keep people at an arm’s length.

But Maker, it hurts. This time, it hurts.
Childish

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter that would not allow itself to be written! Sooo glad it's done.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The ride back to Skyhold is awkward. If Belassan notices the tension in the air as the two of you dismount, or the shame on your face, he doesn’t comment on it. He takes Ashi’lana back into the stables and you lead Revas in after him. Solas doesn’t follow.

You give yourself time to grieve as you unsaddle and groom Revas, lavishing him with strokes and attention far longer than is necessary to clean him. You find it hard to believe he has the reputation for having a bit of a temper; he stands calmly as you lay your weight on him and cry into his soft, thick fur.

It’s stupid of you to cry, and you certainly feel the fool for it. You only allow yourself the indulgence because you have a moment of privacy. You’ve experienced this dull stabbing of the chest before. You wouldn’t have made it this far in life if you hadn’t been able to push back against your fool’s crushes when it came down to it. But you’d let yourself get a little too close, this time, so the cut felt more raw. Solas’ disappointment had been written plainly on his face, and there was no room for alternate explanations here. And of course he was disappointed. You would be disappointed in someone who believed what you professed to believe. You would think them childish, simple-minded. Immature. Foolish. You had a somewhat justifiable explanation: trauma from your exposure to Tevinter magic at a young age. It’s a good enough lie that Solas might not hold your supposed prejudice against you.

But you had disappointed him.

And it stings.

You manage to pull yourself together shortly before Belassan comes to check on you. Concern is plain on the man’s face. “Emma, did Solas-” he begins, but your glare cuts him off. Not only does it silence him, it’s so potent as to leave him stunned. You simply shake your head, then jump the gate and head out of the barn. You see Blackwall as you storm past, but you have no patience for him at the moment.

You have some time before lunch. You privately apologize to Leliana, to yourself, and to the unknown Draconologist your work is for, but you can’t bring yourself to go straight to the rotunda and settle down to work as if you hadn’t just made an absolute ass of yourself. Instead, you head for the baths. Not even the human baths, this time… you don’t have the confidence at the moment. You slink into the elven baths like a kicked Mabari pup. You don’t soak, because the cold water would be a misery to soak in, but you use a rough sponge to scrub yourself until your raw skin threatens to break and bleed. This time, the pain does little to soothe you.

You putter about getting dressed into fresh clothes, wasting as much time as possible. But you have responsibilities, and in the end, not even your own mortification could lead you to let Solas go hungry. You fetch his lunch in the kitchen, once more taking your time. You make a smaller, simpler lunch for yourself, one that will be easy to carry should he not wish to eat with you. You wouldn’t
blame him.

But when you enter the rotunda, there your little stool sits by his desk, as if waiting for you. Solas is reading the same tome he was when you entered that morning. It should be soothing, but the sight makes your chest ache anew. You steel yourself with a deep breath and head for his desk. He looks up from his tome as you set the food down before him, but you hesitate with your own plate. The stool is there. He had to have put it there, on purpose. But…

With a deep breath for courage, you set your food down his desk and sit. You’re back to trying to take up the least amount of space possible, keeping your plate perched on the absolute corner of his desk.

The both of you seem somewhat at a loss for what to say. You desperately hunt for something, anything, to discuss, and fall upon the utterly banal. Solas has a clean, fresh smell about him. He’s wearing a different sweater. He does not have hair to be wet, but yours is obviously damp and your clothes are just as changed.

“I see we had the same idea,” you say lamely and with forced cheer. “A bath before returning to our respective tasks. I’m sure yours was more pleasant than mine, though.”

Solas seems grateful for a subject to reach onto, even one so utterly stupid as this. “Oh?”

“The public baths aren’t particularly pleasant,” you say with a hopefully-believable chuckle. “But if I had one of those private baths, they would have to pay me just to leave the room.”

Solas looks surprised, and you realize that in your distraction, you’d just admitted something rather telling. Solas seems amused, however. “Tell me, just how far into my room did you snoop when you broke in…?”

“Oh, Maker, no!” you say, waving your hands in front of you for emphasis. “I swear! I just saw… That is… Iron Bull told me about them.” It didn’t seem smart to admit you’d bathed in Bull’s, or that you had snuck in and pranked Vivienne’s. Solas clearly isn’t buying it, however.

“I see. Bull just so happened to mention that Skyhold was in possession of enchanted bathtubs, and that I was in possession of one?”

“It’s more believable than it sounds,” you say with a wince. “You’re not the only one who likes to tease me.”

“Now that I can believe,” Solas says with a chuckle. You breathe a small sigh of relief. The conversation continues through lunch, slightly stilted as both of you avoid the subject of magic entirely. The thought that you may never be able to beg another magical demonstration out of Solas cuts you, threatening to bleed you dry. The smile on his face when he’d conjured veilfire out of seeming nothingness. The way the greenish fire reflected in his eyes. You try to beat the thoughts away while you force a smile and continue your conversation with Solas. By the time he’s finished his meal, you’ve exhausted yourself. You’re ready to run right back to the barn and drown yourself in wretched, stupid self-pity. Instead, you calmly gather the plates and leave to return them to the kitchen. You have no intention of returning to the rotunda.

You can’t just wander around Skyhold or sulk in the barn, however. You need to at least pretend to get something useful accomplished. You head up to the library, pointedly taking the longer route to avoid Solas’ rotunda. You meander about the library for a little, looking for Thea and pointedly avoiding Helisma. You can’t find Thea, but Dorian seems to zero in on your almost immediately.
“You look like someone just drowned kittens in front of you,” he comments. “Trouble in paradise?”

“Something like that,” you mutter. You have no energy for the Tevinter’s odd sense of humor right now. Then you eye him anew, an idea forming in your fogged mind. “Say, Dorian, why don’t we discuss that tome you lent me? Outside. In a place that’s not here.”

Dorian’s eyes slide over to the railing, where Solas rests some twenty feet below. “Say no more,” Dorian says cheerfully. “I can tell you’re just dying for my company.” He steers you out of the door onto the walkway around the library. From here, the two of you can walk onto the battlements and avoid the Great Hall altogether.

“Did you actually want to talk about that tome?” Dorian asks curiously as you begin meandering your way towards the outer battlements.

“To be honest with you, I’m not even halfway through,” you say with a sigh. “I can barely understand it. I think it’s a bit above my education level.”


You glare over at him, but it lacks conviction. “No, my education in Seheron was decidedly non-magical. It mostly involved chess and Qunari.” You pause. “Although, I once translated a missive that detailed the disemboweling of a Magister. Is that the sort of education you mean?”

Dorian wrinkles his nose. “Ugh. Definitely not. Why do Qunari write that sort of thing down?”

“The same reason some Vint wrote down how best to bind a hunger demon into a corpse. If you want to do it more than once, it helps to have instructions.”

“My, but you’re morose today,” Dorian says dryly.

“Maybe that will help me understand the tome!” you declare. “I just have to get into the right mindset. Let’s find some black robes, go into the Undercroft and begin chanting.”

“Maker, no. No robes, no Undercroft, no chanting. If Dagna saw something like that going on, we’d never escape her.”

“Dagna?”

“Oh, you’d love her. She’s a non-mage who’s obsessed with magic. You’d have so much to talk about!”

“Really?” you say, intrigued despite yourself. You’re not actually the same, but it would be a very interesting perspective.

“Yes, she’s a dwarf, actually.”

“W...what?” you say, laughing. “A dwarf who studies magic? Now that is bizarre.”

“You have no room to throw stones,” Dorian says with a snort. “Up here asking me about necromancy...”

“Fair enough. Is she an enchanter, then? I mean, she must be, right?”

“Mnhmm. Have you ever considered studying enchantment, Emma?”
You wonder idly if Dorian is a clever enough person to notice the trap he just laid. Had he done it on purpose? But after a month of playing with Iron Bull, Solas, and Leliana, Dorian’s efforts seem clumsy. “Don’t be ridiculous. Only dwarves and Tranquil can do that,” you lie dully.

“Not true!” Dorian says, seeming delighted to be able to educate you. You’re glad you let him have this one. Not only is his cheerful patronizing annoyingly endearing, there’s only so much education on a subject you can justify by throwing your hands in the air and yelling “TOMES” very loudly. “Although they’re best at it because of their resistance to lyrium. But in Tevinter we use non-magically inclined slaves to-” He freezes mid-sentence. “...Um.”

You imagine you must look intensely unamused. “No, no, Dorian, by all means, continue,” you say sourly. “Expound to me the benefits of a slave-driven economy.”

“I… I wasn’t-” he begins, but you cut him off with a smile.

“I won’t hold it against you every time you happen to bring up Tevinter’s slavery. I’ll make a face, but I won’t hold it against you personally. So they have non-magical slaves enchanting? Doesn’t that drive them mad?”

“If their master isn’t careful, it can, but for the most part, they’re regularly rotated out. They spend two parts researching or doing other work to one part enchanting,” Dorian explains. “To keep the lyrium exposure down. The less magical inclination they have, the longer they can work safely.”

“Fascinating,” you lie. In truth, you knew all this already. The ancient elves had no Tranquil that you know of, and their enchantments were some of the most elaborate and long-lasting. Tevinter stole many things from the Elvhen, and their theories on enchantment were among them. You had read both Elven and Tevene tomes on the subject.

But Dorian’s animated explanations are entertaining. He seems to enjoy educating, enough that you feel bad he’s telling you things you already know. You steer the topic back towards the necromancy tome; he’s more than happy to explain in great detail how one binds spirits to corpses, the theories behind the magic, and what spirits are best for what uses.

You wonder if he’s friends with Cole. You wonder if he hears himself when he talks, really. He talks about spirits the way he talks about slaves. Like they’re things. At least he’s peripherally aware of you as a person and an ex-slave, but he seems to have some serious cognitive dissonance in that area. You suppose most Vints do. They’re not all monsters, and how else could a good and decent person justify that to themselves? By lying about the reality of it, even to themselves. By not thinking about it at all, not really.

You don’t dislike Dorian. In fact, you would be more likely to say you pity him. He clearly patronizes you due to your apparent lack of magic, but that affectionate pity he has towards you is mirrored in your own honest emotions towards him. Poor dear, you both likely think of each other. Just doesn’t know any better. No hope of comprehending the reality.

Although you’re still more than willing to listen to him wax poetic about magic. He’s a Tevinter trained altus. That he knows more about magic than you do is simply a given. Your knowledge has been stolen and swiped over a careful, cautious decade. You have nothing on even the youngest of Circle mages, not really. You listen carefully, committing his words to memory. It’s almost humorous how willing Dorian is to ramble on about semi-forbidden magics. Vints. And to think, you’ve been spending all your time downstairs, attempting to squeeze even a drop of magical knowledge out of Solas.
The two of you idly walk about the battlements as you talk, and after one time too many the two of you are given the stink eye by one of the guards, Dorian sighs. “Of course, now that I’ve been seen in public with you, rumor will have us sleeping together by dinner.”

You can’t help it; you burst into laughter. “You’ve noticed that too, have you? I’ve utterly lost track of how many men I’m supposed to be sleeping with at this point.”

“Between one and seven, by my last count,” Dorian says mildly. “You must be very busy.”

“Incredibly. I never have time to sleep,” you say without a hint of irony.

“Were you actually listening to all that rambling?” Dorian asks curiously. “I’m afraid I have a tendency to get carried away.”

“For purposes of spreading chaos, the traditional choice is the hunger demon, of course,” you quote. “But personally I find that a rage demon is the easier option for those apprentices just starting. They break down faster, but they’re less clever.”

Dorian whistles; you’d just quoted him word for word. “It really is a shame you’re not a mage,” he says, voice full of genuine regret. “A brilliant mind, wasted.”

You glare sourly at him as the oblivious Vint realizes what he just said. “Well… not totally wasted, obviously,” he says quickly, and you simply roll your eyes. Privately, you agree with him more than you should. A mind like yours would be wasted were you not a mage. You would probably still be a slave. There’s no greater waste than that.

You glance out at the sun, setting over the mountains, and realize you’ve flitted away another day without completing so much as a page of work on your actual job. You’ll have to get some work in after dinner, no matter how awkward you feel around Solas. You’re being childish. Hadn’t you debased yourself in a hundred worse ways than this? So he takes you for being superstitious. You’ve let people believe much worse about you for the sake of your safety.

“Thank you for the company, Dorian,” you say with a smile. “But I’ve put off my duties long enough. If I’m late with his dinner, Solas will be cross.”

“Why do you do that, anyway?” Dorian asks curiously.

“A multitude of reasons, not the least of which is that I get to fetch two meals from the kitchens. You friends of the Inquisitor eat better than us peasant masses,” you say with a smirk. You wave goodbye to Dorian as you head directly to the kitchens. You take time to make sure the foods he like are the only things that make their way onto his plate, and swipe some freshly baked tarts more or less directly out of the oven. They’re the sweetest thing you can find. You feel the need to apologize, and delivering him stolen sweets is about the only way you know how.

“I was worried I would have to fetch my own dinner,” Solas comments, but you see laughter behind his eyes. He’s not cross with you, thank the Maker.

“Well, we can’t have that. Gaston would have fits at the sight of you in his kitchen. All the girls would faint, and afterwards they’d think you’d cursed the roast with blood magic,” you say dryly. “Best to have a go-between for something as delicate as fetching dinner.” You unload your tray and sit down on your little stool with no small amount of relish. No matter how much you may have diminished yourself in his eyes, it isn’t so much that he doesn’t want you around.

“Where were you all afternoon?” Solas asks after the two have you begin eating. You hope this is mild curiosity and not the precursor to scolding. You should have been here working.
“I was off with Dorian, discussing the tome he lent me,” you reply, seeing no reason to lie. “Time got away from us. Dorian is predisposed to lecturing.”

“I’m surprised you’re comfortable with the subject of necromancy.”

“Well… comfortable is a strong word,” you say with a nervous chuckle. “It’s kind of… creepy. But as long as he’s not actually raising a corpse from the dead right in front of me, I can listen to the theory.”

“Have you ever seen the undead?”

“No, thank the Maker,” you lie. “They sound terrifying. And smelly. I don’t know how Dorian does it,” you say with a scowl. “He’s such a clean fellow; how did he come to play with corpses?”

“I’m sure they have different standards in Tevinter,” Solas says with a faint smile. You snort.

“Hah, I’ll say. Here, I got these.” You pull out the hidden tarts, which you’d wrapped in a dish towel, and lay them out on the table.

Solas actually chuckles, and the sound makes your heart skip a beat. “Famin da’ahtras.” His tone is scolding, but you really don’t care. You would behave very badly to hear more Elven out of him. “Can you go nowhere without resorting to petty theft?”

“The nobles here won’t miss a few tarts,” you say with a grin. “It’s not stealing if it’s from rich shems.”

“No wonder you and Sera get along. Where did you learn that?”

“Same place she did, I’d bet. Denerim orphanage. Our hahren would have disagreed, but he wasn’t going to feed me either.”

“You grew up in the orphanage, but I’ve heard you speak of your mother before,” Solas says, one of his questions that isn’t a question.

“I remember her from when I was very young. Before the orphanage.” Only half a lie.

“Did something-” Solas is cut off as you rather rudely push a tart towards his face. You shove it right up to his lips, although you stop short of attempting to cram it into his mouth.

“They’re best when they’re warm,” you say pointedly. You will not be speaking of your mother this evening. Fortunately, Solas takes the hint and the tart. An image of him plucking it straight from between your fingers with his lips flashes through your perverted little mind, but Solas takes it rather politely with his hand before eating it. It’s probably better this way. If Solas started actually flirting with you, you doubt your poor, strained heart could take it. It’d probably explode right then and there.

The subject turns back to Dorian, and from there, to magic. The two of you rather delicately tiptoe around the subject of mind-magic, and you know you won’t be able to ask for any more demonstrations, but at least Solas isn’t turned off from discussing the subject with you entirely.

“I don’t know if Dorian will ever get over his disappointment over my lack of magical aptitude,” you comment dryly. “Just today he said my mind was wasted.”

For some reason, your words have Solas eyeing you sharply over his drink. “Do you find you garner that sort of reaction from mages often?”
You’re a little taken aback by the question. Does he suspect something? You’ve been awfully careful, and he must have checked you for magic half a dozen times by now. Surely he’s satisfied by now? Perhaps not. “If you share his opinion, you’ll be the second one,” you say, making your face look puzzled. “Why?”

“Mn. Nothing, I’m sure,” Solas says, returning to his drink. You pout. He does that often, saying something incredibly leading and then refusing to explain further. If you were half as frustrating as he was when he asked questions, you’d have been thrown out of the rotunda on your ass by now. “Will you be working on your tome this evening?”

You wince guiltily. You should have been working on it all day. “Yes… Probably late. I don’t have practice with the Iron Bull tomorrow, so I can work late,” you explain quickly as you see the tiniest frown form at the corner of Solas’ lips. You wish you could understand why it displeased him so. If he were your master, or even your employer, you could make some sense of it. But he’s just… Well, you don’t even know what. Something between a friend and a boss, is how it feels. “I’m going to drop the rest of these tarts off with Thea, first, then I’ll be right back to get to work,” you promise. Solas has eaten his fill of the sweet tarts, and they really are better warm. Plus, you really need to check in with and bribe Thea. The last you’d seen her, you’d snapped at her rather roughly.

You wrap the tarts back up in the dish towel and take them up the stairs. Fortunately, Thea is easy to find this time. She’s on a ladder, restocking some books back up onto the shelves, likely trying to create some semblance of order in the chaotic library.

“You come bringing gifts,” you call up to her. You glance sidelong to your right; you’re standing relatively close to Helisma’s desk. She’s working as studiously as you ever have, with an unwavering focus you almost envy. But the thought of why she has such a dedicated mind quickly sends a chill down your spine, and you return your focus to Thea, who’s climbing down the ladder.

“Thank the Maker! I could use the break. Requisition is givin’ Mahvir a hard time, and you know I’m caught in the middle of it because none of them want to talk to a kniiiiiiice elf?” she attempts to finish, eyes widening halfway through the word.

“Nice catch,” you say dryly. She grins apologetically.

“Sorry. S’been a long day, and I’ve been hearin’ the boys toss that one around like it’s goin’ outta style.”

“If they’re giving Mahvir a hard time, I suppose that means I can expect my tomes sometime next year,” you say with a scowl. “If it weren’t for the damn war, I’d ride out to get them myself. I can’t finish that tome until I get the supplies I need, and I can only put off certain sections for so long!”

“You’re preachin’ to the choir, Emma,” Thea says with a sigh. “I’ve been wrestlin’ with them since Haven and it’s only gettin’ worse, honestly-”

“Since Haven?” you interrupt, surprised. “You’ve been with the Inquisition for that long?”

“Sure have!” she says proudly. “I was a pilgrim, y’know. Got kinda caught up in it. I’d be runnin’ this library if Mahvir weren’t… well, just plain better at it, really.”

“If you were at Haven, then you saw what hap-”

“I’mma stop you up right there, Em,” she says with a scowl. “You know all about havin’ awful stuff you don’t wanna talk about, right?” You nod sympathetically, although you’re still curious. You’ve heard rumors about the destruction of Haven, about Templars and Tevinter cults and darkspawn and
dragons, but you’re not really sure which one actually did the damage. Not darkspawn, surely; everyone would know if there was another Blight on, especially so soon after the last. You sincerely doubt dragons were involved, either.

After a bit of pleasant small talk with Thea, you head back down towards the rotunda…but you slip one of the tarts onto Helisma’s desk, first. It’s stupid. You don’t even know if she’ll know to eat the damned thing without being explicitly told, but…you still feel badly about how you treated her. How you know you’ll continue to treat her. When in doubt, bribery. It’s worked for you well up to this point.

You head straight to your desk upon returning to the rotunda, but Solas waves you over before you can sit and begin your work. Curious, you approach him. Wordlessly, he snatches your right arm, pulling it towards him. You manage not to flush bright red, knowing nearly immediately what he’s doing, although you really wish he was a bit more self-aware. Asking you to strip, manhandling you, taking you out on rides through the countryside… You must be a completely non-sexual entity to him for him to act like this. Frustrating, but probably for the best.

You fight off chills as he pushes your sleeve up your arm. He runs his hand along the skin there, as if admiring his handiwork. Fortunately, you gained no new bruises that low on your arms during morning practice. If he could see your shoulders right now, he wouldn’t be so calm. You manage not to shudder as you feel his magic pushing under your skin, wrapping around the muscles and sinews in your arm, strengthening, stabilizing. Your own aura stays wrapped obediently in your gut. You wonder, not for the first time, what it would be like to mingle your aura up against his. Obviously, you’ve never had the opportunity (nor the desire, particularly) to do that with someone.

When Solas is done enchanting your wrist, he releases you. “Don’t use that as an excuse to push yourself to work late into the night,” he chides. “Or I’ll make you go without for a week.”

“Yes, ser, of course, ser,” you say sarcastically, but Solas doesn’t seem to notice. Perhaps he’s a little bit closer to “boss” than “friend.” But, while you have him… “Solas… you said you were with the Inquisition since the beginning. You helped seal the first of the rifts.”


“But you were there,” you insist. “You were at Haven. So you know what happened.”

Solas looks grim. “I was, yes. Why the sudden curiosity?”

“There’s nothing sudden about my curiosity, Solas. It’s a steady constant. But about this, well… Thea mentioned it, and I don’t honestly know what happened. I’ve heard the most ridiculous rumors, but I have only a vague outline of what really happened. Haven was destroyed. It was either cultists, rogue Templars, darkspawn, or dragons, from what I’ve heard.” You laugh, but Solas still looks quite serious.

“It was all of those, in part.”

You’re… kind of dumbfounded by that. “Whu… Y-you’re being serious?” you stammer. You’re not sure which is stranger, the darkspawn or the dragons.

“Just one darkspawn. He claimed to be a Tevinter magister, one of the first darkspawn. A man who walked physically in the Fade.”

You scoff before you remember you’re supposed to believe that to be true. “Surely any such creature would be long dead,” you say as a cover.
“Perhaps he’s merely mad, but that is what he claimed,” Solas says. “With him was a dragon, possibly an archdemon, although there were no darkspawn other than he himself. He also commanded an army of red Templar and Venatori cultists. We were wiped out in quick order. It was only due to quick thinking and a heavy risk by the Inquisitor that we managed to escape at all.”

You… genuinely don’t know what to say. “I thought… I thought all the talks of that ‘Elder One’ were just superstitious nonsense… or just part of the cult,” you say, a bit shell-shocked. “I didn’t think…”

“Few do, even now. The hardest job the Inquisition has is merely having their claims taken seriously. It doesn’t help that they seem so outlandish,” Solas says solemnly. You’re quiet for a time.

“…Thank you for telling me, Solas. I… might not have believed it, coming from anyone else,” you admit. If Thea had told you, you’d have thought her a superstitious fool, to be sure. Solas likely knows that. Thea likely knows that; it could be part of why she didn’t want to talk about it.

You settle in at your desk and begin working. The words seem to fly by, as they always do after Solas has enchanted your wrist. In truth, his threat of making you go a week without would actually be quite devastating to you.

Solas reminds you of it one more time when he leaves for the night. You don’t know that he would have any way of knowing if you spent the whole night here working, but you’re absolutely not going to risk it. You put in another few hours before calling it a night. Your candle is burning low and while you’re not sore yet, your body is as tired as ever. You could stand to lie motionless for a few hours, and you’ve plenty of reading material.

Unfortunately, it’s another night where you can’t get to your room unmolested. It’s enough to make you seriously consider just sleeping in the damn rotunda, consequences and embarrassment be damned.

They catch you halfway between the building that houses your quarters and the Great Hall; it would be difficult for you to dart all the way to either. Fortunately, it seems the men have more mischief in mind than violence.

“Look, it’s our resident riding-elf!” one of them chortles. There’s three in all, enough that for you to be worried if their intentions turn darker than taunting. “Taking a break from mounting mercenaries? Tell me, are you on your way to or from a fucking? Or do they all blur together?”

The other two chortle. You simply try to keep walking, but one quickly steps into your path. “Do the Chargers have claim on you, or is it a free for all?” the man in your way asks.

“Maybe she charges, and they’re the only ones who can afford her rate?” another jokes.

“No way she charges; you think that knife-eared apostate could afford shit?” the first one exclaims with a laugh. You see red flash before your eyes, and you can hear and feel your aura roaring in your ears. You could turn all three to ash before they could blink. But it wouldn’t be satisfying. You’d like to hear them scream. You entertain the thought of the man on his knees before you, burning slowly, long enough to calm yourself slightly.

“Have you nothing better to do, Lawrence Underhill?” you say sharply, turning to face him. “Of course you don’t… you were taken off the caravan job entirely. This sort of behavior is no doubt why the Commander doesn’t even think you can be trusted to watch a bunch of elven brats.”

The man flushes bright red, and you fear for a moment you may only have provoked him into
escalating, although part of you *begs* for the excuse. But instead, he spits at your feet, seeming to think better of spitting in your face at the last moment. “Ah, fuck this knife-eared bitch. Not worth any one of us. C’mon, boys.” The others scarper off with him, thank the Maker. No matter how much you might long to dangle them off the battlements, that would spend the end of your time here.

With a sigh, you turn back towards your quarters.

Chapter End Notes

Famin da’ahlras = Wicked little thief
Wait, What?

Chapter Notes

I almost ended this one halfway through the conversation with Josephine, just to taunt you guys. But my desire to maintain a standard of long updates won out, in the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You fell asleep.

You must have fallen asleep, because now you’re dreaming. It’s the kind of hazy half-dream you tend to have on the rare occasion you actually manage to sleep while your aura is tucked inside of you. You can’t really connect fully with the Fade like this… a benefit and a downside.

You’re dreaming of Aimée, it seems. A wholly unpleasant subject that you dream of often enough for it to irritate you. You let the dream shift messily around you, unable to quite find a foothold in your mind. First she’s holding the dagger, then you are, as if your subconscious can’t quite make up its mind.

The scene shifts further and you find it’s Solas standing before you, not Aimée. He grabs your wrist, a mirror of the motion earlier that evening, but instead of stopping to enchant your arm, he pulls you flush against his body. You know it’s a dream, but your heart still leaps into your throat as he leans down. His lips brush against yours as you fight to remind yourself this is but idle wish-fulfillment, then he chokes, and your face is wet with blood. He pulls back, staring at you with wide, confused eyes, blue stained red.

The dagger is in your hand.

You drop it, forgetting that this is a dream for one horrified moment. You take a step back, shaking your head and holding your hands in front of you. They’re stained with his blood, wet and sticky. Solas clutches the wound in his side, red gushing out between his fingers. His look of betrayal traps your eyes. You can’t look away.

“Yesnathra, lethallin?” his voice chokes as his throat fills with blood.

You sit bolt upright in bed, a cry straining in your locked throat. You finally managed to force yourself awake, but the sheen of sweat you’re drenched with is sticky and reminds you of the feeling of Solas’ blood on your hands. You strip out of your underclothes as fast as possible, using them to wipe the sweat off as best you can. No time for a bath… there’s sunlight coming in your window.

You’re dressed and halfway to the training yard before you remember what day it is. You didn’t miss training with Bull… but you are very late to seeing Revas. The thought of skipping doesn’t even occur to you even though you’ve ridden Revas the last two days. Belassan looks relieved when you walk into the barn.

“I wasn’t sure you were coming,” he says, and you feel a slight pang of guilt. Solas isn’t the only one you’ve been keeping at arm’s length. It’s a shame, but it’s also a necessity.

“And miss riding Revas?” you say, forcing joviality into your voice. “Not a chance.”
It seems Revas will never stop being happy to see you. He huffs and stamps his feet just as much as if he hadn’t seen you for a week. You coo gently to him and rub him down while you get him saddled and bridled. You think enviously of how Solas and Belassan rode without saddles. You’ve finally gotten to the point where you can consistently stay on Revas, even when he gallops. You’re so far away from riding bareback that it’s a little embarrassing. Ah well… Halamshiral wasn’t built in a day and all that.

Your mother had once told you that Halamshiral hadn’t been built in a day, but Arlathan may well have been. She probably meant something inspirational by it, or maybe she was just being her normal, precise self… But mostly it just serves to make you feel inferior. Solas had said it once, too… at your best, you’ll always be a ghost of what once was.

You loosen the reins and let Revas take over almost as soon as you’re in the pasture. You don’t get to enjoy that flying feeling for long, though. As he comes around the corner to head back to where Belassan waits, you see something a little alarming. There’s someone talking to Belassan… a human, from what you can see, and dressed in the uniform of Skyhold’s many messengers.

You know he’s one of Leliana’s before you even see Belassan point out at you. With a long sigh, you tighten the reins and steer Revas towards the two men. This is what you get for sleeping in… Your time with Revas cut short by Leliana’s needs. You pull up next to the messenger, frowning.

“Miss Emma? I have summons from Lady Josephine Montiliyet. She wishes to see you in her office at once.”

What? Montiliyet? The diplomat? You frown further. “Lady Montiliyet wishes to see me? Did she say why?”

“No, miss, but she said ‘at once,’ ‘right away,’ and ‘as soon as possible.’”

Maker. What have you done now? “Belassan, do you mind…?” you ask, gesturing towards Revas.

“Of course not. I’ll take care of Revas,” Belassan says, reaching over the fence to take his reins. Not that he needs them; you’ve seen him guide a hart with little more than a hand and some kind words. You hop off of Revas directly onto the fence, then jump down to land next to the messenger. You smell of hay and harts, no doubt. Hopefully Lady Montiliyet doesn’t take offense. She had said “at once.”

You let the messenger lead you, but find you know where he’s going. Lady Montiliyet holds her office just off of the Great Hall, in front of the War Room. You know you’re in deep shit as soon as you enter… Leliana is there as well, standing in front of Lady Montiliyet’s desk and speaking with her in quiet tones. Lady Montiliyet looks extremely flustered, moreso than you’ve seen her before. She’s normally extremely calm and polished.

Her fluster lessens somewhat when she sees you enter, although it’s obvious she’s forcing it down. “Miss Emma, wonderful. Thank you, Albert.”

“Not at all, my lady,” the messenger--Albert, apparently--says with a bow before quickly exiting. You approach the desk cautiously, eyes flicking between Lady Montiliyet--who’s working too hard at not looking frantic--and Leliana--whose face looks mischievous, the absolute last expression you want to see on her.

“May I help you with something, Lady Montiliyet?” you say with the appropriate Orlesian style bow. No need pretending here; Leliana knows your history as Alix Gagnon--well, some of it anyway--and you want to leave a good impression on Josephine Montiliyet.
Lady Montiliyet takes a deep breath. “Yes, actually. Due to your… expertise… the Inquisitor has selected you as part of a team to go to the University of Orlais to retrieve resources for the Inquisition.”

You could hear a pin drop in the room as you stare blankly at Lady Montiliyet. You take a long moment to compose yourself. Had you misheard? Inquisitor? University of Orlais? Expertise?

“W…what expertise is that, exactly, Lady Montiliyet?” you ask, your voice coming out strained.

“I believe the Inquisitor’s exact words were-” Leliana begins, but Lady Montiliyet cuts her off.

“She doesn’t need to know the Inquisitor’s exact words, Leliana.” She clears her throat delicately. “You worked in Val Royeaux for some time, isn’t that correct?”

“Yes,” you admit. “But not at the University.” Because, you know, elves weren’t allowed there at the time.

You want to say that. You don’t.

Lady Montiliyet sighs. “I will admit, Miss Emma, you may not have been my, ah… first choice, but the Inquisitor seems confident that you are the woman for the job.”

The Inquisitor, clearly, is tired of your bullshit and is trying to get you killed. Some of this must read on your face, because Lady Montiliyet rushes on. “Of course, you won’t be going alone. I’ll be sending a diplomat, and there will be a team of guards,” Josephine begins. Leliana cuts her off, this time.

“The Inquisitor was somewhat hungover when he made this decision, Emma, but he’s standing by it,” she says bluntly. “Elves have been allowed inside the University for several years now. The Inquisitor is sending the two people who have the made the most difficult-to-obtain requests. He believes that the two of you can save the Inquisition time and money by simply obtaining the tomes yourself.”

“The… two of us…?” you manage. Your mind is rushing with the sudden onslaught of new information. Trip to Val Royeaux? University? This is utter madness. Is the Inquisitor trying to make a political statement, or was he really just that hungover?

“Yes. Technically, you’re going as an assistant. Solas’ assistant,” Lady Montiliyet says promptly, and you feel the bottom of the world drop out beneath you.

Montiliyet is still talking, but you can’t hear over the loud buzzing in your ears.

You. And Solas. On a trip to Val Royeaux.

You find you honestly can’t handle the sudden explosion of emotions. It’s a miracle you don’t faint on the spot. You just stand rooted there, staring wide-eyed at nothingness while your brain attempts to restart. Happiness. Frustration. Excitement. Horror. You don’t even know where to start.

“W….what?” your voice comes out as a squeak. Lady Montiliyet stops mid-sentence, looking at you in some alarm. You see that Leliana is having some difficulty not smiling; your face must be quite the sight. “The… The Inquisition is sending two elves… one of whom is Solas… to Val Royeaux… to the University in Val Royeaux. Two elves. Solas. The University.” Your mind finally broken, you throw your hands into the air. “Does no one see the problem with this plan?!”

Lady Montiliyet winces. “Believe me, we see it,” Leliana says seriously. “But Josie will be sending a diplomat along to smooth things over.”

“Why isn’t the Inquisitor sending Madame de Fer?” you demand, by now beyond caring about how
rude you’re being. “She’s perfect for this task!”

“The Inquisitor was of the opinion that sending Vivienne and Solas to Val Royeaux together would result in the city being leveled,” Leliana says dryly.

“Why send Solas at all? Am I missing something?” you ask, running a hand across your head and inadvertently knocking some of your thin hair loose from its bun.

“He’s made the most--and the strangest--requests,” Lady Montiliyet explains. “It could take my men a very long time to locate them. The Inquisitor is of the opinion that he could find them the fastest, and that you would be the most help.”

You open your mouth to declare the Inquisitor a damned idiot, but quickly close it.

“I believe you can do this, Emma,” Leliana says soberly. “Solas can find anything, but he needs someone to smooth over the process. Someone who knows Orlais, who knows Val Royeaux. Were it my choice, I would send one of my own men. But it is not my choice, it is the Inquisitor’s. And he has chosen to send you.”

“If we believed this hopeless, or even dangerous, we would not send you,” Lady Montiliyet assures you, although it does little for your mood. “The University has already agreed to let us use their resources for this. There will be guards to protect you on the way there and the way back. It will only be a two week journey.”

You let out a long, pained sigh. There’s clearly no getting out of this. You’ll have time to process your complicated emotions later, when you’re not in front of two of the most powerful women in Thedas. “I will do my best, of course, my Lady. I only hope that’s enough.”

“I have faith in you, Emma,” Leliana says firmly. “You leave at dawn tomorrow, so take the rest of the day to-”

“Tomorrow?!” you exclaim. “Er… Je suis désolée… So soon?”

“Yes. I suggest you speak with Solas and begin making preparations. Good luck, Emma.”

You leave the office looking dazed, barely listening as they return to bickering behind you.

“The Inquisitor’s exact words, Leliana? Really?”

“I’m certain she already knows, Josie.”

You gently close the door behind you. Yes, you suspect you do. The Inquisitor did not pick you and Solas for this task out of faith in your respective abilities. The question is, was it to get you out of his hair, or something more sinister?

The Inquisitor couldn’t possibly know what a Maker damned hassle he’s just dropped on your lap, not entirely. Under nearly any other circumstances, a trip to Val Royeaux--with an armed guard, at that--would be a dream. You could get the supplies you need, check in with contacts you’ve been neglecting, and most importantly, let your aura out for a solid two weeks. Two weeks of real, blissful sleep. Instead, you’re looking at two weeks of tense nerves as you spend all day, every day, in close proximity to the exact person most likely to discover you.

By now, it’s getting on towards lunch, so you head to the kitchens rather than Solas’ rotunda. Celia will be pleased to know she’ll be getting two weeks off of delivering breakfast to the Shirtless Wonder, but she’ll probably miss the extra income. You’ll have to see if there’s anything you can
pick her up while you’re in Val Royeaux. Thea will just be pleased by the sheer number of books you intend to bring back. You’ll have to get the requisitions from someone. You can look over them on the ride there… You mull over the details as you absentmindedly put two meals together. Picking Solas’ favorites is beginning to come more naturally to you; your fingers automatically snag the turnips out of the salad the chefs made for him and toss them into your own salad.

Your distraction does you a disfavor on the way to Solas’ rotunda, however. Crassius Servis sneaks up on you without you even noticing him. Not until he steps out in front of you, at least. You manage to come to a sudden halt without spilling the soup, thank the Maker. You keep from glaring at him, as well, keeping your face a polite mask. What now?

“I’ve heard you and your elven master are heading to Val Royeaux,” the man says with a smile. You eye him warily.

“Word travels fast. Can I help you with something, ser?”

“As a matter of fact, yes!” Servis says cheerfully, tucking a strip of paper under one of the plates on your tray. “Since you’ll be in the area. I think the Requisition men have been burning my requests.”

You can’t really look at it with your hands full, which may have been his intent. “A book?” you say dryly.

“I suspect I won’t be the last one to make this kind of a request before you leave,” the Tevinter says with a grin. “Books have been low on the Inquisition’s priority list.” With that, he turns back towards his Templar watchman, and walks towards that little hidden library. You’d meant to dig through that place, eventually, but Servis’ presence there keeps stopping you. It’s not that the man intimidates or even unnerves you… It’s that blasted Templar of his. He’s one of the glarey ones. Every time a Templar glares at you, you irrationally think back to your time in the Circle Tower. It had been one of the nicer Circles, and yet you’d still sooner slit your own wrist and summon demons through the Veil than ever be doomed to live there, under constant watch.

Of course, that’s the problem. Not all mages feel that way, but enough do that it creates a cycle of paranoia. A mage may never feel the need to resort to blood magic until they feel they have no other choice, say, when they’re about to be slain or captured by Templars. But when they summon those demons, the Templars have justification for the continued hunting of mages. And on and on and on, until… well, until war, apparently.

Your thoughts are grim when you enter Solas rotunda, lunch in hand (or on tray, as they case may be). It must show on your face, because Solas immediately inquires.

“Oh, it’s nothing,” you say with a sigh as you begin to lay out Solas’ lunch. You take care to slip Servis’ paper up your sleeve as you do so. “I had another run-in with that Tevinter mage.”

“I gather you don’t mean Dorian,” Solas says, running a fork through his salad… looking for turnips, no doubt, since they’re obviously present in your salad. You feel a tiny rush of pride… It’s the little things that give you satisfaction with your work, really.

“No, the creepy one. Servis, I think,” you say sourly. “I delivered a missive to him once. I made the mistake of bowing in the Tevinter style. I did it without thinking, really, but he picked right up on it. I don’t know what it is with Vints… Dorian had me pegged for an ex-slave immediately, too.” You shudder.

“Is that all, to have you so strained?” Solas says mildly. “I’m sure that Templar watchman of his will prevent him from being more than a nuisance.”
You sigh. He’s observant enough for it to be seriously concerning. Sometimes you wonder if the only reason you’ve kept your secret for as long as you have is the fact he was gone for two weeks. And now you’re about to traipse off through the countryside with him. Well, at least if he discovers you in the Orlesian wilderness, it will be easier for you to make a break for it.

“Have you heard about this… venture to Val Royeaux?” you ask sourly.

“Ah, yes. Josephine told me this morning,” Solas says, and he seems rather more upbeat about the whole situation than you. Not that he’s particularly cheerful, but his bored neutrality is vastly more chipper than your irritation-bordering-on-hysteria.

“And it’s not the worst idea you’ve ever heard?” you say dryly, sinking dejectedly onto your stool. “You must not know much about Orlais.”

“I know enough,” Solas says sharply, eyeing you from across the desk. “But Josephine is sending a diplomat. I’ve no doubt that he’ll do all the talking necessary to get us into the University library. I thought you might be a little more excited about what we might find within.”

You open your mouth to respond angrily that you already know damn well what you’ll find within, then realize that it’s probably best not to be honest about that, even with Solas. Instead, you say, “Are you that confident in Lady Montiliyet’s diplomat? The University has only been open to elves for a few years.”

“But it is open. The University already agreed to allow the Inquisition access… If they turn us away now, they have an ugly incident, both with the Inquisition and with the Empress,” Solas points out.

You shake your head. “I can understand sending you. I just have no idea why I’m going.”

“Surely Josephine told you?”

“Yes, but I’d like to know the truth,” you say sourly.

Solas chuckles. “I’m sure the Inquisitor has… something resembling a reason.”

“I suppose gods are noted for their eccentricities,” you say, sarcasm dripping from your voice. Irritation at being put in this position is making you bold. You can see that Solas is trying not to laugh from the trembling in his lips, though, which makes you bolder. “Clearly, his holiness sees a divine plan for me that my mortal eyes simply cannot comprehend. Praise the Herald!” Solas covers his mouth with the back of his hand, and you grin. Amusing him has made you feel better, at least for now. “At least the company will be good,” you add, although in reality, the fact that you’re going with Solas is possibly the worst part.

It’s like the world is taunting you. Hadn’t you been daydreaming about traveling with him just the other day? Of course, in that fantasy, he already knew your secrets. In reality, you’ll have to guard them twice as jealously for the duration of the trip. It will be far from relaxing.

“I’ve certainly traveled with worse,” Solas agrees. “And didn’t you live in Val Royeaux for a time? I’ve only been once, and we were barely there for an hour.”

“You went all the way to Val Royeaux and only stayed for an hour?” you demand, horrified. “Wait… was this when the Inquisitor was there? When the Lord Seeker punched a revered Mother?”

“It wasn’t the Lord Seeker, but one of his Templars,” Solas corrects. “But yes.”

“No wonder you left in such a hurry!” you say with a snort. “Well, Lady Montiliyet said the trip
would be two weeks all told, so I imagine we’ll have a week or so in the city proper.” You tap your chin thoughtfully with your spoon. “I wonder where we’ll be staying?”

“I’m sure Josephine’s diplomat is taking care of the particulars,” Solas says.

“Well, then I hope her diplomat is caring more about the shape of our ears than the Inquisitor appears to be,” you say with a frown. There are plenty of inns in Val Royeaux, but most of them won’t take elven guests. You stayed outside of the city for a reason, and it wasn’t just to be blinded by the Sun Gate every morning.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” Solas says mildly. His lack of concern is almost irritating. This is Orlais, damnit. You can’t just leave these things to sort themselves out! Perhaps it’s because he’s not been to Val Royeaux, not really. Maybe you can get a name from Lady Montiliyet and speak with this diplomat of hers, make sure he’s not as bumbling an idiot as the Inquisitor. “Calm down,” Solas says, his firm voice jolting you out of your thoughts. “I can actually see you working yourself into a frenzy.”

“This isn’t the sort of thing I thought I’d be doing with the Inquisition,” you say, trying to keep your voice from sounding as strained as you feel. “I ran out of Orlais a month ago. Now I’m going back in, to demand entrance to the University?”

“We won’t be demanding anything,” Solas says mildly. “Leave that to the diplomat. Josephine’s people are more than capable in dealing with the peculiars of Orlesian politics. You and I will simply be there to do the research.”

You snort. “Nothing’s simple in Val Royeaux. But I will strain to obtain your optimistic outlook.” You turn your eyes towards your desk. “I suppose I’ll spend the rest of the day getting to a good stopping place in my work.” Trust the Inquisitor to only give you half a day’s notice. As if you didn’t have things to do! Well, at least you won’t have to worry about telling your friends, with the way news travels in Skyhold. They likely knew before you did.

You start to stand, ready to begin working, but Solas’ voice cuts you short. “You’ve barely touched your food.”

You can’t help rolling your eyes in an exaggerated fashion. “Emma ir abelas, mamae!” you exclaim sarcastically.

“Lahmir, din’samahlen,” Solas replies. His voice is low, his Elven as smooth and beautiful as ever. Your ass is back on the stool before you realize you’d begun to sit. “Eat,” he says, in Common. You mourn the loss of his Elven words. “We won’t have this sort of food on the road.”

“Don’t tell me that,” you grumble under your breath. “Food’s the second best thing about this place.”

“Second best?” Solas says, sounding amused.

“Best thing’s the company,” you say with a grin. “But I’m taking that with me.”

Solas enchants your wrist before letting you go to your own desk to work. Once you do settle in to work, however, you find yourself flying through the process of lettering. You finish up the page you had been working on, and then focus on organizing your work. You’ll be gone for two weeks... There are limits to even your memory. You tend to be a little disorganized while working, counting on your good memory to fill in the gaps. However, if you’ll be gone for a while, each page needs to be in order and carefully numbered. Making sure everything will be ideal for picking right back up
where you left off takes you the rest of the afternoon. You don’t stop until it’s time for Solas’ dinner.

Trusting Solas’ words about road provisions being less generous, you decide to load both of your plates up high. By now, however, it seems that word has reached the kitchens. The second you walk in, you’re swept up by a wave of kitchen workers.

“We heard all about it! You’re accompanying your master all the way to Val Royeaux, you lucky thing!” one woman says cheerfully as she shoves a rather large bag into your arms.

“We’ll miss you more than your master,” another adds. “So damn peculiar about his tea.” She’s stuffing bread into the bag.

You get passed around the kitchen, with people thrusting all sorts of foodstuffs into your bag, from bread to dried meat to pickled vegetables and even fruit. To your surprise, Gaston seems fully aware of what they’re doing… in fact, he hands one of the ladies a jar of what looks to be jam to shove into your rapidly-filling sack.

Celia puts in a pair of candied apples with a very telling wink. “Good luck camping out with Ser Shirtless Solas, miss,” she says with a grin you wouldn’t have believed her capable of. When she next checks her apron pocket, she’ll find that you slipped two silvers in. A down payment for her continued loyalty, you tell yourself. She’s smarter than she lets on; you want her for your own.

You do eventually, get handed two rather enormous dinners on a large, heavy tray. Between it and the bag, you can barely walk. Somehow, you manage to get up the stairs, but your arms and legs are trembling by the time you stumble back into the rotunda. You must be quite the sight… Solas lets out a short bark of laughter when you trip through the door, barely managing to keep it open with a foot long enough to get through. Miracle of miracles, he actually stands to help you.

“What in the world is this?” he says, sounding amused, as he helps you unload the plates onto the desk.

“A feast, courtesy of my worried friends in the kitchen,” you say. “Maker, please grab the bag, it’s cutting into my neck.”

Solas grasps the strap of the bag and lifts it off, over your head. “And this?”

“Apparently the thought of you going even a day without fine dining was too much for them to bear,” you say, pausing to rub at your neck. “Maker, it felt like they put half the kitchen in!”

“Do you have this effect on everyone you meet?” Solas asks, eyeing the ludicrous amount of food you somehow walked out of the kitchen with.

“Just cooks and maids;” you say dryly. “I’m working on mages, but it doesn’t seem to be taking.”

Finally, all of the food is unloaded and you and Solas sit down to eat. You try to take Solas’ words to heart and eat as much as you can… which admittedly, is a lot. Dinner conversation inevitably turns to travel. Solas wants to know about yours, because he always wants to know things. Still, you’re damned curious about his own travels, so you’re willing to indulge his curiosity on the off chance that he’ll indulge yours.

“I’ve only really traveled with merchant’s caravans,” you lie. Such a damn lie, too; you’d spent a good year hiking across Thedas. “So I always stayed on the main roads.” Liitiiieesss. But you can’t exactly tell him that you once spent an evening in a tree, waiting for the hungry bear beneath you to fall asleep.
“I’ve barely traveled in groups at all,” Solas comments. “I kept to myself before joining the Inquisition.”

“You must have, if you avoided Templar detection entirely,” you prompt him. You’re desperate to know how he did it. If it’s something you can do. Solas doesn’t really take the hint, however. Instead, he begins waxing poetic about some ruins he visited in the Dales… You want to try and turn his focus back to Templars and the hiding therefrom, but you can’t bring yourself to do it. You get caught up in the story of an overly-friendly Purpose spirit, and before you realize what’s happened, you’ve both finished your meals.

You try to figure out a way to turn the conversation back to Templars when the door to the rotunda slams open, startling you both. “’Oy! I hear you’re stealin’ my Em, baldy!”

Oh, right. Sera.

“We’ve been sent on the same task, Sera. I’m hardly stealing her,” Solas says mildly.

“Ugh, piss,” Sera says in her typical, eloquent manner. You can’t help smiling.

“I’ll only be gone two weeks, Sera,” you assure her.

“Don’t you dare come back pissin’ and moanin’ about elven glory,” she says sourly. “Don’t let ‘im rub off on you! Might be contagious.”

“I’ll keep my head firmly in the present,” you promise, too amused to be irritated at her.

“You better!” she sends a glare off towards Solas. “I know y’gotta pack and shite, but I wanted you to have these. Fer the road. Just, y’know… in case.” She pushes something into your hands, and you look down to see a rather nice leather holster containing five throwing knives.

“Sera!” you exclaim. “These look expensive!”

She shrugs, a fluid motion that sends a warm tingle up your spine. You’re sitting; she’s standing. Certain things are right at eye level. “I got ‘em from a job, but I’m shite at throwin’ ‘em, you know that. Figure they’ll be better off with you. They can keep ya outta any trouble baldy here gets you into.”

Solas, for his part, has been tolerating Sera’s presence admirably. She sticks her tongue out at him once more before bending down to give you a little peck on the cheek. “You be careful out there, elfy. Don’t go adopting any alienage orphans or fallin’ down any stairs.” She skips out before you can fully process how soft and warm her lips had been, pressed against your cheek.

“Well, that was-” Solas begins, but before he can even get a full sentence out, someone else is peeking their head in through the open door.

It’s Belassan, to your shock. You don’t believe you’ve ever seen him this far from the barns. Seeing him indoors, surrounded by the rough stone walls, seems wrong, somehow.

“Emma. Ser,” he says politely. “The stables have heard that the two of you will be in the group riding out tomorrow morning. I wanted to… inquire as to which mounts-”

“Revas!” you exclaim, rudely interrupting him. “Er, ir abelas. Can I take Revas? All the way to Orlais?”

Belassan smiles at your eagerness. “I was hoping you would. And perhaps one of the others, for
Ser…? They don’t get much chance to ride out together, and this would be a wonderful opportunity for them.”

“Do you want to take Ashi’lana, Solas?” you say, still excited. Oh, the thought of you riding two harts across the Dales… Maker. Plus, if something happens and you need to make a break for it, you like the thought of stealing Revas away with you.

“That should be fine,” Solas says, his face unreadable. “Full saddles and bags on them both,” he instructs Belassan. The darker elf bows slightly.

“Of course, Ser. I’ll see you off in the morning, Emma,” he adds with a smile in your direction. You wave as he leaves, unable to remove the broad grin from your mouth. This trip is starting to look like more fun than mortal terror.

You turn towards Solas. “I should get the dishes back to the kitchen before—”

“Emma, darling!”

You sigh. “Hello, Dorian.”

“Weren’t you going to come see me before traipsing off to Orlais? I’m hurt,” he says, feigning an injured look. “I had to come all the way down here!”

“How can you ever forgive me?” you say dryly.

“I’m sure I’ll find a way. I’m very magnanimous. But you’ll make it much easier on me if you happen across any of these.” He slides a piece of parchment onto the desk. You eye it… a list of tomes. Some of them you recognize. Servis, apparently, was correct that you would be a celebrity for mages and researchers until the morning.

“I didn’t think those should necessarily go through the Requisition officers,” Dorian says with a wink towards Solas. “But you two will surely be discreet and efficient.”

“I’ll see what I can do, Dorian,” you say with a smile. It’s impossible to be cross with the man. “Was that all?”

“Of course not. Solas, keep her safe. She’s a precious little thing.”

“Certainly,” Solas says solemnly, and you glare between the two of them.

“Alright, enough of that. Back upstairs with you, mage!” you say sourly. You don’t say anything as silly as ‘I can take care of myself.’ As far as they know, you can’t. You don’t particularly want Solas watching you any more closely than he already will be, however.

After Dorian leaves, you wait in silence for a few moments. Surely enough…

“Stutter, Chuckles! You two busy?”

“Hey, Varric. Got a list of books for me to get?” you ask dryly.

“Quite the opposite! Thought you might get bored out there, so I decided to give you this.” Varric slides bound parchment into your hand. A manuscript? Curious, you flip to the first page. A strangled noise escapes you. Hard in Hightown is written across the top, bold as brass.

“Is this the next chapter?” you squeak. “I thought it wasn’t out yet!”
“It’s not. What you have there is the unpublished manuscript… so don’t go losing it in Val Royeaux,” Varric says with a roguish grin.

You give the dwarf a one armed hug, still grasping the manuscript with your other hand. “Ooh, thank you!”

“No problem, Stutter. Chuckles, you take care of her, alright? She’s not like you; she’s fragile.”

“I am not!”

“She’ll be fine, Varric,” Solas says, clearly fighting to keep from smiling. When Varric leaves, the hidden smile emerges. “You are very popular.”

“Oh, shush,” you say, still excitedly clutching the manuscript. “Don’t let me read this yet. Yell if you see me start. I’ve still got work to do… Starting with these dishes.”

You actually do manage to get out the door this time, although Vivienne stops you in the Great Hall. She has a letter for you to deliver… ‘since you’re going that way.’ Your hands are full so simply tucks it into your front pocket with a little pat and a simpering smile. You’re totally going to read it. You expect that’s the point, of course, but you’re still going to do it.

By the time you get back to the rotunda, Krem and Iron Bull are there, and Solas is looking extremely bemused.

Krem is scowling at Bull, but brightens up when he sees you enter. “Emma! I heard the news. I wanted to send some of the Chargers with you, as guards, but apparently we’ve got a job,” he says, glaring back at the Iron Bull.

“Don’t forget to keep practicing in the mornings,” Bull advises you. “I don’t want you going soft.” It seems that he mostly came to talk to Solas… the two of them are sharing a meaningful look that you don’t particularly like. But your attention is quickly stolen away by Krem again.

“I got you… I mean, this is for… Here,” he says finally, thrusting a long, thick brown coat out towards you. You take it curiously. It’s quite heavy… you soon find out why. This is an armored coat, a nice one, at that.

“The fur inside is removable,” Krem informs you as you slip it on. “You can wear it anywhere chilly, but it’ll keep you warm even in the mountains, with that.”

“It fits!” you exclaim, astounded. “It fits an elf. Where did you get this?”

“It used to be Skinner’s,” Krem admits. “She sent me up here with it. I told her she should come, but… well, you know her.”

You run a finger along the fine leather, admiring. You’ve never owned anything this nice before.

“Thank you, Krem. And thank Skinner for me,” you add. “Still trying to butter me up to join the Chargers?”

“We just want you to come back intact,” he says, flushing slightly.

“Don’t worry. Solas has been sworn to protect me about six times already,” you say somberly, then grin. “I’ll be fine, Krem. Thank you.”

He and the Iron Bull eventually shuffle back out, and you give a Solas a somewhat overwhelmed smile. “You’re right. I am popular.”
Elven Guide
Quenathra = Why
Emma ir abelas, mamae = I'm so sorry, mom
Lahmir, din’samahlen = Sit, brat

Orlesian Guide
Je suis désolée = I'm sorry

Now is the time where I take another short break to work on an outline. I expect the next update to be next weekend, probably. Depends on what the doctor says tomorrow and on how fast I get the outline done.
Reasonable Caution

Chapter Notes

HOO! This one was a doozy. This introduces five new characters that we'll be seeing more of. I hope it does so well. In related news, our five new fellows will be the stars of a five-part short story series that I'll be publishing over at Tiny Secrets, starting tomorrow and updating every day until I'm done. If you haven't been following my drabbles (and who could blame you), this will be a good time to start!

Also, there's NSFW content in this chapter. I should probably mention that. Read at your own risk!

The language translations are at the end. There are a lot in this chapter!

Fun fact: this chapter was very almost named "Cole Ships It."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One last person comes to bid you farewell before you turn in for the night… Cole catches you on the walk to your room. As always, your chest lightens at the sight of him. Such an odd looking boy, but he’s come to mean only good things to you. If he appears on your way to your room at night, it means this is a night where you won’t be harassed by the men of Skyhold as you cross the courtyard. No one seems to notice you at all when you’re with Cole.

“Have you heard the news?” you ask, tentatively following Cole into the shadows behind one of Skyhold’s many large buildings.

“Yes!” Cole says, and he sounds enthused. “At first, I was worried… I wanted to come with you.”

“Could you come?” you say excitedly. The thought hadn’t occurred to you… But how marvelous would that be? You’d have a lot less to fear with the invisible boy at your side.

“I could, but I won’t,” Cole replies cheerfully, and you frown. “Solas is going.”

“But you like Solas!” you protest.

“Not the way you like him. Burning, blushing heat. He runs his hands over me; I can’t stop thinking about them-”

“Ooooh-kay, enough of that!” you say quickly, glad that the shadows hide your blushing. “Is that why you won’t come?”

“The two of you should be alone,” Cole says proudly, as if he plans on breeding the two of you like prize horses. You rub a hand down the side of your face.

“…Cole,” you begin, not sure how to even begin addressing this with a spirit.

“You should trust him,” Cole urges you for possibly the hundredth time. “But you won’t listen to me. So maybe you’ll listen to him. The two of you should be alone; I’d just be in the way,” he says matter-of-factly.
You sigh. You seriously doubt there’s any talking him out of this. He’s always adamant when it comes to you and Solas. You had no idea that spirits had a concept of being a third wheel. You wish you could have his optimism. “I’ll be lonely without you, Cole. What if I have nightmares, or panic? You won’t be there to calm me down.”

“Go to Solas,” he says promptly. “He’s good at calming people down.” Cole looks as if he’s considering something seriously. “You panicked and the Iron Bull helped you. Now you trust him. If you panic, and Solas helps you…”

“Don’t go down that road, Cole,” you say darkly. Ugh. Just the thought of Solas seeing you in such a state is enough to make you panic right there on the spot. No, you’ll just have to keep a handle on things by yourself. It’s just as well… It wouldn’t be right for you to grow dependant on Cole.

“I don’t mind you needing me,” Cole says immediately. There’s something odd about the conversations one has with a mind-reader. “But Solas wouldn’t mind you needing him, either.”

“Alright, alright, enough about Solas,” you say with a scowl. “I swear to the Maker, you’re worse about matchmaking then Hahren Tabris…” You’d think you were talking to a spirit of love, not compassion! But you suppose the two aren’t that far removed. “I’ll be gone for two weeks… Be safe while I’m gone. Don’t let the Inquisitor drag you into anything too dangerous!”

“I will be safer than you,” Cole says with a sigh. He turns towards your room and the two of you begin to walk that way together, slowly. You’re dragging out the time before you have to pack your things. “But Solas will keep you safe. Stay close to him.”

“Because I’ll be safe, or because you want us to live happily ever after?” you say sourly.

“Both,” Cole says, without a hint of self-consciousness. At least he’s honest. That’s more than you can say for most of the people in your life… yourself included. The two of you walk in silence until you reach the door that leads to the hall that contains your quarters. You stop outside of it; you don’t want to go inside. Another two weeks without Cole… The world doesn’t like you to be happy, does it?

“Cole…” you say, searching for the words. But, of course, this is Cole. You don’t need them. He opens his arms, awkwardly, and you wrap the tall, skinny boy up in the warmest hug you can. “If you stay safe, I promise I will too,” you say when you finally let him go. He nods somberly; you know he’ll take you seriously. And then he does something that startles you. He brushes a bit of loose hair back from your face, tucking it behind one of your long, pointed ears. It renders you somewhat speechless.

“It will be okay,” he says, with such confidence that you believe him, believe that he could possibly know that. Then he simply turns and wanders off. You’re left standing by the door, somewhat stunned. Was that some kind of… weird spirit blessing? Or was he just being… Cole?

Well, Cole has vanished off to do whatever spirity things he does. Helping the sick and the sad. Solas said that many people within Skyhold who know what he is dislike him, but you find it incredibly hard to believe. How could anyone dislike an actual, in-this-world compassion spirit? It’s nonsensical. He literally exists to help people. Spirits like him represent the absolute best this world has to offer, distilled to their purest forms. With a sigh, you head into your room.

You look around your bedroom with a dour glare. Packing. Ugh. You barely have to. You hardly unpacked in the first place. You roll your clothes up as tight as possible and cram them into your backpack. They’re almost the only things you’ve obtained since coming to Skyhold… that and a few tomes. You leave Dorian’s necromancy tome behind with no small amount of regret, but it’s too big
and too valuable for the road. Solas’ Veilfire tome gets tucked into your bag, however, as does the
book on spirits he gave you. You tuck the copy of Fenris’ letter into Varric’s *Hard in Hightown*
manuscript and cram everything into your bag as best you can. You pack everything. There’s a very
good chance you’ll never be coming back to Skyhold, after all… if something happens while you’re
on the road, or in Val Royeaux, you need to be ready to bolt. You own so little from when your
house burned down… you can’t bear the thought of leaving any of it behind.

You try not to focus on the possibility of never seeing Cole again. Or Iron Bull. Or Sera. *Fuck,* why
were you excited for this again? Despite your strain, however, it becomes evident quickly that Cole
had done something when he brushed your hair back. You should smack him for it later—he *has* to
stop messing with your head without asking your permission first—but whatever he did, you’re getting
sleepy. Properly sleepy. It seems the Fade is almost grabbing you, pulling you, dragging you down.

You collapse into bed with a sigh. No point in fighting it. You’re going to have a long two weeks
with Solas. The chances of you getting any sleep at all are slim. Might as well get some now…

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Of course, nothing’s that easy. From the moment your mind touches the Fade, you know you’re in
for a long night. You dream of Orlais… no surprise there. But there’s a telling pink twinge to your
dreams, and seemingly no matter where the Fade takes you, your mind finds a way to shoehorn
Solas in. The time you covered your ears and eyes with a cleverly crafted mask and snuck into a
ball? Your mind seems to recall Solas being there, dressed in a splendid suit and mask he would
*never* wear in real life, you suspect. He sweeps you off your feet with an elegant Orlesian dance that
he most certainly doesn’t actually know, and when he dips you low, your mind finds ways to
imagine the touch of his lips, the nip of his teeth.

The song ends, and you expect the dream to as well, but instead, it continues, and Solas drags you
off to a shadowed corner… a lover’s alcove. Ridiculously, your mind goes to his ears, proudly bare
where yours lie hidden. That’s so… Solas. He *would* show up to an Orlesian ball, bare-eared and
brazen, wouldn’t he? He acts as though he hasn’t quite realized elves are supposed to be second class
citizens.

You suspect this may be a desire demon, but you know quite well how to deal with those by now…
and how to have a little bit of fun with them without danger of possession. So you straddle Solas
there in the alcove, run your tongue perversely down the length of his bared ear. He shudders
underneath you; your mind has assumed his ears would be as sensitive as yours. His hand slips
underneath your dress, taking advantage of the spread of your legs. Coyly, you move to close them,
pushing his legs together as you close yours. But he forces them back open again, pushing his knees
against yours and spreading them wide. You gasp, then groan in approval as his mouth finds your
neck. While you’re distracted by his curious lips, he slips his hand into the elaborate Orlesian
underwear you remember wearing with this silly dress. Then his hand is against you, rubbing gently
along your folds, and you don’t care about the dress, or the dream, or the Orlesians, although you
can hear them within the confines of the dream. Their gasps and shocked murmurs serve to fuel your
perverted fantasy as Solas slips a finger inside of you.

You groan and rock against him, balancing yourself with a hand on each side of his shoulders.
Fuck… *Fuck!* You can’t let yourself forget it’s a dream; that’s too dangerous… Even if this isn’t a
desire demon, one *will* show up if you’re that careless. But Maker, you can enjoy the ride. Solas
brushes his lips across your collarbone, then lower, exploring the scant cleavage the dress reveals.

You don’t know how long the dream continues like that, endless panting, thrusting, and moaning,
but you’re more than a little irritated when a loud noise snaps you awake. Someone across the hall
closing their door a little too loudly is all it took. You’ve always been a light sleeper.

You groan softly into your pillow, body still taunt with unrelieved arousal. Forget smacking Cole, you could kiss him for helping you have a dream that nice. But now you have a problem. There’s no way you’re climbing onto Revas in this state. It’s going to be hard enough to make eye contact with Solas at all. Well… it’s still dark out. You have time.

You slip your hands down under the sheets, into your underwear, and let your mind wander back to the dream.

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It’s inching closer to dawn by the time you finish both your orgasm and your post-orgasm guiltfest. It feels wrong to masturbate over someone you’re actually friends with. Or… well, whatever you are with Solas. It’s going to be very hard to make eye contact, that’s for damn sure. But you don’t have time to marinate in your guilt. You double check your bags, making sure that you have everything packed. It’s a heavy bag, but it contains literally all of your possessions, so maybe that’s a good thing. You strap your dagger into its typical hidden location at the small of your back, but you wear Sera’s throwing daggers openly around your waist. Solas already knows you own them, and you doubt the diplomat will care.

Finally, you bundle up in Skinner’s jacket, throw the bag over your shoulder, and head outside. It’s not hard to find where you’re supposed to be… There’s a considerable group gathered near the gates. Belassan is there with Revas and Ashi’lana, both of whom are decked out in rather nice traveling saddles, complete with a lot of saddlebags. To your surprise, Revas is already loaded down with the huge sack of food the kitchen workers had given you. He’s looking rather dour until he spots you, and then he trots sharply away from Belassan with a snort, coming over to nuzzle affectionately against you. Two men have to duck under his horns as he does so.

“At least someone’s happy to see me,” you mutter with a smile as he shoves his snout towards your pockets. “Sorry, Revas, you’ve got all the treats this time.” You can’t wait to dig into some of the goodies in that bag… but it can wait. You let your eyes sweep over the rest of the group. There are five horses. No spares, so they must be planning on traveling light and steady… One is for the diplomat, so four soldiers. On the other side of the courtyard, you spot more horses, and a pair of distinctive horns… Krem hadn’t been joking about them having a job, then. They’re leaving out today as well?

Your eyes are naturally drawn to Solas as they sweep over the small crowd. He looks… Eesh. He looks terrifying. Not angry, per se, but… not pleased. The last time you saw him looking that fucking scary was after he’d had to deal with the Inquisitor… perhaps they’d had another conversation? Either way, you decide now’s definitely not a good time to go say hello.

Fortunately, Krem sees you and trots over, followed in short order by Bull.

“Hey, Emma! Nice daggers,” he says, panting slightly. He’s wearing full armor… just where are they going?

“Nice… what is that?” you say, pointing to the giant weapon strapped to his back. “A rock tied to a stick?!”

“More or less,” says Bull, coming up behind him. “Krem, you can’t just run off to chat up your girlfriend. We have actual work to do.”

“Oh, shove it,” Krem says with a scowl. “Like you weren’t gonna come over yourself.”
You grin sheepishly at them both. “You weren’t kidding about that job, huh… Sometimes I forget you guys are actual mercenaries. Well, I forget Krem is, anyway. Bull smashes me into the ground too much for me to forget, honestly.” You happen to glance over at Solas as you say this, and catch him giving you—or possibly Bull—a positively pants-shittingly terrifying glare. You actually take a step backwards without realizing. Fuck! No more reminding Solas of how beat up you get, that’s for damn sure. You could go your whole life without being on the receiving end of a glare like that again.

Fortunately, neither men trace your moment of terror back to Solas, as both are distracted needling each other.

“See, Krem, you just gotta throw her around more,” Bull is teasing.

“We can’t all win women’s hearts by brutalizing them, Bull. That’s only appealing when you’re three hundred pounds with horns.” It’s good to see Krem able to joke about it for once, rather than just turning bright red. Maybe he’s recovering from his crush on you? You almost feel a pang of loss at the prospect… but it’s only fair. Of all the people who have developed ill-advised feelings for you, Krem is the one who most deserves better.

“This is going to sound stupid, but… you guys be careful, okay?” you say, a bit nervously. It does sound stupid.

“Ah, don’t you worry!” Bull says, giving you a rather painful slap on the shoulder. “We’re the Chargers! You’re the one who needs to watch your ass. You’ll probably be along the Imperial Highway damn near the whole way, but that doesn’t mean there won’t be trouble, especially with the war on. Don’t go wandering off to… I dunno, make flowers bloom with your song. Whatever it is you elves get up to in the woods.”

You risk another glance over at Solas. Fortunately, he appears to be busying himself checking Ashilana’s packs. “You know damn well what elves get up to in the woods, Bull, and you know damn well we won’t be getting up to it.”

Bull snorts. “You never know! Don’t worry too much about him… Solas doesn’t like mornings.”

You sincerely hope that’s the case, because you really don’t want to get a few leagues down the mountain only to learn that you’ve done something to seriously piss Solas off. This trip is going to be trepidatious enough as it is. You, Krem, and Iron Bull say you farewells as the rest of your group begins to mount up. Belassan comes over to help you get onto Revas… thank the Maker. You don’t know what you’ll do on the road… climb a tree and jump down onto him, maybe. But for now, Belassan boosts you up. You’re impressed with the effort with which the man seems to support your weight… but then, those muscles are hardly just for show.

“Thank you, Belassan. I’ll take great care of both of them, I promise,” you say with a smile.

“I’m sure you will,” Belassan says, smiling right back. “I slipped some treats into the back saddlebag,” he adds. “For Revas, although if you particularly want to eat an oatcake, I won’t hold it against you. Revas might.”

You laugh. “I’ll miss our Sunday lessons, Belassan, but I suppose I’ll be getting a crash course on riding since we’re going all the way to Val Royeaux. Pray for me… Maker knows I’ll need it.”

“You’ll be fine,” Belassan says, patting your leg. It’s kind of amusing; he pats you the same way one would pat a horse. “You’re a natural on Revas. The two of you are connected. Even if you get into trouble, he’ll keep you safe.”
“Come on!” one of the guards is shouting. “Let’s move out!” You let your hand rest briefly on Belassan’s, once again at a loss for words meaningful enough. It will be two weeks before you see your friends, and that’s a best case scenario. There’s a very real possibility that after today, you will never see another Inquisition soul again.

You try not to let that fear show on your face as you wave a final farewell to Belassan, Krem, and Iron Bull, then give Revas a gentle nudge forward. Once again, you find yourself crossing the long bridge of Skyhold, only this time… you won’t be coming right back.

You do recognize one of the women, however. It takes you a moment to place why her face is familiar, but you have a very good memory for faces. She’s the woman who carried you to the healer’s tent after you tripped and fell down the stairs outside of Cullen’s office. Embarrassing, yes, but she seemed a nice enough lady.

Since Solas has said all of two words to you since leaving Skyhold, you hover close to the diplomat, instead. Your well-being rests as much with him as it does Solas, if not moreso… He’s the one in charge of getting you into the University and out again, intact and with a bunch of books. Not a task you would give to any man lightly. Hopefully Josephine picked a decent man for the task.

“I don’t believe we’ve been introduced,” you say, wishing you could curtsy on a hart. You know how to act around Orlesians, dammit, but horses never really factored in before. “My name is Emma.”

“I rather imagined,” the man says with a light-hearted chuckle. You breath an inner sigh of relief. At least he’s not an ass. “As you’re the only female elf with the party. I am Baptiste Felicien Bellerose… but please, call me Baptiste.” Oh, how Orlesian. What a relief. “I hear you’ve been to Val Royeaux before.”

“Yes, I lived there for years… or, well, just outside. You have quite the task set up for you, getting Solas and I into the University.”

“In truth, the University will have very little say in the matter, although I’m certain they’ll complain quite melodramatically. They already agreed to allow researchers from the Inquisition, and as elves are technically allowed within the campus, they cannot turn us away without creating several political scandals.”

“Mm… so I keep hearing,” you say, thoroughly unconvinced. “And yet I suspect that if Solas and I simply showed up and announced ourselves, we would be laughed out of Orlais.”

“Well… perhaps,” he admits. “But I’m here to smooth the process. Chancellor Haulis is an old acquaintance of mine. He’ll huff and he’ll puff and he’ll possibly swoon in a dramatic manner if he sees your companion’s bare feet,” Unbidden, you glance over at Solas. If he hears, he doesn’t react.
“But he’ll let us in.”

“You know the Chancellor?” you say, pleased and a little impressed. “Lady Montiliyet chooses her allies well. I’m pleased we’re in such capable hands.”

“Flatterer,” he says with a deep-bellied laugh. “Don’t let my wife hear you talking like that! She’ll have both our ears.”

“I’ll be the absolute picture of discretion, I assure you,” you say with a teasing wink. “Votre femme est Orlaise?”

The man looks surprised, as Orlesians always are when they hear an Orlesian-speaking elf. Honestly, it’s a little embarrassing. Many, many elves are Orlesian; why wouldn’t they speak the language? The Common tongue hasn’t overtaken all others just yet.

But it works exactly as you intended, and the two of you spend the morning chatting animatedly in Orlesian. It allows you to be equal parts comfortable and forward without offending the delicate sensibilities of those around you... For Orlesians, flirtation is expected, but let a Fereldan overhear you and he might just explode on the spot. Plus, it has the added benefit of allowing you to disguise what you’re saying from Solas. You doubt he’d particularly care, but you’d rather not risk his judgement for flirting with a married man clearly over twice your age.

You’re glad for the company, in all honesty. Endearing yourself to an Orlesian man is an effortless, practiced action for you. Baptiste is easy even insofar as Orlesians go, being a generally laid back man without a particular grudge against elves. Solas still looks grumpy and... has... has he fallen asleep on Ashilana? How is he staying on? The seven of you are damn near in single file heading down the mountain, and it’s steep enough that you have to focus every step of the way so as not to slip onto Revas’ neck.

It doesn’t appear as though the group will be stopping for breakfast, and when you see some of the guards pull out rough travel bread, you decide that you might as well eat while you ride. You excuse yourself from Baptiste’s company and pull Revas up next to Ashilana. Solas is awake, or at least he looks up when you pull up beside him.

Tentatively, you offer up some of the treasures from your bag of goodies from the kitchen... a little bag of candied fruits. You had been hoping to save it, but you’re starting to get scared of Solas’ expression. You don’t want him to be cross with you, especially when you have no idea what you might have done.

Solas takes the bag from you wordlessly, but his expression softens somewhat when he opens it and sees what’s within. Quickly, you pull out some soft biscuits, although you have to forego the jam or honey while you’re riding. You really need to go through this bag when you set up camp... the more you dig, the more treasures you’re seeing. The kitchen workers clearly thought you’d be traveling the entire fourteen days, from the look of the spread they gave you.

Solas eats with you in uncharacteristic silence... although he seems less irritable. Perhaps he doesn’t talk as much around others? Although you’d never thought about it, essentially all of your conversations with him have been one-on-one, in the relative privacy of his rotunda. Hopefully you can catch him alone at lunch or in the evening and ask. Still, he hands back the bag of candied fruits, still half full, and you think for a second you might see a slight smile. At the very least, it’s the absence of a frown. You’ll take it; perhaps he’s not cross with you after all.

After ensuring Solas has had his fill, you decide it’s time to endear yourself to the rest of the team. You slow Revas until the two female guards, who were bringing up the rear, catch up with you. You
introduce yourself the best way you know how… by offering them some sweet candied nuts. Both women grin and accept—their rations are soldier’s rations, and not any more delightful than what the servants tend to get.

The women introduce themselves as Kelsie and Elaine… Kelsie is the one who carried you to the healer’s, which you belatedly thank her for.

“Oh no, I should be thanking you,” she says with a chuckle. “That trip of yours caused a bit of a stir, and once word got out that I was the one who took you to the tent, I was popular overnight. Everyone wanted to know what I’d seen.”

You pale slightly. “Um… What did you tell them?”

“That you fell down the stairs chasing a cute girl,” she says with a grin. “No one believed me, though. They all wanted to blame that Qunari mercenary. I told them, if he’d been there, I’d’ve seen him! You can’t miss him.”

“No,” you say with a laugh and a sigh of relief. “You really can’t. Well, I appreciate you trying to clear my good name.”

“Which one are you with?” Elaine, who seems a bit quieter than Kelsie, chips in.

“‘Laine!” says Kelsie, who at least has the good grace to sound horrified. “You can’t just ask people who they’re with!”

“You only think that because you’re Ferelden,” Elaine says dryly. “I’m curious!”

Four curious eyes turn to you. You try to pretend like you don’t notice the diplomat and possibly Solas appear to be listening in as well. You clear your throat awkwardly. “Would you believe no one?”

“Not if you say it like that,” points out Elaine.

“Well, I’m sticking to it anyway,” you say with a sheepish grin. “I can’t even keep up with who the rumors are pairing me with from week to week.”

“Well, I was thinking…” Elaine’s eyes trace over to Solas, lingering meaningfully on his back.

“Really?” Kelsie says curiously. “My sister works in the kitchen; that’s who she thinks, too. Most of the girls in the barracks lean towards Iron Bull, though.”

“I bet they do,” you say dryly.

“Not like that!” she says with a laugh, throwing a candied nut at your head. “Well, not most of them, anyway.”

“Those girls always bet on the biggest horse,” Elaine says, rolling her eyes.

Honestly, you can’t believe you’re having this conversation. “Skyhold must be a very boring place,” you comment, although you keep your voice good natured.

“Soooo boring,” says Kelsie, rolling her eyes exaggeratedly. “It’s just training and guard duty and waiting to be sent out! I was overjoyed when I heard I’d finally been assigned to something. Even if Emilio is here too.”

“Emilio?” You immediately jump onto the opportunity to change the subject away from the
popularity of your supposed love life.

“He’s Antivan,” says Elaine knowingly.

“He’s a flirt,” Kelsie says with a scowl.

“You’re just mad because he dumped that water on you.”

“Damn right I am! I was wearing white!”

You peer up towards the front of the progression where the two male guards are riding. The swarthier of the two is probably Emilio, then. “Who’s the other one, then?” you ask.

“Oh, that’s Garrick. He’s alright,” says Kelsie with a nod. “He was at Haven. Lost a finger to a Venatori.”

“And won’t shut up about it,” adds Elaine. “You’d think he’d lost an arm.”

“Well, to be fair, if I’d lost my finger to a cultist, I’d never shut up about it either,” you admit.

“Well, sure, but you’re not a soldier, you’re a… you’re a… Say, what are you, exactly?” Kelsie says curiously.

“She works for that apostate,” says Elaine, seemingly without a care that “that apostate” can probably hear her.

“I know that!” Kelsie says indignantly, much to your amusement. “But she can’t just be a maid! Who takes a maid with them on a trip like this?”

You hear Solas mutter something along the lines of “who indeed” under his breath, but the humans’ subpar ears don’t seem to pick it up.

“Let’s just say I’m an assistant,” you say with a smile.

“Uuuuh-huh. You’ve got some nice throwing daggers, assistant,” Elaine drawls. “You assist him with those, too?”

You snort. “Please. Ser Solas is a mage. He’s in the Inquisitor’s Inner Circle. He certainly doesn’t need my assistance in battle. These are just to keep me from winding up dead. I wouldn’t be of much assistance to anyone if I took a sword through the gut, after all.”

“You any good with them?” Kelsie wants to know.

“I’m okay when it’s a stationary target,” you say with a self-deprecating chuckle. “Let’s just say that if there is a fight, I’ll be relying entirely on you ladies to save me.”

After delighting Kelsie and Elaine enough, you eventually move up the formation to begin work on the two men. This is a bit more dicey, but you squeezed enough information out of the ladies to feel confident that you can enamour yourself to them without getting yourself into any uncomfortable positions.

You start the conversation like you always do… shameless bribery. You butter them up good with a small fruit pie each, making sure to lay on no small number of “hungry soldier” cliches. Garrick jumps on it immediately, bless his heart. You’ve met his type before… a humble commoner his whole life, probably, and now extraordinarily proud to be a soldier, part of something bigger than himself.
“Thank you, miss,” he says, sitting up a bit straighter in the saddle. Time to go in for the kill…

“Oh my! What happened to your finger?”

“Well…”

Hook, line, and sinker.

You listen, politely enthralled and gasping at all the proper moments, while he retells the story of losing his finger to a Venatori in Haven. When he finishes that, you start working the conversation towards the trip through the Frostbacks, to Skyhold, but it proves unnecessary. Emilio quickly grows jealous of the attention you’re lavishing on his fellow soldier, and inserts himself into the conversation.

“What a delicious treat,” he says as he showily savors the last bite of his pie. His Antivan accent drips over the words like honey. “Nearly as sweet as you, bella, to show such care for a wounded veteran. You must have a heart as pure as gold.”

You don’t miss the way Garrick rolls his eyes skyward, but you were expecting this. “Antivan? Ah, sei come l’acqua nel deserto!” You relish the way the man’s eyes widen. Even Garrick looks shocked.

“Si parla Antivan?” he says, visibly startled. You’ve knocked him out of his stride.

“Naturalmente! Il linguaggio dell’amore!” you purr.

“Mia amore, dove sei stato per tutta la mia vita? Mi vuoi sposare?” he says, looking dazed. You laugh.

“I feel like I’m missing out on something here,” Garrick comments, and you favor him with a smile.

“Oh, I’m sorry, ser! I got a little carried away.” You titter. You hate tittering, Maker damnit, but it works.

In shorter order than the diplomat or even the female soldiers, you have both men wrapped firmly around your finger. After you’re certain they’ll stay like that, and only then, you allow yourself to retreat back to the safety of riding by Solas’ side. It’s midday now… if they don’t stop for lunch soon, you might cry. Your ass is killing you; you’re unaccustomed to riding for so long. You just want to lay on your chest and whimper for a bit.

“Making friends with the other men?” Baptiste says teasingly as you ease slowly back to the middle of the progression.

“Don’t worry, mon chou, vous êtes toujours mon préféré.” you say with a wink.

He laughs. “Mon chou? Qu'est-ce qu'il est? Mon loup?”

“Loup?” you snort, following the man’s gaze to Solas. “Mon coco, peut-être.”

You pull up next to Solas, and he favors you with a bit of a smirk. “Talking about me behind my back?”

You give a gasp of exaggerated horror. “Me? I would never! If you like, I can talk to you in Elven, and we can make them all jealous.”

“And tolerate your terrible pronunciation? Goodness no,” Solas says good-naturedly. You scowl at
him, but you’re honestly just relieved he’s decided to begin talking to you. You wish you could speak Elven well enough to hold on a conversation with him in it. You feel self-conscious, speaking to him where others can hear. It’s like they’re eavesdropping, even though they’re obviously doing no such thing.

“Well, I know you soldiers can weather anything,” Baptiste calls out, saving you from having to come up with a response. “But this old man’s ass is about to fall off!”

Garrick nods from the front, and calls back, “There’s a clearing just off the path ahead. We can stop there, rest the horses and have some lunch.”

You feel Solas’ eyes on you when Emilio helps you down from Revas, the Antivan’s hands lingering on yours a bit longer than is entirely necessary. You don’t really mind, so long as he keeps them out of any of your more personal areas. Despite the fact that you should probably share lunch with the guards to ensure you have them charmed, you immediately beeline for Solas. He’s sitting by himself under a tree, a thick, waterproof blanket laid out to protect him from being soaked by the snow. You tie Revas loosely to Ash’lana… you want him to be able to wander, but you fear he’ll wander a little too far. Even if Revas may not obey you, you feel confident that Ash’lana will obey Solas.

“Not sitting with your new friends?” Solas quips as you flop down next to him. You wince as soon as your ass hits the blanket; you’re so not used to riding for hours at time.

“It’s lunch. You and I eat together. Grant me that constant, at least,” you say, shifting in an attempt to find a part of your ass that doesn’t hurt.

“I thought you might want to finish charming our comrades.”

You laugh. “Charming? That’s overstating it a bit.”

“You once said you only have this effect on cooks and maids,” he says, sounding amused. “I believe you can safely add soldiers to that list.” He points, and you follow his finger, just in time to see all four guards quickly look away. “Do you simply know what people want to hear?”

“Nothing so dramatic, Solas. Maybe I’m just a friendly person.”

Wordlessly, he raises an eyebrow.

“You don’t think so? I’m hurt,” you say with overdramatic sorrow. “When we first met, you couldn’t get me out of your rotunda fast enough. Wasn’t it my friendly disposition that won you over?”

“It was curiosity,” Solas says promptly, and you’re somewhat surprised at the seemingly honest, serious answer. “I doubt you can say the same for those men.”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re curious about something,” you say dryly.

“Not curious… Intrigued, perhaps. Enthralled.”

“Enthralled?” you snort. “Now I know you’re overstating.”

“The Iron Bull did something similar to you,” he points out, and you freeze. The food in your mouth seems to turn to ash. “When I left, you were terrified of the man. By the time I returned, you acted as if he was your closest friend.”
“He’s not,” you say immediately. Although you would be unwilling to say who was… Solas might suspect how attached you are to Cole, but it would be odd for an elven lass who’s never seen a spirit before to count one as her truest friend.

“Do you trust him?”

“Well… I…” you fiddle with your bread, appetite gone completely. You’ve gone over this line of thought a lot on your own… sharing it with Solas does nothing for you. “It’s… complicated.”

“The Qunari, particularly those enslaved by the Qun, are nothing if not simple creatures,” Solas informs you. “If it is complicated, you may be the one making it so.”

“I know what he is,” you say sourly. “I don’t need a lesson, hahren. Not on this.” You sigh. You find your hands tearing your bread into increasingly small pieces, just for something to do with your sudden anxiety. “You’re concerned he’s using some of his Ben-Hassrath tricks on me, yes?”

“I know that he is. My concern is that you don’t realize.”

“I do,” you say, watching as the loaf shrinks into bite sizes, and then smaller. “I just… decided not to let it bother me.”

“That seems…”

“Stupid?”

“I might have said ‘unwise,’” Solas replies.

“That’s kind of you,” you say with a laugh. “I guess… I guess I do trust him, Solas. I appreciate your concern, truly. But I… I don’t think he’ll do me any harm.”

Solas fixes you with quite a look. True, Bull had battered you to hell and back. “Well, not without me asking first,” you add with a chuckle.

“I trust that you’ll act with reasonable caution,” Solas says with a sigh.

“You do? You must not have been paying much attention then,” you snort. “I suspect I’m neither reasonable nor cautious.”

“You have more of both than you care to let on,” Solas says seriously. Something about the way he says it makes you glance over towards him. You make eye contact, and once his eyes have yours, you find you can’t look away. “You have many more things than you care to let on.”

Rather than letting his comment unnerve you visibly--although it does chill you--you let your lips curve upward. “Do you think so? Then I suppose that makes two of us, Solas.”

Chapter End Notes

Orlesian Translations

Votre femme est Orlaise = is your wife Orlesian?
mon chou = my pastry (term of endearment)
vous êtes toujours mon préféré = you are still my favorite
Qu’est-ce qu’il est? = what is he?
Mon loup = My wolf (term of endearment)
Mon coco, peut-être. = My egg, maybe.

**Antivan Translations**
Sei come l'acqua nel deserto = you are like water in the desert
Si parla Antivan? = you speak Antivan?
Naturalmente! Il linguaggio dell'amore! = Of course! The language of love!
Mia amore, dove sei stato per tutta la mia vita? Mi vuoi sposare? = My love, where have you been all my life? Will you marry me?
Curiosity and the Cat

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Solas doesn’t call your bluff. You can hardly believe your luck.

He may, in the future, but for now, he’s let your secrets lie in peace. At least, he didn’t pester you about it after you dropped that ominous line at him. In truth, it’s obvious he’s keeping his own secrets, if only because he’s terribly reticent about his past. But you have absolutely no idea what they are. You had been bluffing straight to his face.

After lunch, all seven of you mount back up. After two rather embarrassing failed attempts to climb back onto Revas, you accept Garrick’s assistance. He’s a giant of a man, and could probably simply lift you up and set you on the hart. His leg up nearly sends you flying, but you manage to get onto Revas. Your ass protests immediately, but there’s no helping it. You’ve definitely bruised. Perhaps you can ask Solas for healing if it still hurts in the mo-

A lewd image of Solas running his healing hands across your bare buttocks flashes through your mind.

Nope. Nope. Nu-uh. Noooo. Looks like you’re just going to have to deal with a sore ass.

You travel steadily all afternoon. You do your best to distract yourself from aching legs and rear by chatting, whether with the guards, Baptiste, or Solas. You continue worming your way into their hearts almost absentmindedly… Well, the guards and Baptiste, anyway. You have been largely unsuccessful with worming when it comes to Solas, not that it stops you from trying. By the time your stomach begins to growl again, it’s clear that you’ve all made excellent progress. The snow on the ground becomes spotty, and then disappears altogether, as you climb down out of the mountains. That’s right… it’s August. The rest of the world is enjoying autumn. Will the leaves be changing in Val Royeaux? You feel a pang of something… not homesickness, but a kind of longing nonetheless. You’ll be crossing through the Dales over the next two days. You always get like this in the Dales. Like something’s calling to you.

You write it off as missing Val Royeaux.

Eventually, Garrick finds a clearing a bit off the main path that seems to please him. You aren’t to the Imperial Highway just yet, and he’s likely skittish about the possibility of bandits. You’re a bit concerned about that, as well. You’re hobbled when you travel in groups like this. If you can’t use your magic to defend yourself, you’re stuck with your dagger and little else.

The seven of you dismount. Well, they dismount; you all but fall off of Revas. Your legs feel like rubber; you’re certain you’re walking funny. You’re also in no small amount of pain. You have to feign a sneeze in order to wipe off the tears that are forming in the corners of your eyes. Maybe you can ask Solas to just heal your legs…?

A glorious vision of him running his fingers up your thighs slips through your mind.

Nnnnnnope.

You’ll just have to suffer.

Garrick tosses you a bundled up thing that turns out to be a tent. You stare at it with some
trepidation… you’ve never actually owned a tent before. You try to watch how the guards are setting theirs up and mimic their actions, but all it really gets you is a tangled mess of rope, stakes, and cloth. Fortunately, Solas comes over before you have an opportunity to make any more of a fool out of yourself.

“Did the merchants you travel with have no tents?” Solas says, amused, as he begins to help you set it up. At least that much of his story checks out… he sets a tent as if he’s been doing it every day of his life. You try to help as much as you can, but you’re probably more of a hindrance than anything.

“They had them. I didn’t,” you say with a scowl. A piece of rope flies loose and smacks you in the face; you swear loudly in Tevene, one of the only languages you can safely speak in a party of Orlesians, Antivans, and elves. “I was lucky if I had a bedroll,” you add sourly as you catch the flapping rope and attempt to tie it down to a stake.

By the time Solas finishes essentially putting up the tent for you, everyone else has finished as well. You scan the clearing idly. The two male guards are going into one tent, the two female guards into another, and the diplomat is…

Wait, where’s Solas’ tent? You frown. “Did you help me put up my tent before you did yours, Solas?”

Solas glances around the clearing, seemingly noticing the same thing you are. Garrick hears your question and looks up from his own tent, surprised. “There are only four. I just assumed the two of you…” He flushes bright enough that you can see it from where you stand, halfway across the clearing. “Well… That is…”

Now it’s your turn to flush, humiliation and indignation both. “What?”

“They only packed four!” he protests, holding his hands up as if he expects you to storm over and slap him. “I just… um…”

You grind your teeth in frustration. Who…? Leliana? Belassan? Or just some damn grunt who figured the elves wouldn’t mind sharing a tent? Racism, or the assumption that you’re a whore. Which would be better? It hardly matters now.

“If you do not wish to share your tent with the apostate, I would offer my services as a bedwarmer,” Emilio offers cheekily.

“Oh, shut up, Emilio,” says Kelsie with a scowl. She turns to you. “I’m sorry, Emma! I’m sure we could squeeze you into our tent.”

“Inutile!” says Baptiste, shaking his head. “If Solas has no objection, he can share my tent. Why cram the women all into one and have two men with a tent to themselves?”

“Thank you,” Solas says politely. “I believe that would be best.”

“That’s not necessary!” you exclaim. “I’m used to sleeping without a tent! I can just-”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Garrick says with a frown. “It may snow.”

“It’s not an inconvenience, Emma,” Solas tells you, although you don’t believe him.

Your face is bright red by now. “I’m… sorry,” you mutter, staring down towards the dirt. You’d rather bunk with the Orlesian yourself than kick Solas out of his tent, but you can’t come up with a good excuse for your irritation other than the fact Solas is a man.
“It’s not your doing,” Solas says with a shrug. “If our diplomat does not mind, neither do I.”

“I hope you don’t snore,” Baptiste chortles as Solas moves over to their now-shared tent.

Face still flaming, you duck into “yours,” as well. You have good cause not to want to sleep in a tent with Solas. Having him in that close proximity to your sleeping mind would be an utter disaster, for one. And if you didn’t sleep at all, it might bother him. And how in all of Thedas could you live with yourself, staying up all night watching him sleep? You would! You know you would, because you’re a wretched, awful little pervert! So you know this is necessary. But you still feel humiliated and guilty. You don’t want to come out of the tent, not even to unpack Revas. In the end, however, you have to.

You pop out long enough to unload Revas and shove your bags into the tent. There’s more than enough space for them, since you have the whole damn thing to yourself. At least your books will stay dry. Then you give Revas a thorough rub down. You brush him, you clean his hooves, you even wipe down his antlers… Then, when there’s nothing more you can do for him, you turn to Ashi’lana, who’s already been unpacked, and give him the same treatment. Then the diplomat’s horse. You’re ready to move onto the guards’ horses when Emilio announces that dinner is ready.

“Dinner” is stew, as it turns out… of course it is. What else does one eat while traveling? You share it somewhat sullenly around the campfire. You’re still bitter about the tent situation, and embarrassed to boot. You don’t want that to affect your relations with your companions, however, so you suck it up and socialize your way through dinner anyway.

Garrick has pulled up some fallen logs for the seven of you to sit on. You note that Garrick and Baptiste share a log, as do Kelsie and Elaine. Emilio is sitting alone, the poor sod. You briefly consider sitting next to him, but decide you don’t need to flirt any more than you already have. You sit on the last log, by yourself, with a bowl of stew and a chip on your shoulder that you have to ignore to ensure the five humans actually like you. Your life might depend on it later.

You’re more than a little surprised when Solas comes over with his own bowl and sits next to you. He doesn’t even sit that close, but just the fact that he’s sitting here, and not off by himself, is a shock to you. That he’s sitting next to you makes your heart leap into your throat. Don’t read anything into it, you tell yourself firmly. You’re just the only one here he knows.

You seize on the opportunity to attempt to endear him to the others. He dodges all of your attempts to pull him into conversation, answering any inquiries politely but shortly. In the end, you simply opt for comfortable body language, leaning towards him when you mention him, nudging him with your elbow gently when you make a joke. Let the others see there’s nothing to fear from him, through you.

“Is it weird, working for a mage?” Elaine asks in that deadpan, I-could-care-less-if-this-question-is-rude way of hers.

“Oh, I suppose it has its quirks,” you say, side-eyeing Solas. His expression is as neutral as ever, of course. “Sometimes I come in to work and he’s glowing, for instance. But frankly, I think the benefits outweigh any of the oddities.”

“Benefits?” Kelsie asks, skepticism clear in her voice. “What benefits could there be?”

“I can think of a few,” Emilio comments, before Kelsie’s glaring eyes shut him up.

“A large portion of my work involves writing, scribing copies, that sort of thing,” you say, a little self-deprecatingly considering what your actual work is. “Solas can work a spell on my hand and
wrist that keep me writing steadily, without pain, for hours.” You give Solas a bright, winning smile, more for everyone else’s benefit than his.

“Well… I can see how that might be useful,” Kelsie says dubiously.

“Try writing twelve hours a day, every day,” you say with a chuckle. “You’d all be lining up for Solas’ magic.”

“I thought mages mostly used their magic to make things explode,” comments Garrick, a little darkly.

Your eye twitches slightly, but you don’t think anyone sees it. You force a smile, with great effort. “Not at all. I did work for Circle in Montsimmard. Honestly, sometimes I think the only reason Circle mages learn how to throw fire is because we insist on using them in wars,” you say, more pointedly than entirely necessary. As if every one of these idiots wouldn’t take advantage of Solas’ magic in a fight, only to act like brutes about it afterwards. You’re used to it, but it still irritates you. Some days you think you should never have left Rivain.

The others don’t seem to really believe your claims about the lack of violence inherent in mages, but they at least change the subject. You smile your way through dinner, quietly fuming. When Solas retires to his tent, you quickly make your own excuses and head to your own.

- 

You can’t sleep. It’s not unexpected, but it is frustrating. Normally when you travel, at night you use your magic to create light. With Solas off in the next tent, you don’t dare risk it, even though he’s likely sound asleep. Eventually, you get sick of tossing and turning in the dark and take some of your papers out by the fire to read.

Garrick is there, up keeping watch. He’s idly poking the fire with a stick. He looks up sharply when he hears you approach, but relaxes once he sees it’s just you.

“You’re up late,” he comments.

“Couldn’t sleep,” you say with a slight smile. “I’m not used to sleeping on the ground, I suppose. I thought I’d at least come out to the light and get some reading done.”

You settle down onto one of the logs and shuffle through the stack of papers. Most of it is the manuscript Varric gave you, which you’re very much looking forward to. But your hands pause on the transcribed copy of Fenris’ letter. Just a few sentences, really. You read them, then read them again.

As for the woman, Emma, tell her that it’s pleasant to find someone else who escaped from Tevinter’s clutches. She sounds quite charming. I’d like to know more about how she escaped and what she did afterwards. Perhaps you can introduce us while I’m at Skyhold?

Chaming. Hmm. Solas had just used that same word to describe you, earlier. Perhaps you are, although it’s through hard work and concentrated effort, which seems antithetical to being truly charming. It’s not so much that you are charming as it is you charm. There’s a difference, albeit one that is only clear to you.

When will he arrive at Skyhold? How long will he stay? Varric hadn’t said. What if you miss him while you’re out traipsing through the woods with these humans? Fenris wouldn’t bother charming these humans, of that much you’re certain. He wouldn’t have to. Between his strength and the powers granted to him by the lyrium infused into his skin, he could face down any bandits or bears that might attack. Similar to how Solas needn’t bother endearing himself to anyone, it seems. You’re
envious of them both.

You flip past Fenris’ letter and on to Servis’ note. Servis' book request is, sadly enough, just that. You had kind of hoped it be an encoded message or something. This is how you know you've been out of Orlais for too long... You're making mischief to get into. It seems you're a natural schemer.

Well, being back in Val Royeaux will give you plenty of opportunities for trouble. Being in Val Royeaux with Solas will give you plenty of opportunities for fatal trouble. You're excited in some ways, yes, but you can't let that distract you from the truth... this is dangerous. Cole as much as said it... Solas is likely to find out your secret, with this much prolonged contact. You need to be careful.

That brings you to another piece of trouble… Vivienne’s letter. You haven’t opened it yet, because you have some serious suspicions. She certainly expects you to read it. That’s not going to stop you from doing it, mind, but you have to be careful about it. You run a hand carefully over the sealed envelope. There are wards, and she’s sending it to a fellow enchanter. They appear to be a safeguard against tampering. The letter will not be destroyed if they’re disturbed, but the other party will see the broken seal and know it had been opened. A clever little system. She’s expecting you to open it and break the wards, no doubt. But you’re confident that you can open it without breaking the wards, then reseal it. You just need time alone to work your magic. It will have to wait.

“I’d like to, um… apologize,” Garrick says, apropos nothing. You look up from your papers, surprised.

“Pardon? For what?”

“The, um… assumption everyone made about you and your, uh… master,” Garrick says, rubbing his nose to try and hide the fact he’s turning red. “I hadn’t given it much thought, but I see how that might be offensive, especially if untrue.”

“It is untrue, and offensive,” you reply, a little stiffly. “But not unexpected. You were in Skyhold, ser, and the soldiers all gossip. You’ve doubtlessly heard all sorts of interesting things about me.”

“Ah… Well… I mean…”

“I want to be clear, ser. They’re untrue. They’re mostly simply an embarrassment, but I don’t appreciate it when they affect Solas or my work.”

“Yes, I understand. Again, I’m sorry if I-”

“You didn’t do anything,” you say with a light smile. “And I appreciate the apology. Hopefully the rumors don’t follow me all the way to Orlais.”

It’s then that Emilio emerges from his tent, stretching and yawning. “Alright, capo, I’m here to relieve you… Ah! Mia amore!” he adds when he catches sight of you. “I’ll be happy to relieve you as well…”

Garrick kicks him solidly in the shin as he passes him to go into the tent. “Ow! Figlio di puttana!”

You snort.

“I’ll be heading to my tent as well,” you say, not wanting to spend the next few hours flirting, even in Antivan. Emilio looks glum, so you blow him a little kiss before you leave. At least flirts understand when something is teasing… if you did that to Garrick, he would probably explode.

Fereldens…
You don’t sleep a wink that night, but you make yourself stay in the tent. You come out only when you hear activity. Another conscious person-- besides whichever guard is keeping watch--means you can finally leave. When you come out of your tent, however, you only see Kelsie readying breakfast by the fire. Who had you heard…? You wander around the tiny camp for a moment, curious, but quickly wish you hadn’t. You had heard Solas, who is up… vigorously up. He’s doing those same odd stretches you’d caught him at once before, or something similar. At the moment, it involves a very creative interpretation of a handstand.

You note that he’s wearing a shirt, this time, although the way it’s sliding down to show his bare stomach is almost worse than wearing nothing at all. You look away quickly, feeling heat building in your face. You’re curious about the stretches--they’re much more elaborate than anything you do with Bull--but not nearly enough to approach him. Instead, you head over to Kelsie and resolve to help her with breakfast.

You can see Solas from here, though, and your eyes keep dragging back towards him. Occasionally, effort will cause him to let out a soft grunt. It’s a beautiful sound.

“You are the sort of thing I expected a mage to get up to,” Kelsie comments, following your stares. “This must be one of those work benefits you were talking about,” she adds slyly. You clear your throat and force your eyes away from Solas.

“I’m as surprised as you are. You’re burning the oatcakes, by the way.”

“Oh, shit!”

You manage to get breakfast prepared… despite Kelsie, who is easily distracted and seemingly capable of burning anything, including her own fingers. The other guards and even Baptiste come out of their tents, no doubt smelling food. For your part, you bring a stack of oatcakes on a cloth to Solas. You try--and fail--not to stare as he pushes himself up off the ground. He’s sweating slightly, and you have to resist the urge to wipe his forehead and face off with your sleeve. Instead, you offer him breakfast.

“Bringing me breakfast?” he says, almost… coyly. He’s teasing you again, you suspect. “The more things change, the more they stay the same.” You follow him as he finds a tree to sit by. He sinks onto the ground and leans against it with a soft sigh. You sit down next to him, and reveal a hidden treasure… something from the kitchen workers’ bag. It’s soft, sweet cheese, perfect to complement the dry oatcakes. Solas smiles, and that’s all the reward you need. The two of you share the soft cheese and oatcakes under the tree, and you can almost forget the fact that you’re traveling with five humans. Your aura, wrapped tight in your gut, however, serves as a potent reminder that despite the wide open expanse around you, you’re still not free.

Riding Revas is every bit a misery for your ass as you thought it would be. The chafing, dear Maker, why? But you’ll get used to it eventually. Nothing to do but wince and bear it. You chat with Baptiste and the guards alternatingly as distraction as you ride. Slowly but surely, the mountains turn into rolling hills. By the time you get to the Imperial Highway, you’re beginning to get restless. As many times as you’ve ridden through the Dales, you’ve never actually used the Imperial Highway for any of it. Too many people, too many Templars. And now that you have Revas, all you really want is to tear it some random direction for an hour or two. Every time the temptation to bolt rises to nearly unbearable levels, you force yourself to ride by Solas for a time. Remind yourself of what you have to gain by staying put.
The wanderlust doesn’t go away, however, and when your group stops for lunch, you resolve to sneak off, if just for a bit. You need some privacy for Madame de Fer’s letter, anyway. You make sure Solas is thoroughly distracted when you sneak off; he’s the one most likely to follow you, and the one you least want to find you.

As soon as you’re out of sight of the camp, you set a brisk but quiet pace. You’re no Dalish, but you have some experience with moving quickly through the trees. You just enjoy the sensation of running for a while. When you finally believe you have enough space between you and the others, you settle yourself into the nook of a tree and pull out Vivienne’s letter.

You ease your aura gently out, keeping it tucked close to your skin, just in case. The few nights’ sleep you’ve gotten since you released all your energy into the frozen lake means that it’s a healthier size, but you’re still underpowered. Well, it barely matters. If you’re in a situation where you have to use your magic at this point, you’re already dead, either way.

Carefully, you work your way around the wards, gently poking and prodding until you figure them out. This is one of the few things you’re actually quite good at... You never got the hang of, say, throwing fire without setting absolutely everything including yourself on fire, but you’ve had plenty of experience fucking around with other people’s wards. Never figured out how to use them yourself, mind! But other people’s, you can get around.

After five minutes or so of mental prodding, you figure out a way to get it open without disturbing the wards. You slip the envelope open excitedly, even though you know there will be nothing of much interest.

Amusingly, amongst other things, the note is about you. No doubt she expected you to read it, and wanted to make you paranoid. But in all actuality, it makes you laugh... She doesn’t know who you are! Or at least, she’s not admitting to it within the confines of this letter. She wants her mage friend to look into you, and see if he can get you alone for some “tests.” Left ominous on purpose, no doubt. Well, you’ll nip that one right in the bud. You’ll send the letter the rest of the way with a messenger on your way out of Val Royeaux. Better safe than sorry.

You tuck the letter carefully back into the envelope, reseal the wax, and then reseal the wards. It looks as though it’s never been touched. You smirk gently to yourself... it seems you haven’t entirely lost your to-

Something tingles at the edge of your aura.

Instinctively, you snap it back into you, tucking it into your stomach as you stand, hand resting on one of your throwing daggers. But there’s no one out here... and you don’t hear anything. Tentatively, you let your aura back out, the tiniest bit. It’s not Solas, is it? No... This is something else entirely. Cautious but curious, you head in the direction of the odd sensation. It feels like a... weird tingling, like a strumming. Like a rock dropped in a pond, something is sending ripples across the Veil. You track the odd sensation through the woods, aura as tight to your body as you can keep it.

Your curiosity leads you to a pile of rocks. No, strike that... Part of an old ruin. The rocks are from a wall, long since collapsed. You tuck your aura back into your gut as you kneel. The sensation is now close enough that you can feel it through your very skin. You dig through the rubble, yanking stones out as best you can, wedging others up and out of the way, until you come across... something.

It's like an orb, almost... but there's a weird design sticking out of the side. Is this elven? It looks vaguely Elven, pre-Halamshiral at that, but beyond that, you have no idea what this is. You run your hand across it, and it seems to purr. Should you examine it closer with your aura? Seems like it might
be dangerous. You'd haul it back to camp to show it to Solas, but that would probably raise too many questions. How much longer do you have before they miss you at camp? They've probably already noticed you're gone. Whatever you're going to do, you'd better do it--

A dark, low growl emanates from behind you. You freeze, hands still on the orb, and slowly crane your neck around. There's a wolf at the edge of the clearing, hackles raised, slowly advancing on you.

Fuck.

For all your talk of Dalish superstition, wolves are dangerous. Your hand travels quickly to a throwing dagger as more growls echo from the woods behind the wolf. Oh shit, you've stumbled into a whole pack. An embarrassing way to die... you should find a tree.

Before you can bolt up the nearest branch, however, there's a crash in the woods. The wolf's head snaps to the side, its teeth still bared in an angry growl. Then another loud snap, enough to have you concerned. The wolf snaps at you, once, then bolts as something huge crashes through the underbrush and bursts into the clearing. You yank a throwing dagger out of its sheath, ready to plant it squarely in a bear's eye. But it's not a bear, it's a hart.

And on that hart is Solas.

And, oh, Maker, he's giving you quite a look.

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

*ducks under the hail of thrown rocks*
Pain, Without Love

Chapter Notes

So, this chapter was actually going to go up TOMORROW. Possibly even later, because my precious editor just had surgery and I wasn't sure when she would be up and about. However, I decided to update about 24 hours early. Why, you ask? Because one of my readers joined Tumblr and drew THIS:


So you have them to thank for this chapter being early. Go follow them, shower them with praise, and most importantly, convince them to draw more things. They're the reason you have the closure to this cliffhanger way, way early. (Of course, expect more typos/errors because my editor is on bedrest. You can send her wellwishes at macnmemes.tumblr.com if you want to!) I never want to try editing something without her again. It took forever.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Your aura is inside of you now, but… how long has Solas been following you? How did he even find you? Why is he on Ashi’lan? So many questions! You stare up at him dumbly, hand still holding your throwing dagger, at a total loss for words. He looks pissed off, and the combination of that and the fact you’re looking up at him as he reigns in Ashi’lan… Maker. You would be turned on if you weren’t so scared. No, strike that, you’re a bit turned on anyway.

“What are you doing out here?” Solas asks finally. His voice is deceptively calm, but you can hear the ice in it. Oh yeah, you’re in big trouble. You swallow, hard.

“I was, um… exploring. And I found these ruins. I was just… looking at them?” Your voice squeaks a little. How much did he see?

Solas doesn’t look any less irritated as he dismounts. You take a step back away as he does, nearly tripping on some of the rubble. He didn’t even look this angry when he’d stripped you down and seen the extent of your injuries. You fear he might strike you. And you really wish he’d reveal the extent to which you’re screwed before getting close. You’d appreciate a running start. Fortunately, he walks past you as you step out of the way, and squats down by the ruins, examining the very orb you’d been prodding at.

“…You just stumbled across this, did you? Buried?”

You fight hard to keep your voice level through your lies. “A bit was poking out… it looked odd, so I wanted to see what it was.”

Solas turns to look at you. His eyes are piercing; you struggle to meet them. “And?”

“Well, I… I still don’t know what it is,” you say, relieved you don’t have to lie about it. “I think it… might be Elven? We are all but in the Dales. Do you not know?”
“I do,” he says, eyes shifting back to artifact. “You however, should not be wandering alone. What would you have done, had I not shown up when I had?”

“Climbed a tree,” you reply promptly. Solas looks at you sharply, as if trying to see if you’re joking. “No, really. Last I checked, wolves can’t climb. One of you would have been out looking for me eventually.”

“That… That is…”

“Unwise?” you say with a sheepish grin.

“Stupid,” Solas finishes. You laugh, still a bit nervous, but less so. He may have suspicions, but if he’d detected your magic, you suspect he wouldn’t be lecturing you about nearly feeding yourself to wolves. That turns out to be a bad move, however, because at your laughter, his anger intensifies. Oops.

“Do you find this funny?” he snaps. “You could have been killed!”

“I-ir abelas,” you stammer, mirth dead in an instant. “I… I didn’t think…”

“No, you didn’t,” Solas agrees. “If you plan on wandering, then at the very least take Revas with you.” He pauses, kneeling down next to the artifact. To your amazement, when he runs a hand over it, it begins… begins glowing! Not a glow you’re used to, either. A bright green swirl of energy. You can feel something odd in the Veil, a… strumming? You can’t quite place it.

“W…what did you do?” you ask, your fear overwhelmed by your curiosity.

“I activated it. This is an ancient Elvhen artifact that helps map and strengthen the Veil. It will help to protect this area against tears.”

“Seriously? How?” you say, kneeling down next to the artifact with Solas, forgetting that he’s angry with you for a moment. You run a hand over the glowing artifact. It’s hot to the touch. It feels as though it’s humming. Even with your aura a terrified knot in your gut, you can feel it fill you, a pleasant vibration, a pleasing song. “Amazing. We can’t take it with us?”

“No, it should remain here.” Solas, for a moment, looks amused, before seeming to remember he’s irritated with you. “Was that your intention?”

“Yeah. I was going to take it back to camp, see if you knew what it was,” you lie with a chuckle. “Thought maybe I’d use it to get on your good side.” Then you face him, more seriously, and try to force your expression into something genuine. “I’m… I’m sorry, Solas. I didn’t mean to wander so far.”

Solas lets out a long, drawn-out sigh. “You just wandered into the woods, and tripped over an elvhen artifact?”

“I… Well, when you say it that way, it sounds weird,” you mutter. “But, yeah.”

“Perhaps I should take you with me more often when I travel,” he says sourly. His tone keeps your heart from racing at his words; you know he’s not serious. “You appear to be an idiot savant.”

_Ouch._

He straightens, and gestures for you to do the same. He pats Ash’lana’s saddle. “Get on,” he says shortly.
“I… what?” you stammer. Solas doesn’t repeat himself, just looks at you pointedly. You decide maybe you’ve tested his patience enough for one day. You do your best to clamber into the saddle, although predictably, Solas has to help you. He lets you step on his knee to give you the necessary height to throw your leg over Ashi’lana’s back. You try to stand on it as gingerly as possible.

“How to,” he says, and as you do so, you only a moment of horrified realization before Solas is pulling himself into the saddle as well. You ram yourself against the back of the saddle as you scramble desperately backwards. Even then, this saddle was not meant for two people, and is heavy with packs, to boot. Thank the Maker he got up in front of you and not behind! You might have died on the spot. As it is, you’re basically straddling Solas’ ass, even with yours flush against the back of the saddle. Ashi’lana begins to move forward, and you suddenly realize that you have access to neither reigns nor stirrups. You’re rather precariously balanced as is, leaning backwards and trying not to rub up against Solas.

You hunt for something to hold onto. You sort of cling to the saddle, but that’s not helping. Then Ashi’lana breaks into a trot, and with a desperate squeak, you throw your arms around Solas’ chest. You’d nearly bounced right out of the saddle. Even clinging to him, you think you might fall off. Is a trot really necessary? God, don’t let him move into a gallop, you will come flying right out of this saddle.

Solas seems unaware of your discomfort, or possibly, he’s doing it on purpose because he’s still cross with you. In any case, the trotting continues, and your embarrassment only grows. With each bounce, your ass burns with pain, and you can’t seem to land on it properly without the use of stirrups. You can’t even grasp Solas loosely around his waist like a normal person. To avoid falling, you have to grip him like a goddamn lunatic, arms tight around his chest, hands clinging to his vest. And all you can think about, even more than not wanting to fall off, is how broad his shoulders are, how nice your face feels when it’s pressed between his shoulder blades. He feels solid in your arms. Maker forgive you, because you are a terrible person.

Just when you think things can’t get any worse, you feel a not-so-subtle prodding. Solas has done many things to you with his mana, from subtly poking at you to check for magic, to accidentally sliding it over you--repeatedly--thanks to the assumption that you couldn’t feel it. Now… he starts with a less than gentle prodding, which alarms you. You fight not to have any reaction; if you so much as stiffen in response, he’ll feel it, thanks to the way your entire body is flush against his.

Then it stops being just prodding. He pushes his mana forcefully into you, and you can feel it ripping through your skin, pushing towards your core. You have to force yourself not to cry out, to remain focused on staying on Ashi’lana and to keep your body as relaxed as you can. A simple glance at your skin shows that there’s no real damage, but that’s little comfort. He pushes in deeper, and you yank your aura away. Thank god it’s as small at is right now. He runs his mana through you like he’s ruffling through files, and you choke back a whimper. Would an ordinary person feel this? You have no idea. You may be giving yourself away by not reacting, but in the end, all you can do is guess.

You grit your teeth, shove your face against Solas’ back, and wait it out.

By the time Solas pulls Ashi’lana into the clearing where the others are waiting, you’re an absolute wreck. Your ass is killing you, you’ve been rather violently invaded by Solas’ magic, and despite the pain, you can’t get the feeling of your nose shoved between Solas’ shoulder blades out of your skin. The smell of him has filled you, reminding you sharply of your pleasant nights with his blanket. Even with the sensation of being shredded from the inside out by mana, you suspect you would have been content to ride like that for twice as long. Solas finally withdraws his magic from you, and once again you have to resist the urge to make a sound. Your body slumps, the tension slipping out of your muscles. You try to just disguise it as part of being glad Ashi’lana had stopped. Revas
immediately trots over, snorts angrily, and takes your sleeve in his mouth, yanking at you.

“Jealous?” you grumble at him. “Possession is the opposite of freedom, you know, you scoundrel.” He all but pulls you out of the saddle; you literally just let yourself fall off of Ashi’lana and thud painfully onto the ground. You need a nap. You hadn’t realized one could be hurt with magic in that way, and you still have no idea if your cover is blown or not. You just hope Solas doesn’t make a habit of it.

“Where have you two been?” Garrick asks with a frown. “We’re ready to leave.”

“It’s my fault, sorry,” you say before Solas can answer, sitting up off the ground. “I was wandering into the woods and I got lost. I’m lucky Solas found me when he did; I wasn’t sure what to do.” You stand with some difficulty; your legs feel like rubber and your ass is on fire. You feel like you’ve been belted with sandpaper.

“Well, saddle up then. I want to make good time while the weather is still good.”

It’s a testament to your willpower that you don’t break down crying on the spot. Instead, you just nod. “Of course.” You clamber up onto Revas with help from a nearby stone, although it’s still an undignified struggle. Garrick sets the pace at a slow, gentle canter, and every stride sends bolts of pain through your legs and ass. Your body aches in new, strange ways from Solas’ violent search, and you really just want to curl up into a ball and cry. Instead, you take a place near Baptiste, who looks as displeased with the pace as you feel.

It’s a relaxed enough pace that you can talk, although Baptiste seems to have some difficulty with it. You doubt the large man has that much experience riding horses in this kind of a situation. What on earth would make someone like him sign up with the Inquisition? Faith? You hope not. You’re rather starting to like him.

“Have a relaxing ride through the woods with your beau?” Baptiste asks you, sly despite his obvious discomfort with the pace.

Your laugh is unfortunately hollow, but you force a smile. “Hardly. Solas is very cross with me for wandering off alone and getting lost.”

“He’s doubtlessly only cross because you gave him a fright,” Baptiste says, over-generously in your opinion. Solas does have an unusually high concern for your well-being, but there are reasons for that that very much are not what Baptiste is clearly thinking. But he’s Orlesian; that’s just what they do.

“So, do you have our days planned out for us, once we reach the city?” you ask, opting to change the subject entirely.

“Unfortunately, yes,” Baptiste says with a nod. “You’ll be very busy… not too much time for sightseeing.”

You can’t say you’re surprised to hear that, but it is a disappointment. You’ll probably spend most of your days locked in the library. From what you’re hearing, the Inquisition worked hard to get this opportunity to dig through the University’s books… and then sent you and Solas to do it for some Maker forsaken reason. You may never understand what was going through the Inquisitor’s head when he made that inspired decision.

“Don’t worry too much,” Baptiste says with a long wink. Your disappointment must have been obvious. “I intend to visit family while I’m there. I’m a grandfather, you know. I’ll make sure we get
some time off. No point in going to Val Royeaux just to stay locked in a room, yes?"

You spend most of the afternoon discussing the itinerary with Baptiste, if only to distract yourself from the growing agony that is your entire goddamn body. You doubt that whatever Solas had done actually damaged you physically… more likely that your tension at the pain combined with being thrown around by Ashi’lana had injured you. You may not be able to avoid asking Solas for healing, but the healing of your aching ass is absolutely out of the question. There are places you just have to draw the line. And the rest of you doesn’t have a very good excuse to ache. You’d fall out of a tree or something, but the thought of what Solas would do to you if he saw you fall out of a tree… You shudder, chill despite the warmth of the autumn sun.

You’re a disaster by the time the sun begins to set and Garrick pulls the group off the road and declares you’ll all set up camp by a small copse of trees. It’s more plains than forest by now… you suspect you’re well and truly in the Dales by this point. At least you’re in too much pain to be struck by waterlust just now.

As soon as the group stops, you slide off of Revas and just let yourself sink to the ground on your knees, using the hart’s large body to shield you from judging eyes. How much longer can you keep this up? Maybe if you just crawl around instead of walking… With a groan and a whimper, you pull yourself up, using Revas to support you. He’s sweaty and hot and doubtlessly wants those saddlebags off. You unload him as much as you can, and then go to Garrick for your tent.

It’s just your tent, so you attempt to make it yourself. You’d been paying attention when Solas did it, but it just seems like it’s all sticks and ropes and way more complicated than it ought to be. To make things worse, there’s a wind picking up from the west that keeps catching the cloth of the tent and blowing it all over the place. About the time a sudden gust blows it onto you and nearly knocks you over, Solas comes over to assist. He helps pull the tent off of you, untangles you from the flapping ropes. It’s just as well… at the rate you were going, not only would you have failed to make the tent, you might have been strangled to death by it.

Solas seems to have settled down a bit. You have no doubt in your mind that he suspects you have magic. He’s checked you for magic, what… half a dozen times now? More? But each time is more invasive, which probably means he has yet to find you out. You just hope he doesn’t shove his mana into you like that ever again. You’re used to dealing with pain, but your body is still smarting.

Solas seems to notice your wincing, and frowns. You decide to beat him to the lecture.

“I just learned to ride,” you explain with a pained smile. “I don’t think I’m cut out for this gallop-all-day business yet. Between that and sleeping on the ground, I think I’ll be sore for weeks.”

Solas looks as though he’s about to speak, and irritably at that, but then seems to reconsider. After a moment of continuing to set up the tent, he says, carefully, “I could assist you with that, if you would like.”

Now it’s your turn to hesitate. “Well, I… I mean…” You clear your throat. “I ache, yes, but I’d prefer to keep my clothes on.”

Solas looks at you sharply, as if to gauge your expression. When he sees your teasing expression, he seems to relax. You’re making a joke of it. No lasting trauma here from being forced to strip, no sir! Definitely didn’t think you were about to have your way with me! As if, in retrospect. You still feel like an idiot for that.

“Wear something baggy, perhaps?” he suggests, almost jokingly. “If your injuries are not too severe, I can heal you through your clothing,” he adds, more seriously. “I would prefer you not wind up in a
“Heh… Yeah, I’d like to avoid that too,” you agree. “A… alright. If we can even be in the same tent without the Fereldens’ heads exploding.”

Solas laughs, a short chuckle, but enough to draw the attention of Baptiste and Emilio. More quietly, he adds, “Seek me out after dinner. I’m sure we can find some privacy without setting their gossiping hearts aflame.”

He walks away before you can reply, which is just as well, because your bones are turning to jelly. After standing stupidly by your tent for a moment, you wander dazedly over to Revas to finish unloading him and rubbing him down. You give Ash’lana a similar treatment again, and then, out of things to do, wander towards the other tents.

You find yourself in the company of Elaine and Kelsie, who are relaxing by their tent while Emilio prepares dinner… stew again, no doubt. Elaine has her hair down and is combing through it gently while Kelsie admires. You sit down as well, preferring their company to the Antivan’s, for the moment.

“I wish my hair looked like that when it was long,” Kelsie says enviously, shaking her short, curly locks. “It just turns into a tangled nightmare.”

“It’s just as well you keep it short,” Elaine says with a shrug. “One less place for someone to grab you. Watch.” Like a flash, Elaine drops her comb, reaches out, and grabs you by your bun. You quickly force yourself not to jab her in the soft, squishy place where thumb meets hand. You have to look unimpressive to these people. Instead, you cry out as if startled and in pain. “See?” Elaine says, releasing you.

“’Laine!” Kelsie exclaims, exasperated. “You can’t just grab people! She’s not a soldier; you’ll scare her.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” you say, wincing. Your hair is coming loose, damnit. You’ll have to pull it back again in a moment. Elaine has stopped combing and is now beginning to braid her hair. “I can do that for you, if you’d like,” you suggest. It’s always easier to braid someone else’s hair then it is to braid your own.

“You’re too nice,” Kelsie objects.

“People keep saying that to me in an accusing manner,” you muse out loud as you sit down behind Elaine. She hands her hair off to you, and you begin to braid. It’s a practiced motion for you, even after all these years. Her hair isn’t even as long as yours once was.

“Do you have sisters?” Kelsie asks curiously, and seemingly out of nowhere.

“Um… no,” you reply, not quite sure why she asked.

“It’s just, you’re really good at that.”

“I used to keep my hair in a braid, back in my more adventurous youth,” you say with a chuckle. “I suppose you never really forget how to braid hair, really.”

“Youth?” Kelsie says incredulously. “How old are you? I thought you were Elaine’s age.”

“Are you calling me old?” Elaine asks sourly.
“Ancient,” replies Kelsie.

“I’m probably around Elaine’s age,” you say, to cut off any possibility of a fight.

“Then don’t talk like you’re an old lady,” Elaine says darkly.

“I bet you’d look younger with your hair down,” Kelsie says, reaching right up and pulling the band out of your hair. You nearly drop Elaine’s braid with shock, but you don’t want it to get loose; you’d have to start over. So you grit your teeth and bear it as Kelsie fluffs your hair from behind. Does this girl have no concept of personal space?! “Oh wow! Your hair is like Elaine’s! Soft and thin. You’re really wasting it, wearing it all dull and up like that.”

“It serves my purpose,” you say, seriously regretting your decision to come over here. You should have gone to flirt with Emilio instead. He probably would have touched you less. “Hold still, please,” you add to Elaine, who’s craning her neck around to see.

Kelsie reaches around you to snatch up Elaine’s comb. Oh, Maker. “My sister has hair almost this color… darker, though,” she says, almost absentmindedly running her fingers through your hair. “You might know her, actually! She works in the kitchens. She mentions you, now and then.”

“Does she?” you say, not really surprised. “I’m in there every day, so I suppose that’s to be expected.” There are two redheaded humans who work in the kitchen that you can recall.

“Her name is Lily.” Kelsie informs you as she begins to run the comb through your hair. You have to admit, it feels nice. You try to keep your hair more or less kempt, but you haven’t had a proper comb since you escaped your home. You’d been planning on picking one up in Val Royeaux, as a matter of fact. “She doesn’t talk much.”

“Short hair, or long?” you ask absent-mindedly. You’re almost finished with Elaine’s braid.

“Short, although she’s growing it out.”

“I think I know who you’re talking about, although I don’t believe I’ve ever actually spoken to her. And she talks about me? All good, I hope.”

“No, not really!” Kelsie says brightly. “All about you and… well… you know.” She gestures over towards Solas, who’s currently doing something to his mage’s staff, although you couldn’t say what from here. His hands are glowing softly.

“Oh,” you say darkly. “I can’t say that really surprises me.”

“I keep telling her you play for the other team,” Kelsie continues brightly. “But no one listens, of course.”

You decide that it’s really not worth correcting her with the details of your sexual attractions. She’s awfully handsy for someone who thinks you exclusively prefer the company of other women, though. You finish Elaine’s braid and tie it off, relieved to perhaps have an excuse to leave what’s rapidly becoming a sapphic stereotype. And to think, you were worried about the men.

It seems Elaine is going to double down on your discomfort, however. She runs a hand along the braid, inspecting your work, and then nods, seemingly satisfied. “Alright. Let’s do yours,” she says matter-of-factly.

“I… Pardon?”
“That’s a great idea!” Kelsie chirps happily. “You’ve got such nice, long hair, it’s a shame to just leave it in that bun.”

“A shame, is it?” you say sourly, but it seems that nothing will discourage them. Elaine pushes Kelsie out of the way and takes a seat behind you. She combs your hair back and begins the braid, and you let out a small sigh. Might as well just grin and bear it. There’s no one out here to care how you wear your hair.

“So did you have brothers, then?” Kelsie asks, flopping into the grass in front of you and laying, sprawled out.

“No.”

“An only child?” she says, sounding a little surprised.

“I thought elves bred like rabbits,” Elaine says dryly. You stiffen. A poor choice of words on her part. “I don’t think there’s a single only child elf in Ostwick, and they’ve all got barrels of cousins.”

Alright, that’s it. “An orphan, actually,” you say sharply, and feel Elaine’s hands freeze in your hair. So she can feel social awkwardness, after all. Kelsie, for her part, looks guilty. “Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to… I mean, my siblings and me, we are too.”

Mmm, so much for that getting her to change the subject. Well, she’s talkative. Just let her talk. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“We’re here now, though!” she says, seeming to regain her cheer quickly. “The Inquisition has been great.” A recent orphan, perhaps? Well, far be it from you to pry.

You and Elaine let Kelsie do most of the talking, which seems to be fine by Kelsie. She babbles on about her sister and brother--both younger, from what you gather--who work in Skyhold as well, albeit not as soldiers. Her sister is in the kitchen, her brother, the smithy. It seems she’s joined up fairly recently. You hope she’s good with that sword on her back. You had assumed the soldiers of Skyhold would be more like… well, soldiers. You’ve spent this much time endearing yourself to them… if a fight happens and they turn out to be useless, you’ll be pissed.

“There!” Elaine says, sounding mildly satisfied. “Much better. Here, look.” To your surprise, Elaine hands you a small hand mirror. It’s simpler than the one you used to own, but it’s been well over a month since you last saw your reflection. You look more at your face than your hair; seeing it pulled back in a braid brings back memories, some of them less than pleasant. It’s your face that interests you, however. Your cheeks have filled out a bit… have you perhaps gained weight at Skyhold? It’s hard to tell, honestly, since all of your pants are so ridiculously oversized.

Kelsie, of course, immediately wants to touch the finished braid. She runs her hand down it, much to your irritation. “Aaah, your hair is so pretty, Emma!” she cooes happily. Fortunately, you’re saved from the situation before anyone can suggest breaking out the massage oils or pillows.

“As much as I hate to interrupt what seems to be a lovely gathering,” Emilio announces from the camp fire. “Dinner is ready, if you ladies are interested.” Praise the Maker! You are very ready to get some distance between yourself and the two handsy ladies. There are no logs to sit on this time, but you spare yourself any additional touching by sitting close to Solas--everyone seems to be giving him plenty of space.

Solas starts slightly when he sees you, no doubt because of your hair. You look younger with your hair down, of that you are well aware. You’re soured a bit further by that thought. The last thing you
want is to look more like a “da’len” to Solas. But you can’t just yank the braid out in front of everyone; it would be rude. You’ll probably be stuck wearing it at least for the evening, possibly tomorrow as well. But your hair will be back in a bun by the time you hit Val Royeaux, no matter how much Kelsie whines.

“Bella, i tuoi capelli sono come il tramonto!” Emilio purrs. It would make you genuinely happy if not for your sour mood and general soreness. Nonetheless, you give him a pleasing smile, and neglect to mention that Bella was the name of your mule.

You try to keep up with the conversation and to be as animated and cheerful as possible, but you’re distracted continually by Solas. It seems his suspicion hasn’t died out entirely; he’s really eyeballing you. Well, fortunately, you’re not without your own tricks, and he’s already expecting you to sneak off with him. Almost as soon as you both finish eating, you stand, make a bit of a show of stretching, and then turn to him.

“Solas, would you mind taking a walk with me? I’ve something I’d like to show you.” That, of course, is enough to pique everyone’s interest, but Solas plays along.

“Certainly. Simply let my fetch my staff. We can’t have you getting lost again,” he says gamely. Ouch. Was that last bit really necessary? Nonetheless, you take the opportunity to swing by your tent to fetch a few things as well, and pretend not to notice the other five watching you as you and Solas walk off across the plains. Fortunately, the fact that Garrick had set up camp in a small copse of trees, for shelter, means that you don’t have to go too terribly far for privacy. You stroll to a slightly larger-than-average tree at the top of one of the Dales’ many rolling hills before turning to Solas.

“I’m not sure that was the best way to alleviate rumors,” he says, sounding amused.

“Still better than you crawling into my tent,” you laugh. “Besides, I really do have something to show you.”

“Oh? Is that so? Healing first, in any case. If you’re actually requesting it, I suspect it’s worse than you’re letting on.”

“It’s mostly just stiffness!” you insist. “If there’s any bruising it’s...” You clear your throat delicately, a flush coming to your cheeks despite yourself. “You know. From riding.”

Now Solas really looks amused. His eyes flit down your body. “Aaaah,” he says, and–Maker bless the world and everything it contains–he grins. It’s worth the humiliation, absolutely. “Of course. You’re not used to riding. No wonder you wished to maintain your clothing.”

At that, any semblance of control you had flitters into the wind and you blush a bright crimson. But what can you say? He’s right.

“I will be as gentlemanly as possible,” he says somberly, his beautiful grin already gone, although his eyes still twinkle with mirth.

He walks around behind you, and you can’t help but notice a slight change in his gait. You can’t quite place why, but he seems to glide, each foot hitting the ground with absolute silence. You’re more stiff and still than you were when he was tormenting you with his magic. Has he always moved in such a way? So quietly, so sure? Your awareness of where he is comes from the air he displaces as he moves and little else. When his hands grasp your shoulders, you jolt.

“Hamin, da’asha,” he says softly, and you melt into his grip, more due to how he spoke than what he said. Elven sounds… right, when he speaks it. What will you have to do for him to teach you?
Your skin begins to tingle as you feel the stroke of his magic through your shirt, but to your surprise, he doesn’t simply lay hands. He grips your shoulders expertly and digs his thumbs and palm into your knotted muscles. Ooooh, Maker, why. You weren’t prepared for this.

You’ve never received a magic-tinged massage before. Solas had done something similar once prior, unknottting painful muscles in your back, but that had been purely with magic. Now he involves his hands as well, pushing and rubbing with fingers and mana until both you and your tension submit. By the time he’s reached your lower back, you feel like melted rubber. He damn well could have brought his hands straight down to your ass for healing, and you wouldn’t have said a word. Instead, however, he lifts his hands, raising them an inch, perhaps two, above your skin, and ghosts above your sore rear and down your aching thighs. His hands are absent, but his mana remains, no longer untangling, but properly healing. You feel your pain drain away as he moves his hands down, never touching. A gentleman, after all. You try to pretend that you’re not a little disappointed.

Still, by the time he’s finished, you’re extremely flushed and wishing you’d brought a copy of *The Randy Dowager* with you instead of *Hard in Hightown*. Solas takes a step back from you, as if to indicate he’s finished, and you take a quick moment to compose yourself before turning around.

“Th-” Your voice cracks; you clear your throat. “Th-thank you. I, um… Maker, this doesn’t seem like such a surprise anymore, so much as appreciation, but…” You pull out the special gift you’d been saving… Celia’s trick up your sleeve. Two beautiful, hopefully delicious, caramel apples. Solas looks surprised when you first pull them out, and then, to your surprise, begins to laugh. What? Is he allergic to caramel or something?

“You gave food to the guards, as well, to win their favor,” he points out.

“Bribery *always* works,” you say with a grin. “At least, it never hurts. Are you going to turn me down?”

“I didn’t say that,” he says, almost cheekily, and takes one of the caramel apples from you. He looks funny, holding an apple on a stick like that. Those same hands cast incredible magic, but here he is, holding glorified festival food. You’re about to comment on the absurdity of it when something catches your eye, out across the fields of the Dales.

“I think I see something!” you exclaim, peeking around his shoulder. “Oh! Hold on!” You shove your apple into your mouth, gripping it with your teeth to keep it from escaping, and begin to scramble up the tree.

“Emma?” Solas calls up after you. “What are you doing?”

“Sssshh!” you mumble around the apple in your mouth. You clamber up and out until you find a good, sturdy branch to sit on, then straddle it and pull yourself even further out. Yes! A herd of wild halla!

You hear a branch creak, and turn to glance behind you. What you see shocks you so much the apple nearly drops from your mouth… Solas has climbed up after you!

“What are we looking at?” he asks, dropping his legs to straddle the same branch as you. Wordlessly,
still somewhat in shock, you point out towards the halla. “Aaah,” Solas says, and you see a slight
smile flicker across his lips. “I suppose they must be a rare sight for you, dwelling in cities as you
do.”

You finally pull the apple from your mouth, although you take a bite when you do. After
swallowing, you nod, your voice quiet as if they might hear you, all the way over on a hill and up a
tree. “This might be the closest I’ve gotten… Shh, shh, they’re coming this way!”

“They cannot hear us, Emma,” Solas says, sounding amused, but you shush him again as they
wander slowly closer. You hear a crunch as he bites into his apple, but beyond that, he finally
consents to be silent.

You watch with increasing awe and glee as the halla come closer. Eventually, they’re passing under
the tree, and you’re so excited you barely dare to breathe. As they continue on, you twist to watch,
eventually turning entirely. Solas is watching you, not the Halla, and that’s enough to distract you
from their graceful beauty.

He’s eaten about half his apple. The stick hangs lazily from his hand. He sits comfortably, back
against the trunk of the tree and legs stretched out, crossed, in front of him along the branch. Perhaps
it’s the dark browns and greens of his outfit, but he looks quite at home there. His soft cloths and
leathers are better suited to his surroundings than your tunic and pants, to be sure.

“Have you been satisfied?” he asks mildly when your gaze lingers on him. “May I be permitted to
speak?”

You flush. You had been rather blunt, hadn’t you? “Ir abelas, Solas, I didn’t mean to be rude.”

He waves his hand vaguely, shaking the caramel apple as he does so. “No need for apologies. I can’t
imagine you get such an opportunity often.”

“That’s the closest I’ve ever been,” you reply, craning your neck around to watch them meander on
over the plains. “They’re beautiful.”

“Yes,” he agrees, but his eyes still linger on you. "They are."

Chapter End Notes

All of that pain and it's still being called an idiot by Solas that hurt the most. >.< Oh, Emma.

I appreciated all of your screams of anguish from the last chapter! <3 You know how to
make a writer feel good about themselves~

Bella, i tuoi capelli sono come il tramonto = Beautiful, your hair is like the sunset.
Hamin, da’asha = Relax, little woman.
Despite the fact you’d originally been planning on heading back relatively quickly, you and Solas spend quite a bit of time together in that tree. At some point, you kick off your shoes, letting your toes relax in the cool autumn air. The two of you finish your caramel apples slowly over the course of the next half-hour or so, and Solas tells you more about the strange artifact you’d found in the woods.

It’s beginning to get quite dark out, however. When you comment on this to Solas, he simply reaches his hand out between the two of you and summons a small ball of light. Unfortunately, you’d been looking directly at his hand when he had. You squint painfully, but don’t recoil, lest he think you’re afraid. Even before your eyes have adjusted, you’re staring with glee. You reach out towards it, wondering if it will produce heat like Solas’ veilfire. It seems to be simply light, however.

Solas reaches out with his other hand and grips your wrist. You freeze, wondering if you’d done something wrong, but he simply twists your wrist until your palm is facing upwards, mirroring his. And then he takes the light and simply… places it in your hand. You freeze, but the little light is in no way attempting to draw any power from you… it’s merely sitting in your hand. You’ve done this trick yourself, a tiny light that sticks to things. It’s a common trick amongst mages, but you marvel at it nonetheless. Such a little thing, but sharing it with another makes it seem shiny and new. You rotate your hand slightly, flickering the light through the leaves of the tree and smiling. You’ve had so little time in your life to simply play with magic. You want to throw the light up, send it dancing through the branches… but for that, you’d need your own mana.

Despite the way Solas’ bright blue eyes dance in the flickering light, it’s a risk you cannot take.

Your eyes meet his, stay a few beats too long. You realize with dawning horror that you want to kiss him. Like with Sera on the soft bed, if he makes a move now, you won’t be able to make yourself stop him. You see his lips part slightly, and fear grips your heart, enough that you feel as though it might shatter.

“We should get back to camp,” you say quickly, before he can say or do whatever it was he might have been about to say or do. “They’ll be getting worried by now.”

Solas is quiet for a moment, then nods. “Of course.” He flicks the light gently from your palm, sends it hovering out along the tree so that the two of you can see to climb down. You let him descend first, if only because in order to get down as is, you would have to scramble over his lap. It’s only the feel of your feet in the soft grass that reminds you to grab your shoes, and you yank them on hastily before heading back to the camp with Solas.

“Did you children have fun?” Baptiste comments as the two of you stroll back into the copse of trees that houses your temporary camp. His eyes sparkle with that specific brand of Orlesian glee. Must everything be sex? Although it’s not as if your mind hadn’t gone there as well. Between the massage, the halla, the magical light in your palm… If you had kissed him, no one would have blamed you. Perhaps not even Solas himself, although you’d hate to make things awkward when you finally seem to be endearing yourself to him. Especially when you’ll be spending the next two weeks in such close contact.

Solas makes his polite excuses and heads straight for his tent. That’s just as well… if he hadn’t
hidden in his tent, you would have hidden in yours. As it is, you stay up by the fire. Baptiste goes to bed eventually, and then you’ve only Elaine for company. She’s not much of a conversationalist, which is fine by you. The two of you sit together by the time until her watch is up, and it’s Garrick’s turn.

“Up late again?” Garrick asks as he sits by the fire. He has with him a giant double-headed axe. It's a terror to behold: not as large as the huge sword you'd once seen Iron Bull carry, but intimidating nonetheless. He sits by the fire and begins to sharpen one of the edges with a whetstone. The sound gives you chills.

“I’m still not used to camping,” you say with a pleasing smile, trying to ignore your discomfort at the sight of his axe. “I’m sure I’ll sleep better once we arrive in Val Royeaux.”

“We’re making good time,” he assures you. “At this rate, you’ve only one more night of sleeping under the stars.”

“I can’t say I’m not relieved to hear that,” you say with a chuckle. “I’m a city girl at heart. I’m not built for this sort of travel.”

“Where are you from?” he asks curiously. “I can’t place your accent.”

“Ferelden, originally, but most recently, Orlais,” you reply, waiting for the inevitable follow-up question.

“Ferelden?” Garrick visibly brightens. “I’m from Redcliffe. Well, outside Redcliffe. Where are you from?”

“Denerim.”

“Pardon my saying, but you don’t sound Ferelden.”

“A great deal of my childhood was spent elsewhere,” you say, praying he doesn’t pry. You’ve no real reason to lie about it, not now, but that doesn’t mean you enjoy bringing it up. “My accent simply didn’t know what to do with itself and gave up.”

“Really? You sound-”

“Emma.” Solas’ voice pierces you like a spear; your whole body goes rigid. “Ghilas era.”

You whip your head over towards his tent, but you don’t see him. Is he speaking from inside? Why is he still awake? Had you woken him with your chatter? “I-ir abela-”

“Sahlin.”

“Vel, hahlin!” you exclaim, scrambling towards your tent. You dive into it without so much as saying goodnight to Garrick. There are some tones with which one does not argue.

- Is it possible to fall asleep out of sheer terror? You can only assume that’s what happened. Solas told you to sleep, so you slept.

Your dreams are heated and hazy. You run across endless plains on Revas’ back, holding tight to Solas. Not out of fear, but out of joy. In your dreams, there is no pain: the gentle blessing of the Fade.
You and Solas sit high in a tree, watching the sun set over the curve of the horizon. This time, when he places light into your hand, you don’t have to run. In the Fade, you can’t hurt him, and he can’t hurt you. There is no pain. There is only the feeling of his lips pressed against yours.

You awake slowly, gradually, sometime before dawn. You can still feel the ghost of lips upon yours. You suddenly miss the cold of the mountains; you could stand for a roll in snow at the moment. You’ll just have to walk it off.

Solas told you to sleep. You slept. Hopefully that will satisfy him, because despite the early hour, you can’t bear the thought of staying in your tent until dawn. You dress as quietly as you can and all but sneak out of the tent, as if Solas might somehow hear you and demand you return to your bedroll.

Kelsie is up keeping the last watch, but you know that if you go to her, her chatter will certainly wake up Solas. Instead, you head for Revas and Ash’lana. It doesn’t matter to you that both have already been brushed the night before; you give them both a fresh rub down for the day to come. When they’re both spotless, you move on to the guard’s horses. They’re less happy to see you than the harts, but warm to you quickly thanks to a few choice bribes. Bribery works on everything in this world and the next; you’ll stop doing it when it stops working.

You’re on horse number three of five when Solas rises. He seems to awaken with the sun, despite the fact he sleeps a little past dawn at Skyhold. He emerges in dark, tight pants and a loose undershirt. You watch from over the horse’s back as he begins to stretch behind the tent he shares with the diplomat. The stretches start normal enough, but quickly delve into the sort of bizarre, elaborate things you’ve seen him do on several occasions now. You wonder if Bull knows similar stretches, although you can’t imagine him resting on his forearms with his legs curved above him, the way Solas is now.

The horse’s snort serve to remind you that you’ve been brushing the same place for about five minutes now.

“Can you blame me?” you mutter under your breath to the horse. “He’s **flexible.**” The horse snorts as if to say yes, he can blame you, and that you should focus on your work. You try, but you really can’t avoid staring. What would have happened if you’d kissed him in the tree yesterday? Intense awkwardness, to be sure, but would Solas be tolerant of your silly schoolgirl crush? Or would it completely shut down all the progress you’d made on winning him over?

Well, you’ll never know, because you’ve no intention of kissing him. Look, but don’t touch. Hopefully you can at least manage that.

After you finish brushing every animal in sight, you go to help Kelsie prepare breakfast. You do it just for something to do, really. Since it’s Kelsie, though, you have to if you want to have anything that’s not burned. You watch the sausage over the fire while she endlessly prattles away. You just sort of let it wash over you, saying things like “mmhmm” and “oh!” at appropriate intervals. She’s chipper. It’s not a trait you dislike, per se, but you’ve very little energy for it so early in the morning.

Eventually, the others begin filtering out of their tents, flocking towards the smell of cooking sausage. You decide there’s no harm in a little last-minute bribery. You fetch from your bag of treats one of the jars of fruit jam.

“Let’s make that travel bread a little more appealing, hmm?” you declare as you plop down by the fire again. You pass the jar around, and breakfast immediately becomes an Event. Emilio and Kelsie begin amicably bickering with each other and Baptiste waxes nostalgic about the jellies in Val Royeaux. He even promises to get you some apple jam, which you fully intend to hold him to.
You’ve endeared yourself well to the five of them over the last two days. You don’t know that any would take a blade for you, but they’d probably at least stand between you and the man wielding it. You’ve only one day of travel left, however, so it’s likely a moot point. Still, better safe than sorry. If they’ll be escorting you about Val Royeaux, they may be the only thing between you and a chevalier sooner or later.

You certainly hope at least one of them will be escorting you through the streets, in any case. As much as it might entertain you to think of strolling through the streets of Val Royeaux with Solas, two elves walking cockily through the richer side of town always draws eyes. And Solas… Well, he dresses… like Solas. Perfectly serviceable, and your current wardrobe isn’t that much better, but he’ll stick out like a sore thumb in Val Royeaux. If it’s just the two of you and Baptiste, you could pass for a servant… but Solas?

Eventually the seven of you pack up camp and head out. The day is bright, clear, and sunny, with only a few gloriously white, fluffy clouds in the sky. Almost as soon as Revas is galloping beneath you, you begin feeling those strong pangs of wanderlust again. Sticking to the road like this really isn’t satisfying you at all. You think wistfully of the halla from last night, how free they’d been. You want to run across the Dales like that. Wild and free. Now that you have Revas, you really could, and the desire very nearly overcomes you several times.

Revas seems to be feeling the same way, or perhaps he simply picks up on your mood. You’re forced to ride next to Solas or off to the side, because if you get anywhere near one of the horses, Revas tries to jab them with his horns. Even if you steer away from them, he prances and huffs and is just generally a pain. You whisper soft apologies into his ear, telling him you understand, that you want to run too, but you doubt he can understand you. It doesn’t seem to calm him, at any rate.

By lunch, both of you are irate. Garrick leads the group off the road, and most dismount and begin pulling out things to eat for lunch, but your stomach is in twists. You wander away from the others slightly, still on Revas, as if keeping watch. You gaze out across the plains. It feels like they go on forever, like you could just run and run and nothing would ever stop you.

Fuck it, you need to get this out of your system.

You don’t even have to kick Revas, you just have to give him the reins. He goes from standing to galloping in a single stride, sending dirt and grass flying behind you. He tears off across the Dales, and you just hold on for dear life. The wind steals the breath from your lungs, but you don’t feel like you need to breathe anymore.

Revas thunders across the plains, and somehow you manage to stay on him. You wonder if this is how Belassan feels, like the hart is an extension of your own legs. The endless plains roll by as you tear towards the nearest cluster of trees, just to aim for something. Just so that you can see how fast you’re going.

You feel alive.

As you near the trees, you drop the reins around the saddlehorn and just throw your hands in the air, leaning back and watching as you race the clouds. That’s when you notice that it’s not just you and Revas out here. Behind you, not even very far, are Solas and Ash’lana, galloping across the plains just as fast.

Again, you’re struck by just how marvelous of a figure he makes, astride the stark white hart. With the two of you trailing across the Dales together, it’s even easier for you to imagine a life of freedom, shared. Solas obviously has tricks to avoid Templars, good ones. He suspects you have magic, if the frequency with which he checks you for it is any indicator. Would it be so bad to just tell him…?
Ah, but Solas wouldn’t just abandon the Inquisition to trail across the countryside with you. If he’s putting up with the Inquisitor, he has good reason. He spoke very seriously about the creature, Corypheus. He actually takes his responsibilities seriously. Unlike you. For you, this is more of a way to pass the time until you can find someplace safer. He’s no reason to run away with you. But for a moment, you close your eyes and imagine, just pretend. It’s just the two of you. Safe. Free. Alone, together.

As it turns out, closing your eyes, dropping the reins, and leaning back on a speeding hart is an incredibly stupid idea.

Belassan had warned you that harts had a fourth gait. A “bound” he called it. You’d never actually seen a hart do it, however, and certainly never been on one. When Revas springs up into the air, you lose your balance, your feet come out of the stirrups. You lean desperately forward, trying to compensate. His feet hit the ground and he springs up again, and you come flying out of the saddle. You soar over his head, spinning feet over his head. Time seems to slow and you have a very vivid moment to stare at Solas, seemingly upside down to you, looking severely alarmed. Fortunately, or unfortunately, perhaps, there’s a tree to break your fall.

You slam into a branch rather painfully, your vision quickly obscured with a flurry of leaves. You thump down through the branches until you fall the last two or three meters straight onto the ground, face down.

Your mind swims with dizziness. You’d spun through the air and hit the tree still spinning, and bouncing off all of those branches hadn’t helped. There’s a loud ringing in your ears, enough that you can’t hear anything else until it begins to fade. When it does….

“Emma! Emma!” Solas’ voice sounds like it’s coming from a long way away. With a pained groan, you roll over. Your head is a spiraling mess, but you can move, at least.

“I’m okay!” you slur, dazed. You attempt to stand, but don’t get very far.

“Sit still!” Solas shoves down on your shoulders, forcing your ass back to the ground. He kneels next to you; you try vaguely to push him away.

“Really, I’m fine,” you repeat. The fog is starting to clear from your head, doubled vision slowly fusing back to normal. “The tree broke my fall.”

“You stupid… Hold still!” he snaps. You try to push him off you once more, and he grabs both your wrists, snapping them down by your waist. “Be still, or I will make you be still!” he snarls, and you finally stop wiggling. As your head clears, the pain is starting to hit, as well.

You feel Solas’ magic push into you, without pain this time. You have enough sense to tuck your aura down and out of the way while he examines you. It’s more difficult than it has been in the past. He seems intent on giving you a thorough exam, so you have to keep dragging the center of your power out of the way. “Solas, I’m fi-” you begin, but he shoves a hand, rather rudely, over your mouth. Looks like you’ve nothing you can do but try to play keep-away with your aura.

Finally, Solas lets out a long, irritated sigh and stops raking you with his magic, but his hand is still over your mouth. Frustrated, you do the only thing you can think of… you lick the inside of his hand. Shocked, Solas pulls it away from your mouth, and finally lets you speak.

“Solas, I’m not seriously injured. The tree broke my fall.”
“The tree could have broken your spine,” he snaps. “What were you thinking?”

“I, um… Well…” you grin sheepishly. He’s mad, but you’re still too full of adrenaline to be frightened. “I was thinking how much fun it would be to run across the Dales. I didn’t expect you to follow me, though.”

“Of course I followed you! It looked as though you lost control of Revas,” he says with a scowl.

“…Oh.” You… hadn’t thought of that, honestly. “…Oops?”

“Oops,’ she says,” Solas grumbles, but he seems to be calming down slightly. “You’ve injured your leg, but only mildly. Somehow, you’ve avoided serious injury.”

“I told you I was fine!”

“You won’t be, if you keep mouthing off,” he says with a scowl. Maker, you’d really pissed him off this time! You suppose you ought to go into damage control mode.

“Emma ir abelas, Solas,” you murmur, eyes downcast. “Ar nuvenin vhenal revas.”

He’s quiet for a time, and you don’t want to look up to see his expression. You keep your eyes low. “…Vhenal,” he corrects with a sigh. You manage not to grin, but you do look up. Solas looks… tired, a bit, and still irritated, but his anger seems to be abating somewhat. He reaches for your leg, but you stop him.

“You said it was a mild injury, Solas. Don’t waste your strength with it,” you say, although you suspect you may be risking irritating him again.

Solas hesitates, so you urge further. “We’ll be riding all day. If it’s still bothering me in the evening, you can just heal it then.”

He sighs yet again. “Fine. But you’ll have difficulty riding. Come here.” He stands, then helps you stand. Your left leg does feel like you’ve sprained the ankle, or the knee, or both, but you can walk on it. He leads you towards the harts, both of whom are breathing heavily from the run. You fear for a moment that you’re in for another rough ride behind him on Ashi’lana, but he takes you to Revas’ side, instead.

The hart snorts in your face and rubs his soft nose against you, then down your side as if checking to see if you’re alright. “As if it’s not your fault,” you say with a chuckle, rubbing behind one of his ears. “Jumping like a loon.”

Solas helps you up onto Revas, and you realize that he’s right. Without your leg to help support and balance you, you feel precarious. There’s no Solas up here to hold onto. Fortunately, Solas seems to have a solution. He rummages through one of the packs on Ashi’lana and comes out with…

“Is that rope?” you exclaim.

“You seem unable to stay on your hart without assistance,” he says darkly, and you see a glint in his eye. Embarrassing you does seem to be his favored method of revenge when you’ve upset him. “We can’t have you falling off again, can we?”

You don’t really have any way to argue, so you stay silent. He ties your injured leg onto the saddle… rather expertly, you note. You try to ignore the feel of his hands on your leg. Fortunately, the tie stops at his knee. If he’d tried to go any higher than that, you would have simply walked back to the others, injured leg or no.
Once he’s satisfied that you’re securely tied to Revas—now there’s a play on words—he mounts Ashi’lana. He leads you back towards the camp at a leisurely pace, likely to rest the harts. Running Revas wasn’t the smartest thing to do, now that you think about it; he has to carry you all the way to Val Royeaux. Or, well, to the ferry, at least.

“Solas?”

“Mmm?” Solas is riding directly to your side, perhaps to make sure you don’t fall off despite the ties… or bolt again.

“Do you know why the Inquisitor sent us on this task? Well… Me, mostly, if I’m being honest. You, at least, make sense.”

“Do I?” Solas says, sounding amused. “I’ve spent no real time in Orlais. You are familiar with the city.”

“So is Madame de Fer, and she has the connections necessary to actually make a good show of this,” you point out. “The Inquisitor didn’t even send Baptiste. That was Lady Montiliyet. He just wanted the two of us to go.”

“Do you have a theory?”

“No, not particularly,” you say with a frown. “That’s why it bothers me. It seems like an incredibly stupid decision, and I doubt it was made out of faith in our skills… No offense.”

Solas laughs. “No offense taken. Did Leliana or Josephine say nothing that gave you any ideas?”

“They seemed to think it was boneheaded as well,” you confess. “Which… worries me.”

“Don’t fret overmuch,” Solas advises you. “No matter the Inquisitor’s intentions, we’re more than equipped to handle this.”

You snort. “Says the man who’s never really been to Val Royeaux. At least we have Baptiste,” you add with a sigh. “And hopefully at least one armed guard.”

“Do you suspect we’ll need one?”

“I’d rather have one and not need it, then need one and be sorely without,” you say dryly.

You’re coming up on the others, now. You see Kelsie wave, then shout something to the others. As you draw closer, the teasing begins.

“You two really can’t get enough alone time, can you?” Kelsie says, nudging you playfully in the leg. Then she notices the ties. “Maker! What happened?”

“I, uh… Fell,” you say lamely.

“Onto your friend?” asks Baptiste gamely. The group chuckles and asks no more questions. You could kiss the Orlesian, honestly. He’s done that twice now, covered for you in an awkward situation. You’ve no idea if he’s doing it on purpose, but either way… he’s your favorite.

The group sets out again, and you take up beside Baptiste. “Excited to be back in Val Royeaux?” you ask cheerfully.

“Exuberant!” he replies merrily. “I’ll have you know I’ll be meeting my grandson for the very first time! My daughter is bringing him to the docks to meet us.”
“Is he very young, then?” you ask, wondering how long the man has been away from home.

“Four months!” he says excitedly. “He’s my first grandson, you know!”

“But not your first grandchild?”

“I have three daughters and four granddaughters,” he says with a chuckle. “I’m sure you can understand my excitement at the prospect of another man in the family.”

He talks gleefully about his growing family for some time as you ride, and then about the itinerary some more. It does sound as though you’ll be spending most of your time in the library, but not all. He says with a long wink that he’ll be sure to give you and Solas time to “tour the city.” He’s teasing you, but you’re glad. There are a few things you really would like to show Solas. You have favorite haunts in that city, bakeries and restaurants and stores. You know the back alleys, you know how to get into any number of places despite your pointed ears… and often without being seen. Funny how often those two go hand in hand.

You also learn that it’s Baptiste who has the Requisition forms. While Revas is laden with supplies and food, his horse is burdened with no small amount of paper. You’ll have to have a look at those yourself once you settle down into Val Royeaux, or perhaps tonight, if he’ll let you. How many different people have requested how many different books? There could be useful information in there. Also, you want to make sure yours are there and haven’t been shredded by a certain vengeful Loghain-fanatic.

The weather turns from sunny and bright to overcast as the sun grows long in the sky. Once it’s late enough for whatever arbitrary measure he uses, Garrick pulls you all off of the road again, this time into a sort of cul de sac created by large boulders and steep hills. It makes a good place to stop, especially given how cloudy it’s getting. If it storms, you’d like to be out of the wind, at least.

All of you dismount and begin preparing to set up camp. You’re still next to Baptiste. He steps out from around his horse, and says, “Emma, I have to say--”

You’ll never find out what it was that Baptiste has to say, because an arrow sprouts from his eye socket. Blood begins pouring from him as he crumples to the ground, instantly lifeless.

Chapter End Notes

*ducks under thrown debris again* See you next time, folks! :D

The Elven in this chapter is a hoot.
Ghilas era = Go to sleep
Sahlin = Now
Vel, hahlin = yes, sir
Emma ir abelas = I'm very sorry
Ar nuvenin vhenal revas = I wanted to feel free.
Blood and Chocolate

Chapter Notes

Another chapter that's a little short, but I'm still sans one computer and I figured you guys would rather have some closure sooner than later after that last update. :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If no one notices how fast you react, it’s only because everyone else reacts just as fast, with the exception of Kelsie. Your hand flies to a throwing dagger as you spin to face the direction the arrow came. More arrows come, swiftly. Elaine catches one in her shield, you hear the wooden thunk. None come close enough to you for you to have to dive out of the way. Small blessing; you can put weight on your leg but your mobility is limited.

They look like bandits, from here, but well-armed ones. Your party is pinned in by the rocks; an excellent ambush site. No doubt you’d walked right into it. You take sight of one of the bandits as Garrick bares down on him. The man’s shoulder raises to swing downwards at Garrick’s head, and you sink a throwing dagger right into it. You can’t move much with your leg still injured, but you can do that, at least. Garrick takes advantage of the distraction and brings that double headed ax of his brutally down into the man’s neck.

Once the guards are engaging the bandits, you feel a surge of mana from behind you. You risk a glance; Solas’ hands are up and glowing. Good. But unfortunately, Kelsie had lagged behind the other three guards, and in waiting for her to be clear, Solas is about five seconds too late. Solas simply gestures and bright, jagged ice explodes upwards from the grass, creating a protective wall between the two of you and the bandits. It comes up beneath a charging bandit, but rather than being skewered on the sharpened ice, the man rides it upwards and jumps, coming down on the side nearest you. He’s only a few feet away.

No time for throwing daggers. You swear aloud as your hand yanks your hidden dagger from its sheath in the small of your back. You’ll have to explain that to Solas, but it’s easier to explain than a fireball.

You bring the dagger up just in time to parry a downwards strike. You see the dagger in his spare hand just in time and dart backwards away from it. It slices into your thick leather coat but doesn’t touch flesh. You send a little prayer of thanks to Iron Bull for keeping you in shape, to Skinner for the coat. But you can’t keep parrying a longsword with a dagger.

That’s when you feel a familiar sheen over your body, a tingling outside your skin like a protective shell. A barrier! You recognize the sensation of Solas’ magic, although it couldn’t have been anyone else’s, really. Your skin tingles and shines, a distinct blue glimmer, but the bandit doesn’t seem to notice. An opening! You grip your dagger tight, preparing. The man brings his sword down again, but this time, you don’t move to parry. You see his victorious grin as you bring your left arm up as if to catch his sword with your arm… Which you do. But Solas’ barrier stops the blade from piercing your skin. The man’s eyes widen; his arm is still in the air, the blade bashing into your arm, painful but not debilitating. He’s wide open. You bring your dagger forward and slice, smooth and deep, from one side of his abdomen to the other. Blood sprays across you; the man screams. His blades are rapidly forgotten as his hands move to his wound, desperately clutching at guts that threaten to spill
forth onto the earth. He collapses to the ground. He’ll bleed out quickly.

A few more flashes of mana from behind you tell you that Solas is well and truly in the fight now that he can stop babysitting you. You don’t even try to join the guards; you stay back behind the wall of ice with the horses. The battle is over in short order, in any case. You doubt the bandits had been expecting you to have a mage with you. Solas fills the impromptu battlefield with ice as he swings his staff about, keeping the guards from being overwhelmed. Garrick swings his battle axe like a terror, Elaine kills with quiet efficiency, and Emilio seems to be able to navigate the battlefield despite Solas’ magic… in some cases, he even seems to use it to his advantage, as if he knows what to expect from the mage. Even Kelsie manages, although she seems a bit shell shocked by the end.

And it does end. Your guards slaughter them to the last man. Your chest thuds with adrenaline and fear even after the last one falls. You try very hard not to look at either of the bodies at your feet, but it cannot be avoided. One lies with his guts spilled out onto the grass, leaking a terrifying pool of blood onto the ground. The other…

Baptiste lies lifeless on the ground, arrow still protruding from his eye.

“I was… just talking to him,” you say quietly as Solas runs over to you. He gives you a quick once over. You’re covered in another man’s blood, and you suspect your arm will bruise where you caught the blade, even with the barrier’s help. But you’re unharmed. The same can’t be said for the others; Garrick has a nasty cut on his leg and Kelsie’s side is bleeding. You point, wordlessly, but Solas is already heading towards them.

You kneel down by Baptiste’s body while Solas tends to them. The Orlesian’s one good eye is wide, as if in shock. Hand shaking, you draw his eyelid closed. “Hahren na melana sahlin,” you say quietly. “E… emma ir abelas. Souver’inan isala hamin, vhenan him dor’felas. In uthenera na revas.”

It’s all you can do.

It doesn’t feel like much.

You don’t have time to be in shock. You’re soaked in a man’s blood. A man you disemboweled, a man Solas saw you disembowel. With that hidden blade you shouldn’t have. After saving Garrick with a well timed dagger. You have a lot of explaining to do. Fortunately, no one—not even Solas—rushes to question you. Before he’s even healed, Garrick is barking out orders. Emilio and Elaine sweep out to scout the area, ensure there are no more nasty surprises waiting for you. This is as good a place to dig in as any. The rocks had cornered you, yes, but they also offer natural protection.

As soon as Solas is done healing Kelsie, he comes to you. You’re already standing, moving stiffly and woodenly away from Baptiste’s body. You hate the sensation of being soaked in blood. Your mind keeps wanting to take you back to Seheron. Cover yourself in their blood. Hide in the bodies.

“Emma…” he begins, but Garrick cuts him off, perhaps unintentionally.

“Elves! Get the tents up! Back towards the rocks. Solas, get that girl away from the bodies!” As if you weren’t the cause of at least one of those bodies. Solas steers you back away from the bloody messes, however, a hand on each of your shoulders directing your movements.

You’re lucky, really. Your perceived sensitivity means you don’t have to clean up the bodies. You don’t envy Kelsie. You stare blandly at the rocks until Solas appears next to you again, this time with
tents. You honestly doubt you’re much use, if any. After the first tent goes up, you’ve probably been
more hindrance than help, and your mind is starting to fill with empty echoes of the past.

Spray of blood across your side. Hot, sticky. You can’t tell yours from theirs anymore. You
don’t resist as Solas pushes you into the tent. You just curl up into the corner of it, fight the panic
quietly. There’s no Bull out here, no Cole to save you from the twisted machinations of your own
damaged mind. We all bleed red. Who knew?

You’re not sure how long you spend alone in the tent, rocking back and forth, covered in blood,
crying. You can’t stop. You scratch at your hands until they bleed, quietly chasing a bit of pain to
bring you back to the moment. You wish Bull was here. He could beat you back into the here and
now.

Bull isn’t here. But Solas is. You’re startled when he ducks into the tent, and instantly embarrassed…
You don’t want him to see you like this. You quickly wipe your eyes off; all it really serves to do is
make your face bloody. But Solas doesn’t comment on your appearance. He has your bag of food, as
well as…

“Did you… bring me dinner?” you say, voice coming out like a croak. You smile a weak, lopsided
grin, appreciating the irony.

“How many have you brought me?” he jokes. “It only seemed fair.” He hands you a thick rag first,
and you attempt to wipe off the worst of the blood. Solas’ clothes are stained with drying red liquid
as well, although he’s not splattered the way you are. Your hands are shaking, making it difficult to
clean yourself. After a few moments of watching you struggle, Solas’ hand lands gentle on yours.

“Would you mind?” he asks, and the kindness in his voice makes you want to throw yourself off a
cliff. You just disemboweled a man, and here he is asking if he can help you get the blood off. But
you wordlessly hand him the rag and sit still as he wipes blood from your hands, arms, and face.
You’ll need a bath, and you’ll need to soak Skinner’s coat to get the blood stains out. But you’re at
least a bit cleaner.

You wonder if Solas notices the scratch marks on the backs of your hands and wrists. One more
thing you don’t want to have to explain. Bull gets it, but Bull thinks in pain, deals in pain. For most
people, the thought of you hurting yourself to help yourself would be alien. Distressing.

The food Solas has brought for the two of you looks as though he haphazardly threw a meal together
out of what you had in your bags, although there are a few things present that didn’t come from your
supplies. To your surprise, there’s hot tea, as well as a thick, soft bread that you don’t recognize.
Whatever it is, it’s delicious; Solas has warmed it, likely by placing it near a fire. You can feel your
humanity sinking back into you as you eat.

“The others have searched the area. It seems as though no one else is present. They appear to have
been bandits, opportunists prowling the Imperial Highway,” Solas informs you gently as you wash
down thick bread and cheese with the warm tea. “They’ve likely overcome many a caravan thanks to
these rocks.”

“I… Baptiste, did he… was he…?” you manage to say.

“He died instantly,” Solas says softly.

“He was talking to me,” you say hollowly. “He said, ‘Emma, I have to say.’ I’ll never know what he
had to say.” Something inside of you snaps, and you’re snarling, fists clenching and unclenching for
want of something to strike. “This would never happen if it weren’t for this stupid, pointless civil
war. All the soldiers are off murdering each other instead of protecting the people.” One more death on the heads of Gaspard and Celene. One of thousands. Even both of their heads on a pike wouldn’t satisfy their debt to Orlais.

Wordlessly, Solas reaches into your bag and pulls out a small, wrapped bundle. You recognize it. Again, a lopsided smile cracks your face. “Of course you’d find that, out of everything in that bag. Do you have a dog’s nose?”

Solas snorts. “I came across it while attempting to assemble something resembling a dinner. It seemed to me that you might need it.” He opens the little bundle, and the delightful smell of cocoa hits your nose. A few small chunks and a little bundle of shreds to be melted in hot milk. That the kitchen workers even smuggled that much for you is flattering.

“You have good instincts,” you say, nabbing a piece. Any other day, you’d almost prefer to watch Solas eat it, but today, you want the smooth, sweet comfort for yourself.

“As do you,” Solas replies, and you stiffen slightly. You knew you’d have this conversation sooner or later. “I believe you may have saved Garrick’s life in that fight… as well as your own.”

The two of you are quiet for a while, and then he says, “Ir abelas. Was he your first?”

The question is so absurd that you stare at him. He’d just watched you slice a man’s stomach open with a hidden dagger, and he wants to know if that was the first time you killed a man? How traumatized must you look? The lie is too absurd for you to contemplate, and besides, you’ve started incredulously for too long to say yes now.

“I… No. It wasn’t.”

“I… see. I apologize if I’ve brought up more unpleasant memories. Will you allow me to heal you now?” Solas asks, and you almost laugh. You can’t tell where his mind is at all. What is he thinking? You had no idea he thought so fucking well of you. Your first time… Ridiculous. And he hasn’t even asked about your dagger. This man has spent the last month sniffing around your secrets, and now, when your mask finally slips, he wants to see if you’re alright?

“If you can without risking exhaustion,” you say finally. “You’ve used your magic a lot today.”

“Don’t fear for my stamina, da’len,” Solas says teasingly, eeking another smile out of you. You pop another piece of chocolate into your mouth, let it melt against your tongue as he grasps your hands. He had noticed the scratches, because he heals them first. The combination of chocolate sweetness melting in your mouth and Solas soothing magic and warm hands is beyond relaxing. Any stray panic you had remaining melts into the abyss.

You barely keep your mind enough to keep your aura out of the way as he moves his soothing magic to your leg. Maker, you wish you could let yourself go and slip into the Fade, leave the blood-drenched world behind. But not is certainly not the time. Maker, after you leave this cursed Inquisition, you’re going to hide in the woods with your aura out for a year. Well, not really, obviously, but you certainly feel like it.

Once you’re healed, Solas removes his hands from your leg, and you make a vague, displeased noise without realizing it. You open your eyes quickly, realizing you enjoyed that far too much, but Solas doesn’t look irritated at all.

“Ma serannas, Solas,” you say, still a little embarrassed.

“Think nothing of it,” he replies. You wish he’d speak Elven. “I believe they are… disposing of the
bodies,” Solas says gently. “Including that of Baptiste. Would you like to…?”

“No,” you say, perhaps too quickly. You understand the necessity of burning the dead. Corpses attract spirits, and the Nevarran’s tactic of dealing with corpses is just as unpleasant. But the smell always takes you to places you’d rather not go. The thought of Baptiste on a pyre, burning away to ash like all the others… You shudder. “No. I’ll… just stay in here.”

“I find myself of a similar mind,” Solas agrees, and you expect him to go to his tent… the one he now has to himself, you realize. But he doesn’t move, and it dawns on you that he means to stay in here, with you.

Well.

You won’t be the one to turn him out.

You keep the tent closed, but either the smell washes in, or maybe it’s just all in your mind. That sweet stench of burning flesh. You wish you weren’t as familiar with it as you are. You just stay sitting in the corner of the tent, knees pressed tight against your chest. You nibble slowly through the last of the chocolate as Solas does his best to distract you. He talks somewhat awkwardly about his travels. Twice, he begins a story about ruins only to peter off right when he gets to the part where some horrible disaster befell them, killing them all in doubtlessly horrible ways. He’s not very good at cheering people up, all in all, but you focus on the sound of his voice to keep you in the moment.

He’s just finished telling you about a circle of ruined arches where the Veil was thin. Lovers from nearby villages would sneak there for impassioned encounters at night, causing it to be a haven for spirits of desire and love. It’s only then that you find your voice again.

“I wish I could travel like that,” you say, a little forlornly. “The things you see…”

“We are traveling now, are we not?” Solas says with a faint smile. You can’t help mirroring it.

“I suppose we are. I can’t say it’s the best trip I’ve ever had, though.”

Solas seems relieved that you’re cracking jokes. “If you are feeling better, I believe the Antivan located a stream nearby. If you wish to wash off, Elaine could accompany you.”

You almost ask him if he’ll come without thinking, but thankfully, catch yourself. You just would prefer to have him watching your back, but that won’t do if that “back” is going to be naked. You’ll just have to ask Elaine. You nod, eager to rid yourself of the sensation and stench of blood.

The stream barely qualifies as such, but you’re relieved just to get clean, even if it is tricky. Elaine keeps watch while you and Kelsie bathe, and then Kelsie watches while Elaine cleans herself off. All three of you are sticky with blood. The water is stained bright red as it washes away downstream.

Kelsie seems even more in shock than you. Solas had asked if it was your first time killing someone, which was ridiculous, but you suspect it may actually have been Kelsie’s. You hope they didn’t make her handle the bodies, too. That’s always the worst part.

Without Kelsie’s cheerful babble, the three of you barely speak at all while cleaning yourself. It seems as though the younger girl can’t stay in shock forever, though, nor can she keep her hands off of you for long. She startles the shit out of you by running a finger across the scar on your stomach. You recoil backwards automatically, but she doesn’t seem offended.
“How did you get that?” she wonders. “It looks like a-”

“It was an accident,” you say quickly, barely keeping yourself from snapping. You don’t want to upset her when she looks so fragile. “I fell on something sharp.”

It’s bullshit, and Kelsie and Elaine both probably know that, but fortunately, neither call you on it. It was rude of Kelsie to ask in the first place, although neither woman has given much care for being rude in the past. But there’s never a pleasant story behind a scar like that.

You clean yourself while Kelsie bathes, and clean Skinner’s coat while Elaine bathes. Fortunately, no bandits pop from the woods to ambush you. Once the three of you return to camp, the men leave to bathe as well, although you note Solas doesn’t join Emilio and Garrick. Well, he’s barely bloody at all, having been able to do all his killing from a range. You’re just as glad. You stick close to him for the rest of the evening, shadowing him around camp. You brush down Revas when he brushes down Ashi’lana, sit next to the fire when he does. The camp is quiet; everyone is either processing the fight and Baptiste’s death or keeping a sharp eye out for any more bandits.

Garrick announces that watch will be doubled that night, and you and Solas both volunteer to help. You suspect he’s about to turn you down, but something seems to stop him. He agrees, although he seems to factor you both as a single person, putting you and Solas on first watch with him. Or perhaps he just notices how close you’re sticking to Solas. You’re sitting next to him on a rock by the fire now. In your defense, though, he’s attracted most of the group. He was telling you more stories of his travels to soothe you, and Kelsie started to listen, then Emilio. Elaine is listening while pretending not to, standing near enough to hear yet far enough to be able to say she’s keeping watch.

Eventually, the others begin heading to bed, first Emilio, then Elaine, then, finally, Kelsie. You think you remember Kelsie going to bed, anyway… It all gets a bit hazy towards the end. The day is catching up to you rapidly, and despite the fact that your aura is still tied tight in your gut like a knot, you find yourself drifting listlessly towards sleep.

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That you have nightmares is no particular surprise. You recognize them as dreams straight away; your connection to the Fade isn’t strong enough for realistic dreams, with your aura tight inside you the way it is. The stench of blood and burning bodies stuck with you into the Fade, and you dream of the brutal battlegrounds of Seheron, of being chased through Ferelden by Templars, of blood and pain and death. That much is expected. You have such dreams often. No, the surprising part is Solas. He seems determined to invade your dreams as of late, and tonight is no different. There’s an overcast of warm magic to your nightmares, the tingling feel of a barrier on your skin. Protection. It makes the dreams less unpleasant than they might have been otherwise.

You awake in your bedroll inside your tent, extremely confused. Not by the nightmares… That’s expected, although you’re beginning to become concerned with how much you’re fantasizing over Solas. No, you’re just uncertain as to when, exactly, you wound up in your tent. The last thing you remember was sitting by the fire next to Solas. Had you fallen asleep during your watch? Now that’s embarrassing… the woman who can never sleep falls asleep the one time she’s meant to stay awake. You’ll have to apologize to Garrick and Solas. But how had you gotten back to your tent? Had someone… carried you? You check your clothes quickly, but you’re still wearing the ratty, crumpled clothing you’d fallen asleep in. It’s the worse for the wear, having been bloodied, washed in a creek, and then dried on your body by a fire.

You want to stay in your tent and hide away from the day, forget that you live in a world where a kind Orlesian man can be slain by bandits on the Imperial fucking Highway. Your bitter fury at the civil war rages in you again as you change into fresh clothing. This would never happen if not for the
war. Orlais is weakened, embarrassingly so. No wonder the Inquisition is picking up power so rapidly! Orlais and Ferelden have become jokes, even the Marches are distracted with inner conflicts. Pathetic.

You do, eventually, face reality and leave your tent. With Baptiste gone, there are things that need to be taken care of, things you can put off no longer. Fortunately, it seems as though the others realize that as well. They’re talking seriously around the campfire when you emerge from your tent.

“We have our own job to do in Val Royeaux,” Garrick is saying as you join them. “We can’t just turn around.”

“But what are we going to do with Solas and Emma?” Elaine points out. “We were just supposed to drop them off, but without Baptiste, where will they go?”

“We can set them up with a group of merchants or something, get them back to Skyhold,” Garrick replies, frowning. “No need for them to even get on the ferry. We might be a little late, but-”

“Wait,” you say, frowning. “What are you talking about? We’re still going to Val Royeaux.”

“There’s a hotel room, but it was all in Baptiste’s name,” Emilio informs you with a sympathetic frown. He’s holding a disorganized stack of papers. “I doubt you’ll even be able to check into it.”

“So, what?” you say with a scoff. “I go back to the Inquisitor and say, ‘oh, sorry, your holiness, but that diplomat we weren’t supposed to have died, so we just turned around and came back’? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Do you have a better plan?” Garrick snaps. “Two elves-”

“Can handle this,” you say shortly. “Give me those, Emilio.” Wordlessly, he hands the papers over. “And give me every piece of paper that Baptiste was carrying.”

“How are you even going to get into the University?” insists Garrick. “They won’t-”

“Have a choice. Baptiste already said, they already agreed to allow Inquisition agents into the library. He was just there to smooth things over. I may not know Chancellor Haulis, but I can get us in the front door. I can take care of the hotel, as well.” You shuffle through the papers. “Qu’il repose en paix, Baptiste kept excellent records.”

“He was carrying the requisition forms as well,” Emilio comments. “There are a lot of them.”

“Good. We’re practically on the Waking Sea, Garrick. There’s no point in any of us turning around. We’ll take the ferry as planned. Solas and I were intended for this task; Solas and I will complete it.”

“I’m in agreement,” comes Solas’ familiar voice from behind you. “Complete your job, and we will complete ours. Baptiste’s death is tragic, but for the rest of us, life continues.”

You flash him a grateful smile. At least someone has faith in you. You’re not even sure you do. This is quite the task the Inquisitor has dropped on you, made much more difficult with the loss of Baptiste. But you have to at least try.

Chapter End Notes
Elven
Ma serannas = My thanks
Hahren na melana sahlin = Elder your time is come
Emma ir abelas = I am filled with sorrow
Souver'inan isala hamin = weary eyes need resting
Vhenan him dor'felas = heart has become grey and slow
In uthenera na revas = in waking sleep is freedom
((An Elven eulogy))

Orlesian
Qu'il repose en paix = May he rest in peace
I can't believe I'm almost to 40 chapters. I think this is beyond "got away from me" and into "completely took over my life," xD Shout-out to my editor, Macnmemes/Elvishloves who edited this FROM A MOVING VEHICLE (but not while driving).

The rest of your journey down the Imperial Highway is mercifully uneventful. Garrick sets a brisk pace, and all six of you are alert as you travel along the Highway. Kelsie seems to have recovered slightly thanks to a night's sleep; Garrick had given her only a single shift of watch despite the need for extra security. She's still not as talkative as she once was, but she’s smiling more. You find yourself relieved despite your general annoyance with the girl. She’s overly friendly and far too handsy, yes, but… That doesn’t mean you would wish her sunny naivete bashed away by cruel reality. It may be inevitable if she’s going to be a soldier, though.

Emilio is actually the one who eeks most of those smiles out of her, to your intense amusement. He seems to understand that Solas is providing comfort to you, and he’s attempting to do the same with Kelsie. Frankly, he’s better at it than Solas, objectively, but you still wouldn’t trade Solas’ gentle attentions for anything.

You really have to get a handle on this little crush of yours if you’re to be keeping him safe in Val Royeaux. You can’t afford the distractions of your throbbing libido. As you ride, you do your best to read some of Baptiste’s papers, although it’s difficult to read and ride at the same time. Twice, you look up only to see Revas inching towards one of the horse’s asses, no doubt wanting to poke it with his horns.

The day only gets cloudier as you ride, with dramatic, dark storm clouds coming in from the north off of the Waking Sea. And you have to get onto a boat? This will be miserable. By the time you reach the port town where you’ll be boarding the ship to Val Royeaux, it’s begun to rain. A slow, cold drizzle turns into a dramatic thunderstorm as you ride, and you’re forced to thoroughly pack all of Baptiste’s papers. Fortunately, the man had very well-waterproofed bags.

Garrick stops you in a dockside inn. Normally, Baptiste would go over the itinerary here, but you and Garrick both pick up the slack.

“We’ll see you to the inn, at least,” he says, still sounding dubious about the two of you handling this on your own. You can’t blame him, really. You’re a bit dubious about it. But it has to be done.

“All four of you are needed for another task?” you ask with a slight frown.

“Yes. We’ll meet back up with you on the 26th and travel back to Skyhold together,” he says. The 26th. Essentially, you have seven days in Val Royeaux. Seven days to fill as many of these requisitions as possible while avoiding ruffling too many feathers. And in Val Royeaux, there are a lot of feathers and a lot of ways in which they may be ruffled. You try to imagine Solas strolling into the University on his own.
You shudder.

Well, you’ll just stick to him for seven days. Not necessarily the safest thing you’ve ever decided to do, but again, you once decided you could totally spend a month in a Circle, and you didn’t get caught then. You can handle this. Actually, the worst part of this trip is probably going to be the ship ride across the Waking Sea. In this weather, it’s going to be a nightmare. You focus on your work while the others eat, nibbling on Kelsie’s bread crusts, which she refuses to eat.

Baptiste keeps very good records. By the time the others are finished eating and discussing their plans—sounds like they’re meeting up with another, larger group in the area—you have… if not a plan, at least half of a plan.

Revas is not happy to be loaded up into the hold of the ship that will be taking you to Val Royeaux. He steps on three feet until you go over to help calm him. You would stay in the hold with him, but you simply can’t abide by it. You loathe sea travel in general, and holds even more so. This will be a miserable trip on the deck in a storm, but you’re willing to tough it out.

The six of you load up onto the ship. You’re on edge from the second it sets out from the dock. It’s clear Kelsie has never been on a ship before; she has nothing resembling sea legs. Frankly, Emilio seems to be the only one at all comfortable with the situation. You cling to the railing of the ship, knuckles turning white from your grip. You’ve been sticking close to Solas ever since Baptiste’s death; now is no different. If anything, you stick even closer. If he so much as steps away, you’re moving to follow, paranoid that you’ll lose him. He seems to notice. At the very least, he’s staying on the deck with you while most everyone else heads for cover. Every time a sailor so much as brushes against you, you’re flinching, and after every flinch you’re closer to Solas, until you’re practically his shadow.

If possible, things rapidly get worse after you lose sight of land. As the ship gets further out into the Waking Sea, the storm only worsens, and the water turns from choppy to hazardous. Most passengers duck below deck. Those who aren’t below are on deck solely so they can vomit over the side of the ship. You have little difficulty staying on your feet, having spent your fair share of time aboard ships, but it seems everyone else is falling over, sick, or both. Even Solas doesn’t appear to be immune, and looks more and more peaked as the weather turns worse and worse.

It appears to be the sight of another person vomiting nearby that sets him the rest of the way off. He moves towards the hold, but you catch his sleeve. You don’t want to go down there; you really don’t want to go down there.

“It’ll be back shortly, Emma,” he says, looking positively ill. You feel guilty for having automatically moved to stop him. As if you have any say in where he goes. You quickly release him and he heads for the hold again… but you follow him. Your panic levels go through the roof as you step under cover, although it’s somewhat of a relief to be out of the rain, physically. You stop just short of following him into the latrines… because he stops you, hand firm on your chest. “Wait here.”

He says it in a voice firm enough that you can obey despite the steadily growing screaming in your mind. You sit with your back pushed against the door. The walls feel like they’re pushing in on you, and the violent rocking of the ship makes you feel unstable.

Whatever he does in there, it doesn’t seem to help. He comes out looking even worse, but he tolerates the way you shadow him as he moves through the massed bodies in the hold. You want to go back up, but it doesn’t look like Solas does. In the end, you’d rather be here with him than outside without him. The sailors make you nervous, and the ship tosses no matter where you stand.

Solas, for his part, doesn’t push you off of him. Someone grabs your shoulder from behind and you
nearly jump out of your skin, launching yourself forward to grab Solas’ shirt.

“Oh, sorry,” the man who grabbed you says. “Thought you were someone else.”

He may well have, but your nerves are officially shot. You don’t let go of Solas’ shirt, clutching it like a child clings to their mother’s skirt. He pushes his way through the crowd until you both come out the other side. Then, to your horror, he goes even further, deeper into the bowels of the ship. But you don’t say anything; he looks ill and irritated. Eventually, he finds what he was looking for—beds. They’re the narrow, uncomfortable beds of a ship, and over half of them are occupied by the particularly seasick. It’s only in comparing them to Solas that you realize he really does look very ill. Solas sits down on one of the beds, finally necessitating your release of his shirt. He lays down with a groan, and you shift from foot to foot, nervously standing by the bed.

An exceptionally dramatic wave hits the ship; the wood creaks and most of those still standing fall. You don’t, but when someone with worse balance than you bumps into you, you clamber into the bed with a whimper. Solas is tall; his feet reach the foot of the bunk. You crawl onto the back corner, finding a place to sit by his legs. Fortunately, again, he doesn’t complain about the liberties you’re taking.

The two of you are intensely miserable the entire time, but somehow, you manage to get through the long trip across the Waking Sea. You’re simply relieved it’s only going to take six to eight hours, rather than being a multi-day journey. There’s no way you could have gathered the courage to leave the bed.

You don’t think Solas sleeps at all. For your part, you intend fully to spend the entire trip curled up a ball by Solas’ legs. At one point he asks if you wouldn’t be more comfortable with your own bunk. You just vigorously shake your head and hope he doesn’t insist. He doesn’t, just goes back to looking miserable. At least you’re both in hell together.

You can tell when the ship makes it through the storm, because the violent shaking gradually turns to a slow, steady rocking. Solas looks only slightly less ill, but as the sea calms, he sits up on the bed. He barely can without hitting his head on the bunk above, so tightly packed are the beds. You’re glad he’s feeling better, because you’re not. If anything, the familiar rocking of a ship on seas is worse than the violence of the storm tossed waters.

“Would you like to go back above deck?” Solas asks, and you nod vigorously, still unwilling, or perhaps unable, to speak. You’re so cramped from curling yourself into a tight ball that Solas has to help you stand; both your legs have fallen asleep and hang like dead weights. Walking on them as sensation returns is an agony, but you still do it, moving quickly to stay caught up to Solas.

Relief crashes over you the second you’re out of the cramped quarters of the ship’s hold. There are still few people on the deck despite the fact that it’s no longer raining. But you don’t let go of the back of Solas’ vest until he glances over his shoulder at you. Then you realize what you’re doing and release it like it’s on fire. You won’t be back in your right mind until you’re off of this Maker forsaken boat, but being out of the hold helps to clear your mind of the screaming panic. One more thing you’ll have to explain to Solas. But hopefully he was too ill to notice just how out of your head you were… and still are, to a point.

Solas takes a place near the guardrail of the ship, and you stay steadfastly by his side. Back on the deck means back near the sailors. You can feel them leering at you, but you suspect it’s all in your head. There are people on the ship much more attractive than you for them to leer at, and these men are professionals, not pirates.

“Not fond of ships?” Solas says finally, breaking the uneasy silence. The sea seems quiet now,
although you can still see the clouds of the storm off to the south.

“No, I’m not,” you admit. “Although you don’t seem overly charmed by them yourself.”

Solas runs a tired hand over his head. “I rarely travel by sea. The dreams are never worth it.”

You can’t say your dreams change much, one way or another, but his connection to the Fade is obviously infinitely better than yours. “We’ll be in Val Royeaux soon,” you assure him. “I promise not to take you onto the Miroir de la Mère,” you add as a joke. “You won’t have to so much as look as a ship for a week.”

“And then we load right back onto one,” Solas says, sounding amused.

“I’m trying not to think about that.”

The idle chatter soothes you for the last hour of the trip to Val Royeaux. You become excited when you see the dazzling shine of the city on the horizon, despite your uneasiness with the ship. You run to the bow of the ship, and this time, Solas trails you, although much less closely than you had shadowed him.

“Look!” you exclaim, pointing excitedly forward. “There it is! We won’t be able to see the Sun Gates from this angle, but the whole city shines. Isn’t it beautiful?”

Solas doesn’t reply, but you don’t really care. You’re too excited about being back. Val Royeaux is the closest thing to a “hometown” you ever really had. You have old contacts to touch base with, a lot of shopping to do, and a lot of sweets to eat. Oh, and work for the Inquisition, of course, but that goes without saying.

You’re fully cheered by the time your feet hit the ground of the docks. Val Royeaux is so familiar. You often lurked by the docks, enjoying the sounds and smells of the sea, if not the actual ships. It always reminded you of Antiva. You meet back up with the four guards, who escort you to the inn as promised, before going their own way. You wouldn’t have minded keeping one, but in some ways, this will be easier. It grants you additional freedoms; all you have to worry about is keeping up appearances with Solas, who knows more about you than most already. You don’t have to pretend to be innocent around him, nor clumsy, nor sweet. You can’t quite be yourself, but you can be someone whose shoes you fit slightly better.

“Well, now that we’ve gotten rid of the luggage,” you say jokingly to Solas as the guards wander out of sight. “We can relax and enjoy the city! We only have to worry about that teensy matter of getting into the University and filling a few hundred requisitions.”

“Relieved to be rid of your friends?” Solas asks, sounding amused. “You spent the last three days charming them.”

“And in return, they kept me from getting run through by bandits,” you say gamely. “I’m just as glad not to be roaming with either of the women. They’re entirely too hands-on for me.”

“Oh?” Solas says slyly. “And what about the Antivan? Will you not miss his charming words?”

“Jealous?” you ask with a grin. “It’s the language, isn’t it? Don’t be envious, I can speak to you in Antivan as well, cacasenno.”

“Cacasenno? Do I want to know?”
“It’s a term of endearment!” you protest. “Far be it from this din’samahlen to say something unkind about another in a foreign language.”

“Mmhmm, certainly,” Solas hums, clearly amused. “Now let’s see how you intend to get us into our rooms, din’samahlen.”

That’s probably going to be the second hardest task of the week, easier only than talking your way into the University. Thankfully, you have documentation on your side. The inn is only moderate, thank the Maker. The Inquisition could likely have afforded better, but you’re just as glad they didn’t bother. The less grand a place, the less they care about having rabbits scrambling about the hallways.

“Just let me do the talking,” you assure Solas, then straighten yourself out a little. Your posture changes as you walk through the door, and Solas doubtlessly notices, but you’re hardly going to get through this week pretending like you don’t know exactly what you’re doing. You stroll casually to the man behind the front desk, glancing over the hangings on the walls as if you’ve seen better—which you have.

“May I help you?” the man sounds uncertain. You’re an elf, but you’re walking like you own the place. He likely expects you a servant for someone important.

“Yes, I’m here for the Bellerose rooms,” you say, only glancing at the man you’re speaking with. You pull out a few of the papers Baptiste was wise enough to bring, including identification papers.

“Oh, the Inquisition group,” the innkeeper says with a nod. “But I was told it would be a Bellerose and two elven servants. I see the elven servants, but no Bellerose.”

You bristle, and don’t bother hiding it. Let him guess why. In reality, it’s the cover the Inquisition used that upsets you. Two elven servants? Just to get Baptiste a decent room rather than putting you up in one of the less aesthetically pleasing inns near the alienage. Far be it from you to speak ill of the dead, but the thought does leave you bitter.

“Monsieur Baptiste Felicien Bellerose was detained on other business,” you say coldly. “But we are still here, and we still require use of the rooms. The rooms were paid for in advance, I believe? As well as a stipend.” You point rather firmly at the receipts and contracts. Nothing is done in Orlais without a contract.

“And you are?” the innkeeper asks, clearly not appreciating your tone.

“Alix Gagnon,” you say sharply. “Do you require my pedigree, as well? A written note from the Inquisitor, perhaps?”

The man stiffens, as if realizing he may be dealing with someone not accustomed to the second-class citizenry of elves in Orlais, although you have a very Orlesian name. “Of course… Miss,” he says stiffly. With a shuffle of papers and a clink of metal, he hands you a single key. “Room 32. It’s the fourth room on the left, on the third floor.” A single room? But you say nothing, as there’s nothing in the papers to contradict the man.

“Thank you, ser. Please send someone up with two dinners, in perhaps half an hour,” you say with a thin smile, taking the key from his hand. You turn, and Solas follows you up the stairs. You march all the way to the room before relaxing your posture slightly. “I’ll be damned; it worked,” you mutter to yourself.

Solas snorts, and the sound startles you. He’d looked very neutral downstairs, but now he looks as though he might burst out laughing. “You certainly know how to handle Orlesians,” he says, lips
twitching as he fights not to laugh. “He turned so red that I thought he might burst.”

Solas’ mirth coaxes a grin out of you. “It’s a fun way to deal with Orlesian commoners, particularly in a city like this. If you come in like you own the place, it throws them off,” you say with a laugh. “Now come on, let’s see how they intended to squeeze the three of us into a single room. Perhaps they’re adjoined?” You turn the key in the lock, but you’re not prepared for what you find. The room is quite splendid, probably one of the nicer ones in the inn. It has a fireplace, glorious, soft carpeting, a rather delightful mahogany desk… and a single large, grand bed. You frown. It could fit both you and Solas, effortlessly, but you doubt that was the intent.

“Well, that was intended for Baptiste, no doubt. Let’s see what these doors hold for us.” You drop your bags onto the floor; Solas follows suit. The first door leads to a bathroom with a rather grand looking bathtub that you cannot wait to use. The second leads to, as you suspected, an adjoining room. It’s much less splendid than the main one, clearly for servants. There are two beds, a small dresser, a table, and little else.

Your face must be a storm of indignation, although Solas’ expression is unreadable.

“Maker, I’m going to have words with Lady Montiliyet,” you say darkly. “First the tent, and now… They meant to cram us both into this room for a week!”

“I’m sure it was simply for the sake of appearances,” Solas says, but you’re still irritated. You can’t even be relieved that you won’t have to share a room, because that’s tantamount to being relieved that Baptiste is dead. So you just fume as you go get your bags to drag them into the smaller room. Perhaps you shouldn’t be surprised when Solas moves to do the same, but you are.

“What are you doing?” you say, confused. “I’ll take the smaller room, Solas. I already kicked you out of your tent once.”

“That was a convenience for both our sakes,” Solas informs you. Ouch, he hadn’t wanted to share a tent with you, either? Well, y’know, fair enough, but still… ouch. “It was your clever tongue that got us this room, you should enjoy the nicer amenities.”

“Oh, enough about my clever tongue!” you snap, flushing. He has to know how that sounds, dammit! “I couldn’t sleep in a bed like that.”

“Do you suppose I’m any more used to luxuries?” he asks, sounding amused. “Apostates do not often stay in high-end inns.”

You want to point out that this is hardly high-end for Val Royeaux, but that doesn’t help prove your point any. Nor would pointing out how little playing the “humble elven apostate” card works on you. “I’d be much more comfortable in the smaller room, Solas. And besides, you’ll want a desk before our business in Val Royeaux is over, of that I’m sure.”

It takes a bit more haggling, but you do, eventually, get Solas to take the larger bed. You weren’t lying; you’ll be more comfortable in a small room. You may not like the cramped feeling of a ship’s hold, but generally speaking, you prefer small, tight spaces where you can see every corner at once.

Solas insists you share the main room’s amenities with him, however, so you unload Baptiste’s papers onto the mahogany desk after you’ve dropped most of your things into the servant’s room. When a serving girl—an elf, you note sourly—brings dinner, you tell her to bring hot water as well. The bath is nice, but it’s hardly going to be enchanted.

The dinner is pleasant enough, no clear signs of spit or any other bodily fluids. This is Val Royeaux;
the cleaning and cooking staffs are probably entirely elves. Even if the innkeeper wanted them to take some good old fashioned revenge on you, he’d likely be unable to get the elves to play along. You give the serving girl a hefty tip out of the Inquisition’s money, just for good measure.

Ah… That’s the other thing. The bandits were wise to attack you, because as it turns out, Baptiste was carrying what could be charitably called a fuckload of royals. According to his notes, the money was from the Inquisition, and he had his finances for the trip very well planned out. You intend to ignore his planned spending altogether, however, and simply come up with your own. You may not be an Orlesian diplomat, but you have connections that he didn’t. You can get better prices. You will get better prices. Your pride couldn’t take it if you paid as much as he was planning to pay for some of these things.

You muse over his papers as you eat. Solas alternates between exploring the room, looking out the window, and reading over your shoulder, which makes you twitch every time. You can’t really blame him, however. He probably wants to be out seeing the city.

“We’ll meet with the University representative tomorrow,” you tell him as you go over Baptiste’s extremely detailed itinerary. You’re grateful he was so particular, even if reading the notes in his precise handwriting makes your chest ache. You’ll be glad when this trip is over. You can no longer picture his face without seeing the arrow that killed him.

Baptiste was not the first man you watched die any more than the nameless bandit was the first man you killed. The shock will wear off quickly, but not while you’re reading his handwritten notes, in a room that was meant for him.

“I take it you will want to do ‘the talking’ there as well?” Solas asks, fortunately sounding more amused than offended.

“I don’t mean any harm by it, Solas,” you assure him. “But you said it yourself… I know how to handle Orlesians. I can get us in, I think… Probably. Maybe. I can try. I’ve got the papers, but if they call the chevaliers, we’re getting the hell out and trying again later, alright?” You frown, tapping your chin with your quill. “That reminds me… I need to get a message to Lady Montiliyet. The Inquisition should know what’s happened. I might wait until I see how things go at the university, however… No point in paying for two messages when one will do.”

“Do remember to sleep,” Solas quips. “You tend to forget.”

“Sleep?” you ask with mock horror. “In Val Royeaux?”

Solas gives you a very un-amused look, and you grin sheepishly. “Vel, mamae.”

“You’re not half as amusing as you think you are,” Solas says dryly.

“But still amusing!” you say cheerfully, pulling another stack of papers out of Baptiste’s bags. “Maker, here are the requisitions. There are hundreds. Remind me to get a present for Helisma.”

“The Tranquil?” Solas says, sounding surprised. “I doubt she would even know to appreciate it.”

You sigh. “You’re probably right. But it’ll make me feel better. She’s the one who showed me how to do these stupid requisitions. Solas, would you mind helping me organize these?”

“Better than spending the evening pacing the room,” he says with a faint smile, and pulls up a chair to the desk.

“Alright, anything magic related, put in a stack here. If it’s a technical tome, put it here-”
You and Solas work relatively late into the night, but the requisitions get sorted. You'll still have to look through them in more detail, but you know which ones are going to be harder to find. Baptiste had readied a list of bookstores, all upscale and legitimate. Not a bad list to start with, but you append it with some less… savory sources.

After the two of you finish sorting the papers, you take a short break to bathe. You bring clothes in with you, just so that you can change in the bathroom and not risk even the slightest bit of incidental nudity around Solas. You seem to be the only one taking such care, however. When you come out of the bathroom, Solas is preparing for bed… by removing his shirt. You wind up going to your room with a handful of paperwork just so the man can dress (or undress, as the case may be) in peace. You suspect he may have done it on purpose in an attempt to force you to get some sleep. You try, but after an hour of tossing and turning on the unfamiliar bed, you simply light a candle and continue to work. The tiny room affords you some privacy, at the very least.

You stay in your room until you hear movement from the adjoining one. Solas must be up, signaling that it’s safe for you to come out and pretend to have slept. You change into fresh clothes, wishing again and again that you had something nicer to wear. You’re just pulling your hair out of its ridiculous braid and into a responsible bun when you open the door to Solas room and…

Oh Maker!

You came in a little too early, it seems. Solas is standing by the bed, pulling his pants up. You get quite the view of the curve of the top of his ass before he notices you. You turn around quickly, staring at the wall and turning bright red.

“Ir abelas! The door doesn’t have a lock, does it? Ahahaha… Ir abelas!” you stammer, fumbling with the doorknob. Why had you even shut it behind you? Why can’t you get this stupid fucking door open?!

“Perhaps in the future, you could knock?” Solas says mildly. Your cheeks and ears are a flaming red; you could cry from embarrassment.

“Of course! Yes! I’m sorry! I…” you finally manage to get the door open.

“You may as well stay. I’m decent now,” Solas comments, although you want to dive under your bed and hide for a few hours. “I’m uncertain as to how I request breakfast here.”

“I’ll take care of it,” you squeak, still facing the wall. Maker, and they wanted you to SHARE a room? Did they think elves simply never changed clothing? Or did everyone in the Inquisition just assume you’d be spending most of your time naked, in any case? Ugh. You could die of shame.

By the time you gather the courage to turn around, Solas has a shirt on, and is beginning to wrap his feet. You frown, although your embarrassment is not completely forgotten.

“Ah… Solas?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have… perhaps… shoes?” you ask as delicately as possible. Personally, you’re fond of the way he dresses. You wish you had the courage to run about all but barefoot. But you are about to attempt to talk your way into the University of Orlais.
“Contrary to popular belief, yes,” Solas replies. “Do you believe I should wear them?”

“If… you don’t mind, yes,” you request nervously. “We don’t have anything in the way of Orlesian clothing, but we might as well look as…”

“Non-elven?”

“...Yes,” you say with a sigh. “As non-elven as possible. I’m sorry. If we get what we need, we can spend the last day running through the library barefoot, if you wish.”

Solas chuckles. “I’m not offended. I trust your judgment in this.”

You breathe a sigh of relief. He has no reason to trust your judgment, but you’re glad he does. Your task is grand enough without stacking the odds against you. You spend some time adjusting yourself in the mirror, then ring the bell to call for help. The same serving girl appears, and you request two breakfasts. Might as well... you have a sizeable stipend to work through before you have to start paying for meals and services at the inn out of pocket. And by “out of pocket,” you mean still out of the Inquisition’s pocket. You really need to hide that money. You’re not at all confident about carrying it around Val Royeaux.

In the end, you wind up asking Solas to do “something magical” with it. You could be more specific, but you’re confident the man knows how to lay protective wards. You’ll just bring enough to get you through anything the first day might throw at you. You might wind up having to bribe your way into the library, although it’s not your first choice, and then there are meals…

You cram a bag with all the papers you might possibly need, and nervously set out onto the streets of Val Royeaux with Solas on your heels. Whatever the day will bring, it’s bound to be interesting.

Chapter End Notes

Elven Translation
Din'samahaen = brat
Vel, mamae = Yes, mom

Antivan Translation
Cacasenno = an Antivan insult. holds a similar connotation to "smart ass" but literally translates as "one who shits wisdom"
My aunt, who is actually fluent in Italian, unlike me, suggested this word when I was telling her about Solas. I think she really has a good grasp on his character.

The addition of Emma walking in on Solas' ass brought to you by:

Solas' Ass by Beginnerfanartist

That's basically what she saw.
Maker bless.
You feel elated despite your nerves the second your feet hit Val Royeaux’s streets. It’s not a very long walk to the University—perhaps ten minutes at a decent walking pace, but you feel as though you could spin in place. Val Royeaux! The sights! The smells! *You’re home!* There’s a definite spring in your step as you walk side by side with Solas along the boulevard. Your face feels uncomfortably bare, however. Your meeting with the University representative is unmercifully early, or you would go shopping *first*. Clothing could wait, perhaps, but to your shock, the Inquisition hadn’t provided masks for you and Solas. Baptiste had packed one, but it wouldn’t fit either of you, nor was it particularly appropriate for elven wear.

Solas seems quite happy to silently take in the sights, but you blather idly as the two of you walk, pointing out stores that you’ve been in or food stands from which you purchased meals. As the two of you pass a Lover’s Alcove, you cheerfully point to the couple walking into the shadowy recess.

“It’s Lord Bellemont! And is that a new beau I see? Why… it’s Baron Choffard’s son! I haven’t even been gone half a year; what have I missed?” you say with a laugh. “I have to catch up on my gossip.”

“You seem quite involved in politics for one who professed a dislike for it,” Solas comments, sounding amused.

“It’s not politics, Solas, it’s *gossip,*” you say with a scoff. “If I don’t know these things, I won’t even be able to hold a decent conversation in Val Royeaux. I have a hard enough time being taken seriously without appearing uncultured.” At the word uncultured, your eyes drag over his outfit. Sigh. Well, yours isn’t any better. You’ll have to cause quite a scene to get into the library in any kind of legitimate fashion.

“How do you know the two of them are romantically entangled?” Solas asks. It’s a fair question, they’re not holding hands nor sitting particularly close, and Solas hasn’t spent much time in Val Royeaux.

“Note the alcove in which they sit,” you explain with a grin. “Very shadowy, is it not? With lots of corners where one might be unseen by passers by? As if designed for the arduous task of making love, yet placed in plain sight. There are many such corners in Val Royeaux, and they mostly serve as a means of announcing a relationship. In Ferelden, one simply publically declares a relationship, but that would be uncouth here. To be seen entering one with a lover is much the same as shouting your love from the rooftops.”

“Fascinating,” Solas says, and to your surprise, you detect no sarcasm. Most people find the roundabout way of doing things that most Orlesians share to be… tiring. It would be nice if Solas was as interested in the culture of your countrymen as he is in the cultures of lost civilizations. Your desire to show him the beauty implicit in Val Royeaux only grows.
Unfortunately, duty calls. The University buildings loom on the horizon. You take a deep breath to calm your nerves. “Alright, Solas… Try to let me do the talking, even if they become rude or hostile. If the Chevaliers become involved, we’ll make a break for it and contact the Inquisition for further instructions.”

“Do you feel that particularly likely?” Solas asks.

“It’s enough of a possibility that I’m preparing for it,” you reply. “Alright… Let’s see how rusty I’ve become.”

You stroll through the main gates as if you own the place. The mural in the courtyard fills you with as much hate as it always has. Shartan, with his ears docked. Were it not the last such mural, you would melt it to slag. As it is, you’d love to vandalize his ears back on. But you focus, letting the hate fill you with a form of arrogant confidence, a cockiness that lets you look down on shemlen much taller than you.

You fix the world around you with a steady glare as two guards expectedly bear down on you. “Hey, you-”

“Finally, some help,” you say with a very Orlesian scoff. “I’m here to meet with a Jean-Marc Bernier. Why is he not here?”

Your tone throws both guards. “Uh…”

“Don’t just stand there,” you sigh, rolling your eyes. “Is no one here informed? How do they expect a man to do his job under such circumstances?” You see the guard’s eyes flickering about as he attempts to figure out if you’re referring to him or yourself. “I’m Alix Gagnon, with the Inquisition,” you say slowly, as if explaining something to a child.

“…You’re the ambassador?” the other guard says, appearing to finally grasp what’s happening.

“Ah! I see you’ve caught on!” you say, sarcastically clapping your hands together. “Yes. Where is Bernier?”

Just then, a rather flustered looking man runs over. You eye him, making care to look genuinely unimpressed. “Please, please. Tell me your name is Jean-Marc Bernier.”

“They didn’t even give you a name?” you say with a sigh. “Typical. I am Alix Gagnon, for the Inquisition. You were at least told researchers were coming, I hope?”

“They said there would be an ambassador and researchers-”

“Ambassador,” you say dryly, pointing to yourself. Then you point to Solas. “Researcher. Pardon if I’m a bit short, monsieur, but it’s been a very long journey. We’re both eager to see the University’s resources.”

“Uhm… If you would just… come with me?” the man says, looking somewhere between annoyed and panicked. With a short, resigned sigh, you follow the man. He leads you and Solas into something of a sitting room. You sit on a couch; Solas sits next to you. You take advantage of the moment to size up how Solas is doing. His face is such a neutral mask that even you have no idea what he’s thinking. Good. Although you really expected no less. Anyone who can fool you can fool some Orlesian fop. You cross your legs at the knees and lean back on the couch, adopting the posture of one tired but comfortable with their surroundings.
“Are we to meet someone?” you ask, eyeing your surroundings as Bernier murmurs something to another man. “I wasn’t told to expect anyone besides you; they will have me at a disadvantage.”

“Ah, I just need to… clear a few things…” the man murmurs, and you frown.

“Why was this not taken care of before we arrived? You were given warning.”

The man bristles. “Well, with all due respect, Miss Alix-”

“Gagnon, at the very least,” you interrupt with a scowl.

A few more people shuffle in, and another man moves to address you. “My apologies, madam, but the University was expecting someone more… official.”

You glare up at the man. “Pardon me? Official? Your assumptions are hardly my fault. I’m here to do a job, even if none of you know how to do yours.”

A few of the others begin speaking in Orlesian together, the choice words “lapin” and “orgueilleuse” among them. You glare at the speakers.

“Si vous voulez parler dans mon dos, assurez-vous au moins que je ne suis pas là! Imbéciles! Si vous êtes incapables de faire votre boulot, trouvez-moi quelqu’un pour le faire à votre place!” you snap, Orlesian tumbling from your lips with satisfaction.

The looks on the men’s faces are priceless. You keep up your glare. Even the man who deigned to speak down to you looks a little pale. “I will… get my superior,” he says icily.

“Do that,” you say darkly. “With some degree of haste, if you please. Some of us have work to do.”

You’ll win no friends, but they weren’t going to like you anyway. You sit with your legs crossed, foot flicking irritably, as a few of the men shuffle off, no doubt to get someone who actually gets paid enough to deal with the headache you’re causing.

“So… Alix Gagnon was it?” the arrogant man says as his subordinates fetch his betters. “You are not what was expected.”

“So I’m gathering,” you say sourly. “However, that’s more your shortcoming than mine, is it not? The Inquisition sent its best researchers, not its best courtesans. I was under the impression that our presence had already been settled.”

The man hesitates, doubtlessly knowing that it had, in fact, been settled, but that no one had mentioned you would be elves. That wouldn’t have even occurred to an Orlesian to ask. “I’m sure you and my superior can work things out,” he says finally, with some delicacy.

“I would hope so.” You wait, putting on the air of someone who has much better ways to spend their time. Not even any tea! You consider commenting on it, but really, they should know better without you saying. You steal another glance at Solas, but he’s looking as blank as ever. You’re sure you’ll get quite the reaction out of him later.

Finally, the others return with yet another man. The University has become something of a sausage fest since you were here last, Maker. But the sight of the man startles you so much that it shows on your face, however briefly. You regain your composure quickly, standing to shake the man’s hand as he approaches. “Alix Gagnon with the Inquisition. And you are someone with some degree of competency, I hope?”
“I am that, madam!” he says cheerfully. “I believe I grasp the misunderstanding here, fellows. Give me some time with Ambassador Gagnon, would you?”

The others seem more than willing to clear out of the room and leave you to the man. As soon as they’re gone, you break out in a grin to match his. “Jean-Luc Génin, you rascal!” you exclaim. The man pulls you into an embrace, and you return it gladly. “You’ve moved up in the world since I’ve been gone!”

“So have you, Alix!” he laughs. “Ambassador to the Inquisition, really?”

“It’s somewhat more complicated than that,” you admit with a chuckle, pulling back from the embrace. Both of you sit, you into the couch next to Solas, and him into a chair across from it. “But I am here on official business of the Inquisition, if you can believe that.”

“I can, but barely. Who’s your friend?”

“Oh, my apologies. This is Serah Solas, magical advisor to the Inquisition.” No point in lying, the man carries a staff. “The Inquisitor actually did send the two of us for this task.”

“Magical, hmm? Pleased to meet you, Solas. I’m Jean-Luc.”

“A pleasure,” Solas says politely.

Jean turns back to you. “The Inquisitor sent two elves? What was he thinking?” Jean laughs. “How much does he know about you?”

“Not enough to think I could handle this,” you say with a snort. “I’m his assistant, technically,” you add with a gesture towards Solas.

“Lucky man,” Jean drawls. “Well, you’re in luck, Alix. I’ve got a great excuse to let you in, and legitimately this time! Try not to trod any more of my men, though. I don’t want a knife fight in the stacks.”

“I never thought I’d be lucky enough to see you promoted,” you snort. “I figured I’d have to bluff and bluster my way in. Fate’s smiling on me lately.”

“Honestly, we couldn’t turn you away without risking a stink with the Inquisition and the Empress,” Jean admits. “Plus, who wants to piss off Alix Gagnon?”

You snort. “Everyone, last I checked. I appreciate this, Jean.”

“We’ll have to catch up, Alix,” Jean says, a bit more seriously. “You’ve been gone for a while. Most of us thought you died when… I mean, your house… It’s gone, Alix. Burned to the ground.”

You wince. “I know. Send me a raven tonight. I’m at the Les Indignés Skunk, room 304. Give me some spares, as well.”

Jean salutes sarcastically. “Your wish is my command! But you absolutely must fill me in. I have so many unanswered questions.” He gives Solas a long wink. “Your assistant is wiley, monsieur. Watch out.”

“Yes, thank you, Jean,” you say dryly.

“Well, let’s get the two of you set up in the library!” he says gamely. “I’ll be running around soothing hurt feelings all day. I’m going to be the one to tell the Chancellor about this, you know.
Jean shows the two of you around the library and introduces you to the workers, more for Solas’ benefit than yours. You honestly can’t believe your good luck. Jean-Luc has been your contact within the library for a long time now. You’d pulled some strings to get him hired in the first place; you had known him when he was but a humble student, attempting to get some attention paid to his dissertation on the fallibility of the current economic hierarchy. You’re pleased to see he’s moving up in the world, considering you helped put him there. When he succeeds, you succeed, and this is a very real example of that. Plus, with his help, it will be all the easier to touch base with your old contacts without screaming to Solas “HEY LOOK AT ME DO ALL THIS SHADY BARD STUFF.”

Solas, at the very least, waits until Jean has left to turn to you. “Know that it’s only the presence of all this knowledge that keeps me from questioning you on the spot,” he informs you, although you see the ghost of a smile on his lips.

“I’ll explain later, I promise,” you say with a guilty grin. “For now, let’s focus on getting as much done as we can before the Chancellor catches wind of us and starts screaming for the Chevaliers.”

You begin unloading requisition forms and lists onto the workspace that’s been designated for the Inquisition’s use. “Focus on what you want, first, but when you’re satisfied that you’ve filled your own requests, please assist me with the magical requests. I barely understand what some of them are,” you lie.

“Of course, Ambassador Gagnon,” he says, and you can’t help laughing.

“Thank you, Serah Solas, Magical Advisor to the Inquisition,” you reply solemnly, trying and failing to keep a straight face.

The two of you sweep through the library with a vengeance. It takes Solas impressively little time to accustom himself to the place. As for you, well, you’ve been here before, and the only thing that’s changed is that now you don’t have to sneak around. You would take joy in slowly perusing the aisles if not for the sheer amount of work you have to do. Solas, true to his words, not only fails to question you, but essentially ignores you altogether, only interrupting you when he needs your assistance with something. He doesn’t seem to want to use the library staff; you don’t blame him. Not a one of them is an elf, and all are staring at the two of you as if you’ve six eyes and three heads apiece.

You do much as you told Solas, focusing on your own requisitions first. You tear through every book they have on dragons, writing down names and authors of every tome that might even be slightly useful to you. Next, you take special care to do Helisma’s requests, which takes you much longer. Most the magic books will have to be obtained through your less, um… legal… channels, you’re sure, but these bestiaries you can get from the University.

You only realize how late it’s gotten when your stomach begins to rumble. What time is it? A cursory glance at a water clock lets you know it’s well into the afternoon. You’re surprised, but it seems Solas is just as willing to work through the lunch hour as you are. It’s something of a relief, actually, to know he can be swept away by work as well as you can. Perhaps he’s just chronically bored at Skyhold? Now that you think about it, he’s always either reading or fiddling with something magical if he’s in the rotunda. Normally reading. Doesn’t the Inquisitor give him things to do? Maker knows they manage to keep you busy.

Either way, you’ll both be kept busy for the entire time you have in Val Royeaux. There’s much to do and little time to do it in, so you’re more than willing to have the meal skipped. You focus on
your work as much as you can throughout the afternoon.

You’re getting pretty hungry by the time it could arguably be called “dinnertime.” Solas is still working through tome after tome after tome, and you begin to suspect he’d work here until midnight, then simply sleep on a table, if you let him. It’s almost a shame to interrupt him. You wait until he seems to hit a lull.

“Solas.”

“Mmm?”

“Solas. Come on, I’m hungry.”

It seems to take a moment for this to register with him. He looks up from the tome he’s flipping through.

“That means you’re coming with me. To get food. Food, Solas, that thing you normally pester me for?”

“Yes, of course,” Solas says, though he still seems distracted. He glances down at the book. “I don’t suppose they let us take these…?”

“Us?” you say with a snort. “Maker, no.”

Solas sighs, and places a soft strip of cloth into the book. “Will they leave them alone?”

“Yeah, I doubt they’ll touch anything we leave out until we’re gone for good,” you say with a chuckle. “C’mon. There’s a place nearby we can go.”

You do manage to drag Solas out of the library, despite his distracted fussing. You go only a few buildings away to a bakery that you’re familiar with. You lead Solas around to the back entrance, although you suspect he doesn’t even notice.

The back entrance is hot, because it’s behind the kitchens, where the ovens vent. But it’s where an elf can grab some food in peace, one of the few places on this side of town. The back area has a couple of tables haphazardly scattered about. There’s only one other person there; not a lot of elves come this way.


“Hello, Élise,” you say gamely. You have a very good mind for names and faces. It’s a blessing. “Something like that. What have you got for me?”

“Lots of leftover crullers today! I think we’ve got some day-old baguettes and some spread that’s starting to look a little off…”

“No chance of something nicer?” you say with a smile, slipping a few coins onto the counter. “Got to show the tourist a good time.”

Élise chuckles. “I’ll see what won’t be missed.”

You head to the table Solas has sat down at. He seems to have gotten his head out of the book-fog and is looking at you curiously. Now is probably when the deluge of questions comes. “Is it not so simple as buying food?”

“It’s hard to even find a place that’ll seat elves on this side of town,” you say with a sigh. “The
owner here tolerates us as long as it gives him people he can sell old bread to. He won’t sell it up front, not good enough for sh… humans.”

“You seem to know exactly where to go and exactly what to say,” Solas observes.

“I lived in—or just outside—Val Royeaux for years,” you reply, knowing that doesn’t even begin to explain it. Solas’ expression says as much.

“And you have friends within the University,” he points out.

You cough delicately. “Yes, well, that’s something of a secret. Less now, I suppose, since elves are allowed in.”

“And you know the layout of the library and how to request tomes… and the names of several workers.”

You wince. You hadn’t thought he was paying that much attention, absorbed in his work as he was. “Ah… Well…”

Élise saves you from answering right away by arriving with two bowls of soup, miraculously hot, and some of the aforementioned crullers and slightly old bread. Still good, really, and Solas doesn’t seem too picky. You thank her and pay, and only turn back to Solas when she walks back into the kitchen. You let your eyes trace over the other person in the room, but he seems to be finishing up and getting ready to go, not paying you much mind.

“I… Well, honestly, Solas, the University is the reason I lived in Val Royeaux. It attracts the kind of people who hire linguists and scribes, and it has one of the greatest—if not the greatest—library in Orlais. I… found ways to get in.”

“That much is clear,” Solas says with a chuckle. “It’s interesting to meet Alix Gagnon.”

You flush slightly. “She’s not so different.”

“No?” Solas says, looking amused. “You’re more confident here.”

“I know what to expect in Val Royeaux,” you say, shuffling your feet uncomfortable under the table. “Skyhold is still new to me.”

“Is it difficult, to be an elf living here?” Solas wants to know.

“There are places where it’s easier and places where it’s harder,” you say generously. “There are more elves in Orlais than anywhere else, especially here in Val Royeaux. We’re ubiquitous… and no one tends to look twice as long as you don’t stray from your expected paths.”

“But you do,” Solas points out. “Or you never would have discovered the bakery that sells day old bread to elves.”

You nod. “Because of my job, I often show up in places where humans don’t expect me to be. I’ve learned ways of helping them cope with the shock.”

Solas prods you with more questions as the two of you eat, mostly harmless, but you can tell he’s curious about who you were in Val Royeaux. You can’t blame him. You’re just glad he’s not being ruder or more forceful with his inquiries, actually. He’s acting like someone who just learned about a friend’s hobby. Perhaps he’s just doing that to make you comfortable? He’s certainly seeing now that you can be wiley. It might be that he’s just decided a direct approach won’t work on you.
You wish that you could stop being paranoid and enjoy a pleasant conversation with an attractive, fascinating man. But the day you do that is probably the day you die. So the paranoia can stay.

After dinner, the two of you head back to the library to do even more work. By the end of the day, you have a significant stack of requests to hand to the library staff.

“I need copies of these,” you tell a rather tired looking librarian.

“Some of these only have one copy,” she points out dryly.

“It’s a good thing not all the mages are gone from Val Royeaux, then, isn’t it?” you say with a smile. “I’m sure the University knows several mages who would be willing to magically copy the tomes swiftly enough to have them ready by the week’s end. If not, I could provide a list.”

The librarian sighs. “It will be expensive.”

“I have the coin. Please, have them start at the top of this list, they’re ordered by importance,” you inform her. “And this won’t be all of them. This is just to start.”

After you get everything squared away with the librarian, you head to collect Solas. Days are still long in Val Royeaux, but it’s getting dark outside, and that means it’s time for the two of you to begin your walk back to the inn. Dragging Solas away from his books yet again will no doubt be a task.

“Solas. Soooolas.”

“Mmm.”

“Solas, it’s time to go back to the inn.”

Solas pauses, then looks up from his tome. “I would have thought you’d wish to stay here all night. Does the library close?”

“Maybe I’ve just decided that sleep is a precious thing.” Solas’ skeptical look could peel paint. You sigh. “It’s getting dark, and we have to walk back to the inn.”

“I wouldn’t have pegged Val Royeaux for a dangerous place to walk at night,” Solas comments.

“I’ve got long ears and spent all day irritating people, Solas. I don’t care how far we are from the Alienage; I’m not risking running to a Chevalier.” You glance out a window at the steadily darkening sky. You’re not sure which you want less: to see what a Chevalier would do to you or what Solas would do to a Chevalier. You’d rather just avoid the confrontation altogether.

“You’ve mentioned them often. Are they such a problem?”

“How about we start walking and I tell you on the way?” you urge.

Solas looks at his book and sighs. “Very well.”

You walk quickly through the streets of Val Royeaux, but try your best to look like you belong there. No posture could make you actually belong, of course. You and Solas look like alienage elves at best. The lack of masks is also particularly telling. He’s insistent on you explaining as you walk,
however.

“The Academie des Chevaliers is here in Val Royeaux,” you explain while keeping a keen eye on your surroundings. “Meaning Val Royeaux is always full of new Chevaliers and cocky little shits still in school, ready to prove themselves. They’re known to target elves out late, whether in the alienage or not. And before you say anything, yes, Solas, I’m sure you could protect both of us from a single arrogant Chevalier, but I’d rather you didn’t have to.”

“Is this why you were hoping to keep a human guard?” Solas inquires.

“Yes, precisely,” you admit with a sigh. “As much for the human part as the guard part. It wouldn’t be an issue if Baptiste were still with us. But he’s not, and it’s my responsibility to keep us out of trouble.” Solas snorts before he manages to cover his mouth with a hand. “Alright, alright, my responsibility to keep us out of trouble that ends with spilt blood,” you amend with a chuckle.

“I’m lucky I have you here to keep me safe,” Solas quips, and you spin your head to look at him. He’s teasing you again!

“Oh, har har,” you say sarcastically. “Laugh it up; I’ll still fret. I can’t even imagine you in Val Royeaux alone… they really should have sent Madame de Fer for this.”

“We can complete the task better than her,” Solas says with a smile. “Whether that was the Inquisitor’s intent or not.”

You smile as well, unable to help it. He’s complimenting you, in a roundabout sort of way. “At least this way I get to show you the city… If we can get our work done quickly enough, anyway. Ah! Les Indignés Skunk! Home sweet home.”

You order wine and snacks as soon as you’re back in the room. As tempted as you are to take yet another bath, you don’t really need it, and you’d like to avoid getting naked in Solas’ vicinity as much as possible… even if he doesn’t feel the same constraints. That he sees you as a non-sexual entity has been established, but Maker, you sure don’t see him the same way. You’d seen half of his ass and thought you might actually die. He’d stripped you nearly nude and mostly just been irritated that he had to.

Despite having left the library at a decent hour, the two of you stay up rather late. You both sit at the desk, going through the requisitions together.

“These are the one’s I’ve requested from the University,” you say, pulling out a stack. “They’re the intersection of ‘hard to find’ and ‘the library had them.’ I think for a lot of these magical requests we’re going to have to go to some of the bookshops here in town, especially, ah…” You pull out a form. “Rivaini Seers: A Forbidden Art… My, who would have requested something like that?” you say sarcastically. It’s one of Solas’ many requests.

“Clearly, a man up to no good,” Solas says with a faint smile. You snort.

“We can go to some bookstores tomorrow… The sooner the better, really, but I still want to spend the morning at the library…”

You go over your plans for tomorrow with him as the two of you sort through the requisitions a bit better than the rushed organization you’d given them the night before. It’s mostly about familiarizing yourself with the names, authors, and subjects… several of the requests are like yours, requesting any tomes on a certain subject that can be found. Those are the most time consuming to fill.
The two of you eat cheese, drink wine, and sort paperwork until late in the night; your idea of the perfect evening, honestly. Solas does eventually retire, but since he just yanks his shirt off and collapses into the giant bed, you stay working at the desk. You’re a little uncomfortable, knowing he’s half naked under the sheets, but you try to ignore it. There’s still work to be done, and honestly, it’s much nicer to be working at a desk.

You try to focus on your work, but your eyes keep drawing back to Solas’ sleeping form on the bed. Every time you notice yourself watching him, you snap your eyes back to your papers. Isn’t this the exact scenario you had scolded yourself for, not five days prior? How pathetic are you, to watch a man sleep?

Still, you can’t help but notice that Solas sleeps like the dead. The steady rise and fall of his chest are the only things that inform you he’s asleep and not a corpse. He doesn’t snore, doesn’t toss and turn… Even when your aura isn’t wrapped up tight inside you, you’re a fretful sleeper. He sleeps so completely that it’s making you tired. You consider going to your own room to lie down for a bit, but shrug it off. Chances are you won’t be able to sleep, so why bother? Might as well get some work done since Solas fell asleep without chasing you out.

Chapter End Notes

lapin = rabbit
orgueilleuse = arrogant
Si vous voulez parler dans mon dos, assurez-vous au moins que je ne suis pas là!
Imbéciles! Si vous êtes incapables de faire votre boulou, trouvez-moi quelqu’un pour le faire à votre place! = Don't presume to talk about me as if I'm not here! Idiots! If you can't do your job, find me someone who can!

I wasn't sure where to end this chapter, so I have like... 30% of the next one finished. Probably won't be too long between updates.
Masks

Chapter Summary

In Val Royeaux, we all wear masks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s only when Solas begins to shift in bed that you realize the sun is up. You set down the list you were making, rub exhaustion out of your eyes. You need tea… strong tea. You write yourself a tiny memo to buy a bag of your favorite strong blend while in you’re in Val Royeaux… never know how long it’ll be ‘til your next trip out of Skyhold. The memo goes onto the long list of things you want to buy with the combination of wages and gambling money you brought with you.

Solas sits up; the sheets slide down his bare torso. Maker’s breath, does he have no self awareness whatsoever? You try not to look at him, but his eyes are locked on you. You glance over as soon as you realize he’s staring. His expression is thunderous.

“Have you been there all night?” he demands, and you quail at the sight of his anger.

“N-no, of course not!” you insist quickly. You had gotten up to stretch several times, as a matter of fact, gone to your room to answer several ravens and send out several more. You’d had the foresight, at least, to change clothes an hour or so ago. “I laid down not too long after you fell asleep,” you lie. “I’m simply used to rising early thanks to training with Bull.”

Solas’ tense shoulders relax slightly, but he still looks irritated. “I note that ‘laid down’ does not necessarily imply ‘slept.’”

It would be easy to lie about that, as well, but you just rub your head a bit sheepishly. Admitting you hadn’t slept much would excuse the fact that you doubtlessly look as though you haven’t slept in months. “Maybe a bit? I did try.”

Solas sighs, shifting his legs out from under the covers. They look like they’re silk. It would be wasted on you, with how little you sleep... but if you get the chance, you want to lay down in the luxurious bed just once. Alarming quickly, Solas has gone from furious to seemingly hesitant. Perhaps you’re not the only one who needs strong tea in the mornings. “...Emma. I don’t want to… push, but… You need sleep. I can help.”

You stiffen, your sleep-deprived mind racing for the best way to fend him off again. You don’t want to bring up your supposed fear of magic a second time; just thinking about it makes you feel ill with guilt, but…

“Once before, you used a blanket with sleep enchantments,” Solas continues. “I brought it with me.”

You can’t help it; you light up like the White Spire at the mention of the blanket.

“It uses the same sorts of spells that I would use, however. They do touch the mind. Any sleep enchantment would, even if it was placed on a blanket or in a drink.”
You deserve the truth,” Solas says seriously. “I don’t wish to do anything that makes you uncomfortable without your knowledge.”

This from the man who’d stripped you without bothering to explain why first? But your irritation is mostly at yourself. To keep up your stupid lie, will you have to act scared of a blanket? You like that blanket, damnit!

“I… appreciate your candor, Solas,” you begin, but you’re mercifully interrupted by a gentle rap on the door. You quickly rise to answer it, knowing what it is. Breakfast! You let the girl in to set it down on the table, and Solas rises the rest of the way from his bed. You note the way her eyes trace over his bare chest, as well. Seems as though Solas will forever be tormenting the serving girls with his nudity.

“Miss?” Solas says.

“Yes?” you and the serving girl say in unison. She stares over at you, confused, and you begin to flush. It had been automatic.

Solas chuckles. “Would you mind bringing up some hot water for the bath?”

“Of course, monsieur,” she says with a curtsy. “I will bring it when I return to fetch the dishes.”

She turns and leaves the room; you’re still flushing. Solas grins at you, and that only makes it worse. “Old habits die hard?”

“Something like that,” you mutter. You slump down into a chair by the table. “Not even going to put on a shirt?” you ask Solas sourly as he walks over.

“These are yesterday’s clothes. How am I to change into fresh ones with you here?” he points out, and you flush even more. You can’t catch a break this morning.

“O-oh, I can, um, yeah, I’ll just-”

“After breakfast,” he says, sinking into the chair across from you at the small table. It’s making it very difficult not to stare at him. You examine your breakfast and tea very closely, but you see him making a face as you take a long drink from the strong, dark tea.

“I know, I know, but it wakes me up,” you say with a grin.

“I imagine,” Solas says, wrinkling his nose. “The smell alone is potent enough to wake the dead.”

“So… our plans for the day,” you begin. Your notes on the matter are still on the desk, but you remember them. “The library first, of course. However, this afternoon I need to begin making circles to the bookstores, before we put in more requests at the library.” You gesture vaguely to the desk. “I’m prepared enough that I’m confident I can do it alone, if you want to remain at the library.”

“How many people ordered me to keep you safe in Val Royeaux?” Solas asks. “If they find I let you wander around the streets alone, I may return to Skyhold only to face an angry mob.”

You snort into your tea, then cough, wiping off your nose. “Alright, fair enough. I’ve got a list of bookshops if you’re curious. A few of them specialize in magical tomes; you’ll be of the most help there. I’ve drawn up lists to give to each bookstore, here, if you’d like to see…”
You wind up pulling your chair over next to Solas’ so you can read over the lists together while you share breakfast. You can almost forget he’s shirtless, but every now and then his arm brushes against yours and the feel of skin on skin sends electric tingles down your spine. Of all the days not to wear long sleeves.

You talk after breakfast, outlining your plans for the day, until the serving girl comes with Solas’ hot water. You let her clean up and let Solas go to bathe, ducking into your little room to prepare for the day. You straighten yourself as best as you can. A mirror and comb are both on your list of personal purchases; without them, there’s only so much you can do.

You’re careful to knock before you enter the main room… and just as well. Solas’ voice calls back, “Wait a moment.” You wait patiently by the door until you hear, “Come in.” He’s pulling on a shirt as you enter; that is apparently his definition of “decent.” Well, at least you hadn’t walked in on him in a towel or something.

You get a lot of rough looks crossing the University campus and heading into the library.

“I’m torn,” you say sourly to Solas, walking a little closer to him thanks to the potency of the glares you’re receiving. Part of me thinks we should get hoods. The other part wants to run barefoot across campus and rub my ears in their faces.”

It does strengthen your resolve to pick up masks while you’re out that afternoon, however. At the very least, you can at least look less like obvious tourists. Elven servants are a common sight even in this part of Val Royeaux. You’ll blend in more easily and be less likely to have a run in with a Chevalier looking for trouble.

You do get to the library intact, however, and Solas spends his morning cheerfully digging through tome after tome after tome. He provides you with another stack of requests by mid-morning, which you dig through on your own to decide which ones you might be able to find cheaper from other sources. When you have a list of the hardest to find ones, you drop it off with a librarian, who once again qualms at the quantity and rarity of the books listed.

“These eight, I know you have in circulation,” you say firmly. “Give them to me and have new copies scribed at your own pace. That doesn’t matter to me. If you don’t have existing copies of these, have them magically scribed, now. I don’t want them sent with some haphazard guard, I want them leaving Val Royeaux with me in six days. No, don’t tell me it can’t be done. Did the mages take all the lyrium with them when they left the White Spire? No? I didn’t imagine they did. If your resources are subpar, I have a list of magical scribes who I’m sure would be more than happy for the business. I understand it’s expensive. Fortunate that I’m paying for it, is it not? Make it happen.”

You finally talk the librarian down, and return to Solas’ workspace with a sigh, rubbing your temple. “I swear, they’re just giving me a hard time because… Why are you looking at me like that, Solas?” you say warily.

“You know quite a bit about the process of magically transcribing tomes,” he comments mildly.

“It’s rather integral to my business,” you say with a pout, not liking the direction of his implications. “I’m in direct competition with them. People dislike dealing with mages, but some like dealing with elves even less.”

Solas looks unconvinced, which irritates you. It’s a good excuse! It’s, like… forty percent true! “Don’t expect me to admit to using their services in public,” you add jokingly. “That would be
Solas seems content to let it drop, although you’d be willing to bet he’s still nursing his own private suspicions. You can only imagine what he must think of you by now… You haven’t been doing a very good job at keeping your secrets, but as with Leliana, the important ones still seem to be intact.

You break for lunch at a reasonable hour instead of working through, and it’s a bit easier to drag Solas out of the library this time. Perhaps he’s looking forward to seeing more of Val Royeaux? You suspect he’ll be bored, however. All you’ll be doing is going to bookstores… Then again, you’re talking about a man who came back from a trip to a swamp with books.

“Are we not going to the same bakery for lunch?” Solas asks as you pass aforementioned bakery.

“No need. We’re going to be walking around Val Royeaux anyway; might as well take the opportunity to try something different. Besides, I can only tolerate day-old bread for so long when I have this much coin burning my pockets. But first…”

You head for a mask shop you’re familiar with, one that often outfits elven servants, which they’ll no doubt assume you are. Solas looks slightly bemused as you walk in the door. “Masks, Emma?”

“I’m tired of looking like a tourist. For some Maker forsaken reason, they didn’t bother to send masks with us, and Baptiste didn’t have anything written about what the Inquisition’s style is. I don’t suppose you know…? No, I suppose you wouldn’t.” You sigh. “Shame.”

“May I help you?” inquires an approaching worker. You eye her rounded ears with some distaste, but smile respectfully. An elf would be somewhat out of the ordinary even in a mid-range shop like this, really.

“Could you point us in the direction of your working section, please?” you say politely, even though you’ve no real intention of shopping from there. The lady directs you to a small stand, and you make a show of looking at the masks until she wanders off slightly. You’ll probably be followed, but at least they’re not making it obvious.

You eye the masks as you slowly make your way through the shop’s displays. The masks are all behind glass, and a cursory brush with your hand lets you feel the magical wards present on the cases for the more expensive pieces. Not that you were planning on stealing anything… particularly not with Solas right there. You simply have a habit of checking.

Just because you don’t know what the Inquisition is wearing doesn’t mean you and Solas can’t match. If you don’t know what the Inquisition’s patterns are yet, chances are no one in Val Royeaux will. No Inquisition agent you’d seen in the city before had even been wearing a mask. As long as you and Solas match, the assumption of some professionalism will be assumed.

You eye the silver longingly, but there’s no need for something expensive when you don’t know how much use you’ll get out of it. So you hover towards the silver-nickel mixes, then wave over the worker subtly keeping an eye on you.

“Could I see these, please?” you ask, pointing at a small selection silver and nickel masks with various inlaid gemstones. The worker opens the case, and you’re pleased at the lack of fussing. Perhaps they assume you work for someone after all, or perhaps the purse--heavy with coin--you have hanging at your hip is enough to convince them your business is legitimate. She even brings a mirror!

You examine a few, and try even fewer on. Then you turn to Solas, mask in hand. “Here,” you say,
holding it out to him. He blinks.

“Pardon?”

“Try it on. I’m not going to select without seeing how it looks on you,” you point out. He hesitates, then takes the mask.

“Are you sure this is-”

“Just put it on, Solas,” you interrupt. Rude, yes, but you don’t want him saying too much in front of the worker. With a slight frown, he does so, tying it around his head with obvious discomfort. You have him try on two more before you’re satisfied.

“These two,” you tell the worker. She has the manners not to look too surprised at your selection. They could be for servants, but someone who works in a mask store may be rather aware that no one in particular uses silver and opals for their servant’s masks… and that the style you got isn’t precisely a servant’s style. Still, the clink of your coin purse seems enough to satisfy her.

“You paid from the Inquisition’s purse,” Solas points out as you leave the building.

“I can’t believe they didn’t give us masks in the first place,” you say with a scowl. “Believe me, this is a business expense. I won’t get anywhere in this town looking like some half-cocked tourist.” You pause outside of the shop, unwrapping the mask then and there to put on.

“Is it so necessary that you needed to purchase one for me, as well?” Solas says as you tie the mask’s ribbon firmly into your bun. It wouldn’t do for it to slip.

“Absolutely. And we’ll match; people will assume we work for someone, if they see matching masks and matching ears. I’d rather be taken for a servant than a cocky Alienage elf.” You pull out Solas’ mask. Yours is a delicate silver and nickel filigree inlaid with white opals; his is similar, but in a men’s style and with black opals. You admit that the fact they’re rather pretty informed your decision. If people take you for servants, they’ll take you for high-level servants, personal manservants or the handlers of estates. Rare for elves, but the human mind will grasp for any reason for an elf to not be a free man.

“Oh, let me; I don’t want it to slip,” you say as Solas begins to tie the mask’s ribbon behind his head. You slip behind him, stand on your tiptoes to tie a firm knot that won’t slip. It would be easier if he had hair, but you’d given him a style of mask that rested on the nose for that very reason. Still, you’ll probably have to adjust him throughout the day.

You step back out in front of him, admiring your handiwork. “Well, I won’t say you look Orlesian, not in that outfit… But it’s better,” you say with a slight smile. In truth, the mask looks fantastic on him. You hope yours looks nearly as good on you. “Now that I’ve accosted you with culture, let’s grab some lunch.”

You take Solas to a nearby restaurant that tends to serve servants out and about on business for their masters. Elves aren’t an uncommon sight there, so you manage a decent table on the patio. Solas seems mildly uncomfortable in the mask, but he’ll just have to get used to it. This is Val Royeaux. People wear masks. “Don’t fret at it,” you say the third time he adjusts it on his face. “You’re going to be wearing it for a week, so get used to it.” He reaches up again; you reach across the table to swat at his hands. “I’ll let you know if it gets off center. Leave it be.”

“You quickly become insufferable on subjects in which you actually have superior knowledge,” he quips at you, but you just grin.
“Insufferable, I can live with. Particularly if it’s deserved.” In fact, as if to prove your insufferableness, when the waitress comes, you order for both yourself and Solas. Really, the menu is in Orlesian, so it isn’t as though he’d know what to order, but still. It’s the principle of the thing, you’re sure.

“I can’t deny it’s deserved, Alix,” Solas says with a smirk that sends butterflies swarming in your stomach. “If I weren’t so certain the Inquisitor sent us simply to be rid of us, I would suspect he knew things about you that I did not.”

A flush lights your cheeks and ears. “He does not, I assure you.”

“So,” Solas says as the waitress brings your drinks over, a sweet, fruity Orlesian wine. “Who is Alix Gagnon?” He waves his hand as you open your mouth. “Besides a linguist.”

“Not so different from Emma,” you say with a tiny pout. Does he think you have two utterly different personas? Well… He’s not wrong, you suppose, but he sees more of you than most.

“More comfortable in her skin,” Solas points out, and something about the way he says ‘skin’ makes your face heat.

“More comfortable in Orlais,” you correct. “In Val Royeaux. This is…” You wave your hand vaguely around you. “The closest I’ve ever felt to belonging. I know who I am here. I know who Alix is.”

“But you fear for your life,” Solas points out. “You were frightened simply of the possibility of seeing a Chevalier.”

“Tell me, Solas, have you ever been to a place where you didn’t fear for your life?” you ask pointedly. “Truly? Even in Rivain, where they care less about pointed ears, there’s always fear of bandits, Tal-Vashoth, the Qunari themselves. In Ferelden they’ll kill you for looking at them wrong, they have mercenaries everywhere, they’ve got all those giant dogs, and the bears. Maker, the bears.” You shake your head. “An elf who’s not concerned for their life at times is simply an elf who’s not paying attention to their surroundings.”

Solas is quiet for a long while after that. He seems to be thinking over what you said. It was perhaps a telling thing to say, but you couldn’t help it. You knew he had to understand; he was an apostate. He had to know what it was like. Even if he’d avoided Templars his whole life, somehow, he would know the fear of them. There couldn’t be an apostate in this world who didn’t.

Solas seems to muse over your words as you wait for your food. You’re relieved when it does; you’re hardly that hungry, but if there’s food in front of you, you’ll eat. Besides, it gives you something to focus on other than Solas.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised you’ve learned my tastes,” Solas comments part way through the meal.

“That means you like it, I take,” you say with a broad smile. “Good. I wouldn’t be much of a tour guide if you hated the food.”

Solas snorts. “Tour guide, are you now?”

“Yep! Working day and night to endear grumpy elves to Val Royeaux,” you say with a snort. “A task nearly as challenging as the one the Inquisitor actually gave us.”

“And yet, we seem to be doing fine,” Solas says with a thin smile.
“To my surprise, yes,” you admit. “That was a stroke of luck with Jean… I don’t know if I could have talked our way in or not, otherwise.”

“You seemed to be doing fine.”

You chuckle. “Man, the look on their faces… Priceless.”

After the two of you finish your meal, you lead him towards the market district. You won’t actually be going down the main stretch just yet--just as well, your outfit is beyond subpar--but several of the bookstores are near there.

You navigate through the legitimate ones swiftly, almost all of which were on Baptiste’s list. Having lists of the books you need allows you to play the part of the elven servant again. You drop off a list of books at each, with instructions for them to find which they have available, list them with their prices, and send them to your room at the inn in no more than three days time--although you instruct them to make the list out to Baptiste, which makes you more believable as a rich man’s servant. Some may disregard you because of your ears, but it’s not so difficult to make a list, and they’ll see they have the opportunity to make a pretty penny.

Finally, three hours later, you’ve hit every blasted legitimate bookseller in Val Royeaux, or so it feels. You pause to rest on a bench, and Solas sits beside you.

“You are sweeping through this city like a storm,” he comments, and after a moment, you realize he’s complimenting you, and flush.

“Th...thank you, Solas,” you stammer. “But I simply want to obtain as many books for the Inquisition as possible while we’re here. If I’m going to do a job, I’m going to do it well.”

“A commendable attitude,” Solas praises, only serving to make you flush darker. “I do have a question however.”

“Y...yes?”

“You mentioned the Inquisition’s name at some shops, but not others. Why?”

Oh, he noticed that, had he? You suppose he would have. “The Inquisition is still a subject of some debate in Val Royeaux, although what I’ve heard today leads me to believe popular opinion is swinging slightly positive. I mention the Inquisition only at places where I knew it was regarded favorably.”

“How did you determine whether or not a location held a positive view of the Inquisition?” Solas inquires.

“I pay attention,” you say, a little shortly.

Solas raises an eyebrow, but you decline to elucidate… It would be a long conversation, and you’re tired from walking around and putting on a show for every single bookstore worker. Every single human you’d seen so far was looking at Solas strangely. You knew why; he dressed strangely and carried a staff. “Do you normally dress like that when you come into a town?” you ask, a little sourly.

Solas actually looks a little offended. “Pardon?”

“Solas, you’re wearing a fur. It’s very fetching, but it does make you look a little… rustic?”
“I rarely spent any amount of time in towns, particularly not cities of this size,” Solas informs you. Hmm. Maybe he was just significantly better at surviving in the wild than you, and that was part of how he’d avoided detection for so long. Maker knows you’d never had much luck roughing it across Thedas. You had more issues with Templars in that one year than you did your entire time in Orlais.

“Ah, well,” you say with a sigh. “At least you’ll fit in better where we’re going.”

“Oh? Have we not gone to all the bookstores on your list?”

“Oh Bapiste’s list,” you correct with a smile. “We’re about to start on mine.

Chapter End Notes

Bit of art to go with this chapter courtesy of needapotion on tumblr!

A Subject for Debate

Chapter Notes

Somehow I doubt that anyone's going to take a break from the DLC to read this right away, but here it is!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Val Royeaux gets shittier and shittier the closer you get to the walls of the alienage. You don’t particularly like coming to this side of town. The Chevaliers patrol more heavily here, and you’ve never been fond of alienages. Not that you actually go into it… No, you stay on the outskirts. And rather than going to any sort of legitimate business, Solas watches as you drop off very different lists to a chain of increasingly shady looking individuals. You speak to each in hushed tones, praying that Solas overhears little. Each and every person you speak to that afternoon knows you, by face or by name, and the less Solas knows about that the better. Solas seems increasingly intrigued with each list delivered, however.

You stop at a very familiar elven bakery near the entrance to the alienage when you’re finally done dropping off lists.

“Alix!” the elf behind the counter exclaims when you walk in. He actually jumps over the counter, bare feet covered in flour, and sweeps you up in a warm hug. “I thought you were dead! We all did, when Jean said your house-”

“I’m fine, Luvian,” you say, flustered. “And you’re covering me in flour.”

“Oh!” he says, releasing you. “Sorry! But where have you been? What happened? We heard the red Templars are--”

“I got out in time,” you explain, trying to calm him. He’d nearly knocked your mask off, and you pause to adjust yourself while you talk. “And I joined the Inquisition.”

“What?” Luvian says, shocked. “But you called them, and I quote, ‘nothing but a bunch of Templar-loving idiots who couldn’t bend over fast enough to let the Chantry fuck them up the ass.’”

You hear a spluttering laugh covered poorly by a cough from behind you. This seems to draw Luvian’s eyes, as well. “And who’s this, then? Elgar’nan, Alix, is that a staff?”

You glance over at Solas. The mask is doing well to hide his expression, but you’re experienced enough with his face now to recognize how displeased he looks with the situation. You quickly attempt to deescalate. “Luvian, we’re starving. Would you mind getting us some food? Then I can explain everything.”
“Of course!” Luvian says cheerfully. “Have a seat anywhere, both of you! I’ve got some fresh baked laise bread in the back.”

As he scurries off, you pull Solas to a table, embarrassed beyond reason. You should have thought better of bringing Solas here. “He has very good bread,” you say, by way of explanation. “He’s just very very… enthusiastic.”

“Laise bread?” Solas asked, sounding a bit tired. The man had just said ‘bread bread,’ essentially.

“He’s very enthusiastic,” you admit, rubbing your head. “He’s got a shrine to Sylaise hidden in the back and everything. I think the Chevaliers tolerate him being just outside the alienage only because he’s well-to-do and gives them hot rolls when they’re patrolling.”

“And the two of you are friends?”

“When I first came to the city, he was the first person to hire me for something actually linguistics related,” you confess. “And I do love bread.”

“Dare I ask?”

You flush. “He was paying me to teach him some Elven.”

You see Solas twitch behind his mask, and you fight the urge to bury your face in your hands.

“W… well,” Solas said, clearly struggling. “Your vocabulary, at least--”

“You can make fun of me,” you inform him, giving up and lowering your face into your palms, blushing furiously. “I would make fun of me. I’m in no position to teach anyone Elven, I know that now, but…”

Luvian comes out of the back then, necessitating the end of that particular discussion, thank the Maker. You try to hide your embarrassment. Luvian is a very sweet man, really. He gave you a job when no one else would, bragged about you to his customers. You had gotten a small job for a Chevalier’s rich uncle thanks to him. You owed him better than being embarrassed by his presence.

“So,” he says, placing hot bread and steamed bread on the table, then sitting down. “Fill me in!”

And you do, although a tastefully edited version. You can’t help but notice that Solas is listening with great interest as you explain how you escaped your house and made for the Frostbacks with the hope of joining the Inquisition.

“Why not just come back to Val Royeaux?” Luvian asks, at one point.

“And live where, Luvian?” you say with a scowl. “In the Alienage? After what happened?”

“That sort of thing won’t happen here!”

“Enough, Luvian,” you say shortly. “To get to Val Royeaux, I would have had to go twice as far, and through the fighting of the civil war, mages, Templars, demons… No. I went for the Inquisition.”

“Seems to have worked out for you!” Luvian said, cheerful despite your obvious irritation. “Look at you, assistant to some big, important mage!”
Luvian’s chatter fills the meal. Solas eats in silence; you eat in increasing discomfort until you can finally make an excuse to leave. “It’s been wonderful catching up with you, Luvian, but we’ve still got work to do, and I don’t want to be out after dark…”

“Oh, of course! Stop by again if you get the chance, Alix! It’s just good to know you’re alive.” The relief in his voice gives you another pang of guilt. You don’t have the right to look down on him the way you do. If anything, your experiences with Solas have taught you that much. As much more as you may know than Luvian, you are far, far from an expert on Elven lore.

You collapse onto a bench a few blocks away from Luvian’s bakery. “Maker why did I think going in there was a good idea?” you groan.

“The food was very good,” Solas said amiably.

“Even if the company lacked?” you ask sourly, rubbing your eyes under your mask. “I feel like I just aged three years.”

“You have not, I assure you.” Solas sits down onto the bench next to you; you scoot over a bit to make more room for him. “I note that your friend wore a mask, but many of the elves I see out here do not.”

“Mmm. Only the well-to-do or servants of the well-to-do tend to be able to afford them,” you say absent-mindedly. “Would you buy a mask, or food? It’s like any jewelry, really. Why wear a valuable thing around your face? It’s like screaming that you have enough money to be mugged.”

“Then why are we?” Solas asks pointedly.

“No one’s going to mug us, Solas. Even if they didn’t all think we worked for someone important because of the value of these masks, you carry a staff. The White Spire is right there. People here are used to seeing mages enough to make a wide berth for anyone carrying a staff like that.”

“That’s very interesting, but doesn’t quite answer my question.”

You eye him sourly. You let him dodge questions, why can’t he return the favor? “Appearances. We need to fit in, need to look like we know what we’re doing.”

“You do know what you’re doing,” Solas points out. “You’re more at ease here than I have ever seen you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” you say, shaking your head. “Eighty percent of knowing what I’m doing is knowing how to look, Solas. It’s Orlais. Didn’t you ever wonder why Madame de Fer dresses the way she does? It’s not because she enjoys spending an hour getting ready every morning.”

“You are not nearly so meticulous in Skyhold.”

“Skyhold isn’t Val Royeaux. Unlike Madame de Fer, I’m not actually that… pompous. Outside of Orlais, all it gets you is contempt, not respect. But here… I could be a genius, but if I didn’t look the part, I’d accomplish nothing.”

“Could be?” Solas says, something in his voice causing the beginnings of a rosy blush to heat the tips of your ears. “It seems evident to me.”

Thank the Maker for masks, because you’re certainly crimson behind it. You stand up quickly. “Well
we still have work to do!” you say a little too loudly. “No time for dallying!” You power walk off
down the street, Solas trailing amusedly behind you.

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It’s hard to track down some of the people you’re looking for, and you wind up staying on the
shadier side of Val Royeaux much later than you would like. You catch a few less-than-savory
people eyeing you, but they worry you less than the chance of a Chevalier coming across you. Most
of the elves are off the streets and back in the alienage by the time night rolls around. It won’t be long
before you and Solas are the only pointed ears to be seen.

After one more delivery, you’ve conquered your list. You immediately begin heading back towards
the inn, jumpy and eager to be off the streets.

“This has been an interesting way to spend a day,” Solas is saying as you cross a bridge over a canal
that serves to separate the poor from the rest of Val Royeaux. You’re barely listening, however. The
White Spire is all lit up, and it’s vibrant gleaming catches your eye. You stop in the middle of the
bridge and turn to look at it, resting your hands on the railing.

Solas notices you’ve stopped and his gaze follows yours. “Quite the sight, isn’t it?” you say quietly.
“Like a sword aimed at the heavens. I’m amazed they have it lit up. What’s the point? Most everyone
abandoned the tower and the city both, and I doubt there’s a single Templar left in Val Royeaux at
this point. There are no mages left here to intimidate.”

“We’re here,” Solas says, startling you. You look at him sharply. Did he have suspicions you’d still
yet to quell?

“I suppose there’s some truth to that,” you say cautiously. “You’re an apostate. But it still seems
pointless.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“I don’t think much of anything intimidates you, Solas.”

The two of you stare quietly out at the White Spire for a little longer.

“I’ve heard the Veil is thin as paper there,” you comment. “It seems like a terrible place to hoard
mages. Wouldn’t a thin Veil mean more possessions?”

“Yes, but also more potent magic,” Solas says. “I’d like to see it for myself, actually.”

You turn to stare at him. “That’s… That’s really…”

“Unwise?” Solas says with a quirk of his lips.

“Something like that, yeah,” you say, grinning despite yourself. “An apostate sneaking into a Circle
tower? There’s no way you survived this long doing that sort of thing, Solas.”

“No, I suppose not,” Solas says, but your mind is already spinning with thoughts and idle ideas.
There are no Templars in Val Royeaux, they’re all with the Inquisition now. There are still mages
holed up in the Circle, the last loyal mages that Madame de Fer “leads.” But there would still be no
better time to sneak into the White Spire than this. Could you do it? How pleased would Solas be, if
you could actually get him inside?

A terrible idea, most likely… But there’s no harm in looking into it, right?
It’s another night of wine and snacks in the inn. No reason not to, really… it’ll be an effort to work through all the surplus funds Josephine sent to the inn. Baptiste must have been a man generous with room service.

You try to avoid thinking of him, but it will be difficult until this trip is over. You’re looking through his notes on a daily basis, reading things in his handwriting. You can’t help musing over his excitement over meeting his grandson. But such things only serve to depress you, so you try to simply focus on your work.

You have several ravens lurking in your bedroom when you enter it, but you ignore their messages for now. You’ll need to reply, and you simply can’t do that while Solas is awake. You give them some crackers to reward their patience, and shut the door firmly behind you when you leave.

“Someone here has requested additional tomes on veilfire.” Solas is seated at the mahogany desk, idly going through the magical requisitions you had set aside for him. You’d meant to leave that one out of Solas’ stack. “My, I wonder who it could be?”

“I was curious!” you protest, flushing slightly.

“Have you already finished the tome I gave you?”

“I have. I was going to give it back to you… After I got my own copy,” you admit sheepishly. “It’s in my bag, if you want it back.”

“You brought it with you?”

“Yes, sorry… I wanted to finish reading it. I didn’t want to wait two weeks while we traipsed through the countryside.”

Solas smiles lightly. “You can give it back when we return to Skyhold, then. What did you think of it?”

“Well, I didn’t understand most of the instructions,” you lie. “How to summon it, that sort of thing. But the theory and practical application sections were fascinating. Particularly the way elves seemed to use it for… magical shorthand, essentially.”

“Of course, you would focus on the ways in which veilfire can be a form of writing,” Solas says with a warmer smile that fills you with a heat of your own. “If you are interested in that aspect, there are a few tomes I could recommend…”

The two of you sit there, side by side at the desk, while Solas walks you through suggestions for some of the vaguer magical requisitions requests. You note the names on each… Madame de Fer seems to always request specific tomes, whereas Dorian is sometimes vaguer. The “Dagna” whom you’d heard about from Dorian was probably the most frequent and most vague of all, but you also see Helisma’s name as well as several you don’t recognize at all.

He gets tired before you, of course… or perhaps it’s more apt to say he goes to bed first, as you’ve been tired all day and will doubtlessly continue to be so. It comes in waves… sometimes the dizziness hits you so potently that you would swear you might fall over. Most times it’s just an exhausted buzzing in the back of your mind. Solas reminds you to try to sleep as he wearily strips his shirt off and flops into the bed. You promise him you will.

As soon as you’re certain he’s asleep, you return to your own room to deal with the ravens. They’ve
been waiting patiently, munching on crackers. One of them has gotten into your bag of food and is pecking idly at some of your bread. You wave it away, then retrieve the notes. You reply to them each in turn, and send an extra note along to one of your more… magically inclined contacts. If anyone knows if it’s possible to get into the White Spire right now, it will be him.

After sending out the ravens, you spend most of the night working at the desk in Solas’ room… Although you know you’ll have to go to your own room before he wakes, lest you risk his ire again. However, several hours before dawn, your own exhaustion begins to overtake you. Your limbs feel impossibly heavy; you’re dizzy and can’t see straight. Your head spins and your vision tunnels. You need to lay down, if nothing else.

You stumble to the room’s couch and find you can go no further. You tumble onto it with a soft groan, close your eyes, and try to pretend you’re back on the couch in Solas’ rotunda, the one place where you slept so well.

You don’t dream, a sign that you didn’t properly sleep. But you don’t regain consciousness until you hear a quiet shuffling. That alone is enough to wake you--you’re a light sleeper even under ordinary circumstances.

You open your eyes, groggy and confused, not quite remembering where you are at first. What the hell kind of fancy… Oh… Right. Your memory from the past few days catches up to you. You see Solas stretching by the bed; nothing so fancy as you’d seen him do in the past, but he’s still shirtless, wearing naught but trousers and his wolf-bone necklace. Its black outline is fetching against his pale chest.

Solas grimaces slightly, and you worry he’s about to scold you again. “I apologize. I was trying not to wake you.”

Oh… Maker, you’d slept! That close to him! What if he’d come over and examined your sleeping mind? What would he have found? You honestly don’t know, but the thought chills you.

“Is the couch more comfortable than the beds in the other room?” Solas is saying, and your panicked mind races to keep up. “Perhaps you should be sleeping on this bed, as I said before.” He gestures towards the grand, silk-sheeted bed.

“Oh, no… I just got tired working and laid down,” you explain. “I have this problem in Skyhold, too… By the time I walk all the way to my room, I’m not tired anymore.”

Solas frowns, though he continues to stretch. “Feel free to use the couch in the rotunda. I doubt anyone will bother you there.”

Ha, of course not… No one except for you and Solas even goes in, most days. Before you can reply, Solas squats down, beginning to stretch in more intricate ways. You quickly avert your eyes. Come to think of it, the sun was barely peeking over the horizon. He was up early… had he woken early to stretch, or had you simply interrupted his usual routine yesterday?

“...Solas?”

“Mmm?”

“What are you doing? I’ve seen you do it a few times before, but it’s not like the stretches Bull taught me.” Or any other stretches you’d seen, for that matter.
“Ah. No, I would be surprised if he’d shown you something similar,” Solas says. He doesn’t appear to have any self-consciousness about you watching him. You wish you could say the same. “It’s a technique I learned in the Fade. I find it keeps mind, body, and mana… limber.” Something in the way he says “limber” sends a shudder down your spine.

“Learned it in the Fade…” you murmur, more to yourself than anything. Exactly how much have you lost out on by purposefully limiting your ability to connect to the Fade? Do all mages have such experiences, or is Solas above average in his ability to navigate that other plane? Perhaps he is above average, but you’re almost certainly below average. As you are in all things magical. The thought depresses you, enough that you don’t pursue that line of questioning any further. You go to your own room to change into fresh clothes for the day to come. There’s a raven there waiting for you.

After dealing with the very interesting contents of the raven’s pouch, you come back out to find that breakfast has been delivered and Solas has clothed himself, thank the Maker. You don’t know how much of the man’s skin you can take, at this point. Once again, you go over your plans for the day with Solas, what little plans they are. Until you hear back from the bookstores, there’s little to do except for spend your day in the library. Although that’s hardly a waste of time… Some of the requisitions, particularly the vague ones, require research. You instruct Solas to focus on his own needs first; ostensibly, the reason you and he had been sent in the first place was because Solas’ needs were so complicated.

Everything is going well until you hear a knock at the door. You assume at first that it must be the serving girl, but realize at once that’s not the case. The knock is heavier, and strikes the door higher. The innkeeper, perhaps, to raise another fuss since Baptiste never did show up? You take a moment to adjust yourself and answer the door.

To your infinite confusion, there are two people at the door… or perhaps three, technically. The masked human man was no doubt the one who knocked, but just behind him is a woman carrying a baby. What on--

Realization and dread sink into you in equal measure.

“E… excuse me… We’re looking for Baptiste Bellerose?” the man says, his eyes fixed on your ears in some confusion. “We’re his family. He was supposed to meet us at the docks, but didn’t, and when he didn’t contact us… Well, we know he was supposed to stay here, and the innkeeper said his party had checked in… I’m sorry, did he send us to the wrong room?”

You wish that you’d already put your mask on, because there’s no hiding the horror on your face. “I… I…” you stammer, for once at an utter loss for words. You had hoped that your letters to Josephine and Leliana would save you from this situation. “I…”

Incredibly, it’s Solas who comes to your rescue. He appears behind you in the doorway. “You’ve found the right place,” he assures them. “Please, come in.”

Confused, the couple walks in the door. You’re frozen, but Solas steers you out of their way by your shoulder. You stare, transfixed, at the bundle the woman is carrying.

“I’ll have you know I’ll be meeting my grandson for the very first time! My daughter is bringing him to the docks to meet us.”

Oh, Maker, no, you can’t handle this. You can’t look this woman in the eye and tell her that her father is dead, that he was the only one who died, that you were talking to him, talking to him,
Solas forces you onto the couch, and then sits at the table with the would-be happy family. The woman’s eyes are on you, on your expression. She knows, she has to know, how could she not know?

“I’m very sorry to have to tell you this--” Solas is saying, but the screaming in your mind blocks it out. You’re deafened by roaring in your ears, as if the ocean has come to flood the room. But there’s nothing that can block out their expressions. The woman covering her mouth, hot tears bursting from her eyes, the shell-shocked look on the man’s face. As if sensing his mother’s distress, little Baptiste begins to fuss. Solas’ expression is pained, but gentle. The man slams his fist on the table; Solas remains calm. You don’t. You fight just to remain still.

Solas comforts them, somehow. A gentle touch on the woman’s shoulder at just the right time, the right words said to calm the terrified, angry, sorrowful man. After a lifetime, the woman jerks to her feet, sending the chair clattering backwards. She thanks Solas with a short bow, and stumbles out of the room. The man follows her.

Solas closes the door behind them and turns to you. The roaring is still in your ears, and you feel inexplicably damp, as if you’re still soaked in blood, as if you didn’t scrub yourself raw to get it off. Your shaking hands touch your face and you realize why; you’re crying, quite heavily. Tears you didn’t have time for earlier are forcing their way out. You struggle to gain some control over yourself. You don’t have the right. This stupid expedition is why Baptiste is dead. If you hadn’t antagonized the Inquisitor to the point he’d sent you on this suicide mission, maybe Baptiste would--

Solas sits besides you on the couch. He’s saying something, but you can’t quite make it out. Your eyes are unfocused, bleary with tears.

“I-I-I’m fine, S-S-Solas,” you stammer. That has to be the single most unconvincing thing you’ve ever said. Solas brushes fallen hair off of your shoulder and rests his hand there, as he had with Baptiste’s grieving daughter. A rugged crack snaps through your walls, just enough that the floodwaters held in place begin to pour forth. Your quiet crying is broken by an undignified wail. You cover your face with your hands, and bring your forehead down to rest on Solas’ shoulder, trying to muffle the sobs. Bless him, Solas lets you.

“It’s not fair!” you hear someone yelling. You’re startled to realize that it’s you. “This stupid war! All of these stupid fucking wars! Baptiste should be here, with his family, not off serving some half-cocked military! He should never have been on the road! Those bandits should never have been on the road! If anyone in this Maker-damned world would prioritize lives over their own stupid fucking politics!” You slam an angry fist against Solas’ other shoulder. He responds only by rubbing your shoulder, urging your tensed, spasming muscles to relax.

Eventually, you simply run out of tears. You stay resting against Solas’ shoulder longer than you can justify before finally sitting up, your embarrassment winning out over all else. You quickly rub your sleeves across your face. “Now you’ll learn the other reason we wear masks in Val Royeaux,” you say hoarsely, standing quickly on shaking legs and stumbling over to where your mask rests on the table. With fumbling fingers, you try to tie it into your bun, but your hands are still shaking violently. You feel Solas fingers catch the strings, push yours gently aside. He ties it himself, long fingers deft in your hair. You let out a long, shuddering breath, then turn to face him. Your eyes are hidden behind the mask. You are hidden behind a mask.
“Good as new,” you say with a forced smile. “G… get yours on too. We should get to the library.”

Chapter End Notes

**Elven Guide**

laise = bread
The Mask Slips

Chapter Notes

There's a visual aid for this chapter, provided by the ever-talented rinniethemouse (check her out on Tumblr!)

http://i199.photobucket.com/albums/aa46/Chricorvalabs/Reference/imgo%202_zpscgh53ofy.jpg

Solas, mercifully, lets you recover from your humiliation with grace. He doesn’t poke or prod at you, simply lets you gather your things in peace and head out the door. The mask on your face soothes you as surely as his touch had, although that thought threatens to fluster you in a different manner. You should apologize for your behavior, but that would require drawing attention to it. Instead, you prefer just to pretend it never happened, and Solas seems content to let you do just that.

You walk briskly to the library, and you’re ready to settle in for a long, long day of research and bullying Orlesians. Unfortunately, after only a few hours of work—and before you have the chance to bully even a single Orlesian—you're pulled aside by a rather nervous looking human. “Ambassador Gagnon?” Oh, that’s interesting. Almost all of the humans here insist on calling you ‘Miss Alix.’ “Chancellor Haulis wants to see you.”

Oh, well… balls.

Two other men–large men, you note--whisk you off before you can so much as protest. You notice nervously that this trio had waited until you were out of anyone’s sight to do this. This could be ugly… But this is Chancellor Haulis, not a Knight-Captain. He can’t just have you assassinated in the library, for the Maker’s sake.

You are, in fact, delivered to the Chancellor’s office. It isn’t your first time seeing it; you have broken in three times prior, in fact. This is certainly your first time going in legitimately, however. You enter with trepidation, noting that the hall is uncharacteristically empty. Hoo boy.

The Chancellor is a very average looking Orlesian man, insomuch as you can’t see his face at all. He’s wearing a rather elaborate golden mask, suited to one of his stature. You’re glad you have a mask of your own today. “Ambassador Gagnon,” he says, a little stiffly, and you bow as properly as you’ve ever bowed in your life. You don’t like this situation.

“Chancellor, it’s a pleasure. I did not expect to be invited to your office,” you say politely.

“I suppose we’ve both been surprised this week, then,” he says, a little sourly. “But nevermind that. I didn’t bring you here to scold you for the terror you’ve put into the library staff, but to thank you. Your assistance with Mother Hevara and her… ilk… has been invaluable.”

You have absolutely no clue what he’s talking about, but you smile. “I’m pleased to hear that, Chancellor.”

“She actually came in here and apologized!” he says with a low chuckle. “The look on her face alone was worth the hassle you’ve given me.”
“I’m glad the matter could be settled so well,” you lie through your teeth. “Although, I wouldn’t have minded seeing that myself.”

The man laughs again. “I may not see eye to eye with the Inquisitor on everything,” he admits. “But he does seem to have an eye for talent… no matter how blind he might be to social niceties.”

“Thank you, Chancellor,” you say with an easy smile. He gestures for you to sit, and you do, crossing your ankles in the polite Orlesian fashion. “I try very hard to reward the Inquisitor’s faith in me. I understand that my associate and I were not precisely what the University was expecting. Would that the Inquisitor had sent slightly more clear word ahead of us, we may have avoided some unpleasantness.”

The Chancellor waves you off with a sigh. “No, the Inquisitor was right. I wouldn’t have even let you in the front gate had you not caught me unawares.” He eyes you. “But I suspect you knew that.”

“I may have had some suspicions.”

“I’ve looked into your work, Alix. It surprised me very much to learn that we had some of it here at the University,” the Chancellor says dryly.

“I’m a very prolific worker, Chancellor,” you say with a smile, the smugness in your eyes shielded by your mask. “As you no doubt found, seven of your professors used my services regularly.”

“And every single one claimed ignorance to your race.”

“I never did meet any of them in person, now that you mention it. Still, I never claimed to be human.”

“Just as the Inquisitor never said you human. A very Orlesian thing to do for a man who professes exhaustion for our politics.”

“The Inquisitor has advisors as fine as his servants.”

“Mmhmm… And which are you?”

“I serve as many roles as I can for the Inquisition, of course,” you say gamely, watching in satisfaction as the corner of the Chancellor’s mouth quirks.

“Well, I appreciate your assistance… and the Inquisitor’s wisdom in sending someone so astute. I won’t go so far as to say the dear Empress was onto something with her… insistence elves be allowed beyond the gates, but… Since you are here, you should take full advantage. I’ll be sure to let the library staff know you are to be given full access to our archives… as thanks.”

Your lips curl upwards, but you manage to keep from grinning broadly. “That’s very generous of you Chancellor. The Inquisition appreciates your generosity.”

“Appreciate it quickly,” the Chancellor says pointedly. “I’m sure the Inquisitor is eager to have you back at his side.”

You leave the office as smug as can be. You have no idea what the shit you just took credit for, but even if you get found out, it’ll probably be too late for the Chancellor to do anything but throw a fit. You can’t wait to tell Solas the good news; you spend a few moments fantasizing about how pleased he’ll look--will he praise you again?--as you walk back to the library.

Solas is engrossed in his work when you return. You sincerely doubt he’d even noticed you were
gone. Ah yes, your guardian: the man who doesn’t notice when you’ve been kidnapped. But perhaps you won’t mention that to him; you don’t need him to be even more fretful over you than he already is. Instead, you decide to drag him out for an early lunch. He protests a little, but in the end your insistence--along with the knowledge you’ll be spending the whole day in the library either way--wins out.

Since you’ll be coming right back to the University, you drop in at the same bakery you had before, for soup and day-old bread. As you eat, you tell Solas the good news.

“So, I spoke to the Chancellor,” you begin. Solas already looks mildly surprised--had Baptiste perhaps mentioned something to him about the Chancellor’s strong opinions regarding elves? Or maybe he’s just now realizing that he had lost track of you rather completely. “And I’m pleased to announce that we have access to all of the archives… and his word that we’ll find their resources fully ours to expend.” You grin wickedly. “I intend to take advantage. I suggest you do as well--there is likely more than one rare tome of magic locked away in their vaults, and I know for a fact they keep books banned by the Chantry in there. All ours, now.”

Solas looks delighted. “That’s wonderful! Harel’asha, how did you manage that?”

You laugh, pleased as punch by both his exuberant expression and slip into Elven. His reaction was everything you’d hoped. “I suppose I’m just very good at what I do, hahren.”

“Do you honestly expect me to be satisfied with an answer like that?” he says, a touch of wickedness in his voice and grin sending a pleasant shiver down your spine.

“It’s as close to the truth as I can manage,” you chuckle. “I believe I played the Chancellor for a fool. He seemed to think I’d done something that assisted him in some manner… Something about a Chantry mother. I was quick enough to take credit, in any case.”

You regale an increasingly pleased Solas with the entire story, delighted by his enthusiasm. You find yourself slipping into the same storytelling you used to entertain the kitchen staff, mimicking the Chancellor, exaggerating him into a cliche of a stuffy, racist Orlesian. Solas chuckles along, and each smile and laugh is a bolt of purest energy, a high more potent than any drug.

“The image of you as an advisor to the Inquisitor…” Solas laughs. “The Chancellor believes you able to grant far more favor with the Inquisitor than you ever could.”

“Hopefully I’ll be long gone from Orlais before he realizes how much he’s been had by a little rabbit named Alix Gagnon,” you say with a wicked grin. “And hopefully, we’ll have a very full cart of books to soothe any temper the Inquisitor takes over my creative interpretation of reality.”

“We must get back to the library,” Solas declares. “I suspect the workers there will suddenly have become much more pleasant.”

The two of you sweep through the library, a renewed terror to the people therein. The word has obviously gotten out to the library staff, as they’ve gone from endlessly hassling you about every little thing to bending over backwards to give you what you want--and get you out of there as fast as possible. That’s fine with you; the faster you finish your work for the Inquisition, the more time you have for entertainments with Solas. In fact, you’re plotting something for this very evening, although you’re sure dragging Solas away from the library will be a challenge.

Solas works steadily and swiftly through the afternoon, but your focus is somewhat more
fragmented. Jean drops by to see you, and with him brings a letter from the magically-inclined contact—a mutual friend—you had sent word to the night before. You pour over it, even discuss parts with Jean in a quiet, private corner of the library. It is as you hoped—the White Spire is not abandoned, but it’s never been less defended. There are essentially no Templars, and the mages that are there are few—none of the “loyal mages” of Thedas were mages confined solely to the circle. The ones left all have other homes they can go to, so comparatively few are in the Spire at any one time.

There are magical protections to contend with, but even if ward nullification and avoidance wasn’t one of the few things you do know how to do… You have Solas.

You send word back to the contact through Jean. You still need to hash out the details, but Solas has inadvertently given you quite the useful idea. He hadn’t survived so long by breaking into Circles, perhaps, but you had. This seems a much easier way to get your hands on some precious tomes than living under Templar watch for months at a time. You just need to be careful about the timing—Vivienne will know you were in Val Royeaux, and she already has her eye on you somewhat.

You communicate back and forth with your contact—through Jean—several more times throughout the afternoon. He’s probably on or near campus, and you’d love to simply slip off to speak with him yourself, but you have to at least look like you’re doing the job you and Solas came here to do. It’s still several hours before sunset when you’ve officially run out of things to do, however. You mill about, assisting Solas with a few last things, for perhaps half an hour before finally deciding you’ve done all you can. Even Solas is more or less just reading.

“Solas, come on,” you say, idly tugging at the corner of his sleeve to try and get his attention after repeatedly saying his name has failed.

Solas finally looks up from his book, mildly irritated. “It’s well before sunset. Surely you can’t want to leave already.”

“I can, in fact, though it has little to do with the sun. We’re obtaining a copy of the very tome you’re reading, Solas. You can read it when you’re bored back at Skyhold. This is Val Royeaux. We have free time. There are things I want to show you.”

Solas frowns, and you can feel the sharp dismissal coming, but he hesitates. His frown fades into curiosity mingled with frustration, and he sighs. “Very well.”

“I’ll make it worth your while, I promise,” you say with a relieved smile. You’d been worried you’d receive a lecture—it had been nearly record time without one. Val Royeaux has put Solas in a good mood, it seems.

You drag him out of the library and onto the streets of Val Royeaux. It’s late afternoon, leading into evening, and the streets are full. For once, the two of you don’t stand out. You don’t have time for proper clothes shopping so late, but you lead him towards the shopping district nonetheless.

“What are we going?” he asks warily as the thickness of the crowd intensifies.

“Trust me, Solas,” you say, gripping him by the sleeve so he doesn’t lose you in the crowd. He stands a full head above most elves—and, admittedly, even you are slightly tall for an elven woman—but you’re still rather short, and easily lost in a crowd of humans.

You stop by a food stand, rather than going into a proper restaurant. Solas seems entertained by the concept of food sold on the roadside, even though it’s simply hot sausages in bread and popped corn. You let him eat one sausage now, but tuck the rest into your bag. “For later,” you say, and of course he wants to know more, but you just grin.
Then down the street to visit more vendors. You don’t stop until you find one that sells elaborate Orlesian cloaks in the latest fashion—well, near latest, anyway. You examine each one carefully, holding one or two up to Solas for evaluation. "Emma, no," he says, scowling. "I have no need for such... frippery."

"Nonsense! You have every need for it," you say cheerfully. "As do I. Have I been wrong yet?"

"I'm certain you have," Solas says dryly.

"And I'm certain you could list every time," you say, voice just as dry. "But indulge me." A little longer of browsing the racks and you select two cloaks that suit your fancy. The vendor, once wary of your pointed ears, immediately cheers at the sound of clinking silver. You walk off down the street with Solas, pulling your own cloak on. It serves to hide your travel-worn clothing somewhat. Between the dramatically ruffled hood and the mask covering your eyes, you doubt anyone will tell you’re an elf at a glance. And Solas is so tall for an elf, honestly, all he needs is a hood.

By now, you’ve left the bustling market place and are on to less densely packed streets. The sun is rapidly setting, and you’re eager to reach your destination. You’re used to navigating Val Royeaux’s streets at nights, but with Solas, you feel as though you have a weight tied to your leg. He simply doesn’t understand the place the way you do.

You pester Solas into putting his cloak on. It’s black lace over beautiful royal blue velvet, and would be fetching on anyone, but on Solas’ broad shoulders, it causes your breath to hitch and your heart to skip a beat. Solas seems displeased by it, however.

"I look ridiculous," he says with a scowl.

“You look... fantastic,” you say, mouth switching out a more appropriate word at the last minute, thank the Maker. You really couldn’t go around calling the man gorgeous and expect your secret crush to actually stay secret. “Orlesian fashion suits you, Solas… Or perhaps I just have good taste?”

Solas opens his mouth to make a sharp retort, but your eyes catch on an approaching figure behind him. You recognize the uniform at once. Chevalier! In one smooth moment, you snatch his hood with both of your hands and yank it up, hiding his pointed ears from sight and pulling him closer to you. You lean back against the wall of a nearby building and drag Solas with you, using his body to shield you from sight. He seems alarmed, but you hold him there, faces close enough that you could be mistaken for lovers, until the Chevalier passes.

His eyes follow your gaze as soon as you release him, and he sees the Chevalier’s back as he walks out of sight. You take that moment to compose yourself somewhat. Solas’ face that close to yours is not something you could ever get used to. Wanting to cover your embarrassment, you pull your own hood up to hide your blushing face.

“Your fear of them is somewhat distressing,” Solas comments as he turns back to you. “Would they run us through simply for walking?”

“On this side of town? Probably not,” you admit. “But they would stop us and pester us for identification papers. It wouldn’t do for us to be late.”

“Late?” Solas asks, eyebrows arching.

“Honestly, Solas, did you think I would let us leave Val Royeaux without seeing a show at the Grande Royeaux Theater?”

“I was not aware that the theater was in the habit of allowing entry to elves,” Solas says dryly. “It
seems more places here than not bar our entrance.”

“Perhaps not officially, but in practice, yes; you’re correct,” you agree. “Which is why we have hoods and why we’re not going in the front door.”

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You have seen dozens of plays at the Grande Royeaux Theater over the years, always alone. Despite your friendship with Jean and other coy Orlesian men, you never shared your knowledge of the loose window in the alleyway, nor the balcony that makes it so easy to climb into. Solas is the first to ever climb up beside you and hoist himself over the balcony railing.

“Is this the sort of thing Orlesians normally get up to?” he says with a slight huff as you begin fiddling with the window. But the smile on his lips tells you he’s enjoying himself nearly as much as you are.

“A certain brand of Orlesian, perhaps,” you say with a quiet chuckle. “Ah! Here we are.” You pop the loose latch open and slide the window up. “Tourists first,” you add with a smirk. Solas tsks gently at you, shaking his head, but climbs in through the window nonetheless. You follow him, then close the window gently behind you.

It’s dark, and the play is already starting. You catch some part of Solas’ arm and lead him, both of your eyes glinting slightly in the dark.

This particular balcony is old, and rarely ever used. There are other balconies, closer to the stage and with better views, and rarely is a performance so packed as to warrant its usage. It’s dark and empty tonight, and you lead Solas quietly to the railing, where you sit to watch the play through the bars.

“How many times have you done this?” Solas asks, his voice a breathy whisper. He kneels onto the floor beside you, finding a good spot from which to watch the show.

“Dozens, at least,” you reply, voice just as quiet. “Perhaps I’d deign to pay them if they let me in the front.” You ruffle silently through your bag until you pull out the bread-wrapped sausages and popped corn. “Dinner and a show,” you say, your grin going unseen in the darkness of the balcony.

“Is that man an elf?” Solas says, clearly surprised. He’s pointing down at the stage.

“The actor, yes, the character, no,” you reply softly.

“They won’t allow elves in the front door, but they may play on stage?”

“Since Empress Celene removed the religious and political restrictions from theatre, it’s become something of an… unusual subculture within Orlais,” you explain, still watching the show below. “It used to be, both the court and the Chantry had to approve of a play. After the Empress did away with that, it was inevitable that it would become a haven for the more liberally minded of Orlesian citizens. But the Grand Royeaux Theater is very old and very important, so the only elves you’ll find here will be on stage or serving food and drinks.”

“Or in the balcony, apparently,” Solas adds, and you chuckle.

“Oh! I think this is supposed to be about Lord Bellemont. See that mask, gold and rubies? That’s rather similar to his style… Yes, that’s the Baroness Choffard. I knew there was something there! I’m so behind on news… Maker, did he really?”

You half-narrate the play to Solas as the two of you lurk on the balcony, idly eating popped kernels.
A lot of the intricacies of theatre and Orlesian culture in general are lost on him, you suspect, but he seems to be enjoying himself nonetheless. During intermission, the theatre lights come on, and the two of you skitter behind a row of chairs to avoid detection. There, you explain your motivation somewhat.

“I really couldn’t leave Val Royeaux without seeing a play if there was a chance to,” you confess. “I used to do this every time a new play began showing.”

“With a friend?” Solas inquires. It strikes you as an odd question to ask.

“Never, until now,” you say with a smile, glad the hood is hiding the slight blush of your ears. You would consider Solas a friend, by now, but you’ve no idea if he thinks of you the same way. Perhaps he does. Perhaps his fret over you is caused by genuine concern, and not related to your work at all. Although, really, that’s quite silly, and more appropriate to nighttime fantasies than any honest consideration. “And, if I’m being perfectly honest,” you add, noting how he perks up at this. “I wanted to see how well you could sneak.”

“A test, *da’len*?” he says dryly, a teasing note to his voice. “Have I passed?”

“With flying colors, *hahren,*” you reply, grinning. “Perhaps in your youth, you were a da’ahlras as well.”

Solas doesn’t respond. The lights dim once again, and the two of your scuttle back to the balcony to watch the rest of the play.

“If that man is supposed to represent a real person,” Solas asks around the time that ‘Lord Bellemont’ is attempting to negotiate a threesome between Baroness Choffard and her son. “Isn’t this somewhat slanderous?”

“Technically, I suppose,” you whisper back. “But it’s expected. Even the Empress has been made victim of political scandal through the theater.” That thought sours you somewhat. You don’t want to dwell on Celene and Gaspard right now. You want to focus on the play, on Solas, on enjoying your limited time back in Val Royeaux.

The play comes to a hilariously orgiastic climax when ‘Baron Choffard’ walks in, and you pull Solas quickly away from the balcony as the actors march gleefully across stage to bow. “We should go before the lights turn on,” you whisper, and he follows you back through the darkness of the theater to the window you’d snuck in through. Back out you go, and back down the side of the building. It’s well and truly night outside now, and you’ll need to be careful heading back to the inn, but adrenaline and enjoyment of the play have you giddy. You spin around when your feet finally hit the pavement, cloak swirling out from you.

“Val Royeaux!” you exclaim gleefully. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“You seem to bear the city no small amount of love,” Solas notes as he watches you twirl.

“I love it and I hate it,” you confess. “I want to burn it to the ground and I want to live here forever. Come. Let’s get back to the inn before I remember all the reasons to hate it. Hood up, *hahren,* lest the wolves find us.” You yank your own hood up, covering your pointed ears.

The trip back to the inn is mostly peaceful. You explain a few more things about your life in Val Royeaux while the two of you walk. You have too much pent up energy from excitement and adrenaline; you jump up to walk on raised sections between paths, even on railings, hands out to keep your balance. The beginning of an autumn chill is in the air. The marketplace will have fresh
apples, honeys, and jams. You cannot wait for your own day to shop, to spend your coin on necessities and trinkets alike, rather than all this endless shopping for the Inquisition.

You’re walking backwards along a railing, chirping cheerfully about the theatre, when Solas suddenly grabs your waist. You let out a startled squeak, but have time for little else. He spins you down onto the ground, and then, hands still on your waist, pushes you into the shadows of a building.

“Solas! What are you-” you cry out, but he lifts a hand from your waist to place a single raised finger gently across your lips.

“Shhh, Emma. One of your Orlesian wolves is prowling about.”

You see the man as Solas tells you this--a Chevalier you hadn’t noticed thanks to your backwards gait. Solas mimics your actions from earlier, shielding you from sight, holding you close enough that the two of you would be taken for lovers, were you seen at all. But with Solas pushing, one hand on your waist and a single finger brushing softly against your lips, your body reacts in a way it hadn’t when you’d been the one pulling. You feel a flood of liquid heat between your legs and fight against a crimson blush. It seems like eternity before the Chevalier passes. You want it to be longer.

When Solas finally steps away from you, you find yourself struggling for breath. Your hand goes absentmindedly under your hood, checking to make sure your hair and mask are still in place. You struggle for something intelligent to say. “Well,” you manage finally, your voice somewhat strained. “You definitely pass the test.”

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You’re giddy and foolish with adrenaline and arousal in roughly equal parts by the time you and Solas slip back into the inn. You note the innkeeper watching you; the two of you must look quite the sight all of a sudden, decked out in beautiful Orlesian cloaks, silver masks and opals glinting in the lantern light.

“Send up some wine and fruit, if you would,” you call out to him cheerfully as you head up the stairs.

“Is it not late enough to retire to bed?” Solas asks as you crest the final flight of stairs.

“I’m too pent up,” you say with a laugh. “I’ll have to drown myself in paperwork to calm down.”

You open the door to your shared room, pausing only to strip off your cloak before throwing yourself down onto the couch and sprawling out luxuriously. “Aaah! To live like an Orlesian!” you say with a giggle. “Soft pillows, fine silks, chilled wines. I would have signed up with the Inquisition months ago if I’d known I would be living the high life on their coin.”

Solas chuckles as he hangs up his own cloak next to you and immediately removes his mask, seeming relieved to be rid of them both. Underneath is the same rugged looking elf with hand-stitched clothing. He’d looked so fetching dolled up in fancy Orlesian wear, but there’s something comforting about a man who simply tosses a pelt over himself when he wants to be kept warm.

“Are you heading to bed already?” you protest, sitting up as he sits down on the corner of the bed to yank his shoes off.

“It is quite late, Emma, and unless you have managed to procure all of the necessary tomes already, we have another long day tomorrow,” Solas informs you. You pout.
“You’re just eager to get to sleep. Do you turn into a turnip if you don’t get your full eight hours, hahren? No energy left in those old bones for late nights?”

Solas scowls at you, but doesn’t raise to your bait. “Sleep is not merely rest for me, da’len,” he chides. “Your greatest adventures may be on the streets of Val Royeaux, but mine have always been in the mists of the Fade.”

You pout, idly reaching up to remove your own mask. “I suppose that’s true. And there’s so much history in Val Royeaux… your dreams must be incredible. I’m jealous,” you confess. “Still… I hope our waking adventures entertain you somewhat.”

“Oh, they certainly do,” Solas says with a faint smile. “I doubt I would think to sneak into an Orlesian play on my own, but I enjoyed myself nonetheless.”

“Good,” you say with a relieved grin. “Maybe I’ll come up with adventures good enough to keep you awake all night before we’re done,” you quip. The mirth quickly drains from your face as you realize the obvious implications of what you’d just said. You’re horrified with yourself, but Solas doesn’t seem to have noticed the unintended innuendo.

“You’re very comfortable here in Val Royeaux,” Solas comments, as he has before, but there’s a glint in his eye. “You know people. Places. Secrets. Am I to believe Alix was simply a scribe, after all I’ve seen?”

You flush. You’d known you wouldn’t be able to keep that part of yourself secret from him forever in Val Royeaux, but there are still many lies to tell. You hesitate only slightly. “Being an elf in Val Royeaux automatically aligns you with the seedier underbelly of Orlesian politics,” you begin, but your heart’s not in the lie.

“Emma,” he says, cutting you off. “You are not the only person with a roguish past. You needn’t hide.”

His words strike to the heart of you. Cole’s words echo in your mind. “Solas is similar, somehow. He sounds the same. Tell him. Trust him.” You swallow, hard. Emotion is overtaking your good sense, you need to…

You glance up. Solas’ blue eyes are on yours, piercing.

“…To have any margin of success in Val Royeaux, one must play the Game,” you say softly. “…However, I played it more than most.” The crack in your walls that your tears came through that morning widens, and, hands shaking, you allow a gentle trickle of secrets to spill forth. “It began with the elves. It’s not difficult to become involved with a certain kind of criminal when they all lurk so close to the alienage. But I wasn’t satisfied with that sort of life. My position for Comte Pierre was one I was placed into, in order to better smuggle secrets, but when he offered me a job as a linguist, I took it in honesty. I cut my ties with the foolish thugs in the elven underbelly of Val Royeaux. I moved out of the alienage. But the Game pulls you in. Always.”

“I played as much as any elf can. I will not burden you with the name of my patron. I’m free of him now, in any case. That is how I have the connections I do, and a part of how I was able to make Alix Gagnon a name to respect in Orlais,” you admit. “All was well in my life, until… You remember I mentioned the Empress had not been spared humiliation at the hands of the theater?”

Solas, still silent, nods. You continue, breathless now with the secrets spilling from your lips. “It was a ploy by the Grand Duke Gaspard, I believe, though I have no evidence. I was in the balcony that night. A play twisted to imply she was sleeping with her elven handmaiden, that she was soft on the
elves because of an unnatural lust for them. I don’t know the truth of it, but her reaction… Even you, traveling as you doubtless were, must have heard of the massacre.” You stare down at your hands, wrung tightly together. “The elves in Halamshiral had been rebelling. Mien’harel, they call it. A quiet rebellion, soft. The bite of a poisonless snake, simply tired of being tread upon.” There are tears in your eyes and you’ve no mask to hide behind; this line of storytelling always brings up painful memories. “She murdered them to the last. The streets of Halamshiral ran red with elven blood yet again. It was then that I… I gave up.”

You rub your arms, as if you can warm yourself against the chill that memories have struck in you. Twice before had you seen an alienage massacre. You hadn’t needed to see it a third time for it to strike you when you learned of it in Val Royeaux. “That was when I left. I retired to the countryside to work my linguistics in peace. I wanted nothing more to do with filthy Orlesian politics. No matter how well I played the game, no matter how well Briala played the game… We will always be the ones to lose.” You spit the words out. Briala’s human lover had betrayed her as surely as yours had. As surely as every last one always would.

Solas is beside you on the couch, a comforting hand on your shoulder. When he’d moved from the bed, you didn’t know. You’d stared downwards for the entire length of your confession, unable to look up.

“I hate Orlais. I love Orlais. I want to watch it burn and I want to watch it bloom,” you confess. “It’s my home and my prison. My abusive lover,” you add with a bitter chuckle. “It beats me and I come back for more because of the sweetness that runs like honey through the streets. There is so much good here, so many kind and wonderful people… Like Baptiste, like Jean. I thought I could count the Empress among them, for a time. I thought there could be change. Now…” You sigh. “I don’t know. But it’s still so satisfying to be back.”

You finally glance over to Solas, and find, beyond all hope, compassion shining in his eyes. “Thank you for trusting me with this, lethallin,” is all he says. The word thrills your wounded heart--he could not have rewarded your honesty more perfectly had he been trying.

Solas attempts to return the favor as well as distract you, and accomplishes both with more stories of his travels. You listen with rapt attention as the two of you half-assedly fumble through paperwork, distracted and downing wine at an alarming pace.

Solas eventually retires to bed, and by then you’re quite drunk. But you simply slow your drinking to allow yourself to sober at a controlled rate. You redouble your focus on your work as you do, though it’s somewhat difficult to focus while waiting for the drunken haze to clear. Now that Solas is asleep, you’ve letters to send, although it seems pointless to hide it now. At least he won’t be suspicious of your present to him now. You’ve finished concocting your plans to sneak into the White Spire, as well as your goals in doing so. Beyond simply giving Solas a very unique gift, in any case. And now that you’ve shown yourself to him, it seems even more fitting to impress him with your talents. Well… your mundane talents, in any case. Some things must ever be a secret. You’ll see how he handles the new information you’ve given him… as well as a live demonstration.

Chapter End Notes

Harel’asha = tricky/treacherous woman
da’ahlras = little thief
Mien’harel = rebellion (or else a violent call for justice, depending on the interpretation),
normally a city elf term; a concept that when humans push the elven population too far
they must remind them that even a "short blade" must be respected.
You go the night without rest once again. It'll catch up with you eventually, but there's nothing you can really do about it. You're already feeling foolish about your little moment of weakness with Solas, and the worst he could do with the knowledge you gave him is blackmail. Oh, certainly, he could kill you with it, but he'd have to work very hard at it. It almost wouldn't be worth the bother. As long as he keeps his mouth shut about it, you'll be in no real danger. Your magic, on the other hand, is a secret you can't risk sharing. A pair of soulful blue eyes aren't worth your life.

You make certain to change into fresh clothes towards dawn, not wanting Solas to realize just how little sleep you get. There's no hiding the effects of your self-imposed insomnia from Solas, but you can at least hide just how bad it is. If he actually suspected you went for days at a time with no sleep at all, Maker only knows what he'd do to you. Magic being cast on you without your consent really isn't one of your favorite things, mind magic or otherwise.

Solas awakens grumpy, as he always seems to, and snips at you about everything from being up before dawn to the bags under your eyes. You just placidly agree and idly wish he'd take to drinking strong teas in the morning the way you always have.

You take some of that dark, bitter tea with breakfast and feel almost immediately better. Solas makes a face as you drink it, of course, but you just stick your tongue out at him.

"Make that face all you want, Solas; I've sorely missed this tea. I really must pick some up to take with me back to Skyhold."

"Have you considered simply sleeping instead?" Solas says sourly. He certainly knows it's not that simple, but he's still grouchy. His mood will improve with food in his stomach, you suspect; he'd simply gotten to bed late the night before thanks to you.

"I can sleep when I'm dead," you joke, but the glare Solas fixes you with shows you that it's still a little too early in the morning for that sort of joke. "So, our plans for the day," you say quickly, changing the subject quickly and completely. "I'm pleased to say that--"

A knock on the door interrupts you. You freeze, momentarily terrified that Baptiste’s family has returned. You force yourself to stand and walk shakily to the door, opening it slowly. But it's just the serving girl again.

"Sorry to bother you, Miss, but these have come for you." She looks slightly nervous as she holds out perhaps a dozen letters of varying sizes. "I think that’s all of them, but they’ve been coming in a bit… fast. If any more come, I'll bring them to you," she promises.

"Oh, thank you," you say with a smile, reaching into your coin purse for a few copper to give her. You accept the letters and head back to the table with a relieved grin. "Change of plans," you tell Solas. "I’ll bet these are from the bookstores."

Surely enough, they are. You open them one a time and glance over each list. You'll need time to examine and compare them, and time to make additional lists to give to each shop. The letters contain what books they have, as well as the quality and prices. You need to figure out where you’re getting each tome, ensure you don’t get unnecessary duplicates, ensure you’re getting the best price…
“This will take me a while,” you admit. Your first instinct is to beeline for the desk, but you very quickly realize that’s a poor solution. Solas will swiftly grow bored locked in the hotel room, and you can’t simply let him wander the streets of Val Royeaux by himself, even if it’s just down to the university and back. You tap your foot with slight irritation. Well, there’s no helping it.

“We’ll go to the library,” you decide. “You can finish whatever tasks you still have there, or simply read. I can do this there. Then we’ll have to go around to the bookstores again.”

“Can I assist with those in some way?” Solas inquires, gesturing to your numerous lists.

“No, not really, but I appreciate the offer,” you say with a sigh. “It’s a one-elf job, I’m afraid. It’s all comparisons and calculations. I recommend you take the morning to ensure you have requested every single tome you want. We’ve only a few days left, and they do need time to put these things together.”

“Don’t forget to eat, Emma,” Solas chides as you begin fumbling about for a quill to jot down some notes. You glance down at the table; your breakfast is all but untouched.

“Oh. Right,” you say. You’d genuinely forgotten. Solas shakes his head, but he looks less irritated than he had earlier.

“You claim to assist me, and yet I can’t help but feel you’re the one who requires a keeper.”

“Keepers are for the rich and the Dalish,” you say with a grin. “But I take your meaning. I get distracted easily, I’m afraid. No focus.”

“You have excellent focus,” Solas disagrees. “If only on one thing at a time. Were you a mage, it would serve you well.”

You eye him suspiciously. “Is that so? Perhaps that’s why Dorian so often laments my mundanity.”

“That,” Solas agrees. “And that he lacks sorely for the company of other mages. The few mages we have at Skyhold are primarily of the southern Circle and want nothing to do with him.”

“I should introduce him to Servis,” you say sourly. “Two Tevinter peas in a pod.”

“Somehow, I doubt Dorian would see it that way,” Solas says with a chuckle. And Solas is surely right; Servis was, after all, arrested by the Inquisition for helping the Venatori. He’s a remarkably slimy individual.

“That reminds me, Solas,” you say with a frown. You’d been hemming and hawing over whether to share this with him or not, but the confession from last night has you leaning towards honesty with your apostate friend. His opinion is one that matters to you. “Servis made a request of me when he learned I was to be obtaining tomes from Orlais. I’ve made arrangements to obtain it through my connections, and I’m inclined to give it to him, but I wanted to run it by you first. Ensure there was nothing I was missing.”

“Why is your inclination to secretly obtain a tome for the prisoner mage?” Solas asks, as you point out the tome in question on a list.

“Because it seems a relatively harmless request, because I dislike his Templar leash-holder, and because I like the idea of a Tevinter mage owing me a favor,” you reply with uncharacteristic honesty. Uncharacteristic in that there’s any honesty at all; part of it has to do with a sense of solidarity as well as your endless curiosity. You sympathize with any mage being held captive, and you want to see what he’ll do with resources if you give them to him. He may well be a shady
“This is simply a book of glyphs,” Solas says, looking mildly confused. “Why did you even need to go through your contacts to obtain it?”

“It’s been banned,” you say with a pout. “And I confess that I don’t know why. I can only assume there’s something within that the Chantry frowns upon… blood magic was my first thought, but I’ve sources that say they have the tome who specifically refuse to deal in blood magic. It seemed a shame to deprive the man of his resources simply because I’m ignorant on the matter.”

“Hmm,” Solas says, tapping the edge of the paper idly. “Obtain it,” he says firmly. “But allow me to look through it first. If there is something in there our Tevinter friend means to do ill with, I will find it.”

You smile. “I’m glad I can rely on you for such things, Solas. My work for mages has been difficult, in the past, due to my lack of understanding on the matter.”

“You know more than I have come to expect, particularly of non-mages,” Solas says, and you bask in the praise like a cat rolling in a sunbeam. Him saying “non-mages” doesn’t hurt, either. Sometimes it seems he’s still nursing suspicions about you.

You work as you eat, mostly just going over the list visually and getting a feel for what you’ll need to do once you get to the library. You have to pester Solas to put on his mask, and he flat out refuses to wear his cloak. You grab it and bring it with you, just in case. It’s more evening-wear anyway, but you wish he’d consent to look more Orlesian when walking about town. You suppose you should be grateful you can even get him to wear the mask. Honestly, though, with no Templars in town and Solas carrying that staff about, you doubt anyone would bother him no matter what he was wearing.

You arrive at the library without incident, and allow Solas to do whatever it is he needs to do while you settle down at an empty desk and begin to slave away at your seemingly endless lists. It’s more time consuming than genuinely difficult. A lot of comparing numbers and doing math in your head, and then just a lot of writing. Solas comes over to check on you at one point. You stiffen as he leans over your shoulder—you seriously hate that—but relax slightly as he chuckles softly, close enough to your ear that gives you chills.

“Would you like a wrist enchantment? It seems you cannot escape a single day without constant writing.”

“Well, that is rather central to my job, yes,” you say with a smirk, pausing in your writing to turn. Maker, his face is right there. If he was a mere six inches lower you could just-- You clear your throat, turning back to face your papers. “I am fine, however. I suspect I’ll be done within the hour. Have you requested every tome you want?”

Solas laughs again, still too close to your ear. “I feel as though half the books we return with will be ones I requested, but yes.”

“At least we’ll have a good selection,” you reply. “Perhaps I’ll have more down time to read when I actually manage to finish that dragon tome.”

“I’m sure I could make some recommendations. Hopefully your work will go swiftly when we return to Skyhold.”

Solas wanders back off to do whatever it was he was doing, leaving you with a pounding heart and a lot of distracting mental images. You’ve made remarkable progress with Solas over the course of a
month, and even just over the course of this trip. In the end, you suppose the Inquisitor actually did you a favor by sending you on this little suicide mission… But you still can’t feel good about it, not with Baptiste dead and burned to ashes.

As if you had planned it, you finish your lists right around lunchtime. You’re quite pleased with yourself, and for once, you don’t have to drag Solas out of the library kicking and screaming--it seems he’s finally satisfied that he’ll be bringing home every book he wants. When you reach the exit of the building, however, you realize that the day—which had dawned bright and sunny--has turned grey. A miserable, constant drizzle rains from the sky.

“Ah…” you say with a smirk, glancing upwards. “If only some clever lady had purchased Orlesian cloaks for us? Oh, wait, that’s right…” You hand Solas his cloak with a broad grin. He scowls at you, but puts it on and even pulls up the hood. You pull up your own hood as well. Your cloaks may be decorative, but both are thick and they’ll help keep the rain off. Even if you’ll have to carefully dry Solas’ when this is all over.

“We’ll need to stop by the inn to pick up the Inquisition’s purse,” you explain as the two of you make your way down the puddle filled streets of Val Royeaux. “And since we’re going that way, there’s a particular bakery I’d like to stop at for lunch.”

“Oh? I’m surprised there’s a bakery that will seat us between here and the inn. Is it another like the one by the university?” Solas inquires.

“Admittedly, it’s a bit out of our way,” you say with a sheepish smile. “But it’s not too far, and I think you’ll like it.

You lead Solas to the bakery in question, a rather upscale one. That you can be seated here at all is a case of connections, not a case of the owners being soft on elves in general. In fact, when you first lower your hood, one of the workers--a new one, perhaps, as you don’t recognize her--begins to scowl at once.

“Excuse me,” you say to the obviously offended worker. “Is Sonia here?”

“What does it matter to you, kni-”

“Alix? By the Maker, Alix, is that your voice I hear?” a voice comes from the back. There’s a bit of a clatter, and then a woman, blonde hair pulled back into a bun and pink frosting staining her cheek, rushes to the front. “It is! It’s been so long, Alix! What happened? And who is this gentleman?”

“Sonia,” you say with a relieved smile. The worker looks caught between confusion and horror, but you ignore her. “My house was burned down, but no matter. I came back to Val Royeaux for your cakes.”

“Can you afford them this time?” she teases. “You have to come see me more often to keep getting a friends of the family discount, you know. …Wait, did you say your house burned down?” she demands, your words catching up with her.

“I wasn’t inside it.”

“Clearly! But all your works…”

“Yes, at this point I believe that your stepfather has more of my tomes than I do,” you say with a self-deprecating chuckle.
What a shame… Well, this is the first time you’ve brought a date, Alix! Clearly, it’s an occasion. Why not have a seat? The store’s mostly empty anyway,” Sonia suggests.

“I… He’s not my-”

“Sit!” Sonia insists cheerfully, spinning about and heading back into the kitchens. With a sigh, you lead Solas to a seat towards the back of the shop. No point in scaring off her customers when she’s being kind, after all.

“You have such colorful friends in Val Royeaux,” Solas comments as the two of you sit down.

“Her stepfather is a historian I’ve done a lot of work for over the years. He specializes in the history of the Qunari-Tevinter conflict, and I’m a unique resource for him,” you explain. “Her husband is a bookbinder. We travel in similar circles.”

“And you use your connections for cake?”

“I can think of no better use for them,” you say coyly. “And I believe you’ll agree with me after you’ve had her mignardises.”

Sonia actually brings out two small slices of opera cake—a personal favorite of yours—to “start you off.” You hope Solas is in the mood to have nothing but sweets for lunch, because that’s certainly your plan.

“Oh, Sonia, Sonia,” you say as you savor your first bite of cake. “Ma mie, vous m’avez tellement manquée.”

She snorts. “Save your sweet words for your lover, Alix,” she scolds you playfully. “What if he grows jealous?”

“He’s not-”

“Not the jealous type? They always say that, love,” she says cheerfully. You sigh.

“This cake is marvelous,” Solas comments, surprising you. Up til now, he’s been very tight-lipped in public.

“Thank you, mon cher,” Sonia replies. “I’m sure they’re quite different from the cakes where you’re from! Where did Alix find you?”

“Ferelden, Sonia,” you answer quickly.

“Ferelden,” she says with distaste, wrinkling her nose. “Well, at least he doesn’t smell of wet dog.”

“Sonia, would you be so kind as to bring us some of your mignardises?” you say sweetly, changing the subject as best you know how. “I can think of no better way to showcase the tastes of Val Royeaux.”

“Pretty words!” she says with a scoff, even though you’ve clearly pleased her with them. “Very well then! If your masks are any proof, whatever group has bought you this month is making a good show of it, so I’m sure you have the coin.”

Solas raises his eyebrows as Sonia ponces away. “This month?”

“The Inquisition is the last in a long line to hire me for my services,” you say loftily, to cover for the fact that her phrasing in front of Solas made you a bit nervous.
“So it seems. Skyhold is not the only place in which you’re popular.”

You dance around the subject of your previous employers nervously until Sonia comes back with a much-needed distraction. You don’t want to get into such details with Solas, despite the fact you’d already been honest on the subject of your less-than-savory past. For one, you’re in public. Honesty in public is just distasteful, particularly in Orlais. For two, well… He doesn’t think worse of you now, and hopefully in breaking him into the White Spire you’ll frame your talents in a way he approves of. But if he knew more about the things you’ve done in the past, he might be less keen on spending time with you.

The cakes distract him well and truly, however, and to be entirely honest, you lose your train of thought quickly as well. Somewhere around the time he sucks a bit of pink frosting off of his thumb, your brain stutters out and ceases to function altogether. Watching Solas eating sweets is a greater pleasure than eating them yourself… Although you do eat plenty as well.

You’re stuffed by the time you leave the bakery… And the best kind of stuffed: stuffed with Orlesian cake. Solas seems quite content as well, and ate just as much as you. It’s still dreary out, so the two of you pull up your hoods before taking back to the streets. You swing by the inn room and dig out the purse full of royals. It makes you nervous just to hold that much money, so you quickly thrust it into Solas’ hands.

“You’ll be the one making all the purchases, Emma,” Solas points out.

“I don’t want to carry that thing! It makes me nervous; I keep thinking I’ll be mugged. You carry it… Put a spell on it or something!” you say with a frustrated wave of your hands as the two of you exit the inn once again.

You go around to the reputable bookstores first. You can lighten that coin purse considerably that way, and not go into the shadier side of Val Royeaux with a clinking coin purse full of hundreds of royals. The process would be simpler if even a single bookstore had anticipated the size of the orders. They clearly hadn’t expected you to make purchases as large as you were despite the size of your lists. You take advantage of their alarm to haggle prices even lower, however, which helps make up for the increased price due to the rushed nature of such a large order.

You arrange to have each and every bookstore deliver the books to the docks. You know from Baptiste’s notes that the Inquisition has already made preparations to have a very large wagon and two draft horses ready at the docks to be loaded into the ferry. You’re just as glad the Inquisition made those preparations ahead of time. One less thing for the “knife-ear” to try and accomplish against the rushing flood waters of racial prejudice.

You drop off list after list at bookstore after bookstore. Your exhaustion is starting to catch up with you as the effects of the morning’s tea wear off, but you try not to sag too much… Solas is watching, you’re sure, and Orlesians are always watching.

“I’m not looking forward to the trip back,” you comment on the walk from the fourth bookstore to the fifth. Almost done… Maker, you’re tired of walking, but you’ve only more of it to do.

“Oh? I can think of a good number of reasons why. The boat ride? Another three days on hartback?” Solas suggests.

“Those too,” you admit. “But mostly it’s the idea of traveling back with this wagon full of tomes. We’ll be moving more slowly, and it feels like we might as well be waving a flag saying we’ve valuables. We were already attacked by bandits once-” Your voice catches, trembles when you continue. “We’ll have more guards, but…”
“With something of value to guard, our soldiers will surely be more alert,” Solas says, clearly trying to comfort you. “And I will be as well. I promise.”

You manage a shaky smile. “The idea of your protection comforts me more than that of the soldiers,” you admit. “That bandit slipped right through their guard. If not for you, I think I’d have joined dear Baptiste on that pyre.”

“The guards took out the bandits,” Solas points out, but you shake your head.

“I doubt they would have without your help, not without sustaining much worse injuries. And me? None of them could have doubled back in time to protect me from that bandit. Your barrier saved me.”

Solas has an odd look on his face. Perhaps you should let this line of conversation drop… but you are grateful. You don’t have his knack for subtle magic. You can’t cast a barrier. You can wiggle your way out of wards and set everything in the immediate area--yourself included--on fire. You’ve few other talents, and you wouldn’t have had much luck taking on a bandit armed with one little dagger. He may not have saved your life, precisely, but he had gotten you out of a very sticky situation much more intact than you would have been otherwise.

Was that why you had trusted him last night? You can’t help but wonder; the confession was out of character for you. Was it the adrenaline still pounding through you? The subtle, seductive feeling of camaraderie from sneaking about the Grand Theater together? Your own foolish schoolgirl’s crush? A combination of all of these things, perhaps? It was anyone’s guess; even you didn’t know. Solas’ effect on you, whatever the cause, is dangerous. A smarter woman than you would run. Your mother, certainly, would have chosen now to break free; it would be more easy in Val Royeaux than anywhere else in the world. You know this place. You know how to disappear.

But in the end, you never were as clever as your mother.

You’re staying right where you are.

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It’s getting towards dinnertime by the time you finish with the legitimate bookstores, but you head towards the alienage anyway. It will be easier to find a place to comfortably eat closer to the alienage, where your pointed ears will be less of an oddity. It’s stopped raining, finally, although the sky is still dark and dreary, making it seem as though night is coming more rapidly than it actually is. You’re near the walls of the alienage when trouble finds you… or, to be more precise, you find trouble.

The sight catches your eye immediately, even before you hear the shout… an elven girl bumps into a Chevalier. That can be the start of an altercation right there, but the Chevalier simply gives the girl—who looks to be no older than thirteen—an angry shove before continuing on his way. You’re ready to continue on yours again when you hear it.

“What the-- You! Wretched knife-eared thief!”

You freeze mid step, despite the fact you know he’s not talking to you. You mentally urge the girl to run, but she’s not fast enough. The Chevalier catches her wrist in an angry, gauntleted hand, spins her back towards him. You stare in horror, transfixed as the scene you’re so intimately familiar with begins to play out. Other elves quicken their pace to avoid getting pulled into the trouble. You should too. You’re in no position to be--
The man shoves the girl, and you see his arm swing back, ready to backhand her with the sharp metal of his gauntlet.

Quicker than the Iron Bull has ever seen you move, with more agility than Sera will ever witness in you, you dart between the man and the elven lass. “Wait, please!” you cry out, shoving the girl behind you, but the gauntlet is already coming down. You hear a sickening crack, too close to your ear, as metal strikes flesh and bone. Your first thought, ridiculously, is of Commander Cullen. These gauntlets are remarkably like his—how often have you feared he’d strike you like this? Your second is relief—he’d missed your mask, which was infinitely more expensive than your jawbone. The pain makes you dizzy, and worsens when you attempt to speak, but you push through it.

“Get out of the way, wench!” the Chevalier snarls as you grasp the girl’s shoulders behind you, keeping yourself between her and the angry man. “There’s only one way to teach a knife-eared brat to respect her betters!”

“Please, ser, she’s young! You’ve struck a terror into her, let her simply return what she’s stolen—” you attempt to reason. But the Chevalier is still angry.

“If you coddle her, she’ll never learn!” he snarls. “You have to put the fear of the Maker into motherless brats like that! Out of the way!” He grabs the shoulder of your cloak, but you simply hold tighter to the girl behind you; you can feel her crawl up under the back of your cloak, clinging to you in terror. As the Chevalier shakes you, your hood falls, and when his eyes land on your pointed ears, his face distorts with rage and disgust both. He’d mistaken you for a human woman at first. You steel yourself as the arm not gripping you draws back a second time.

You don’t even notice Solas beside you until his hand comes to rest gently on the arm that has a death grip on you. Horrified, you stare over at him. His eyes are a stormy rage to match the grey-blue sky. His voice, however, is calm. “Do not think to strike my companion again.”

This is it, you think to yourself. This is where it all goes to the Void.

“Fucking knife-ears, I’ll show the lot of you!” The Chevalier makes a mistake, then, even more than Solas’ mistake to lay a hand on him. He releases you and makes to shove Solas. You don’t know what Solas would do upon being struck, and Maker knows you don’t want to find out. But today won’t be the day you learn that. Fury screams in your ears, your aura untangles itself from your stomach and fights to break free of your skin. Your own pride you can swallow, but the thought of Solas having to suffer the indignities you have at the hands of Chevaliers is simply too much.

You grab the man’s arm before he can lay so much as a finger on Solas, snatching it out of the air and forcibly yanking it down. The man’s eyes turn to you, disbelief and rage. What you’d done was, quite frankly, assault.

“I would think twice, ser;” you say, unable to keep fire and hate from your voice. “Before striking the magical advisor to the Inquisition.”

The man’s eyes flit back to Solas. He takes in the steely grey rage, the expensive cloak, the silver and opal mask…and the staff strapped proudly to his back. Then back to you, a mask to match, though no staff. You can see the pieces click in his head as he begins to second guess his actions.

“...Goddamn fucking knife-ears, sticking themselves where they’ve no place,” he snarls, but he’s all bark now, having decided that the two of you might have a worse bite. “Fine! Waste your time on a brat like that! She’s probably already stolen your own purse!” He throws his hands into the air in frustration, and then begins to storm off. You see Solas’ hand twitch towards the Chevalier’s exposed back; you catch his wrist, shaking your head firmly. If you escape this with no more than a
broken jaw, you’ll count yourself quite lucky.

You heave a long sigh of relief as the Chevalier turns a corner, and turn to Solas. “I can’t believe—”

“Do you ever think?” he explodes, catching you off guard. “Throwing yourself in the way like that!”

“What would have had me do?” you snap right back, at once hurt and confused. “Watch him strike the girl?”

“If you’re going to put yourself in these situations, learn to block with something other than your face!” he counters. His hand comes to your jaw quickly, and you flinch, thinking he’s about to strike you. But his hand is gentle on your broken flesh. “You must let me heal this at once. Do not fight me on this,” he adds as you open your mouth.

“Fine, Solas, but we must get off the streets… and the girl with us. The Chevalier will be waiting for us to part ways, no doubt. He will get his hands on the girl if we leave her now, and it will be worse than if I had not intervened at all.”

“Very well. Bring the little troublemaker with us,” he says with a sigh. “I would be happier out of sight, in any case.”

You duck into a tavern nearby, one you’re familiar with. It serves food and will do as well as any other as a place to have both dinner and privacy. You slide into a booth, table and chairs both attached to the wall. You slide onto one bench, expecting Solas to sit across from you as he normally does, but he slides in right next to you. The girl stands, awkwardly, before he gestures at her. “Sit, child.” She does so, quickly. She looks as though she thinks you’ve kidnapped her… She might, actually.

“Don’t worry, da’len,” you comfort her. “Solas is grumpy, but safe.”

“Is he a mage?” the girl asks quietly, wide eyes fixed on his staff.

“He is, yes. I- Ow, Solas!” you snap, as his hand twists your face towards him.

“Quiet,” he says with a scowl. “I need to examine your jaw.”

“You don’t need me to be quiet for that,” you say with a scowl. “Child, did you steal from that Chevalier?”

“No!”

“The truth, da’len,” you say darkly. “You’re not the only da’ahlras here.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means she’s as much a thief as you, child, and even worse at following instructions,” Solas says sourly, running a hand over your bloody jaw.

The girl pouts, but after a moment, she pulls out a small coin purse. The Chevalier’s, no doubt.

“Da’len, remember this lesson. Chevaliers are never worth stealing from, no matter how tempting their low-hanging purses. You—”

“The lesson in thieving protocol can wait, din’samahlen!” Solas snaps. “Child, you at least seem to listen. Fetch me a clean towel. Go.” You know that tone. You would have run off to find the towel yourself had it been directed at you, so it’s no surprise that the girl immediately scurries off.
“She needs to learn, Solas, or she’ll just wind up getting herself killed,” you explain, frowning.

“I appreciate that sentiment,” Solas says with a scowl. “But you have yet to learn that lesson yourself.”

“Don’t lecture me, hahren,” you snap. “I did the right thing.”

Solas lets out a long, pained sigh. “...Yes, you did,” he admits. “And you handled yourself well. But you give me no end of anxiety.”

“...Ir abelas, Solas.”

The girl returns then, having somehow obtained a towel. Nabbed it, probably. It’s what you would have done; it’s quicker and easier than trying to explain why you need it, in any case. Solas thanks her and takes it, pushing it against your still-bleeding jaw. The girl pulls herself back into her seat. You wince--despite Solas’ gentle hand, the pressure hurts quite a bit.

“It’s been fractured,” Solas explains. “Badly. You’ll need quite a bit of healing.” But your eyes have already returned to the girl.

“Chevaliers are not marks, da’len. They are to be avoided. His gauntlet fractured my jaw. Think for a moment of what it would have done to you.”

She nods vigorously. “I’m sorry. I was just...” She bites her lip.

“Hungry,” you say with a sigh. “Hungry and angry. I understand. But the death is worse than hunger. No matter how drunk a Chevalier appears, no matter how distracted, they are well trained. A Chevalier will always notice a pickpocket.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Emma, be still and silent for once in your life,” Solas says, his irritation returning. “I need to heal this.”

“I-”

“Have no room to lecture a child about not taking risks after the one you just took.”

“But she-”

“Is a spitting image of you when you were her age, I’m sure.”

“But, Solas-”

“Emma, if you will not be quiet on your own, I will gag you.”

You clamp your jaw shut. The girl watches in fascination as Solas heals you. His magic is like a thousand pinpricks, then a pleasant, numbing warmth. Your jaw aches deeply as his magic probes it, but you stay quiet. It would be much worse if he wasn’t around to heal you.

“This will take more than a little healing to fix,” he says with a frown. “I can handle the superficial damage now, and begin to coax the bone into growth, but it will require time and additional healing.”

You wait until he drops his hands. You are at once relieved and desolate. The feel of his warm hands on your face had been... beyond pleasant, with or without the pleasurable tingle of his magic.
“That’s so cool,” the girl whispers, hands eager on the table, leaning forward to watch. “His hands glow.”

“What’s your name, child?” Solas inquires. “We can’t simply keep calling you da’len.”

The girl shifts uncomfortably in her chair. You know that look. That’s the look you had before your mother took time to coach you, *Dirth’len. Your name is Dirth’len.*

“My mother called me Banal’len before she left,” the girl says nervously. “So I think that’s my name. But the people at the alienage mostly call me Len’alas?”

Both you and Solas stare in abject horror.

“Th… those aren’t names, are they?” she says with a nervous laugh. “I kind of figured…”

“Your mother only ever called you banal’len?” you ask, voice cracking slightly. “Nothing else?”

“Nothing worth repeating,” the girl says quietly. You swallow, hard. Your mother loved you dearly. You can’t imagine…

“That’s…” Solas begins, but he seems unable to finish his thought.

“You deserve a better name than that,” you say gently. “A proper name, one you can make famous when you’re older.”

The girl snorts. “Me? I’ll never be famous.”

“I grew up in the Denerim alienage. An orphan, like you,” you say seriously. “Solas calls me da’ahlras because it means little thief. That’s what I was.”

“Still are,” Solas quips. You glare over at him, and the girl cracks a smile.

“And now,” you say, giving Solas one last pointed glare before returning your gaze to the girl. “I work for the Inquisition. I made my name one worth respecting in Orlais. And you need a name for people to respect, too.”

“I could go by Da’ahlras!” she says cheerfully, and you laugh.

“A little on the nose, perhaps,” Solas says, and you’re relieved to hear he sounds somewhat amused. “Ati’asha?”

You snort. “Does she strike you as peaceful, Solas? She’s a pickpocket! She needs a name that’s clever, like her.”

The girl is grinning now as the two of you hash out elven names. Giving her an Orlesian one was out of the question, for the two of you.

“How about Dirth’len?” you say finally, glancing over at the girl with perhaps a bit too much emotion. Her hair is a messy brown, the color your mother dyed yours sometime when red hair would stand out a little too much. “Little Dirth’len.”

Solas can’t possibly know what the name means to you, but he nods along.

“I like it,” the girl says. “It has ‘len’ in it. It’s familiar, but it sounds better than Banal’len. Dirth’len. Diiiiirth’len,” she mumbles, trying it on for size.
“It’s a good name,” you say with a melancholy smile. “It fits you.”

Chapter End Notes

Ma mie, vous m'avez tellement manquée= My dear, I have missed you so much.
Dirth'len = secret child
Banal'len = Nothing child, child who does not matter
Len'alas = Dirty child
Ati’asha = shortened/derivative of peaceful woman
Chapter Notes

You'll want these. Reference One Reference Two

See you at the end!

The three of you have dinner there at the inn. You entertain the girl with stories of your adventures in the Denerim orphanage, but her fascination rests solidly with Solas and his magic. She peppers him with questions, and he actually answers most of them. Perhaps you’re not the only one with a weakness for children. After ensuring she has a full belly, you slip her a few extra coins from the Inquisition’s purse. Sending her off with royals wouldn’t do her a bit of good; she’d be dead for them within the day. You can’t give her one of your little throwing daggers to use as a knife either--elves aren’t allowed to carry weapons in the alienage. It’s a hopeless position. But you see her back inside the alienage walls and give her enough coin to last her through the week, at least.

Perhaps there’s something more you can do… Once you get back to your inn room and your ravens. It’s almost underwhelming, after all that, to spend the rest of your evening trudging around, chasing down your contacts and your contacts’ contacts in order to ensure your precious lists get into the right hands. The hardest part is coordination; you’re getting “shipments” from four different sellers. Not to mention that half of the books you’re getting from your contacts are banned by the Chantry or, at the very least, frowned upon. Not all of them, mind… but enough that this has definitely crossed the line into smuggling.

The wagon will be there overnight on the 25th. The horses will arrive early on the 26th. That will be your saving grace. You arrange with each of the sellers to arrive in shifts--you don’t need a turf spat happening while you’re trying to arrange a delivery--and load their books into the bottom of the wagon. The less legitimate books will be covered by a layer of the legal but difficult-to-locate books that you’re getting from each seller. And you personally arrange for an overnight guard to ensure nothing untoward happens and there aren’t any little kerfluffles between, say, your Carta contact and her direct competitor, both of whom you’re buying from.

It’s pricey, of course, but the Inquisition had filled your--Baptiste’s--coin purse rather dramatically. Baptiste had been planning on obtaining some of these tomes from legitimate sources… Which would have cost four times as much for buttering palms and sealing mouths alone. At the very least, at the end of this, you’ll be able to say you saved the Inquisition money. Besides, Baptiste would never have been able to find some of these books legitimately. You can add “smuggler” to your list of Inquisition-related services, you suppose.

And to think, you once wanted to keep your head down and dig latrines.

It’s dark by the time you make your way back to the inn. You’re exhausted down to your very bones--and Solas looks tired as well. But your day is a long way from over. As you expected, there’s a package and a raven waiting for you on your bed when you enter. You have to go through with your plan tonight if you’re going to at all… But first, you need to ensure Solas hadn’t simply been joking about his desire to see the White Spire.
“Solas,” you begin as he sinks down onto the couch. You can tell he’s tired; he may not wish to do it at all. “You mentioned a few days ago that you wanted to see the White Spire.”

“Mm, yes,” Solas says distractedly, running a hand over his face where the mask had been sitting. “Why? Have you arranged for a tour?” he asks with a chuckle.

“Arrangement, yes, tour, no,” you say. You take a deep breath and sit down on the couch next to him. He seems to notice your serious tone and sobers quickly. “Tell me, Solas, how do you feel about breaking and entering?”

Solas’ eyebrows both rise, and he seems to carefully consider his next words. “You’re quite serious, aren’t you?”

“I am. I… told you, about the sort of thing I used to get up to in Val Royeaux,” you say with a delicate cough.

“You were a bard,” he says matter-of-factly.

“...Yes. Tactfully put,” you say sourly. “After you expressed interest in the White Spire, out of curiosity, I put out some feelers. My suspicions were correct… the tower is nearly abandoned. I’ve obtained details on a way to get in. We won’t be able to go far, and likely shouldn’t, but I can get you to a safe location where you can…” You wave your hand vaguely in the air. “Do whatever magey things you were hoping to do. But there is danger. There are no Templars here at the moment, but there are mages. We could be in serious trouble, were we caught.”

“Do you believe that likely?”

“No, or I wouldn’t even suggest this,” you reply seriously. “My contact is good. If he says it’s safe, I believe him. Normally I would never consider sneaking into a place like the White Spire… But I believe this may be something akin to a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

Solas considers your words, and then nods, seemingly to himself. “Tell me your plan, first.”

This, you can do. You lay out the drawn map your contact sent you, explain how you’ll be getting close, how you’ll be getting in, how he’ll need to disable runes and wards as you go. As you suspected, Solas confirms that he’s capable of such a thing. You explain that your contact has indicated where each ward will be, so that you run no risk of tripping a hidden one on accident. You show on the map the room where Solas can have some security, an old forgotten attic.

When you’re done explaining as much of the plan as you feel you can, Solas nods. “And you wish to do this tonight?”

“We’ll need to, if we do it all,” you say firmly. “Preparations are in place, but they’re good for tonight only.”

“Very well then,” Solas says, rising from the couch. “Let’s prepare.”

Part of you seriously can’t believe you’re doing this--or that he’s going along with it. As a general rule, you don’t work with amateurs… or with anyone, if you can help it. Your ‘magical friend’ is one of the few people you’re comfortable sharing work with, and he’s experienced--very experienced. Solas is many things, but a sneakthief? However, if what he showed you yesterday is any indication, he has the basics down and knows how and when to follow instructions. You would have preferred a lower-stakes task first, but you weren’t lying when you said this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance. It’s only a matter of time before the Circles are reinstated and the Templars are back in place.
You tuck the map back in the pack, and pull out a few other things. “We’ll be leaving here in our formal cloaks, but we’ll change into these on the way,” you say, showing him what you have. “Circle mage cloaks. Borrowed, unfortunately; I’ll have to return them when we’re done. And these.”

“Masks?” Solas says with a sigh. “The ones we already have won’t serve?”

You roll your eyes exaggeratedly, but manage to avoid throwing something at the man’s head. Honestly. “These,” you say, holding up your silver and opal mask. “Are our faces, Solas. These are how we are recognized within Val Royeaux. Why would we wear our faces to a break-in? These actually serve to cover our faces completely. You’ll get used them more quickly than you imagine, although they do limit the peripheral vision somewhat.”

This is why you don’t work with amateurs. But Solas, for his part, agrees, though he doesn’t look very pleased about it. “You even commit crimes in an Orlesian fashion.”

“Well, you know what they say… When in Minrathous… Or do they only say that in Tevinter?” you muse to yourself briefly. “Doesn’t matter. Anyway, we have a few hours before we need to leave. Honestly, I recommend you sleep.”

“I would recommend the same to you,” Solas says, a little sourly.

“I’ll lay down,” you say, and you mean it. You’re exhausted. You need to at least physically rest your body if you’re going to not only get through this, but also keep Solas from making any tragic mistakes.

“Would you like to borrow the blanket?” Solas asks… and you consider it, honestly. But in the end, you shake your head.

“No… Now’s not the time for us to be experimenting on how sleeping magic affects me,” you say with a sigh. It’s as good an excuse as any. You still haven’t quite decided what you’re going to do about Solas and his increasing desire to “fix” your insomnia. The closer the two of you get, the less you like lying to him, and the less you like saying no.

Close…

You glance over him. He’s dragging his shirt off to flop into bed, without a hint of self-consciousness. You take him to places you don’t take anyone else. You tell him things you shouldn’t. You’re about to break into a Circle tower, the Circle tower, trusting him not to blow it and get you both in serious trouble.

You can count on one hand the number of people who you’ve been this close with. It’s even easier to count the number of them that are still alive.

You push that thought from your mind as you go to your own room to try to rest for a few hours. Your mind needs to be clear for this.

- You and Solas are quiet as you prepare, leave the inn, and make your way towards the White Spire. You have no idea what Solas is thinking, but your mind is busy going over every little detail of the plan time and time again. You have alibis in place for yourself and Solas for when Madame de Fer inevitably looks into it. You know the way in, you know the location of each ward—although you intend to be on the lookout for ones your contact missed. You know the room, its doors, its location… You know the time, you know the place. You tear the plan apart and rebuild it a dozen
times before you reach your destination—it has to be foolproof, because you may well be bringing a fool. Only time will tell… But if your life is any evidence, being a sneakthief is infinitely easier than being an apostate on the run, and Solas has lived that reality far longer and with far more success than you.

“Alright,” you say, gazing at the collection of walled buildings that is the White Spire—although technically, most people just think of the big tower in the middle. “Now the fun part.”

"How are we meant to get to the tower?" Solas inquires quietly, staring up at the large, walled complex of buildings before him.

"We're not," you reply. "Our goal is that window... there. Two buildings back. The main tower is where the mages slept... it has much higher security. That's the thing about Circles; always more concerned with keeping people in than out," you say, a little smugly.

You both take the moment to switch masks and cloaks. Solas looks eerie in the starched white Circle cloak and solid black mask. It covers his entire face, and when you pull his hood up, there's no recognizing him as an elf, let alone as Solas. The only hint is the piercing blue eyes that stare out at you through the holes in the mask. You pull your own hood up and hope it disguises you as well as it does him.

You dislike full-face masks and suspect Solas feels much the same. Despite the hole for breathing, it tends to get heated quickly, and you never like feeling that your vision is limited. But if you get spotted, you need to be sure your actions can't be traced back to you—or the Inquisition, you suppose, but mostly you.

"We'll need to go up side by side," you inform Solas quietly as you both slip your shoes off. It had gone unspoken, but neither of you wish to climb something so difficult while crippled by footwear. What surprises you, however, is when Solas hands you a small bundle of cloth... foot wraps, you realize. Elven style ones, like he wears. You stare at them momentarily before sitting to wrap both your feet, leaving your toes and the ball of your foot bare for gripping. It's a strange feeling; you'd never worn elven foot wraps before.

The two of you begin the climb silently. You pause near the first set of windows. "The first of the wards are here," you inform Solas softly. You can feel them through your skin even without touching them. He climbs up beside you and you watch curiously as he disarms them. He does so faster than you would have been able to, you note sourly. Must he be better than you at everything? But you suppose that in this case, you should just be grateful.

The two of you make your way up slowly, temporarily disarming wards as you go. Your contact hadn't missed a one—you hadn't really expected he would. The final wards, and most difficult to get around, are on the window you need to climb in. They've been damaged, however, probably by mages sneaking out. A well-kept secret, and one that allows Solas to worm his magic through them and disarm them. Meanwhile, you hang from the windowsill by one arm to give him space to work. Thank the Maker for your training with Iron Bull, as well as your lithe frame. This had been easier back when you were more fit.

Solas scrambles through the window and you swiftly follow him, your arm aching from the prolonged hang, even though it had only taken perhaps thirty seconds for him to work his magic. You let your hands and bare feet rest flat on the floor for a moment, feeling as best you can through your skin for magic. No doubt Solas will be much better at sensing anything amiss; his aura is out, free, and curious, gently gliding over everything nearby—including you. You're glad to know he's on the lookout, at least.
You stand and take visual stock of where you are. It’s dark, dusty, and dank. It had clearly been out of use even before the mages fled the Circle. “Alright… that room,” you say, pointing towards the second door down. “According to my friend, they used to do Harrowings there. It’s seen a lot of death and a lot of fear… I imagine the Veil is thinner than rice paper there.”

“Wonderful,” Solas breathes. “The Veil here is not merely thin, but *worn*. This site must have been used for powerful magic over the course of centuries.”

You’re a little cheered at how pleased he seems, but you force your mind to remain on the task at hand. “There’s only one door, this one. I’ll stand guard outside of it, but–”

“I’ll place wards,” Solas says absent-mindedly. You can feel his aura whipping about, feeling at things you can scarcely imagine.

“Your have an hour,” you remind him. “I know it’s not much, but…”

“It is enough.” He turns to you then, and you wish to all gods that may have ever been that you could see his expression behind the black mask. “Thank you, *lethallin*.” His words are heartfelt; his voice carries miles of meaning despite the fact you cannot see his face.

You swallow, hard. At least your expression is hidden as well, thank the Maker. “I… Well, don’t waste time, then,” you say brusquely, shooing him towards the room. “Go do… whatever it is you do.”

“I will explain it later, if you are interested,” he volunteers as he heads into the room. You shut the doors behind him and only then to you manage to breathe.

Yeah.

Worth it.

You give yourself a few minutes, as much to gather your composure as to give him time to set his wards and--you suspect--go to sleep. *Lethallin*. The feminine version is *lethallan*, although you’re well aware that’s something of a modern twist. Odd that he uses the older style. But then, he speaks the language better than you. ...Although, that begs a question. If you learned primarily from scripts and scrolls and cannot pronounce it correctly… Where did he learn? Not the Dalish--he’s already established what you suspected, that they have their own modern dialects. If he had learned from books, would he not have the same issues as you with pronunciation? Had he learned it in the Fade? Traded a spirit for the knowledge, perhaps? Such a thing had occurred to you, and you’d oft been sorely tempted. Fear of possession had always stopped you short, however.

Had it stopped him? He was skilled with spirits, to hear him talk, able to speak with them far better than any you’d heard of previously. Did that extend to bartering without risk of losing himself to them?

Or had he already lost himself once?

The idea that Solas might well be an abomination strikes you like a sudden bolt, but you shake it away just as quickly. If not you, *someone* would have noticed, surely? He was sitting in a nest of Templars! But… Templars could be fooled, as you well know.

Hm.

Well, it’s something to think about later. You can’t allow yourself to become so distracted right now. You can ask him about his knowledge of the language later, though you’ve no reason to believe he’d
tell you the truth. You wouldn’t, in his position. For now, you have work to do. Surely Solas is set up and asleep by now. You hadn’t snuck in here just for his sake, after all.

Just as your friend had told you, there were no wards between the old Harrowing chamber and the room just below. Most people had forgotten this attic even existed, and the room below was rarely used. You drop in through a panel in the room’s ceiling, and land on top of a bookshelf. You can’t help smirking to yourself as you let your aura out the tiniest bit, keeping it tight to your flesh like a protective shield. Individual books are warded, as are the doors, but no one had expected you to come in through the ceiling, apparently. You’ve snuck into one of the White Spire’s many libraries. In this particular case, one containing banned books--hence the lack of usage; the storage in a remote corner of the Spire; and the focus on warding specific books and the doors out, but not the exterior of the room. As always, Templars were so focused on keeping their prisoners from obtaining forbidden power, they’d forgotten to consider that other people might want it as well.

You browse the aisles merrily, avoiding the warded books and keeping a very sharp eye out for any magic that you might set off on accident. You take the books on your list and nothing else--no matter how tempting some of them might look. There are books here you’ve been after for years, although many of the ones you grab are for your contact. He does the planning, you do the stealing… just like old times, or close enough. The elven apostate sleeping in the attic is new, though.

You have to disarm wards to retrieve three of the books, and since you’re not nearly as talented as Solas--apparently--it takes you some time. When you’re done, you leave a little present--one more thing to throw Vivienne de Fer and the other Circle Mages--and possibly Templars--off your trail. Between the calling card and the hefty bag of books on your shoulder, you feel like a proper cat burglar as you climb back up onto the bookshelf and through the hole in the ceiling. You have to enjoy the little things in life, really.

You close the panel carefully behind you and then make your way to the window you and Solas climbed through. The door to the Harrowing chamber is closed… Solas is still within, hopefully, and none the wiser that you haven’t been standing guard outside. You scan the window carefully for any stray wards, but it’s still clean from when Solas disengaged them. Then you poke your head out; sure enough, there’s your man. He waves up at you cheerfully; you wish you had the chance to go down and talk to him, but he needs to be out of sight by the time Solas comes out. With a grunt of effort, you lift the bag of books, tie it closed to so it won’t spill. Then you carefully drop it out of the window. It plummets like a bag of… well, books… but about halfway down it slows, caught in a greenish glow of magic. It levitates gently into his arms. He tosses it over his shoulder much the way you had and gives an exaggerated salute. You salute back carelessly with two fingers, a loose grin on your face. It’s a sign of how well you know him that you’re letting him walk off with those books.

You hear a sound behind you and spin around, but it’s just Solas opening the door from the old Harrowing chamber. He glances around and then catches sight of you.

“Good nap?” you ask quietly, a little teasingly.

“I’ve learned much, even in that short period of time. The spirits here are remarkably friendly; they’re used to regular contact with the mages,” Solas says, and you’re thrilled to hear genuine excitement running through his voice. He’s like a dog with a ball. “I only wish I could stay longer--but even this was more than I had hoped.”

Your aura is wrapped up tight inside of you, but you still feel like you’re glowing. You feel like you could hop out the window and levitate down yourself. “I’m glad I could do something for you,” you say, grinning broadly behind your mask.
“I’ll be sure to return the favor,” he says, and without seeing his face, you’ve no way to know how he meant that.

The two of you actually get out of the White Spire and down the street without incident. You’re a little floored. Have you ever had a plan go that well? Well, yes, you have, but you certainly hadn’t expected it now, not with you dragging a rookie along for the ride. But Solas handled himself better than you could have hoped. He could move quietly when he wanted to, and worked his magic with the wards even faster than you could have. The last time you’d seen talent like his, you’d snatched the mage in question up before anyone else could. It’s a shame you’re retired--and a shame Solas isn’t one to be snatched.

A safe distance from the Spire, you and Solas stop to change out of your cloaks and masks. You move to unwrap your feet, but Solas stops you.

“Keep them,” he tells you. “I have plenty.”

You flush slightly, running your fingers along the soft green cloth. These had probably been wrapped around his feet once, carried him across lands you may never see. You pull your shoes on over them before you can make a fool of yourself.

“What do we do with the cloaks and masks?” Solas wants to know.

“You give them to me,” a voice says from behind you. Solas spins to face the man, hand going towards his staff.

“Solas, it’s fine,” you say quickly, standing and turning to face your friend. “This is my contact.”

“Your contact?” the man says with a laugh. “The things you call me.” You eye the familiar shape of his mask—it covers nearly his entire face, but his pointed ears are left brazenly bare. It's much the same as it was when you wore it. Six dramatic horns, six ruby eyes. You don't miss everything from your time as a bard, but you miss that damn mask.

“So, this is your man,” the masked man says, stepping gently towards Solas, who regards him stiffly, one hand still on his staff. “Is he as good as me?”

“In some ways, he’s better,” you say with a grin, causing him to turn and face you sharply.

“Don’t be rude,” he says loftily. “No one’s better than me.”

“And who are you, precisely?” Solas says stiffly, somewhere between irritation and caution.

“They call me Banal’ras, lethallin,” he replies with a sweeping bow, his voice just a little mocking.

“Don’t be an ass,” you say, swatting at his ear. He bats your hand away, of course.

“I’m fairly sure you lost the right to corporal punishment a while ago, ma asha.”

“I will never lose the right to smack you, brat,” you reply. “Take your masks and stop harassing my friend.”

“I can see when I’ve been replaced,” he says, his fake hurt sounding mocking. “But aren’t you supposed to replace me with a younger man?”

“Any younger than you and I’d be stuck with a toddler,” you reply smartly. “Stop showing off,
Banal’ras.”

The man salutes crookedly, takes a step backwards, and slips through the fade to teleport swiftly away. Cocky and showing off, as always. Made bold by the mask, as he always had been. You sigh. “I swear to the Maker…”

“You make interesting friends, Alix Gagnon,” Solas says sourly.

“Ir abelas, Solas,” you say with a scowl as you situate your silver mask on your face. “I was supposed to simply dump them at an agreed upon site, but it seems as though Banal’ras couldn’t resist. He never can. Change back into your mask and cloak, Solas. I want to get off the streets before a Chevalier finds us.”

Solas consents to put his mask and cloak on, but of course he’s not going to let that little exchange with your friend go. You’re going to give that boy such a beating when you see him next. Not that you expect him to appear before you again before you leave Val Royeaux.

“Dare I ask how you know him? The two of you seem… very familiar,” Solas comments.

“It’s not like that,” you insist, checking both ways before exiting the alleyway. No trouble yet. “He’s just being a shit.”

“Oh?” says Solas, clearly not believing you.

“Yes,” you say firmly. "Whatever you're thinking, I can promise you, you're wrong. He and I have simply been friends for a large part of his life. What you witnessed is him being sour at me for leaving."

"How long have the two of you been acquainted?"

"Long enough," you reply shortly.

"This explains your comfort with apostates," Solas points out, and you sigh.

“It’s a miracle he’s not been caught. Showy idiot…” you grumble. “You can interrogate me about him later, if you wish. For right now, I just want to get back to the inn before the other shoe can drop. Honestly, I can’t believe it’s gone as well as it has.”

“What? Did you think we would be caught?”

“Well… I mean, I didn’t expect it to go so well,” you admit. “Everything went perfectly according to plan, aside from my friend’s little plea for attention.”

“Why did you decide to do it if you thought we would be unsuccessful?”

“Because there aren’t any Templars there, and I know I can run faster than a Circle mage,” you joke.


“You’re the apostate,” you say dryly. “You tell me. Could I outrun you?”

“Hmm. Perhaps one day, we’ll find out.”

His voice chills you to the core, creating a conflicting sensation with the heat the rises between your legs. You stare desperately for some hint of his meaning, but his face betrays nothing.
Once again, you’re left wondering if—in your fear of Iron Bull and Commander Rutherford, Leliana and the Inquisitor—you hadn’t walked right into the den of someone much more dangerous.

To your amazement, you actually do get back to the inn without incident. “Wow, that… really went better than I expected,” you say, running a hand through your hair to untie your mask.

“So you keep saying,” Solas says. He removes his mask and cloak quickly, depositing them on the couch with a careless toss. You frown and pick them both up, hanging the cloak and placing the mask carefully on a table. You hear the bed creak as he sits down on it; you expect he’s eager to get to sleep, given how late it is. As you’re removing your own cloak, however, he calls out to you.

“Emma, come here.”

You glance over at him. He’s sitting on the bed, yes, but fully clothed. What’s he up to now? You approach with some caution.

“Don’t give me that look,” he says with a slight frown. “Have you already forgotten your promise to submit your jaw to more healing?”

You had, actually. Your jaw has been steadily aching since your misadventure that afternoon, but given your near-constant headache and general exhausted pain, it had just faded into the background. You walk closer. Solas pats on the bed, and with a resigned sigh, you sit down next to him. Why must he always do this on a bed?

You’d thought being stripped naked for healing would be the most embarrassing thing you’d suffer at his hands. You were wrong. He catches your face in his hands, one on each side of your jawbone. He stares at you with intense focus as his healing magic begins seeping into your jaw, a slow, steady throbbing. It’s different than when he’d healed your bruises. You’re the one who looks away, but with him directing your face towards him, it’s impossible to get those narrow, focused blue eyes out of your line of vision.

Your ears flush pink, but you manage to keep the blush from spreading to your cheeks, through sheer force of will. Solas takes his time with the healing. You must be sitting on the bed, face tucked in his warm hands, for a solid ten minutes. He runs a thumb along your jawline… is that strictly necessary?! As the healing continues, you find your eyes growing heavy. Healing tends to make one tired, and this much concentrated magic focused on your bones is definitely exhausting you, even more than his healing of your bruises had. Perhaps you’ll be able to sleep tonight? You doubt it. Finally, he seems to finish. The magic fades away, and after a second or two, he releases you. To your credit, you don’t immediately spring off the bed and flee. Actually, with how heavy your body feels, you doubt you’d make it very far. “M… sleepy…” you manage to murmur, eyes sinking closed. “I’m just gonna… lay down for a sec…” You move to stumble upwards, but Solas catches your shoulders and pushes you down onto the bed. You should protest, but you don’t. Your eyes fluttered closed one last time, and then darkness takes you.

You don’t dream, which means you probably didn’t properly sleep. But you are disoriented when you awaken. The bed is so large, so impossibly soft and silky, that you feel as if you must be sleeping in a cloud. The room is dark, and it takes you a moment to remember where you are and why. Groggily, you feel around on the bed, but Solas is nowhere. You glance around, your eyes quickly adjusting to the dark. You spot him, an outline in the dark, curled up on the couch with your
cloak thrown over him for a blanket. Your heart thuds in your chest; he’d let you have the bed and slept elsewhere for your comfort, despite the fact there was certainly room for two on the giant mattress.

There’s no point in waking him, so you lay your head back down in a hopeless bid for more sleep. It doesn’t come, of course, but you do enjoy simply lying in the silk sheets for a time. Wouldn’t it be nice to own a bed like this? Solas must have been enjoying himself with it these last few nights.

In the end, however, you have to come to terms with the fact you just won’t be getting any more sleep. Still, no reason to wake Solas. You slip softly out of bed and to your room, fetching the tome on spirits Solas had gotten you in Redcliffe. You consider staying in your hard cot of a bed, but…

Well, the bed is empty. You tiptoe back through the dark room and climb back into the soft bed with a contented sigh. You stack the pillows against the headboard until you can comfortably recline. You can see well in the dark, but not well enough to read, so you light a candle. You only hope it doesn’t disturb Solas’ slumber. You doubt it will, however--he seems a very solid sleeper.

This might as well be the Golden City for how pleased you are. The bed is delightfully soft, the silky sheets so soft on your skin that you would strip naked were Solas not in the room. As it is, you do take off your tunic and just sit in your undershirt, enjoying the way the silk feels against your bare arms.

You don’t know how long you sit there, reading cheerfully about nightmare demons, before a sound breaks the silence. “Is that book truly better than sleep?” You glance up, startled. Solas is awake… perhaps your candle had disturbed him after all.

“Ir abelas, Solas,” you say, quietly despite the fact you no longer have to worry about waking him. “I couldn’t get back to sleep.”

“I’m glad you could rest at all, even a little,” Solas says, rising from the couch. He’s fallen asleep in his clothes. “While you’re up, may I look at your jaw again?” You can think of few things you’d like less, but you nod, sitting up a little straighter in the bed. Rather than coming to stand by the side of the bed, however, Solas climbs onto the other side, kneeling on the sheets. Fair enough, he had better access to the left side of your jaw, where you’d been struck, from that angle. Still, it was a little embarrassing for both of you to be on the bed like this.

Solas examines you more quickly this time, simply running soft fingers along your jawline, probing gently with magic. “It seems to be healing fine,” he says, relieved. “I doubt you’ll need more healing, although you should be careful of it for the next few days.”

“Thank you, Solas. I hate to think the kind of wreck I would be without your healing, by now.”

“I feel much the same,” he says dryly. His eyes flick over to the book, and you see a faint smile on his lips. “Have you not finished it yet?”

“It’s thick reading, and I got sidetracked with the Veilfire tome,” you admit. “I don’t have… context, for most of the things I’m reading, but it’s interesting nonetheless.”

To your surprise, Solas shifts to sit beside you, leaning back against the headrest. “Nightmare demon? An unpleasant subject to read about when you should be sleeping,” he comments.

“The author separates them out from fear demons,” you reply. “I found that interesting.”

“It’s a somewhat blurred line,” Solas agrees. “In fact, one could argue that a nightmare demon is simply a kind of fear spirit. The classification of spirits, even now, is a hazy study, blurred further by
the barrier the Veil puts between this world and true understanding.”

“While I have you… This part here, sort of confused me,” you say, flipping back a few pages.

“Ah, yes. The author of this book is perhaps a bit too concerned with the classification of spirits versus demons. He, at least, seems to understand that they’re two sides of the same coin, but…”

Somehow, Solas winds up lying next to you in bed for some time, reading along with you. He provides supplemental information, explains parts you don’t understand, even tells personal anecdotes about his experience with certain spirits. Forget the bed… *this* is heaven.

He’s quiet for a time as you read, and when you next glance over, you’re startled to find his leaning up against your stack of pillows, sound asleep. Again, you’re struck by just how *deeply* he sleeps. Were it not for the steady rise and fall of his chest, you’d wonder if he were dead. You shift in bed and he rolls over onto his side towards you. An arm drapes over your legs and a blush begins crawling from your ears to your cheekbones. You’re suddenly very aware of the fact that you’re in a bed.

Carefully, so as not to wake him again, you slip out from his arm and the blankets both, crawling awkwardly off the bed. You take the candle from the bedstand over to the desk. There’s still no chance of sleep for you, and you certainly aren’t going to spend the night watching him sleep—although you probably could and be perfectly entertained by it. Instead, you do some last minute paperwork. Mostly, you’re figuring out just how much money you’ve spent, and on what, and how much more you can spend before you leave Val Royeaux. You also send out one more raven… probably your last, but one never knows. You work at the desk until your eyes grow heavy again. You rest your head on the desk, just for a few minutes… and sleep takes you yet again.

Chapter End Notes

PHEW. Now you know why this one took me nearly a week.
You awaken confused to the sound of movement; something that’s becoming somewhat regular for you. When exactly you’d passed out, you’re uncertain. You’ve drooled slightly onto the paper you were working on. You sit up slowly, body aching miserably. It seems your acrobatics from yesterday--including being punched in the jaw and hanging from one arm off of a three story windowsill--have finally caught up to you. Particularly when combined with sleeping hunched over on a desk.

You groan as you straighten, hand going to your lower back. Oof.

“Three beds and a couch we have,” you hear Solas quip. “And yet…”

“I must’ve… fallen asleep writing,” you say, a yawn interrupting you. “That rarely happens. I must still have been feeling the effect of your healing.”

“I apologize for turning you out of the bed, even accidentally,” Solas says. You finally turn to look at him. Shirtless. Of course.

“I appreciate you letting me sleep in it a bit in the first place,” you reply. “It’s a very comfortable bed.”

“Help yourself to it. The couch here is as easy to sleep on as my bed in Skyhold.”

You stand and stretch, letting out a pained grunt as you do so.

“Have you injured yourself yet again?” Solas asks dryly.

“Nnn, no, just sore,” you say, wincing as you try to unclench stiffened muscles.

“I’d like to have another look at your jaw-”

“Then put on a shirt,” you say firmly. Solas laughs, and you can’t help but smile. Come to think of it, would you ever have dared to speak to him so before this trip?
“I need to change into fresh clothes, but I thought you might be displeased if you woke to find me unclad.”

You stop smiling as your mind helpfully suggests several mental images to go along with that thought. “...Ah. I thank you for your gentlemanly courtesy, then,” you manage. “I’ll just... adjourn into the other room so that you might have your dignity.”

You scoot into the other room quickly, if stiffly, face threatening a crimson blush. You close the door firmly behind you; you need to change as well. You wouldn’t mind a bath, either, to rest your aching body, but for now, fresh clothes alone will have to do. You strip, and manage to pull on fresh trousers before you’re interrupted by a raven flying in the window. You pause in your dressing to intercept it, pulling the message off its leg. It’s from Banal’ras, of course... He’s found Dirth’len like you asked. You let out a sigh of relief, and move to your bag to grab a bit of parchment to pen a response then and there. You can’t exactly be sending out ravens in front of Solas. Well... you suppose you can, really, but it goes against your instincts.

You’ve just finished writing your reply and tucked it onto the raven’s pouch when you hear a sound at the door. Concerned you’ve been found out, you turn quickly. Solas has opened the door and taken a step inside. His eyes widen and his jaw goes slack, and it’s that exact moment you remember you’d not actually put on a shirt yet. He quickly about-faces as you squeal, covering your chest with your arms. He closes the door right as you throw a pillow at him; it bounces harmlessly off the wood.

“You were correct!” you hear him exclaim from the other room. “The door does not lock.”

“Wasn’t it you who said we should knock?!” you screech through the door at him.

“I suppose that now we’re even,” he comments. You throw another pillow at the door in your frustration.

You dress quickly, but wind up simply sitting on your bed, stewing and attempting to regain your composure. It wasn’t as though he even saw much of anything. You’re lacking in the chest area, even for an elf. But still, you find yourself more than a little mortified. It takes you a while to gather the courage to come out of your room; it’s only the sound of breakfast arriving that does it.

You come out to see Solas--fully dressed in fresh clothing, of course--already sitting down, knees crossed, at the table where breakfast has been placed. He seems rather composed, but as you get a bit closer, you could swear you see the slightest pink flush to his cheeks. You write it off as a trick of the light, though. He’d seen you in your breastband once already and hadn’t reacted then. If he’s embarrassed, it’s because of how you reacted.

You try to gather your own composure as you sit. You’re a grown woman. These sorts of things happen. You can be mature about this.

“So, our plans for the day--” Your voice cracks. You clear your throat, then continue. “Baptiste had a day off planned, and we’ve worked fast enough to allow it. Today we can spend however we choose. I have my own shopping to do, of course, but I’d love to show you a bit more of Val Royeaux.”

“I would like that,” Solas says. He smiles; your heart skips a beat. This is what you’d dared to imagine when you’d first heard you would be going to Val Royeaux with Solas. It had seemed stupid at the time. The fact that it’s happening is a shock.

“Are there any sort of shops in particular you’d like to visit?” you ask, unable to keep the excitement from your voice. “I’m sure you’ve shopping of your own you’d like to do.”
“I trust your judgment in such things,” Solas says, and you can’t help but smirking. You tsk gently, shaking your head.

“I thought you’d be deferential! Old bookstores and magic shops it is.”

“You only prove my faith was well-placed,” he says, another smile ghosting over his lips.

He could have walked in on you completely nude; if he smiled at you like that, you’d forgive him anything.

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You start the day out with something you want: clothes shopping. Part of it is simply that it needs to be done. The other part is that you’re really damn sick of only having five pairs of trousers. The vast majority of the clothing you “own” was given to you by the Inquisition and is horribly ill-fitting. You have enough money to buy yourself a more suitable wardrobe, even in Val Royeaux. Solas seems amused by the situation, as if you’d fed into some expectation or stereotype.

You go to elven clothing stores first. It’s not preference so much as it is necessity. You don’t have time to wait for a human shop to take in a full wardrobe. An elven store will have clothes that fit you. Solas mills about patiently as you try on multiple outfits. You try to get him to try things on as well, but he declines. You can’t imagine why; his own clothes look as though he made them.

You focus on the necessities. Work clothing, trousers and tunics. New underclothes. Clothes that can take wrestling with a Qunari. You gravitate automatically towards skirts and long, flowing sleeves, but force yourself away from them. There’s no point in having clothes you’ve no reason to wear.

You pick up the majority of your new wardrobe at elven shops near the alienage. As before, you refuse to go into the alienage itself. Solas seems to pick up on this, and finally deigns to ask you about it.

“I don’t like alienages,” you reply, a bit shortly. At his quizzical look, you sigh. “They’re depressing, they have walls, and I have far too many bad memories in them. Additionally, you and I are both armed. Agents of the Inquisition or no, elves aren’t permitted to carry weapons within the alienage.”

“Those are good reasons,” Solas agrees. “Is it so difficult to share them?”

You glare, but there’s no passion in it. “I’m… not accustomed to…”

“Honesty?” Solas interjects as you trail off.

You scowl. “The next shop is over here. Come on.”

“This is not an elven store,” Solas says, sounding a bit surprised.

“You did your research first. You won’t be causing a fuss today; these stores normally outfit elven servants. And in any case, it’s nice to have an opportunity to look at some proper Orlesian goods. The elven stores were nice and you could get clothing for a good price, but the fashion left something to be desired.

It’s even harder to focus on being a responsible shopper when surrounded with the opulence of Val Royeaux, however. You pick up and set down a pair of sandals several times as you repeatedly talk yourself out of purchasing them. When you reach the smalls and breastbands, however, you’re
finally undone. The ones this shop has are adorable, and surely you’ve enough money to indulge yourself slightly? It isn’t as though these are the sort of things that will impede your ability to work, after all… You do tuck them under a scarf you’re purchasing, however. There are some things Solas really does not need to know about you.

Solas manages to keep his good humor even when you stop by a rather elaborate store that specializes in Orlesian formal wear, although a morning spent watching you pick out clothing is doubtlessly wearing on him. You had stopped chasing after him to try on clothing after you left the elven stores, but here, you’re back at it again. With every dress you try on, you subtly--or not so subtly--suggest he might find Orlesian formal wear an interesting experience. He doesn’t seem to be having any of it, however.

But between the fourth and fifth dresses, you see it. Your eyes just glance over it the first time, but they come back and latch onto it.

It's men's formal wear, something that flirts with the line between a long coat and a robe, perhaps designed with Circle mages in mind. But that's not what makes you stare.

It's so remarkably similar to what Solas was wearing in the dream you had, the night before you left Skyhold.

*You straddle Solas there in the alcove, run your tongue perversely down the length of his bared ear. He shudders underneath you; your mind has assumed his ears would be as sensitive as yours. His hand slips underneath your dress, taking advantage of the spread of your legs.*

You shudder slightly as the memory briefly overtakes you. It had been a very good dream. And that was a very nice outfit.

"Solas," you begin, your voice taking on a slight begging whine.

"No," he says from where he stands, a few racks over, idly examining a pair of boots.

"You have to look at it before you say no," you say with a pout.

"I find that I really do not."

"Please, Solas?" You let your voice beg shamelessly. "I was right about the mask and the cloak, wasn't I?"

Solas sighs. "I do not need anything from a store like this."

"Just... try it on? Humor me, please?" you continue to beg. "You said you owed me a favor."

"I *said* I would repay you," he corrects you. "And I don't see how trying on Orlesian formal wear would do anything of the kind."

"I think it would go quite a long ways towards paying me back, actually," you insist. Solas lets out a frustrated noise, between a sigh and a grunt.

"Very well. What has caught your eye so effectively?"

You show him the outfit. He appraises it slowly, eyes tracing up and down it. He seems mildly displeased, but less than he had been with the cloak. "It's not the worst thing I've seen from Orlesian 'fashion,'" he says with a sigh.
You wait with baited breath outside the fitting room. When he comes out in it, your heart thuds painfully in your chest. It fits him. It fits him well.

*He forces your legs back open again, pushing his knees against yours and spreading them wide. You gasp, then groan in approval as his mouth finds your neck.*

"See?" you say, voice coming out slightly breathless. "That's not so bad, is it?"

"It's pointless," he insists. "I've no need for such a thing. Is your curiosity satisfied?"

"Yes, Solas," you say with a smile. "Thank you."

You don’t complain as he changes out of it. But you make sure he’s not looking when you slip it in with the rest of your purchases. You’ve enough bags now that it’s easy enough for him to overlook one more. It helps that he seems to be getting a bit restless. The good news is that you’re essentially finished with clothes shopping and can now perhaps move on to something Solas will enjoy more.

The used book store you drag Solas to isn’t one you visited to get books. It doesn’t have anything particularly valuable, and isn’t that organized, either. It’s more like the result of someone piling every book that no one else wanted in one place. It’s disorganized and chaotic and the books are all very old.

It’s one of your favorite places.

Solas seems similarly enamoured. You catch up with the shop owner, an old Anders man with whom you’re casually acquainted. You used to do work for him pro-bono, just because you liked his shop so much and he didn’t mind your ears. Back when you were still struggling to make something of yourself, he would let you come in and read even when you didn’t buy anything.

You’re not surprised when Solas leaves the shop with bags as big and heavy as all of your clothing bags put together.

“Let’s go by the inn to drop off our bags,” you suggest. “I have some place special I’d like to take you for lunch.”

“Very well,” Solas agrees. He seems quite cheered by his hour-long stint in the bookstore. Personally, you can’t wait to dig through his bags and see what he got.

There’s no further news from Banal’ras in your room. You chew your lip a little nervously. Have you done the right thing? He will see her set up somewhere safe, if nothing else, surely? But this is Banal’ras. Whatever he does, it will be precisely what he wants to do, and nothing else. You sigh slightly. There’s no helping it. Anything is better than leaving her to starve, one orphan among many, in the Alienage.

You stew a little bit in your own hypocrisy as you walk back into the main room--you helped her only because she caught your eye, there were hundreds like her. Solas has already taken his mask off and has a book open, despite the fact you’re turning around and leaving right away. You can’t help but smile.

“Do you know, Solas, there is a stereotype in Orlais. A little boy who won’t put on his mask, makes his mother chase him around the room…” you say, grinning. He looks up from the book he’s reading.

“That boy must find the masks exhausting as well, then,” he says dryly.
“You look good in it, Solas! Don’t make me chase you around the room.”

“Very well,” he says coyly. “For the sake of mother dearest, then.” With a small sigh, he picks up the mask. “What on earth will you do with this after we leave Val Royeaux?”

“It’s yours; keep it,” you say with a small shrug. “The Inquisitor may require you to be in Orlais again.”

Solas runs a thumb over one of the black opals imbedded in the filigree. Then he seems to snap out of whatever he was thinking, and ties the mask onto his face. “You said you had something in mind for lunch?”

“Yes!” you say, unable to hide your excitement. “I’ve been looking forward to this.”

You have to admit, the look on Solas’ face when you enter the restaurant is priceless. Perhaps you should have warned him? The two of you enter and are immediately greeted by a handsome young elf, face and bare chest covered in swirling vallaslin, a dedication to the god Sylaise. Solas actually flinches backwards, face the absolute picture of shock. You watch as his eyes take in the restaurant. Every single one of the servers is elven, most with vallaslin, in showy faux-Dalish outfits. Seated around the restaurant are Orlesian nobles and tourists, come for dinner and a show.

His face changes from shock to something bordering on outrage, so you decide it’s time to intervene. “Hold your temper, Solas,” you say quietly. “I’ll explain.”

His expression is thunderous, but he follows you as you’re led through the restaurant towards the back. “Emma, what is this?” he hisses into your ear. “Do the Orlesians hire these elves to make fools of themselves for their pleasure?”

You wince. Perhaps you should not have surprised him after all. You quickly shoo him through a curtain to the back. From here, you can see the kitchen--it’s staffed entirely by elves as well. In this back area, there are many guests seated… but the only human faces you see are those of half-elven children with their families. Solas takes this in, and you explain.

“I should have warned you, Solas, ir abelas. Have a seat and let me explain, please.”

You finally steer him to a table. His eyes are wandering about his surroundings. Finally, they come to rest on you, narrow, confused, suspicious.

“This place is run by a friend of mine. An elf,” you explain. “The front is a show. It brings in the pompous Orlesians, tourists, fetishists, mostly. It gives this place an excuse to be open. But the real restaurant is back here.” You gesture around you. “You have to be an elf, or elf-blooded, to be here. It’s a place we can relax. Chevaliers cause problems at elven taverns in and around the alienage, but here…”

“The vallaslin--” Solas begins, and you rush to intercept him.

“Real, with a few exceptions. This place employs most of the ex-Dalish who live in the alienage. Human-run businesses won’t hire Dalish, even the ones that will hire elves. They think them savage. Here, they can blend in; there are enough elves with fake vallaslin out there that the humans assume them all fake. They think us painting our faces for their amusement. Instead, we pocket their coin.”

The irritation and confusion both are fading from Solas’ face. “How-”
“Emma!” The voice startles Solas, but you recognize it. You stand, gleefully, and are immediately all but tackled by an elven man of short stature, shorter even than you. “It’s been so long! We heard from Jean, but we weren’t sure if we’d see you!”

Behind him is a human man, who moves to embrace you somewhat more gently. “We were so worried when the reports started coming in,” he says, his voice a low baritone.

“I’m fine. I’m sure Jean told you the details. Aldric, Enansal, this is Solas,” you turn to face Solas as best you can with Enansal still clinging to you. “Solas, this is Aldric,” you tilt your heads towards the human man, “And Enansal. They own the restaurant.”

“Technically, Aldric owns it,” Enansal says smartly. Aldric plants a gentle kiss on the top of the elven man’s head.

“I’m pleased to meet you both,” Solas says, and he sounds sincere. You breathe out a sigh of relief. “Ir abelas, Solas, I should have told you… But I wanted to see your face.”

“Yes, I’m sure it was very amusing,” Solas says sourly.

“Actually, it was terrifying,” you laugh. “I thought you were going to set me on fire!”

“Ah, yes, the front entrance can be a little alarming,” Aldric says with a chuckle. “My apologies. But the motif explains our all-elven staff and allows our Dalish friends gainful employment.”

“No apologies are necessary,” Solas says. “It’s quite clever.”

You manage to pry Enansal off of you and sit back down. “You know,” Enansal comments. “She used to work here.”

“Enansal!” you protest.

“Oh, you should have seen her. Thin as a rail and dressed in that ridiculous ‘Dalish’ leather breastband and collar… thing. We had to pad i-oof!” He stumbles backwards as the cloth napkin you throw hits him in the face.

“That’s how we know her,” Aldric adds with a smile. “A lot of our workers go on to better things once they get a foothold in the city. It’s nice when they come back to see us.”

“Better things?” you say with a snort. “I suck up to just as many humans now as I did here. The only improvement is that I get my ass pinched less.”

“Do you now?” Enansal asks, pulling the napkin off of himself. He eyes Solas knowingly. “Now there’s a shame. You’ve an ass that deserves pinching.”

You grab Solas’ napkin and make to throw it as well. Enansal laughs and darts behind Aldric, sticking his tongue out at you.

“We’ll have Lin bring you some drinks, on the house,” Aldric says with a fond smile. “And we’ll let you two enjoy your meal. Thanks for dropping in to see us, Emma.”

You wave as the two depart. “It’s true,” you admit. “They helped me get onto my feet when I first came to Val Royeaux.”

“I can’t imagine you dressing up like a Dalish,” Solas says, sounding amused.

“It was a paycheck,” you say dryly. “And it was a relief to be around other elves. My coworkers
were able to help me understand how the city worked, keep me out of trouble with the Chevaliers.

“You lived an interesting life here. I note they called you ‘Emma.’”

You nod. “Yes. A few people know me by that name here.”

“Like Banal’ras?”

You flinch and look around quickly to see if anyone’s listening in. Fortunately, there’s not really anyone within earshot, even elven earshot. “I didn’t think you’d stay your curiosity for long.”

“Would you?”

“When I make demands for your knowledge, I don’t get them,” you point out.

“Will you deny me?” The way he says it makes you shiver.

“...Not yet.”

“How did you come to know him?” Solas presses.

“I met him when we were both younger. Two brats who wanted more than life would give them willingly, determined to take it by force. We worked well together,” you admit. “He wasn’t happy when I left Val Royeaux.”

“He explains your comfort with magic and fondness of mages,” Solas comments.

You sigh. “Yes. As well as why I kept that hidden. Average women don’t go cavorting about with apostates in the evening hours.”

Solas is smiling slightly; you’re not sure why. “You’re certainly not average.”

The drinks come then, and you order food for both of you that you know is good. It serves as an adequate distraction from the subject of Banal’ras. The little brat had done you a great disservice by showing up like he did. You dislike forced honesty; you prefer to tell the truth only when it’s on your terms. One never knows when hidden knowledge may be useful, and the less people know of you, the less likely you are to be caught in your web of deceptions.

But… you had done Banal’ras a disservice, retiring when you did, and then proceeding to vanish off the face of Thedas after the red Templars hit your village. You’d wanted to get word to him. There had simply been no way of doing so safely. This past month can’t have been fun for him. You wish you could get time alone with him, but with Solas here, it’s not safe. You don’t like the idea of trying to deliver messages out from under the Nightingale’s nose, either. Once you’re back in Skyhold, you’ll have to go silent again.

Your stress must show on your face; Solas switches the subject off of Banal’ras rather graciously. The two of you linger over the subject of magic, however. It feels dangerous, having this kind a conversation in public; you’re not used to it. But Solas wears his staff proudly, as if he’s never feared Templars a day in his life. You wish you could have his bravery, his pride. Solas. Maybe that’s why he called himself that.

“In Tevinter, it’s all about the most flash, the biggest boom. You’ve seen Dorian. They’re all like that… elaborate, showy. Nobles are nobles everywhere; in Tevinter they just do it with magic,”
you’re saying. “I was surprised, when I came south, by how… demure the mages were, in comparison. It was like seeing a caged wolf. You don’t know whether to be relieved that you’re safe, or sad that such a powerful creature has had its freedom taken away.”

“Most people would not be so kind to the wolf directly after having been mauled,” Solas points out.

“I’m not short-sighted enough to believe magic to blame for all of my life’s woes,” you say with a sigh. “It’s not that simple. It wasn’t a mage who enslaved me. It was a man, barely even a noble, who cared for his own petty squabbles than for the innocent lives he was destroying. Should I hate all such men? Blame nobility? Fereldens? War?” You shake your head.

“Were it your choice, what would be done with the mages?” Solas inquires.

“It’s not my choice,” you say shortly.

“And you’ve never imagined it were? Never thought about what you believe to be right? Even if you would never fight for such a change, I do not for an instant believe you have no opinion on the matter.”

You eye Solas over your entree. He’s a tricky one. But so are you. “I think that sort of thing might be better discussed in the comfort of our inn room.”

Solas shakes his head, a motion so small you barely catch it. His corner of his lips quirks upwards in the slightest smile… no, smirk. “Should I drag you there now? Lock the door so you can’t escape? I suspect you’d jump out the window to avoid a conversation you didn’t wish to have.”

“I might, at that,” you reply, ignoring the shiver that runs down your spine. “And besides, if you dragged me off now, we wouldn’t get to finish our meals.”

“That is true,” Solas agrees. “And this food is too good to waste.”

“You like it, then?” you say, relieved despite having not noticed you were worried. “When I saw your face upon walking in… I thought I’d make a terrible mistake.”

“I would have appreciated some warning,” Solas says with a light chuckle. “You certainly keep me on my toes, Emma. But I’m glad you showed me this place. It’s… enjoyable, to see elves thumb their noses in such a blatant manner.”

“I rather agree,” you say with a grin. “It’s a nice little metaphor isn’t it? We may be forced to serve them, to submit, to bow our heads and wag our tails… But seeds of rebellion are spread wide. Occasionally, they grow into a little oasis like this.” You gesture at the restaurant around you. Elves hard at work and elves relaxing. An escape from the world where shems ruled, just for a little.

“Dare I ask what you have planned for our afternoon?”

“Dismantling the upper class, one shem a time?” you joke with a snort. “More shopping of course, Solas.”

“More?” Solas asks, looking surprised.

“Would you be satisfied with a single bookstore? This is Val Royeaux! I won’t stop until you’re half as enamoured with her as I am.”
The truth is, you also just have a shopping list to get through. Your very first stop is a writing supply store. You hit it first solely because you know this is where you’ll spend the most money—and because you can justify dipping into the Inquisition’s purse for some of your purchases. You buy the only magnifying stand the shop has. It’s a bit fancier than your previous one, and it’s expensive, but you can’t be picky right now.

Solas eyes some of the inks and brushes while you swoop through the store. You wind up spending a small fortune on inks, quills, paper, pre-bound books… But it will last you. You arrange delivery for the magnifying stand; the rest you carry out of the store. Solas surprises you by taking one of the bags for you. In the past, he’s been quite content to let you carry things, be it pillows and blankets or his dinner.

Next, you go to a magic shop. This is for his benefit; you can’t actually buy much of anything with him present. You follow him around the shop, nervously avoiding the Tranquil shopkeeper. You don’t want Solas to notice how terrified you are of them and wonder why. Solas is distracted, however, cheerfully explaining the uses of different enchanted items to you.

“The selection of items for actual mages here is shockingly limited,” he comments as he flips through a book.

“This is the Circle store,” you explain. “They sell things that the Tranquil enchant, to fund the Circle. But since it was assumed all mages would always be in the Circle, items for actual mages are handled through there.”

“I see…”

Solas leaves without buying anything, but you’re just glad you won’t have to interact with the Tranquil. Embarrassingly enough, next you stop by a home supply store. Solas seems a bit confused when you enter.

“I have things I need,” you mutter. When Solas sees you heading towards the blankets, he laughs.

“Blankets, Emma? As you no doubt recall, I have many you could use.”

“And risk another of them being enchanted? No thank you,” you say with a snort, although the thought of a warm, soft blanket, that sharp, sweet smell resting gently on your nose, carrying you off to— You clear your throat in an attempt to clear your mind. “The Skyhold blankets are horribly scratchy, in any case. I’ll appreciate having my own.”

You select two blankets it soft wool, more concerned with how soft and warm they are than anything. Back in Skyhold, winter is rapidly approaching, and your room has a window without glass and no fireplace. Hopefully the sleeping clothes you bought earlier will go a long way towards keeping you warm.

You make your rounds through the store, selecting items seemingly at random as you see something you need. You have a list, but you’re barely consulting it. You do make sure to pick up a few large bags of your favorite tea leaves, however. Maker only knows when you’ll next get the chance.

Solas follows you about once again, seemingly amused just by seeing you buy mundane objects like herbal candles and a lock for the chest that came with your room in Skyhold. Well, you’re just as glad he doesn’t seem to be boring easily. In truth, you’d follow him around shopping all day as well. It would be interesting to see what he picked out. But you doubt that sort of thing would be satisfying for him to see you doing. Perhaps he’s just being polite.
In any case, you hurry out of the supply stores and head towards the shadier side of town. Solas seems more intrigued when the shittier the buildings around you get, although Val Royeaux is never completely awful looking.

“Should I be concerned?” Solas asks as you lead him into a rather sketchy looking alleyway.

“Have I ever given you cause to be concerned?” you say coyly, ignoring the look Solas gives you. You lead him through a remarkably shoddy door into a dark, run down house, and then down a nearly-collapsing flight of stairs. To a door, which you knock on in a peculiar manner. Solas shakes his head slowly. You can’t blame him; the owner of this particular shop has quite the stereotypical flair. But the door opens, and Solas sees why it’s worth playing into his eccentricities.

On the walls, staffs of every kind. In the back, a lyrium crate, firmly locked. Blasting rods and tomes of magic.

“Everything an apostate needs, right here in Val Royeaux,” you say with a grin. “I suppose I have to thank Banal’ras. Without his little stunt, I would have been too nervous to show you this place.”

This is clearly the magic shop Solas had expected. You watch as he cheerfully peruses the wares. His mouth seemingly never stops; each item gets an explanation, whether you have any hope of understanding or not. In truth, you grasp most of what he’s saying, although some of it does fly straight over your head. What in the Maker’s name is ambient energy, and how does one redirect it, exactly? But you’re pleased to listen anyway as he rambles on about the uses of different crystals in staffs. In truth, you would be content to watch him all day.

Solas makes purchases here, a new staff blade, half a dozen tomes, a handful of magical trinkets. You’re surprised at the amount of coin he drops, actually. Does the Inquisition pay him? You suppose they must. They pay you, after all.

In truth, you lust after a few of the items yourself, but of course, you can’t buy them. Even under ordinary circumstances, you deny yourself most such things. Like Banal’ras, you’ve barely ever trained with a staff. You pull your magic from yourself and warp the Veil by hand with nothing to help. More effort for the same result, perhaps, but you can’t all be proud little apostates like Dalish and Solas. A staff is a guaranteed death at the hands of Templars.

After the magic shop, you head back towards the inn. You’ve one last surprise for Solas, but as with the White Spire, you’re not sure how he’ll react.

“Solas... “ you begin, a little uncertainly. “I can’t say I’ve shown you Val Royeaux without taking you to a salon. With that in mind, I arranged invitations for us to an auction that Baron Sauveterreis is putting on. It’s not much of an event, and the Baron is a dull, pompous man of little standing. But I had very little notice, and, well...” You gesture vaguely towards one of your ears.

“Do you believe it worth attending? Would you enjoy yourself, even were I not there?” Solas inquires. You think over your answer.

“I’ll enjoy myself more with you there,” you reply finally. “There may be interesting items for sale, but... In truth, I would not go on my own. Just as I wouldn’t have gone on my own to the magic store. It’s not the place alone... It’s that I would enjoy seeing you in such a place.”

Solas looks a little shocked. Perhaps it’s your honesty? It’s true, you’ve become a great deal more forthright with him during the trip to Val Royeaux. You wonder if the sensation of faux closeness will remain when you return to Skyhold or if, like the strike of midnight in the oldest of fairy tales, the world will go back to dull normalcy.
But what he says then surprises you, as well as the softness in his eyes when he speaks the teasing words. “But this is Orlais, da’asha.” A strange smile lingers at the corners of his lips. “What on earth will we wear?”

“I cannot believe you!” Solas exclaims as you reveal the outfit you’d bought for him. “Harel’asha! Famin harel’asha!”

You’re back in the inn room now, and you grin despite the harshness of his words. “You looked so good in it, Solas, and I’d hoped I would be able to talk you into going to the auction. If I told you then that I wanted to stick you in Orlesian formal wear, would you have even consented to try it on?”

Solas shakes his head slowly, smiling lightly despite his disbelief. “And what about you? Did you purchase something for yourself?”

“The Inquisition did, as a matter of fact,” you say loftily. “As thanks for saving them so much money despite the fact I was woefully under equipped for the task.” Solas snorts. “I was considering keeping my ears covered,” you add with a slight frown, fingering the edge of your pointed ear. “I’ve done it before. But somehow, I doubted you would be interested in that.”

“I can’t imagine we’re going as servants, dressed like this,” he says, gesturing towards the outfit you’ve selected for him. He probably thinks it’s flashy, but it’s quite understated for Orlais.

“Agents of the Inquisition,” you say with a thin smile. “So be prepared for a lot of shocked gasps. The Baron knows we’re elven, though; he’s likely looking forward to the drama. A surprise wouldn’t go as well here as it did at the University.” You lift your own outfit from its bag. “I’m going to change in the bathroom. I will knock loudly before I exit, lest we see so much of each other we’re forced to wed to protect our own modesties,” you say sourly.

In truth, changing is something of a task, and you have to do your hair, as well, so you’re in the bathroom for quite some time. Fortunately, there’s a mirror, so you’re able to adjust yourself. Your outfit is Rivaini themed, a nostalgic nod to your time as a bard that you’d been unable to resist. It is… a daring outfit, to say the least. The ruffled, multicolored skirt is cut so far up the thigh as to be bordering on indecent, but that is the Rivani style. Current Orlesian trends feature low cuts and cleavage, but you have none of that to show off; the top is actually comparatively modest, though it leaves your midriff bare. It’s not Rivani if they can’t see your stomach, after all.

You’re tempted to style your hair into a braid, but resist the temptation. You pull it into a rather dramatic updo that leaves some of it cascading down the back of your neck. You won’t be the prettiest peacock at the ball, but at least you’ll leave an impression. It isn’t as though you have a reputation to worry about—aside from the Inquisition’s, you suppose.

You spin briefly for the mirror, admiring the way your skirt straddles the line between “autumn leaves” and “actively on fire.” Really, you’ll probably never have another excuse to wear it, but you couldn’t pass it up when you saw it in the store. You lace up your sandals, give yourself one last look over, and knock on the door. It seems silly to knock on this side of a bathroom door, but oh well.

“Come in,” Solas’ voice comes, muffled through the door. You open it cautiously, as if expecting him to be nude despite his invitation. He’s not, however. He’s dressed fully in the outfit you’d selected for him, and somehow even more attractive in it than he’d been in the store. Perhaps it’s the shoes you’d picked out to go with it. Your breath catches in your chest and it feels as if your heart ceases to function altogether.
Their gasps and shocked murmurs serve to fuel your perverted fantasy as Solas slips a finger inside of you.

You force your mind away from the memory of the dream, but it’s difficult. As Solas slips his mask into place, it becomes almost impossible. His hand on your waist, his teeth on your neck, his hands in your--

Fortunately, Solas seems nearly as dumbfounded to see you. His hands freeze in the middle of tying his mask as he takes you in. His eyes fix on your face first, and then slowly trace down your body. You suddenly feel self-conscious about your bare midriff, ridiculously.

“You look…” His voice sounds somewhat strained at first, but he catches himself quickly. “Fantastic. Is that truly Orlesian fashion?”

“Not quite,” you admit, happy for a conversation subject to distract yourself from his broad shoulders and long, slender fingers. “It’s Rivaini-inspired. Your outfit is traditionally Orlesian; I’ll be seen as the exotic accessory. And since you no doubt plan on carrying your staff, it will serve us well to look slightly foreign.”

“Do you put so much thought into all of your decisions?”

You grin and shake the skirt back and forth slightly with your hands. “Also, it’s pretty.”

Solas laughs. “That it is,” he agrees. “Shall we be off?”

You get quite the look from the innkeeper as you leave, but he must be getting used to seeing the two of you dressed in all sorts of finery by now. You eye the sky nervously as you head towards the Baron’s auction. It’s rather cloudy… will it rain again? You hadn’t brought your cloak; it wouldn’t even begin to match your outfit.

At the very least, it remains dry for the walk over. You get a little perverse flurry of glee as you’re announced as “Alix Gagnon and Serah Solas of the Inquisition.” You haven’t had an introduction that grand in a while. You haven’t been “of the” anything for a while now. It feels a bit like coming home, even if it is quite the lie. You delight in the shocked murmurs as well, which double when you get close enough for people to see your ears. You take a seat at a table with Solas, a properly wicked smile resting on your lips.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself,” Solas comments.

“I don’t normally get to make scenes like this,” you reply. “It’s quite satisfying.” You eye the stage. There’s already some items you believe will be for auction up there… But what’s with that giant, empty iron cage? It’s eerie to look at. Is that for auction? Or will they be attempting to sell a live animal? You had gone to an auction once in which they had sold a dracolisk. It mauled its new owner just outside. Now *that* had been a party. You hope nothing similar happens tonight, however. You doubt Solas would approve.

Dinner is brought out, and you have a splendid time explaining each dish to Solas. He has a delicate palate; you’re as pleased as you are surprised. He seems to have no issue eating the crassest of Ferelden stews, and yet he enjoys delectable sweets and delicate Orlesian fare as well. It doesn’t make a great deal of sense, but you enjoy it.

Everything is going wonderfully, in fact, until the auction starts.

The Baron takes the stage, which is expected. What you don’t expect is the… *creature* on leash behind him, towering and huge yet visibly bound and broken.
Saarebas.

Chapter End Notes

Harel'asha = traitorous woman
Famin = wicked

Did you enjoy the chapter? Feel free to stop by the new Keeping Secrets chat and talk to other readers (and also me!). Just click the link and type #keepingsecrets into the second box.
A Surprising Moment

Chapter Notes

There's a lot of foreign language in this one, so I'm putting the guides up here instead of at the bottom.

Elven Guide
Hamin = Relax
Ara ma'desen melar = I will hold you here
Ir abelas = I'm sorry
Emma ir abelas = I'm so sorry
Dar’atisha = Be at peace
Ma eth = You are safe
fenrel = colloquialism similar to "pervert/perverted" or "dirty"
fenrel'hahren = essentially, a "perverted old person" often used like "dirty old man"

Orlesian Guide
Ayez pitié! = Have mercy!
C’est des conneries = This is bullshit

Tevene Guide
Misericordia = Mercy

Antivan Guide
Figlio di puttana = Son of a bitch

Also you'll need this, more wonderful art by Rinniethemouse. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A Saarebas. Bound and broken as they always are. You feel the bottom drop out of your stomach, swirling panic conquering your mind. Why is there a Saarebas here?! You pick up on the inconsistencies even as panic overtakes you and you rise to your feet. The mask it's wearing isn't accurate. It still has its horns, whereas most Saarebas have them shorn down to nubs. You can't tell from here, but you'd be willing to bet the bindings are mundane, not magical. Saarebas are not difficult to control, but the Qunari would not suffer one of them to live free of their Arvaarad.

Solas sees the expression on your face, even hidden behind your mask. “Emma?”

“I just need some air.” You choke the lie out and flee, ignoring the murmurs of the crowd. You rush onto a balcony, clutch the railing as your stomach rebels, expelling its contents out of your mouth. You manage to puke over the edge, at least, and not ruin your dress. The cloudiness isn't helping, nor is the dark.

You see the creature and you taste true fear. You thought nothing could be more terrifying than the Qun. Until you saw the result.

Saarebas.
You gag and retch again and again, but nothing’s coming up.

**Please, no! Don’t hurt me! I didn’t do anything!**

“Emma?”

You recoil blindly backwards, hand going to your back for a dagger that isn’t there.

**Mercy! I beg you, mercy! Ayez pitié! Misericordia!**

**Oh Maker, oh Maker, how do you not know the Qunlat word for mercy?**

*“Hamin, lethallin. Ara ma’desen melar.”*

His voice catches you, the words, the sound, the gentleness. You watch cautiously as the man approaches. A mask; the enemy. But pointed ears. Those ears mean trust to you. That language means family. He catches the sides of your face in his hands; panic screams in your ears. But piercing blue eyes hold yours behind his mask.

*“Look at me, Emma,”* he says, Elven cool and soothing on your ears. *“Focus only on me.”*

You find yourself willing to do so, despite the screaming in your head. **Please no, please no, anything but that! I’ll be good! I’ll be good!** A strangled whimper escapes your lips.

*“Ssshhh, gentle girl, you are safe. We are the only ones here.”* You twist your eyes around to look. *“Look at me, only at me,”* he says firmly, and your eyes snap back to his. He whispers to you then, gentle, soothing Elven words. It’s the way Cole speaks to you, but without the spirit magic to calm your panic or carry you away to the Fade. It seems to be working, however. Slowly, the screaming subsides to a buzzing in the back of your head.

*“S-Solas…”* You sob his name, feeling wretched. You didn’t want him to see this part of you. *“Ir abelas, Solas. Emma ir abelas, emma--”*

*“Ssshhh, shhhh. Dar’atisha, lethallin. Ma eth.”* His hands are on your bare shoulders now, and you reach out to grasp his, digging your fingers against the thick cloth of his coat. Gently, he brings your head towards his chest, and with a shuddering gasp, you rest your forehead against him. The contact soothes you; Cole lets you do this sort of thing as well. Your life has often been starved of this kind of gentle touching.

*“The Qunari?”* Solas asks quietly. You nod against his shoulder. *“It’s dressed like one of their mages, but--”*

*“It’s not, is it?” you ask softly. “The mask is a fake, and it still has its horns.”*

*“You are correct. It has no magic. But how did it come to be here?”*

“I intend to find out,” you say, standing shakily. *“This isn’t Tevinter. We do not practice slavery. Whatever loophole the Baron has abused to allow this barbarity… This ends.”* You straighten, shakily, panic still not entirely gone from your mind. But you have new focus. A slave is a slave. To the Qun, to Tevinter, to the Circle, to the Chantry. Human, elf, even Qunari. It matters not.

*“Emma, don’t be rash,”* Solas begins as you head back into the auction. Something in your eyes makes him pause when you turn back to him. Or perhaps it’s the slightly manic smile on your lips.

*“Stop me if you’re going to, lethallin.”*
You turn back and enter the hall.

Solas doesn’t stop you.

In any case, you have no plans to be as rash as Solas likely fears. There’s a small crowd around the “Saarebas,” which is now housed in the iron cage. Pathetic. As if it were even dangerous, arms bound behind its back, blinded by the mask. Even if it had magic, which it does not, it would pose no risk. You make your way over to it and kneel down as if in awe, like the others. You listen, for a moment, to the conversations around you. The unfortunate creature “belongs” to the Baron. Not legally, you’re certain. He’s not selling it, just showing it off, by the sound of it. Is it a hired bodyguard? There has to be some way he’s doing this legally. But you won’t find that out here. Instead, you take the opportunity to murmur to the Qunari.

“Thing,” you say quietly in Qunlat. “Do you serve the Qun?”

The creature recoils from your voice as if struck, rattling against the chains hooked to its collar. It lets out a low, growling sound. Had this disgusting Baron actually sewn its mouth shut? There are gasps of horror and delight from all around you, a reaction to the “thing” acting wild.

“Then answer me only this. Do you wish to be free?”

The fake Saarebas’ head turns slowly towards you. A grumbling growl, and then, unmistakeable… a nod.

“Be at peace, grey one. I will bring you freedom.”

You stand, a hand over your mouth, pretending to be overcome with fear as the Qunari fights against its chains again. You hear gasps and murmurs in the crowd: “it looked right at her!” “I would be frightened too!” “What a savage thing!” The savagery here is in the people looking at an intelligent being caged, bound for their amusement. You close your eyes briefly to fight the rage that twists in with your panic, the burning desire to show these disgusting shemlen what savagery is.

You walk quickly away, and spot Solas in the crowd. You beeline for him, not trusting yourself not to do something… “rash.”

“What did you do, Emma?” he asks quietly.

“Nothing you would disapprove of, Solas,” you say, your voice shaking quietly. Bravado or no, being that close to the thing left you nauseous and terrified, a sensation doing nothing for your bloodlust. Red fog screams at the corners of your vision. “Can we leave?”

“You have nothing to apologize for, Emma,” he assures you. “I understand if you wish to go back to the inn room at once. But... we are dressed for a night out.”

You stare at him, shocked. Your limbs are still shaking from the near-miss. But do you really want to just go and hide in your inn room? Admit your failure? Your weakness? A shaky grin slowly forms on your face. “Where are two elves going to go dressed like this?”
“If a place for those such as us exists here, I’m sure you know of it,” he replies, only making you smile wider, more genuinely.

“Sweet talker... Come on.” You hook your trembling arm around his, hiding your need for physical support in an act of friendship. “We’ll make our own fun, tonight. If a Chevalier bothers us, we can simply stab him and dump his body in the Miroir de la Mère.”

Solas lets out a short bark of laughter; you’d surprised him. “What happened to avoiding them?”

“Always preferable,” you agree. “But if there are no other options, well… I would prefer not to break my jaw again.”

“And you know the best place for dumping bodies, I assume?”

“I’d do it in the Miroir out of spite.” You let out a quiet sigh as the two of you walk down the quiet street. “I’ve blown my cover so completely with you,” you say with a melancholy smile. “It feel pointless to pretend at all.”

Solas is quiet for a time. “Was this so necessary to hide?”

You stare at him incredulously. “Why, of course! How foolish of me! When we get back to Skyhold, I’ll march right up to the Inquisitor and let him know he has an ex-bard of unknown loyalty befriending his Commander and half of his Inner Circle! Translating delicate material for his Spymaster!”

“Ah. When you put it that way...”

“I’ve done questionable things in the past. I’d just like to leave them there.”

“Then we shall,” he says. “No more talk of the past. Where will we go first?”

There really aren’t places for finely dressed elves to go in Val Royeaux, not really. If you wanted a drink, you’d probably have to go to a whore house or something. Anywhere else and you’d either not be able to go in due to your elfiness, or both be woefully over-dressed. Val Royeaux isn’t really set up for well-to-do elves. So the two of you wind up walking the streets. When you’re strong enough to walk on your own, you release his arm, but still find yourself walking closely enough that your bare arm brushes against his coat. Before you’ve walked far, you tie your flowing skirt in a knot above your knees, just to keep it from getting dirty rubbing on the ground.

Despite his claims that you would talk no more of the past, it seems as though that’s the only thing you two have to talk about. But you talk of more pleasant things than Qunari or bards. You make your way slowly through the streets of Val Royeaux, and you entertain Solas with tales of your past exploits in the city. You had arrived when you were still a young thing, after all. Although after a good year of wandering about Thedas, you were glad to settle into one place. That had been your “freedom” phase, the closest thing you ever experienced to the life Solas claims to have lived.

Mostly, you had learned that Templars are smarter than they let on, Ferelden has a lot of wolves and even more bears, and that it’s a very bad idea to get wet in the winter. You weren’t very good at freedom, all told.

“And then I said... Well, it doesn’t translate very well. I called him a poorly groomed sheep, essentially, but I promise it’s much ruder than that in Orlesian.”
“Perhaps the reason you’re so keen on avoiding Chevaliers is that they may all know you on sight,” Solas quips, and you laugh.

“I don’t know how I never wound up run through, honestly! I learned a lot in my first six months here, though. Things were so different than in Antiva or Rivain, or even Ferelden.”

“How young were you when you arrived?” Solas wants to know.

“Young enough to be an ass,” you reply. “And old enough to know better. I learned fast, though. I—” You pause. You felt a drop of wetness on your head. Another… then another. Within seconds, there’s a steady drizzle coming from the skies. “Shit!” you swear out loud.

“Will you melt?” Solas asks, amused at your panic.

“I don’t want to get my dress wet!” you exclaim. “And your own outfit is hardly waterproof!” It begins to rain harder and you squeal and bolt. You hear a laugh from behind you, but you’re too busy looking for shelter. There! An alcove! You dart under its shadowy roof, panting slightly. Solas arrives only a few seconds after you. His laughter triggers your own. You must have looked ridiculous, bolting through the rain like a squealing princess.

When your laughter subsides, you take stock of your surroundings. “Thank goodness this was here. This dress would not look good wet.”

“There’s one in every district, didn’t you say?” Solas says, sounding amused.

It takes you a moment to parse his meaning… And when you do, you begin to flush from the tips of your ears down to your neck. This is a lover’s alcove. You lower your face into your hands. Oh, Maker. Seriously? Just… seriously?

“How was it you described them? Designed for the arduous task of making love, I believe?” Solas says, sounding intensely amused. You turn an ever-brighter shade of red. “Seeing the inside, I can’t quite imagine it.”

“Oh, Maker, I’m just going to go stand in the rain,” you groan, taking a step towards the exit. Solas catches your wrist as you go to leave, however.

“I apologize. It was not my intent to make you uncomfortable. There’s no need for you to ruin your dress.”

The fact he’s touching you does nothing for your embarrassment, but you do stop. You brace yourself, then turn. “Solas, I—”

His eyes are on your face, but as they glance down you, they seem to stick at your midsection. You pause, then look down yourself. The powders you’d used to cover your scar are running from the rain. “Ah, shit.”

“I had forgotten that,” he muses. “You used something to cover it?” He reaches out towards it and you flinch. He stops, as if realizing that rubbing a hand over your stomach would be more than forward.

“Y-yeah,” you say, shaking your wrist free of his grasp and taking a few steps away to sit down on one of the alcove’s benches. “Some of the powders I picked up today. Useful for this sort of thing.”

“Why cover it?” Solas asks, sitting down—mercifully, some distance away.
“It’s unsightly, but I enjoy this sort of outfit,” you reply, running a finger over the scar. It smears the make-up, and you sigh.

“We all have our scars,” Solas says. “Although that one is particularly grand.”

You snort. “Grand is a word for it, I suppose.” A crack of thunder interrupts you; it begins to rain even harder. “Looks like we’ll be stuck here for a while.”

“There are worst places to be stuck,” Solas says. “We’re dry, and reasonably safe.”

“Hopefully it dies down a bit.”

“I was unaware there was a lake in Val Royeaux.”

You turn to look at what Solas is talking about, and realize the back of the alcove has a view of the Miroir de la Mere. “Oh, that’s the Miroir,” you explain. “It’s not much of a lake. How much do you know about Emperor Reville?”

“He was behind the Orlesian invasion and occupation of Ferelden,” Solas replies promptly, and you smile.

“Like most historians, you think in wars, Solas.”

“Wars leave indelible marks upon the Fade. Spirits still reenact them even now.”

“I suppose that’s a good enough reason,” you agree amiably. “But the Mad Emperor was more interesting for his exploits here in Orlais than his ones in Ferelden, in my opinion. Despite his success in Ferelden, Emperor Reville actually lost quite spectacularly to Nevarra. Perendale is Nevarran to this day. After the death of his mother, Reville snapped. He ordered his younger twin brother, rumored to be behind whispers of his incompetence, murdered… As well as his brother’s wife, their three children, and all eight of their grandchildren. He grew increasingly mad as time went by. He commanded the Miroir to be built in 8:49 Blessed, to be a reflecting pool large enough to draw his mother’s spirit back through the Fade.”

Solas snorts. “That’s ridiculous!”

“It is,” you agree. “There’s a reason he’s known as the Mad Emperor. He had the city torn apart for it, and even then, construction wasn’t finished until two years later—the very week of his death, in fact. The worst part is, he had the damned thing lined with lead to increase its reflectivity. Nothing will live in there. It’s essentially a giant pool of stagnant water in the middle of Val Royeaux.”

“Do they use it for nothing at all?”

“Just bored nobles in gondolas,” you say dryly. “Although it makes an entertaining way to escape from Chevaliers, in my experience.”

“I suspect there’s a story behind that,” Solas comments, and you regale him with the tale of your daring escape from a Chevalier who just so happened to be wearing half-plate. He couldn’t jump in after you, and there were no nearby boats for him to commandeer. You wound up swimming a quarter of the way around the Miroir just to get away from him.

That story leads to another, which leads to another. You never particularly noticed it—perhaps because you had no one to share them with—but you have your share of amusing tales. None can match Solas’ adventures in ancient ruins, but Solas seems to be interested nonetheless. You even manage to make him laugh, with a story about when you and Banal’ras broke into an estate during a
You had an important theft to make, and had told Banal’ras to “make a distraction.” You quickly learned to be more specific with him.

“And Maker, the screams!” you say, gesticulating wildly. “I thought he’d killed someone! But I had to finish the job. So then I go to exit, I look down, and it’s dark… Well, you know, humans can’t see in the dark! So they’re scrambling down there, I’m thinking I’m going to have to thrash Banal’ras, and I just see maybe a hundred nugs running around, chewing on dresses, knocking things over! It was all I could do not to laugh and give myself away!”

Solas’ laughter is a bell-ringing pleasure that only encourages you. “He’d released an entire crate full of nugs, straight from Orzammar, and this after blowing out all the lights. That ass! I don’t even know where he got a crate full of nugs!”

“Now I know why you’re so adept at dealing with Sera,” Solas says, still chuckling.

“Maker, that does sound like something she’d do, doesn’t it?” you say with a laugh of your own. “I better not tell her this story! She’ll get ideas.”

The only sound for a little bit is laughter from the two of you, and the sound of rain on the roof of the alcove. That’s when you hear the gentle tinkling of music--someone nearby must be having a party of their own. You sigh. “I regret missing the dancing the most, of everything that auction offered,” you admit. “I was going to cause such a scene.”

“You’re aware that most bards sing, play music, that sort of thing? I was most well known for my dancing.” You gesture at your outfit. “I learned in Rivain. I was never that good at it by Rivaini standards, but for Orlesians, it was quite impressive and just as scandalous. It got me into all number of parties that a bard of my limited experience really shouldn’t have had access to.”

“I have seen the way Rivaini dance,” Solas says, and you see a bit of a mischievous glint in his eye. “I’m sure you were very popular.”

“If you’re fishing for a demonstration, you’ll have to do better than that,” you say with a laugh.

“If you were to dance at the auction, would I not have seen then?”

“There’s a world of difference between that and a private show, fenrel’hahren. I’m wise to you.”

“I would certainly never suggest anything to affront your modesty,” Solas says, and even delivered straight-faced, the comment makes you laugh.

“Solas, I-” You pause, tilting your head. Did the music get louder, or…? “The rain!” you exclaim. “It’s stopped!” You stand and poke your head out of the alcove. It’s still misting, a bit, but there seems to be a break in the storm. “Hurry, let’s see if we can get back to the inn before it starts back up again!”

The two of you dart back into the streets of Val Royeaux, not quite running, but walking quickly. The good mood follows you, and you continue cracking jokes while you walk. That is, until the rain picks up again. You’re not far from the inn, but even running, you’re properly drenched by the time you reach the hotel room.

“C’est des conneries!” you swear. “All that and I still wind up drenched! I-” You turn to look at Solas, who’s very nearly completely dry. “…Solas. Why is that I look like I just took a swim in the Miroir, and you’re completely dry?”
“Magic has many uses, da’len,” Solas says coyly. “If you hadn’t run so far ahead…”

“Figlio di puttana!”

“Miss, you’re dripping on my floor,” interjects the innkeeper rather irritably.

You let out a disgusted noise. “Just… send up some water!” you snap at the man. “And you! Stop looking so smug!” you add as you storm up the stairs, Solas trailing some distance behind.

“I assure you, I am not.”

“Oh, I forgot, that’s just your face.”

“You did run ahead-”

“Yes, and you let us sit in a lover’s alcove rather than tell me you had a convenient little stay-dry spell,” you reply sourly as you open the door to your shared room.

“Would you have preferred spending another evening in here, instead?” Solas asks, and you shake your head.

“Cacasenno, you are very frustrating.”

“I grow less and less convinced that is a term of endearment,” Solas comments as he closes the door. You drip sullenly onto the carpet.

“I’m going to wait in the bathroom. Please bring in the water when it comes. I don’t want to destroy the rug,” you say with a sigh, plodding into the bathroom. You leave the door open, and sit down on the edge of the large, stone bath to take your shoes off. “At least your clothes aren’t damaged.”

“Are yours?” Solas asks. You can’t see him through the doorway, but it sounds like he’s on the couch.

“Nothing a drying won’t fix,” you reply. “Can you bring me some clothing, Solas?”

“Certainly,” Solas replies, and you hear a slight shuffling sound. He must be grabbing one of the bags of clothes you bought today. It’s taking him a while though.

“Solas?” There’s a rather dramatic rustling sound, and then Solas comes into view. He is, in fact, holding one of your bags. He sets it slightly into the bathroom, and you almost laugh at his unwillingness to go into the bathroom while you’re in here. That seems more like something you would do.

You untie the knot you made in the skirt around your thighs, letting it fall back down onto the ground with a soggy thump. It really loses a lot of volume when wet. You hear a knock at the door and let out a sigh of relief; the water had been prepared quickly. When the girl brings it into the bathroom, however, you swear aloud. The serving girl jumps.

“I’m sorry,” you say with a sigh. It’s not her fault. “But that’s cold.”

“I-I’m sorry, miss, I only brought up what he said-”

“It’s no issue,” Solas says from the next room. “I can warm it.”

“Would you mind, Solas?” you ask hopefully. You could do it your damn self if he weren’t here. “I don’t want to have to wait for them to heat up more water.”
“Not at all,” he replies cordially.

“Ma serannas. I’m sorry for the fright,” you add to the girl. “I know it’s not your fault.” She bows—something that makes you mildly uncomfortable—and quickly exits. As she does, Solas enters the bathroom. He’s stripped out of the fancy robe/jacket, and is wearing just the pants that went underneath. His nudity makes your dress feel skimpier than it actually is. He joins you in filling up the tub with the water buckets, and then you step out of the way while he works his magic. Interestingly, he places some kind of fire rune in the bottom of the tub that heats the water, rather than simply blunt force pouring fire into the water, the way you would. You wish you could have him show you how to cast a rune like that. You’re willing to bet it’s a much more efficient way of heating water.

“Thank you, Solas,” you say when he steps away from the tub. “Really. And… thank you for earlier, as well,” you add with a slight flush. “With the Qunari.”

“You’re quite welcome, Emma,” he says. “In both cases, I was glad to do it. Although I do hope you’ll tell me before you do whatever you’re planning.”

You chuckle. “No promises, hahren.”

Solas shakes his head. “Emma…”

“Do you intend to stay in here while I bathe?” you ask, and the question seems to startle him out of whatever he was about to say. “Shoo!” You wave him out the door, and he closes it, but as you’re stripping out of your wet clothes, you hear his voice through it.

“What have you any idea why the Qunari was there? It seemed as though it was being kept as a slave, but slavery is illegal in Orlais, is it not?”

“From what I heard, it wasn’t being sold… The Baron keeps it around to impress people,” you reply as you slip into the water. Ooooh, it’s blissfully hot. You can’t help letting out a moan, forgetting for a moment that Solas is in the next room. You could soak in this for hours.

“Emma?” Solas says, sounding mildly alarmed.

“Oh, sorry. I’ve never had a fire rune bath before.” You let out a long, contented sigh, letting your hair down into the water. “Maker. This feels amazing.” You reach idly for the soap and your hand hits a small bottle. Curious, you pick it up. Oooh, is this scented? You hadn’t even noticed it before. You open the bottle and sniff, letting out a pleased sound at the gentle scent of lavender.

“The, um… Qunari, Emma?” Solas’ voice comes from the other side of the door.

“Oh, yes,” you say, dropping a bit of the liquid into the water. You splash around a bit to spread it around as the scent of flowers fills the room. “Mmm… I suspect he has found some way to do what he’s doing legally, or he wouldn’t be so intent on strutting the thing around. The Baron is well known for his hatred of mages; I was in court once when he very nearly struck Madame de Fer. I suspect that’s tangentially related to why he has it brutalized like a Saarebas. Or, it was sold to him, and he genuinely believes it to be a Saarebas. It matters not.”

Your unpleasant talk is interrupted by a coo of delight as you run a soapy cloth over your arms. The water from the rune more evenly warmed than water heated over a fire, and it shows no signs of cooling off. “Oooh, Solas,” you say with a happy sigh. “You could charge for this. It’s marvelous.”

Solas coughs from the other room. “It’s a simple spell, lethallin.”
“No such thing,” you say happily, sinking deeper into the sweet scented water. “For those without magic, every such spell is a tiny miracle.”

“Did Banal’ras never do such things for you?” Solas asks. You sigh. He would bring up Banal’ras again.

“Practical magic is not particularly his forte, no.” And why would it be? It wasn’t yours, either. “Travelling on your own, I’m sure you learned all sorts of interesting tricks to stay safe and comfortable,” you say enviously. “And then you risked it all to join the Inquisition. I’m not sure I would have done the same, were I in your shoes.”

“The Breach threatened the whole world,” Solas replies. “It was my duty to help, were I able.”

“It needed to be done,” you murmur to yourself. “I can appreciate that. But I still don’t know I would have done it myself.”

“You came to help as well, did you not?” Solas points out.

“Well, yes,” you admit. “But that was after the Inquisition had proven itself… and after my house was burned down by monsters, leaving me stranded in the middle of a war torn country filled with demons, soldiers, and lyrium-addled Templars.”

“And yet you had connections here. People who would have housed you, friends. But you decided to travel into the mountains to join the Inquisition, instead.”

“Phrased like that, perhaps not the wisest of decisions,” you say dryly. “Still, it turned out to be for the best, I think.”

“I’m pleased you think so,” Solas says. “I find I agree.”

You soak in the bath longer than is really reasonable… you suspect you’re in there for nearly an hour. In the end, it’s the fire rune wearing out that causes you to regretfully climb out of the tub. You’re impeccably clean and you suspect you’ll smell of flowers all day tomorrow. You and Solas talk nearly the whole time through the door. At one point, he began to read one of the books he picked up at the shop and, sour at being ignored, you demanded he tell you what it was about. What surprised you is that he humored you, reading to you from the tome, which turned out to be a history of the Fourth Blight.

You idly hunt through the clothing bag Solas had left in the bathroom, a towel wrapped around your hair. He’d just so happened to bring the bag with your sleep clothes in it… or had he looked in to make sure he grabbed the right one? In any case, you’re pleased to pull one one of the night gowns you purchased. An appropriately Orlesian piece, all white and pink and ruffles and flower motifs. Still, it’s silk, and sleep clothing—like underwear—is one of the few things you can indulge yourself in. Speaking of underwear; this bag has none. You wind up just having to put on the thin underwear you’d worn with the dress; it’s better than nothing at all, considering you’re in a gown.

“I’m coming out now,” you announce through the door. “You’re decent, right?”

“I am,” Solas replies, and you open the door, shivering as the heat of the bathroom escapes into the main room. Solas is at the desk, though he’s pulled the chair closer to the bathroom door so as to be able to speak to you through it. He is, in fact, clothed, having changed from his formal wear back into his normal, comfortable attire.

“I’m sorry; I stayed in there so long the rune wore off,” you apologize. “I can have more water brought up if you want a bath as well.”
“I am fine, thank you,” Solas says, his eyes lingering on you oddly. Normally when he’s reading, he barely glances at you. Perhaps it’s the gown? It is unlike what he’s seen you wear in the past, if only because “what he’s seen you wear in the past” is whatever clothing the Inquisition deigned to give you. You wander over to another bag, pulling out the brush you’d purchased earlier that day. Finally, you can probably brush your hair.

You flop down on the couch, more relaxed than you have been in months, and hum softly to yourself as you let your hair out of the towel and begin to brush it.

“Where are you at in the book, Solas?” you ask curiously.

“Partway through the fall of Antiva City,” Solas replies. “It’s interesting how the betrayal of the Guard mirrors the unrest in Ferelden during the Fifth Blight. It seems every time a Blight takes the land, it’s made worse by humans turning on each other.”

“The Grey Wardens are supposed to be able to combat that… That’s what the treaties are for, anyway,” you say with a sigh. “It rarely works that way in reality, I suspect. Solas, where were you during the Fifth Blight?”

“Far to the north,” Solas replies, flipping a page. “By the time I’d even heard there was a Blight, it was already over.”

“The Fifth Blight was remarkably short lived,” you agree. “But that’s thanks to Warden Tabris and King Alistair. I knew her, you know.”

Solas looks up in surprise. “The Warden?”

“Yes. I was an orphan in the Denerim alienage. I remember her, and her would-be ‘wedding day.’” You shudder. “And what happened after.”

“I’ve heard little of who the Warden was before the Fifth Blight,” Solas says. “Only that she was an elf from Denerim.”

“She was much older than me,” you reply. “Eight years or so. But most everyone knew each other; Denerim’s alienage is comparatively small. More orphans than anything; because of the orphanage there, just about any orphaned elfkit in all eastern Ferelden got sent there. I knew her and her father both. She was… prickly. That’s all most anyone ever saw.”

“Not you?”

“No,” you agree softly. “Not me.” You sigh as you run the brush through your hair, catching on tangles weeks old. “In Seheron, they have this fruit from Par Vollen. The Qunari call it *atisha qaran*, dragon fruit. It’s a hideous color and covered in spikes. It’s short lived and difficult to obtain, and as spiky as it is, it’s a wonder anyone bothers. But if you crack it open, inside it’s soft and sweet and good smelling. Leah was like that.”

You smile to yourself. “I heard what happened, even all the way in Tevinter. It trickled down to even us slaves, eventually. Loghain made a Warden, dying slaying the Archdemon.” Your smile fades quickly. “I can’t believe she… I thought… Well, never mind what I thought.”

“Have you ever tried to find her?” Solas asks curiously. You scoff.

“Why? If she remembers me at all, she likely thinks me dead. What good would it have done me to track her down? What would I have said? What would I have told her? If she cared, it would have caused her pain. If she didn’t care, it would have caused me pain. Either way, we both lose. She’s
better off not knowing.”

“Perhaps you are right,” Solas agrees.

“Enough talk about the Fifth Blight,” you say abruptly. “Tell me about the Fourth.”

“Would you have me read to you?” Solas asks, clearly joking, but you grin.

“Yes! Tell me a story, hahren!”

“This is not particularly a storybook,” Solas says dryly.

“I don’t care. Read to me?”

To your surprise, Solas does. And it is dry. But you sit on the couch, listening to him tell the story of the fall of Antiva City while you endlessly brush your hair until it’s perfectly smooth. You lean back against the couch, sprawling out somewhat, and it’s then that you take note of just how bare your legs are. The gown doesn’t even go to your knees… Is this perhaps inappropriate? Solas doesn’t seem to be distracted by it, however, and you’ve long suspected he sees you in an entirely non-sexual light. Still, perhaps you should…

It’s then that you hear a raven crow. It sounds as though it’s coming from outside, and Solas pays it no mind, but you perk up.

You excuse yourself quickly to your room. Sure enough, there a raven sits on your windowsill. What timing! You pull the message off quickly. It’s from Jean, but you’re more interested in the raven then what it’s carrying. You quickly pen a message for Jean and Banal’ras both. Between the two of them, they can get you the information you need, and fast. You only have tomorrow and tomorrow night to figure out what to do about the imprisoned Qunari.

You pull on thigh-high stockings while you’re in there, just to have been said to do something. You had been increasingly self-conscious about your bare legs as the night went on, anyway, and you’d purchased several such stockings for the sake of staying warm back at Skyhold. You head back into the main room; Solas is reclined on the couch now, nose still buried in a book. You sink down onto the floor by the base of the bed, leaning back against it.

“Keep reading?” you ask, tucking your legs up against your chest and resting your chin on your knees.

He glances over at you, and does a quick double-take. Likely noticing that you’d put on something at least vaguely resembling pants, you suppose. Then he clears his throat. “Certainly.”

You can’t really think of a worse bedtime story than the Blight, but you listen nonetheless. By the end, you suspect you’re listening more to Solas’ voice than the actual words he’s saying. The book is terribly dry, but Solas could be reading a manuscript on nug breeding and you’d still be enthralled. The world around you gets foggier and heavier as your tired mind drifts listlessly towards the Fade.

You barely notice you’re asleep, at first. You’re on the hold of a horribly familiar ship. But you quickly realize that you’re an adult, not the twelve-year-old child you were when you were on this cursed boat. Still, being in the hold, even in a dream, causes your chest to tighten with panic. You need to wake up, lest this dream go horribly wrong.

You hear the door open and cringe. You know how this dream goes. That will be the captain--drunk,
as likely as not--here to cash in on the “payments” you’re making to get from Seheron to Antiva. You need to wake up. You don’t want to have this nightmare, not again. Not now.

But it’s not the captain who walks in the door. It’s Solas. No surprise… You’d spent the whole day thinking about the dream you’d had about him that last night in Skyhold, and you’d fallen asleep listening to his voice.

“Oh, you would show up here,” you mutter. “I shouldn’t be surprised.”

Solas walks closer to you, and you find yourself hoping against hope that this will be a good dream after all. “Are you going to pop into every bad memory from now on?” you ask idly. The dream around you is hazy, threatening to shift into another scene. You don’t want it to. You want to stay here a little longer. But the way you are, you have no control over your dreams at all, and only a tenuous grip on the Fade.

Solas gestures to your surroundings. “This must be why you dislike ships.”

“How astute,” you say, standing to test the solidity of the ground. The dream seems firmer where Solas is standing; you walk towards him. A Desire demon again, perhaps? You would be so lucky. There’s an easy enough way to find out. You walk closer. “You’re correct. Spend a few months locked in the hold of a ship yourself, your only company an amorous, drunken pirate captain. I promise you, you’ll come to hate them as well.”

“Amorous pirate captain?” The would-be Solas latches onto the subject of sex, confirming your suspicions. Well, now that you know what he is, the rest is easy. You haven’t lived this long without learning how to deal with spirits, and desire demons in particular never give you much trouble, if only because you’ve so much practice with them.

“I don’t want to think about that now,” you say, wrapping the leather thong of Solas’ wolf-bone necklace around your hand. You pull him down with it at the same time as you lift yourself up onto your toes, planting a deep kiss against his lips. You’ve startled the spirit; its eyes are wide. But quickly they slide closed. It wraps Solas’ arms around you and pulls you close, deepens the kiss. You moan into it softly, looking forward to another dream similar to the one you had in Skyhold.

But then, something happens.

The spirit pulls away, recoiling quickly. On its face… guilt.

You stare, dumbfounded. “Even in my dreams?” you say, frustrated. “Not even in my dreams?!” But then you stop. No desire demon would do that. It would keep going, tempt you, get you delirious with pleasure and then whisper sweet, poisonous lies into your ear. They were always like that. Spirits were not creative things. This… What is this thing?

“It’s not right,” Solas says, and you feel the dream fading. “Not even here. I’m sorry.”

Realization hits you like a bucket of ice water to the face, jolting you the rest of the way awake. You sit bolt upright. You’re on the floor of the hotel room, but you stare over at the bed where Solas sleeps. Pieces click rapidly into place. The way he talks of the Fade, as if it’s a place he can walk. The things he’s seen. His love of sleeping, his use of enchanted blankets to sleep deeper. His knowledge, his power.

Somniari. He’s a fucking Somniari! How had you not realized sooner?! And that… That had really been him! Why hadn’t you recognized it? Because of you piss poor connection to the Fade, no doubt. That bastard! And after you had gone on and on about your supposed “fear of magic,” he just
strolls right into your dreams without your permission? Not that you can say a thing without giving yourself away, no non-mage would… W… Would…

… Oh, fuck, you just kissed Solas.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who don't follow me on Tumblr, please note that I'll be going on hiatus for the next 1-3 weeks due to the DLC. I think we can all agree this was an excellent place for a hiatus, yes? :D
You spend the night sitting on your bed, knees against your chest and arms wrapped over your head.

*What have you done?*

The fact that Solas hadn’t immediately snapped out of his sleep and accosted you means that—contrary to what you’d feared—he couldn’t tell you were a mage simply from touching your sleeping mind. And considering he was apparently a *fucking Somniari*, that meant your little hiding trick was even better than you’d thought it was.

That was the good news.

Everything else was *horrible*. The more you thought about it, the more you wanted to climb under your bed and spend the next decade hiding.

*You kissed Solas.*

The *real* Solas. You’d thought he was a spirit; you’d gotten careless. And once again you’d let your stupid fucking libido get the better of you. You’d been so excited over the prospect of getting some attention—*in a dream, even*—that you’d overlooked the signs of a Somniari.

Now Solas knew, rather *explicitly*, that you harbored attraction to him. And Maker, what you’d *said*. You want to crawl under a rock and die. You never want the sun to come up. But slowly, inexorably, it does. You hear Solas up and moving around. He’s probably in there *stretching*. Like an *asshole*. You stay in your room and sulk. It isn’t until you hear breakfast arrive that you finally force yourself to change into some of your new clothing and face the day. The terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.

Solas has already started on breakfast when you enter the room. “Ah,” he says as you enter. “I thought you might be asleep; I didn’t want to disturb you.”

You want to glare. You want to tackle him and *throttle him* for coming into your dreams, for *tricking you*, even by accident, for *seeing that, for knowing, for*--

Instead, you force your face to be pleasant. “I felt like staying in bed a little longer this morning. I appreciate your consideration.” It takes every ounce of your willpower to sit across the table from Solas and smile. You’re screaming inside; you don’t know when you’ll stop.

You down your strong tea in one long chain of gulps, as if you’re chugging alcohol. Solas makes a face but otherwise doesn’t comment. Today, you need all the herbal help you can get. You set the cup down and take a long, deep breath, steeling yourself.
“Our plans for today,” you begin, pushing your emotions down into the pit of your stomach as if you could control them as readily as your aura. Making eye contact with Solas is difficult. You make yourself do it anyway. “I’m afraid it will be a bit dull. It’s essentially a day off for you; I just have a lot of running around to do to ensure everything goes off without a hitch tomorrow. You could go to the library, or explore Val Royeaux. Accompanying me would be rather boring—”

“I would rather remain with you. With your luck, you would be accosted the second you left my sight,” Solas says.

You briefly fantasize about lunging across the table and strangling him. Can’t he take a hint? How does he have this kind of a straight face, anyway?! You’re the only one who has to pretend here! He knows and he’s not letting anything show at all! It’s absolutely unfair. He could at least be a little ashamed of himself! Or embarrassed, or… or… anything! If he brought it up, you could at least clear the air, but he’s not. He would just let you go on believing it a dream?! Pervert! Goddamn pervert! Aaaaah, it’s so embarrassing you could just kill yourself! Or him! Or both!

“Very well,” you say with a smile. “But remember I did warn you it would be dull.”

You hear a crowing from the other room then, and glance behind you. Solas glances up as well. Should you wait? Another crow; loud and insistent.

“Perhaps I should shut the window,” you comment, standing. Solas isn’t buying it, however; as you trail into the other room, he follows.

The ruckus is quickly explained; there’s two crows and a raven sitting on your bed, each with a message.

“Only one of those is Leliana’s,” Solas comments. You scowl at him.

“You know Leliana’s birds by sight? That’s more suspicious than anything.” You remove each of the bird’s messages, glancing over them briefly. One is, in fact, from Leliana—directly, it seems, which is more than a little alarming. One is from Jean with collected information from contacts; the other from Banal’ras. All three birds wait expectantly. “You’ll just have to wait,” you tell them sourly. “I’m in the middle of breakfast.”

You take the letters back to the table and sit back down. Solas hovers around your shoulder for a moment before you glare at him. “Your breakfast will get cold, hahren.”

He sits down on the other side of the table with what could only be called a pout. His desire to see what you’re up to would be amusing if you weren’t so cross with him. You glance over the information as surreptitiously as possible. Leliana’s is the easiest to look at, if only because you don’t have to yank it away when Solas twists his head to see what it says. It’s full of useful information about the trip back to Skyhold. The guard will be effectively doubled, and Leliana emphasizes that the four additional “agents” are more experienced than the guard you’d had before. You hope she’s right; you’re not looking forward to the trip back to Skyhold at all, and in light of Baptiste’s death, well… You won’t be relaxing until those books are within the walls of Skyhold. You idly read over her short descriptions of each agent, but your eyes stick on one. A Qunari mercenary? Your first thought is, ridiculously, that she’s sent the Iron Bull. But no, why would he be away from the Chargers? That does give you an idea, however.

Coupled with the information sent to you from Jean and Banal’ras, something resembling a plan begins forming in your mind. It seems as though luck is smiling on you and the fake Saarebas. You had thought you’d have to leave his rescue to the hands of others. If he was an elf, Banal’ras could be trusted to do it with little more than a point in the right direction, but this is a Qunari. It will be
easier and cheaper if you simply do it yourself. This Qunari mercenary in your group may give you the chance to do just that.

“I know the look of a woman plotting,” Solas says mildly as you flip through the collected information. “Why try to hide it?”

You eye him sourly. “I’ll tell you when there’s something worth telling. This is all quite dull, I assure you.” Solas snorts. “Trust me,” you insist. He sighs, but presses you no further, which is... kind of amazing, actually. In the past, Solas had gotten quite insistent with you, to the point where-- intentional or not--he’d actively intimidated you to get answers. “Taking no for an answer is a good look on you, Solas,” you say with a smile.

“Enjoy it while it lasts,” Solas replies.

You fight against a shudder. You wish you could better parse his meaning when he said such things.

“I’ll need to write replies,” you say apologetically. “Do you mind getting a bit of a late start this morning?”

“It will give me an excuse to bathe,” Solas replies. You wonder idly why he hadn’t bathed last night. You’d offered to get more water for him. Perhaps he’d just gotten too absorbed in his book? In any case, you request water--hot, this time--when the serving girl comes to collect the breakfast dishes. You sit at the desk and try to focus on your writing while listening to Solas splash about in the tub. It’s more difficult than it should be thanks to your continued humiliation. You’d kissed him, you’d kissed him, you’d kissed him. And he’s acting like nothing happened, even though he knows.

Solas comes out of the bath some time later, freshly- and fully--clothed. He smells slightly of lavender; you smile. Had he discovered the scented bath oil as well? You try to redouble your focus on your reply to Leliana, but of course, Solas isn’t content to let you work in peace. He lingers over your shoulder. After a few minutes of increasing irritation, you turn slightly to tell him off. His face is rather close to yours. You find your eyes fixing on his lips. You turn quickly back to your work, scooting forward slightly, trying to kill the blush that was rising in your cheeks. Not fair. Not fair.

Solas idly watches as you scribe your response to Leliana. You suspect he’s a bit bored, though he’s certainly got plenty of books he could be reading. You send off three different messages with the three different birds; Solas sighs rather heavily, but doesn’t pester you further to tell him what you’re up to. You’re just as glad--there’s not a chance in the Void that he’d let you do what you have planned. He’d tie you down first--Oh, Maker, you shouldn’t have thought that.

“First things first,” you say as you pull on and Solas head out of the inn. “I’d like to stop by the University. I need to make sure everything is set up there, as well as thank the Chancellor.” You eye Solas sourly, wondering if he’d realized how boring spending the day with you will be. But he says nothing. He simply follows you out the door and onto the streets of Val Royeaux. One last day in the city… does he really want to spend it following you around? Well… You suppose that’s his call.

It’s on the way to the university that you overhear it... A few guards are speaking, their tones somewhat hushed, but humans always forget how superior elven hearing is.

“They don’t know how they got in. There’s no Templars there, but the mages are all in a fuss.”

“Why should we care? The White Spire has never been our job before.”

“Who breaks into a mage tower?”
You glance over at Solas, but he shows no more indication that he’s listening than you do. You’ve no doubt he can hear, however. You slow your pace somewhat, wanting to listen in a bit more.

“--books, apparently. Magic books.”

“Oh, that sounds pretty bad. Apostates, then? Maybe some rebel mages?”

“How would we have rebel mages in the city?”

“How would we not? The Templars are gone!”

It’s about then that you finally leave hearing range. Seems like they’ve already discovered the missing books and, likely, the calling card. That was fast. You’d hoped to be out of the city before the break in was even discovered. Perhaps you’d triggered some sort of unseen ward in the library? You’d been careful. It could be as simple as bad timing… But in any case, you’ll have to be extra careful moving the books out of the harbor. And you should let Banal’ras know they’ll be looking for him, although he doubtlessly already knows.

Solas’ eyes are on you, you realize. Oh, yeah, he’d heard that, hadn’t he? Missing books. You’ll have a fun time explaining that one to him. Yet another thing you would have rather avoided. It will be difficult to explain why you’d want tomes of magic, in particular. But you’ll come up with something. For now, you just focus on getting to the university.

Amazingly, it seems like everything is set up at the university. Whatever bullshit you’d pulled with the Chancellor, it had clearly worked. You work with several librarians to confirm the work you needed is complete and to ensure the deliveries will be on time tomorrow morning. Then you announce somewhat loudly in the presence of two security guards that you wish to thank the Chancellor. You give them time to scurry off and make whatever preparations they need before heading towards the man’s office. Solas follows you, though you wish he wouldn’t.

Judging by how empty the hall to his office is, you suspect he’s having it purposefully kept free of people. The fewer folks who see him speaking with the two rabbits forced upon him by the Inquisition, the easier it will be on his reputation… and dignity. You can’t even hold it against him.

“Ah, Ambassador Gagnon,” the Chancellor says with forced pleasantness as you enter his office. “And… associate,” he adds stiffly as Solas steps in behind you. “I’m pleased to hear you found everything you needed.”

“You and your companion. I’m pleased to hear you found everything you needed.”

“And then some, Chancellor,” you say warmly. “I wanted to personally give you my thanks--the Inquisition’s thanks--for your above-and-beyond assistance in this matter.”

“Of course, Ambassador,” the Chancellor purrs. “I appreciate the… haste… of you and your companion. I’m glad we were able to move at an appropriate pace.”

You can’t see the Chancellor’s expression through his mask, but you do note that his eyes are trained rather firmly on Solas. That’s the only warning you get before he does something you really wish he hadn’t done. He pulls Solas into conversation.

“Do tell me, what did the Inquisition’s magical advisor make of the University’s library?” the Chancellor asks, and it’s all you can do to keep your face a pleasant neutral. Solas doesn’t know the intricacies of Orlesian politics--you were an idiot to allow him to follow you. The things he might say to this pompous ass…

“The library here is quite remarkable, Chancellor,” Solas replies promptly, his voice even and polite. You can’t help but glance over at him, and see him standing tall and authoritative, but polite, hands
clasped behind his back. “It is certainly the finest bastion of knowledge I have seen in Orlais.”

Wow, now that was a nice technical-truth. Had Solas seen any other libraries in Orlais? Doubtful. Solas’ well-picked words seem to appease the Chancellor, as well.

“I’m pleased to hear that.” The Chancellor turns his gaze back to you. “Am I correct in assuming this is the last I’ll see of you for some time, Ambassador?”

“Until the Inquisitor’s needs send me back to beautiful Val Royeaux,” you simper.

The Chancellor inclines his head slightly, and you bow. Solas, you note, does neither. Whatever—you’ll take it. He had handled the Chancellor as well as you could expect from a non-Orlesian, let alone a “humble apostate” or whatever it was he claimed to be.

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After the library, you make your way to each of the bookstores in turn, ensuring everything is in order and the deliveries will be made on time. You’ve staggered them much in the way you’ve staggered the “overnight” deliveries, just to make loading up that much easier on everyone involved. It will be a task to get all of the books into one wagon as it is. You hope those horses the Inquisition got are strong.

You find, post-purchase, that it seems suddenly everyone recognizes your name. Likely, they’d bothered to do research once realizing how much coin you were dropping. The name Alix Gagnon is on everyone’s lips, which forces you, in turn, to be pleasant and polite. Everyone wants to mention which of your works they’ve enjoyed, whether they actually have or not. One woman even has the irritating Orlesian audacity to cheerfully note that she had no idea “Alix Gagnon” was a rabbit. Through it all, you smile and nod, ignoring purposefully slights and comments about how intelligent you were “for an elf” and how it just “went to show.”

They find you a cute little oddity, or a demonstration of how great their country is, that “even a rabbit” can find upward mobility if they are talented enough. You wish you could write down each and every one of their names and forward the list to Banal’ras. Instead, you grin and bear it for the sake of speeding things along and maintaining your good name.

You’re amazed to have everything set up by lunch. Somehow, you’ve actually managed this gargantuan task, although you know the job’s not over until you actually get the books back to Val Royeaux without anything catastrophic happening. There are plenty of ways yet for this to go wrong. But… so far, everything is going pretty okay. Aside from the fact you keep catching yourself staring at Solas—and his mouth, in particular.

Rather than stop at a restaurant, given the side of town you’re on, you just swing near the market district and grab some food from a stand. You and Solas wind up eating on one of the Miroir’s many docks, just because it’s out of the way and not particularly crowded. You kick your shoes off and let your toes dangle into the crisp, cool water.

Eating next to him proves to be a challenge, however. Not staring at his lips while he wraps them around his food is far more difficult for you than it should be. You wind up staring off at the Miroir despite the lack of anything interesting to look at, just to avoid staring at Solas instead.

“It is surprisingly peaceful,” Solas comments about halfway through the meal.

“It’s surprisingly dull. The beauty wears off amazingly quickly, so people don’t come around,” you explain. “The really pretty corners of Val Royeaux, under the apple trees and whatnot, are always
chock full of lovers. There’s practically a line.”

“And so you bring people here, instead?”

“I don’t tend to bring people anywhere,” you say quietly, splashing the still water idly with your foot.

“No? But you seem to have a great many friends.”

“Think for a moment on the people you’ve seen me with in Val Royeaux.” You turn to look at him despite your general reluctance to do so. “Businessmen and women I know through work. Former employers. Workers or owners of restaurants or shops. I do not have the kind of relationship with them that includes lunches on a pier.”

Solas is quiet for a time, and you realize just how telling that sort of statement might be now that he knows you harbor less than platonic thoughts about him. You idly consider diving into the Miroir and just swimming the fuck away. Have you done what you feared you’d do, sitting in the tree on the Dales? Have you ruined your chances at friendship with Solas?

If it was going to be destroyed either way, you almost wish you’d at least kissed him of your own volition, rather than thinking him just a figment in a dream. At least that way you wouldn’t have to play this stupid game of pretend, acting like you don’t know he knows.

Irritated—at yourself, at Solas, at a world that feels like it’s conspiring against you—you toss the rest of your sandwich into the Miroir. It’s pointless to think about. You would never have kissed him of your own volition. There was too much danger in that. “It seems we have the afternoon off, Solas,” you say, fighting to keep your voice light when you feel so dark. “If there’s anything else you wish to do in Val Royeaux, now is your chance.”

Solas seems to consider it. Whatever he’s thinking, you doubt you’ll be so lucky as to have some time away from him to compose your wretched self. In all likelihood, he’ll just shrug and say he’ll follow you around all bloody afternoon, leaving you to come up with something to do to entertain him. All you want to do is go somewhere where you can rela—

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Solas says, interrupting your thoughts. “I would like to see more of the city. But like this.” He gestures around at the empty pier. “Take me where you go to relax.”

You blink, slowly. That wasn’t a request you were really expecting. Well, it is, in a sense. It requires both you being with him and you coming up with something entertaining, but… Well, maybe you should just do it honestly? Just go where you’d been planning on going without him.

“...Alright,” you say, pulling your feet out of the Miroir. Your feet are too wet to go back in shoes, but that’s fine, considering what you have planned. With no small amount of self-consciousness, you reach into your back pocket and pull out the foot wraps Solas had given you when you broke into the White Spire. The fact that you’d been carrying them was probably telling.

“You’ll probably just be bored,” you mutter as you avoid looking at him and wrap your feet from ball to calf.

“Perhaps,” Solas replies. You see him shrug out of the corner of your eye, try not to let your gaze grasp onto his broad shoulders. “But even so, there are worse things in this world than a single dull afternoon.”

It feels very strange to be walking through the Belle Marche in elven foot wraps. You can feel the
shape of the stones underfoot, their warmth against your toes. You doubt any Orlesian shem has ever felt the city quite like this.

Being in the bustling marketplace is so enjoyable that you can *almost* forget your troubles. Not quite, and every now and then Solas says something and your eyes drag back to his lips and you remember that you’re mortified. But generally, you can keep yourself distracted. You walk the stalls with him, examining trinkets and accessories and wares of all kinds. You spend what coin you have left in your own purse, since you’ve nothing to really do with it back at Skyhold.

You’re actually starting to become quite cheered until you pass by a stand selling apples and apple-based goods. “Oh, I should buy some apple j--” You stop in the middle of your sentence as a memory hits you like falling boulders. Baptiste had wanted to buy you apple jam in Val Royeaux. Cheer suddenly gone, you run a sad finger over one of the jars.

You expect the shopkeep to be rude, but perhaps she sees the past purchases and your decent clothing. Or perhaps, to her, your gold spends as well as anyone else’s. In any case, she engages you cheerfully.

“You have wonderful taste, miss! The jam this season is marvelous. I also have fresh apples here, ripe and marvelous. It is the perfect season for them!”

You can’t help but smile a bit at the eager sales pitch. You wind up purchasing a few jars of jam, as well as some apples—and something for later, when Solas wanders of a little bit to look at another stand. Actually, you wind up buying quite a lot there in the Belle Marche, mostly presents for your friends and “friends” back in Skyhold. It occurs to you only now, but you should take advantage of being in Skyhold to get something for Banal’ras as well—the two of you have something of an anniversary coming up, although you’ll miss the date itself.

You make your way through the Belle March, and wonder if Solas is as bored as you predicted he would be. You doubt he suspected another day of shopping, but you still had things to pick up, coin to spend. He does seem to be less than content.

“Is this what you do to relax?” he asks as the two of you make your way back from purchasing food from a vendor. “I expected something with… less people.”

“I do love the market,” you admit. “But I’m not done yet.” You lead him into an alleyway, tucking the food into your bag as you do so. “Have you noticed how popular lattices are here in Val Royeaux?”

“It hadn’t particularly stood out,” Solas replies. “Is it significant?”

“Only for one thing,” you say. You grip onto a lattice on the side of the alleyway, one that has thick vines growing up it. Toes already bare for gripping, you begin to scale up it. “Are you coming, Solas?” you ask, glancing down over your shoulder at him and grinning.

Solas shakes his head slightly, but he’s smiling. He grips onto the lattice and begins climbing up beside you. You lead him up, up, further up, climbing across stranger’s balconies and scaling up lattices, vinces, and windowsills. Finally, you reach a roof, several stories above the ground where crowds still bustle through the Belle Marche. It’s the tallest building for several blocks, and the view is splendid.

“This was more along the lines of what I expected,” Solas says, turning to look around.

“I’m still not done,” you say, walking towards the edge of the building.
“What are you do-”

Regardless of how badly he seems to react to surprises, you can’t resist. You only wish you could see his face as you step off the roof.

“Emma!” His strangled shout will just have to do. It’s a bit satisfying--revenge for tricking you, perhaps? You look up and see him as he rushes to the edge and peers over, only to see you a few scant feet below, sitting cheerfully on a large, decorative statue jutting from the side of the building. “Y… you…” he says, and you watch as panic turns to relief turns to anger in his eyes.

“Tel’abelas,” you say, laughing. “The look on your face is worth it.”

“Do you enjoy causing me distress?”

“Did you enjoy watching me get drenched in the rain last night?” you reply smartly. “Climb down with me, Solas.”

This seems to surprise him. “Is that not dangerous?”

“Not really,” you reply. You smack the statue between your legs. It’s solid, thick, and heavy. “These griffons have been here for a very long time. They won’t break under our weight. And besides, you wanted to see what I used to do to relax.”

Solas climbs down onto the next statue over, somewhat more cautiously than your casual jump from the side of the building. There is nothing between your dangling feet and the ground but air. The statues are close enough that you could reach out and touch Solas if you wanted to. You don’t, of course. But you could.

“Is this altogether wise?” he wonders, testing the statue between his legs.

You shrug. “The statues won’t fall, and I won’t slip. We’re probably safer here than in the alienage, all told.” You shift your bag around in front of you and pull out some of the things you’d bought--food, mostly. “I used to come up here all the time, watch the people, read a book… When you asked me for a place I came to relax, this is the first place I thought of.”

You pull out one thing in particular for Solas… You’d seen it, thought of him, thought of where you’d be going. In the end, you hadn’t been able to resist, despite the fact you knew you really should have. Out of your bag come two caramel apples. You hand one over to Solas with a nervous smile. His hand brushes yours as he takes it. This is a mistake. This whole thing is a mistake, you shouldn’t have--

“Ma serannas,” he says, a simple reward that soothes your doubts. Your heart thuds dully in your chest. You really have no self-control, do you?

“The apples here are better than what we get in Skyhold,” you explain, looking away from him quickly. You can barely eat your own; your stomach is tied up in knots. Long-held fatigue is making your mind feel fuzzy.

“Have you never been spotted from below?” Solas asks after biting into his apple with a satisfying crunch. He’s glancing over the shoulder of the griffon statue at the people walking below in the Belle Marche. “We are not that far up.”

“People rarely look up. You have to crane your neck just to see these statues from the market. And in the afternoons when the sun is high, you’d be staring straight into the light. It blots everything out.”
Solas is silent for a moment while he chews. After a moment, he says, “This is a remarkably dangerous place to come to relax.” You’re ready to be offended, but he chuckles. “It’s very much like you. I suppose we should all be glad you haven’t taken to scaling the battlements.”

“I have, once,” you admit, which causes him to look over at you sharply. “It was Sera’s fault. She has a way of roping me into the stupidest things.”

“I can relate,” Solas says dryly, looking down at the ground, a long way straight down.

“This is nothing compared to breaking into the White Spire,” you say with a laugh. “Or any number of rather foolhardy things I’ve done with you here. I’m amazed you keep going along with it.”

“Nothing particularly terrible has happened yet.”

“Not for lack of trying,” you chuckle. You pull your legs up from around the griffon statue, resting them in front of you.

“Trying such as that,” Solas points out. “You’re going to fall off.”

“Stop fretting, mamae,” you say sarcastically. “I have done this before, you know.”

“I have no doubt. And yet I cannot shake the feeling that this will be the time something goes wrong.”

“If I fall, you can catch me,” you say with a careless grin. “You’re a magic man, after all. Be glad I’m not Sera. She would dangle from one arm just to see me sweat.”

“That would seriously hamper your relaxation,” Solas agrees.

The two of you eat your caramel apples slowly, as you had before. You shouldn’t have started the meal off with dessert, but you couldn’t resist.


“They’re not bad,” you say with a chuckle as you watch. “They need to work on the mark-picking, though. They’re going after the easy purses, not the heavy ones.”

“I imagine you must be quite skilled. Somehow, I doubt you needed Sera to show you how to pick my lock.”

You flush at the reminder, looking up from the thief below. “I… well, she gave me the picks,” you insist. “It’s not as though I had any! I left that part of my life behind long before I joined the Inquisition.”

“I believe it may have followed you,” Solas quips. You glare at him and toss a wrapped sandwich at his head. He catches it and pauses to look at what you threw, then laughs. “What would you have done if I dropped this?”

“Watched with great amusement to see whose head it did hit,” you say with a snort. “As if I’ve never dropped things off of here before! I once spent an entire afternoon up here dropping lizards.”

“Lizards?”

“Mhmhm. I’d play a game to see if I could make them land on people’s heads. One woman stayed
at a stand long enough that I was able to get **seven lizards** on her hat before she wandered off.”

Solas looks intensely amused. “Where did you find that many lizards? And how did you get them onto the roof?”

“I have a gift,” you say seriously. No need to tell him that Banal’ras helped you carry them up.

“A gift with lizards?”

“Absolutely. Perhaps I’m a mage after all, just instead of being able to manipulate the energies of the Fade, I can just… manipulate lizards.” You wiggle your fingers dramatically, and Solas laughs again. You would normally be uncomfortable about joking about that sort of thing, but it’s worth it to make him laugh.

You stay up there longer than you should. Until the sun is setting in the west and the Belle Marche is closing down below your feet. And you talk. You can’t quite forget the kiss, but this feeling is so sweet that you almost don’t want to. Solas doesn’t appear to be holding it against you. Your act is working—he may know your feelings for him, but he believes you think it was no more than a dream. His pretending **burns**, but given time to think about it, you’ve realized he’s no doubt attempting to spare your feelings. You can appreciate that.

“I noticed you bought a lot of trinkets in the marketplace. And a great number of… ribbons. Are you fond of them?” Solas asks. He’s shifted into a more comfortable position, still straddling the griffon, but leaning back against the building. You’re lying down the length of the griffon on your stomach, legs gripping the base of it to ensure you don’t slip off. It lets you watch the people mill about below.

“They’re presents,” you reply. “For people back in Skyhold, mostly. It’s something of an Orlesian tradition to bring women ribbons from Val Royeaux, and I know a great number of women these days. Those are easy. But Dorian, Bull, Krem… so many of the others, I wanted to get them things, but had no real idea what they’d like… so… trinkets.” You sit up with a grunt, twisting your bag around in front of you. “I have no idea if they’ll even like any of them.”

In truth, you’d bought something for essentially every person you knew, even people you didn’t know very well. You kept seeing things that reminded you of those you knew in Skyhold. You have no idea how you’re going to give them when you get to Skyhold… You don’t know what the protocol around giving gifts is.

You idly rummage through the various presents. You had, in fact, even picked something up for Solas, the day before. You suspect you’ll never actually gather the courage to give it to him. You pull out a few of the multi-colored ribbons to show Solas.

“They’re for your hair,” you explain. “It’s just a… tradition, I guess? It makes things easy on me, but then I was thinking I should get the men something too, and that’s where it got complicated.”

Solas chuckles. “That explains the pins.”

You grin. “Do you think they’ll like them?”

“I am the last one to judge. I’m certain you know them much better than I.”

You sigh and lean back against the building, mimicking Solas’ relaxed posture. “It’ll be odd, going back to Skyhold,” you confess. “Falling back into old routines.” It’s hard to believe you’ll have been gone for two weeks. It doesn’t seem so long, but it’s a third of the time you’ve worked for the Inquisition, really. They sent you out on such an important task despite the fact you’d only been there for a month… ludicrous. Although, you have to admit, it certainly worked out for them. You’d done
a good job.

“You will reaccustom yourself quickly,” Solas says. “Or do you simply mean it will be odd to go back to being Emma after being Alix for so long?”

You fix him with a sour glare. “I am Emma,” you say firmly, well aware of the irony, given what your name means. “Alix Gagnon is a mask as much as this one.” You tap against the silver mask on your face. “I shed it when I left Orlais for the Inquisition.”

“And donned it quickly when you came back.”

“Of course,” you agree. “But even if everyone in the world knew me as Alix Gagnon, that wouldn’t make it true.”

“Would it not?”

“No,” you say firmly. “We are not people’s perceptions. We are ourselves. The core of us is fixed. It does not change based on whim, ours nor others’.”

Solas is silent, and for a time, you wonder if you’ve said something telling again. Blast Solas to the Void… You want to know what he thinks about everything. Everything including you. You want him to see the heart of you because you want to know what he’d make of you. To watch yourself, spread open on an examination table, as he picks about the parts of you and tells you what they mean.

It’s very foolish.

“I believe it’s long past time for us to climb off of this roof, Solas,” you say with a sigh. The two of you have watched the sun set. Now you’re just wasting time, whittling away at your last night in Val Royeaux.

“Any more dramatic plans for the night?” Solas asks as you stand, feet careful on the stone statue, to pull yourself back up onto the roof.

“Certainly,” you say amiably. “We can return to the hotel room and I can enjoy one last bath while you read. Out loud, if I get my way. Then perhaps you’ll bathe, and I’ll read to you. I’m certain by then, the elderly like you will be heading to bed. We have a long, long day tomorrow.”

“I’m hardly in need of yet another bath,” Solas says mildly. “But I would enjoy hearing you read.”

It’s dark on the streets. Two elves, out past curfew again, and while you have your cape, Solas neglected to bring his. His bare ears are a beacon. You shouldn’t be surprised when trouble finds you.

You see the Chevalier only moments before he sees the two of you. Solas seems to have noticed him as well, and it’s that split second of eye contact that makes the Chevalier’s decision for him. “Hey, you two,” he says with a frown, and takes two steps forward before your instincts kick in. You and Solas could probably talk your way out of the situation, but your jaw has finally healed and you just really don’t want to deal with that shit tonight.

“Cheese it!” you exclaim, wrapping your hand around Solas’ wrist. You take off down an alley, dragging a startled Solas along behind you. He stumbles only briefly when you first yank, and then he’s running along with you.
“Hey! Fucking knife-ears! Stop!” you hear the Chevalier shout behind you. You release Solas’ wrist to throw yourself at a half-wall, scrambling up to the top, toes gripped into the rock.

“Why are we running?” Solas asks as he clambers up after you.

“Isn’t it obvious?” you say, a little breathlessly. “To see who can outrun who.”

You lead the Chevalier on a merry little chase through the back alleys. The fact of the matter was, he had no real chance of catching you. If you were that easy to catch, you would have been dead years ago. The speed and grace with which Solas moves is a pleasant surprise, however. He matches your pace, letting you lead the way but keeping up with seeming effortlessness. You wind up taking a more convoluted route than you need to, leading the Chevalier along rather than simply losing him along a shadowed rooftop. Just to see Solas move, to see his shoulders tense beneath his clothing as he pulls himself up. Just for the sheer joy of snaking your way through the night with him, a pair of giggling thieves dodging the law.

You’re high on adrenaline again by the time you sneak around to the inn. Bare toes on the flagstones and you feel like you want to grab him and dance. You manage to resist, but laughter finally comes bubbling out as the two of you slink into the room together one last time.

“I didn’t expect you to be so athletic, Solas,” you laugh. “You had no trouble keeping up. All that stretching you do must really work.”

“I suppose so,” Solas says, sounding amused. “Perhaps next time, I should lead, to see if you can keep up?”

You laugh again, the sound light and breathless. He doesn’t seem at all winded, but you are, breath fluttering in your chest like butterflies from your long run. “Next time? Do you see this becoming a regular thing for us?”

“Perhaps,” Solas says, and once again you can’t quite parse his meaning. But one thing you know for sure… There are worse fates in this world than running. Particularly if you have someone with which to run.
Another chapter? So soon? Yes. Enjoy the pace while it lasts. There’s a bit of foreign language in this one. I’m putting it at the top to save you some grief.

Qunlat Guide
Ashkost = Be at peace
Saarebas-saam = Saarebas nothing, not Saarebas.
bas saarebas = A non-Qunari mage
valo-kas karasten = sword of vengeance
Vashoth = Grey one
Ebasit kata maraas shokra = It is ended. There is nothing to struggle against.

Your evening goes precisely as planned. You bathe, a long, soaking affair with the assistance of another of Solas’ fire runes. He is spoiling you, and you tell him as much. You’re very much going to miss this when you return to Skyhold. You already suspect that you’ll become distracted often thinking of the baths in Solas’ and Iron Bull’s rooms.

Emboldened by Solas’ good manners, you leave the bathroom door cracked just the tiniest bit, so that you can easily hear him through it. He reads to you from that dry, dull tome on the Fourth Blight, and you think that you’ve never heard anything quite so interesting. You have just enough presence of mind to berate yourself. You should be distancing yourself from Solas, now that he knows your less-than-pure feelings about him. But he’s acting so much the same that you can almost forget he knows.

After your bath, you change into a nightgown, simply to demonstrate to Solas that you’re in for the night. He doesn’t take you up on your offer to read to him right away, but you wind up sitting next to him on the couch, reading the tome alongside him, just to give his voice a rest. It is perhaps less interesting without his narration, but you enjoy it nonetheless. You’ve long maintained that there’s no such thing as a useless book. There is something to be gained from even the most obvious work of fiction or propaganda. The tome may be dry, but it is educational.

You find, to your frustration, that Solas actually reads faster than you do. And you’re no slow reader! After a half dozen pages turned before you’ve finished them, you take to holding the side of the page yourself, moving your thumb of the page only when you’re ready for him to turn it. The positioning has you pressed close to him, thigh against thigh, but he doesn’t seem to mind, and you find some small comfort in the contact. You don’t believe you’ve ever touched a person this much and not had them come after you sexually. It’s… strangely freeing. That he allows it despite his knowledge of your attraction to him is very kind.

You actually struggle to remain awake. You don’t think Solas is working any magic on you--none that you can detect in any case--but you feel the subtle pulls of the Fade on your mind. It’s a shame you can’t sleep tonight, really. You allow yourself to recline on the couch away from the book, however, if only to encourage Solas to go to sleep. You rest your head on the soft armrest of the couch, your feet snaking closer to Solas as you relax. Tentatively, you allow one foot to rest against
his thigh. He doesn’t protest, and you allow the contact to soothe you even as you fight the pull of sleep.

You’re half-asleep yourself by the time Solas puts up his book and heads to bed. You watch through a half-lidded eye as he strips by the bed. You see him put a hand on his trousers and suddenly you are wide awake. He glances over towards you and you quickly close your eyes the rest of the way. Slowly, you peek out between your lashes, but he seems to have thought better of removing his pants. It’s just as well. You wouldn’t have been able to stop yourself from watching, and you really don’t need that on your conscience. Instead, you watch as he pulls a blanket off the bed and walks back towards you.

Your heart pounds in your chest as you shut your eyes once again. You feel a blanket settle of you, and then Solas’ soft hands as he tucks it around you. Unnecessary… He doesn’t need to do that. But the fact that he does set your chest to a painful ache. Who was the last person to tuck you into bed like this? Your mother? Leah? Aimée?

You open your eyes only when you hear the bed creak as Solas climbs into it. You have emotions you’re not entirely equipped to deal with. You wish he’d stop being so kind. It would make things easier. And yet, you know you would miss it achingly if he did stop. You’re in a hell of your own making.

You give it perhaps a half hour, then stir from the couch, shifting the blanket off of you with regret. You would have been quite happy to stay there the whole night through. But tonight, you really can’t. You slip out of your nightclothes and into something more reasonable, and then out the window you climb, careful to leave it open so that you can sneak back in. Hopefully Solas doesn’t wake in the evening and find you gone… or worse, close the window without realizing.

Banal’ras came through for you, as he always does. It’s costing you an extra tome from the White Spire, one you had really wanted… but the Qunari’s freedom is more important than your lust for knowledge. There will be other opportunities to learn.

You climb down the side of the building cautiously, and then you’re out onto the streets of Val Royeaux. You swing by one of your oldest stash spots. Banal’ras has been by. An old black cloak and a very familiar mask lie within a tied up bag. You can’t help but roll your eyes. Any mask and cape would have done, but of course Banal’ras would be brought your old gear. He’s trying to goad you out of retirement.

The six eyed mask is familiar and comfortable on your face. You let your aura out just past your skin; the lyrium in the mask picks up on it immediately. He really had given you the real mask. Idiot. You’re amazed he’d part with it, really. But you suppose it’s important, if Banal’ras is to be taking responsibility for tonight.

You sweep your way to the Baron’s estate by rooftop. Banal’ras, likely in a matching mask, will be making a distraction. You sneak in the back entrance he detailed to you, six gleaming red eyes lighting your way. It’s amazing to you how easily it is for you to become reaccustomed to the quirks of the enchanted mask—as if you’d never ceased to wear it. Your vision through it is hazed over red, but you barely notice it. And it’s worth the odd tint. You could have used this mask breaking into the White Spire, for its ability to see enchantments and runes. Unfortunately, Solas being there had prevented its use.

You break into the Baron’s basement with a muttered spell, slide into the darkness as if it were home to you. But what you see has you nauseated despite the fact you were expecting it.

The “Saarebas” is caged and bound. A brief brush of your aura confirms what you’d suspected;
there’s no hint of magic in his bindings. This poor creature is simply a Qunari--Tal-Vashoth, most likely--captured and sold for the pleasure of those who should know better. Its eyes meet yours--or the six glinting lights that represent your eyes--but rather than struggle, it lets out a low, tired grumble.

You sweep across the basement towards it, your aura sparking around you at your barely-controlled rage. The basement fills with the sparks and pops of barely suppressed power; the air around you grows humid, the feel of the storm before lightning strikes. Your pride aches in the place of this Qunari’s. Its arms are bound behind its back, chains are hooked to a brutal, thick collar that is imbedded around its neck and chest. The air smells of blood. No living creature should be subjected to this.

“Ashkost, saarebas-saam,” you say, voice low and quiet. The Qunari shifts in its bindings, lets out a grunt of pain. “Do not be frightened,” you inform it firmly. You place a small rune on the lock of the cage, give it a little burst of mana for charge, and then step backwards. It blows the lock open with a burst of power, looking very much like it had been smashed from inside. The Qunari flinches backwards, lets out a cry of alarm. You swing the door open, step in next to the creature.

“You are not of the Qun, bas saarebas.” Its voice is low, accusing. Hoarse and cracked. Too long without being used.

“I am neither Qun nor bas saarebas,” you reply evenly. “Have you been away from Par Vollen for so long that you’ve forgotten there is more than one way to make a thing explode, saarebas-saam?” You remind yourself you have nothing to fear. The Qunari is still bound.

“No.”

“Good. Do you still want to be free?”

“Yes. I will kill the man who did this to me.”

You shake your head. “I cannot have you rampaging.”

“This cannot go unpunished!” the Qunari snaps, lunging forward against its bonds.

“It will not. Calm yourself, saarebas-saam. I’ve already begun your vengeance. If you will allow me, I will free you, and I will be your valo-kas karasten. But you must trust me.”

The Qunari glares at you. “You are an elf, and not of the Qun, yet you speak it. How?”
“I was like you. A man captured me and bound me for his own delight. I was pet to a Tevinter master. But I wanted freedom.”

“And you took it. I should take my own.”

“A qunari helped me then. I will help you now,” you say firmly. “Let me do this; do not fight me. *Ebasit kata maraas shokra.*”

“Stop that,” the Qunari snaps. “It is disturbing.”

“I am not made of time and patience, *vashoth.*”

He is silent for a time, then nods. “Very well. You will be my *valo-kas karasten*... if a *basra* even knows what that means.”

“I don’t want to hear that from a *vashoth,*” you grumble, but you sidle around beside him and place a hand on the chains binding him in place. “This will hurt.” It’s the only warning you give him before placing more small runes on the chains and activating them. The chains burst as if shattered by a powerful blow. The Qunari falls forward, hands still bound behind his back. You take a dagger to the thick ropes, hacking your way through them brutally as a way to work out your anger and fear both. You do not look forward to being alone with an unbound Qunari. **Grey skin and sweeping horns.** You grit your teeth.

Finally, its arms are free. It moves to push itself off the ground, crawling out of the cage before standing up to its full height. Panic flutters in your chest, your aura constricts defensively around you. You’d thought perhaps Bull had done you some good in regards to being able to tolerate the presence of Qunari, but the sight of the beast sends pure terror knotting into your stomach. And you’d taken this thing on as your charge?

“If you do not wish me to take my own vengeance, *Valo-kas,* remove me from this place,” the Qunari growls. You scramble out of the cage. It’s difficult to maintain your air of command when you’re so clearly intimidated by the Qunari’s size, but the mask helps.

“We’ll escape this way,” you say, leading him to the way you’d snuck in. “I have a cloak to help me get you as far as my room. From there, we’ll see about removing the rest of those bindings… I’m sure you’re eager to be rid of them.”

Banal’ras had doubtlessly given you the largest cloak he had access to, and yet the Qunari still sticks out like a sore thumb. You sneak him along back alleys, moving slowly and cautiously to avoid sight. His horns may be covered, but there aren’t a lot of eight foot tall Orlesians.

You make it back to the inn, somehow. You hide the mask in a nearby stash, knowing Banal’ras will be back for it. Wrapped up alongside it, you leave Banal’ras’ present. It’s easier than trying to tie it to a bird. Banal’ras may not have a proper birthday, but every year you celebrate the day you met. He’ll be sour that you’re missing it this year… a present is the least you can do, as it’s in a few days’ time.

Now for the hard part… getting a Qunari in a third story window. Fortunately, the thing can climb. You climb up first, scrambling silently in the open window and tiptoeing to your room, where you retrieve the rope from your travel bag. With help from the rope, the Qunari manages to scale the building. It gets stuck in the window somewhat, but you manage to pull it in.

Unfortunately, it seems Solas can only sleep through so much. He awakens to you dragging a Saarebas in the window.
Honestly, you’re amazed he doesn’t freak out more than he does.

“Fenedhis!” he swears, rolling out of bed. You’d be amused if you weren’t in such serious trouble. You’ve never heard him swear like that. He lets out a long, loud, angry stream of Elven that you’ve no hope of keeping up with. It’s quite clear he’s talking to you, but he’s not pausing long enough to give you time to reply, or even to inform you you’ve no idea what he’s saying.

You take a nervous step between him and the Qunari as Solas takes angry strides towards you, his blue eyes flashing furiously in the dark room. He gesticulates angrily at the Qunari behind you, then bats at your chest, or perhaps your cloak. He turns around, throwing his hands into the air in frustration. It’s almost mystifying… You’ve never seen him like this.

His stream of enraged Elven finally slows. You stare, hypnotized, at the rise and fall of his bare shoulders. He turns, slowly, and fixes you with a steely glare. “Emma,” he says, his voice dark and low. That’s enough to snap you out of your reverie.

“I didn’t understand a word you just said,” you blurt out. It was the entirely wrong thing to say.

“You might have stopped me!” you protest. “And this needed to be done.”

“Perhaps, but not by you!” Solas exclaims. “What precisely do you intend to do with him?”

“Free him,” you say firmly. At the irritation in Solas’ eyes, you rush onwards. “I do have a plan. Banal’ras is causing quite the upset at the Baron’s estate even as we speak. The Baron will not notice his pet’s escape until the morning, at the earliest. Even then, he will be hard pressed to come after him. When he does see the escape, it will look very much as though the Qunari did it himself.”

Solas crosses his arms, but at least he’s waiting for your explanation. “His best bet of escaping is with us. One Qunari is very suspicious. But one of the Inquisition agents arriving here tomorrow is a Tal-Vashoth mercenary. Two Qunari is not so odd as one.

“I can disguise his face,” you rush on. “With your help, I could remove his bindings. We can slip him out of the city before anyone even notices he’s missing.”

Solas is taking deep breaths, clearly trying to keep himself from losing his temper with you again. You know you should be more scared, but he’s very shirtless and you’re very distracted by that fact. He looks like he wants to grab you and shake, and Maker spare your soul, you wouldn’t mind one bit if he got a little violent with you right then. You swallow, hard, trying to control yourself and struggling with it as clearly as Solas is. Although, you know, for very different reasons.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Emma?”

“You might have stopped me,” you repeat. “I couldn’t risk that. He needed to be freed, Solas.”

“I did not stop you last night,” he points out. You bite your lip. You cannot tell him you needed to do
things you couldn’t do in front of him.

“Emma ir abelas, Solas,” you say finally. “Perhaps I misjudged you.”

Solas eyes the Qunari behind you sullenly. “Will this creature even obey you? Can it speak?”

“It can,” the Qunari grumbles. “She is valo-kas karasten. I must trust her.”

“What did you do, Emma?” Solas says irritably.

“I’m his… sword,” you say, wondering how best to explain this to one who might be unfamiliar with the intricacies of the Qun. “A sword safeguards your life. It’s your defense and offense. Valo-kas karasten means sword of vengeance. I must protect him until I’ve unleashed his vengeance.”

Solas lets out a long, drawn-out sigh. He rubs a hand over his brow, and you can see the tension in his muscles. He’s still angry, and you’ve denied him a means of getting it out. Your mind comes up with several not-so-helpful suggestions of ways you could help him release that frustration. You try to push those thoughts out of your mind.

“It’s done,” Solas says shortly. “Now all that remains is… damage control.”

“I want to get the bindings off of him,” you explain. “But if they’re anything like Saarebas bindings, they may be… embedded.” Solas sighs.

“Very well. Have your charge strip. I will see what I can do for him.” He moves to fetch his staff from the bedstand.

“He does speak Common,” you grumble, but you turn to the Qunari nonetheless.

“I do not wish to suffer the ministrations of your saarebas,” the Qunari growls, and you scowl.

“Too bad, vashoth. Those bindings need to come off, and I cannot hope to remove them myself. He can dull your pain and prevent serious injury. Strip, please.”

The Qunari glares, and inside, you’re trembling, but you hold your ground. You cannot appear weak in front of this thing. Too much is at stake. Once you’re out of the city, you can… release him into the wild, or whatever, and spend a full day shaking and puking in sheer terror. For now, you have to hold it in.

Of course, then he strips off his cloak. The panic rises in your chest. The collar is heavy on his neck, chains and rope and dried blood. His hands go to the half-robe wrapped around his waist and legs, and you lose your confidence, looking away. You cannot watch him strip. You're not even thinking about Iron Bull. Your mind is firmly rooted in Seheron. You taste the tang of iron in your mouth—you must have bitten your cheek so hard it bled. You can’t panic, you remind yourself. You can’t. You don’t have that luxury.

"Who did this to you? Was it the Baron?" Solas is asking. He's approaching the Qunari as if the creature isn’t half-naked and bound in rope and chains and that horrid iron collar.

"It was done to me on his behalf,” the Qunari says shortly. You take a few deep breaths, trying to steel yourself.

"Lie on the floor," you order. As he does so, you examine the damage. "We're in luck," you murmur. "I think the only part embedded is the collar. This part around the chest is just straps."
"Was his mouth sewn shut?" Solas demands, examining the Qunari’s face.

"Yes," you say shortly. "Solas, we may have to cut this section off..."

The two of you work the Qunari over with knives and magic. To his credit, he’s quiet, gritting his teeth through what has to be excruciating pain as you work embedded metal out of his flesh before Solas soothes the wounds with tender magic. The Qunari is in rough shape... He’s thinner than a Qunari should be, probably due to Maker knows how long on a liquid diet.

“Tomorrow, I can craft an illusion to disguise these,” Solas says, tapping on one of the Qunari’s horns. The Qunari lets out a displeased grunt, but is otherwise submissive to it. “Many people identify Qunari by their horns. Give him a different set, and that may be enough to elude detection.”

“Ma serannas, Solas,” you say, pleased that you didn’t have to suggest the idea yourself. You’d been trying to figure out a way to do just that without seeming overly knowledgeable.

After magic has done all it can for the Qunari, you turn to Solas. “Solas, you should rest. You can’t do anything more for him, and we have a long journey tomorrow.”

Solas sighs. “I fear for what you might get up to while I sleep.”

“I’ll remain in this room until you wake, Solas. You have my word.”

Solas does, eventually, go back to bed, although it’s with a lot of fussing and glaring. You don’t know how he can sleep in these circumstances, but you’re glad he can. You stay up tending to the Qunari. His hair is a knotted mess, but he consents to sit on the floor while you sit on the couch and work your comb slowly through it, taking a knife to it when a comb won’t do.

“Simply cut it off,” the Qunari says with an irritated grunt as you savage yet another knot of tangled hair.

“With my knife? You’ll look like a half-plucked chicken,” you say with a scoff. The Qunari’s hair is a dirty-off white, but you suspect that cleaned, it would gleam like snow reflecting sunlight. His horns sweep back from his head, but the dramatic curl of them keeps them from reminding you of any Qunari you used to know.

“Why did you take it upon yourself to free me, Valo-kas?” the Qunari asks after a while.

“I saw you at the Baron’s little auction,” you reply.

“That is not an answer.”

You sigh. “Is it not enough that I did? Qunari should not be curious.”

“I’m no Qunari,” he spits.

“Fair enough, vashoth. Your imprisonment angered me. I had the means to end it, so I did.”

“Why enact my vengeance, Valo-kas?”

You smile. “That, I do because it brings me great joy, saarebas-saam. I barely need an excuse to bring pain to a man like your Baron.” You remove chains from his body and decorative hoops from his horns, and the Qunari peppers you with quiet questions the whole time. Occasionally, his voice rises and you shush him. When you’ve cleaned him as best you can, you fetch your bag of food from your room and feed him from it--slowly. You don’t wish to make him ill, and it’s likely his stomach
will have difficulty with solid food for some time.

While he eats, you busy yourself with his garments. The half-robe of a saarebas would be way too
telling, but you can’t bring him to the harbor nude, either. You shred it in several places with your
knife, and then fetch needle and thread from your bag to craft it into rudimentary pants. He won’t
look good, but no one really expects a Qunari to look good. With a bared chest and bold horns,
there’s a good chance no one will be looking at his pants at all.

The Qunari is perhaps the most talkative Qunari you’ve ever come across. He’s full of questions, not
only about you, but about Solas, why you’re in the city, who you work for, and then, as the night
wears on, why you’re not sleeping, why you’ve crafted him pants, why, why, why, why. It’s more
amusing than it is annoying. He reminds you of a child, somewhat, despite being easily twice your
size. If nothing else, it serves to relax you. His sitting on the floor assists as well… for a short time,
you can forget how huge he is.

He sleeps for a few hours sometime before dawn, and you send out a last few messages… farewells
and thanks to Jean and Banal’ras and a few other contacts you managed to reach while in Val
Royeaux. You also send Vivienne’s letter to Jean, with details on who to deliver it to and the firm
message to do it tomorrow after you’ve left Val Royeaux. No use in giving Vivienne’s “friend” any
spare time to track you down.

Solas stirs around dawn, and the look on his face when he awakens to see you reclining on the couch
and the Qunari passed out on the floor is… terrifying. You wish you had something to bribe him
with to help assuage his temper.

“Are you certain your charge will behave, Emma?” Solas asks, eyeing the sleeping beast on the
floor.

“I believe so. He seems rather adrift. So recently freed from slavery, I doubt he’ll know what to do
with himself at first, and Vashoth are often a little… aimless. He’ll follow me, for now, and he’s
already shown he’s willing to do what I tell him to. For now, anyway. I believe we’ll be able to get
him out of the city. After that?” You shrug. “We’ll see.”

You’ve changed into travel clothes and your thick, strong leather boots in preparation for the
journey. All of your things are packed, and you assist Solas in packing the last of his. “Solas,” you
say, after being silent for some time. “I want to apologize.”

“It’s quite telling that you could be apologizing for one of many things,” Solas says sourly.

“For not telling you about my plan to free the Vashoth. I was concerned you’d stop me, but…
You’re right. I should have trusted you.” You’re lying, of course. You believe your decision was the
right one. But a little bending and scraping never hurt.

Solas is quiet for some time, then sighs slightly. “Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, those are names you might recognize if you’ve played Dragon Age Multiplayer.
Argent, Katari and Korbin are all canon agents of the Inquisition. Don’t bother hunting
for our Dalish friend, he’s an OC.
I hope you enjoyed furious! Solas nearly as much as I enjoyed writing him. *fans self*
Wow, I, uh... 50 chapters. Man. That's... that's a lot of chapters, innit? I'll be doing a contest in celebration over on my Tumblr, so keep an eye out for it.

The two of you wake the Qunari and tuck him into the adjoining room before the serving girl arrives with breakfast. Then you feed him--again, carefully--from your plate and the bag of food. It's fortunate you had left it essentially untouched while you were in Val Royeaux. It will serve you well to feed the extra mouth on the way back to Skyhold.

Back to Skyhold.

It seems almost alien to think of returning. You wonder if everything will be exactly as you left it. Will it be easy to fall back into your routine? Training with Bull in the morning, riding Revas on Sundays? Long afternoons in the rotunda with Solas, translating the Tevinter tome? Will the Chargers already be back when you arrive? Will Bull have lost any men on whatever task they were completing? Is he okay? Is Krem? Skinner, Dalish, Rocky? You really must stop making friends with soldiers and mercenaries. It will end in tears. Yours, most likely.

What will you tell Leliana, Josephine, and the Inquisitor? Will they wonder at how you completed the tasks so well? Will Solas keep the secret of your past to himself, or share it with the Spymaster?

It does you no good to worry about that now. First the Qunari, then the trip back to Skyhold. Then you can worry about Skyhold itself. Your time in Val Royeaux has been marvelous and freeing and beautiful... But it was always temporary. It's time to go back to the real world now, with all the dangers that presents.

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When word comes that your “guards” are here to pick you up, Solas goes out the front while you smuggle the Qunari back out the window and around the inn. It looks like Solas is explaining as you come around the corner. You’re nervous, but the Qunari is as well disguised as he’s going to be. His horns are cloaked with magic--unfortunately, the swoop that Solas had elected to craft with his illusion makes you nauseated just to look at--and his face is marked with fake vitaar that you crafted from your makeup. It looks rather realistic--you doubt any but another Qunari would be able to tell the difference.

You recognize one of the people sent to escort you… Emilio. It’s something of a relief to see him. He has a dwarven man with him, someone you very much do not recognize. But neither of them so much as blink at the Qunari. You love good liars.

The Qunari sticks close to you as you walk through the streets. You get a lot of stares, and you know you’ll be remembered, but you’re confident that your not-Saarebas looks nothing like himself. Your group is a chaotic mix: one human, two elves, a dwarf and a Qunari. You’ll be remembered for that, but in such a bizarre mix, a Qunari almost fits in.
You find your eyes lingering on the dwarf when you’re not scanning the crowd. His face is heavily tattooed… a Casteless come to the surface, perhaps? Admittedly, you know little about dwarven culture. Leliana had mentioned there would be an addition four guards, but she hadn’t mentioned much beyond “a human, an elf, a dwarf, and a Qunari” and that they were more skilled than your four human guards.

You make it to the docks without incident, to your surprise. Perhaps no one wants to step in the way of such an obviously dangerous group? Honestly, you’re the odd one out. Everyone else—even Solas—is seriously intimidating.

The rest of your group is by a wagon that must be yours. You quickly move to examine the contents—it’s positively creaking with books. There’s no real way for you to ensure that everything is there, but the guard you hired assures you that everyone came on schedule and there were no incidents—other than one Carta idiot trying to steal a book, which he took care of promptly. You quietly ensure that your own smuggled books were put in place… the ones from the White Spire. Humorously enough, you are smuggling books within smuggled books for the Inquisition. They couldn’t have set you up for this more perfectly.

“If you’re finished, the boat is here,” a low voice informs you. You turn to see who is talking to you and barely bite down a cry of alarm. You had known there would be a Qunari. You hadn’t been expecting him to be quite so… terrifying. His face is marked with purple vitaar—at least your Qunari fits in, with his red and white faked vitaar—and he is tall, tall even for a Qunari. Sweeping horns and white hair threaten to send you straight back to Seheron. Grey skin and black eyes. Reflecting—You choke back panic as your eyes flit between the two Qunari.

“This is going to be a really fucking long boat ride.”

“You-yes,” you stammer out, mentally cursing yourself. Solas is watching you. You’d barely stammered at all in Val Royeaux… He’ll definitely be taking notice of your sudden-onset speech impediment. “I-I’m r-r-ready.”

The second-last thing you want to see steps out from the shadow of the last thing you want to see. A Dalish elf. A Dalish elf and a Qunari. Maker’s balls, what cruel punishment is this?

“I’m Adahlen,” he says cheerfully, and you try not to scowl. “Katari didn’t tell me the two of you were elves! Thought I’d be dealing with some idiot Orlesian shems... Oh, no offense, Argent.”

“We’ll have time for introductions on the ship,” the vitaar-faced Qunari says firmly. You quickly make your way to Solas, not bothering to reply to Adahlen. Not even on the ship yet and you’re already gluing yourself to his side. You watch as workers drag the wagon away—the horses must already be loaded into the ship.

You don’t realize it until you’re nervously climbing onto the ship itself, but your Qunari is as glued to your side as you are to Solas’. You’ve no doubt it’s much more comfortable with sea travel than you, and its face betrays little behind the red-and-white vitaar mask. But still, it sticks close to you. And with you sticking close to Solas, the three of you must make an odd sight.

Unfortunately, this ride isn’t going to be any easier than the first one. Not due to weather—the sky is blue and clear—but due to company. It seems introductions really are in order. You recognize your four companions from the trip to Val Royeaux—and are quite happy to see each of them, you find, although they’re all eyeing your Qunari suspiciously. But there are four strangers to get to know. Even if you’d rather not.

The Dalish is, as he said, Adahlen. An archer, if the bow strapped to his back is any measure, and all
vallaslin’d up in honor of Andruil--your least favorite deity. He seems the most friendly of the four, but you find him deeply distasteful. The dwarf introduces himself as Korbin--you’ll quiz him about his face tattoos later, if you get the chance. You’re probably most curious about him. There’s a quiet woman with a thick Orlesian accent who is introduced as Argent. She’s an assassin--that much is obvious just by looking at her. One of Leliana’s, no doubt. And then there’s Katari, the huge brute of a Qunari who’s taken control of this expedition from Garrick. You wonder if that was always planned, or if Garrick is in trouble for letting Baptiste die on his watch.

Katari is terrifying, and he wants very much to know why you have an extra Qunari he was not informed of. Solas seems content to watch you flounder, but you try to put together something akin to an explanation.

“He’s… I…” You clear your throat nervously. You don’t know whether to explain it the Qunari way or not… Tal-Vashoth sometimes react poorly to the Qun. But it’s the only explanation you really have. “I’m his valo-kas karasten.”


“I saw him in Val Royeaux,” you say, standing up a little straighter. The sheer power radiating off the Qunari gives you the subconscious urge to submit; you have to fight against it. “He was being kept as a slave. I was given the opportunity to free him and take his vengeance, so I took it.”

Katari eyes your nameless Qunari, obviously sizing him up. Your Vashoth is small compared to him, nearly a foot shorter and scrawny from malnourishment. “The Qun from an elf;” he says darkly. “Disgusting. If he’s yours, then, you have full responsibility for him. If he acts out, it’s on you.”

“Yes, ser,” you say obediently. Anything to get the Qunari to stop talking to you. You’re so scared that you’re literally trembling, something that you hope is hidden by the rocking of the ship. You’re very much not looking forward to a trip spent sandwiched--metaphorically, you dearly hope--between two Qunari. Hopefully when you hit land, your Vashoth will be content to bolt.

Solas isn’t very interested in comforting you this time. He actually starts moving as if he’s going beneath deck again--you catch his arm without even realizing what you’re doing. He turns to stare at you and you release him as if he’s on fire. What are you doing? The man is free to go beneath the deck if he wants! Leaving you on deck with a bunch of sailors and two Qunari… Your pleading must show in your expression, as Solas sighs and stays on deck. You stay next to him. Your Qunari stays next to you. The only silver lining is that with the presence of two Qunari--one standing right next to you at all times--the sailors give you a wide berth.

The weather remains sunny, and that seems enough to keep Solas from becoming seasick. Good for him. You spend the entire trip with your mind screaming. You hate the steady rocking of ships. It takes you right back to hell. Every time you close your eyes--Smell of alcohol on his breath, grit your teeth and bear it. You shudder and stand a little bit closer to Solas, stopping short of latching on to him. There are watchful eyes. There always will be, from here on out. Your days of taking advantage of Solas’ gentle physical comfort are over. Not to mention that he still seems cross with you.

When you finally hit land, you all but rush the shore, relieved to be off the ship and back on solid ground. You try to be patient while the fog clears from your mind. You have to wait for everything to be unloaded, unfortunately, so you mill about uncomfortably on the dock, your Qunari constantly beside you. When is he going to leave, exactly?

No one seems eager to talk to you with him constantly present by your side. You had expected warm greetings from at least Kelsie, but she’s keeping her distance, eying the Qunari by your side with
obvious distrust. You can’t even blame her. You’re keeping similar distance from Katari. Still, you wish at least one of them would say hello… Even Emilio had barely spoken to you on the walk to the dock in Val Royeaux.

At least there’s a single person happy to see you. You don’t even see him coming. You hear the cry of alarm and have just enough time to glance behind you before Revas headbutts you in the back, sending you sprawling forward. Your Vashoth catches you, much to your chagrin, and for a moment the whole world is horns and snorting as Revas butts his face against you repeatedly, nibbling at your clothes and huffing in clear distress. The Qunari wraps his arms around you protectively, which only serves to irritate Revas further.

It takes your Qunari and Solas to get Revas to back off enough for you to turn around. You would appreciate the Vashoth’s quick thinking more had you actually been in any danger. As it is, you’re less than happy at his quickness at sweeping you into his arms.

“Let me go, vashoth,” you say, more irritation in your voice than is fair. He does, and you turn. Revas strains against Solas’ grip on his bridle, and you take a quick step towards him so that he can butt his head against your chest. Prepared for it this time, you don’t fall over. “Maker, he really missed me,” you mumble through a faceful of fur.

“He was insufferable the entire time,” you hear, and are surprised to find it’s Garrick talking to you. “The other one behaved, but not this fellow. He nipped anyone who got to close for the longest time. We finally got him an elven stable hand and he settled down a little, but…”

“Is he yours, then?” Adahlen asks. “I was wondering, when I saw them load the two harts up. I’m surprised; I thought harts only liked the Dalish.”

“He’s not mine,” you say through gritted teeth. This is why you fucking hate Dalish. “He belongs to the Inquisition.”

“I think he might disagree,” Adahlen says with a laugh as Revas snorts warm air right into your face. You run your hands over the hart’s face and neck, trying to soothe him.

“Well, neither he nor I have much of a say in it,” you grumble, sour despite your joy to see Revas. Two Qunari and a Dalish… One Qunari stuck to your side, the other leading the entire group. Ugh. This is going to be wretched.

You watch as the cart and the rest of the horses are unloaded. There are eleven horses, two of which are huge draft horses, clearly there to pull the wagon. One of the horses was apparently meant to be a spare, but you had to bring a tagalong. You don’t even think it’s going to be an issue, at first… you keep expecting the Qunari to leave. But he doesn’t. Instead, he pesters you.

“Valo-kas, how will you enact my vengeance if you’ve left the city?”

“The sword is already swinging, vashoth. I need not be there to see it strike.”

The Qunari lets out a dissatisfied grunt. “Where are you heading?”

“To Skyhold, in the mountains. I work for the Inquisition. These books are for them.”

“What is ‘the Inquisition’?”

“Oh, Maker…”

“You! Elf!” You actually jump at the sound of Katari’s voice. So much for seeming in-control in
“Y-yes?” you ask, trying to compose yourself as you turn around. Revas snorts angrily, digging one hoof into the ground. “Calm down,” you hiss at him. “That’s the last thing I need right now.”

“Is he coming with us?” Katari demands, gesturing at your Vashoth with distaste. You glance over at the Vashoth, who nods. You can’t hide your surprise.

“What? Why?”

“I have no evidence you’ve actually completed my vengeance. I have no other sword, and with the Baron still alive, I could be recaptured,” he replies promptly.

You sigh. “You’ve thought about this.”

“More than you did, in any case. Did you think it would be an easy thing, freeing a Qunari?” Solas says sourly. “Perhaps if you had not taken it upon yourself to do…”

“He’s coming with us, yes,” you say to Katari, irritation fighting with your fear. You feel ganged up on. Katari lets out an irritated grunt, but says no more to you. Fantastic… you’re on the bad side of a Qunari… thanks to another Qunari… who won’t leave your side. And the worst part is, you pretty much did this to yourself by deciding to save the damn thing. Solas in particular seems more than content to watch you lie in this uncomfortable bed you made.

Katari gives everyone a quick rundown of how you’ll be traveling. He runs a much tighter ship than Garrick, clearly. The guards and even you and Solas will be in formation… although it’s quite clear Katari’s treating you like an unwelcome tagalong. You can barely blame him… Solas is a mage. He, at least, can handle himself. You? You, as far as Katari knows, are just one more fragile thing he needs to get to Skyhold safely. That doesn’t mean you’re particularly happy when he sticks you and your Vashoth together behind the wagon. It’s arguably the safest part of the formation, but… ugh. At least you’re within reasonable talking distance of Solas, who’s positioned with Emilio to the wagon’s left.

The eleven of you mount up as workers latch the two draft horses to the wagon. They’re huge, burly beasts, even bigger than Katari’s mount. Just as well; they’re expected to drag no small number of books up a goddamn mountain. The Vashoth seems awkward on the spare horse. Were he his full weight, you’d worry for the horse, but the Vashoth is still scrawny with malnutrition. You barely even realize you’ve taken it on yourself to handle his diet until you find yourself carefully selecting his lunch from your bag of food. Well… you’re stuck with him. Might as well do a good job of it, if only to spite Solas.

Kelsie is positioned near you, but she’s uncharacteristically tight-lipped, her wary eyes on the Vashoth instead of outwards. You couldn’t have asked for a worse rear guard, honestly. Also unfortunately nearby on the rear guard is Adahlen, but he’s not very talkative either—small mercy. Most of what he has to say is commentary on Revas, who you suspect he’s envious of. You hope it tastes bitter in his mouth, the sight of two flat-ears on harts while he’s stuck on a fucking horse. What little else he says is all commentary on the Dales. A Dalish perspective, he says, as if he’s bestowing you a precious gift by spouting his empty myths. You grind your teeth as he extols the virtues of the Dalish traditional oral history. Your only comfort is that Solas looks damn near as irritated as you do every time the man opens his mouth.

Honestly, of everyone nearby, the Vashoth is probably the most talkative, if only to you. He needles you with endless questions. You can’t blame him—it’s becoming clear he was enslaved for quite a while. His Common is adequate, but the two of you slip in and out of Qunlat as you hit words he
doesn’t understand. You explain about the Inquisition, about the Breach, about the mage/Templar war. To his credit, he actually shows an interest in listening. You find you can relate; you’d been desperate for news when you first escaped slavery. And your master had actually acknowledged you had a mind, not like the Baron keeping the “Saarebas” as a trophy with which to spit at newly-freed mages.

He won’t be doing that any more, at least. The Baron won’t be able to get within spitting distance of any Qunari for the rest of his wretched life, you suspect, and that’s if his noble pride survives your revenge and he doesn’t just fall on his damn sword.

The Vashoth says he’s not a Qunari, but you have to explain to him twice that you’re not Solas’ Arvaarad. If he’s away from the Qun, you doubt he’s been that way for long… perhaps just the duration of his slavery? You don’t pry, however. It would be severely hypocritical of you. He’s away from the Qun now. He may stay that way, he may not. For now, all you can do is answer his questions honestly and give him time to figure himself out. It’s difficult for Vashoth; it always is. You saw your share of them in Seheron, driven mad by the Qun and the fighting. So brainwashed that they even rebelled within the strictures of the Qun. You don’t want to see that happen to your Vashoth. The least you can do is arm him with some knowledge. Help him to think for himself, maybe for the first time in his life.

Plus, it’s nice to have someone to speak Qunlat with. Your Qunlat is as rusty as his Common is. The two of you talk on and off until Katari calls for you all to stop. He’s found a bunch of boulders off the highway that offer some rudimentary shelter, a decent place to camp for the night. He clearly knows what he’s doing… He gives stringent instructions on where the wagon is to be stopped and where the tents are to be set up, as well as where to light fires. You don’t like him, but you can’t help but be a bit relieved that he’s in command. You wouldn’t want to be an attacking bandit with him in charge.

Knowing you’re useless at setting up tents, you instead assist with lighting the fire. Your Vashoth stays close, as always. Perhaps seeing that you’re already near the fire, Katari gives you a rough order to prepare dinner. You bristle internally, but immediately comply. You wouldn’t be able to say “no” to the Qunari, even if you wanted to. Your instincts to keep your head down and submit are just too strong. Perhaps if he weren’t a Qunari, or weren’t so commanding… But you suppose it’s just as well. You may dislike your reasons for obeying, but you’re the only one who knows them. Honestly, rebellion would be an odd thing coming from the person you’re supposed to be. Better to keep your head down.

You dig through the rations to figure out what you’re cooking for dinner. You’re determined to do better than another goddamn pot of Ferelden stew. You’re not the absolute best at cooking over a fire--or cooking in general--but there are things your mother taught you.

You make sour faces at the lack of actual herbs and spices in the ration bags. Honestly. The Inquisition can send you to Val Royeaux with a purse full of gold, but can't spring for flavor? Fortunately, you’re used to working with little, and you have some herbs you picked up in Val Royeaux, and there are some onions you can chop...

You set to work, the Vashoth ever-hovering nearby. You tire quickly of his endless questions and just wind up putting him to work chopping things. He's good with a knife, no surprise, but it's clear he's not used to using one to cut a potato instead of a ribcage. In the end, you set him to whittling sticks instead. You bake potatoes in the coals of the fire, and grill corn, onions and sausages over it. You just cut everything into chunks when it’s done and use the Vashoth's whittled sticks to make shish-kabobs. It's... adequate. And at least it has flavor.
The soldiers… agents… whatever… seem pleased by it, at least. Adahlen compares it to a Dalish recipe and you feel like jamming one of the damned sticks through his eye, but your food gets most of the guards in one place—letting you eye up your new companions a little more. Korbin gets visibly more cheerful with food in his mouth, and gives you a hefty smack on the back when he goes in for thirds. “Better than nug!” he says cheerfully. You can honestly say you’ve never had nug, and you’d like to keep it that way.

Katari keeps watch with Garrick while the rest of you eat, and you’re quite happy with that. You don’t need to watch Katari eat to know he frightens you. Argent scares you a little too, but in a more reasonable way. You don’t actually worry that she’d hurt you—you just acknowledge that she’s clearly dangerous. She eats in near-absolute silence.

In the end, Kelsie and Emilio finally work up the courage to speak to you despite your ever-present Qunari shadow. Kelsie’s eyes are still on the Qunari, but you can tell her burning curiosity is starting to get the better of her.

“So… why do you have a Qunari, exactly?” she asks, finally. “I heard what you said to Katari, but I didn’t understand it.”

You’ll be explaining this one for a long time. “I don’t ‘have’ him. I just… He was being held against his will in Val Royeaux. I had the opportunity to get him out safely, so I did it.”

“Just like that? You make it sound so straightforward.”

“Should it be complicated?” you ask with a strained smile. “It needed to be done, and I was there to do it.”

“W… what about you?” Kelsie directs this question to the Qunari, to your surprise. It’s the first anyone’s actually bothered to talk to him rather than directing questions to you as if he can’t understand them. “Why are you with her?”

“She is my valo-kas karasten,” he replies grumpily. “Is that not enough?”

“Well, I… I don’t know what that means,” Kelsie flounders.

“That is hardly my failing.”

You flick the Vashoth on the shoulder. “Don’t be rude.”

He glowers at you, but replies to Kelsie. “It means she is my sword. I do not expect a human to understand.”

“Fair enough, I don’t,” says Kelsie with good humor.

“The concept really doesn’t translate,” you admit. “It’s making it hard to explain. I’m… looking after him, for now. That’s all that matters.”

“And that’s enough for you?” Kelsie presses the Vashoth further. “How long are you going to follow her?”

You can tell the Vashoth is getting irritated, but when he opens his mouth for a sharp retort, you fix him with a steady glare. He lets out a low grunt of frustration, but seems to re-consider his words. “Until I am satisfied.”

“So are you from Par Vollen?” Kelsie wonders, and you have to laugh at the Vashoth so full of
questions having that turned around on him. You don’t even help him out of the situation, despite the fact he’s clearly mildly uncomfortable with it. You find it too amusing, and it’s good for him to have practice dealing with humans.

“All Qunari are from Par Vollen,” he replies.

“Not true,” you interject. “Vashoth have breeding populations outside of Par Vollen. Not large ones, but–”

“The True Grey Ones breed?” the Vashoth interrupts you in Qunlat. He looks genuinely shocked.

“Not the Tal-Vashoth, just the Vashoth, as far as I know” you reply, sticking to Common for the sake of the others around the fire.

“What’s the difference?” Kelsie wants to know.

“Complicated,” you reply. She pouts at you. “Vashoth are just big horned guys like this, living outside the Qun,” you say, gesturing towards the Vashoth next to you. “Tal-Vashoth are more like… active rebels against the Qun, perhaps? Although it’s more complicated than even that. Sometimes I’m not even sure the Tal-Vashoth know what they are.”

“Huh… What was it like growing up in Par Vollen?” Kelsie says, immediately focusing back in on the Vashoth. Now that she’s realized he won’t bite, she’s satiating her curiosity on him. It’s satisfying to watch. He struggles to answer her endless questions as you eat. You intervene only when you have something of interest to add, or when he gets too snappish.

“He’s like a Mabari, isn’t he?” Kelsie comments to you after you’ve given him another scolding for his manners. “Big and scary, but kind of sweet, too.”

“What is Mabari?” the Vashoth demands in Qunlat.

“Giant dogs that Fereldens are obsessed with,” you reply, also in Qunlat. The Vashoth looks offended, and you laugh. “She means it as a compliment. They revere them.” This placates him somewhat, though he still looks grumpy.

“I am not ‘sweet’.”

As humorous as you find him saying that, you’re inclined to agree. You wish you could warn Kelsie from becoming too friendly with him without seeming rude. Qunari aren’t to be trifled with, even Vashoth. They’re unpredictable when they’re free of the Qun and untrustworthy when still enthralled by it. But anything you could say on the matter would risk offending the Vashoth and--worse--Katari. It would also come across as rather hypocritical, seeing as how you’ve got one following you around.

After dinner, however… there are the tents. You realize it almost as soon as you stand. One, two, three… five. Five fucking two person tents. But of course the real problem comes from your “plus one” now, since there were supposed to be six men and four women.

“The tent for you and the apostate is there,” Katari says, noticing you gazing around the camp. You stiffen.

“Me and…?”

“I tried to tell him, sorry,” Garrick pipes in.
“You roomed together in Val Royeaux. I fail to see the problem,” Katari says shortly.

“But there’s an even number of men and women!” you protest. “Why would-”

“Emilio and Kelsie have taken to bunking together,” Elaine says dryly. You turn to stare at Kelsie in disbelief--she’s turning bright crimson.

“W...we don’t have to! You and me can bunk together, and Solas and Emilio--”

“None of that accounts for Emma’s Qunari, though,” Emilio points out.


“Does this mean I am to bunk with the Vashoth?” Solas says irritably. You scowl at him.

“Don’t pout at me, Solas. I’ll bunk with the damn Vashoth!” you snap. “You can have a nice big space all for yourself--just like in the inn!” It’s unworthy of you, and you regret it the second you say it. You were the one who insisted he take the larger room. “I didn’t mean… Ir abelas, Solas, ma taren--”

“It is fine,” he says shortly, and you wince. It’s very much not fine, but it’s your own damn fault. He turns away, and you trudge to Revas to unload your tent. You’re still useless at trying to set the damn thing up, but fortunately, your Vashoth seems to know how to do it… Just as well. Solas certainly won’t be coming to help you after you bit his damn head off like that. Stupid.

At the end of all that, the goddamn Qunari winds up sleeping outside of the tent. You want to tear your fucking hair out. He could have goddamn said earlier he didn’t mind sleeping outside! And you don’t even fucking sleep! This whole idiotic mess could have been avoided. You try to find Solas to attempt to apologize, but he’s already in his tent. You could open it up and just go in, you suppose, but that seems insanely rude and counter-productive to the whole “getting Solas to not be mad at you anymore” thing. In the end, you wind up just brushing down and cleaning the hooves of all thirteen mounts. It takes you well into the evening.

You don’t know how late it is when you finally head to your tent. Elaine and Argent are on watch, and your Vashoth is asleep just outside of the tent--you have to step over him to get in. He rouses slightly as you do, but when he sees it’s just you, he just moves out of the way slightly and closes his eyes again. Maybe Kelsie was on to something--he is like a guard dog in some ways. You can’t figure out if that comparison is unflattering to Qunari or unflattering to dogs, though. In truth, you like neither.

You bundle up irritably in your bedroll, ready for a long, shitty night with not much to do except beat yourself up for snapping at Solas. Idiot. Idiot!

Chapter End Notes

So some of those names might be familiar to some of you. Here are some helpful face guides to help you along. <3 (Don't bother hunting for some asshole named Adahlen, he's an OC.)

Argent
Katari
Temper, Temper

Chapter Notes

A LOT of foreign language in this one, so I'm putting it at the top again. Content warning for self harm a bit in this chapter.

Elven Guide
Vennam = Please
Ma nuvenin halani ne = I want to help you
Halath ar melara = hate me later
falon = friend
Ma banal = "I will not" or simply "no"
Ir banal = Absolutely not
Hamin = Rest

Qunlat Guide
Ari va = he is a person
maraas va saarebas = he is not a saarebas
As-eb vashe-qalab = colloquially: "This is bullshit"
Va maraas imekari = you are a child bleating without meaning
vashedan bas = More precisely translated as "shitty thing," used as an insult similar in concept to a gender neutral "bitch"
Kost = Peace
Sataareth = that which upholds

Ancient Tevene Guide
tace, spicaurisger = shut up, elf

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You somehow do sleep… or rather, you pass out. You don’t dream, which inevitably means you didn’t get anything resembling real sleep. No contact with the Fade, no mana, no rest. All it really serves to do is give you a start upon waking; at some point during the night, the Vashoth had climbed into the tent. The sight of him curled against the edge of the tent sends a bolt of absolute terror through you, and you’re scrambling out of the tent in blind panic before you can remember that this is “your” Qunari.

When you stumble out of the tent, you realize why he climbed in… it’s raining: a light, fine mist that’s chilly in the pre-dawn air.

Well, you’re up now. So are a few other people. Kelsie is miserably trying to prepare breakfast over a fire that struggles and sputters in the misting rain. Katari looks like he’s keeping watch, Emilio is with the horses, likely realizing you’d done all of his work for him overnight. And Solas…

Solas is doing those stretches of his, barefoot and barechested in the rain.

Oh, Maker bless.

You’re very aware that it’s not fair of you to stare. You’d been an ass to him yesterday, and the
chances of him still being mad at you are high. You won’t win yourself any points by ogling him. You distract yourself by helping Kelsie with breakfast. The fire is dying fast in the drizzle, but you show her how to wrap up food in the corn husks from last night and bury them in the coals and ashes of the fire. At the very least, you manage to give everyone a hot breakfast despite the chilly drizzle.

No one’s happy about the rain, least of all you. It’s fine right now that it’s just a steady misting—the wagon is covered. But if it starts raining much harder, you’ll have to start worrying for the books, and you’re not entirely certain what you can do to keep them dry. Perhaps you can fix something with the tents…? But you’d have to shred the material from several tents to have any hope of keeping all the books dry, and even then, moisture could seep through and ruin them. You should have thought about this before leaving Val Royeaux. But you’re a fuck up—no surprise there.

Camp is broken down effectively, the horses are saddled up, and your group is on the road again. You’re no longer happy to be positioned near Solas, who is either suffering from his early morning grumpiness or giving you the silent treatment—or both. Both, probably, you admit miserably to yourself. Adahlen is saying something insipid about aravels and Kelsie is chatting on and off with the Vashoth. Your eyes are on the sky, however.

Within an hour of travel, it’s starting to rain harder, and you’re officially worried. It takes a few more minutes for your fear for the books to overcome your fear of Katari, but in the end, you break formation to speak with the giant Qunari.

“Ser, I’m concerned for the books in this rain,” you tell him nervously. His glare quails you, but you press on. “I need to get them under cover. The books are the whole reason we’re doing any of this.”

Katari opens his mouth and you’re already flinching—seems like everyone will be mad at you today. But, surprisingly, it’s Solas who comes to your rescue… sort of.

“I believe I may be of assistance. I can put a barrier over the wagon that will keep the books dry,” Solas interjects.

Katari eyes the mage sourly. “That will leave you weakened if there is an attack.”

“Yes, but it allows us to keep moving and ensures the safety of the tomes, which is paramount,” Solas points out. You give him a very grateful look, but he doesn’t even glance your way.

“Very well, mage,” Katari says with a sigh. “Trade positions with the elf’s pet. You, elf, keep an eye on him.”

Great.

As the two of you ride back into formation, you try your best to be less of a bitch to him. “M-mer serannas, Solas.”

“It would be a waste were the books damaged after all the effort you went through to obtain them,” he replies, his voice cool and clipped. It makes you want to jump off a cliff.

“I… yes, of course, I-”

“I will need silence in order to concentrate on the spell,” he says shortly, and you flinch.

“…Of course, ser. Ir abelas.”
You keep a close eye on Solas while he rides, eyes closed, hands up and glowing. As always, you’re impressed by his ability to stay on Ash’lana while otherwise occupied. The barrier is a physical, palpable thing. You watch the rain slide off the invisible barrier and pour around the sides of the wagon. It’s incredible. You could never maintain a physical barrier like that. You don’t know the first thing about making one. He’s obviously using his mana wisely to make it last; you’d probably be drained bare within half an hour.

It’s raining hard now. All eleven of you are drenched, including Solas. It pains you to see him sitting unresponsive in the rain, his mind occupied with carefully maintaining his spell. What if he gets ill? How much is this spell draining him? You can’t tell. You keep wishing Katari would find a cave or a roadside inn or something, anything to let you cover the wagon in a more mundane manner. You fret endlessly over Solas, and when Adahlen opens his mouth to make some stupid fucking comment about Dalish magic, it’s all you can do not to chuck a throwing knife right at his stupid Maker-damned vallaslin-marked face.

You’re strained and soaked and generally miserable by the time lunch rolls around. Katari announces that the caravan will continue onwards to avoid exhausting Solas unnecessarily. There just isn’t shelter enough to get the books out of the rain, and it’s really coming down now. You fret next to Solas as the others pull out food. You have enough presence of mind to pull food out of your bag for the Vashoth, handing him the softest bread you have and a half-full jar of honey, emphasizing that he needs to go easy on the sweet honey. Then you turn your focus to Solas.

“S-Solas... Ir abelas, Solas, but you need to eat,” you stammer, riding close enough to place a nervous hand on his shoulder. He opens one eye to look at you. “You’ll exhaust yourself otherwise,” you beg, holding up what you’ve prepared. You’d opened a jar of hard boiled eggs and used one of your throwing knives to cut them onto a torn off piece of biscuit—carefully bite sized.

Solas frowns, but you persist. “Vennam, Solas,” you beg, voice taking on a whining quality. “Ma nuvenin halani ne-”

“Enough,” he says, his voice somewhat strained. You fix him with what must be the most intense, dejected, puppy-dog eyes you’ve ever managed to conjure to your face. “Fine.”

You brighten immediately and offer him the first bite of food. You had hoped he might take it directly from your hand, but instead, with a grunt of effort, he switches to supporting the spell with one hand. You feed him chunks of biscuit and egg as fast as you can, delivering them ready-to-eat to his hand as soon as he’s finished swallowing one. Too soon, he’s done, having barely eaten two eggs and two biscuits.

“Solas,” you begin, but he shakes his head firmly, and brings his other hand up to begin casting the spell with both again. You let out a frustrated, quiet groan, but insist no further. At least you’d gotten something into him.

You grow increasingly stressed as noon stretches to afternoon with no sign of the rain letting up. If the other guards are in any condition similar to yours, they’re freezing and miserable, but your foul mood goes beyond that. How long could Solas possibly keep this up? You can tell it’s wearing on him... he’s beginning to look peaked, and you swear he seems to be sweating, though it’s hard to tell in the rain. His arms are getting a definite tremble to them.

You keep a watchful eye on Solas. Every time someone so much as tries to talk to you, you’re snapping at them like a snarling dog. Adahlen opens his mouth about Keepers one too many times and you actually snap, “tace, spicaurisger!” at him. Fortunately no one here has any idea what that means, least of all Adahlen. He seems a bit startled, but not offended. The Vashoth, at least, has the presence of mind not to pester you after the first time you snap for him to be silent in Qunlat.
On into the afternoon, it becomes too much for you to bear. You kick Revas into a faster pace until you’ve caught up with Katari near the front of the progression. “We need to move faster,” you pester him. “Solas can’t keep this up, and we can’t allow the books to be ruined. We need to find shelter.”

“The mage can endure,” Katari says coldly, and your frayed nerves unwind the rest of the way.

“Ari va; maraas va saarebas!” you snap, your voice loud enough to carry. “As-eb vashe-qalab!”

“Va maraas imekari,” he replies, looking at you with pure disgust.

“Real mages are not like your broken dogs!” you all but shout, your voice cracking around the rough sounds of Qunlat. “If I tell you he cannot do it, he cannot do it!” This time, when he levels you with an angry glare, you match it despite the terror pounding in your chest. He could snap you in half without trying, he could run that sword through your gut without--

“Watch yourself, vashedan bas,” he says, his voice a low threat. Then he turns to the others. “We’re increasing speed!” Emilio and Argent immediately move to work the draft horses into a faster pace, and Katari turns back to you. “If we exhaust the horses, you will be the one who pays,” he promises.

“If you exhaust my pride, everyone will pay,” you snap back in Qunlat, not caring if it translates, not caring if he understands. Then you wheel Revas back around and trot to the rear of the progression to continue your worried vigil next to Solas. Everyone save Argent and Solas is staring at you with wide eyes, but you ignore them. You will have time for the realization of what you just did to sink in later. When Solas is taken care of.

As the afternoon wears on and Solas looks worse and worse, you find yourself drowning in self-loathing. You know few things as a mage, but the manipulation of mana is the one thing you can do. It would be child’s play for you to feed your aura into his, to give him power for his own spells, spells you could never cast. You’re not using your own strength. You don’t need it. He does. But to do so would be to give yourself away, and you simply can’t. All you can do is ride the horses ragged and pray to nonexistent gods. Gods who have never listened and certainly won’t start now.

It’s hours before your group finds suitable shelter. The rain has become a full blown thunderstorm, complete with teeth-rattling thunder and blinding flashes of lightning. It’s Argent who finds it--Katari had sent her and Emilio out on either side of the road to scout. Argent leads you to a large cave… large enough to get the horses and wagon in, in any case, although it takes a great deal of coaxing. Revas and Ashi’lana go right in, possibly because they can tell that your temper has long since been lost. No one’s even risking talking to you.

Solas is exhausted by the time he can let his barrier drop. He’s good at hiding it, but you can tell. His skin is even paler than normal; he has a persistent tremor in his limbs. You recognize the slightly foggy look in his eyes and the icy coldness of his hands as symptoms of a mage low on power. Despite your insistence of a faster pace, he’d still exhausted himself. You hate to think of what would have happened if you hadn’t increased speed.

You stalk around Solas like a furious mother bear, snarling at anyone who comes too close. You order your Qunari to set up Solas’ tent as you help Solas dismount from Ashi’lana.

“I am fine,” he says shortly, yanking his freezing hand out of yours.

“I have told that lie enough times to recognize it, Solas,” you say firmly. “Halath ar melara, lethallin. Please.”
Solas lets out a frustrated grunt, but leans on you for support. “Anything for you to stop butchering the language of the People,” he says, and you crack a thin smile.

“Thank you, Solas.” You glare at Adahlen, who’s obviously listening in curiously. “If you have time to eavesdrop, falon, then you have time to light a fire.”

“Unless you want me to burn some of those precious books, I doubt we’ll find much in the way of dry tinder,” Adahlen replies.

“Ah, forgive me,” you say darkly. “I mistook a Dalish hunter for someone competent at wilderness survival.”

Adahlen flushes with indignation, but turns and stalks away. Hopefully, to find some fucking wood.

Solas goes to climb into his tent, but you stop him. “You’ll soak it,” you protest. “You need to change first.” Solas lets out a dissatisfied grunt. “It’s that or dry by the non-existent fire. You’ll regret it if you get the inside of your tent wet now, Solas.” Indeed, Emilio has already stripped out of his armor and is wearing naught but trousers. Elaine is similarly scantily clad, and the two of them are hanging up a line on which to dry their clothes near the back of the cave.

Solas hands go to his shirt and you quickly look away. Unfortunately, the shake in his limbs is persistent. Halfway through peeling off his sweater, he teeters dangerously and you catch him, hands on his bare side. You would be more embarrassed and flustered if he wasn’t so frighteningly cold.

Adahlen had better get that fucking wood, or you’ll warm Solas by burning the Dalish’s corpse. With your support, Solas manages to yank his sweater and shirt the rest of the way off. His wolf-bone necklace thuds against his damp, bare chest.

You feel another pang of guilt. He’s in terrible condition, and it’s your fault. If you’d made better preparation in Val Royeaux… if you weren’t such a selfish coward. You could have helped him. Instead, you’d let him do it all himself until he was exhausted. He’d done this to himself just to keep your stupid books safe, and you… you…

“You’re bleeding,” Solas says, sounding alarmed through his exhaustion.

“What?”

His shaking hand goes to your face—his fingers are like icicles. You’d bit your lip so hard it’d begun to bleed; his fingers come back from your face stained bright red.

“Don’t worry about it,” you say, shaking your head. “Just a cut lip.” Solas frowns, but doesn’t press. “Can you stand on your own? I want to fetch you some dry clothes,” you fret, your eyes tracing over towards Ashi’lana, whose huddled to the back of the cave with Revas and the horses. They all need to be unpacked and cared for, before chill sets in. Garrick is starting, but he’ll have trouble caring for all thirteen mounts for himself, and you doubt Revas or Ashi’lana will consent to be touched by him.

“I am not an invalid yet,” Solas replies sourly. You don’t reply, simply make a beeline for the mounts. You tear the bags off of Ashi’lana quickly, placing the soaking saddlebags off to the side before doing the same for Revas. You’ll have to come back and care for them properly before long, but first… Solas.

The cave is a flurry of similar activity. Now that Elaine and Emilio have a line up, damn near everyone is stripping out of soaked clothing. You’ll need to do so as well, you realize. There’s no time or room for modesty here. Adahlen is nowhere to be seen, and you damn well hope he’s finding tinder. Katari is barking out orders, Kelsie is setting up tents… the whole place is like a swarming
hive. You carefully pull dry clothing out of one of Solas’ bags, holding it away from your body to keep it from getting wet. Revas gives a distressed snort, and you kiss him briefly on the nose.

“Ir abelas, Revas. I promise you I’ll be back to care for you as soon as I can.”

You dodge swiftly moving bodies as you dart back to Solas’ tent. You squat by the entrance; Solas is inside and wearing no more than his undergarments. You find it impossible to look directly at him, but you thrust the clothing in. “H-here. Bundle up in the bedroll as soon as you can. I’ll be in momentarily.”

“There’s no need for you-”

“Please don’t make this any more difficult for me Solas,” you say, displeased by the way your voice cracks into a whine. “I already have to wrestle two miserable harts and a furious Qunari.”

Solas sighs. “I do not require a sitter. Focus on your actual charges.”

“Ma banal.”

“Emma-”

“Ir banal!” you snap, and stand, walking away to prevent more argument. At least he’s feeling well enough to be a pain in your ass.

You go to a quiet corner, or what passes for it, in order to strip out of your dripping clothes. To your frustration, your Vashoth follows you. You want to snap at him, but you realize just before you do that he looks… worried? Nervous, perhaps? And he’s soaked, as well. You bite your tongue and attempt to reel in your temper.

“You need to strip, but I have no other clothing that will fit you,” you say in Qunlat with a sigh. “I’m not s-”

As you’re speaking, however, something comes flying towards you. You instinctively raise your hand, which prevents you from being smacked directly in the face, but the thrown cloth wraps around your head. You splutter indignantly as you yank it off of you.

“Dress your pet, elf,” comes Katari’s voice. “We don’t have time for illness.” You look down at the thing you’d “caught.” Pants. Katari had thrown his fucking pants at you! You want to snap back, but you know better. He had done you a kindness, wrapped up in assholery. You turn to your Vashoth, only to find he’s already stripping out of his pants. You let out a strangled noise and turn to stare at the wall. There is far too much stripping going on in this fucking cave!

You face the wall and hold the pants out, not turning back around until you’re certain he’s dressed again. The pants fit him much better than the half-assed ones you’d sewn together, although they’re almost comically large, both around the waist and length-wise. “There is rope in my pack you can use as a belt, vashoth,” you say, amused. “But for now… Stand here, and face that way.” He does so without asking why, of course. You probably shouldn’t be ordering him; it would be too easy for him to fall into blindly obeying. You’ll need to watch yourself in the future. But for now, you use him for a bit of privacy, stripping out of your soaked clothing hidden behind him. Scrawny for a Qunari he may be, but he’s still much, much larger than you.

You strip out of everything but your panties, unwilling to put on dry clothing over your soaked breastband. As it is, you yank on one of the sillier things you bought in Val Royeaux… a dress. Impractical, but for this situation, it’s much easier to get into than pants. Let the guards judge you if they want. Of course, you’d bought it with the intention of wearing it with leggings… it only comes just past your knees. But given all the bared flesh on display right now, you doubt anyone will mind
the sight of your scrawny legs.

You place a nervous hand on your Vashoth’s arm when you’re done. “Thank you,” you say. “I’m going to check on Solas now. Try to get warm. If Katari or one of the others asks you to do something and it seems reasonable, feel free to assist them.”

You rush back to check on Solas, climbing into his tent without so much as asking first. He’s bundled into his bedroll. You place a shaking hand to his forehead. “Your hands are no warmer than mine,” he says sourly.

“I’m going to prepare your dinner,” you say, ignoring him. “Are you still cold? I can bring some of the blankets I bought in Val Royeaux.”

“I simply need rest, Emma.”

“And food, and care,” you say shortly.

“Care from someone who cannot even care for themselves?”

“I don’t see anyone else lining up,” you reply, forcing your temper down. You’re not in the best of humor when out of mana, yourself. “Hamin, Solas.”

You crawl back out of the tent and go back to Revas and Ash’lana, unsaddling them the rest of the way and beginning to brush them down. By the time you’re done with the two of them, Adahlen has successfully managed to start a fire in the entrance of the cave. Essentially everyone is shirtless or changed into fresh clothing; there’s not a single man wearing a shirt, and Elaine is in nothing but her breastband. How are they not cold? You couldn’t be more uncomfortable with the amount of flesh on display, but you settle by the fire to prepare Solas some food anyway. This requires you being in close proximity with Adahlen, unfortunately.

“You Elven has a peculiar accent,” Adahlen comments as you gather rainwater in a pot for some broth.

“I learned from writing,” you reply shortly.

“I thought you might have been raised Dalish-”

“I was not. I’m from Denerim.”

“And your companion?”

“Feel free to ask him.”

“I thought you might-”

“Adahlen, you really need to learn how to tell when women are uncomfortable,” a low voice interjects with a chuckle. It’s Korbin, come to warm himself by the fire. He’s shirtless, leaving you free to notice that his chest is as tattooed as his face, and that most dwarves are apparently as hirsute as Varric.

“I was just…” Adahlen flounders, glancing at you and seeming to notice for the first time just how displeased you look.

“I know, buddy, but give it a rest,” Korbin says, clapping him on the back. Korbin is short enough it’s almost an ass-slap, which makes you smile slightly. “How’s your friend?” Korbin asks,
addressing you.

“...Worrying,” you say with a sigh. You bring the pot over and place it on the frame over the fire. You’ll have to boil the water before anything else. “I’m going to try and get him to eat. This rain had better be gone by morning…”

“Will you threaten our illustrious leader again if it’s not?” Korbin asks with a chuckle. You flush slightly.

“I didn’t threaten him.”

“I’ll take your word for it; I couldn’t understand a thing you two were saying. Never heard an elf speak Qunari before.”

“Qunlat,” you correct automatically. “I’m a linguist.”

“You speak Dwarven?”

“No, actually. I’ve never had the chance to learn.”

“I’ll teach you dwarven swears if you teach me Qunari swears,” Korbin offers.

A smile cracks your tired face. “Deal.”

Korbin keeps you well-entertained while you prepare food for Solas and your Vashoth. You had known the ancient dwarves spoke several languages, and that they had been the ones to invent the Common tongue. But Korbin teaches you a few creative terms that you can’t wait to use on Varric, and even uses a stick to mark some Dwarven runes into the dirt, old ones you don’t know. You’re surprised by the breadth of his knowledge. You’d assumed him Casteless… Perhaps you’d assumed wrong. You’re uncertain of how to ask politely.

“Your tattoos,” you begin, deciding that’s the best way to start. “Where did you get them?”

“They’re called grim tattoos,” he replies gamely. “All the Legionnaires have them. They’re applied at our funerals.”

“I… Pardon me?” you say, blinking.

“The Legion of the Dead? You haven’t heard of it?”

“Oh! I’ve read a little bit of it… not much, though. You have funerals? I mean, before you actually…”?

“Once you join the Legion, you’re pretty much considered dead,” Korbin informs you. “So they give you a big funeral send-off before you go marching into the Deep Roads.”

“Wow… That must be… something,” you say, trying to imagine it. To be that resigned to your own fate? The thought gives you chills… But given the choice between a death now or a death later, you would opt for later. No doubt many dwarves feel the same. You had read that only criminals were sentenced to the Legion of the Dead, but you decide not to bring that up.

Thanks to Korbin, you’re in a somewhat better mood when you bring Solas his soup… But that’s
quickly dashed to pieces at the sight of him. His lips have a frightening blue tinge to them. Once again you’re assailed by an endless string of self-loathing. This is your fault. You could have prevented this.

“Solas?” you say quietly, wondering if he’s asleep. One eye cracks open to glare at you. “Can you sit up? I have soup.”

Solas shifts slightly, and you move to help him as he struggles to rise. Even after he’s in a sitting position, you sit close. His hands are trembling less now, but you’re certain he needs time in the Fade to recover. “You should use that enchanted blanket tonight,” you suggest, hands ghosting near his to ensure he doesn’t drop the bowl of hot soup. He won’t let you feed him, but the weakness in his limbs makes you worry.

“Perhaps you are right,” Solas concedes. “I worry for my inability to wake in case of incident, but I doubt I would be much use in this condition, regardless.”

“I’ll fetch it for you once you’re done eating,” you promise.

“I note you have none for yourself.”

“I prepared enough for myself and the Vashoth,” you promise. “I just wanted to ensure you were feeling well enough to eat.”

“You needn’t fret,” Solas informs you. “I will be fine.”

“If I looked as bad as you do, Solas, you’d lay me out,” you fret. He can’t seem to argue with that. You nag after him to finish the entire bowl of soup, and then fetch his enchanted blanket—locating it amongst his things is embarrassingly effortless—before finally letting him alone to sleep. The guilt is clawing away at your chest, however, and combined with all your stress and the strain of having two Qunari so nearby… You’re in a very poor state. You can barely stomach any food at all, and wind up giving your portion to the Vashoth, whose stomach seems to be recovering quickly from his all-liquid diet.

You wait until everyone but the first watch—Katari—is asleep before sneaking out of the cave. There’s screaming in your ears that you simply can’t ignore. Guilt is threatening to overwhelm you entirely; you’re one hurled insult away from completely melting down. So you flee into the rain, making a stammered excuse to Katari that you need to relieve yourself.

You bolt into the woods as far as you dare before collapsing by a tree, finally allowing sobs to overtake you. Your fault your fault your fault! You struggle to your feet in the torrential rain, clawing at the tree for support. And then you let your frustration out on the trunk. You beat your fists endlessly against the rough bark, crying your frustration, your rage, your self-loathing to the uncaring sky. Your throat tears raw, your endless screaming masked by the constant rolling thunder and howling wind.

You don’t know how long you’re out there, only that your hands are bloody and raw. The water pouring off of you is tinged red; there’s bark and splinters embedded into your hands. The only reason you stop is because a hand catches your fist as you’ve drawn it back yet again to punish yourself against the tree.

You spin to see who grabbed you. The sight of a Qunari, lit by a flash of lightning, does nothing for your chaotic state of mind, and you draw your other hand back to strike him. The Qunari catches
your other arm effortlessly--your muscles are limp as cooked noodles. It’s only then that you recognize him as your Vashoth.

“Kost, Valo-kas,” he says, voice a low grumble that you can barely hear over the wind and rain. “You have punished yourself enough.”

You collapse limply to your knees; the Qunari follows you down to the ground. He has bandages… from your own bag, no doubt. He cleans the splinters from your raw flesh before bandaging your hands. You sob the whole while, self-loathing still not satisfied by your punishment.

“You performed your duty satisfactorily,” he informs you. “You are a sword; you wish to protect. You have done so today, even in the face of that which you feared.”

You should be alarmed at how well Qunari can comfort you. They understand you. They shouldn’t. You should have nothing in common with them. But first Bull, and now this nameless Vashoth. How much had your time in Seheron affected you? You try to shake that unsettling thought from your mind.

“I picked my sword well,” the Vashoth continues. “So did the mage.”

“I’m not his… Never mind,” you say with a sigh. “Thank you…” You trail off, gazing at the Qunari. Both of you are kneeling in the mud as he finishes wrapping your battered hands. The two of you will have to change and dry off all over again. And yet you can’t even bring yourself to be surprised that he followed you into the rain. Why wouldn’t he? He’d followed you everywhere else.


The Qunari pauses, then nods.

“Alright then… Sataareth. Let’s get back to camp.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm really actually a teeny bit proud of this chapter. I hope it's as good as I feel like it is. x_x The language in particular I spent a loooot of time on. I hope the feelings come across well.
Chapter Notes

I think this is the first time I've ever felt the need for a DISCLAIMER before a chapter. Emma espouses some beliefs about the Dalish in this chapter that are a bit less than kind. These are HER BELIEFS. NOT MINE. Please don't send me hate mail. >.>;

TW for gore, blood.

Translations at the bottom of the page because they're a little spoilery.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katari sees you and Sataareth return from outside. And he doubtlessly sees your bandaged hands. You’ll have to try and wear gloves tomorrow, to hide the damage from Solas. You can’t risk him asking to heal you, not with him as drained of energy as he is. Bandages or no bandages, your hands are going in gloves in the morning.

You head to your tent. You see Katari pull Sataareth to the side and you bristle internally… but say nothing. You’ve spent enough time antagonizing Katari today. Instead, you head into your tent to try and get some rest.

No surprise, rest won’t come.

After an hour or two of tossing and turning, you give up. You unwrap most of Sataareth’s careful banding, leaving only a thin layer to protect you from chafing. Then you cram your hands into simple leather gloves. Thin, the only kind you have. Not much protection, but hopefully Solas won’t pay them any mind. It’s less important that your knuckles heal than it is to hide the damage from Solas. You can heal them in Skyhold, away from his watchful eyes.

You exit your tent and head towards the fire with the bag of tea you bought in Val Royeaux. You carefully step around Sataareth, who has fallen asleep outside your tent again. Katari is still up, to your chagrin… You’d been hoping the watch would have changed by now. You do your best to ignore him where he stands watch by the cave entrance, despite being near him at the fire. It’s still raining, but the force appears to be gone from the storm. It’s a steady, pouring rain, but the wind is dying down and the thunder and lightning has passed. Perhaps it will clear by dawn and you won’t be put in the position of fighting with Katari again.

Unfortunately, it seems the Qunari is not as content with the silence as you are. While you’re heating water for your tea, he speaks up.

“Tell me, elf. What do you intend to do with your dathrash?” he asks. You stiffen. Dathrash could translate as “pet,” if one could carry a whole world of meaning with that simple word. He’s implying much more than the Common word would. You react poorly.

“How dare… He is no such thing!” you exclaim hotly. “I realize Qunari have no sense of altruism, but--”

“You have a strong grasp of the language,” Katari interrupts you, eyeing you sourly. “As well as of
the Qun. Are you of it, elf?”


Katari snorts. You would swear he almost smiles. “A runaway like your Vashoth, then?”

“The only runaways from the Qun here have horns,” you spit. “I was in Seheron.”

“Ah. That explains it. But my question remains. The Vashoth. What will you do with him?”

“He is not mine to do something with!”

“You do not intend to keep him?”

“Of course not! He follows me for want of anything better to do. He’s Vashoth—he’ll need time to find a new path; they always do. But he’s not mine to keep. He belongs to no one. I saw to that.”

“That Baron of his… will he not try to recapture him?”

“No,” you say shortly. Katari looks on expectantly. “I ensured it,” is all you’re willing to add. He grunts, but says no more. At least now he seems content to let you make your tea in peace, although it takes a while for your temper to burn back down. You’ve had a very shitty couple of days. Fortunately, Katari doesn’t speak again for nearly an hour, giving you time to stew in your own thoughts.

You have to apologize to Solas. Properly. Somehow. You’d shown you didn’t trust him by hiding your plans with Sataareth, then snapped at him over something stupid. And thrown your time in Val Royeaux in his face, in front of everyone… things that should have remained private, just between the two of you. You’d tarnished them, in your anger. And now he’s exhausted himself, for your books, and you let him do it with no help because you didn’t trust him.

He has every reason to deplore you, even if he doesn’t know the full extent of your treacherous nature.

But you don’t want him to. That’s just how selfish you are, you suppose.

So you have to find a way to make it up to him. You’re just… really not sure what that might be. Hopefully, something will come to you. You’ve a long way to Skyhold yet, and you don’t want to be miserable the whole trip. And when you get back to Skyhold… You…

You know things will be different than in Val Royeaux. That knowledge stabs painfully at your core. But maybe they don’t have to be so different. There will be no cuddling on the couch, no Solas reading to you through a bathroom door. But there could be other things, different things. Sharing meals and conversations and little, tiny secrets. The only kind you can afford to give.

“Do you not sleep?” Katari’s voice jolts you out of your miserable trance. You glare blearily over at him.

“No,” you say flatly. “I don’t.”

“Good,” he replies evenly. “We can always use another pair of eyes on watch.”

“Wait, what?”

“Good night, elf.”
But Katari is already walking away. And who’s walking up to start his turn at watch but Adahlen, who looks almost as confused as you feel. “You’re taking the second half of Katari’s watch?”

“I… Uh…” Katari is wandering further back into the cave. “…Apparently…” you say.

Adahlen squats near the entrance of the cave, his eyes away from the fire. If you’re going to actually try to keep watch, you should move away from the fire too, you realize. Elves have good night vision, yes, but staring directly at a fire will wreck it. You put on water for another cup of tea and then move around to the other side of the fire, letting it warm your back but keeping your eyes on the darkness outside. The light from the fire means that a lot of things could potentially see you and attack, even in this rain. After your run in with bandits before… well, it pays to be careful.

Unfortunately, Adahlen isn’t content to watch in silence. As you steep tea into your hot water, the talking begins.

“So neither you nor your companion are Dalish?”

“Could you not tell by the lack of vallaslin?”

“Some Dalish never get their vallaslin. Some leave. Did you have Dalish parents?”

You stiffen, hands clenching around your cup so hard you suspect it would break were your hands not weak and bandaged. “No,” you say, your voice dark with promises of pain should this avenue of questioning continue.

“What about your friend? Is he a circle mage?”

“No.”

“But--”

“He is neither Dalish nor circle mage,” you say shortly. “If you wish to know more, you should perhaps try speaking with him. I am not simply here to provide gossip about Solas.”

“I… It’s just, I didn’t think there were mages outside either,” Adahlen insists. “I thought humans bound and broke all the city elves, and dragged their mages off to Circles.”

“You’ve not spent a great deal of time away from the Dalish, have you?” you ask dryly.

“I… No, not really,” he admits. “My clan sent me to spy on the Conclave. I was late, and… Well…”

“You stuck around, rather than return to your clan? Why?” you ask with a frown.

“I didn’t,” he says with a laugh. “I went straight back. The Keeper sent me back again. This time, to help.”

You can’t help chuckling at the mental image.

“I… feel like we got off on poor footing. Ir abelas, da’l-”

“Do not ruin your good intent by finishing that word.”

“It doesn’t mean-”
“I know what it means. Not all elves look up to the Dalish as superior,” you say sourly. “Do not do me the disservice of presuming I should.”

“What is your problem with the Dalish?” Adahren snaps right back. “Allergic to halla?”

“Right now, you are my problem with the Dalish,” you snarl quietly. “How much older do you think you are, to call me a child? How much wiser? And yet you didn’t even know that there were free elven mages outside the Dalish! Your Keeper has done you a service by allowing you to see more of the world than the inside of an aravel. Perhaps spend some of that time attempting to learn, rather than attempting to teach.”

“Do you think you know more than me?” he demands. “The Dalish are the best hope for preserving the culture of our people!”

“The Dalish are so obsessed with their half-forgotten legends that they’ve closed their minds to outside influence! They are fools acting out stories misheard and repeated wrongly a thousand times!”

“Oh, but you know the truth?”

“Of course I don’t! But the fact of the matter is, neither do you! And perhaps if the Dalish would consent to compare notes, something could actually be learned.” You glare down at your tea. “But they barely even speak with each other. Some clans trade mages like resources while they spit empty words against slavery. Few trade much else, even during arlathvhen. More knowledge is lost or twisted with each generation. And we have so little left.”

“The Dalish are doing everything we can to restore elven history,” Adahren hisses. “If you know something new, share it.”

“Oh, what a solution!” you say, voice dripping sarcasm. “Share! That never even occurred to me! Please. You aren’t interested in my knowledge of elven history. You were more interested in teaching me, this entire time. Lecturing me on the history of the Dales as if I haven’t torn through every tome on the subject. As if I haven’t torn apart ruin after ruin searching for answers!”

“Tomes don’t contain everything. The Dalish have stories that have never been written down!”

“Because the Dalish won’t write them! If the Dalish tried to reconcile those legends with existing records, maybe we could learn something!” you reply hotly. “But the Dalish won’t even speak with historians who are Elven! They don’t want to hear what a flat-ear has to say! They spit seth’lin in my face, and you have shown me no different!”

“Venavis. Ma u’nadas, harellan.” You all but recoil from his words. You finally stand from your seat at the fire, clenching your battered hands into fists despite the bandages.

“Banal’athim, banal’dirthara,” you say coldly. “It took me twenty years to learn. How long will it take the Dalish?”

The two of you glare at each other for a while. Adahren breaks the staring contest first to glower back into the darkness. You sit back down at the fire and frown into your tea. Fucking Dalish. He meant for his words to sting, but they cut deeper than he could realize.

It’s a miserable few hours of sulking. You would go back to your tent, but you don’t want to give Adahren the satisfaction of being able to tell Katari you flaked out. The man winds up getting his
revenge later, in any case. Solas rises slightly before dawn, to your irritation. You don’t even notice until he moves next to the fire.

“Solas! You should still be in bed,” you say, long standing irritation melting into concern. You stand quickly to press the back of your wrist against his forehead. He seems a normal temperature.

“I am fine, da’len,” Solas says evenly. You can practically feel Adahlen’s rage--you would let the flat-eared mage call you child, but not him. “You are up early as well.”

“She never slept,” Adahlen says shortly. Solas’ eyes narrow and you bite your lip guiltily.

“Emma…” Solas begins. You drop your eyes down to stare at your feet. “This is what I meant. How can you attempt to care for others when you take such poor care of yourself?”

“Ir abelas-” you begin, but Solas cuts you off.

“Mala abelas na banam.” His tone is that of gentle scolding, but it’s more than you can bear.

You stare at the ground, as much to hide the watering in your eyes as anything else. He’s right, of course. You’re amazed it took him this long to figure out what a shitty, wretched little thing you are. You remain silent; there’s nothing to be said. Solas sighs and steps around you towards the fire. You stumble out of his way, and then walk quickly back towards your tent. You need to find something useful to do.

The rain stops completely a bit after dawn. Solas is still clearly tired, and you suspect his mana has not quite recovered. His exhaustion makes him snippish, but you’re more than willing to accept the abuse, scurrying about him in an attempt to assist despite the fact it’s clearly annoying him. You fuss after Solas to eat a large breakfast, load up his bags onto Ashi’lana before he can do the work himself, anything you can to try and ease his morning. You even offer to tie Ashi’lana to Revas if he wants to travel on the wagon rather than ride. The only person perhaps more annoyed with you than Solas is Adahlen, who seems to take your submission to Solas as a personal insult after your clear refusal to accept him as your superior.

By the time you’ve all saddled up and hit the road, however, Solas seems to have given up on verbally whipping you. Perhaps your placid acceptance of the punishment bored him. Even without his sharp words, however, you spend most of the morning staring at your saddlehorn.

The day is grey and bleary, with a freezing wind whipping down off the mountains. The road is a muddy mess, meaning slow going for the poor horses pulling the wagon. Twice the progression has to stop to help yank the wheels out of the muck. Despite your small stature and lack of physical strength, you jump off Revas into the mud both times, pushing and straining at the wagon with the strongest of the guards. You want to help. You want to feel less wretched. You want to feel less like the giant inconvenience you’re certain you are.

You’re uncertain if anyone else notices your strained, anxious mood, but Sataareth certainly does. After you needle Solas to have a mid-morning snack after his too-small breakfast, the unlucky Vashoth makes the mistake of calling you Solas’ “arvaarad” one time too many.

“Mages here neither have nor need arvaarads, vashoth!” you snap, much more roughly than he deserves. “Because we do not insist on making mindless beasts of them!”

Sataareth, to his credit, seems to take little offense. “But you care for him,” he points out, seeming genuinely confused. It only fuels your frustration, and your strain is great that you almost feel tears
coming to your eyes.

“I care for him because he is my friend, Sataareth! Why is that so hard for everyone to understand?!”

Sataareth is silent for a moment, and you catch your breath. People are staring, Kelsie in particular.

“...I apologize. I should not have shouted,” you say hollowly, returning to your sullen contemplation of your saddlemhorn. You can feel eyes on you, but you refuse to look up. Perhaps the lack of sleep is finally catching up with you. Your grip on your emotions is practically non-existent.

- Your mood hasn’t necessarily improved by the time lunch has rolled around, but the sky is much clearer and you’re less worried about rain, at the very least. You’re still keeping a close eye on Solas, but he seems to be fine. But your mind is still bouncing around with the events of the last few days… picking fights with Adahlen and Katari both, bloodying your hands… You’ve kept them firmly in your gloves despite the pain. You don’t think Solas suspects anything. If they aren’t healed on their own by the time you get to Skyhold, you can get a healer to look at them there, simple as that.

Your group happens across a merchant caravan stopped for lunch by the side of the road, and Katari decides to stop there as well. Safety in numbers and all that. The caravan is more than happy for the well-armed company. It’s all surfacer dwarves carrying goods direct from Orzammar, and you’re more than happy to look through some of their wares while the others settle into their meals.

To your pleasure, they’re mostly transporting enchanted goods. You can tell just by looking that the vast majority of it is well out of your price range, but it’s fun to look. One of the dwarves makes quite the attempt to sell you a lyrium-engraved quill upon learning that you’re a linguist. The quill is gorgeous, and when you set it in ink, the enchantment pulls the ink up inside it. No more constant dipping for more! It’s quite ingenious, really. It’s far more than you can afford, however.

There are magical trinkets and the like as well, ones obviously designed for a mage’s use that could come in handy in quite a few situations. But of course, you have no “excuse” to buy those, so you have to pass them up as well. In the end, however, you do buy a single small bauble that you can afford. It’s just a little lyrium ball that glows. It’s got a limited charge, so it’s relatively cheap, but it’ll serve you well in your tent tonight.

A few of the others peruse the wares as well, although Kelsie and Solas are the only two that actually buy something. Katari and Sataareth both keep their distance… superstitious, probably. Korbin has a good time chatting with the merchants, catching up news from Orzammar. You mostly just watch Solas and Sataareth to make sure they’re eating properly.

There’s less mud as the afternoon wears on, and your pace improves somewhat, as does everyone’s mood. You wish Solas would consent to rest on the wagon and get some more sleep, but he insists he’s fine, and you don’t want to irritate him by pushing. He’s finally stopped glaring. That improves your mood enough that you find yourself able to chat idly with Sataareth as you ride. He’s as full of questions as always.

“This Inquisition was formed to seal this… hole in the sky you spoke of, yes?”

“Mnhmm,” you say, half distracted from his words as you eye Solas. Is he slumping in his saddle slightly? Perhaps he might sleep; you’d seen him do it before.

“But they are still an organization. Why did they not end when the hole was fixed?”

“They’re going after the group responsible for creating the hole, the Venatori,” you reply, still
slightly distracted.

“Why did these ‘Venatori’ wish for a hole in the sky?”

“I promise you that I don’t know, Sataareth.” He frowns, seemingly unsatisfied by your answer. “They were Tevinter, if that helps,” you add.

“Ah,” he says, nodding as if he understands. “Idiots.”

You snort. Thank the Maker Dorian isn’t here. “That seems as good a motivation as any I’ve heard, yes.”

“And you joined with the Inquisition… to stop them?” he presses.

“Not really, no. I joined the Inquisition because they have a sizeable standing army and their base, Skyhold, has extremely thick walls.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The world is very chaotic right now. My house was burned down by red Templars. I needed somewhere safe to go; I went to the Inquisition.”

Sataareth is quiet for a while after that, possibly thinking over what you’ve said. It would be easy for you to overthink your words to him. You know he’s carefully absorbing everything you say. But you figure the best route is just to be honest with him--well, as honest as you can be, anyway. He’s a thinking creature. He can draw his own conclusions, given time.

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The day is nearing twilight when it happens. The sun is low on the horizon, painting the Dales a glorious, burning orange. You’re just starting to feel the twinges of wanderlust again.

Solas and Katari see the bandits, even before you do. They shout their warnings in tandem, and you’re instantly alert. This time, the first of the arrows are caught in a hastily raised barrier from Solas. By the time the second wave comes, everyone is armed and ready. Solas’ first action this time, after hastily blocking the arrows, is to throw a personal barrier over you. Seems he doesn’t want to take any risks with you this time. You can feel his magic through your skin, and you pay it close mind as you grab the first of your four remaining throwing daggers from your waist.

Your gloved hands are clumsy, flesh still raw and broken against the inside of the leather. You grip harder to compensate, feeling the broken skin crack open and bleed once again.

It’s bandits; a lot of them. Far, far more than the first time. They’re coming from both sides of the road; there is nothing for you to hide behind. You’ll be in the fight whether you like it or not. All eight of the guards engage with a brutal fierceness, and once again Solas strives to control the battlefield with lightning, ice, and raw power torn from the Fade--if the slightly metallic taste in your mouth is any indication.

Your first dagger goes into the skull of a man bearing down on Kelsie. The second goes into the back of the neck of a bandit attempting to chop Korbin in half. That’s when you notice Saataareth has joined the fight out of sheer necessity, his bare hands around the neck of a bandit, keeping him just out of stabbing range. Another bandit comes towards Saataareth from behind; you use your third throwing dagger to sever his spine.

One dagger left.
You want to save it to use in Saatareth’s defense; the Qunari is **unarmed** for the Maker’s sake! Unfortunately, there simply aren’t enough guards to keep the bandits away. Several are bearing down on you. Revas rears back wildly and caves in the head of one of the attackers. You put your last throwing dagger through the throat of another.

Now you’re in a position nearly as bad as Saatareth’s. Worse, possibly; the Qunari is, at the very least, much larger than any of his assailants. You quickly realize you can’t do shit from Revas and slide off the hart’s back. He seems fully capable of fighting, and more than willing to, so you stick somewhat close to him, letting him protect your back while you take stock of the situation.

There are a **lot** of bandits. Leliana had doubled your guard and still you wish she’d given you more. But at second glance, you realize that your side is controlling the field. Solas is wielding his magic masterfully despite the fact he **must** be weakened. He’s keeping the bandits away from the wagon and the horses, for the most part. Ash’lana is as much of a terror on the battlefield as Revas is, rearing high and caving in skulls with power hooves, and Solas is much more skilled at fighting from hartback than you. Adahlen has gotten on top of the wagon somehow, probably by jumping from the back of his horse. He shoots arrow after arrow, barely seeming to pause after each, and each time he hits a mark. He might not be Sera, but he’s good.

The warriors are a force all their own. You wish you could stop to be impressed by the sheer range of fighting styles on display: Kelsie with a longsword and dagger, Elaine with a shield and sword, Korbin with a tower shield and axe, Garrick with that terrifying giant axe of his… and Katari. Katari in particular is a holy terror, swinging a ludicrously huge sword as if it weighs nothing at all. You don’t even **see** Argent, but that’s probably for the best.

Despite the advantage however, the numbers are what they are. You’ve no time to consider hiding or to figure out how to remove yourself from the combat. Already two more bandits are rushing you.

You slip your dagger out from its sheath at your back but keep it hidden behind you, only revealing the fact you’re armed when you can move to slice the hamstring of one of the charging men. As you’re moving to parry a blow from the other, however, you feel a painful jolt against your head. You swear and roll forward, barely avoiding the bandit’s swing. An arrow on the ground reveals what struck you; it had bounced off of Solas’ barrier, which is now wavering and weak.

Solas seems otherwise occupied, but you hear him call out in alarm as you’re overwhelmed. Your desperate lunge out of the way has left your back vulnerable, something quickly taken advantage of by a man with a greatsword. You’re flanked, a bandit on each side, and you doubt the barrier will take much more. Oh, and you’re attempting to defend yourself with a single dagger.

Two blades swing. You catch one with your dagger, your battered hand leaking blood out of the glove and your arm straining with effort. The other one strikes your barrier and shatters it. You try to dive out of the way as the man with the greatsword heaves it around to slice you in two, but the longsword is pushing down against your dagger, locking your arms in place, pinning you. You reach desperately for you mana, out of other options, dread and terror knotting in your stomach at the realization that you’re dead either way.

You hear the high pitched scream of a hart; you’re vaguely aware of something huge lunging behind you. Then Revas thuds into your back, sending you sprawling forwards onto the man with the longsword. Fortunately, this catches him off guard as much as it does you. You recover first, taking advantage of the smaller heft of your weapon. You plunge the dagger into his sword arm as the two of you fall. He screams; his grip on his longsword loosens and it clatters to the ground as you thud down onto his chest, your knees on his thighs. You yank the dagger out and stab again, this time straight through his hand, pinning it to the ground.
He screams again. His other hand comes up, punches you square in the jaw. You leave the dagger piercing through his hand and grip onto the man’s armor for support, refusing to get off and allow him to regain his footing. He wraps a powerful fist around your bare neck while you reel from the blow to your face. One of your hands instinctively goes to wrist as you stave off burning, useless panic.

With his other hand crucified to the ground, his longsword is left unguarded. You grip it shakily; you’ve little experience with swords, and it’s heavy for you to attempt to lift with one hand. He sees you struggling with it and squeezes your neck tighter, trying to choke the life out of you before you can run him through.

He does not succeed.

You plunge the longsword through his neck, the most exposed part of him you can find in your blind desperation. You thrust so hard and with so much panic that the blade not only sinks through his flesh—showering you with a bright red fountain of the man’s life—but travels a few inches into the ground below, as well.

You scramble back off of the man, a whimper wet in your throat. It has been a very long time since you killed a man that… brutally. You have just enough sense to yank your dagger from his hand. The fight isn’t over yet. But when you turn to see how things are progressing, a scream tears from your throat.

Revas has fallen. His ruddy brown-red fur stained brightest crimson from the gaping wound in his side.

Chapter End Notes

**Elven Guide**
- seth’lin = thin blood
- Venavis = stop
- Ma u’nadas, harellan = You are alone for a reason, traitor
- Banal'athim, banal'dirthara = roughly, "No learning without humility"
- Mala abelas na banam = your apologies are empty

**Qunlat Guide**
- Vashedan Qun = lit. "The Qun is shit" (This is very blasphemous.)
- Ka-antir vas Qun = I spit on the Qun
Ma Revas

Chapter Notes

Here's a guide to help you with the Elven in this chapter.

**Elven Guide**

Hamin malan = calm yourself
Vennam = please
Ar nu'alas = "I'm begging" or "I beg you"
Ar din'solas in ma = Lit "I have no pride with/before you" Essentially a way of saying "I will do anything" or "I put myself at your mercy"
Ma ir'hallan = you are so gentle/kind

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The man with the greatsword lays dead, a horrific hole in chest that you can only guess came from Katari’s giant blade. But Revas had been struck while protecting you… he had taken a blade for you when he’d shoved you over. There is a large gash in his side, one that perversely mirrors the scar you carry on your own stomach. You scramble to him on hands and knees, whimpering.

“No, no, no, no, no.”

You press hands to the wound and Revas lets out a weak, whining moan.

“No, no, no, please no.”

The battle around you is ending. Bandits are rapidly retreating back into the wilderness; every now and then one will sprout an arrow out of his back and collapse. The warriors are making short work of any stragglers. But your eyes are glued to Revas. You whisper quiet prayers to a god that has never answered. Then you remember you’re not alone.

“**Solas!**” You scream his name as if you were the one who lay dying. “**Solas help me!**”

Solas quite literally appears beside you, panic burning in his eyes as surely as it must be burning in yours. He drops to his knees beside you; you must be quite the sight. You doubt there is an inch of you not covered in blood. “Are you injured?” His voice sounds strained. How drained is he? Because of you. If he’d been at full power, this would never have happened, this is your fault this is your fault this is your fault.

“It’s Revas, Solas,” you choke out, your hands still pushing against the wound, as if you could stop the bleeding through sheer force of will. “Please, please, please…”

Solas rests his hand on Revas’ neck. His expression is grave as he stares down at the hart. “This wound is serious.”

“Solas, please, please-”

“If the beast cannot move, we must put it down,” Katari says from behind you. “We have people injured, we need to-”
You turn on Katari with a burning vengeance, spinning around and standing. Blood slings from your hand as you gesticulate furiously. Your voice comes out as a blood-filled screech, swearing at him in half a dozen languages before settling on Qunlat. Rage comes out of your mouth in a torrent. You curse him, you curse his nameless parents, you tell him precisely what you will do to him and his Tamassran if he so much as takes a step towards Revas. Katari looks startled, then furious, but you’re too far gone to be cowed.

“I will not risk lives on this expedition for a beast of burden!” he snarls right back. Sataareth looks on in wonder, the only one who can understand what is being said.

“You will be risking your own life if you say one more word, bastard!” You storm right up to him, shove bloody, shredded, gloved hands against his chest while screaming in Qunlat. “This expedition is mine as much as it is yours! You are in charge of MY books and MY safety! You cannot touch me—no matter what I do—because the Spymistress would have your head, and you know it! So sit down and shut up! Find us a cave to hide in! Do something useful, but stay away from my freedom!”

It’s Solas’ hand on your shoulder that stops you from striking Katari again. “Lethallin, hamin malan.”

You don’t have the strength to snap at Solas, or even to glare at him. Your eyes turn pleading again as you face him, your bloody hands fold together in supplication. “Lethallin, vennam! Ar nu’alas!”

Katari barks orders to someone else to find shelter, which you take to be a good sign. But your eyes are on Solas. He looks weary; how drained is he, precisely? Does he even have the strength to save Revas? Will he even consent to try?

“Emma-” he begins, but Katari cuts him off.

“I do not want the mage exhausting himself on your behalf again,” the Qunari says firmly. You turn to give him another tongue-lashing, but Solas stops you with a hand on your arm.

“I believe it is my decision, Qunari, not yours.”

Katari glowers, but says nothing.

You clutch at the front of Solas’ vest. “Solas, ar nu’alas. Ar din’solas in ma.”

“Stop,” Solas says firmly, and you nearly let out a wail before he continues. “I will do what I can.”

You drop to your knees next to Revas, something akin to relief flooding through you and leaving you weak. You watch desperately as Solas places his hands on Revas’ side, as that familiar warm glow overtakes his hands.

You can tell this is straining Solas—your fault—and briefly, you consider outing yourself there on the spot in order to save Revas. You could feed every drop of your mana into Solas, let his expertise manipulate it in ways you could never manage. You could do it. You could save Revas.

But you don’t.

Fresh, hot tears spill down your face. Everyone, including Solas, likely thinks you’re simply terrified for your hart. Perhaps they think you weak. They aren’t wrong. But above all that is a burning self-loathing. Revas would die to save you. He just demonstrated that. But you wouldn’t return the favor? You wouldn’t even risk death to save him?

Apparently not.
You’re a coward.

You’re a wretched, pathetic coward.

You’ve never deserved this. You’ve never deserved any of them. You only hurt the people you’re closest to. Lies and secrets and daggers in the back. That’s all there is to you. Your core is immutable and your core is wrong, wicked and evil and twisted.

A choked sob escapes you. You’re very aware that you’re coated in blood. Yours, several bandits’, Revas’...You’re responsible for every drop of it. You’re a monster, you’ve always been a monster, you didn’t need anyone else for that--

Please, please, make it stop.

Solas’ hands stop glowing. It’s hard to tell, with Revas as soaked in blood as he is, but the wound seems to have scarred over.

“Solas,” you choke out. “Is he…? Will he…?”

“He should be fine, lethallin,” Solas says gently. His quiet words are more than you deserve. “He will not be able to carry anything, people nor bags, and he will need rest... but I believe he will live.”

You throw yourself at Solas, forgetting for a moment that you’re disgusting and covered in blood from head to toe. You clutch uselessly to the front of his vest, knowing you’re dirtying him but unable to care. You bury your head against his chest and sob burning tears into his shirt. You’re surprised to feel his arms rest gently on your shoulders, and you feel more corrupt than ever to be taking comfort from him when this is all your fault. But you’re weak. You’ve always been weak. You let him soothe you gently with kind Elven words that you’ll never deserve.

“Emma, I must tend to the others,” he says softly after you’ve calmed somewhat. You release him reluctantly.

“O-of course, ir abelas,” you mutter, not capable of making eye contact. Solas squeezes your shoulder, reassuring, but it only makes you feel worse. You let your eyes glance over your companions. No one was injured as badly as Revas, to your relief, but essentially everyone was injured. Kelsie was shot--the arrow still protrudes from her armor--but she is standing. You shift your focus back to Revas.

His breathing is coming slow and easy now, although he’s still letting out soft, distressed little honks and huffs. You run your hands along his neck, whisper words you hope will soothe him. You try to drown out the constant echoing screaming in your mind.

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Adahlen manages to find a cave nearby where all of you can huddle up and take shelter. The camp is quiet; you’re all like injured animals, curling up to lick your wounds. Fortunately, Adahlen has outdone himself... there is a stream further back in the cave where you can wash yourselves off. You haven’t yet, despite your desire to be clean of the blood that stains you. You remain with Revas, who managed to walk to the cave but laid down again just inside the entrance. The blood drying ruddy stains across your body is a punishment, although not one that comes close to abating your guilt.

Sataareth avoids bathing as well; he’s sticking as close to you as you are to Revas. His only injury is a broken hand. You assisted Solas in setting it, knowing Solas couldn’t spare the magic to attempt to heal it outright. Given a few days rest, he could help speed it along the way he had your broken jaw. Of the others, Kelsie is the worst injured; she had taken an arrow to her shoulder. You listened to her
scream as it was cut out of her flesh. She will be fine, fortunately; the arrow hadn’t hit anything particularly important. Everyone else’s injuries are fairly superficial.

You haven’t let Solas look at you yet; you insisted that you were fine and that he examine everyone else first. You’re fairly certain you are fine, at least within your own parameters. The only thing you’re a bit worried about is your hands. You haven’t taken them out of the blood-drenched gloves yet. You don’t know how bad the damage is, only that every little movement with them is fresh agony.

Sataareth does his best to give you comfort while Solas is tending the others. He brings you water from the stream in a large pan, helps you encourage Revas to drink it, and then encourages you to drink some yourself. It’s as sad as it is funny. You might be his sword, but he really is that which upholds. You will be sad to see him go.

After Solas has done what he can to the others, he comes to you. You point to his own injuries, suggesting he perhaps heal himself first. He’s not having any of it, however.

“Emma, you need to clean off so that I can see the extent of your injuries, you are, ah…”


“Why don’t you take Revas to the stream?” Solas suggests gently. “He is strong enough to move, and you can clean his injuries there.”

You know damn well what he’s doing. But… That’s actually a very good idea. “Will… will you help me move him?” you ask softly, and Solas nods. You, Solas, and Sataareth work together to encourage Revas to his feet and lead him slowly into the cave to the stream. Getting him to step in is even harder, but you do eventually manage it. You roll up your blood-stained trousers and pull off your long-suffering boots, and follow Revas into the water. Solas floats a soft, magical light into the air to allow you to see more easily. You wish he wouldn’t waste his mana, but you thank him nonetheless.

Solas leaves you to your own devices after suggesting you bathe as well. Sataareth stays to assist you. You know why; Solas knows you won’t get naked around him, while Sataareth is more concerned with staying near you than he is for your modesty. You’d stripped near him once already. In truth, it’s easier for you to peel off your blood-drenched top than it should be, given that Sataareth is a Qunari. Perhaps have you Iron Bull to thank for that? And yet the idea of being nude within sight of Katari fills you with nauseated dread.

The water downstream of the three of you is bright red as you wash off. You focus on Revas first, as he’s clearly displeased to be standing in the cold water. You work quickly, washing his wound gently and then scrubbing dried blood out of his fur as best you can. Sataareth assists and also scrubs some of the blood off of his own chest and hands. Then he brings you fresh clothes and sets them by the side of the creek. After you’ve cleaned the hart as best you can, Sataareth helps you get Revas out of the river. He tries to lead Revas back towards the entrance and the warmth of the fire, but Revas simply lays down by the creek.

You finally allow yourself to scrape the blood from your flesh, if only because you’re already soaked. It takes longer than you would like, and you’re going to have to take a very, very long bath once you’re back in Skyhold. You know you won’t feel clean until then. Your hair is the worst part; when you’d stabbed through the bandit’s throat, nearly decapitating him, your hair had been drenched in the deluge of blood. Getting it out is a nightmare, and the water is icy cold. But at the very least, you manage to get the worst of the gore off of you.
And you get to look at your hands.

They’re…

It’s bad.

You wind up actually having to let Sataareth cut the gloves off of you with your knife. Even then, bits of your flesh come off with them. You’ll have to show them to Solas, you realize, but you still want to wait, at least until morning. The damage looks severe, but you’re willing to risk it. Revas is alive, despite you. If your hands are injured permanently due to your own stupidity, than that seems a fitting punishment for your actions as of late.

You rinse your hands off in the water as best you can, despite the pain and the disturbing way bits of your skin float away in the current. You don’t scrub, lest you risk losing even more flesh, but you let them soak a little bit, hoping the moving water will rinse them clean.

In the end, you’re unwilling to be naked around anyone, even Sataareth, who you’re coming to trust somewhat. You bathe with your underclothes on in order to allow him to help you. He keeps his pants on, as well, simply rolling them up to his knees. He scrubs dried blood from your skin where your destroyed hands would have struggled.

When you look back at Revas, you find he has company. Ashi’lana has come to lay down by his side, and is gently rubbing his nose against the back of Revas’ neck. You’re certain Belassan would be able to tell you--

Belassan.

Oh, Maker, Belassan is going to kill you when he finds out how close Revas came to death because of you. The worst part is, he won’t. You know he won’t. This is Belassan; you’re not even convinced he’s capable of holding a grudge. But he entrusted Revas to your care for this journey, and you could scarcely have failed him more utterly.

You crawl out of the river miserably after you and Sataareth are reasonably clean, and the two of you struggle to get Revas to go back to the fire. Ashi’lana helps, prodding firmly at Revas’ ass until he moves. You’re worried about his lethargy, but hopefully it’s just a side effect of the healing. You strip out of your soaked smallclothes and throw on the same dress you’d worn before, too exhausted to wear anything more complicated.

Revas is far back enough from the fire that you have a bit of privacy. You sit by his side, legs folded beneath you, hands freshly bandaged--with some difficulty, thanks to Sataareth’s broken hand-- and slowly feed him oatcakes. Ashi’lana and Sataareth stand nearby, giving the sensation like they’re guarding both of you in turn. You’re enthused by how much Revas is eating, despite his seeming exhaustion.

Before long, Solas comes by to check on Revas, or perhaps you, or perhaps both. He looks over Revas first, in any case.

“He will be fine,” Solas assures you after giving the hart a once over. “He is healing well. He will be quick to fatigue for a few days yet, but he is no longer at risk.”

“Solas… thank you,” you say quietly. He hides his own exhaustion well, but you know he must be feeling it. His skin is paler than usual--freckles that are normally nearly invisible now stand out starkly.

“You are welcome, Emma,” he says simply. “Now, will you let me look at you?”
You cringe. There’s no helping it; he’s no doubt already noticed your bandaged hands. But you nod. His hands immediately go to yours, but while he frowns at the bandages, he says nothing about them, only moving to gently unwrap one. “Did you notice any wounds while you bathed?” he asks.

“A few small cuts, but nothing serious,” you assure him. “Sataareth bandaged me up, and--”

“Sataareth?”

“Oh, they uh… the Tal-Vashoth,” you say, gesturing towards Sataareth with your other hand.

“Ah. Did you name him yourself?”

“I… yes.”

Solas chuckles. “Ma ir’hallan, lethallan.”

You know he’s doing it on purpose. He’s trying to make you feel better. You shouldn’t take pleasure in it, because you know it’s more than you deserve, but Maker, Maker, sweet Maker. Those words from his lips fill you with gentle peace. He’s wrong, he’s so wrong. But you want him to be right.

Solas’ face falls when he finishes unwrapping your hand and sees the extent of the damage to your knuckles and fingers. He sucks in a sudden breath. “Fenedhis, Emma, what--” But he glances up at your face and must see something in your expression. He lets out a long, forceful breath, as if calming himself deliberately. “This will… require healing,” he says, and you almost laugh. No shit, Solas.

“Not tonight, though, Solas. You must be exhausted, and something else might yet happen.”

Solas gives you a long, level look. You suspect he’s attempting to determine the best way to proceed. You can appreciate him not just scolding and lecturing the way he normally does. You’ve no doubt he’s tiptoeing around you do to your obviously fragile state. He acted similarly the last time you’d been in a fight, when Baptiste had died. Then he turns his gaze to Sataareth. “Pardon me, friend, but might we have some privacy?”

Sataareth looks startled to be addressed, as he had when Kelsie spoke to him. He hesitates, looking at you as if for advice. You simply shrug. He wanders nervously off towards the fire, where, you note, he’s intercepted by Katari once again. You’ll really have to seek after Katari’s intentions towards Sataareth. If he’s giving him guidance, Vashoth to Vashoth, that’s one thing. Anything else? Well. You won’t let Sataareth be manipulated.

“I lost sight of you, during the fight,” Solas says quietly, deft fingers beginning to unwrap your other hand. “I felt your barrier go down, and saw you fall. Then I could see nothing at all.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he replies. “In fact, I should--”

“Please, don’t,” you say quickly. You really couldn’t take Solas apologizing to you. He falls silent, and you watch as he finishes unwrapping your hands. The last layer of the bandages is bright crimson, the color of fresh blood.

“You are worried for my stamina,” Solas says finally. “A compromise, then. Let me heal the superficial damage. Stop the bleeding, prevent infection. I will not insist on healing them any more tonight. Then in the morning, after we’ve both rested, you will allow me to repair them more completely.”
You can’t help it; you laugh. Solas looks mildly alarmed, and then simply confused.

“I’m sorry, it’s just… listen to yourself. Negotiating fixing me as if it’s doing you a favor. Most people would bend over backwards for magical healing applied so readily, and yet you have to haggle it out of me.”

Solas smiles, slightly. “If that’s what it takes,” he says simply.

You know you shouldn’t, but you lean forward, resting your forehead against his shoulder. With his hands still on yours, it feels very… intimate. “Ma serannas, lethallin. Your kindness is more than I deserve.”

“It is no such thing.” He pushes a hand against your shoulder, a gentle request for you to sit up straight. You do so, and he begins his work on your hands. You watch carefully to see if he was telling the truth about only healing your slightly, but it seems he was being honest when he made the offer. You can still feel sharp, scorching agony underneath the skin, but little surges of magic burn away pinpricks of pain and encourage recovery. You let your eyes slide shut, exhaustion beginning to catch up with you again.

When he’s finished with your hands, he cuts off the soiled parts of the bandage and re-wraps both your hands with dextrous skill. He seems about to say something, but Korbin appears then, carrying two large bowls of stew. It smells marvelous, or perhaps you’re just only now noticing how hungry you are. A glance towards the fire shows that most of your companions—including Sataareth—are sitting around in enjoying similar bowls. You smile slightly to see him engaging Kelsie willingly, without your prodding. Soon, he won’t need you anymore. That was the goal, but it’s a little bittersweet.

There’s not even a need to discuss it. You’re not leaving Revas. Solas shifts from squatting to sitting on the cave floor, bowl in his lap. The two of you share dinner while watching over Revas, who drifts in and out of sleep. Solas confirms what you suspected, that his drowsiness is a result of the extreme amount of healing magic poured into him. When he is not asleep, he’s ravenous, going so far as to stick his nose into your bowl of stew before you pause in eating to hand-feed him more food. As hungry as he is, you would think he would eat from the floor, but he fusses unless each and every morsel comes from your palm.

“He’s being spoiled,” Solas informs you with an amused expression. “He knows you’ll fuss over him, so he’s taking advantage.”

But you don’t mind. You’re so relieved he’s alive, despite you. The wound on his side will likely scar, Solas informs you. It’s a jagged sword wound across his ribs, and you find your hands tracing across your own stomach when you look at it. If Solas notes the similarity between your scars, however, he doesn’t mention it.

What he does seem to notice, however, is your melancholy. At first, he attempts to cheer you as he had in the past, by simply talking to you. And it works, to a point. But your mind is dull with guilt and worry. Whenever your focus shifts back to Revas, or you have even a second to consider all that’s transpired, it feels like a knife plunging through your chest.

“Emma, what troubles you?” Solas asks finally.

“I’m… worried for Revas,” you half-lie.

“He will be fine,” Solas reassures you. “I’m more concerned for you, at the moment.” Perhaps he’d seen the near-decapitated man, whose hand you can still feel compressing your throat. Obviously,
knowing you’d been a bard, he knew the idea of the previous bandit having been your first kill was laughable, but… This had been much gorier, more personal death than most people were accustomed to. He may think you traumatized.

You realize you’ve been silent for some time.

“I will be fine, as well,” you say, extremely belatedly. Solas is, no surprise, unconvinced.

“I will not force you to speak with me about what troubles you, but I will be here if you wish to.”

Maker damn his stupid, perfect voice and concerned blue eyes to the Void. You don’t want to have this kind of a weakness. With a noise between a sigh and a groan, you lean gently against Revas’ shoulder. The hart huffs slightly and shifts in his sleep, but consents to be laid upon. Solas takes your silence for a dismissal, and stands to go. This, apparently, wakes Revas, despite his seeming ability to sleep through being laid on. He lets out a distressed honking sound that echoes through the cave, causing just about everyone to turn and look.

“What’s wrong?” you exclaim, sitting up off of him. “Are you hurt?” As if he could answer. He settles down as you speak, however, laying his head back onto the ground. You send a desperate look towards Solas, uncertain as to what disturbed Revas or what you should do. Could harts have bad dreams? Was he in pain?

Solas kneels down by the hart’s head, running a hand along his neck. “He seems fine…” Solas muses. The two of you are silent for a time, and after a moment, Revas lets out another distressed honk. It echoes unpleasantly through the cave.

“I don’t know what’s wrong!” you fret.

“Nor do I,” Solas begins, but as soon as he starts talking, the hart settles back down. You blink.

“I think he… likes hearing us talk? No, that’s stupid,” you muse to yourself.

Solas laughs, startling you. “You would select the brattiest hart in existence to love, din’samahlen.” The way he says it makes you wonder if it’s become more like a nickname than an insult.

“You don’t think that’s really the case, do you? That he likes our voices?”

“We could test it, but I suspect our companions might protest.”

True. And you’ve tried Katari’s patience enough for one day. Enough for your entire life, more like. You must have been right about him being tasked to get you back to Skyhold alive, specifically, or you suspect you would have been dead or at least lightly maimed by now.

“I suppose I’ll just talk to him all night then,” you say with a chuckle.

“You will only encourage his bad behavior,” Solas points out.

“He’ll settle down once we get back to Skyhold… He probably misses Belassan. Don’t you, Revas? You miss your stable-elf, don’t you?” Revas snorts, shifting his head slightly to aim a stare at Solas, who has begun walking again. He opens his mouth to honk, and you cover his nostrils with your hands, making him stop and snort, shaking his head to dislodge you.

“Perhaps I should stay?” Solas says, sounding amused. “Should I read your hart to sleep?”

The thought of Solas reading aloud again causes a vibrant thrumming in your chest. He had clearly
meant it in jest, but when you make eye contact, expression slightly hopeful, the joviality fades to sincerity.

You manage to keep Revas silent by whispering soft nothings into his ear until Solas returns. You expect his tome on the Fourth Blight, but instead, he’s brought one of the books the two of you had purchased, one about Veilfire runes. You perk up immediately at the sight of it.

“It’s very dry,” he informs you as he sits down next to you by Revas’ side. “I believe it will put him to sleep.”

And so Solas reads.

His voice carries away your anxieties and the strain of the day. You curl up against Revas’ side, knees tucked close to your chest. You nestle the side of your head into his fur, resting against him and listening to the slow, steady sound of his breathing. Alive. Alive. He’s alive. You’re alive. Solas is alive. Everything else can wait.

Even the pain in your aching body and the agony in your hands seems to fade away as you listen to Solas explain the very basics of Veilfire writing. You barely understand, but his voice is so beautiful. And Revas is so warm, so soft. The soft singing of the Fade calls to you, and your eyelashes flutter against your cheeks as your eyes sink shut.

Peace.

For a short time, anyway.

- 

At first all you’re aware of is the softness of Revas’ fur against you. Then you realize how dark it is… has the fire gone out? And it’s so quiet. You shift slightly, running your hands against Revas’ side. His breathing--

You can’t hear it.

You sit bolt upright, hands pressing against him frantically. He’s not breathing! **He’s not breathing!**

“No, no, no, no,” you murmur, horrified, voice choking. Your hands are wet. Why are they… Blood! He’s bleeding again! You try to call for Solas, but suddenly your voice is catching, your throat constricting. You can’t make a sound. Why? **Why?**

Revas’ eyes are open. Cold and dead, no life. Not breathing, he’s not breathing, his life’s blood is pooled around you on the cave floor.

**Your fault your fault your fault.** An endless chant that seems to emanate from all around you, from your very head. You try again to scream for Solas. For anyone. For help. You struggle, feeling heavier and heavier, your throat tight as if there’s a fist around it. Where is everyone? Why isn’t anyone coming to help? How could Revas die without anyone **noticing?** Without you noticing?

The sensation on your neck grows tighter, and you realize it’s the bandit from earlier, the man whom you’d killed so viscerally. His throat is still torn open, blood pouring from it onto you, but his hand is tight around your neck. Squeezing, tighter, you can’t breathe, you can’t--

“**You’re going to die just like the rest of them.**”

You break your throat trying to scream, louder and louder, higher and higher until finally a sound
pierces through you, loud and harsh and brutal. You can’t move your body; are you dying? You scream again, trying to thrash. You’re in your tent, but the murdered bandit is still on top of you, holding you down, choking the life from you. Dead, dead, dying. You scream Solas’ name, and he’s there, somehow, somehow, and he pulls the bandit off of you and, and, and--

You collapse against his chest, aware now that you’re screaming, that you’re sobbing… and that his enchanted blanket still entangles your legs as he finishes peeling it the rest of the way off of you.

Chapter End Notes

I have a general rule about not changing important plot events based on reader reaction. **But I want you to know I would have been incredibly justified in murdering Revas.**
You’ve awoken in the middle of an attack before, but never like this. Never screaming, never flailing. Solas struggles to hold you, but rather than force your arms down against your sides the way the Iron Bull would, he simply keeps you pressed against his chest until you begin to calm. You don’t even realize he’s speaking to you in a calming, gentle voice at first, but it does soothe you. Your mind is still hazy and terrified, but you find that you can cling to him and know that he, at least, is real. Even in a dream, he might well be real.

“She is fine,” you hear him saying, not to you. “She… suffers from night terrors.” Is he lying? For you? “Give us space, please.”

But you’re already coming down from your panic, the fog of the Fade leaving your mind. The more your mind sinks back to reality, however, the more mortified you become. You quickly push Solas off of you, and since your screaming has stopped, he lets you. Your eyes fall to the blanket. How had you…? You didn’t even remember coming to your tent.

“The… the last thing I remember is you reading,” you croak out. You taste blood… how much had you been fighting to scream in your sleep?

“It is my fault,” Solas says, and you realize he looks guilty. “You fell asleep. I brought you to your tent and… thought this the best way to ensure you rested properly.” He gestures towards the blanket. “I was concerned for your health and, I… I did not anticipate this sort of reaction.”

“I… couldn’t wake up,” you realize, pieces clicking together in your head. “Normally, when I’m having nightmares, I can make myself wake up, but I couldn’t… and then I was kind of awake, but still dreaming…”

“Ir abelas, da’len,” Solas says. His voice is mournful, and you’re torn between wanting to reassure him and wanting to scream at him for once again fooling with your sleeping mind without consulting you first.

“It didn’t do that before,” you mutter, letting your fingers slide across the blanket. It doesn’t look so appealing as it once did.

“If you were sharing it with others, its effect would have been muted,” Solas replies. Of course, he doesn’t know about all the times you used it before then. “I should have… It was unwise of me to use it on a… non-mage without thinking it through first, particularly without your knowledge. I apologize.”

You could scold him, perhaps, and ensure he never did anything like this in the future. And you do consider it. Looking at him, seeing the guilt clear on his face, you know exactly how to twist the knife. Act distressed, play on your supposed “fear” of certain forms of magic.
But you don’t have the strength, not after the misery you’ve put him through over the last few days. “I appreciate what you were trying to do, Solas,” you say instead. A shadow shifts over the side of the tent, and you flinch.

“It’s only Sataareth,” Solas informs you. “He’s frantic, I’m sure.”

“I should… what time is it?” you ask. There’s no way you’re going back to sleep, in any case.

“Dawn,” Solas informs you. “If any of our companions were still asleep, I assure you, they aren’t anymore.”

You wince. “That’s not a pleasant way to wake up.”

“No,” Solas agrees. “But yours was worse. They will understand. Combat can be a terrifying thing. They are soldiers; you are not. I believe they were all a bit… concerned for your well-being.”

You want very dearly to say that you doubt it, or even that they needn’t have been. But you had just woken everyone up screaming, so it doesn’t feel like there’s much you can really say. The shadow shifts over the tent again, and you call out.

“I am fine, Sataareth. I apologize for worrying you.”

You hear a grunt, but nothing else. You doubt he’d admit to being worried, anymore than you would confess to worry about him. The two of you make an odd pair, that much is certain.

You’re amazed you didn’t come out of sleep casting. You were certainly trying everything else. But the fact of the matter is, your instincts just don’t run that way. After years hiding yourself, your instinct upon being panicked or frightened is to damp your aura down tighter, not attempt to cast. It’s a good habit. If you set things on fire every time you got scared, you would be dead by now.

Still, the more you sleep like this, the fatter with mana your aura will become. It won’t be too much longer before you have to drain yourself down again, something that will be increasingly difficult the more time you spend with Solas. You sigh inwardly. You certainly have made things impossible for yourself, haven’t you? This is what you get, for thinking with your goddamn libido. You should have run when you had the chance. But even now, the thought is appalling to you. Weak. Weak, weak, weak. Your mother had warned you about this sort of thing, and yet here you are.

Solas still looks concerned. You may have decided against purposefully hurting him, but you don’t particularly feel like comforting him, either. He really needs to stop doing this sort of thing. You shift back onto your knees, pushing against the ground with your hands. You wince at the sudden explosion of pain this causes. You look down at your hands… the bandages are red. Your flailing and punching had opened your wounds again.

“Please, let me help,” Solas says, reaching tentatively towards you, but not actually grabbing your hand.

“I don’t--”

“I understand, da’len, but if we are not careful with your hand injuries, you could have permanent damage.” His voice isn’t threatening, but begging. He’s not trying to scare you. He doesn’t want to see you hurt when he could have helped.

You understand that instinct.

You give him your hand with a sigh.
After Solas has healed the new damage to your hands and soothed the pain of the old injuries, he re-bandages you with a warning to use your hands as little as possible. They won’t heal properly if you keep exacerbating them. Then the two of you head out towards the smells of breakfast.

You settle in by the fire, heating water for a cup of tea. Solas wrinkles his nose at the smell of the strong tea leaves, but says nothing, letting you drink the bitter brew in peace. With every sip you feel more alive. You find your aura is a bit more lively than it had been the night before; the result of full night in the Fade, no doubt. Shame that’s all but useless to you. Your magic is more of an inconvenience lately. With so many mages and Templars around, you can barely ever use it, and instead have to deal with the consequences of hiding it. There’s no helping it, however. You wouldn’t wish it away even if you could.

Revas is stronger that morning. Solas had assured you it would be the case, but it’s still such a relief to see. He still hassles you to feed him, but at least he doesn’t insist on having every single morsel hand-fed to him. The others begin preparing for another day of traveling, breaking camp and preparing breakfast. Kelsie surprises you by offering a few comforting words; she confesses that she had suffered from nightmares that woke her screaming after the fight two weeks earlier.

“Oh of course, I don’t necessarily recommend you recover the way I did,” she says, her eye glancing over towards Emilio. You can’t help smiling.

“I was wondering,” you confess. “But I wasn’t going to ask.”

Kelsie flushes. “It’s not what you think. We aren’t… We don’t… He just…” She drops her voice quieter. “I would wake up screaming. The first time, he held me to calm me down. But it would happen every night. So… we started sleeping together. Just… in the same bedroll, I mean. He…” She gets a look of wonder on her face. “He didn’t try anything.”

“I’m happy for you,” you say honestly. “Emilio is nicer than he lets on.”

Kelsie nods. “He really is. Anyway, I don’t know if that would work for you, but it seems like your apostate might be willing to fill the role.”

You laugh hollowly. “That’s the last thing I need.”

“Maybe that pretty elf girl back in Skyhold then,” Kelsie says, giving you a pat on the shoulder. “Tell her you’re a war veteran, all proper now,” she advises. “The ladies love it.”

Kelsie isn’t the only one to offer advice or support, to your surprise. You hadn’t believed him, but perhaps Solas had been right about some of your companions being concerned. Elaine advises crushed lavender under your pillow. Korbin recommends a pint of ale before bed. It seems many of your companions have issues with nightmares now and then. In truth, most of the time, your nightmares don’t bother you that much. Today was an exception only because you couldn’t escape them.

After camp is broken down, however, there’s one more issue to deal with… Revas can’t carry anything. That means his bags are split up amongst the other mounts; no big deal. But because you’d brought Sataareth along, there is no spare mount. Garrick suggests you could ride on the wagon, but Katari is having none of it.

“We are all but in the mountains. Soon, these horses will be pulling through snow and over rocks. I don’t want them pulling even a pound more than they have to,” the Qunari says firmly. “We have no
spares.”

“She could ride with any of us, really,” Emilio points out.


“Don’t ask a lady her weight,” you say dryly.

“You should ride with Sataareth,” Kelsie suggests.

“Are you kidding? I pity any horse that has to carry one of you giants,” Korbin says with a snort. “No offense, Katari.”

“I don’t know how to ride a horse,” you interject. Half a dozen eyes turn to you. “I learned how to ride on a hart. I’ve never ridden a horse.”

“Oh. Well, that makes it easy then,” says Garrick, pointing over towards Solas, who is tying the last of his bags onto Ashi’lana. You pale slightly.

“Oh, I don’t know if…”

“Don’t pretend to be modest now, we’ve seen you do it before,” teases Emilio.

“I don’t want to impose--” you begin.

“Hey! Solas!” calls out Elaine, making you jump slightly. “Can Emma ride with you?”

“Certainly,” Solas replies evenly. You rub a hand over your face. Maker… But it’s better than sharing a horse with just about anyone else, you admit. Solas leads Ashi’lana over, the barest hint of a smile on his lips—likely, he knows how this sort of thing embarrasses you.

“I’m sorry,” you begin, but he shakes his head.

“It’s necessary. I would hate to see you attempting to learn how to ride a horse while saddled with Katari or Adahlen, after all.”

You shudder. “Ugh, yeah. Thank you, Solas.”

He even helps you up onto Ashi’lana. One day, you will get the hang of mounting. Today is not that day. He boosts you up and then climbs up—behind you, this time. It’s simultaneously better and worse. It allows you to grip the saddlehorn, and he lets you use the stirrups, guaranteeing you won’t have as hard of a time as the last time you shared a hart with Solas. But it also makes it feel very much as if you’re sitting in his lap. The saddle is barely big enough for two; your ass is all but flush against his crotch. Perhaps that sort of thing is no large issue for him, but for you, it’s equal parts mortifying and uncomfortable.

It must be no concern for him; you don’t feel any unfortunate prodding the entire ride. In fact, Solas is the perfect gentleman. His arms are around your waist to allow him to hold the reins, but he sits up straight; he doesn’t lean against you unnecessarily. He doesn’t rest his arms on your thighs, but keeps them upright, even though it must certainly tire him after awhile.

He really is so kind. You find yourself less and less tense as time passes. And while he’s clearly not recovered fully, he’s much more amiable than he’s been for the past few days. He actually engages you in conversation! It’s a delight, and you’re more than happy to chat away once you get comfortable with the situation.
“The thing I’m looking forward to the most is getting back to work on the tome,” you confess. “It’s just sitting there, half finished… and now I have the materials to really dig in and get it done. ...What about you, Solas? Are you looking forward to being back in Skyhold?”

Solas shrugs, a fluid motion you feel against your back. Have you ever before noticed the way a person’s chest moved when they shrugged? You’re certainly noticing now that you’re pressed against him. “I enjoyed myself in Val Royeaux. It will be gratifying to fall back into routine, but in truth, I’m partial to traveling.”

“I suppose you’re much more used to it than I am,” you agree, wondering again how he avoided Templars on the road. You suspect he just stayed further into the wilderness than you had ever dared to venture. There’s a ‘Witch of the Wilds’ joke in there somewhere, you’re sure of it. “I can’t wait to be back in a fortress. Four strong walls between me and any… bandits.” Your mind goes dark for a moment. **Covered in blood, soaked in it. Eyes locked to yours as they go dark.**

Solas shifts in the saddle. The way his body moves against yours snaps you right out of your blood-stained memories. You lean against him a bit more, shivering slightly. You’re getting up into the mountains now… You’ll need to put the fur lining back in Skinner’s jacket soon. Far from protesting, Solas rests his arms slightly closer to your sides, as if to shield you from the wind. You could get used to this.

“How long do you believe it will take you to complete the tome, now that you have everything you need?” Solas asks.

“Two weeks, perhaps?” you muse, considering. “Depends on how much I can focus on my work… Skyhold is lousy with distractions.”

“Should we banish the others from the rotunda?” Solas says with a chuckle. It vibrates against your back, like the low rumbling of the earth itself.

“Nothing so drastic,” you say with a light smile. “Though, that enchantment of yours would go a long way towards speeding things along for me.”

“A long way towards ensuring you would work through the night without stopping to rest, perhaps.”

You can’t even deny it, really. How many times had he fallen asleep to you working, then woken up to you working?

“Hmm… Perhaps a trade?” Solas suggests, and you tilt your head back and to the side curiously. You can’t really turn enough to make eye contact with him, but it indicates your interest. “I will give you the enchantment every day, to help speed your work along. In return, you will promise to spend a reasonable amount of time laying down and attempting to rest.”

You can’t help laughing. “What do you get out of this, Solas?”

“A well-rested companion, perhaps?” he replies. “It’s no great inconvenience for me to assist you.”

“If you’re always doing me favors, I’ll never be able to get you to teach me Elven. I need to turn the tables on you somehow,” you chuckle. Then, more seriously, “I hope you will let me know if there’s ever anything I can do for you, Solas.”

“I will keep that in mind,” he says gamely. “Do we have a deal, da’len?”

“For the enchantment?” you pause briefly, considering it. It would be a good trade off. You could always work in your room, but… no, if you agree to this, you should actually do it. You owe him a
bit of honesty, with how much you lie to him on a day-to-day basis. “...I’d be an idiot to say no. That enchantment of yours is a marvel.”

“That reminds me,” Solas says, shifting both reins into his left hand. He slips his hand under one of your bandaged ones. “I should take another look at these hands of yours. If I don’t ensure they heal correctly, you won’t be working on the tome at all.”

“That bad?” you say, lifting your hand slightly. Solas’ hand follows it up.

“Yes,” Solas says gravely. “It would have been better if you came to me right away. I had hoped the incident with your bruising taught you that.”

You flush slightly. “I wanted to give you more time to recover. That… backfired. Although I’m just as glad, if you had even an ounce of spare mana you wouldn’t have otherwise,” you add.

Solas releases your hand to flick the end of your ear painfully. You let out a rather undignified yelp that has everyone within hearing range glancing over. “Don’t make excuses for your bad behavior.”

“Ow,” you whine, rubbing a bandaged hand against your ear and trying to ignore the trickle of warmth between your legs. It had been more painful than pleasurable, but you’ve always been prone to confuse the two, even on the best of days.

Solas wraps Ashi’laná’s reins around the saddlehorn before taking one of your hands into both of his. He leans flush against your back to peer over your shoulder as he unwraps your right hand, running gentle fingers along the damaged flesh. There’s no more blood, but it still hurts a great deal and you can tell you’re missing skin. The whole area is horrifically red and gorey; you avert your eyes, wincing.

Solas pushes more healing magic beneath your skin, easing the pain with warm tingling. You can tell he’s taking his time and conserving his mana. Or perhaps that’s simply the best way to heal this sort of injury? You admit that you have no idea. You’ve never had any talent for healing. The few times you’d succeeded at it, you’d simply been using fire magic to cauterize. Not quite the subtle, soft spirit healing that Solas employs.

You slip your eyes closed as Solas begins to repair your other hand. You feel… comfortable. More than you have any right to, given that Revas is tiredly plodding along behind the wagon, a fresh scar adorning his side because of you. It’s just... Solas is very warm against the morning chill, and then there’s the steady rocking of Ashi’laná’s gentle gait, the tingle of soothing magic, the delightful pressure of another living being’s touch. Your entire body is against his. It’s very, very rare that you get that kind of contact. Rarer still that it isn’t corrupted by pain or fear.

You’re glad that none of your Skyhold friends are here. None would be content to let you have this kind of moment in peace, save perhaps Cole. They would all interrupt with teasing. And Sera? Sera would probably throw a melon at your head. She won’t be happy with the prospect of you and Solas growing closer. Although that may be just as well. You had very nearly kissed her. You would still like to. You should probably distance yourself.

Now if only you had the strength to do that with Solas.

You stop for lunch too soon. Your group simply stops by the side of the road, but you can tell everyone is on high alert, looking out for more bandits. Ludicrously, however, the closer you get to Skyhold, the less likely it is to be a problem. Orlais is the one that can’t keep their goddamn roads
clean. The Inquisition does a good job of keeping the area surrounding Skyhold free of any trouble. Perhaps that’s why you feel safe wandering off, or perhaps you simply tire of the dour, tired mood in camp. While Solas is going around and touching up everyone’s healing, you slip off into the woods. Sataareth follows you, but you don’t particularly mind. You’ve no intention of attempting to use your magic—not with Solas so close—you simply want a last taste of freedom before being inclosed in the walls of Skyhold yet again.

Sataareth is so quiet, it’s almost like having no one along at all. Peaceful. Again you find yourself wondering if your newfound comfort with Qunari is due to the Iron Bull’s efforts. You’re still scared to even look at Katari, although apparently not so scared that you won’t threaten to sodomize his Tamassran, when pressed. But you’re comfortable with Sataareth. For whatever reason. Perhaps it’s the way he’s content to walk with you in silence. No prodding, no questions. No unfortunate emotions. He’s just… there. Company, yet not.

You’re quite startled when the silence is broken, however. You almost don’t hear it at first, but your ears are nothing if not keen. You pause in your steps, holding up a hand to stop Sataareth as well. There it is again. Pained mewling. Curious, you stalk silent through the snow, zeroing in on the sound of huffing and unmistakably feline groaning.

You half expect to stumble across a puma or something similar, with your luck being what it is, but no. What you find is a cat, hiding in the hollowed stump of a tree. It hisses furiously when you get close, but doesn’t run. You squat down next to it, head tilting. It’s a little thing, like the ones they keep as pets in Orlais, but not nearly so well-bred. Its fur is thick and matted, and indiscernible, dirty brown.

“You’ve picked a poor hiding spot, cat,” you say out loud, amused. “Your trunk has no top. You’ll be snowed on in short order.” The cat hisses loudly and yowls in response. You lean over the stump; it bats a clawed paw up at you to warn you off.

“Why are you taunting it?” Sataareth asks.

“Because it’s there,” you reply, waving him off. “I wonder why it’s not moving?”

“It appears to be moving to me,” Sataareth comments as an angry claw swipes upwards.

“I mean away from us. Cats normally bolt, even the tame ones… oh.” You frown. “I think its leg might be broken. Poor thing. At least it looks… ah, shit.” You reach into the stump; the cat immediately begins savaging your hand, but can’t get through the thick bandages. Its attack is weak and tired. You run a hand over its stomach and sigh. “Pregnant, with a busted leg. You’re in a poor state, aren’t you, cat? What are you even doing in the mountains?”

“Valo-kas, I am uncertain as to what you are doing,” Sataareth says as you begin shrugging your coat off.

“One more thing for Solas and Katari to yell at me about, I’m sure. Sataareth, you’re the only one here with even one good hand, help me.”

“Help you what?”

“What do you think? Wrap the cat up.”

“It seems ill. I do not think it would be worth eating.”

You snort. “I’m not going to eat her, Sataareth. I’m going to help her.”
“Why?”

“Why not?”

“It will likely die; it is a waste of effort,” Sataareth points out.

“She might… But it’s no great inconvenience to ensure she dies in a better manner.”

“Would it not simply be easier to put it out of its misery, then?”

“Maybe. But not until I determine whether or not she has a chance at life. You don’t just kill things because a better option has yet to present itself, Sataareth. Now stop being inquisitive and help me wrap this cat up.”

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You don’t even get all the way back to camp proper before Solas intercepts you. He’s pacing around the edges of the group when he sees you coming out of the woods, your jacket in your arms completely covering the furious but lethargic cat. The second he spots you, he storms over, the swiftness of his stride and the look on his face immediately striking the fear of the Maker into you.

Katari spots you as well. “I told you the elf had simply wandered off, mage,” he says blandly, but Solas ignores him. You can see anger flashing in Solas’ eyes, but he seems to be trying to compose himself before speaking. You take a nervous step backwards, but Solas only takes another forwards.

“Emma,” he says, and your eyes flick over to Sataareth, whom, you note, is not standing as close as he once was. Coward. “Tell me, why would you wander off into the woods… alone… again?”

“I wasn’t alone,” you blurt out. “Sataareth was with me!”

“You are even less able to defend yourself than usual.”

“I didn’t go far,” you protest. “I just…”

It’s at that moment that your jacket meows.

Solas looks down at it, as if just now noticing you were holding your jacket in your arms rather than wearing it. He reaches out a hand towards it.

The jacket hisses.

“Don’t start, Solas,” you say with a frown. “It’s injured.”

“I can’t even bring myself to be surprised.” Solas says, shifting your jacket until the cat’s head pokes out. It glares sourly at the two of you. “This seems to be a habit for you. At least this one is smaller than the last stray you picked up,” he adds with a glance towards Sataareth.

“Do you feel the need to care for every injured creature you pass?” The voice is Katari’s; he’s walked closer. He looks intensely amused, which is better than the alternative, you suppose.

“It’s bizarre, I know, but I’m capable of this emotion I like to call compassion. Learned it from a friend,” you say sourly. “I could have him show you, if you’d like.”
“Don’t think to have your mage waste himself on healing an injured animal again,” Katari warns, and you bristle.

“I can take care of it myself! I wouldn’t have picked her up if I was just planning on appealing to Solas’ better nature.”

“What is wrong with it?” Solas inquires.

“Broken leg, at least. Maker only knows what else. I don’t know if she’ll survive,” you admit.

“Orphans, mages, Qunari… Honestly, taking it on yourself to care for a cat is almost reasonable by comparison. But did it not occur to you that would be difficult, while we travel?”

“I was thinking I’d ride on the wagon. More space to work, and you wouldn’t risk being mauled.” You preempt Katari’s protest—which he’s already clearly gearing up for—by sticking your tongue out at him. “I’m tiny, Vashoth. I think the horses could handle it.”

“You… are exhausting, woman,” Katari says with a sigh. “Fine. Ride on the wagon. I suspect you’ll do whatever pleases you, regardless.”

You can’t help smirking.

“Our companion has figured you out,” Solas says dryly. “If only I’d realized as quickly.”

The others are mounting up now, so you climb onto the front of the wagon. The horses pay you no real mind. The cat, however… Maker, the cat. She’s difficult to handle with two severely bandaged hands, but fortunately she’s as ill as she is pissed off, and with a broken leg, she’s not going anywhere.

And the leg is… bad. Mangled. You can only guess as to what happened to it; it looks like it had been run over by a cart wheel or something. You’re genuinely uncertain if it’s salvageable at all. Despite your claims that you could heal the cat on your own, you’re no medic. But you know the basics, at least.

You rummage through your packs. You’ll have to find and pick some elfroot the next time you stop. There will be some, even here in the mountains; it’s basically a weed. Until then, you’ve nothing to dull the cat’s pain with. You instead focus on getting it to eat and drink a little. It’s difficult, but you’ve cared for sick animals before. You chew up pieces of dried meat until they’re wet and pasty, and then, with great difficulty, stick it directly into the cat’s mouth. She’s not particularly happy about the situation, and she spits it out more than half the time, but… you’re getting a bit of something into her.

Despite the cat’s weakness and your bandages, you wind up covered in scratches and bites in short order. You’re certain that Solas will fuss at you, but honestly, it’s nothing that will require healing.

Katari is content to ignore you, but no one else is. Korbin offers you a flask of alcohol for the cat, because racial stereotypes apparently exist for a reason. Kelsie and Elaine are slightly enamoured with the thing, but not enough to actually help. Kelsie tells Emilio she wants a kitten; Emilio looks mildly panicked at the concept. Revas pokes his head into the back of the wagon occasionally, snorting curiously. Solas mostly just makes snarky commentary every time the cat hisses and lands a blow on your tender flesh.

As it turns out, actual help comes from the least expected person… Adahlen. After a few hours of you struggling to find a way to get liquid into the cat, he presents you with an odd little device… A small, carefully carved wooden tube with a long, small opening at one end. The other end has a
stopper that can be removed.

“You put liquid into it,” Adahlen explains. “Then push the stopper down. It forces it out the other end and--”

“Right into an animal’s mouth,” you say, pleased. “This is fantastic, Adahlen. Where did you get this?”

“It’s Dalish,” he says, with no small amount of force. You almost laugh.

“I didn’t think it was Dwarven. I meant, why do you have one?”

“Oh. I, uh…” He rubs under his nose awkwardly. “I made it.”

“Really? The carving is exquisite. You’re skilled.”

“Well the Dalish are--”

“Take some credit for yourself. Not every Dalish elf is skilled with a carving knife. Did you design it yourself?”

“N-no, I learned from the craftmaster in my clan. I, uh… had found some kittens…”

“Really?” you say, looking up from squeezing drops of water into the fussy cat’s mouth. “Maybe you should be taking care of this cat.”

“No way,” Adahlen says, putting his hands up. “You’re bleeding a puddle. That monster is your problem. If I brought a creature that badly injured back to camp, my Keeper would have called me a fool.”

“Fair enough,” you say with a snort. “Thank you, Adahlen.”

“I did it for the cat,” he grumbles, before turning his horse and riding back to his spot in the formation.

With the addition of the little syringe, feeding and water the cat becomes slightly easier… or at least more successful. You’re concerned for the amount of pain she must be in, but at least the food appears to be staying down.

You’re relieved when the group stops for the evening, though. Your ass aches in new, creative ways from sitting on the wagon; your back hurts from bending over the cat and being jostled about; and you’re absolutely mauled. You clamber awkwardly off of the wagon, wrapping the cat up more firmly in your jacket. Solas takes one look at your still-bleeding arms and lets out a long, tired sigh.

You make a face at him; you’re in no mood for another lecture. But instead of continuing his snark from throughout the afternoon, he gestures you towards him. “Let me take a look at the wretched thing, then,” he says with a sigh. “Else it keep me up all night with its screeching.”

“Our leader ordered you not to,” you quip snidely. “Are you as disobedient as I, hahren?”

Solas raises a single eyebrow. “Such a smart mouth. Are you getting the last of your sharpness out now, before we return to Skyhold and you must pretend to be demure again?”

You scowl at him, but find you’ve no rebuttal. He’s not wrong. You glare a few seconds longer, but you’ve no hope of winning a staring contest with Solas. You break eye contact, staring down and to the side. Damnit. When you do, he continues to unwrap the cat.
She hisses miserably, but there’s barely an force in it. Poor thing. “Unwrap it further,” Solas instructs you, sitting down on a rock and gesturing for you to sit next to him.

“Letting me get savaged instead? Fair enough,” you say dryly. And the cat does land a few more choice blows as you unwrap her, before you get a good grip on her front legs. You sit next to Solas, indicating her shattered leg. “This is beyond me. If it were a simple break, I could make a splint but… it’s…”

Solas presses a gentle finger to the leg; the cat lets out a loud, distressed yowl. You run a thumb against its fur, whispering gentle shushes as Revas peers over your shoulder at the strange new creature you’ve acquired. “To heal this would require more than I can spare… and still may not work,” Solas informs you somberly. “We can put it in a splint to prevent undue pain, but…”

“I need to gather elfroot, for the pain,” you inform him. “I should do that before we attempt to move her leg. It’s clearly causing her a lot of pain.”

“Her?” Solas says, then noticea what you had earlier… the large belly, the swollen teets. “Ah. She’s having a poor time of it.”

“Tell me about it,” you say with a sad chuckle. “Always nice to know someone’s life is worse than yours. Right, Revas?” you add, glancing up over your shoulder. He shoves a warm nose against your face. “How is he, by the way?” you add to Solas.

“Recovering admirably,” Solas says, looking over at Revas as well. “If you could ride bareback, you could likely ride him tomorrow. But you cannot, and the saddle is a poor idea.”

You nod. “I can ride on the wagon again. Although I…” You cough awkwardly. “I enjoyed… I mean, that is, I appreciated you letting me ride with you.” Solas’ face is unreadable. “Thank you.”

“It was no inconvenience,” he says. “Obtaining elfroot for the cat would be a good idea, but I do not want you wandering the woods alone again. You might come back with an injured bear cub.”

“I can go with Sataareth--” you begin, but Solas shakes his head.

“I will go with you myself,” he informs you.

“But then who’ll watch the cat?”

“Did you believe there was any chance I would accept responsibility for watching her?”

You make a face. “Fine. Adahlen?” you call out. He looks incredibly startled, looking up from setting a tent nearby.

“What?”

“Would you mind watching the cat for a little while Solas and I gather herbs?” He looks mortally offended, but you know a thing or two about manipulating arrogant men. “You have more knowledge on the subject than Kelsie or Sataareth. She would be best off with you. Just for a short time?”

Adahlen looks disgruntled, then sighs. “Fine. As long as you’re actually going off to gather herbs, and that’s not just a clever euphemism.”

Now it’s your turn to be offended, but it takes more than the implication you’re sleeping with Solas to get to you. At this point, you’re more surprised when people don’t assume you’ve been sleeping
together. Adahlen most certainly knows this isn’t the case, however, and is simply still bitter over your obvious regard for Solas when coupled with your lack of respect for the Dalish—and him, specifically.

You hand the jacket, the syringe, and the cat off to Adahlen. He still looks unhappy, so you decide to lay it on a little thick. “Ma serannas.” He sits up a little straighter, but when you turn to head into the woods, Solas is giving you quite the look, eyebrows raised and expression dry. You return the look by sticking your tongue out. It’s hardly your fault if Adahlen is easily manipulated.

The two of you head into the woods. It’s really chilly without your jacket and without the walls of the wagon to protect you. That the sun is heading steadily for the horizon doesn’t help, either. It’s only going to get colder… It’s late August, and you’re in the Frostback Mountains. You’re not high enough that there’s snow yet, but… Ugh.

You and Solas are both skilled at finding herbs, as it turns out. You’re not particularly surprised that he can keep up with you. Is there anything you do better than him, really? Orlesian things, you suppose. You can play the Game better than him. Is that something to be particularly proud of, though? You really do want to play chess with him sometime, and really play, not the fake little dance you perform for Cullen’s pleasure. Just to see how you measure up. Cards, too, maybe. Any sort of competition, because you have a way of making a contest out of things that aren’t even meant to be competitive. Like picking elfroot.

You’re somewhat annoyed that he’s finding just as much as you when he seems to be much less focused. He strikes up conversation while you’re training all of your senses to the world around you to find as many herbs as you can.

“Are you particularly fond of cats, Emma?”

“Hmm?” you say, distracted. “No, not particularly… Actually, I find them rather obnoxious. I once babysat a cat for my neighbor while she was visiting family in Jader. I despised it. It was constantly knocking things over, trying to climb onto my book while I was writing… I must have lost half a dozen ink vials to that monster. Still better than a dog, but that’s hardly a competition. Honestly, I’m not fond of most… Ah! Solas, I’ve found some royal elfroot!”

“If you don’t like cats, why go through all the trouble of nursing this one? It would have been much easier to leave it, or simply put it out of its suffering.”

“Sataareth said that as well. Should you not be concerned you’re thinking along the lines of a Qunari?”

“Tel’dar din’samahlen,” he replies darkly. “I simply meant that you have more than enough trouble as it is, with the Vashoth and Revas.”

“Well, you’re not wrong,” you admit. “But it’s not really that much additional inconvenience to care for the cat. I can’t always be in a position to help. Like… like with Dirth’len. Doesn’t it bother you? There wasn’t really anything we could do.” You sigh. “It seems like… it seems like when I can help, I should. To make up for all the times I can’t, or don’t. Even if it’s just a cat. It’s not like I’m losing anything by helping, this time.”

“Except for some blood,” Solas quips, and you laugh, grateful to him for lightening the atmosphere somewhat.

“Yes… except for some blood. But I’ve spilled it for stupider things than this, no?” You glance over at Solas’ bundle of elfroot. “I think royal should count double.”
“Count…? Are you keeping score?” Solas says, sounding intensely amused.

“No. Because if I was, I’d be losing.”
This chapter was a pain. I wrote it, then I had to rewrite it. And then it turned into one of the longest chapters I've done. So... victory, I guess? Thanks again to Tatakikick for help with my French. I'm pretty sure what I originally had was Emma asking multiple people to eat her out. Whoops.

**Qunlat Guide**
issari = experienced person, "leader" or "boss"
basalit-an = a non-Qunari worthy of respect
frens = friend

**Elven Guide**
falon = friend
Vel, mamae = yes, mom
Ma enansal = you are a gift/blessing
Vel, hahlin = yes, sir
Ma serannas = my thanks
Atisha’hamin = have peaceful dreams (essentially "good night")

**Orlesian Guide**
S’il te plaît, mange ma minette = please eat, little cat

You return to camp as it’s getting dark, with enough elfroot to dose half the Inquisition. Well, not really, but it’s certainly far more than you need for a cat.

“There you are!” Adahlen exclaims, exasperated, as you and Solas saunter back into camp. “What were you doing, picking half the forest clean?” You quickly pick up the reason for his sour attitude… several fresh, bloody scratches on his arms.

“Was a single injured cat a bit too much for you to handle, falon?” you ask, not even trying to hide your amusement or sarcasm.

“You are insufferable,” he informs you as he plops the yowling cat directly into your arms. You wince as she sinks a claw into your upper arm. “And so is that cat. I hope the two of you are very happy together.”

Adahlen’s irritation and your own attempts to dislodge the cat from your flesh bring a few chuckles out of the soldiers close enough to watch. You’re glad someone is getting some amusement out of it, at the very least.

“Come, it seems as though Kelsie has managed to start a fire,” Solas says, pointing. She has, in fact, and Garrick is in the process of dragging some fallen logs around it for people to sit on. Korbin is already starting on dinner… the fact that the dwarf is the one making it is a little nerve-wracking. You’d never heard good things about cuisine in Orzammar. But you bring the cat over to the fire and sit down nonetheless.
You and Solas plop your elfroot bundles down onto the ground, and you pluck a few leaves for use on the cat. You snatch one of the sausages that Korbin is cooking the second it could be called “cooked” and take a bite, then stuff an elfroot leaf in your mouth as well.

“What are y-” Korbin begins, then laughs at your expression. The sausage is hot, and elfroot is always disgustingly bitter. But still, you chew. Solas chuckles as well as you make doubtlessly entertaining faces. Finally, when the texture is mushy and mixed, you spit the foul blob of meat and elfroot into your hand.

“Y’know what I like about you?” Korbin says with a snort. “Yer so ladylike.”

“I find myself enamored with her table manners, it’s true,” Emilio adds jokingly. Kelsie, who’s sitting on the ground between his legs, is wrinkling her nose at you.

“I know it’s for the cat but… Maker, that’s disgusting, Emma.”

“You don’t have to watch me,” you say dryly as you trap the bundled up cat between your knees and begin to carefully place bits of the mixture on her tongue. She fusses, but you manage to get her to eat some, albeit slowly.

“There may be an easier way,” Solas comments, and you glance up at him. He’s placing a large pot over the fire, the one your group normally uses to make stew. “Particularly since you’ll numb your mouth chewing elfroot all day and night.”

You watch curiously as Solas scoops snow into the pot, no doubt to be melted for drinking water. “A broth of some kind?” you guess.

“Indeed. I find most people here have a tendency to assume all healing things must taste terrible. They simply throw elfroot into mixtures and accept that it will be bitter. It needn’t be that way.”

“Let me guess… In your travels through the Fade, a spirit taught you a secret recipe for elfroot broth?” you say with a snort.

“Nothing so grand,” he says with a laugh. “Though I did observe it in the Fade. The recipe was originally Elven, although I believe the Avvar still use elfroot in a similar manner.”

“The Fade? You can learn cooking recipes in your dreams?” Korbin asks with a snort. “Stone, surfacers are weird.”

“I sure as hell can’t,” comments Garrick. “Don’t lump me in with the mage.”

You stiffen somewhat, although you know by his tone he’s simply covering his own discomfort. Conversations about magic would likely distress your companions, superstitious dolts that they are. You’ll be glad when it’s just you and Solas again, in the rotunda. Going back to being “Emma”—or Skyhold’s version of her, at least—after being “Alix” is going to be annoying enough. Perhaps with Solas, you can still show a little bit more of yourself without risking danger.

No. The fact that you’re more comfortable exposing yourself to him means that such things are more dangerous, not less. Ugh.

“How do you make it, Solas?” you say, hoping to distract from the subject of mages before your “friends” get even more uncomfortable… or hostile. Every single one of these ungrateful fuckers had been healed by his magic within the day. Yet here they were, half of them looking uncomfortable at the reminder. You could just… Ugh. That’s your mood for dinner, apparently. “Ugh.”
“First, we’ll have to wait for the snow to melt, then boil,” he informs you, covering the pot with a lid. “For now, dinner. For us and the cat, I suppose.” He sits down next to you on the log… you resist the urge to scoot closer. Neither he nor the cat would appreciate that. But you’re thinking about how warm his body had been, riding together on Ashi’lana. You’d like to feel that again. But off hartonback, that’s straight-up cuddling, and definitely not something Solas would indulge you in.

Well… at least, not in front of everyone. You’d had a few questionable, almost-cuddling moments in Val Royeaux. You sigh to yourself. Skyhold, you try to remember. What happened in Val Royeaux is in Val Royeaux. In Skyhold, you have to just… pretend like it never happened. It’s bad enough that he knows you have a crush without rubbing it in his damn face.

You chew more elfroot and meat for the cat as Korbin continues preparing dinner. He’s handing off sausages as soon as they’re cooked through. The sight of Solas chowing down on a sausage is an amusingly familiar one. In fact, Solas himself comments on it.

“These remind me of the food in Val Royeaux,” he says when he’s about halfway through a sausage. “Although there, those were wrapped inside bread.”

“You don’t wrap bread,” Korbin says sourly. “Prissy Orlesians… It’s not bread unless you can kill a Darkspawn by clubbing them over the head with it!”

“Agree to disagree,” you say, wrinkling your nose. “I prefer my bread to share as few qualities as possible with a mace.”

“There’s no accounting for taste,” Korbin replies snidely.

“Do you need Solas to feed you the way you’re feeding that cat?” interjects Emilio with a grin. “We’re all on sausage two or three and I haven’t seen anything go in your mouth that hasn’t come right back out.”

“Watching her mouth carefully, were you?” Elaine asks with a wry smile. Kelsie gives her a smack on the knee, but also glares at Emilio, who grins sheepishly.

“What did you expect? Cows never change their spots, you know,” you say to Kelsie with a chuckle.

“Oh, you shut up. Someone stuff a sausage in her mouth!” Kelsie orders with badly-faked irritation. About half the camp bursts into laughter, yourself included. Kelsie turns bright pink, belatedly realizing what she’d said. “I… you… Shut up! Emilio, Maker’s breath, stop laughing!”

“I’m sorry, mon amie,” he says, trying to contain his mirth and failing utterly.

“Oh, you will be,” she promises, crossing her arms and pouting.

The laughter doesn’t distract Solas, however, and he places a chunk of bread and a sausage rather firmly into your hands. You look up at him, and he’s giving you a rather firm gaze. You grin, a sheepish one to match Emilio’s. “Vel, mamae.”

“Brat,” he says, with a short huff of irritated breath. The fact it’s in the Common tongue makes you laugh, for some reason.

“A cow never changes its spots, lethallin,” you say fondly before biting into the sausage, this time swallowing the savory meat down. It’s a bit too spicy for you, but the bread helps with that. How the cat is stomaching it, you’ll never know. If anything, she seems to like it, pestering you to continue feeding her while you eat.
“Ah,” Solas says as you pause in eating to chew more elfroot. “The water is boiling. Emma, give that cat to someone else and come here,” Solas orders. You glance around—Adahlen puts his hands up and mouths “no way”. In the end, you give up and just hand the cat to Sataareth, the only one here who will actually reliably do what you tell him. He looks mildly panicked.

“Just hold her,” you say dryly. “As long as you keep her bundled up, she won’t scratch you.” The cat lets out a distressed yowl.

“Why is she doing that?” Sataareth says warily.

“Because she’s a cat. Cats are awful,” you reply. You hear Adahlen snort behind you, then cover it up with a cough. “Just hold her and let her scream. Like a baby. A horrible baby with claws.”

“You are not very good at being reassuring, Valo-kas.”

“I never claimed to be.”

“Emma, come here,” Solas calls firmly, and you turn go to stand next to him near the fire.

“For some reason, the people here simply throw the entire plant in boiling water, then act surprised when it tastes terrible,” Solas informs you. “Here.” He hands you a stem of elfroot. “Pluck the leaves, then crush them before dropping them into the water, like so,” he instructs. He demonstrates, crushing a few leaves by rubbing his hands together, then letting the remains drop into the water. You mimic him, making a face as sticky leaf juice gets on your bandages. “The most useful part of elfroot is the liquified leaves. Now…”

Solas reaches into a bag… your bag, you realize, the one with your foodstuffs. Bastard, when had he swiped that? He pulls out a few of the herbs and spices you’d gotten in Val Royeaux, with the intent of spicing up the food at Skyhold, which was… very Ferelden. He shows you which ones to use to counteract the bitter taste of the elfroot.

“It can be used with a meat stock as well, if you’re making one,” Solas informs you.

“Can you use dried elfroot for this, or should it be fresh?” you wonder.

“It tastes better and is more potent with fresh, of course, but dried can be used if that’s all you have. In that case, use about half again as much elfroot.”

You and Solas hover over the stew. The fire is hot enough that you wind up having to take off your jacket. You tease Sataareth by hanging it on one of his horns while his hands are full with the cat. He glares at you. “Why not hang it on Katari instead, Valo-kas? He seems free.”

“Because I don’t want to die, sweet Sataareth,” you say with a chuckle. 

“I wouldn’t kill you. Merely maim,” Katari says, and before you can stop yourself, you laugh.

“Did you just tell a joke, issari?” you say with faux shock.

“No. I stated fact,” he says, but there’s a wry grin on his lips. You’re glad he doesn’t appear to be holding a grudge over what you said about his Tamassran, at least. In fact, you should thank him… Sometime when no one else is around, perhaps.

“Emma!” Solas calls you again, and you skip back through the snow to his side. You eat while the two of you cook, stealing bites of food whenever you get the chance. By the end of it, your bandages are disgusting, stained with green elfroot juices and grease from the sausages. The broth tastes
delicious at the end of it all, though. It’s hard to explain the taste… it tastes… fresh? Green? Can something taste green? You can taste the elfroot, sort of, but without any hint of bitterness or sourness. The soup is light, with no bite or saltiness. You’re rather enamoured with it, actually.

You help Solas portion some of it out. There are some people, like Sataareth and Kelsie, whose injuries are still healing, and the soup will do them good. The rest you and Solas pour into waterskins.

“It keeps for several days,” Solas informs you. “Particularly if it’s not a meat broth. This should serve your cat well. It will help keep her hydrated, and the elfroot will be good for her and the kits.”

“Thank you, Solas. Ma enansal,” you say honestly.

“Ah…” he says, seeming caught of guard for a moment. “It was… nothing.”

“Your knowledge is far from nothing,” you insist. “And I thank you for sharing it with me. I only hope I’ll get more of it in the future,” you add, a little cheekily.

“Ah, always thirsty for more,” Solas says with a chuckle and a little shake of his head.


Solas sighs slightly. “Eat more dinner while I tend to the others,” he instructs you. You obey, sitting down by the fire with the cat and stuffing more food into both of you. You watch with mild interest as Solas works through the soldiers. Emilio has a cut on his back that required a mage’s touch— it will likely scar, since Solas could only do so much with his limited resources. Kelsie’s arrow wound still bothers her. She was probably the most seriously injured, but even she is recovering nicely. She has to take her shirt off for the healing, however, and the sight of Solas’ hands on her bare flesh sends an unpleasant twinge through you.

Stupid. It’s just healing. But of course, you know that. The fact of the matter is, it’s always been “just healing.” You just wanted it to be a bit more than that, subconsciously. Seeing him give it to other people reminds you of where you rest in the grand scheme of things. It’s a good reminder, even if it tastes as bitter as the elfroot leaves.

The cat takes well to the elfroot broth once it’s chilled. She still requires the help of Adahlen’s syringe to drink, but she does so with eagerness, gulping down the broth. You’re not sure if she prefers the taste, or if the elfroot already in her system is merely helping to dull the pain. Either way, you’re relieved. She’s doing better than you had hoped.

When Solas finally comes to you, you’re reluctant to accept his touch, for some reason.

“Will you see to the cat, first?” you ask. He scowls. “She’s more injured than me, arguably,” you point out.

“She is also a cat, Emma,” Solas says tiredly. “A wild cat you found in the woods and insisted upon keeping, against sense.”

“I’m not keeping her!”

“Of course… just like you weren’t keeping him,” Solas says, gesturing towards Sataareth, who is scratching irritably at the splint on his hand. You don’t have much you can say to that… you thought Sataareth would be long gone by now.
“...The cat, Solas?”

He sighs. “Fine.” He sits down next to you and glares down at the cat. She glares back through half-lidded eyes—the effect of the elfroot.

“I’ll need to unwrap her,” you say nervously. “But I’ll do my best to keep her from scratching you, Solas.”

“You can certainly try,” Solas says with a snort as you carefully unwrap the cat. She seems mostly sedate at first as you grip her legs carefully, but the second Solas touches her injured leg, she hisses and begins struggling. You hold her down, carefully but forcefully, as Solas examines her.

“This leg…” he says with a frown. “Under better circumstances, it might have been saved but… the bone is broken in too many places, and the injury happened too long ago. The amount of healing it would take… I don’t have it to spare, and regardless, she would be too lethargic afterwards to eat or drink. She is dangerously underweight, particularly for one carrying kittens.”

You nod sadly. “I feared as much. Still, I’m sure she’d rather be alive with three legs than dead with four.”

“I can’t remove it here, but I can set it… prevent it from causing her pain when she moves,” Solas informs you.

“What about her kits?” you ask nervously. Solas’ silence doesn’t help your nerves.

“I… see no need to terminate the pregnancy right now,” he says finally. “She is no danger of dying from it. But I doubt the kittens will survive.”

“Can you tell if they’re even alive right now?” you press. “No need to have her carry around little corpses…”

“They’re alive… for now. They are as malnourished as she is. I doubt they will survive long outside the womb. However, only time will tell.”

You nod. “Thank you, Solas. Please, do what you can for her leg. When we get to Skyhold…”

“There will be no shortage of healers as soft-hearted as you,” he says with a chuckle. “After so long working on dying soldiers, many will welcome the chance to save a cat and her kittens.”

“Ma serannas, Solas. None could be as kind-hearted as you.”

Perhaps it’s just the flickering fire light, but you could swear Solas flushes slightly. “Hold her still,” he says, fetching a splint and bandages from his bag. “This will be unpleasant for all of us.”

You have a lot of new scratches by the time Solas has set the cat’s leg, mostly from preventing Solas suffering that same fate. It’s silly, you know. He can heal himself as easily as you, if not more easily. You just don’t like the idea of him feeling pain… well, at all, if you’re being perfectly honest, but especially not over something he’s doing as a favor to you.

Afterwards, you bundle the cat back up. She’s upset, but as the healing and elfroot begin to take effect, she’s getting more and more drowsy. “I should settle her into my tent,” you murmur. “It’s cold out here, and--”
Solas grips your forearm as you stand. “Do not take me for a fool, da’len. I took care of your cat. Now sit, and let me look at your hands.”

You flush slightly, as much because of his words as his hand on you. You suppose there’s no getting around it. You sink back onto the log, nestle the cat between your legs. Solas immediately begins to unwrap your hands. He throws the bandages to the side; they’re soiled beyond use. The skin on your hands is a bright, vibrant pink. It hurts less now, although you wince when Solas runs careful fingers over the skin there.

He pours more healing into the injuries, and you bite your lip to keep from gasping; he’d caught you off guard. You wonder if it feels like this for everyone. Is it a mage thing, to feel it so keenly? You’ve no way of knowing. You’re constantly paranoid about that; that some tiny tell will give you away for a mage. And you can’t compare notes with anyone else without risking giving yourself away, as well. It’s frustrating. It always has been, but it’s even moreso with Solas. Forget his unwillingness to teach you Elven… The biggest barrier between you and knowledge is your own damn lies and secrets.

But, you remind yourself, the three magical tomes heavy in your bag are a representation of the knowledge only obtained thanks to your lies and secrets. It’s a trade off, you suppose.

“You should rest,” Solas informs you when he’s finished with your hands. He wraps them up in fresh bandages; you watch his dexterous fingers work as he does. “Are you listening?”

“Huh?” you say, gaze snapping up from his hands. “Oh, yes. Rest.”

“If you can,” he says with a frown. “Perhaps when we’re back at Skyhold, we can… determine a better way for me to help. A safer way.” He’s still not giving up on that? Andraste’s tits, this man is determined. At your expression he adds, “If you’re comfortable with it.”

“I’m n… We’ll… cross that bridge when we come to it,” you say. If he can waltz right into your dreams without noticing you’re a mage, you might be safer from detection than you had thought. You’re not sure if this is something you should be playing with, but… Eventually, the insomnia will kill you, or render you so unable to function that you’ll lose control. A little bit of careful experimentation… Well, it’s worth considering, at least. “For now, I’ll try to sleep on my own. Although with this beastie keeping me company, I’m not sure how likely that is,” you add, nudging the cat.

“Simply try not to tax yourself,” Solas says with a resigned sigh.

“Atisha’hamin, lethallin,” you say fondly, your enjoyment nearly doubled when you see Adahlen twitch.

Solas finishes wrapping your hand, and pats it fondly, the way one might do any finished task. But the fact that it’s your hand he’s patting sends a pleasant chill down your spine. “Sleep well, if you manage it.”

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You head to your tent with Sataareth. He moves to sit outside of it, but you reach a hand out to rest on his chest—you would have grabbed his shoulder, but he is significantly taller than you—and shake your head.

“No, Sataareth. It’s cold. There’s snow on the ground, and it may snow more. Into the tent.”

“I have slept in worse--”
“So have I. In the tent,” you say firmly. “Watch the horns, though. I just bought this thing, I don’t want any holes.”

Carefully, Sataareth climbs into the tent. The ridiculous sag of his pants reminds you that you need to get him proper clothing at some point. You doubt Skyhold will have much that fits him. Perhaps the Iron Bull might have something…? You can always take some of the Iron Bull’s clothing in to fit Sataareth. It’d be easy, since it was just pants. Shirts are a hassle, but thankfully, Qunari essentially never wear them.

You crawl in after Sataareth, cat in one of your arms. She’s less lethargic now that she’s being moved, and she squirms and kicks while angrily hissing at you. Aaah. A cramped tent with a Qunari and a furious cat.

Relaxing.

It takes a bit, but you manage to work out a somewhat comfortable arrangement. Sataareth is curled up on one side of the tent, trying not to catch the canvas with his horns. You don’t have a spare bedroll for him, but you give him some of your blankets to lay on. You take the other side of the tent, and the cat lays between you, still cocooned in a blanket and still pissed off about everything that has ever happened.

“Maybe a little bit more lethargy would be good for her,” you mutter to yourself as you try to get her to drink some more of the elfroot broth. She’s in a foul mood, and bites your bandaged fingers several times in the process of drinking even a single syringe of the liquid.

Perhaps it’s because you’d foisted her off on him earlier, but Sataareth seems a bit fascinated with the cat. He watches, enamoured, as you unwrap her, just so that she can stretch her legs a little. The tent is closed, so it’s not like she can bolt. She circles a few times, hissing, before you put some cold sausage in front of her and she gets distracted chewing on it. You and Sataareth watch in silence as she grumpily gnaws on it.

She’s still filthy and matted. You don’t look forward to attempting to wash her… You’ll be putting that off until Skyhold, to be sure. There, you could use warm water and prevent her from getting a chill. In fact, once you hit Skyhold, you’ll likely be able to give her to someone who actually likes cats. You’ve absolutely no desire to “keep” her, despite what Solas and the others seem to think.

Despite her matting, you can tell she’s a sort of speckled brown/grey, although for all you know, she could be white when clean. Her fur must be naturally long and thick, to make such a mess. You wonder--not for the first time, not for the last--how she’d come to be in the situation you found her in. Her leg looked as though it had been crushed, and cats like this aren’t exactly native to the Dales. Maybe she’d been with a caravan… or refugees? You suppose it doesn’t really matter.

Sataareth attempts to pet her, a poor decision. She immediately turns on him, grips onto his hand and savages it with three sets of claws and her teeth. Sataareth watches as you work to detach her from him.

“I don’t know what you were expecting, Sataareth,” you scold.

“She has a warrior’s spirit,” he announces, and you laugh.

“Well, she’s certainly a fighter,” you agree. “I wasn’t sure she’d make it. And I think she’s going to lose the leg… And possibly the kittens. But she seems determined to live. I can relate.”

“As can I,” Sataareth says solemnly. “She is a… asaaranda. Like the other night. I don’t know the
“Storm,” you tell him, chuckling. “Thunderstorm. And you’re right. She is. Asaaranda.” You smile fondly as Sataareth attempts to pet her again, only to get mauled for his trouble. Perhaps you simply have a taste in the “strays” you pick up; these two are both trouble. You sigh as you pull the cat towards you to wrap in a blanket, if only so that she’ll stop mauling the both of you. “You know, Sataareth, it’s unwise to name things you cannot keep.” You realize the irony in what you just said only afterwards. Sataareth notes it as well.

“You named me. Were you intending to keep me?”

You bite your lip, uncertain of what to say. “...I... You know that your vengeance has been completed, don’t you? It was already being enacted by the time we left Val Royeaux.”

“I suspected as much, although I still have no proof.”

“And you likely won’t get any without strolling back into Val Royeaux to check on our dear Baron,” you reply with a scowl. “In any case, I’ve done what was needed. You... can leave whenever you wish. I am not... ‘keeping’ you. You are not a thing to be kept.”

Sataareth is quiet for a time, and you think perhaps the conversation is done, that you’ve answered his questions satisfactorily. But he speaks up again a moment later.

“To the Qunari, you would be basalit-an, Valo-kas,” he says, and you stiffen.

“You are not Qunari.”

“No. And I am unsure what that makes you,” he admits. “But you are worthy of being followed. I would, if you would have me.”

You shift, uncomfortable, not looking up from feeding the cat. “Wh... what would I do with you following me around? I’m not a warrior. I’m a linguist. My day-to-day life involves scribing notes and bringing Solas his meals. There’s nothing for you there.”

“I would follow you,” Sataareth says again. “But only if you wished it. If you do not, I will find something else.”

“That... would likely be for the best,” you say with a soft sigh. “I won’t drive you away, but you should find what you want out of life.”

“I will find another, Valo-kas. You cannot be the only worthy person out there.”

“Why follow at all?” you ask with a frown. “Why not be alone... or lead, even? Don’t you want to carve your own path?”

Sataareth is quiet again for a while. You don’t push it, instead focusing on feeding the cat. It’s hard for Vashoth, you know... but you don’t want to upset him, either. You look up only when you see him shaking his head.

“It is too much. I have... too much to learn. I cannot find my own way without someone to guide me. Not yet. I have too much to learn of the world. I need... someone I can trust. Someone worthy to follow, in the meanwhile.”

You nod, more to yourself than anything, and sigh. “I don’t blame you, Sataareth. I was much the same way when I first escaped slavery. It will come to you, frens. There is no shame in knowing
your limits… You’re already wiser than I was in your situation.”

“Then…?”

You sigh. “I’m… I’m sorry, Sataareth. In truth, I wouldn’t mind your company, but I’m returning to the Inquisition. It was hard enough to explain your presence to those here, and they honestly didn’t care about me enough to truly wonder how I’d come across you. A Vashoth following me around there will spell trouble for us both.”

“I… have been speaking to Katari…” he begins hesitantly. You stiffen, and he notices it, falling quiet.

“What has he been saying?” you ask carefully.

“Many things, some of them useful. I thought perhaps I might sign on to the Inquisition, as well.”

You ignore your knee-jerk reaction and actually give the matter some thought as Asaaranda slurps tiredly at elfroot broth. “Many Vashoth find early comfort in mercenary work,” you admit. “And it’s better than banditry. But why the Inquisition, in particular? Something Katari said?”

“Something you said, Valo-kas,” he corrects. “You signed on with them. They must be worth something.”

You can’t argue with that. “You’ll need to find a sword you can actually swing, first,” you say with an amused smile. “I’ll admit, I have mixed feelings about the Inquisitor himself, but the Inquisition is doing important work. You aren’t wrong. And Commander Rutherford is… well, you may find him a man worth following. I’ve met worse.” Particularly for an ex-Templar.

And this arrangement would let you still see him sometimes… with an excuse. If he’s a soldier or mercenary for the Inquisition, people won’t question his presence around you any more than they question Bull’s. Which is, admittedly, still more than you would like. But you’ll take it.

It’s awkward, sharing a tent with a Qunari and a cat, particularly considering both of them eventually fall asleep and you just… don’t. You shift about idly for a while, keeping an eye on Asaaranda. Eventually, however, you leave the tent… this time for a reason. Elaine and Adahlen are on watch, and neither notice you slip out of your tent… good. If Katari was up, you wouldn’t feel comfortable doing this. But with just those two…

You slip towards the wagon, and then, with a nervous glance around, underneath it. There’s a hidden compartment in the bottom--you would know, you had it cut. You open it up and slide three scant books from it and into the bottom of your bag. It’s unlikely the Inquisition would find the hidden compartment, but it’s better to carry the books the last bit yourself. You’ll be at Skyhold tomorrow, provided there isn’t a damn blizzard or something similarly stupid. You’d rather handle the last leg of “smuggling” yourself. You highly doubt the Inquisition will be patting you down as you come through the gates, after all.

In all honesty, you’re more worried about Solas finding the books than anyone else. It’s not that they’re books that only a mage would have, per se… But it would be kind of hard to convince a mage that you have enough of a layman’s interest to be reading a banned tome of Seer’s rituals. Anyone else, you could tell them you’d brought them to re-sell them for profit. Although, honestly, it could be just as tricky to fool Vivienne de Fer, Seeker Pentaghast, or even Commander Rutherford. Really, the fact of the matter is that it’s just more likely for Solas to find something you’re hiding. No
You hide them well, wrapped up in clothing and tucked at the bottom of your bag. If not for Solas, you’d put a little enchantment on them to keep them hidden. Damn him… Always making your life more difficult. Ah well. It’s unlikely he’ll be searching your bags. However, you’ll keep this particular one on you, just in case.

You duck back to your tent, checking once again to make sure no one saw you. The last thing you need is more lies to explain odd behavior… You have enough of those to keep up with.

You don’t sleep that night… or if you do, it’s in short, unnoticed bursts as you lay in your tent, tending to Asaaranda. You rise before Sataareth, but make enough noise to wake him as you pack your bedroll. Better for him to think you can’t sneak around him without waking him. You sling your bag onto your back, the books thumping against your spine. You’ve hidden them well, but the pressure of them against your back makes you twitchy. Nerves won’t do you any good, you know, but you still have them.

Sataareth breaks down the tent while you fuss over Asaaranda. She’s pissed off and angry, repeatedly spitting food back up into your hand. You sit by the fire while Garrick prepares breakfast, cooing at her and speaking softly in Orlesian to try and soothe her. You had tried a few different languages, but Orlesian was the only one she responded to at all. Perhaps she’d had an Orlesian owner, once?

“How many languages do you speak?” Garrick asks at one point.

“Six,” you reply absentmindedly. “S’il te plaît, mange ma minette.”

“Orlesian, Antivan, Qunari.”

“Qunlat,” you correct.

“Qunlat, then. Elven… what else?”

“Ancient Tevene and the Common tongue.”

“Oh, right. I forget, Common counts, huh? Why Ancient Tevene, though?”

“That’s actually my speciality,” you say with a laugh. “There aren’t a lot of people fluent in it outside of the Empire. I do the most business translating old Tevinter tomes into the Common tongue… or Orlesian, once or twice.”

“Where did you pick it up?” he asks curiously. “It occurs to me I barely know anything about you.”

You look up from Asaaranda, a bit confused. “I didn’t know you wanted to know anything about me.”

“Well, I mean…” he says, as flustered as if you’d accused him of flirting. “If you don’t want to talk about it… I was just curious.”

You shrug. “I pick up languages. I have a knack for it.”

“Surely someone taught you?” he says, disbelieving.
“Good morning, Emma,” Solas’ voice comes from behind you, making you jump—which, in turn, upsets Asaaranda. She lands a painful scratch on your arm, and you wince.

“Good morning, Solas. I didn’t hear you approach,” you say, twisting your neck around to see him.

“Did you sleep at all last night?”

“I’m not sure,” you say honestly. “It can be hard for me to tell. I think I rested some. It was cozy in the tent, with Sataareth and Asaaranda in there with me. I think I’m coming to like sharing my space,” you say with a chuckle.

“Asaa… You named it,” he says, rubbing his temple as he sits down next to you by the fire. “Of course you did.”

“I didn’t! Sataareth did!” you protest. “It means thunderstorm, though. Don’t you think it suits her?” You hold the cat up in front of Solas. She swipes at his face, and you yank her back.

“As much as anything, I suppose,” he replies. “And your hands? How are they this morning?”

“They don’t hurt at all, thanks to you,” you reply. “I’ll be keeping the bandages on at least until I find someone else to foist this monster cat off on, however.”

“Likely a bit longer,” Solas says firmly. “It was difficult to heal the muscle and burn out infection. They will be sensitive for a time. It’s better not to risk them being damaged again.”

“Vel, hahlin,” you say, moving Asaaranda’s arms so it looks like she’s saluting him. She gives you an irritated glare, and you go back to watering her with the syringe.

The others begin waking up and breaking down camp as the smells of breakfast begin wafting through the mountains. It’s oatmeal… not exactly your favorite thing, and not something you can feed to Asaaranda, so you gnaw on some of the dried meat in your bag until it’s soft and mushy enough for her to eat. You chat idly with the others over breakfast, although you’re distracted somewhat by attempting to feed both yourself and Asaaranda… and making sure Sataareth doesn’t overly stuff himself. His stomach is still recovering, and you don’t want him to get ill.

Being so close to Skyhold, however, you turn the conversation to something that had been bothering you for a while.

“Garrick…?” you ask, glancing up from the cat. “I understand if you can’t tell me, but I wanted to ask… What was your group actually doing in Val Royeaux?”

“Ah, I’m not sure…” Garrick says uncertainly.

“Oh, I don’t think it’s any great secret, not after the fuss we caused,” Emilio says with a snort. “We were there to intimidate the Chantry. Some Mother… what was her name?”

“Hevera,” Elaine interjects, and you choke on your tea.

“Are you okay, Emma?” Garrick asks, alarmed, as you cough wildly.

“Fine!” you choke hoarsely. “Fine. No, Sataareth, don’t you dare,” you add as the Qunari goes to slap you on the back.

You manage to catch your breath while the others look on, clearly concerned. “So, the uh… Chantry? What for?”
“Some favor for the University,” Garrick says. “I assumed it had something to do with what you were doing there, actually.”

“It might have,” you confess, trying hard not to smile. You note that Solas also looks amused… he must have figured it out, as well. “Although I’m hardly in the know for such things.”

“We actually got to meet Chancellor Haulis,” Kelsie comments. “He was really grateful.”

“Too grateful,” Garrick says with a scowl. “I think he was trying to bribe us. I just told him to send his thanks to the ambassador.”

You struggle to keep a straight face. “Ambassador? Do you mean Lady Montiliyet?”

“You’re quite finished,” Katari says sourly.

“Best if you give him another day’s rest, particularly since we’re so far into the mountains now,” Solas advises.

“Why don’t you ride with Emilio?” you ask with a scowl. “Then I can take your horse.”

“You can’t ride on the wagon again,” Katari says firmly. “It’s all uphill through snow. Even your scant weight is more than I want to burden the horses with.”

Also because I don’t have the kind of self-control Solas does,” quips Emilio. Kelsie tilts her head, clearly confused.

“‘What do you mean…?'”

“I mean, if your ass was bouncing against me like tha-”

You shut him up yourself with a hastily made snowball to the face. He laughs as he wipes it off; your face is nearly as red as Kelsie’s.

“Also because I don’t have the kind of self-control Solas does,” quips Emilio. Kelsie tilts her head, clearly confused.

“Welcome back,” Garrick says.

You glance over at Solas, still red in the cheeks. He’s straight-faced, of course. These sort of things
don’t seem to affect him. “You don’t mind…?”

“Of course not,” he says, gesturing you over to Ashi’lana’s side. Once again he helps you up into the saddle, then mounts up behind you. You’re even more aware of how close the two of you are, and that the other’s might be watching. Your self-consciousness doesn’t last long in the face of the comfort you get from being this close to him, however.

You make a sling out of your blankets for Asaaranda to ride in, more so that you don’t have to constantly hold her than anything else… Although, in part, it’s also to ensure she doesn’t maul Solas. You hook it around the saddlehorn and let her rock gently by Ashi’lana’s shoulder. She looks sour about the situation, but she’s not being jostled too much. Ashi’lana has a gentle gait to begin with, much more so than Revas. She only yowls when Ashi’lana clambers over loose rocks.

You have to bend down to feed and water her, which is a bit awkward--the saddlehorn pushes into your chest when you lay down over Ashi’lana’s back. Still, better than getting scratched constantly. It’s a bit awkward for Solas, you’re sure; he has to keep moving the reins to the side when you lay forward to tend to the cat.

“Would it not be easier if you merely put her in your lap?” Solas asks at one point while you’re bent down, carefully squirting elfroot broth into Asaaranda’s mouth.

“She’d scratch you; I’m sure of it,” you say, biting your lip as you focus.

“I assure you, I can handle cat scratches,” he says, and his voice sounds slightly strained. You glance behind you to look at him. His eyes are on the horizon, no doubt keeping an eye out for any trouble.

“It’s fine, Solas. It’s no inconvenience. It’s enough that you’re letting us both ride with you. I’d rather be a little uncomfortable than risk you getting hurt, even minorly.”

“I… Very well,” he says, still not looking at you. You make sure Asaaranda drinks the rest of the broth from the syringe, and then sit up. You might say it’s fine, but honestly, it’s making your back hurt a bit.

“I will be so glad when I don’t have to ride a hart all day long,” you say with a long sigh. “Even with our gentler pace, my ass is killing me.” You shift slightly in the saddle, trying to get more comfortable. “How much longer do you think it will be?”

“We’ll probably be there by this afternoon,” Garrick answers. You can’t help grinning. You’ll see your friends again! Cole, in particular, you’re dying to see. Although his smugness when he realizes just how much closer you and Solas have gotten… Well, Solas still doesn’t know all your secrets, so Cole can be smug all he wants.

“You seem excited to be back. Not much for traveling?” Emilio asks.

“I’m not accustomed to it,” you tell him. “And, honestly, after the trip we’ve had, I’d be glad to never go out on the road again.”

“I can’t really blame you,” Kelsie says. “You’re probably even less used to bandit attacks than I am.”

“Certainly,” you say with a nod, even though you’d be willing to bet you’ve had more experience with it than her.

“Oh please,” grumbles Katari from the front of the progression. “Four knives you threw in that last combat, and four men fell from them.”
You flush and try to think of a retort, but Garrick nods. “I noticed that too. Even on the way to Val Royeaux, you saved me with one of those little daggers of yours. Where’d you learn to throw them?”

“I… practice,” you say haltingly.

“On what?” says Katari with a snort. “You severed a man’s spine with a blade perhaps three inches long.”

“And I saw what you did to that other man, with his own sword,” Garrick adds.

You feel a wave of nausea. **Soaked in blood, eyes locked to yours as they go dark.** “I… I…”

You feel Solas’ arms tighten around you, giving you some much needed support. You feel like you might fall out of the saddle. “You said she saved you, did you not?” Solas quips. “And I seem to remember a well-placed blade assisting you, as well, Katari. An interrogation is an odd way to show your gratitude.”

“I didn’t mean…” Garrick says, glancing behind himself towards you. Only then does he see the ill look on your face. “Oh, shit. I didn’t think…”

“That much is apparent,” Solas says coolly. Garrick flushes slightly.

“Sorry,” he mutters, and turns forward again.

“**Ma serannas,**” you murmur, still trying to shake bloody memories from your mind, half-caught in the past. Solas had covered for you… Maker bless him. He no doubt has some idea of where you learned—or thinks he does—now that he knows about your history as a bard. So rather than press, he protects you? Perhaps trusting him with that had been a good decision, even if it had been done on a whim.

Fortunately, the others are content to chatter amongst themselves if they talk at all, giving you time to regain your composure. You distract yourself by giving Asaaranda a bit more broth, then ride in silence. It’s Solas who finally pulls you out of your increasingly morbid thoughts.

“I was wondering… is the desk you have now sufficient for the magnifying stand you purchased in Val Royeaux?”

“Huh… Oh! Hmm… I hadn’t thought about it, to be honest. I just bought the only one they had in stock,” you admit. “I’m sure I can make it work, though.”

“If you need, we can have another desk brought in,” Solas informs you. “It isn’t as though I lack for space.”

“You’re too kind, Solas,” you say, flushing slightly. “Although… a table to the side of the desk, just for the stand, would be extremely useful.”

“Speak with Leliana about it. I’m sure she can find something, to ensure the timely completion of her tome.”

After that, you find yourself chatting quietly with Solas again… not quite as cheerfully as the day before, but still. It helps to keep you in the moment, rather than drifting back to the past the way your mind wants. Whenever you trail off, he assists you with a well-timed question that forces your mind to focus on the here and now.

You’re eager to be back at Skyhold… Despite the fact you know it’s unlikely, you keep expecting
bandits to jump out from the trees. You don’t speak a word of complaint when Katari has you all ride through lunch, despite your sore ass.

It seems like you’re dreaming when you crest a final rise and see Skyhold laid out before you. “We’re home,” you say, breathing a sigh of relief. Finally. It may be a death trap, but it’s your death trap. Better to deal with these nosy bastards than the bandits and red Templars beyond their walls.

You find yourself giddy as you ride across the long stone bridge to Skyhold’s gate. Can it really be? You made it back alive? And Revas and Solas are alive, although Revas is a little worse for the wear. Honestly, everything went better than expected.

Things are bustling when you enter through the gate. The courtyard is full of people… elves, almost every single one, in fact. That catches your notice. They’re certainly not here to greet you. What’s going on? You realize quickly by the state of them… most are shaking, all have ratty, subpar clothing, and they huddle together in a way you recognize, staring at the entering caravan with wide, terrified eyes.

More refugees… You picked and interesting time to show up. Hopefully the Commander is more prepared for this batch then he was the last… but of course, if they’re elves…

“Solas, hold up, please,” you say with a frown.

“We need to-”

You slide off of Ashi’lana, frowning, barely listening to Solas’ protests. “Where are the… damnit, not again. No guards, no healers, no Commander. Ugh.” You straighten yourself momentarily, just long enough to put on a serious face. Then you grab a woman who is attempting to walk by quickly, paying the elves no mind.

“Don’t think I don’t see you! I know you, you work in the healing tent! Get me some healers!” you order. She stiffens.

“I don’t take orders from-”

“I promise, you do,” you say darkly. “Healers. Now.” You release her arm with a bit of a shove, maintaining eye contact until she breaks it, scurrying off towards the tent. You glance around and start to move, raising your voice. “Where is the Commander?” you shout at the same time as you hear a raised voice begin to start a similar query.

“Get me-” “Where is-” a low, loud voice says, right as you thud into something firm. You hadn’t been watching where you were going, instead looking around for a guard you could intimidate into doing your bidding. You’d been walking fast, and whatever you run into is hard. You lose your footing and thud backwards onto the dirt, landing on your saddlesore ass.

“Fenedhis,” you swear, glaring up at whomever you had run into. You’re not expecting what you see.

“Oh, I’m sorry, miss. I didn’t see you,” the man says, offering you a hand. A hand marked with white tattoos, the power from which you can feel through your skin. Lyrium.

An elf with white hair, marked with tattoos made of pure lyrium. This could… This could only be…

“Miss?”

There can be no mistaking it. This is Fenris.
**Fenris**

Chapter Notes

We see the first winner of the OC contest in this chapter: Franchesca’s "Nell." We might see more of her in the future, as well.

**Elven Guide**

ma’asha = my woman

It’s too much for you to take in all at once; you wind up sitting there on the ground just blankly staring upward for longer than is reasonable.

“Miss?”

Fenris. *Holy fucking nug-humping shit, it’s really Fenris?* You force yourself to snap out of it, and—unable to resist—take his hand to help you rise. That turns out to be a serious mistake. There’s lyrium inscribed on the inside of his palm. At the feel of it through your skin, your aura lurches towards it with the hunger of a hundred starving wolves. You almost physically jolt from the sudden surge. You release his hand quickly, as if it were on fire, barely resisting the urge to rub the violent tingling out your skin.

“I apologize,” he says. “Do you work here? I need help for these—”

“I should have known you’d get here before me somehow, ‘just’ Emma.” Your spine straightens like you’d had an iron rod shoved up it. You recognize the Commander’s voice instantly, and there’s no hiding the instant fear reaction before you compose yourself and turn. “You have a nose like a bloodhound for elven refugees.”

“I noticed them as my group was arriving, Commander,” you say politely. “I just got here.”

The Commander is already turning to Fenris, who’s walking towards him. “I apologize. We just got news that you were coming.” the Commander says, glaring angrily towards Varric. You didn’t spot the dwarf at first; he’s standing to his right and a bit back, looking somewhat sheepish. But then his eyes flicker between you and Fenris, and he gets a grin on his face that you do not like.

“We’re really not prepared…” Cullen is saying to Fenris, while Fenris argues the need for immediate medical attention and shelter. You shake your head firmly at Varric. Whatever he’s planning, it’s got to be bad news for you.

“You know,” he interjects into the two men’s conversation-bordering-on-argument. “We can argue all day about whose fault this is…”

“Yours,” the Commander says irritably. “It’s your fault.”

“But we have a solution right here!” Varric says, gesturing grandly at you.

“Varric, no,” you begin, but he keeps talking.

“Emma already showed she’s great at taking care of refugees when no one else can! She knows how
to get things done. Let her and Fenris handle this, while you and the Inquisitor go deal with, uh…
Well, you know.”

“Varric, I swear to-” you begin, but the Commander is looking at you considerately.

“Emma, could you?” he asks. “I know you’ve just arrived back, but I would feel more comfortable if
I knew this was in capable hands.”

You flush light pink. ...Capable hands? Does the Commander actually think that highly of you? You
glance over at the elves, who are scared and shaking. You were going to help anyway. You suppose
there’s no helping it. “Of course, Commander. I’ll do my best.”

“Wait,” Fenris says, frowning slightly. “Emma?”

You swallow, hard. There’s no way…

Fenris turns to Varric. “Varric, is this the woman you wrote about?” Varric nods, and Fenris turns
back to you. “I apologize; I didn’t recognize you. I had hoped to meet you at some point, but I didn’t
expect it to happen so soon.”

“O-o-of course you didn’t recognize me,” you mutter, staring down towards the ground. You can’t
make eye contact. “H-how w-would you have kn-known what I looked like?” you add with a
nervous laugh.

“A good point,” he says with a faint smile. It feels like your bones are melting into a puddle. Varric
isn’t helping, with that shit-eating grin of his.

“Well!” the dwarf--who you’re going to kill--says cheerfully. “Seems like the two of you have this
taken care of.”

“I’ll let my guards know not to give you a hard time with this, Emma,” the Commander says
seriously. “Thank you.” And then he turns and leaves, Varric trailing along behind him… Although
you note Varric turns long enough to give you a wink and a thumbs up. You’re going to kill him.

And now it’s just you and Fenris and a bunch of refugees.

“Varric didn’t mention you were compassionate as well. Although I suppose I should have expected
it. Come. Let’s get these men and women to safety.”

Your mind is in pieces. You decide to simply focus on the task at hand and not the way your knees
are weak and your heart is pounding. Thankfully, the lady you accosted has sent a few healers your
way. You grab them as soon as they arrive. “F...Fenris,” you say, choking on his name as if in
disbelief. “How many wounded do we have?”

“A few,” he says, and begins sorting them out to go with the healers. “Do you have a place where
we can set them up?”

“I have a place we can put them temporarily,” you say with a frown. “We’ll need to find something
more long term, but it’ll work better than leaving them standing in the courtyard.”

You glance around, but Solas and the rest of your caravan are long gone. Maker damnit, you could
have really used his help with this… and you would have liked to ask permission before taking
advantage of his hospitality once again. But that doesn’t stop you from leading the refugees up the
steps and into Solas’ rotunda.
“Sit on the couch, or the floor, not at the desks. Don’t touch anything,” you instruct them nervously.

“An odd place,” Fenris comments, looking around at the murals on the walls. “Is it yours?”

You snort. “Not a damn thing here is ‘mine.’ I just work here.” You shift the bag on your back nervously. You would like very much to dump these books somewhere safe before running around bullying half of Skyhold. But you doubt you’ll get the chance. “Alright, easiest thing first, let me go down to the kitchen and get them some food,” you say with a sigh. “Then I’ll need to try and get an audience with Lady Montiliyet to see what beds we have open.” You run a tired hand through your hair. “Why they thought me capable of this, I’ll never know.”

“You seem capable. And Varric mentioned you had done it before?”

You laugh, a short, harsh sound. You feel like you must be dreaming; everything’s happening so fast that you’re having trouble focusing on any one thing for long. “With a group of two dozen elven orphans, not… Say, who are these people, anyway?” you ask with a frown. “Elven refugees, obviously, but--”

“Ex-slaves,” he says shortly.

Oh.

Well, that makes sense.

You know your expression has twisted into something angry, but you can’t help it. Ex-slaves… That reminds you, you should be talking to Belassan and dealing with Sataareth not… this mess. But it can’t be helped. It needs to be done. You let out a long sigh.

“Okay, let’s… I’m going to find Celia. You go to Lady Montiliyet’s office. Out into the hall, second door on the left. There’s going to be several clerks, and they’re going to try and make you leave. Don’t. Just stand there and look intimidating; I’ll meet you there, and by then, someone will have let her know there’s a scary elf refusing to leave.”

Fenris laughs. “That, I can do.”

The kitchen workers are glad to see you back. Even Gaston, in his grumpy way. You think that’s why they don’t give you a hard time when you ask for so much food to be delivered to the rotunda. Either that, or word that you have the Commander’s official sanction on this spread very fast. It doesn’t really matter; what matters is that the newly freed slaves will have food.

You also have the chance to pull Celia to the side. She’s probably the most happy to see you, and you could hazard a guess why.

“How was Val Royeaux?” she asks cheerfully. “Lots of time alone with your Solas?”

“Not so much that I don’t still need you to deliver his breakfast,” you say wryly.

“I do wonder what you’ve got in your mornings that are more important…”

“Don’t forget one of these silvers is for discretion,” you say sourly as you slip the coins into her hand. “And a distinct lack of curiosity.”

“Of course,” she says, though you catch the little smirk at the corner of her lips. As if you could pay
her not to be curious. No more than someone could pay you for that. You wouldn’t like her so much, otherwise.

With dinner set up for your people, it’s time to liaison with Lady Montiliyet. Not exactly the way you’d hoped to first meet her coming back from Val Royeaux, since you’re certain both she and Leliana will have plenty of questions for you. Possibly the Commander, as well, although that thought makes you shudder. Hopefully the Inquisitor will be content to let his advisors handle this and won’t want to speak with you at all. There’s only so much attention from Templars you can be expected to tolerate.

Fenris is doing exactly what you’d asked him to, amusingly enough. That amusement lays in how he’s doing it, however. He’s leaning up against the doorway to Lady Montiliyet’s office, feet in one corner and shoulders against the frame, essentially creating a blockage. He’s speaking rather boredly with several flustered messengers. The casual nature of his leaning somehow serves to make him more intimidating, not less, particularly in that tight black armor of his. You wouldn’t want to be the one to try and move him.

“I’m sorry, but she’s very busy with--” one man is saying when you walk over.

“What could be more important than tending to refugees?” Fenris interrupts.

“I, well…” the man stammers as you walk up next to Fenris. You have to stand closer than you’re comfortable with for effect—your aura lurches towards the lyrium-skinned man uncomfortably. You’re really going to have to figure out a way to make it stop doing that. It’s beginning to give you motion sickness.

“I confess, I’m curious as well. I hope it’s nothing to do with my shipment,” you say, your professional posture a stark contrast with Fenris’.

“Your… Oh. Well, yes, actually, but--”

“But it can be dealt with at a later time,” comes the soft, Antivan-accented voice of Lady Josephine Montiliyet. “I apologize.” Her eyes land on you with a twinkle. “Miss Emma, I’m unsurprised to see you’ve once again volunteered to assist with those who need you the most. Please, both of you, come in.”

Fenris straightens and follows Lady Montiliyet into her office. His worn, black leather armor clashes so with her finest blue and gold silks; it’s almost humorous. You suspect that after so long on the road, you don’t look much more fitting.

“Before we get down to arrangements for the refugees, Miss Emma, I would like to thank you for your work in Val Royeaux. If you could stop by later this evening, I would appreciate the chance to speak with you about it in more detail.”

“Of course, my lady,” you say politely, with a slight bow.

She sits at her desk, dips a quill into ink gently, and focuses her eyes on the two of you. “Now. What do the refugees need?”

You’re amazed at how much easier assisting a large group of elves in need is when you have a man with a greatsword with you. Lady Montiliyet can’t offer you much for right now. You manage to find quarters for the elves to sleep, though they’ll be cramped. Dinner is taken care of, but the elves can go to the mess for meals in the future. As opposed to the large group of refugees Skyhold had
received before, this group is small enough not to tax the kitchens. Once their immediate needs are taken care of, of course, the question remains of what to do with them.

“You’ve got them this far,” you comment to Fenris as you pour over a listing of empty rooms Lady Montilyyet had given you. You scribble names onto it and assign the elves as best you can. “Are you planning on going further with them? I’ll admit, I don’t know the protocol when one is freeing slaves.”

“I suspect most will opt to stay here, if work is made available to them,” Fenris replies. “They’ve come a long way.”

“Where are they from?” you wonder. “Nearby?”

“Somewhat. Tevinter slavers are preying on the chaos the southern wars are creating. They often kidnap refugees. This group, however, is a group of escaped slaves from Tevinter. I… heard about their plight from a friend.”

“Why bring them here? Surely there was somewhere closer…”

“I was headed in this direction. And the Inquisition is one of the few places where a group of ex-slaves might find peace and safety.”

“Fair enough.” Escaped slaves from Tevinter… a group you and Fenris have a lot in common with, then. “And… Nell,” you say, eyeing your list of names. “Said she was good with children… Put her in the third room on the left with… Aelia, Elpis, and Alexis. The rest can go into the large room at the end of the hall.” You finish your frantic name scribbling and glance up. The hallway is full of elves being sorted into various rooms. There aren’t many children, thank the Maker, but there are some. Aelia in particular pulls on your heartstrings. She can’t be more than eight.

After they’ve all been settled, you let out a sigh of relief. It’s late for dinner, but perhaps you’ll actually be able to grab some. You and Fenris have been scrambling all over Skyhold for hours now, and you hadn’t done any of the things you’d wanted to do upon arriving at Skyhold. You lean back against the wall, feeling distinctly like you’re adrift in the ocean, barely keeping your head above water. And your brain is on fire with observations—you can’t turn it off. The elves don’t gather around Fenris, they gather around an elven woman with hair so blonde it’s nearly white. The woman… Nell. She has to be the one behind their escape. Fenris, you suspect, is only responsible for getting them this last leg of their journey.

Not that any of that is likely important. You sincerely doubt you need to be worried about lies and treachery from a group of ex-slaves. Still, neither Nell nor Fenris are being particularly forthcoming on where all these slaves came from, which sets your hackles to raising. Tevinter is notorious for using “ex-slaves” to spy, because of the sympathy given to them in the south. Of course, Leliana knows this. She’ll be watching them. You needn’t bother.

“I feel ‘thank you’ is slightly insufficient,” Fenris says, snapping you out of your racing thoughts. “I’m told there’s a tavern here. Perhaps I can buy you a drink?”

Fenris wants to buy you a drink.

You’d managed to keep yourself distracted with work for the refugees, but now you’re left with nothing left to think about other than the fact this is Fenris and he’s right there and he wants to buy you a drink. You hope you can blame your flush on the fact you’ve been running around all afternoon.

“Lead the way,” he says, gesturing you forward. Maker, you want to hold his hand again, lyrium be damned. And that armor over his fingers… It’s sharp. Is that for that thing Varric said he could do? Plunge his hand clean through someone’s chest? You’d like to see that. You’re probably not going to get a chance—unless he finds out you’re a mage, of course, and then you’re quite certain you’ll see it first hand.

That thought sobers you up somewhat, and you manage to quash the butterflies in your stomach down. You lead Fenris out into the courtyard of Skyhold. There’s a frigid chill in the air. It will be Kingsway tomorrow, come to think of it. It’s only going to get colder. Ugh. Thank the Maker you purchased blankets. Your room has no fireplace and a window. It’s going to be a long, miserable winter.

“I find it interesting that your fortification has a tavern,” Fenris comments.

“You and me both. I’ll be honest with you, I’m not really sure why. To give the soldiers something to do, I imagine.” You’re trying to keep the nervousness out of your voice, but you doubt you’re succeeding. Every time you look at him, you get overcome with a rush of what the fuck, it’s FENRIS that makes you dizzy. This can’t be happening! “I… I understand this probably sounds weird, but I can’t believe I’m actually meeting you,” you say with a nervous laugh as the two of you enter the tavern. It seems quiet there without the Chargers.

“Oh?” says Fenris, sounding a bit confused. He gets two drinks from the bartender, who gives you a long, possibly judging look. “I hope Varric didn’t build me up to be something grand; you’re bound to be disappointed.”

You chuckle nervously, fingers twisting together in front of you. “Well, you know,” you say as Fenris selects a noticeably secluded table for the two of you to sit. “You spend so long reading about someone, it can be hard to remember they’re real and not legend.”

Fenris had been taking a drink. Perhaps your timing was poor, because he chokes on it. You stare, alarmed, as he coughs, thudding himself on the chest with a gauntleted fist. “Read? Oh, Maker. You’ve read Varric’s book.”

“Did he, uh… not mention that?” you say, eyes wide. What a thing to leave out, Varric!

“He neglected to,” Fenris says sourly. “That little… I can assure you, I don’t have much in common with the ‘Fenris’ he wrote about.”

“No?” you say, a little disappointed, although not altogether surprised. “His description wasn’t very far off, if you don’t mind me saying,” you say, managing to put a bit of a teasing note in your voice, against all odds.

“The description?” Fenris says with a snort. “I don’t know if I should be flattered or insulted, given how I’m described in that wretched book.”

“Well, I’ve yet to see you brood,” you admit. “But other than that…” You weren’t going to repeat the parts you were privately agreeing with out loud, that was for sure. But a ‘lithe, brooding figure, white hair stark against black leather armor’ wasn’t exactly inaccurate. “Did he at least get the facts right?”

“Oh, most of them,” Fenris says sourly. “Although now I’m beginning to question his description of
you, given the accuracy with which he described me.”

“At least you got to read what he wrote about you!” you say with a laugh. Fenris is drinking his drink faster than you are… Let him. You don’t need to be plastered around Fenris. “I just got drunk, rambled my history at him, and prayed.”

“Really?” Fenris says with a snort. “Why did you do that?”

You pause, a flush rising to your cheeks. “He, uh… didn’t say? It was…” You clear your throat awkwardly. “Never mind.”

Fenris raises an eyebrow. The motion reminds you starkly of Solas and sends a pleasant chill through, followed by a rush of warmth. Maker. You cover for yourself by downing some of your ale.

“So what does bring you to Skyhold?” you say, grasping desperately for a topic that isn’t ‘so, hey, TEVINTER amirite?’. “You said you were heading this direction.”

“Ah… yes. I meant to meet a friend here,” he says. “I ran into the runaways on the trip and things got a bit… muddled. It took us longer to get here than it might have, otherwise. But, I’m--”

Just then, the bar door slams open loudly. You jolt in your seat and twist, expecting to see the Iron Bull and the Chargers, just returned from their job. Instead, you see a man you don’t recognize, with shaggy black hair and a trimmed beard. Behind him is Varric, who looks somewhere between exasperated and frantic. Not a look you’re used to seeing on him.

“What part of low profile--”

“Doesn’t get any lower than a tavern, Varric,” the man says cheerfully… and loudly. “Besides, I’m-- Oh! Fenris!” As the man saunters over and places his hands on the table, things begin slowly clicking into place. You stare at the man with wide, disbelieving eyes. “Who’s your lady friend? Aren’t you going to introduce us?”

“I probably shouldn’t, considering,” Fenris says with dry irritability. “Aren’t you supposed to be off hiding?”

“There’s no use in hiding. I’m going to be here for a few days at least; I’m not going to spend it cowering in a corner. Not when there are such pretty women here,” he adds, obviously directing the comment at you, although you have no idea why. There are probably prettier women within ten yards of you at any given time. “If Fenris is going to insist on being rude, would you give me your name, ma’asha?”

His use of Elven makes you recoil slightly, although you fight to hide the disgust on your face. A shem speaking the language. You’d sooner rip his fucking tongue out.

“If Merrill heard you, she’d cry,” Varric comments sourly, giving you an apologetic look.

“Merrill’s not here,” the man says, eyes twinkling mischievously. You feel a sick twisting in your stomach. You glance desperately over at Fenris, praying for him to interject, for him or Varric to tell you this isn’t exactly who you think it is. “Well, it’s good that Fenris has found a ‘friend’. Keep in mind though, love, three makes pleasant company.” He gives you a fond wink and then saunters off towards the bar. You turn to Varric.

“Varric. Tell me I didn’t just get propositioned for a threesome by the Champion of Kirkwall.”
“I wish I could, Stutter,” Varric says apologetically. “He’s uh… He’s got a thing for…”

“He’s an elf fetishist,” Fenris says sourly. “No doubt the length of your ears enticed him.”

You gag into your mouth a little. “You uh… Left that part out of your book, Varric.”

“It didn’t seem relevant,” he says dryly.

“Oh, but you need a paragraph dedicated to my musculature?” Fenris asks irritably.

“To be fair, he spent twice as much time on Isabela,” you interject.

“Isabela insisted,” Fenris replies dryly. You can’t help but laugh, which lightens the mood somewhat.

“You two kids have fun,” Varric says smugly. “I gotta go babysit.” He turns and trots after Hawke; you shake your head slowly.

“You two kids have fun,” Varric says smugly. “I gotta go babysit.” He turns and trots after Hawke; you shake your head slowly.

“Is that the ‘friend’ you were talking about? What’s he doing here?” you ask insistently, your head spinning with questions now that you’re done being revolted.

“He’s meeting with the Inquisitor,” Fenris replies. “More than that, I cannot say.”

You turn to eye Hawke’s back; he’s hitting on the barmaid, looks like. At least you don’t have to worry about him being serious in his expressed desires. As if he can feel your gaze on his back, however, he glances back over his shoulder. When his eyes meet yours, he grins and gives you a wink. You quickly turn your eyes back to your mug. That’s the man who defeated the Arishok in single combat?

“He’s… unexpectedly slimy,” you mutter, and Fenris surprises you by laughing, a low, hearty chuckle that makes your chest thrum.

“Most are enamored by his legend alone,” he says when his laughter dies down.

You scowl. His legend? Admittedly, yes, you’re impressed by the stories you’ve heard about him, but among those stories is the brutal butchering of many an innocent mage. Although… you suppose Fenris wouldn’t have much problem with that. Your mood sours a little further. Surrounded by the very stars from heaven, and every single one of them would probably love to run you through. Hawke, apparently, in more ways than one.

You take a long drink, then thump the empty mug down on the table, which is enough to have the barmaid wandering towards you to refill it.

“That was fast,” Fenris comments. Before you can reply, the barmaid rolls her eyes.

“If I leave it empty, she might throw it at the Champion.”

You glare at the woman, but she just turns cheekily and wanders off.

“It seems as though you’re full of interesting stories,” Fenris says. You snort.

“Me? You’re in a book!”

“Therefore, you already know all about it. I’m at a disadvantage.” Fenris leans onto the table, resting his chin on the back of his hands. You can’t help but stare--Maker, he’s gorgeous. Those eyes… wide and green, like most elves. Like yours, a bit, although his are much more hazel, whereas yours
have hints of--oh Maker you are staring into his eyes stop stop stop stop.

“I, uh… Well I haven’t done anything nearly as interesting…” you flounder, staring down at your mug again.

“We both know that isn’t true,” he says with a chuckle. “Unless Varric was making up stories again.”

You flush slightly. “Well, admittedly, I didn’t read what he wrote, but it was probably true. I don’t think he’d need to embellish.”

“You were much younger than I when you escaped. It’s very impressive,” he says seriously. “To get of Seheron on your own, and then avoid capture…”

“Well I didn’t have anyone chasing me… probably. Nor did I have any way of being magically tracked,” you point out. “I had quite the advantage, compared to you.”

“Where did you go first?” Fenris asks curiously.

“Antiva. I got passage on a ‘merchant’ ship coming from Seheron. I spent a year or two there, then traveled east into Rivain. What about you?”

“I took a similar route, though I went south into the Free Marches,” Fenris replies.

“And to Kirkwall,” you say with a grin. “To think, if I’d gone south rather than east, I could have been caught up in that mess. I had considered Kirkwall, after escaping, but its history with Tevinter slavery made me think twice.” Plus, by that point, word was spreading of Meredith’s paranoia. You had decided that Rivain was much safer for a mage newly come into their powers.

“I wasn’t intending to stay there for as long as I did,” Fenris admits. “Hawke has a way of getting you to do things that you wouldn’t have otherwise.”

You snort into your mug. “Considering the only thing he wants me to do is indulge his desire to be the filling in an elf sandwich, I really hope that’s not true.” You see a half-smile flicker across Fenris’ face. You want to see it again, immediately. “I have to admit, I’m feeling a little overwhelmed.”

“I can imagine,” Fenris says with a thoughtful nod. “You had just arrived back from a journey on behest of the Inquisition, had you not? Then you get immediately swept up in the care of a group of refugees…”

“That’s… not quite what I meant,” you say with a laugh. “Although you’re not wrong. I meant, um… Well, when I first came here and met Varric, I couldn’t believe it. Now I’m meeting you. I… When I first read about you, I couldn’t believe it. Someone like me.” You chuckle. “Maybe it’s not so rare, finding other slaves escaped from their Magister masters. You seem to have found an entire group. But to me it was… I have had too much to drink already,” you decide abruptly, flushing. “I’m rambling.”

“It’s fine,” Fenris says, although it does nothing for your reddening cheeks. “I was… pleased to hear of the similarity in our stories as well. It’s a sort of… camaraderie?”

“Yes! I mean, uh… Yes,” you say at a much more reasonable volume. “I met ex-slaves in Antiva, but most were escaped from the Crows, or something similar. Antiva was… rife with slaves, as I’m sure you know. If there were other escapees from Tevinter there, we all kept it to ourselves.”

Fenris nods. “Yes… I moved through Antiva quickly. It’s not a safe place for those running from
Tevinter.”

“And you went to Kirkwall?” you say with a laugh.

He chuckles slightly. “As I said, it was not my intention to stay.”

The more drink you imbibe, the easier it’s becoming to converse with Fenris. But you keep getting distracted by the sight--and sensation--of the lyrium in his skin. Maker, do you want to touch him again? How do regular mages handle themselves around him? Perhaps they simply have more self-control than you. Still, you keep yourself from drinking too much--you feel that Fenris is the last person you need to be testing your control around.

Conversation inevitably turns to the ex-slaves, which seems like a safe topic. Moreso than Hawke or your own shared histories, in any case.

“I wonder if the Inquisition can find work for them?” you’re saying. “That’s what they seem to do with most small refugee groups… Pick out the ones who can help and find somewhere safe for the rest to go.”

“There aren’t many ‘safe’ places for slaves on the run from Tevinter,” Fenris says darkly. Varric had been right. He has a tendency to brood. Varric had also been right that it was incredibly attractive.

“And Skyhold is one of the few,” you agree. “I’ll speak to Lady Montiliyet about it when… I… when… fuck.”

Fenris looks at you curiously as horror dawns on your face.

“I was supposed to meet with her! Ir abe- Er, my apologies, Fenris. I shouldn’t keep her waiting any more than I already have,” you say, standing up quickly.

“Of course. If you’ll still be assisting with the refugees, I’m sure we’ll be seeing more of each other,” he says, and you fight heat rising in your cheeks--and other places. Yeah, you’d like to see a lot more of--wow you’d drunk more than you thought.

You apologize a few more times for good measure, and then race haphazardly across the courtyard and towards the Great Hall. You’re not extremely drunk, but you are clearly intoxicated. You doubt it will escape Lady Montiliyet’s notice, but you try to sober yourself as much as possible before entering her office.

“Ah, Miss Emma, there you are!” she says cheerfully, as you hadn’t shown up half an hour late and visibly drunk. She sets down the thing she’d been writing, sets her quill into a holder. Maker, she has nice things--you’re a bit envious, really. “We’re so glad you could make it.”

We?

And that’s when you notice that the Nightingale is in the room. And that it’s conspicuously lacking in guards and messengers, particularly as it isn’t even that late yet.

You sober remarkably fast.
For those of you who don't follow me on Tumblr: thanks to the success of my Patreon, I'll now be adhering to an update schedule. So from now on, Keeping Secrets will update every week on Sunday. If there’s an extra chapter in a given week, expect to see it on Thursday.

“Please, have a seat,” Leliana’s softly accented voice says. You swallow, hard, and do so, legs now trembling more from nerves than alcohol. “It seems you had a much more eventful trip than we anticipated.”

“I’m… sorry for your loss,” you say, directing this towards Lady Montiliyet. “It… just happened so fast…”

“Baptiste’s death was a tragic waste,” Lady Montiliyet says mournfully. But she quickly straightens herself. “But neither your doing nor what we are here to discuss. The Inquisition is pleased you were able to salvage the mission. If you have time, at some point I would love to have a written report on everything that happened, but for now…”

“If you could walk us through what happened, in brief. An oral report,” Leliana says.

“Of course.”

And you do… a tastefully edited version, of course. You pick up at Baptiste’s untimely death and go from there, glossing over how you bluffed your way into the hotel and university as chiefly bluster and the name of the Inquisition.

“You identified yourself as an ambassador?” Leliana says, fortunately sounding more amused than angry.

“Ah… Yes, sorry,” you say with a bit of a wince. “It was the first thing that came to mind.”


“It must have worked marvelously,” Lady Montiliyet says, picking up a sheaf of paper. “You obtained every single tome that was asked for—and in some cases, multiple versions.”

“A lot of the requests were… vague. Mine included,” you explain. “One of them just read ‘whatever you can find me on ancient dwarven records of lyrium madness.’ I had to extrapolate.”

“You did a marvelous job, that is not in question,” Lady Montiliyet says. “I was wondering more about how you managed to obtain some of these more… unconventional tomes.”

“Ah, well…” you say, purposefully rubbing your nose sheepishly. “I believe I have to apologize for that as well. There seems to have been a bit of a misunderstanding. Whatever Garrick and the others were there to do… speak to the Chantry on the University’s behalf? Garrick apparently told the Chancellor to send his gratitude to the ambassador. I have no doubt he meant you, my Lady, but the Chancellor assumed he meant me.”
You pause to take stock of their expressions. Lady Montiliyet looks surprised. Leliana is somewhat more difficult to read. You definitely see amusement: a good sign. But there’s something you don’t like glinting in her eyes. You need to tread very carefully.

“You took credit?” Lady Montiliyet says, shock evident in her voice.

“I apologize, my Lady, but yes. I did. As ‘thanks,’ and in order to expedite our departure, the Chancellor gave me access to all of their archives. Hence the rarer tomes.”

“Not all of these tomes could be found in the University’s archives,” interjects Leliana.

“Ah… no, admittedly. Baptiste had in his affects a list of bookstores in Val Royeaux. And, well… I lived in Val Royeaux as a linguist and bookbinder for years. I had my own contacts.”

“And you put them to use for the Inquisition.”

“Of course, serah.”

Leliana looks thoughtful. You don’t like it. “Tell me, how many of these contacts are with the elven underground in Val Royeaux?”

You hesitate only briefly. “None, directly. Indirectly, however… Well, my contact’s contacts aren’t really my responsibility, or my business.”

“What about Liberté Noir? Is he a contact?”

You blink, the confusion on your face genuine. You had expected questions about Banal’ras, but… Noir? That pompous ass? Why would they think…?

“Certainly not.”

“And yet you so happen to appear with a Qunari ‘servant’ freed from a Baron he made a fool of?” Leliana asks sharply.

Oh… Oh! Banal’ras, you wily asshole! He had certainly earned that extra tome. Noir was a cocky asshole, and him going after the Baron on his own was much more likely than Banal’ras doing the same. You hadn’t asked Banal’ras to cover up his involvement, or yours. This was a bonus, and a very helpful one. Perhaps you weren’t the only one who had remembered your anniversary.

“I discovered the Qunari during an auction I was attending with Solas,” you say calmly, crossing your legs as you alter your planned lies about Banal’ras to suit Noir instead. “I passed the information on through my contacts. I didn’t know it had reached the ears of any one of import.”

“How did the Qunari come to be with you, then?”

“I… may have mentioned there was to be a Tal-Vashoth mercenary leaving in a party with me, and that if someone was to want to make an example of the Baron, I could provide a way to smuggle his ‘pet’ out of the city. I knew someone had delivered, not who.”

“Do you know nothing of Liberté Noir, then?”

“Only what I’ve heard. I didn’t think anyone so well known would involve themselves, but I suppose it makes sense. Noir is well-known for striking down anyone shown to have Tevinter sympathies, although I didn’t realize just ‘enslaving a Qunari’ counted. I suppose I can see how it would.”
“As it turns out, the Baron’s sympathies with Tevinter were a bit more… direct.”

“Oh?” you say, your feigned surprise perfectly genuine.

“Yes. He had been in contact with known Venatori agents, in fact.”

“Maker! Well, I suppose what they say about lying with dogs is correct, then. I’m glad the Baron was exposed, and I’m glad I could help the enslaved Qunari, in the process.”

“He’s signed on with the Inquisition, as it so happens,” Leliana says.

“He mentioned he might,” you say with a nod. “I encouraged it. Better than being another Tal-Vashoth bandit.”

Leliana is quiet for a moment.

“Well!” Lady Montiliyet interjects. “It seems you had a much more adventurous time in Val Royeaux than we had anticipated.”

“Things went sideways quickly after we lost Baptiste,” you admit sadly. “I could only do what I felt was best.”

“You did well,” Leliana says suddenly. “You’re a fast thinker, and you have useful contacts in Val Royeaux.”

“Leliana does love it when she’s right,” Lady Montiliyet says with a soft chuckle.

Leliana looks you up and down, then seems to decide something, nodding softly to herself. “As of tomorrow, you are on my payroll, not the library’s,” she announces.

You let your jaw gape slightly in shock. “I… Pardon?”

“I can make better use of you as an agent than I can as a librarian. You will begin training with my people immediately, and I’ll want a more thorough listing of your contacts in the future. However, your first focus must still be on the tome. These two weeks have put it behind schedule, through no fault of yours. When can you have it completed?”

“I, uh… I… Perhaps… two… three weeks, if I’m allowed full focus?” you say weakly. “Pardon me, but what did you mean ‘training with your people’?”

“You’ve been training with the Iron Bull. That’s good,” Leliana says. “But he’s still out on his own job at the moment. Until he returns, your mornings will be taken by one of my own. You’ve already met her, in fact… Argent. She will do to evaluate you, until I find a more permanent arrangement.”

“Is that… really necessary? I’m a linguist! I don’t need Argent’s, uh… particular skill set.”

“All of my people know how to defend themselves. It’s an occupational hazard, and you’re no use if you wind up dead in a bandit attack,” she says firmly. You wince; so does Lady Montiliyet. “Oh… Sorry, Josie.”

“No, you’re right,” Lady Montiliyet says with a sigh. “When you get a chance, Miss Emma, do write up a report on your trip. We can discuss it in depth at a later time. I’m sure Leliana would be interested in that, as well.”

“Of course, my Lady,”
By the time you get out of that room, you feel like heading right back to the tavern and getting drunk, properly this time. But something better finds you before you can get all the way there. You jump when he first appears, but recognize his outline almost instantly, your momentary fear swept away in the rush of happiness.

“Cole!” you exclaim, immediately wrapping him in a hug. He’s the only person you can be so comfortable with. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“You’ve been very busy,” he says. “And you were someone else for a while. Dirth’len, Dirth’len, she has you repeat it until even you believe it’s true. But if you’re not Dirth’len, who are you?”

“I’m Emma,” you say pulling back from him.

“No, you’re not. It doesn’t fit.”

“Neither does your hat, but you don’t hear me going on about it.”

“What if you give it away, like you did the others?” he says with a frown. “You gave her your name, a little love to light her life. A hand-me-down, like worn clothing too tight. You outgrew her. Will you outgrow Emma?”

“I didn’t need them anymore,” you say with an uncomfortable shrug. “Come on, Cole. Let’s climb up on the roof. I need a distraction.”

And Cole is a beautiful distraction. Even when he pesters you about things you don’t want to be pestered about, which he does frequently.

“You and Solas are better now. You’re more like him. I wonder if he’s more like you?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t already gone to see him, Cole.”

“He’s very busy. There are a lot of books, and Belassan was upset.”

You groan. “Ooooh, he’s going to be so mad… I left him to do all the work while I went gallivanting off with Fenris.”

“You were working too. He knows that,” Cole comforts, and you do feel relieved to hear it. “You haven’t told Solas yet. Are you going to tell Fenris?”

“What? No! Maker, no!” you exclaim, horrified at the very thought.

“That’s good,” Cole says, a hint of sadness in his voice. “You like him, but he’s not safe. It would be bad.”

“Yeah, I… I know, Cole,” you say with a sigh. “I get the chills just thinking about it.”

“That’s not the way you want him to run you through. But I don’t really understand.”

You can’t help laughing. “That’s fine, Cole. You don’t necessarily need to understand that. So, what have you been up to while I was gone?”

“I was helping.”

“You’re always helping, Cole. Who’d you help?”

“There was a girl who missed her sister…”
Cole regails you with a few stories of how he helped, ones he feels he can share, you suppose. It’s relaxing just to hear him talk, to be alone and comfortable for a few hours. It would have been nice to have him with you in Val Royeaux, but you suppose you and Solas managed well enough on your own. Still, it’s… nice to be back with him. You lay back down on the roof, staring up at the star-filled sky—so cold, but so beautiful. You still have the presence of mind to notice when you feel the Fade pulling at the corners of your mind, however.

“Cole, stop it.”

“But-”

“Stop,” you say, sitting up. “Are you planning on smuggling me out of Skyhold so that I can drain my aura when it gets fat from connecting with the Fade? Are you going to be here if I have nightmares again? You can’t babysit me, and this is dangerous.”

“But you need sleep. Your mind is failing, fraying, fracturing…”

“I’m damned if I do, damned if I don’t,” you admit with a sigh. “But I know how to deal with the effects of insomnia better than I know how to deal with too much mana. The last time, I nearly hurt Bull.”

“You’ll come apart!” Cole insists.

“I’ll make sure to change something before I do, Cole. But I need to figure out what. I’ve had enough of you and Solas traipsing around in my head without asking first.”

Cole is quiet, and then his eyes light up. “Ohhh!” he exclaims, and you know damn well what memory he just saw.

“Yes, yes,” you say grumpily. “Be smug all you want. The fact of the matter is, we’re at no less of a stalemate than we were before.”

“He wants you to think it was a dream because he believes that would hurt less,” Cole says, striking right to the core of your hurt, as always. “You could tell him. He would be embarrassed, but not angry, I think.”

“If I was going to tell him,” you grumble, “It would have been then and there, so I could slap him in the damn face.”

“But you kissed him,” Cole points out.

“I didn’t think it was him!” you hiss. “I never would have… It doesn’t matter. He’s right; it’s better this way,” you say with a sigh. You’re growing accustomed to the idea that your life here is just going to be an existence filled with incredibly attractive people that you’re not allowed to touch.

“Most of them wouldn’t stop you.”

“I would stop me,” you say sourly. “I can’t trust them.”

“You trust me.”

“I can trust your nature. Mortals are significantly more fickle, and much harder to predict,” you say with a low chuckle. “And you know me, Cole. If you hadn’t been able to tell by looking at me, would I have told you?”
“...No.”

“Exactly.”

You fall silent for a time, not speaking again until you shift, and the weight of the bag at your hips reminds you of something.

“Oh! Cole, I have a present for you.”

“A… present?” Cole says, looking slightly confused.

“I know you understand the concept,” you say, digging through your bag. “As for why... Because you are precious to me. And because I enjoy presents very much. Ah!” You manage to find it amongst the others and pull it out. It’s wrapped in flimsy paper, more to keep it from breaking than anything. Eagerly, you press it into his hands. You have no idea how a spirit will react to a present; honestly, you should have asked Solas first.

Cole unwraps it, delicate fingers suddenly clumsy. He pulls it out; a tiny little chain with a carved nug at the end. The nug is wearing a silly hat. “What… is it?” he asks.

“It’s a charm! You… attach it to things.”

“What does it do?”

“It doesn’t do anything. It’s just cute. You can put it on your belt… or your hat. I wasn’t sure… I don’t know if spirits… do presents? But… I thought, well…”

“Pleasing, precious. Cute, it catches the eye. The hat reminded you of me,” he says, a hint of awe in his voice.

“Exactly,” you say, a bit relieved. It’s so much easier to communicate with Cole, particularly when your words fail you. “Do… do you like it?” But he’s already hooking it onto his belt. “It suits you,” you say with a wide grin. And you find that Cole’s smile nearly matches yours.

You stay up on the roof with Cole longer than you should. You return to your room only to see what’s been delivered there, and finally drop off your bag.

It seems that your personal effects have been dropped off, if nothing else. Most prominent is the bag that holds the remains of your foods--mostly, things you bought in Val Royeaux, like herbs, jelly, and tea--as well as the one that has your new clothing and various other things you purchased. In all honesty, you’re going to have trouble getting it all to fit in your tiny closet of a room, but you’re used to not having much space.

First things first… You close the door and wedge a shoe under it to keep it from being opened. You need time and privacy. You unload the bag you’ve been carrying all day onto your bed. It’s mostly the presents that you’ve purchased, but it’s the six books you’re after. Three of them are magical tomes from your little stint in the White Spire. Three are books with the dullest, most awful titles you could find. The Noun Phrase in Ancient Tevinter: A Functional Analysis of the Order and Articulation of Noun Phrase Constituents in Herodotus. Enough to make anyone’s eyes glaze right over. Carefully, quietly, you unpack the bookbinding tools you purchased--with the Inquisition’s money, even--such innocent, well-meaning tools. And then you set to work.

It’s a shame to get rid of the covers of the magical tomes. But in the end, they’re genuinely
unimportant, if pretty. You carefully remove each one, and then the ones from the three dull, boring books... The three dull, boring books that happen to perfectly fit the magical tomes. Well, nearly perfectly, anyway. It's an easy but time consuming thing to switch the book covers, but in the end, *The Verbal System of the Orlesian of Mother Danielle: An Explanation in the Context of Grammaticalization* actually contains the contents of *Incantations of the Dread Rebels*. Poorly translated, but invaluable, especially considering your repeated failure at getting your hands on an original. The Circle mages knew just enough to dislike the destruction of knowledge, but not enough to understand the value of some of the ancient magic they had hidden in their walls. It's much better suited with you.

With a great deal of distaste, you burn the remaining book covers as well as the contents of the three dull books. The very act feels disgusting to you, but it really is the best option. You let the smoke drift out of your glassless window.

For good measure, the books go with a few of your others at the bottom of your chest. You don't have many at the moment, but you can bring some of the ones you got in Val Royeaux over once you figure out where they've been sent... the library, probably. For right now, it's these three books, two titleless leather tomes, and a handful of similarly dry books. Were it you, you'd go straight for the titleless books. You hope anyone rummaging around in your stuff feels the same. The contents of those two--one Solas' gifted tome on spirits, one a elven journal--are enough to make anyone think they'd found what was meant to be kept secret.

On top of the books you carefully pile your clothing. The chest isn't really that big. You can't fit all of your clothes in it anymore, now that you own more than three outfits again. But you cram as much in around and over the books as you can, and then fold up the rest and put it under your bedstand.

Foodstuffs go under the bed... blankets on the bed, candles on the bedstand. It takes you less time than you would have thought to unpack and organize everything. You still have several hours before your pre-dawn appointment with Argent. You kill it by beginning your examination of *Incantations of the Dread Rebels*. A shame you can't try out any of the techniques within... but they're doubtlessly beyond your skills in any case.

A few hours before dawn, you put the tome back in its spot in your chest, and seal it firmly with your new lock. It's not unpickable. It would be odd if it was. And you can't place your usual ward on it--one of the few you know--out of fear that a Templar or mage would take note of it. Irritating. But you've done the best you can. With a sigh, you throw your cloak over your shoulders and brave the autumn air.

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To your surprise--and relief--the place Argent leads you is indoors. The idea of an indoor practice area seems ludicrous to you, considering how frequently indoor space is needed to house refugees. But you suppose spies need privacy with which to practice their craft.

"I am to assess you," Argent informs you. You really dislike the way she says it.

"There’s little to assess," you lie, and she eyes you.

"Your skill with knives is already known. It’s pointless to attempt to withhold it. This will work better if you are honest."

"I’ll have you know I’m an incredibly honest person."

"Honest people do not wear hidden knives."
“And you’ll note I’m sorely without, today,” you say dryly, removing your cloak and spinning in a circle. “I assumed you’d have something less sharp.”

“You assumed incorrectly. We will be practicing with real knives.”

You stare at her an abject horror. “What?”

“You cannot hurt me, and I will not hurt you,” she says, as if that were an explanation. You scowl. “I’ll try not to slip, then,” you say darkly.

Before the two of you take up knives against each other--real knives, apparently--she starts you sparring. She doesn’t have a warm up stretch the way Bull does, but you had stretched a bit before coming over.

She would start you out with sparring… the hardest part. You have to make mistakes. You’re careful not to move as fast as you can, let more hits collide than you have to, and make mistakes that can be attributed to having “learned” from fighting someone significantly larger and stronger than you or Argent. And unlike Bull, Argent isn’t pulling any punches. Solas will be furious when he sees your split lip and new rainbow of bruises. And this time, you’ve no intention of hiding them from him.

After she’s satisfied with your somewhat underwhelming performance, she switches you to knives. You’re seriously unhappy about the situation. Even at your best, there’s no way you could take her in a knife fight, of that you are certain. And with sharp blades? She’s likely testing your willingness to strike to injure or kill, as well as your nerves in a fight. Well, you’ll give her an appropriate showing in both. She’s seen you kill several men already, one in a rather spectacularly gruesome way… but she’d also heard you screaming in apparent night terrors shortly thereafter.

Fortunately, Argent sticks to her word not to hurt you with the knife. You’ll have a few new holes in your clothing to mend, but she doesn’t once break your skin with the blade. As for you, you hesitate appropriately for someone not used to sparring with real blades, but move more comfortably with the knife than you had with your fists, and show a bit more skill with it. Nothing compared to what you have, but enough.

Then comes the real fun… throwing daggers. She sets up any number of targets. You strike each dead center. She had seen you sever a man’s spine from twenty meters away, while he and you were both moving. There is absolutely no use hiding your skill here. Doing so would only cast doubt on your other performances. Instead, you make a show of cockiness. She throws apples into the air. You plant a knife in each at the peak of its flight.

Overall, you’ve had less pleasant mornings, despite your beating.

“Very well,” she says suddenly, after you land a knife square into a moving target. “We are out of time for today. Tomorrow, we will focus on other, less combat-oriented skills you might possess.”

“Joy,” you grumble, stretching your shoulders uncomfortably. “I’ll try to dress for the occasion.”

Celia will take care of Solas’ breakfast, but it feels a little silly, in a way. You’d eaten breakfast in the inn room with him. You’d gotten a bit used to seeing him shirtless, even. And Bull isn’t here to share breakfast with, so why exactly aren’t you enjoying it with Solas? Oh well…

You’re tempted to just skip breakfast and get straight to work in the rotunda, but… You’re curious to see who might be there. It would be nice to bump into Varric or Thea. You’ve got a bag full of
presents to hand out over the next few days, after all. You had already utterly forgotten to give Leliana and Lady Montiliyet theirs. The mood hadn’t quite seemed right for it, in the end. In fact, you were considering just delivering Leliana’s through a messenger, or tied around the next missive she has you do. You would hardly need to explain the significance of a ribbon from Val Royeaux to her after all, and that would spare you from the immediate aftermath of her reaction.

As soon as you grab your food, you scan the crowd and, to your delight, spot Thea. You head over and sit down across from her cheerfully. She looks surprised to see you, but instead of joy, she regards you with a rather guarded look. Hmm.

“I wasn’t sure I’d be seeing you,” she says, and you tilt your head.

“I’m not that bad about skipping meals,” you say with a smile. “And whatever I may think about their gruel, it’s better than the soldier’s rations I ate on the road. Besides, I picked a few things up in Val Royeaux to help us manage.”

She perks up at this, curiosity overtaking whatever’s bothering her. “You had time to go shopping, then?”

“I made time,” you say lightly. “Like I was going to be in Val Royeaux and not spend every coin I’d made here.”

“I’ve never been,” she confesses. “Is it grand like they say? You used t’ live there, didn’t you?”

“For years,” you say with a nod as you rummage through your bag. “And it is. Full of pompous assholes, but absolutely grand.”

She’s quiet for a moment, then says, “You didn’t come see me ‘fore you left.”

You pause in your searching, looking up. Had you not? No, thinking about it, everyone you said goodbye to had come to you. “I’m sorry, Thea,” you say, frowning. “They dropped it on me the afternoon before I was to leave. In all the rush, I barely had time to pack. But I did think of you while I was there.”

You pull out two jars and set them on the table. “This is for our breakfast,” you say, laying a finger onto a jar of honey. “If we’re careful, I bet we can make it last through most of Kingsway. And this…” You lay a finger on the other jar, which has a beautiful, bright green silk ribbon tied around it. “Is for you. Apple jam, Val Royeaux’s… well, probably not their finest, but it’s up there. The ribbon is yours too; it’s something of a tradition to bring women ribbons from Val Royeaux.”

Thea’s hand is on her mouth, her eyes wide and glittering. Then she picks up the jar of jam and grins broadly at you, and you’re quite certain you’ve been forgiven.

The two of you catch up over breakfast--made infinitely sweeter with a spoonful of honey into each of your bowls of gruel. You have less than you’d like; as it turns out, Sataareth has a sweet tooth. He’d eaten an entire jar of honey by himself on the trip back to Skyhold. You wonder where he is. With Katari? You should take some time to look for him, or perhaps simply inquire with the Commander…

After eating, you tie Thea’s hair back with the bright green ribbon. It’s quite attractive on her; you’re certain she’ll turn a few heads in the library. In any case, she’s happy with it. That’s what matters. The two of you walk back towards the Great Hall together, chatting cheerfully.

“We’ll be sorting through the books for days. Still not enough to completely fill the library, mind, but at least it won’t be so… hollow. Maybe we’ll start getting more visitors. The magical tomes you
acquired alone should have some of the Templars visiting in their off time. Mages too. Maybe we’ll have to break up more fights than just the ones between Dorian and Solas,” she says with a chuckle.

“Maker knows I want to visit more,” you reply. “No idea when I’ll get the chance… Leliana wants me to crack down and finish that tome as quickly as possible because of the delay caused by my trip.”

“Well, don’t skip breakfast, then,” she says with a playful pout. “You’re gettin’ hard to get ahold of! Don’t forget the little ones when you get famous.”

You snort. “You just want to make sure I’m there so you can have some honey.”

“That too,” she agrees with a grin.

You’ve reached the rotunda door. Varric is nowhere to be seen… Probably still babysitting Hawke. You don’t envy him that task. You run over the various things you need to apologize for in your head, as Thea waves farewell and heads for the other set of stairs. Still superstitious, after all this time… You really need to work on Solas’ reputation.

You take a few deep breaths before entering the rotunda. Apologize for being a brat. Apologize for leaving him to take care of the ex-slaves. Apologize for abandoning him with an injured hart and a sick cat. Apologize for--

Your plans fly out of your head when you walk into the rotunda and see the state of it. There are literal towers of books on the ground, each several feet high. Solas is standing by one, looking disgruntled and reading the cover of a tome. The giggle that bursts out of you before you can cover your mouth betrays your presence, and he looks up sharply.

“Ir abelas, Solas,” you say, struggling not to laugh more. “It’s just… how many books did you get in Val Royeaux? I hadn’t realized.”

“Many of these are yours,” he says pointedly as he sets the tome he was looking at down on the corner of his desk. “Are you done with your newest adoptees?”

“For now,” you say with a nod. “I… wanted to apologize, for running off like that.”

“I heard the Commander,” Solas says with a fluid shrug. “I will not pretend to be pleased with being saddled with your pets, but I understand the necessity of it.”

“I’ll make it up to you,” you promise. “I’m not sure how, but I will.”

“You can start by helping me sort through all of this,” he says, gesturing around the room. “I believe the requisition people simply dropped off anything that was labeled for either of us, in no particular order.”

“I can’t believe they dropped off mine here,” you admit. “I thought they’d take them to my room, or the library.”

“It seems that this has become known as your work space, for better or worse,” he says dryly. “I should have anticipated this the first day you crawled under my scaffolding.”

“If you had, you would have seen much further into the future than I,” you reply with a snort. “I thought you’d chase me out at once. But… before we get to work, what happened with Revas, Asaraanda, and Sataareth?”
“Revas and your cat are both with Belassan. He was less than pleased at Revas’ new scar… I suggest you go to see him soon. As for the Qunari, he was with Katari when I last saw him.”

You make a mental note to see Belassan this afternoon. It won’t do you any good to put off facing the music, and you really do want to check on those two. Plus, you have a present for Belassan.

“Thank you, Solas.” You chuckle softly to yourself. “I feel like I’ll always be thanking you.”

“Perhaps not so much as you think,” he replies. You’re not sure what he means. “I believe this one is yours.” He catches you off guard by tossing a book gently at you. You catch it with a clumsy fumble, but manage not to drop it.

“Anatomy of the Dragonling,” you read with a chuckle. “Yep, that’s mine. I guess I’ll just put them on my desk for now. Honestly, I was expecting these to go to the library. It’s not as though I have anywhere to put them, and I think other people might find them useful… or at least interesting.”

You flip through the first few pages… you hadn’t really had any opportunity to actually read any of these books in Val Royeaux. Unlike Solas, who had spent plenty of time reading, you had been too busy. You’re not even sure how useful these books will be… You’d just grabbed anything that seemed like it might help. You’ll be spending many a long night digging through these for useful information if you want to finish that tome in a timely manner.

“We will be at this a long time if you stop to read every book,” Solas quips, and you snap the tome shut self-consciously.

“Ah, good point,” you say, setting it down on your desk. It’s not fifteen minutes later that Solas picks up a tome and gets distracted thumbing through it. The two of you take turns like that all morning, getting repeatedly distracted and reminding each other you’re supposed to be working. It would be humorous if it weren’t so pathetic.

“It’s like watching a mating ritual,” you hear a voice call out a few hours into the process, after Solas has once again pulled a tome out from in front of your curious eyes. You glance up. Dorian, of course, but you’re more happy to see him than you are annoyed. “Is this what you two were like in Val Royeaux? It’s amazing you got anything done.”

“And yet we did,” you point out. “Or has your second edition of In Articulo Mortis not reached you yet?”

Dorian holds up the very tome of which you speak. “It has. In original Tevene, I note. Must have been fun to find in Orlais.”

“Easier to find than to translate myself,” you say cheerfully. “And so much is lost in translation. Mostly thanks to purposeful meddling by the Chantry. I can’t tell you how many times I got a polite little missive from a Revered Mother telling me I was committing heresy just by not lying about what some historical tome said.”

“You can’t?”

“...Three. Three times. But you could have let me have my figure of speech.”

“If you’re quite finished, Emma, we still have work,” Solas says pointedly.

“Make time for me, Dorian, I have something for you,” you tell him. “I’ll likely be up later to drop some of these tomes off, in any case.”
“For you? I always have time,” he says, bowing over the railing with an elaborate flourish. You roll your eyes. Vints.

“Your hard work will make you popular,” Solas comments as you go back to organizing the books.

“For perhaps a week, if I’m lucky,” you say with a snort. “It will wear off quickly enough, and I’ll be able to get back to proper work. Leliana wants me to finish the tome as swiftly as I can due to the delay my trip caused…”

“The trip she sent you on?” Solas asks, and to your surprise, he sounds slightly irritated.

“I think it was more the Inquisitor than her. In fact, I got the distinct sensation no one was particularly pleased with the Inquisition’s choice in ‘researchers.’ I still have no idea why he sent the two of us, even if it did work out fine.”

“It’s my understanding that we were annoying him.”

You pause midway through flipping through a book on dragon mating habits. “…Pardon?”

“Why he sent us. I’ll confess, I was making no small amount of noise about the necessity of some of the tomes I had requested. He sent me, I’m certain, because he was tired of hearing about it. As for why he sent you, I can only assume you were making a similar fuss.” He glances up from the book he was looking at, and something on your face makes him do a slight double take.

“That’s… very interesting,” you say, mind racing. Had you been? No, not really. You’d only just put in the requests; you hadn’t even really spoken to anyone about it. Did he honestly send Solas to be rid of him? Then, why send you as well? Had you really antagonized him enough for him to want you out of Skyhold? “I wasn’t aware that was the way the Inquisitor made his decisions,” you add with a forced chuckle.

“Perhaps it’s divine inspiration,” Solas says, with more sarcasm than you believe you’ve heard out of him before.

You snort. “It must be. After all, it worked. Clearly it’s the hand of divine Andraste and not dumb luck. That would be ridiculous.”
Then pretty soon all of Skyhold is just full of brooding elves. It’s a slippery slope, my friend.

Broody Elves: Not Even Once.

There’s another OC from the giveaway in this chapter! Navi belongs to lyriumbee on Tumblr

You’ve gotten almost all of the tomes organized by the time a courier enters the rotunda. The man doesn’t look nervous at all, a sure sign that he’s one of Leliana’s. You’re instantly irritated as your mind flies to missives and all the work you still have to do. But you’re in luck; this man is delivering something else entirely. A small table is set by your desk, with the magnifying stand already in place upon it. You immediately move to examine it, ensuring it hadn’t been at all damaged by the trip to Skyhold. It’s much fancier than you’re used to working with; it will take some getting used to.

“I believe that signals the start of my work day,” you say cheerfully to Solas. “Oh, that reminds me. This morning I was a bit more active than I probably should have been. Could you look at my hands?”

“Being responsible for once?” Solas says mildly. “Or at least what passes for it, for you. Very well, come here then.”

You approach him, ready to give him your bandaged hands; they only hurt a bit, but you’re willing to bet your antics with Argent had exacerbated them. You wouldn’t be able to get through a full day of writing without some real pain, you suspect. However, once you’re close, his eyes flick from your hands to your face, where they lock. You cringe at the deep frown that forms on his face. What did you do?

He reaches out and grips your chin, angling your face upwards. “Tell me, did your morning activities involve being struck in the face?”

Oh, that’s right. You’ve a split lip. You’ll probably have bruises on your face eventually, but you suppose they must not have formed yet, or Solas would have already noticed. “Yes, actually,” you admit, and Solas’ frown deepens. “Don’t blame me! It was the ‘trainer’ that Leliana assigned to me. She doesn’t play as nice as Bull.”

“That’s alarming,” he says irritably. “Given the way Bull has brutalized you in the past.”

“I don’t think I’ll be with her for long,” you say, trying to reassure him. “Just until-”

“Quiet,” he says, and your mouth slams shut almost before your tongue can stop moving. He runs a thumb over your upper lip and you feel the pleasant tingle of healing magic. A chill shudders down your spine and it’s all you can do not to shiver visibly. Thank the Maker you have self-control; you have to use one hundred percent of it to kill the urge to pull his thumb into your mouth.

You feel like you need to jump into a very cold lake… perhaps roll around in the snow outside of
“Let’s see how much damage you’ve done,” Solas says with a sigh, dropping his hand from your face to your hands. It doesn’t help much.

He unwraps one of your hands carefully. The skin is red and has cracked around your knuckles, but overall, you don’t think it looks too bad. Solas lets out a long sigh, however. “Tell your ‘teacher’ that you’re not to use your hands in any strenuous manner for at least three days,” Solas says firmly. “If she or Leliana has a problem with that, send them to me.”

“I can’t decide if that would be the worst thing for me to do or totally worth it, just to see you get in a pissing match with Leliana,” you say, slightly bemused.

“I will put it this way. If you come to me with cracked knuckles again this week, I will simply bandage your hands in a way that leaves you unable to write,” he says darkly as he unwraps your other hand. “Leliana can decide if she wants the tome enough to leave you in peace.”

You feel like he would win the contest, but that doesn’t make you want to see it any less.

“I can write today, though, right?” you ask, frowning. Admittedly, there are other things you can do if you absolutely can’t write, but you’d like to get started.

“Pace yourself. Do not overdo it… again,” he warns. “But yes.”

He pours healing into both hands, a slow, gentle throbbing that you suspect you’ll be feeling throughout the day. You wonder again what exactly you did to your hands that they require this sort of slow heal. You should probably avoid mutilating yourself on trees in the future… of course, if it were that easy, you would never have done it in the first place. Even just thinking about the state Revas is in, and how exhausted Solas had been… You shudder. You have to avoid that line of thought, as well as avoid thinking about how you’re going to apologize to Belassan.

You make a face as Solas begins re-bandaging your hands. “Is it necessary to have them bandaged? I need—” He doesn’t even say anything, he just gives you a look. You fall quiet. Alright, bandages it is, then.

The last thing Solas does is run a warm hand over your wrist, and you feel the familiar strengthening magic spread through your arm, down to your very fingertips. You can’t help letting out a pleased hum at the sensation.

“Do not forget your end of the bargain,” he reminds you. “No matter how busy you may be, at least attempt a full night’s sleep each evening.”

“Absolutely,” you say, though you’ve no idea how successful you’ll be at keeping to it. You suppose it depends on how many distractions hit you each day. It would be very easy for you to fall into writing all day and then reading all night, especially given that you have other tasks you need to see to during the day. But you resolve to at least try to rest each night. Solas asks very little of you in return for his kindness, after all. The least you can do is actually comply.

Despite your desire to immediately get to work, however, you spend the first hour or so simply getting everything organized. Now that you have the magnifying stand, you want to try it out very badly, and honestly, you might as well. Replicating the diagrams in this tome is going to be the hardest part of the whole thing, if not the most time consuming. Were you alone, you could do half of the work with magic. Were you in Val Royeaux, you could pay someone ELSE to do half of the work with magic. You have neither luxury, so by hand it is.
When you finally have everything ready, all organized and unpacked and sorted and listed, you let yourself turn eagerly to the new magnifying stand. Maker, that’s a lot of glass. And a lot of knobs. It looks more complicated than it is, however. You manage to get the tome situated underneath it comfortably, adjust the mirrors, set the table just so… Honestly, the best thing one can say for a long work day is that you’ll only have to set this up once or twice. You can work your way through all the images in the entire damned book and then worry about the words after. It’ll be easier that way.

And it’s just as you’ve settled in to finally, finally, focus and get some work done, that you realize what time it is.

Lunch time.

You glare at the candle that’s innocently informing you that it’s near noon, as if it’s to blame for this. Your long, irritated sigh sounds like a sound Solas would make, but you stand. There’s no point in starting something that will take hours to complete now. You’ll just have to stop halfway through and it’ll be slow starting again and… Ugh. You turn and see Solas at his desk. There’s a book in his hands, but his eyes are on you. He looks amused, which just fuels your irritation at the world; he’s doubtlessly been watching you fuss about getting everything just so all morning. Ass.

You sulk out of the rotunda and down towards the kitchen, but it seems as though one brooding elf attracts another; you run into Fenris on your way.

It’s not entirely surprising, when thought about objectively. You’ve housed the ex-slaves pretty close to the servant’s quarters, and you walk right through them to get to the kitchen. But the sight of him stops you dread in your tracks. You almost had yourself convinced the day before was a dream. Seeing him here is bizarre to you, like a waking dream. But the reaction in your gut to the allure of his lyrium-infused skin is all too real.

“Ah, Emma,” he says, sounding pleased to see you, which is enough to make you wonder if you’re dreaming all over again.

“Fenris,” you say. His name sounds alien on your tongue. You’d rarely said it out loud outside of particularly questionable, late-night moments in your bunk. You don’t need to be thinking about that right now, though. “How is everyone settling in?”

“Adequately. I think they’re all glad to be safe. Nell is already talking about moving on, but I think most want to stay. They tire of running.”

“Sounds familiar,” you say with a chuckle. “We all get tired of running eventually.”

“Do you think the Inquisition can find work for them?”

“Probably,” you muse, half to yourself. “I can speak to Lady Montiliyet and the Commander about it. I’m sure they could find something... Most of our workers are refugees of some kind, myself included.”

“Varric mentioned little of your recent history,” Fenris says, shifting to lean against a wall. You find your eyes lingering on his shoulders. They’re not so broad as Solas’, but they are very nice shoulders.

“I was living and working in a relatively small, unimportant village in eastern Orlais. Red Templars burned it down,” you say simply. “I came here for lack of anywhere else to go… and as you can see, the Inquisition immediately put me to good use. I’m sure they can find something for the others. What about you?” you ask, tilting your head questioningly. “Will you be here long?”
“I... haven’t yet decided. Admittedly, planning things in advance is not one of my strengths,” he confesses. You snort.

“That seems to be something Hawke’s friends have in common. ‘I have a great idea! I’m going to steal from Qunari.’ ‘I don’t think that serial killer business is really worth looking into.’ ‘Deep Roads? That sounds like a fantastic place to visit!’”

“I’m sure they all seemed very justifiable decisions at the time,” Fenris says blandly. “And you left out all the blood magic.”

You manage to force a grin. You’d been hoping to avoid any conversations about magic for as long as possible. “I thought that went without saying.”

“I suppose to sane people, it--”

“Ah, Emma!” You freeze in place. You can’t think a worse person to show up right now, but there he is. Servis. “So glad to see you. I hear your trip to Val Royeaux bore fruit!”

You stare at him with wide eyes before glancing over at Fenris, who’s gone stiff. There’s no mistaking that Tevinter accent. And the idiot has a Templar following him around! Idiot! Idiot!

“I, ah…” you say as your mind races.

“I had not expected to see Tevinters here. Particularly not Tevinter mages,” Fenris says, his voice a world of danger.

“Servis here is a praeteri whose service got him caught up in some rather unpleasant business,” you lie casually. “He decided he’d rather be involved with the Inquisition than Tevinter cultists.” Miraculously, neither Servis nor the Templar jump in to correct you. Servis, likely because of the look you’re giving him: a casual, affectionate smile you would never grace him with under normal circumstances. It’s likely the Templar simply doesn’t know any better. Few outside the Imperium understand its social classes.

Fenris still looks as though he’s looking at something unpleasant stuck to the bottom of his foot. “I see they at least have the sense to have a Templar watch him,” he says grumpily.

“That’s me,” Servis says dryly, eyeing you. “Happily leashed.”

“Better than the alternative,” you say, your words carrying whole worlds of meaning. “You’re here to ask about your tome, no? I’ll speak to you about it later. I’m fetching Solas’ lunch at the moment, and I’ve dallied enough.”

“You made time for your ‘friend’ here,” Servis points out, raising an eyebrow and smirking slightly. His words carry a lot of meaning, as well. You refuse to blush, however, not for Servis, and not in front of Fenris.

“I’ll find you after dinner,” you insist. “Accosting me now won’t do you any good. As you can see, I’m empty handed.”

“Very well,” Servis says with an overly-dramatic sigh. “I’ll be in my little corner, bored as always.”

Fenris turns to you as Servis meanders away. “I thought this place, of all places, would be free of influences from Tevinter mages,” he says sourly. “The Inquisitor is a fool to allow him to stay.”

Wow, looks like Varric has neglected to tell someone about Dorian.
Well, you’re sure as fuck not going to, either.

“Not everyone caught up in the Imperium is implicit in all they do,” you point out gently. “As you well know.”

Fenris’ bristled demeanor softens only slightly. “I doubt there is a such thing as a Tevinter mage with good intentions. At least they have him watched. But I’ve kept you from your duties long enough. I hope we’ll run into each other when you have a bit more free time.”

You can’t help the blushing this time. Fenris wants to spend time with you. “I… hope so, yes,” you manage, your voice catching in your throat somewhat. You stand in place a few moments after Fenris brushes past you, heading down the hallway. You need to compose yourself… and the place where his skin brushed against your shoulder burns.

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Somehow, you manage to get to the kitchen and back to the rotunda without further incident. It’s strange how normal it feels to be fetching Solas’ meals again; you hadn’t realized how much you had grown accustomed to it while at Skyhold. And of course, eating with him is something you hope never changes. When you see that little stool by his desk, it gives you a thrill you wouldn’t trade for anything.

That’s for you.

He puts that there, just for you.

He’s still reading when you begin setting the food down, and honestly, you don’t really expect him to stop. He’s read books all the way through your meals in the past, and he has a lot of new books to read. To your surprise, however, once you sit down, he sets the book aside.

“I was beginning to worry trouble had found you once again,” he comments. You can’t even laugh, really; it very nearly had.

“I ran into Fenris near the kitchens,” you say, by way of an explanation.

“Ah, yes,” Solas says, perfectly straight-faced. “Your secret admirer.”

You flush. “No such thing!”

“Perhaps it would be more correct to say that you’re his secret admirer?”

“It’s not secret!” comes Dorian’s voice from upstairs. “Varrie’s positively radiating smugness over it.”

You bury your face in your hands. Oh, Maker. If Fenris hears these stupid rumors—Oh Maker what if he hears some of the other rumors about you?!

“I’m going to jump off the ramparts,” you announce.

“Honestly, I don’t see the appeal,” Dorian says, and you glance up to see him leaning over the railing of the library. “With that hair, he looks like an angry old man. Oh, wait, I forgot—that’s your type,” he adds with a knowing nod towards Solas.

You grab an apple off of your plate and chuck it straight up at Dorian. It would have stuck him clean in the face had he not ducked out of the way; as it is, it sails into the library.
“Oy!” you hear Thea yell. “If you’re gonna throw food, throw somethin’ better!”

“What are you even still doing here, Dorian?” you ask. “When Fenris finds out you’re an altus, we’ll be cleaning pieces of you off the wall.”

“I think you might be overstating it a bit,” Dorian says sourly. “And I’m not exactly lining up to introduce myself to him, after what Varric told me.”

“If he enjoys Emma’s company, isn’t it only a matter of time before he visits the library?” Solas comments mildly. “You might pick a better hiding place.”

“I’m not hiding!” Dorian protests.

“You should be,” you say darkly. “If you keep teasing me, I’ll introduce him to you myself. ‘Oh, yes, Fenris, this is Dorian Pavus. You know the name Pavus, don’t you? Yes, that’s right, from the Magisterium! Oh, how do I know him? Every now and then he bemoans the fact I’m not a mage and makes awkward jokes about slavery.’”

“Alright, alright!” Dorian says, throwing his hands up. “No need to threaten a poor man’s life!”

“Varric has given me no such warnings,” says Solas, pulling your attention back to the ground level. “I confess, I know only that this Fenris is an ex-slave like you.”

“Much like me,” you agree. “But significantly less forgiving. I coped with my fear of Tevinter magic by studying it. Fenris copes by murdering most things tangentially related to it. I’ve already had to lie about Servis’ history to prevent a possible incident. That Varric felt the need to warn Dorian tells me that while Fenris may have changed over the years, he hasn’t changed that much.”

“He sounds… pleasant.”

You laugh. “Unlike me, he doesn’t have memories of a time before slavery to fall back on. And his master chased him to the ends of Thedas for nearly ten years. Had I gone through all of that, I suspect I would be a much more jaded individual.”

“Perhaps,” Solas says, but you can hear the doubt in his voice. Does he have trouble imagining you as someone who would hate magic? Perhaps that speaks well of his opinion of you. Although, admittedly, it’s difficult for you to imagine, as well. People are always quick to point to magic as a source of power that people love to abuse. But it wasn’t a mage who sold you into slavery.

It’s not because of mages that you have to keep yourself hidden. Mages don’t force you to lie every day just to stay alive.

In the end, though, you’re no different than Fenris. He hates the systems of power that abused him, right down to the magic itself. You hate the systems of power that abused you, right down to each individual Qunari, every single Templar, every blind moron who pays lip service to the Chantry. You’re the same; you just have conflicting grudges.

“Still,” Solas is saying, pulling you out of your dark thoughts. “It must be comforting to see something so familiar in another. Particularly when you are in such unfamiliar territory.”

“Yes,” you agree, your eyes lingering on Solas’ for longer than they need to. Solas is similar, somehow. He sounds the same. “It is.”
Lunch becomes more pleasant after the two of you get off the subject of Fenris and onto the subject of books, magic, and work. Solas is as interested in your work on the dragon tome as you are in the books of magic he’s obtained, and your dishes lie by his desk as the two of you migrate from his workstation to yours, where you show off your new magnifying stand.

You expect him to leave after you show off all its various lenses and demonstrate how you’ll use it to copy the details of the drawings. Instead, he still hovers as you transition from showing off to actually working. You can’t imagine why; the process of drawing is more tedious to you than even the process of writing. And unlike Solas, who crafts beautiful murals from his imagination alone, you’ve no actual talent. You simply copy whatever’s in front of you.

Solas picks up one particular sketch of a dragon’s open, roaring mouth, after you finish it. It’s meant to be a diagram of the teeth, but the original artist clearly was enamored with the subject material more than is really useful; each individual scale on its head was lovingly depicted, and you had the unpleasant task of duplicating it. He examines it as you begin work immediately on the next piece, a disembodied dragon tongue with all number of useful labels. You certainly hope they’re useful, anyway.

“You’re quite talented,” Solas comments, making you snort.

“No, I’m not. All I do is copy what’s already there. I can’t draw anything that’s not directly in front of me while I’m drawing it.”

“You say that as though you believe it to be a fatal flaw. It’s simply an aspect of skill.”

The only response you have is to shake your head. He’s wrong, but you’re not going to argue it with him.

“Did you learn this simply for use in transcribing tomes?” he wonders.

“No. My mother…” Your voice catches; you clear your throat. “My mother drew. When I was a child, I would get ahold of her charcoals and try to do art like she did. I never had the mind for it. So I simply took to drawing things I saw. I would sit in a corner and just draw rocks and twigs from the ground. And… I suppose I never really stopped. But it’s all dull stuff. Ruins I’ve been to, runes I’ve copied down, herbs… I think the most interesting thing I’ve probably drawn was a particularly fat cane toad that challenged me to a staring contest.”

Solas’ little chuckle encourages you to keep talking, even though you should be focusing on your work. “That, I would like to see,” he says.

“The cane toad?” you laugh. “Because I assure you, while he was something to see, my notebook very much is not. The drawing is half finished; the toad hopped away, and without looking at it, I couldn’t… couldn’t make it look right. I’m useless at it. I tried to draw that artifact we found in the Dales, but I couldn’t. Once it was gone, it was… gone.” You tap your head in frustration, words failing to get your point across. “The details are all wrong, I’m sure of it.”

“I am familiar with such artifacts. If you would like, I could look over your sketch. Perhaps describe it to you.”

“Oh, Maker, no,” you say, shaking your head. “I’m humiliated enough on a daily basis without adding that to the list.” Solas is an actual artist, judging by the gorgeous work on the walls here. The idea of him seeing any of your useless scribbles… You’ve been embarrassed in front of him enough for a lifetime already.
Mercifully, Solas lets it drop, and you’re able to redouble your focus on your work. It’s easier than it’s ever been, thanks to Solas’ magic. You’d had similar enchantments done before, but none ever lasted so long nor worked so completely as Solas’. He could maintain a physical barrier for hours at a time, he manipulated his way around wards better and faster than you, or, in fact, anyone you’ve known.

You glance up at him, wondering, not for the first time and doubtlessly not for the last, exactly who he is. His “humble apostate” tale rings patently false. At the very least, there’s nothing humble about him, perhaps aside from the way he dresses. And yet every single person at Skyhold seems to take little note of him. Bull’s been sniffing around you like a hound since you arrived, but somehow, Solas isn’t a target of that same curiosity? Not from anyone?

Suddenly, his implausible talent for avoiding Templars seems less implausible. Obviously he’s doing something very right.

In the end, thanks to Mr. Humble Apostate’s suspiciously exceptional magical talents, you do get a lot of work done. You’re reluctant to set your quill down, but you have other responsibilities to tend to… ones you can’t put off any longer. With a sigh, you put down your quill, blow out your candles, and stand, grabbing your bag as you do. Might as well kill two birds with one stone and give out some gifts—provided Belassan doesn’t want to throw you out of the stables.

- You see Blackwall first when you enter the barn, and no one else of note. It allows you to put off the inevitable a little bit longer, so you beeline for him. It seems to surprise the man; he’s leaning up against the wall of a stable, carving one of his little wooden toys when you delicately clear your throat.

“Can I… help you?” he says, clearly uncertain as to why in the Maker’s name you’ve appeared before him. Fair enough; the two of you had barely talked at all. The last time you’d interacted, he’d handed you a turkey leg, though, and you’d ended fairly amicably… or so you thought. If he still hates you, this is going to be severely awkward.

“I, ah… I just… Um, I was coming to see Belassan, but he’s not… Um, that is,” you clear your throat awkwardly. He’s giving you the weirdest look. Fuck it, you’ll send the damn thing anonymously through one of Leliana’s messengers. “I apologize, ser Warden. I’m bothering you; I’ll just--”

“You’re not. Belassan’s in the back with some healers and that hart of yours.”

You pale. “Revas? Is he alright?”

“He’s fine; they’re just giving him a once over. I think they’re all more worried about that cat.”

“Oh, Asaaranda. I’m glad she’s still alive.”

“You seem to have a tendency towards protecting the small,” Blackwall says, seemingly out of nowhere. “That’s an admirable trait. You’d make a good Warden.”

You flush with something oddly similar to pride. “I’m not… I don’t… Um, thank you,” you say finally. “I… actually, I had something I wanted to give you.”

“Give me?” he says, right back to being confused again.

“Yes, I, ah… I was in Val Royeaux, as you might know--”
“You obtained a tome for me there, actually.”

“Oh! I did?” you say, only half-listening while rummaging through your bag.

“Tales from the Second Blight.”

“Oh, yes! I remember that,” you say, nodding. “I found it in my favorite bookstore.” The one you’d taken Solas to, in fact. “He doesn’t necessarily have the best books, but he does have the oldest, most obscure ones. Normally the ones people find too boring to read. I’m glad I was able to locate it for you. He had a goodly number of books on the Wardens, actually. I believe Solas bought a particularly dry tome on the Fourth Blight from there.”

“Solas? The Blight? Really?”

“Mnhmm. Ah! Here it is.” You pull out a little bundle, recognizable only because you’d written “BW” on the wrapping paper.

“I’m a little uncertain as to why you felt the need to get me anything at all,” he confesses as you press it into his hands.

“I saw it while shopping in the market at Val Royeaux. I bought gifts for… well, for most everyone, admittedly. But this one…”

He’s unwrapped it now, and holds it up to admire it. A little griffon, small enough to fit in his palm, carved from marble.

“I think you can see why,” you say with a faint smile. “And how often does one get the chance to give a gift to a Grey Warden?”

“I… Thank you, but--”

“I knew the Hero of Ferelden,” you interrupt. He blinks in surprise. “I don’t know if you ever met her. I was in Ferelden during the first half of the Fifth Blight. She stopped it, and stopped Loghain… in a particularly ironic way, I’ll admit. I’ll probably never run into her, never be able to thank her for what she did. But I can thank you, at least, and that’s something.”

“I… understand,” he says, closing his fist around the little griffon. “Thank you.” He has a bit of guilt in his expression. He won’t meet your eyes. Because of how he treated you in the past, perhaps? It’s possible that he’s also embarrassed.

“It’s not much,” you admit. “But it’s all I can really offer.” You glance over Blackwall’s shoulder as movement catches your eye. Belassan.

Time to face the music.

“If you’ll excuse me, Warden, I’ve got to go face a scolding,” you say with a sigh.

Belassan sees you as you speed walk towards him. His expression is unreadable. The absence of the bright smile he normally wears when he sees you feels like a knife in the chest. When, exactly, had you come to worry about what a Dalish thought of you? Or is it all guilt, for failing his trust?

“Belassan, I’m so sorry,” you burst out as soon as you’re close enough. “There, there was an attack, and there were so many of them,”

“Emma,” Belassan begins, but you rush on.
“And I tried to stay close to Revas and stay out of the worst of it but they were everywhere and I got flanked and Revas…”

“Emma!”

“He just pushed me out of the way, I couldn’t stop him, I’m so sorry, I’m so-”

Belassan places a finger gently across your lips, shushing you. You trail off nervously. “Hello to you, too,” he says, eyes glinting with amusement.

“Emma ir abe--” you try, but he pushes more firmly against your lips, quieting you again.

“Calm yourself, Emma. Solas already explained what happened. That Revas was injured protecting you, in a fight… and that you screamed down a Qunari in order to protect him,” he adds, lips twisting into a smile. “I would have liked to have seen that, actually.” He finally lets his finger drop from your lips, and you fumble to find your words again.

“I didn’t… No, I was useless, I-- And Revas, he…” You realize with sudden horror that your cheek is wet. You wipe your eyes off quickly, a flush coming to your cheeks.

“Revas is fine. As are you. That is what’s important,” Belassan says as you gulp down a sob. “I knew when I sent the two of you off that one or both of you could fail to return. I’m glad he was there to protect you… and that you were there to protect him.”

“I didn’t do anything,” you burst out, too full of guilt to speak coherently. You really, really hadn’t. Revas had survived in spite of you, not because of you.

“Shush,” Belassan says, and when you open your mouth to speak, he raises his finger again as if to put it on your mouth. You fall silent, and he smiles. You feel a surge of relief despite your guilt. He’s not mad. You’d feel better if you could apologize some more, but… “These harts--all of these animals, in fact--are being used in a war. I understand that. Any day could be a day they do not return. But I’m glad it was not this day… for both of you. As for your cat--”

“Asaaranda! How is she?” you blurt out.

“Is that her name? Your hahren--Solas--explained about Revas, but not about the rather furious cat he literally dropped into my arms. She’s being seen by a healer now. Her leg couldn’t be saved, unfortunately.”

“I expected that,” you say with a nod. “I apologize. I had meant to explain about her and Revas myself, but I got caught up right inside the gates.”

“With elven refugees again, as I’ve heard,” Belassan says with a smile. “I understand.”

“You’re almost too understanding,” you admit. “I haven’t been this off-balance since Solas refused to get angry at me for breaking into his room.”

“You broke into his room? Surely not his bedroom?” Belassan asks, grinning broadly when you nod. “That’s a story I need to hear.”

“Whatever you want,” you promise. “But first… Asaaranda?”

“Of course. This way,” he says, gesturing for you to follow him. He leads you to a stall in the back of the stables--it seems they keep sick or injured animals back here. Revas sees you and gives a loud
You rush to him immediately and he rubs his head against you, nearly knocking you over. You wrap loving arms around his neck as Belassan gestures into the next stable—there Asaaranda is, looking grumpy but cleaner, with a woman you don’t recognize squatting over her.

The cat shifts to look up at you and lets out an unpleasant yowl that you suppose passes for a greeting.

"Hello to you too, Asaaranda," you say sourly. "Are you being good?"

"Asaaranda?" the woman says, looking up. She has the dark skin of a Rivaini, though you hadn’t particularly noticed until she addressed you. "A Qunari name?"

"It was a Vashoth who named her," you explain. "It’s a very long story. How is she?"

"She will survive," the woman says with a shrug. "Although I suspect it was a close call, given the condition she’s in now."

"How did you come across her?" Belassan asks curiously. "Your hahren didn’t say."

"She was in the woods off the Imperial Highway," you explain. "I just happened across her; she was hiding in a stump. She was in terrible condition, but, well, she was alive."

"She certainly owes her life to you," the Rivani woman says, rubbing a finger under Asaaranda’s chin. To your amazement, the cat doesn’t scratch at her. Perhaps she’s no longer in pain… Or perhaps she just didn’t like you. "She is lucky you found her when you did."

"Thank you for taking care of her, Serah--"

"Navi," the woman says, standing to offer you a hand, which you take and shake firmly.

"Navi," you repeat. "I appreciate it. And you too, Belassan."

"Are you going to be moving her into the rotunda after she’s had her kittens?" Belassan asks, looking amused at the concept.

"Maker, no!" you exclaim. "Don’t get the wrong idea. She’s not mine. My intent was to find someone who actually liked cats to care for her… and the kittens, if they survive."

"She can stay here, if you wish," Belassan says. "She and Revas seem fond of each other, and Horsemaster Dennet has taken to her, as well. He says no stable is complete without ‘a good mouser.’" Belassan makes little quotes with his fingers as he says that last bit, making you chuckle.

"Good. I won’t miss her yowling, or her scratches," you say. "And if I tried to take her into the rotunda, Solas would have me out on my ass."

"You work with him?" the Rivaini--Navi--interjects. "Are you a mage?"

You wish people would stop fucking asking you that.

"No, just a linguist."

"What does a mage need a linguist for?" she asks, sounding amused. "Translating old tomes for him?"

"Bringing him his dinner," Belassan says dryly.
“I don’t work for him,” you explain. “Just… in his vicinity. It’s complicated.”

“It’s not,” Belassan says. You glare at him.

“And the dinner is a mutual thing,” you add. “In any case, it’s irrelevant. But… Belassan, before I forget, I have something for you.” You gesture for him to follow you this time, mostly just out of a desire to get away of the Rivaini and her questions. Fortunately, he does follow, and you head back to the main part of the stables before digging into your bag for his gift.

“Ah… Here,” you say, pulling it out. You wrote his name in Elven, because you’re a dork. He doesn’t seem to speak it, so there’s no chance he knows how to read it. But when you hand it over, he spends a moment thumbing over the letters before carefully unwrapping it, somehow managing not to tear the thin tissue paper. He pulls out one of the little charms, running it between his calloused fingers.

“Is this…?”

“Ironbark,” you say with a nod. “Two little halla horns, made from scraps too small to do anything else with, or so said the woman selling them. I picked them up at a shop near the alienage. I noticed you have your ears pierced… I thought perhaps you could turn them into earrings?” He’s being very quiet, and it makes you nervous. “I-in any case, they made me think of you, so…”

He catches you completely off guard. He suddenly sweeps you against him with one hand, and plants a kiss firmly against your forehead. You flush bright red–he’s bare-chested, and your hands are currently resting against his bare torso—a subconscious reaction to being grabbed unexpectedly. He releases you, and you take a few staggered steps backwards, face still flaming.

“Thank you,” he says simply, positively beaming.

Was that a fucking Dalish thing?! What the Void… “I… Uh… You’re… welcome?” And he’s just wrapping them back up like nothing happened. It must be a Dalish thing. Each clan has semi-unique customs, in any case. “I… I, um… I should get back to work. But I’m sure I’ll see you before Sunday,” you say shakily, still trying to compose yourself. “I… Uh… Bye.”

And then you more or less flee, noting with some irritation how amused Blackwall looks when you rush by him.
You’re still flushed when you skid into the rotunda, closing the door behind you as if you fear you’re being chased. Who kisses someone over a present?! None of the Dalish you’d worked with in the past ever did that… But you’re aware that cultures vary from clan to clan, and Belassan was from a largely Ferelden clan, whereas all the Dalish you’d ever known had been from Antiva or Orlais.

Maybe Solas would know…? No, that seems like a bad idea.

“I can always tell when you’ve been to the stables,” he comments as you wander back to your desk, and your flush starts creeping back again.

“Do I smell? I’m sorry. Honestly, I should have had a bath by now, I just--”

“It’s not unpleasant,” he interrupts you. “Quite the opposite. The scent of hay, horses, the outdoors… It makes the rotunda smell more… lived in, perhaps?”

You can’t help smiling. “You really do like traveling, don’t you? Being outdoors. I couldn’t wait to be back in Skyhold, but I suppose it’s less thrilling for you.”

“One can only explore so much of the Fade from a single location,” he admits. “There is much history here, but I can only sleep for so long.”

“You’re bored,” you realize with a laugh. “Here I am, trying to do a thousand things a day, and you’re bored!”

“The irony is not lost on me,” he replies.

“Should I put you to work?” you ask jokingly. “Perhaps you could be my assistant.”

“Oh?” he says. Is his voice slightly lower than normal, or is it just you? “What sort of tasks would you have me do?”

Your brain splutters to a halt. “I, um…” You clear your throat, trying to think through the sudden rush of unwelcome mental images. “W-well, you know, you’re a faster reader than I am. I could have you digging through these dragon tomes for the information I need.”

“Practical,” Solas agrees. “Have you had others to delegate tasks to, in the past?”

...This son of a bitch, is he pressing you for information now? Still? You bite back irritation. You should be grateful for the reminder that your walls need to be up around him still. “No, not particularly. It simply isn’t difficult to think of ways you could be useful.”

“Is that so?”
“Of course,” you say blithely, turning back to your work. More drawing, ugh. You’ll be at this for at least another day. Maybe two. “You’re intelligent, a fast reader, a skilled mage… What little you don’t already know, I’ve no doubt you could learn quickly. What couldn’t you do?”

“I…” he seems slightly taken aback, but you’re almost too distracted in your own mind and your own work to notice.

“I’ve mentioned this before; mages are inherently useful. If more people worked with them and understood that, I think fewer people would be scared of magic. Tevinter is full of wonders achieved only because of their liberal use of magic. Terrors, as well, certainly, but it isn’t as though you can’t have one without the other. The north and south Chantry both act as if it’s a zero-sum game, as if mages must be either imprisoned or the true rulers of mankind, with no limits placed on their steady rise to power. It’s a ridiculous false dichotomy.” You’re idly rambling at this point, muttering more or less to yourself as you strain to copy down the details of a dragon’s claw. “It’s ridiculous. I don’t know who they think they’re kidding, honestly. I suspect more people think as I do, but of course, the Chantry is famous for censorship, and--”

“You?”

“I mean have you ever read the works of ex-Sister Plinth? The things she was excommunicated for are laughable in comparison to--”

“Emma, you are speaking Orlesian.”

You pause, looking up from your work. “Ah. I’m sorry. It doesn’t matter; I was simply rambling.”

“I didn’t mean to stop you; it was an interesting subject,” Solas says. “Is Orlesian your first language, perhaps?”

“No, but I’m accustomed to speaking it.” Not quite a lie. “It’s easy for me to slip into without thinking.” As easy as it is for you to ramble irritatedly against the Chantry, apparently. “I should know better. Le silence est d’or, as they say.”

“Do they? In Orlais?” he says, and you laugh.

“They do, although perhaps dishonestly. In any case, I apologize.”

“Don’t. I enjoy listening to you.”

You flush then, a bright twinge of pink rushing to your cheeks. He enjoys…? You can’t handle this. Between Fenris, Belassan, and Solas, you’ll be dead by the end of the week.

You manage to shut your mouth and get some work done before dinner. Quite a lot, actually. Thanks in part to Solas enchantment, you really hit your stride. By the time your candle starts burning low, you’ve completed a good four different drawings. Your bandages are stained with different colored inks, which gives you the amusing appearance of having tripped and fallen into a rainbow. Still, bandages are scarce in wartime, so you’ll just have to suck it up and deal with it until you can take the damn things off. Which you definitely won’t until Solas says you can. No matter how much they itch.

You’re relieved when Servis doesn’t jump you on the way to the kitchen. You’d said you’d meet him after dinner, but he doesn’t appear to be the most patient man in the world. Rather than rushing to gather Solas’ meal, however, you take a moment to pull Celia aside.
“Celia, do you have a moment? I know you’re busy, but…”

“Um, yes, certainly,” she says, and you can’t help but notice she seems a little jumpier than normal. That’s saying something, too; she’s always jumpy. Your eyes flick around the kitchen suspiciously, but no one appears to be taking any note of the two of you.

“I brought something for you from Val Royeaux… sort of a thanks for all the help you’ve been,” you explain, reaching into your bag to pull out yet another ribbon. The sooner you can be rid of all of these, the sooner you can stop feeling like you’re carrying an Orlesian trinkets shop around your waist. “It’s a--”

“A ribbon from Val Royeaux!” she exclaims, actually bouncing a little in excitement. You blink; you hadn’t been expecting someone who sounded like a Marcher to know the tradition. “Oooh, is it silk?” Seeing the slight confusion on your face, she exclaims. “Lily got one from her sister yesterday!” She gestures to a girl standing in front of one of the bread ovens. She looks no more than fourteen or fifteen years old, with short red hair barely long enough to be pulled back. Strands of it keep falling loose from the Orlesian silk ribbon she’s wearing.

“Oh, Kelsie’s sister,” you realize.

“You know Lily?” Celia says, sounding surprised.

“No, not really. Her sister, Kelsie, was one of the guards on my trip to Val Royeaux,” you explain, tearing your eyes away from the girl. Something about her… But you’ve no time to speculate.

“This color is beautiful,” Celia coos, running her fingers across the pale blue silk. “I can’t believe you thought of me!”

“I thought it would suit your hair,” you reply with as charming a smile as you can manage. It isn’t as though this is the first time you’ve bought a lady a thoughtful present in order to win her over. It won’t be the last, either. “Here, let me tie it into your hair.”

Celia continues to be charmed, murmuring about how she wishes she had a mirror, as you tie the ribbon into her ponytail. It does compliment her long, black hair. Orlesian silk compliments anyone well, in your personal opinion.

“Really, I can’t believe you!” she says, fingering the silk in her hair.

“Just a way of showing my appreciation,” you say, a kind--if practiced--smile on your lips. “It’s nice to have my mornings free, after all.”

“There are worse things than delivering breakfast to your apostate,” she admits. “Although…” She looks up at you, eyes twinkling. “He looked rather disappointed to see me this morning.”

You fight to keep a straight face, and not to let the heat rising to your cheeks show. “He’ll have to learn to live with disappointment, I suppose. We all do, sooner or later. Still, no need for me to disappoint him right now; I should get his dinner together.”

Thankfully, Celia takes that as the dismissal it is and the both of you get back to work… although the way she keeps running her fingers over the silk in her hair makes you smile. Such little things, gifts, but they stay with people longer than words or deeds.

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You say that, but you can’t quite build up the courage to give Solas his present. Particularly not after
the way Belassan reacted. You can’t imagine Solas doing something like that, but… You just don’t have the strength. Maybe you’ll just leave it on his desk after he leaves for the night? But he’ll know who it’s from. Who else would get him a present, let alone brave the rotunda and leave it on his desk? That’s just delaying the inevitable. So instead, it stays in your bag, burning a hole in your nerves.

You sit on your little stool and share dinner with Solas, and can’t help hoping that this one thing never changes. Logically, you know it will. It’s only a matter of time until Solas gets called out of Skyhold again. Honestly, you could even get called out of Skyhold again. Once Leliana realizes your “contacts” are all based out of Val Royeaux, she’ll see how useless you are to her here. She might respond by leaving you alone, for once, but you doubt it. She might just send you to Val Royeaux.

If she did… would you go? You gain nothing from being associated with the Inquisition in Val Royeaux. Their resources could be used to your benefit, but you’d retired, dammit. You don’t want to get caught back up in that mess again, only with another group added onto the list of ones scrabbling to control you. The only reason you hadn’t already bolted out of Skyhold was the security of being behind fortress walls and the tantalizing possibility of knowledge that Solas offered. Without those, your association with the Inquisition would be rather pointless.

It’s all a moot point, however. For now, you’re in Skyhold, and for now, so is Solas. You can enjoy that for as long as it lasts.

Solas is talking rather animatedly—for him—about the book he’s been reading. From what you gather, it’s a book on Rivaini spirit summoning.

Sometimes, you have to pretend you understand less of what Solas is saying than you actually do.

This is not one of those times.

You can barely understand what the fuck he’s talking about.

But he just seems to be enjoying explaining it to you so much that you don’t have the heart to tell him you can barely grasp the concepts he’s speaking of. He’d probably be better off speaking to Dorian, who also has a tendency to ramble on endlessly about subjects you’ve no real way of comprehending.

From what you gather, the Rivaini summon spirits across the Veil, but don’t bind them. It sounds sort of like what little you understand of spirit healing. When you mention that, Solas immediately branches off on a tangent about Ferelden spirit healing versus Rivani spirit healing, which is apparently fascinating and complex because he’s been explaining it to you for about ten minutes now.

Honestly, it doesn’t really matter to you that you’ve nothing to compare his descriptions of “vibrations in the Veil” to, because his voice is gorgeous and the subject matter is fascinating, for all you don’t understand it. You’ve no real intention of attempting to summon spirits across the Veil. It’s one of those things that just resonates in you as a terrible idea. But it’s interesting to hear Solas’ thoughts on it.

“Solas, you’ve said before that our expectations of spirits can alter them,” you interject.

“That’s correct.”

“Wouldn’t it be inherently dangerous to summon a spirit, then? Even if you have a solid grasp on the spirit in question, pure intentions, all that… Couldn’t another person seeing the spirit alter it? Just
“It depends upon the spirit. The Rivani have methods of protecting a spirit’s nature without binding, and in fact, of protecting spirits from forceful binding and alteration. As for spirit healing in southern Thedas, spirits are summoned briefly and then released back into the Fade. The shorter they touch this world, the less likely they are to be corrupted.”

You hum curiously to yourself as Solas continues on about the natures of spirits. Your mind is on Cole, more than anything, and his remarkably concrete nature. Is that related to his remarkably concrete appearance? Solas has said in the past that Cole is unique. How unique? You don’t have the knowledge base to even speculate, really, and it’s probably considered rude to want to poke your dearest friend with sticks to see what happens, even metaphorically speaking.

It’s only your after-dinner date with Servis that has you cutting Solas off, and reluctantly, at that.

“Solas, have you had a chance to look over that tome of Servis’?” you ask when there’s a brief lull in his lecturing.

He blinks, as if his mind is having to quickly shift gears. “Ah… yes. I believe I’ve found the reason it was banned. There’s a single ward in it, not blood magic, but a protection from demonic interference. If inverted, it could be used to bind a demon to a location or object. I doubt that’s what Servis wants the tome for, however. Any Tevinter mage would know half a dozen significantly easier ways to bind a spirit.”

You chew thoughtfully on your bottom lip. “Should I give him the tome?”

“Personally, I’m inclined towards giving it to him. There are certainly spells he could use to get into trouble, but no more than books we already have in the library here.”

“Another case of the Chantry being a little over-zealous in the banning of books, perhaps?” you wonder. It would hardly be the first time.

“All book banning is over-zealous,” Solas points out, and you smile.

“Good point. Alright. Thank you for wisdom, Solas. As always, it’s invaluable. Is the tome here?” Solas shifts a stack of books on his desk to pull one out and hands it to you. “Wonderful. Thank you.”

“Off to visit the Tevinter?”

“Yes… Hopefully without Fenris, this time,” you say as you gather up the dishes from dinner.

Servis doesn’t jump you on the way to the kitchen, so after dropping of the dishes, you go hunting for him, tome in hand. The first place you look is that little hidden library, and you’re not surprised to see him there. What surprises you is that his Templar doesn’t appear to be present. It’s enough to make you hesitate. What would be worse? If the Templar was hiding in an attempt to ensnare you doing something incriminating? Or if Servis actually had a way to be rid of his Templar watcher, even temporarily?

“Ah, Emma, please come in,” the man says before you can decide whether or not to bolt. He does so without looking up… so Tevinter. You can’t help rolling your eyes. What if it hadn’t been you? What if you’d been a maid? He’d look like an absolute tit.
“I can’t help but notice someone’s missing from this picture, Servis. What happened to your Templar friend?” you ask dryly as you enter the library. You take your time, eyeing the books on the shelves. You still haven’t had a chance to explore this place, more due to the presence of the Templar than of Servis. Although you’re certain if anything particularly good were down here, you’d see people other than Servis.

“He got called away,” Servis says loftily. “Some sort of emergency. I’m considered rather low risk, at the moment.”

“Convenient timing.”

“I rather thought so, myself! I’m sure you’d rather have your privacy when handing over a banned book of magic to a Tevinter mage, after all. Even a… what’s the lie you came up with? A praeteri?”

You scowl. “You should be grateful. Were you unaware of who I was speaking to? Or do you just have a death wish? Because there are easier ways to die than by irritating an ex-slave like Fenris.”

“What about irritating an ex-slave like you?” You stiffen. “It’s no secret,” he points out.

“No, I suppose by now it’s not,” you say irritably. “Regardless, I’m far from being dangerous, let alone as dangerous as Fenris. Have you had your head buried in the sand? Or do they just pretend nothing happened to Danarius, back in Tevinter? Do they say he died in a tragic accident, rather than admit he was murdered in a filthy bar by an ex-slave and a ragtag bunch of southerners?”

“Yes, actually,” Servis replies. “Although the truth *is* known. I know who Fenris is. I’m more interested in why you’d lie to protect me.”

“I don’t dislike you, Servis, despite your best attempts to be unpleasant,” you reply. “I’d rather not leave your fate up to Fenris’ mood. I don’t know if he’d actually hurt you, but honestly, I didn’t feel like finding out. I doubt the Inquisitor would actually protest if he simply maimed you, so long as your mind still worked. Now, do you want to test the lengths of my goodwill, or do you want this book?” You hold it out, and he takes it from you. He flips through it quickly, as if to see if it’s actually what he wanted.

“I can’t help but wonder how you managed to get your paws on this,” Servis says as he glances across the pages. “I know the southern Chantry’s influence isn’t quite as strong as they might wish right now, but it *is* a banned tome of magic.”

“Why would you ask me to get it if you didn’t think I could?” you counter.

“Apparently, you’re even more capable than I thought,” he admits. “I heard you got quite a number of banned books out of Val Royeaux. No wonder our spymistress likes you.”

“A word to the wise, Servis. If you wish to pepper someone for information, do it when there’s something keeping them in the room,” you say dryly, already turning to go. “You’ve got your book. Do me a favor and don’t do anything incredibly stupid with it.”

“You don’t want to stay and explore the library while the Templar’s gone?” he asks. To your credit, you stop only momentarily before continuing towards the door. “Or perhaps you’re just eager to return to your lover.”

You grind your teeth at the obvious jab. “Which one are you referring to?” you ask dryly, pausing to glance over your shoulder. “I’m supposed to have so many at this point; I’m afraid I can no longer keep track of the manner in which I’m being insulted.”
“No insult. You could do worse for yourself than a powerful mage like Solas. Trusted by the Inquisition, yet a notorious loner… You’ve done well in seducing him.”

You bristle despite the fact his game is obvious. “I’ve done no such thing. As you no doubt know.”

“No? I suppose the rumor mill is wrong once again.”

“I’ve yet to see it be right,” you snap, and then finish storming out of the library. Ass. Does anyone actually believe these rumors about you? How, when they seem to change with the hour? Or has Solas simply become a more popular target due to your traveling with him?

And why does that irritate you? It hadn’t before. No one is likely to bear you ill will for being Solas’ supposed lover, and being seen as even having a lover could make Solas seem more approachable. But the thought chafes at you nonetheless.

-  

You manage to focus on your work when you get back to the rotunda, despite the fact that Solas is just sitting there, a glorious beacon of knowledge. It’s amazing you manage to get anything done at all at this point, honestly. Why can’t your job just be sitting and listening to him talk? But you do have a lot of work to do, and not a lot of time to do it in. Or maybe you do. It’s hard to say--no one’s given you anything resembling an actual deadline yet. But you’re still feeling the pressure to perform. You’d proven your worth to the Inquisition handily in Val Royeaux, but you’d rather indicate that you’re worth more here, in Skyhold. The idea that Leliana might want to station you elsewhere is a bit nerve wracking, considering you’d only done this to be here.

You don’t know how late it is when you pause in your drawing. You only do so because your arm is starting to ache tellingly. It’s the joints in your fingers more than anything else, but the stiffness is setting in. It could be due to pain, or cold, or just having worked all day.

“How are you doing?” you ask, sitting back after finishing another piece. “Could you touch up the enchantment on my hand? I think it’s wearing off.”

“No.”

...No? “...Please?”

“Absolutely not.” You pout, looking over your shoulder. Solas isn’t looking up from his book, but it seems he can sense your pout from across the room. “If you are growing tired, that is an indicator that it’s time to rest, not time to use magic in order to redouble your efforts,” he says pointedly.

...Oh, right, you promised him you’d rest. You frown, but he’s not necessarily wrong. You get up before dawn every day. An ordinary person would go to bed at a reasonable time to compensate. Well… might as well get maybe one or two last pictures in before the enchantment wears off entirely, then, and then just head to bed. Admittedly, your plan for sleeping is… well, you don’t have one. You know you won’t be able to. You’re just sort of planning on lying uselessly in bed for six hours. That’s as far as you’ve planned this out.

You work your way through another picture, at this point aware of how late it’s getting. You intend to go to bed soon, but you’re surprised by the fact Solas is still up. Normally, he’s retired by now. Are his new books keeping him awake? Or…

A horrified thought strikes you.

What if he’s staying up to make sure you go to bed?
You immediately stop working to swivel in your chair and look at him. He’s sitting at his desk, reading. Nothing to indicate he’s thinking about you at all. You’re being silly. He’s probably just caught up in reading.

He yawns.

You’re almost too distracted by the way he haphazardly covers his mouth, long fingers splayed out, the way he closes one eye sleepily. Almost too distracted. Not quite.

He’s sleepy.

Guilt stabs at you; you’re nonsensically, utterly convinced that he’s staying up because of you. You have no proof for this assertion but you just feel it in your gut.

You don’t even finish the drawing, you just grab a few of the nearest dragon books, blow out the candle, and stand. Solas pauses in his reading to look at you, and his eyes immediately fall to the books in your arms. He frowns, but says nothing.

“I’m going to bed,” you tell him. “Actually going to bed. I promise. I won’t just read all night,” you say, a twinge of nervousness in your voice. You mean it, but will he believe you?

“Good night,” he says simply.

“I… Good night,” you repeat, then duck out to face the night.

- 

You try.

You really do.

That you utterly fail isn’t really a surprise, though.

You spend the first hour wrapped up in your blankets, staring blankly at the ceiling. You spend the second hour tossing and turning. By hour three, crippling anxiety has set in. Not being able to sleep is making you feel a bit like a failure, even though you’d known when you started that you wouldn’t be able to. Eventually, you pick up one of your books just for a distraction. It helps, sort of, but you can’t help feeling like you’re lying to Solas. Which is stupid, because you are lying to Solas, every single day, about hundreds of things way more important than whether or not you’re sleeping.

You try to brainstorm little ways to drain your mana, maybe ways to sleep. If you can drain yourself a little at a time, you might not get to the point where you have to melt the ice off of an entire lake. Might not get to the point where you almost kill Bull. Because if that sort of thing happened with Solas instead, you would be dead in the water.

You could cast little spells in your room. There aren’t any mages in this wing. But what if a Templar walked by your window? What if a skilled mage could pick up the ambient magic in the air, even hours or days later? Maybe a… quiet, private corner of Skyhold? Some place you won’t be stumbled upon, but some place you could walk away from?

You’ve read three pages and you don’t remember a word.

You set the book down with a sigh, spend another hour flopping about and trying to sleep and wondering and worrying.
All told, it’s a terrible night. By morning, all you have to show for your night in bed is a headache, some extra knowledge about high dragon nests, and a vague plan to ride out of Skyhold before Iron Bull gets back. Solas doesn’t have Bull’s tendency to stalk you, so if you do it now, you can at least drain yourself one last time before you have to start coming up with more reliable alternatives.

The only pleasure you have that morning is delivering Solas’ message to Argent.

“Why have you not already had your hands healed?” she demands, clearly irritated.

“I’m in the process of having them healed. It takes time.” Apparently. You don’t actually know why, or how badly you’d damaged your hands to require this kind of a slow heal when you’d dislocated a hip and then proceeded to fight a Qunari literally the next day.

Although if Solas knew about that… Ha! Well, you’re glad he doesn’t.

“Ridiculous…” the woman grumbles.

“Solas said that if you had issue with it, you could take it up with him. I’m sure he could explain his reasoning far better than I,” you say, not even hiding the smile that ghosts across your lips.

The woman lets out a displeased grunt. “Do you report to him first and foremost, then? I’m certain he’s not the one who handles your pay.”

“You’re a professional, serah, so this might not be your first instinct, but whom I obey first and foremost is based on who’s the scariest,” you lie cheerfully. “And Solas is much scarier than you when he’s angry.” That part isn’t a lie. You’d barely glimpsed Solas’ anger, once or twice, and both times it had chilled you to your core.

“Are you more scared of him than you are of the spymaster?” A threat? No, pressing for information.

“Absolutely. There’s only so much a human woman can do to you, unpleasant though it may be. Magic has no such limitations.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“Of course. You know my history, I’m sure,” you reply. There’s no way Leliana would leave it out, and half the damn fortress knows at this point. “Now if you’re finished attempting to gather information on the relationship between Solas and I, we can begin. Unless you’ve nothing for me to do without strenuous use of my hands, in which case I would love to get an early start on the actual work I’m supposed to be doing.”

Sassing an assassin: not your brightest moment, but you’re in a bad mood. A night of feeling like a failure for not being able to do something you’d no chance of being able to do… Well, you’ll be cross until you get some tea, at the very least.

Argent takes you outside today. There’s not a lot of people in the courtyard; there never is this early. Mostly, you spend the day running along the ramparts and through the grass in the courtyard. It reminds you sharply of when you fell down the stairs outside of Cullen’s office, so you play it safe, and slow. You sprint when she tells you to, but not nearly as fast as you can actually move. After you’ve run around enough to satisfy her, she spends some time throwing things at you. Apparently there was also supposed to be climbing, but that would be considered strenuous hand-activity.

You dislike having things thrown at you, though. You perform decently well out of a desire not to get struck repeatedly and have Solas cross with you again. But you still have a performance to keep up, so you have to allow yourself to get struck multiple times. By the end of it, your ‘bad mood’ has
turned into a full blown irritable rage. Why, exactly, are you submitting yourself to this? You’re a
fucking linguist! You’re not a spy, and you’ve no intention to be! Not for the Inquisition, in any case.

This isn’t what you signed up for. You’re wasting your time, and despite what Leliana seems to
think, your time is valuable.

You’re fuming by the time you make it to breakfast. You almost skip, just because you know you’re
not in any state to put up with Thea’s uniquely annoying brand of tomfoolery. What will she ask you
about today, you wonder, as she spoons your honey into her gruel. Your sexual habits? Details on
whether or not you and Solas fucked in Val Royeaux?

Ding ding, you have a winner. But she’s not as irritating about it as she could be, perhaps picking up
the sharp, angry movements of your hands as you pick at your breakfast. That doesn’t spare her
entirely from your ire, however.

“I appreciate your attempt at tact, Thea,” you say after she’s danced around the issue long enough.
“But to answer the question you’re working your way towards: no. Nothing untoward happened
between me and Solas. We went to Val Royeaux. We slept in different tents and different inn rooms.
It was a delight, yes, but for none of the reasons you’re clearly itching to hear.”

She pouts. “Tha’s a shame. You like him, don’t you?”

“Perhaps not in the sense you mean,” you reply sourly. “I enjoy his company.”

“You say that about everyone you’re rumored with, though,” she points out.

“Imagine, it could even be true!” you snap, then bite your tongue in an attempt to cool your temper.
“Those blasted rumors have everyone thinking I’m some kind of dread harlot. I don’t even know
why they started! I’ve not slept with a single person since I’ve gotten to this stupid fortress!”

Thea shrugs. “Dunno. But if it makes you feel better, with you bein’ gone for a week an’ all, they
kinda died down. People are a bit curious if this means you ‘n’ Solas are somethin’ serious, but
generally, they’re on ta other subjects til you do somethin’ interestin’ again.”

“I’ll have to try very hard to be boring,” you say with a scowl. Something you’ve been trying
without much success for quite a time now. But it’s an option. An appealing one. Perhaps you can
even find a way to call off this bullshit with Leliana. Speaking to Argent had made you realize at
least one thing.

Solas has pulled your ass out of the fire several times, and continues to express concern over your
well-being. It’s more than an enjoyment of your work; he’s as much as told you that he likes your
company. Forget playing the part of Leliana’s pet… you actually would likely have a place here as
Solas’.

You have stopped being afraid of Leliana, to an extent, and it is because of Solas. But not because
you fear him more.

-You’re starting to suspect Leliana is pissing you off on purpose. You can barely register that Solas is
talking over the rushing sound in your ears as you stare down at your desk.

A missive.

A fucking. Missive.
One of your hands rests on the desk by it as you stare down, disbelieving, and you barely catch yourself before the bandages on your hand start to smolder. You’re not even at risk of losing control of your aura from size… You’re just that angry today.

“…a poor night’s sleep?”

You catch on the very end of what Solas is saying.

“Something like that,” you reply. You hope he doesn’t believe the irritation in your voice directed at him, because you have no chance of hiding it. You snap the missive off the desk, angry hand clenching too tight and crinkling it. You turn to show it to Solas. “Another Qunlat message for me to translate,” you say, voice tight with rage. “On top of the morning training she seems to desire for me—for no real reason. Despite the fact she informed me that this book was my top priority.”

“Perhaps you should speak with her about it?” Solas says delicately.

“You may be right,” you agree, turning your angry gaze back towards the missive. “If nothing else, I could use some clarification as to exactly what it is I do here.” You slump angrily into your chair, throw the missive onto the desk. ‘Deliver to the Commander,’ that bitch, ugh… Fine. You can give the Commander his stupid missive and his stupid present at the same Maker damned time, and then maybe you can get some actual work done for once.

You’ve already begun angrily scribbling out a translation when a shadow falls over you. You don’t even pause in your writing, pen scratching across paper in sharp, furious slashes. To his credit, Solas actually waits for you to finish a line before reaching around you and grasping your wrist. The sensation of his hand on you, his chest against your back, is almost enough to improve your mood. But not quite. Instead, you turn irritably in your chair, eyeing him wordlessly. You’ve no doubt he has a reason for interrupting you, but you suspect your expression says it better be a good one.

“I need to look at your hands, Emma,” he reminds you gently. “And I believe your work will go faster with an enchantment, no?”

Tensed muscles in your back begin to relax. He’s right— you’re still wearing the same shitty, stained bandages as yesterday. You rub your other hand across tired eyes, realizing only now that you’ve a horrid headache. “Yes, thank you, Solas. I’m sorry, I just…”

“It’s fine. But it won’t do for you to injure yourself in your anger.”

You try to focus on calming yourself while Solas unwraps your hands. Just the sensation of his gentle hands on yours goes a long way towards that end. You close your eyes and sink into the sensation… and that’s when it hits you.

You’re tired.

Not just tired, not just exhausted. You’re damn near dead on your feet. You can’t imagine sleeping, but your mind is in a fog, your chest is tight with anxiety, and you had gotten so accustomed to the sensation of exhaustion that you hadn’t even noticed it.

And there’s not really anything you can do about it.

A little bit of sleep might help, but connecting to the Fade will build your aura back up, without any way of discharging it. And at this point, you suspect you’d need something like a week of sleep to get even close to feeling normal again.

Cole was right. At this rate, you’re going to come apart. And you’ve no solution.
Your realization of what’s wrong does you no good, and it doesn’t even improve your mood. The second you finish the missive—easier now, your hand doesn’t tremble thanks to Solas’ magic—you’re out the door and headed towards the Commander’s office. You can deliver his present at the same time, that way it won’t be a thing. Why did you even buy the Commander of the Inquisition a present? It wasn’t like Leliana, a gift with meaning, it was just… You’d seen it and thought of him. Thought of stories of his family he told you over chess.

Stupid.

At least Fereldens are free and easy with gift-giving. It’s much more casual there than it is in, say, Orlais, where custom dictates a whole scene around gift-giving. In some ways, it will be easier to give him something than Leliana… and you still can’t even picture yourself giving Solas his present.

Unfortunately, fate is working against you once again. It’s still extremely early in the morning; Solas rises early enough that you forget when normal people roll out of bed. And were it not for the fact you’d once witnessed it, you wouldn’t believe the Iron Bull slept at all.

The Commander is not still in bed; he must be one of Skyhold’s many early risers. But neither has he started his work day. The guard posted outside his office informs you that Commander Rutherford likes to walk the walls and survey Skyhold before he starts his morning. The implication is clear: you shouldn’t bother him.

You’re gonna.

Any other day, you would return to the rotunda and do some other work, then come back at a more reasonable time. But today, you are angry. At Leliana, at the missive, and—ridiculously—at the Commander. For being the recipient of this stupid missive, for being so utterly terrifying, for not being in his office. So you thank the guard and stalk off over the battlements, looking for that ridiculous fluffy pauldron.

You find the Commander near the tower that’s being refitted for Templar use. Of course you do. Because your life is determined to be as unpleasant for you as possible. It says something for just how out of fucks to give you are, that you stalk right over to him.

“Pardon me, Commander?”

He looks shocked to see you. He’d been staring out over the mountains, more or less oblivious to his surroundings. He looks tired; there are slight bags under his eyes that probably mirror your own. Quite a pair of workaholics, the two of you. How funny would it be if you advised him to get more sleep? The fabric of the Veil itself might tear and form another breach in the sky at the sheer irony.

“Emma?” he says, still confused. “Ah…” He straightens somewhat; his hazy, tired eyes focus. “Can I help you?”

“I’m sorry to bother you so early, Commander, but this missive was on my desk this morning, so I assumed it important,” you explain, a simple lie to hide your irritation at being used like a buy-one-service-get-one-free sale. You’re not a messenger, dammit. “I confess, I also had a question for you, myself.”

You hand the missive over it, and his eyes flit down the page. “Hmm.” The corners of his mouth twitch into a frown. You hope he’s getting more use out of the missive than you did; it was a stupid thing about, as far as you could tell, the romantic liaisons of a bisexual Tal-Vashoth in Nevarra. That
the Ben-Hassrath found it important to report on is the only thing of interest you could really locate. You need to copy down the reports you’ve been translating and see if you can notice some patterns, honestly, because this is getting silly.

He glances back up at you. “What was your question?”

You take a deep breath; your heart had jumped into your throat when his eyes met yours, your stomach twisted into unpleasant knots. Perhaps this fear reflex of yours in regard to the Commander is unnecessary—he seems to like you well enough—but there it is, nonetheless. He has the shoulders of too many unkind men in your memory, the rugged chin and rough, round ears of too many humans who’ve done too much to you to ever be forgotten.

“A Tal-Vashoth came to Skyhold recently. He arrived with me; he’s likely going by the name Sataareth. I was pulled away when I first arrived, and I haven’t seen him since. I was wondering if you knew what’s become of him.”

“Oh, yes,” the Commander says immediately. He doesn’t even need to think; you suppose a Vashoth is something of an irregularity in recruits. “I’ll admit, I was at a bit of a loss of what to do with him. Came right up and said he wanted to join, but he makes the other recruits a little… nervous.”

You frown. On one hand, you can’t really blame them; Qunari make you nervous too. But surely the Inquisition wouldn’t turn him down?

“Fortunately, Katari offered to oversee his training personally,” the Commander continues. “And we get enough odd-balls amongst the recruits that we have a bunk specifically for them. Is he a friend of yours?”

“Ah… Something like that.” Had Leliana mentioned nothing? “I’m glad to hear he’s becoming situated, in any case.” Although you’re not particularly pleased to hear he’s being situated with Katari. Your dislike for the Tal-Vashoth is possibly irrational, and you’re willing to admit to yourself that you’re perhaps feeling a little over-protective of Sataareth. But… checking in on them both wouldn’t hurt. “Thank you, Commander. Oh, and… I obtained something for you, in Val Royeaux,” you add quickly, immediately reaching into your back. You’d placed it on the top so you could grab it easily and not spend a few awkward minutes rummaging through your bag. It’s barely even wrapped—the tissue paper opens as you thrust it into his hands, already preparing to turn and walk away. No need to see his reaction. Both of you are interrupted, however, by the oddest sound you’ve ever heard.

Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaasplat
Chapter Notes

A few people have voiced their displeasure with the pacing of my fic. I have heard these complaints, and decided to give you what you're really here for...

An entire chapter about goats.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Maaaaaaaasplat

What…. what the fuck?

It’s clear Cullen hears it too, because you’re both frozen, your hands and his on his gift, eyes narrowing in confusion. Your gazes meet, as if to say… did you hear that too?

MaaaaAAAAAAAIAaaAAIAASPLAT.

“You heard that, right?” you’re the first to ask.

“What in the Maker’s name…”

You both turn to look over the battlements as you hear another similar sound beginning.

And so you both see a goat, flying through the air, then thudding against Skyhold’s wall. You watch, blankly, as it slides down and then stumbles onto its feet, milling about in a confused daze with two other goats.

You and Cullen look back at each other, no less confused.

“I should… go look into that,” he decides, his hand wrapping around the tiny, wooden mabari you’d handed him. He hasn’t even looked at it yet. But he has it. That’s what counts.

“Um… Yes. I suppose so,” you agree, and he rushes off across the ramparts. You stare down at the goats. Who the fuck threw a goat at Skyhold? Multiple goats? Literally at Skyhold?

After a second longer of bewilderment, you head off after the Commander. You’re curious, damnit. You catch up to him quickly, and trail behind him as he shouts for a group of soldiers. You shadow him out of Skyhold. You suspect he’s forgotten you’re there, and apparently your sheaf of paper and the quill behind your ear is enough to make you look like you belong there. Or perhaps no one is questioning you because you’re standing close to the Commander and he’s not questioning you.

But then you get across the bridge, and he and the soldiers begin rushing off towards the source of the disturbance. And you realize you’re outside of Skyhold with a hell of a distraction happening.

Your curiosity can wait.

You slip quietly into the woods. There’ll be no grand display of magic today; your aura isn’t nearly as overpowered as it was before. Instead, you duck only a minute’s run into the woods and proceed
to drain yourself as quickly as you can with whatever spells come to mind. You wish you had time to try some of the new things you’ve read about, like summoning veilfire. But you’re in a rush.

You leave yourself with an unhappy, bare-bones aura again, and tuck it back into your stomach as you rush back towards the bridge. Hopefully, no one will have noticed your little stroll into the woods. Fortunately, things are even more chaotic than when you left. The gates are wide open and soldiers are rushing back and forth. It’s nothing for you to slip back into Skyhold. Honestly, these people need to work on their security–although you do see a few guards take note of you, they seem to recognize you, or simply don’t register you as a potential threat.

Well… now what? Back to work, perhaps? But you’re still a little curious, so you climb back onto the battlements to see if you can’t see what’s going on. You can’t, as it turns out--there’s some sort of kerfluffle, but it’s too far away for you to make out the details. Seems like maybe the Inquisition men are running some other group off–presumably a group of weird, aggressive goatherds or something. Whatever happened, it was clearly interesting, so you’ll certainly hear about it through the rumor mill by lunch.

Seriously though… why goats? That thought is interrupted by a familiar, displeased bleating. You glance down, and to your shock, note that the goats are still there. They’re sort of stuck there along the cliff. How are they going to get down? The little ridge they’re precariously balanced on goes all the way to the bridge, but would they think to walk that way and then cross a bridge?

You puzzle over the mystery of the goats as you head towards the kitchen, absent-mindedly muse as you fetch a wilting head of lettuce and some rope. You suspect you look just as odd as Cole sometimes does, tying rope around lettuce. You don’t even have his benefit of being forgotten afterwards. But, like him, you’re just trying to help.

And as silly as you may look, and as many odd stares as you get from guards on the ramparts, it works. You lower the lettuce slowly over the side of the wall. You have to physically strike one of the goats in the face with it before it gets the idea… and then you have to move very quickly as the three goats chase after the lettuce and try to pull it out of its rope harness.

Honestly, running around the wall of Skyhold, dodging underneath the arms of soldiers, and occasionally jumping up onto the outermost protective wall, all while leading goats with a head of lettuce on a rope…

Probably the weirdest thing you’ve ever done.

You finally reach the gates and have to more or less swing the lettuce onto the bridge and drop the rope. But the goats jump onto the bridge, much to the confusion of several passing soldiers. You dart down the stairs and out the gates, quickly fetching the rope while the goats are still butting heads and tearing at the lettuce. As swiftly as you can, you tie the rope around all three of their necks. They don’t appear to be at all scared of you, or of the soldiers. They must have been farm goats, not wild.

Who threw them at the fucking wall?!

Ah well, you’ve other things to worry about. You grasp one end of the rope firmly--the goats aren’t as big as wild mountain goats you’ve seen--and eaten--in Ferelden, but there’s still three of them. You wait until they finish the lettuce, and then proceed to pull them towards the gate. They don’t really seem to want to go, and all attempt to go in different directions despite the fact that their necks are tied together.

So they’re not particularly smart goats, then.
“What on earth are you doing to those goats?” comes a familiar, low voice. You glance over your shoulder to see Warden Blackwall, of all people.

“Oh, ser Warden… I assure you, it’s not as odd as it seems. ...Or maybe it’s odder, actually. Hey! Hey you! Stop trying to eat his ear!” you snap at one of the goats. You glance back at Blackwall. “You know, you’re a strong looking fellow… and they do say Wardens live to serve,” you say with a cheeky grin. “If I promise to explain the goats, will you help me get them out of the way and into Skyhold?”

Blackwall laughs, a hearty, throaty sound. You can’t help thinking to yourself that everyone in the entirety of the Free Marches probably has an uncle just like him. He sort of gives off that uncle vibe, when he’s not being an asshole for no reason. “Alright,” he agrees. “But mostly because I want to hear that story.”

Between Blackwall’s strength and your coaxing, the two of you manage to get the goats inside Skyhold and into a quiet corner near the stables. You feel quite accomplished.

“So… why do you have three goats?” Blackwall says as you idly feed them some oatcakes, mostly just to feel their adorable little noses pushed against your hand. They’re kind of cute. You’ve always been more fond of animals like donkeys, mules, goats, and sheep than you are of traditional “pet” type animals like dogs, cats, or nugs. Although the nug thing was more of a trend within Orlais, from what you understand. You had thought for a very short time that dwarves kept nugs as pets. You were corrected by a particularly loud, particularly drunk dwarf you’d met at an Orlesian event.

“Alright, so, I was on the walls with the Commander--” you begin.

“Why were you on the walls with the Commander?” Blackwall interrupts immediately. You glare at him.

“I was delivering him a missive. And before you ask why I, a linguist, was delivering a missive to Commander Rutherford, I don’t know either. I suspect it’s because I did it once without protest, and now Leliana assumes I don’t mind.”

The way Blackwall glances around, as if he expects an assassin to swoop down from the barn, is somewhat amusing.

“Anyway, we were on the walls and… someone started throwing goats at the walls.”

“...What?”

“I’m not kidding! I’m still waiting to find out why,” you admit. “But in all the hubbub, no one seemed to notice the goats were stuck, so I sort of… lured them over. They seem to be tame. I can’t imagine why someone was throwing them at the damn walls.” You giggle slightly, distracted, as one of the goats licks at your thumb, hunting for more food. “I want to get a healer to look at them… this one’s limping, and I suspect they might have some broken ribs or something from being… I can only assume they were catapulted or something.”

“Belassan knows one of the healing ladies fairly well. He gets her whenever something’s wrong with one of the animals,” Blackwall muses. “Why would someone throw goats at the wall, though? Do you think they’re possessed or something?”

“I honestly have no idea. I’m sorry to ask for another favor, Ser Warden, but would you mind seeing if Belassan can get that healer? She’s a mage; she could heal them and tell if there was something off
about them. I’d like to stay and keep an eye on them so they don’t wander off.”

“Certainly,” Blackwall agrees amicably. He’s a lot nicer when he doesn’t think… whatever it was he thought about you when the two of you first met.

You run a soft hand over each of the goats in turn. They’re not even slightly skittish, although the way several flinch adds more credence to your theory that they’re injured. How could they not be? It’s a miracle none of them died. They must not have been thrown at a high velocity…

You swallow anxiously at the thought that some may not have been thrown hard enough to fully cross over the chasm.

Your curiosity about who had thrown them is a little darker now.

Blackwall returns, and then a few minutes later, Belassan arrives with the Rivani woman from yesterday. What had she said her name was? Nami? Navi? Navi, that was it.

“Goats?” she asks, an eyebrow raising. “Where did you procure goats from? We’re in the middle of the Frostbacks.”

“Would you believe someone threw them at us?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s the answer you’re getting,” you say with a shrug. “And they’re banged up from it, too. I was hoping you could take a look, see how badly injured they are.”

The woman eyes you suspiciously, but kneels next to one of the goats and runs a hand along its side. Her hand doesn’t visibly glow, but you’re certain you’d be able to feel the magic were your aura out and about.

“Cracked ribs,” she mutters under her breath after inspecting one of the goats. Another gets a diagnosis of three broken ribs and a broken leg. All three are banged up, but at least they’re alive. She leaves to get some supplies to set the broken leg of Goat #2 (you’re steadfastly refusing to name them, though you know it’s inevitable). That leaves you, Blackwall, and Belassan with three goats.

“So… What are you going to do with them?” Belassan wants to know. “You keep acquiring random animals.”

“Maybe you should start a farm,” Blackwall jokes. “Why not? You do everything else.”

Blackwall is joking, but it triggers a thought in you. You hum thoughtfully. “She’s actually going to now,” Belassan says blithely. “Just watch.”

“The chickens,” you say out loud, and both men turn and look at you expectantly. “They just put them in this shitty pen. It’s not even a proper coop. And every now and then, we get other animals from traders… but they just get slaughtered right away, because we’ve no place to put them.” Your mind is racing now, eyes flicking about at nothingness. “But winter is coming, and pretty soon animals won’t be able to make the journey through the Frostbacks as easily. Trade will slow and meat and animal products will be at a premium.”

“Oh dear,” murmurs Belassan, but you barely hear him.

“And there’s so much unused space by the pastures… The horses won’t even be able to use it during the winter, and they don’t need that much space to begin with…”
“Is she serious?” asks Blackwall. You see Belassan nodding out of the corner of your eye.

“Belassan, fetch me the Horsemaster,” you say absent-mindedly. “Blackwall, you carve, do you not? How good are you with wood tools?”

“Adequate, why?” he says cautiously as Belassan scurries off towards the barn again.

“Adequate should be enough…” you murmur. “Whose approval… Dennet and Gaston… Lady Montiliyet? No, she won’t care… Who else do I need? Fenris, Nell, Blackwall, Navi… The requisition agents? No, I can go around them, faster that way…”

“Are you planning what I think you’re planning?” Blackwall asks.

“Probably,” you admit, tapping a finger against your chin. “If I do this right…” You begin mumbling to yourself, then, half thinking out loud, mostly in Orlesian, with the occasional other word thrown in when Orlesian fails you. You wish you had some paper and a quill. Oh, wait, you do have paper. No quill though, damnit. Why do you go anywhere without a quill? You need one of those damn mini-desks like Lady Montiliyet has.

Oh, good, Belassan brought the Horsemaster. He looks a bit confused, but no matter.

“Belassan, do you know where to find Fenris?” you ask, eyes looking past him, mind still flipping through a dozen thoughts a second.

“I can probably locate him,” Belassan says, and you nod.

“Wonderful. Do that, bring him here. Horsemaster Dennet? I have a proposition for you…”

--

After a bit of haranguing, Dennet agrees. Belassan brings Fenris, who brings the news to the ex-slaves, who appear to love the idea. The little ones especially, once they see the three goats. Navi quickly leads the goats away to heal them, and lets a few of the smallest come with her.

Then the real work begins.

You explain the situation to everyone, just once. You don’t want to have to repeat yourself. Then you split them up into groups. Those who have a skill for woodwork are with Blackwall, crafting huts and coops. You’ll need more later, but honestly, right now the entirety of your planning encompasses three goats and two dozen chickens. It’s not exactly a plantation. Fenris gets a group of the stronger adults and begins clearing out some to the spare space in one of the unused corners of Skyhold, near the pastures. Mostly, they’re moving rocks and rubble out of the way. Nell gathers together the rest, women and children mostly, and they get to work running about Skyhold, taking supplies where they can get it.

As for you, you’re mostly doing what you do best—bullying shems.

“Please, serah?” you say, mind racing for a way to manipulate the stern-faced blacksmith in front of you. “What about… Bevin? Surely you can spare him to make a few dozen nails?”

“You know Bevin? I’m not surprised,” the woman says, rolling her eyes. “He does need to work on his form… but this sort of thing needs to go through the requisition officers, young lady.”

“I know, serah, but they’re so bogged down, what with the new influx of books, and it’s just a few nails,” you say, staring up through your eyelashes at the larger woman. She lets out a displeased
“Fine, fine. You’ll have your nails. At least you’re polite about it. I’ll put Bevin to work on it; maybe it’ll tire the little shit out. Oy! Bevin!” Maker, her voice is loud.

While you’re in the area, you take a moment to sneak up the stairs, as well, to where you’d met with Seeker Pentaghast. You’re not entirely sure why she bunks above the smithy… Although you’re also quite certain that you’ll be envying her for it as the weather turns steadily colder.

Fortunately, she’s not in, which lets you simply leave her present on the bedstand. Maker knows you’ll be better off if she doesn’t know it’s from you. You’re certain she’ll like it. If she enjoys Swords and Shields, then she’ll certainly enjoy the--frankly superior--newest issue of Randy Dowager. You picked up two copies in Orlais instead of one. She might not thank you, but it’s a favor nonetheless--getting books up here is difficult, and you somehow doubt she’d put in a requisition for one such as this.

You set it neatly on the stand by her bed and then slip back down the stairs. Back to work!

It’s not easy. You have to beg and manipulate and straight-up lie your way into wood scraps, nails, and the actual chickens themselves. That turns out to be the easiest part--Gaston, to your surprise, listens to you as you explain your plan, and agrees that it’s a good idea. He’s an asshole, as it turns out, but he’s not stupid. Or maybe you’ve just earned enough points with him that he won’t write you off immediately. Either way, the end result is the same.

After all of that, though, the only thing left to do is actually help out with the heavy lifting. It only took you an hour to get the stuff you needed. Especially since you don’t need to bully your way into workers: Fenris’ group is handling the labor… with help from Blackwall and Belassan. And… wait, when did Cole get here? You have to laugh when you see him, toddling across Skyhold with an armful of chickens, dodging out of the way of people who don’t quite see him.

“Let me guess,” you say, pausing to pluck a few chickens from his arms so he’s not carrying quite so many. “You’re helping?”

“I am!” he says happily. “And so are you. It’s very smart.”

“I’m glad you think so! Jobs for the ex-slaves--some of them, anyway--and food for the Inquisition. And the goats get a home,” you add happily. “Sometimes all these things need is someone to kick them off.”

“The chickens will like their new home,” he informs you. “They didn’t like the pens.”

“Good. Hopefully, the goats--”

“Has anyone seen Emma?” You perk up at the sound of your name, and glance around to see Sera. Her eyes are glazing right over you.

“She can’t see us?” you ask Cole.

“She doesn’t like seeing me, so I try not to make her,” Cole says, sounding apologetic.

“Oh, there you are!” Sera exclaims, her eyes locking onto you. “I knew you’d be at the center of all
“Well, the new refugees needed something to do, and I found goats,” you say, a little lamely.

“You found goats? Wot, in Orlais?”

“It’s… becoming a long story…”

“Awright, awright, drinks later and you can explain it. For now, let’s uh… work on the farm, I guess.”

Somehow, it turns into An Event. You suspect it’s because Skyhold really is just that boring. Eventually, you get not only Blackwall, Fenris, Belassan, Navi, Sera, and Cole, but a whole bundle of people you don’t even recognize. Mostly elves.

A boy comes and drops of the nails. You recognize him instantly; he has the same curly brown hair as his older sister. You feel you should apologize for sticking him on nail duty for the day, but instead, you find yourself distracted. He looks to be about fifteen or sixteen, a boy on the cusp of becoming a man, with his sister’s hair, tan skin, and copious freckles. As opposed to their sister, who has dark red hair, pale skin, and deep, hazel-green eyes.

And who also looks about fifteen.

Well, it’s none of your business, admittedly; you’re just naturally curious when you smell intrigue.

You’re not sure how long you’ve been at it at this point. The sun is rising steadily but it hasn’t hit high noon yet, that’s about all you can say. With so many people helping, things are coming along shockingly quickly—the ground has been cleared, fences are actively being raised all over the place, one goat hut has already been finished and there’s a coop coming along very nicely. It’s a bit chaotic, but the ex-slaves look cheerful and engaged and the children are playing with Navi and the newly healed goats—Navi even mentions that one of the girls has a healer’s touch and she intends to see about getting her stationed in the healer’s tent to begin learning.

And that was kind of the point of all this. It gives the refugees something to do now, but it will also give them something to do in the future… a point that isn’t lost on Fenris, who comes to sit next to you while you’re taking a breather and drinking some tea that Lily, Celia and some of the other kitchen girls brought around.

“I feel I should thank you again,” he begins, but you shake your head.

“No need.”

“You’ve gone out of your way to help—”

“The Inquisition would have found something for them eventually,” you say, cutting him off in an attempt to control your blushing cheeks. “I just saw an opportunity to help.”

“Still. It is appreciated. Many would neither see the opportunity nor think to actually help.”

The two of you sit in silence for a moment, watching elves dart around the courtyard. And it is nearly
all elves, you realize, although there are humans too. But well over three-quarters of those working have pointed ears. You suppose that’s not surprising—you’d grabbed most of your workforce from Tevinter ex-slaves, after all… But still, it’s nice to see your people working together for something like this. The elves in Skyhold seem to exist as a sort of quiet, unspoken bottom layer. If there exists any kind of coherent network between them, you’ve yet to gain access to it.

But… if there’s one thing you’ve learned of elves that live within human civilizations, it’s that they are always a network waiting to happen.

You and Fenris work a bit more closely after that. You’re both on your knees in the dirt, planting grass seeds the garden was nice enough to provide, when yet another elf comes to see what all the fuss is about.

Solas.

You see him walking through the work area, what’s rapidly becoming a farm, and pause in your conversation with Fenris about the difficulties of acclimating to life after slavery. Fenris had been telling you about a slave girl that Hawke adopted. But she was young, female, and elven, so while Fenris didn’t seem to think anything untoward happened, you’re nursing private suspicions about the man’s motivations.

All of that rushes from your mind when you see Solas.

He looks so natural here, in his dark greens and browns, bare toes sinking into the freshly plowed dirt. Amongst so many elves, it’s easy to notice how tall he is. He looks… oddly regal, in a way, but that’s probably just because everyone is toiling around him while he strolls through. There’s an odd look in his eye, but you can’t quite identify it. You’re staring when his eyes meet yours… embarrassing.

“I shouldn’t be surprised to find you here,” he says, and you recognize amusement in his eyes, now. “What have you done now?”

“It got away from me, a little bit,” you admit, standing and wiping a bit of sweat off your brow with the back of your hand. No use getting dirtier than you already are. You’ve already forgone your tunic despite the chill nip in the air, and your clothes and hands are both covered in dirt. “But we’re sort of… building a little farm for the animals here. Goats and chickens. Some of the new refugees can man it, and it’ll give the Inquisition a more steady food supply this winter if we can get it up and running before it gets too cold to ship in supplies and animals.”

“An inspired idea. So inspired, in fact, that you worked straight through lunch,” he comments. You pale slightly. “Ir abelas, Solas,” you begin, clutching your hands together as if in prayer. “I thought I had more time—”

“You’re apologizing for the wrong reasons, I suspect,” Solas interrupts you. “A single missed meal would not hurt me. I am not the one whose ribs can be counted.”

You flush. Your sides are very much not visible through this undershirt—what he’s said has revealed to everyone listening that he’s seen you in less. Mortifying in any situation—particularly one where gossipmongers can hear—but Fenris is also only a few feet away, which makes it pass from “mortifying” straight into “hurl yourself from the battlements.”

“I-I-I…” you stammer uselessly, groping for a comeback.
Solas sighs. “Perhaps I can be of some assistance? If the work is done more quickly, it will be all the more easy to persuade you to come inside and eat.”

“We could always use more hands,” Fenris comments from where he still kneels in the dirt behind you. You shift to the side as he stands, already cringing internally. You’d hoped to put this off. What if they loathe each other? Well, Fenris will probably hate Solas, that’s almost a given. But what if they loathe each other loudly? You note nervously the way Solas’ eyes travel across Fenris’ tattooed neck and arms. “I don’t suppose you know much about carpentry?”

“I’m sure I could figure something out,” Solas replies, glancing over towards where the fences are being built. You’ve no doubt he’ll be a great deal of help; one mage is as useful as a dozen men. Whether Fenris sees it the same way, however… “You must be Fenris. I’ve heard a great deal.”

“Oh?” Fenris says, wiping his hands off on his pants. “All good, I hope.”

“Of course,” Solas says. “Emma seems quite… fond of you. I’m pleased to finally meet you.”

Fond? Well, he could have said a lot worse.

“I’m afraid you have me at a disadvantage,” Fenris is saying while you essentially stand in the background, silently screaming.

“Oh, of course. My name is Solas.”

“Oh, yes. Solas. The man whose meals she fetches.”

Oh, Maker.

“The same,” Solas agrees.

“WELL,” you interject loudly, your panicked mind abruptly spilling your nerves. “Solas, why don’t you go help Nell and Sera with that fence? I’ll finish up here and we can go in and have some lunch.”

The still-amused look on Solas’ face tells you that he knows exactly what you’re doing, and why, but you don’t care, so long as he plays along. He gives you a slight nod of the head, and wanders off towards the fences. Fenris’ eyes follow him for a moment, before they focus back on you. The two of you kneel back into the dirt and continue working. You only hope you can continue to hold his focus while Solas begins magically assembling fences some distance away.

“Are you his servant, then?” Fenris asks.

“Not at all,” you say blithely. “Although it’s a common assumption. We share a workspace… his workspace. In return for allowing me a peaceful, quiet place to work, I began fetching his meals. It’s more a favor to myself and the kitchens than it is to him; someone would have brought them regardless. As it is, I can fetch two meals and dine on far better fare than we get in the mess hall.”

“Is he someone of particular importance, then?”

How long can you dodge this before he gets irritated at you when he actually does find out? “He’s of the Inquisitor’s inner circle,” you say carefully. “He’s been with them since before they were the Inquisition, before the Inquisitor was the Inquisitor.”

“You’ve managed to find lofty company--” his voice cuts out suddenly as he turns to look at Solas just in time to see him magically putting together an entire section of fence at once, hands glowing
softly. Well. That didn’t last very long. At least Solas seems to be enjoying himself. Sera punches him in the arm and says something moronic about magic, but one of the slave children is bouncing up and down and clapping, and Blackwall is calling him over to help with the coop.

Fenris’ eyes turn back to yours, eyebrow raised. You clear you keep your face perfectly neutral. You never said he wasn’t a mage, after all.

“You find yourself in the company of a great many mages, it seems,” Fenris says finally.

You shrug. “It’s no matter to me.”

“Is it not?” he says, and you’re not surprised to find he sounds irritated. “Without mages, there would be no ex-slaves here in need of help.”

The corner of your eye twitches slightly. You want to bite your tongue. You do. You want to ignore it and plant the seeds and end the day in peace.

But…

“I know your situation is different, Fenris,” you say finally, with a bit of a sigh. “But do you know who sold me into slavery?”

“I… do not.”

“It was Loghain Mac Tir, in fact. And while the man who ultimately purchased me was a mage, that was one man amongst many. The one ultimately responsible for my position was, and always will be, Loghain Mac Tir.” You look up from the dirt and towards Fenris, a bit sadly. “Slavery exists outside the Imperium. If Loghain had decided selling my body was what he needed to do, he would always have found someone to purchase me. Magic is responsible for great evils, yes, Fenris, but mankind is responsible for far more. I can no more hate every mage for the actions of some than I can hate every person for the actions of some.”

“You have a very… sympathetic worldview,” he says, finally. He looks irritated, perhaps, but not angry. At least he’s not yelling. “One might say overly sympathetic.”

“So I’ve been told. By Solas, in fact, who is as surprised as you at my lack of hostility,” you say with a smile.

“At least he possesses some degree of self awareness, then,” Fenris grumbles, and you breathe a small sigh of relief.

Crisis: avoided. For now, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

There were going to be two chapters this week, and this one was going to be a goodly bit longer, but, to be brutally honest, I’ve been completely depressed and dragged down by things from unexpected critique to straight-up anonymous hate. So, I’m sorry. You’ll just have to deal with a brief chapter about goats and elves and people coming together.
It’s afternoon by the time Solas convinces you that the elves can handle the rest alone, and you’re no longer needed. It’s about fifteen minutes after that when he manages to actually tear you away from the goats. You can’t help it! They’re so cute, with their soft, fluffy lips and bizarre eyes. And the little noise they make. Maaaaa.

You have always been more fond of such animals when compared to dogs or cats.

You flop down into the rotunda to find a cold lunch already waiting for both of you--Solas had it brought, perhaps, though you’re a bit alarmed to think of how. Did he go down to the kitchen himself? They would have had a heart attack. You’ll have to apologize later, if that’s the case.

There’s your little stool by his desk. You feel a pang when you see it. Had he pulled it over and then been waiting on you?

“I’m sorry I didn’t bring your lunch properly, Solas,” you say, frowning. “I lost track of time.”

“It’s no matter. You were quite busy, and it was a good cause. It was shocking to see everything short of a barn raising going on in the courtyard, but somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to be all that surprised to see you at the middle of it.”

You have to laugh at that. Hadn’t Belassan said something similar? She’s going to now, just you watch. “I was pleased when you stopped to help,” you admit. “Thank you for that. A mage is worth twelve men. Though I’m shocked that you so readily knew a spell for putting wooden slats together.”

“It comes up more frequently than you might think,” he replies.

You snort, but your mind stays on how nice it had been to see him out there. You really only ever see him in the rotunda, most days at Skyhold, and you rarely see him speaking to other people. Dorian, occasionally, and you’re certain Cole comes to him as often as the spirit comes to you, but…

It was good, you decide, to see him out in the sunlight, interacting. It makes you smile.

And he and Fenris had met, and nothing had even exploded! Though Fenris had that same tension he probably has around all mages. A pity, honestly, but you can’t even blame him. It stings a bit though… you can’t help but feel like he only talks to you because he doesn’t know what you are.

But then, isn’t that the case with everyone?
That thought sobers you somewhat, and the curl of your lips fades down to neutrality.

Solas notices, of course. His head tilts in a wordless question.

“Just thinking about all the work I’m behind on,” you joke, forcing a smile. Solas wouldn’t hate you for being a mage, but there are other things he’d find just as despicable as Fenris finds magic. Something you need to keep keenly in mind, no matter Cole’s opinion on the subject.

“Eat first,” Solas instructs. “You will get nowhere on an empty stomach.”

“Vel, mamae,” you intone sarcastically, but you begin to eat again. “It was nice, to see you out there,” you decide. He looks surprised. “You know my opinions on the matter… every time someone sees a mage helping out, that’s one more person who might know magic isn’t inherently evil… and neither are mages. Plus, you were cute with the kids.” You pause, eyes widening. OH fuck you hadn’t meant to say that last part! Fortunately, Solas chuckles.

“You would think about such things, even when waist deep in work. I cannot even scold you for becoming so distracted from your duties. It was for a good cause. In one fell swoop, you managed to assist the Inquisition, the ex-slaves, and even the animals.”

You flush with the praise. You could roll around in it like a cat in a sunbeam.

When you finish eating, Solas checks how your hands are recovering and enchants your wrist. You “begin” the day in an excellent mood. If you hadn’t been proud of yourself before (you had been), you certainly are now (even more so). That—combined with Solas’ fantastic enchantment—has you churning out pictures faster than you would have thought possible. You can almost enjoy it; your hand seems to have a direct line to your mind today. Each line is exactly as you wanted, precise and accurate. A satisfying delight that feeds into itself, only improving your work and your mood.

Even Solas’ hovering doesn’t bother you today, though when he gets too close you do feel self-conscious. He focuses mostly on the completed works, examining each page as you complete it; occasionally seeming to compare it with the original in the tome. You feel less awkward about it when he points out small mistakes in one picture. Oh, he’s just checking your work! Another favor, another thing you’ll owe him for, but a helpful thing for him to do. And a good explanation for why he’s lingering over your work rather than focusing on his own.

You quickly realize he’s catching errors you probably would have missed even looking over them yourself. No surprise, he’s a real artist. He doubtlessly has an eye for these things that you lack. But this means you can simply trust him and not pour over the work stressfully yourself. The work he clears goes in one pile, the work you have to make edits on in another.Honestly, that saves you so much time that, despite the delays of late, you suspect you’ll be finished after a full day’s work tomorrow… or perhaps even half or three quarters of a day.

The two of you begin to talk as you work, a testament to how good you’re feeling. Normally it’s difficult for you to talk while drawing. And your dialogue is stilted, but when you turn the conversation to the book he’s reading while waiting for you to finish your next piece—when had he moved onto the couch, anyway??—Solas is more than happy to pick up the slack in the conversation.

“Excerpts from the lectures of First Enchanter Wensulus,” Solas replies. You glance over him, letting your eyes linger slightly, your hand hesitating on the angled curve of a high dragon’s eye. He’s reclining on the couch, back and head supported by the arm and a few of the soft pillows that normally rest there. His legs are crossed, one knee up and the other leg draped casually across it, leaving his foot idly twitching in the air. He looks so comfortable. It’s the best kind of distracting.
“First Enchanter Wensulus?” you say, surprised to realize you’re familiar with the man in question. 
“Anything of use?”

“No, not particularly,” he says with a sigh. “It’s actually rather dull and… tired. Dry. I wanted to 
know more about the sorts of magic they teach in southern Circles, but…”

“You think it’s dry and tired?” you say with a snort, and he glances over his book at you. You 
quickly turn your focus back to your work. “Maker help us all; it must be terrible.”

“Perhaps,” he says with a soft chuckle. After a moment of silently coloring the high dragon iris--
you’re coming to have a new appreciation for their beauty, honestly--you speak up again.

“Have you perhaps tried the works of Josephus or Halden? They’re a little less… restrained. 
Wensulus was a Loyalist, and frankly, it shows. Halden was an Aequitarian, and his writing on 
magic tends to be a bit more… reasonable. Less tempered in absolute mortal terror, at the very least. 
I’m not sure precisely what you’re looking for, but Petrine has some interesting pieces on the 
structure and teaching of the Circle itself, from an outsider perspective. Not much use if what you’re 
studying is the magic itself, but understanding the mage is vital to understanding the biases of their 
work.”

You glance over at Solas. The book is resting on his chest, spread open where he was reading. His 
eyes are on you instead. You’ve been rambling again, without realizing. You could have least done it 
in Orlesian.

“Once again, the extent of your knowledge on the subject surprises me,” he says, and you don’t miss 
the glint in his eye. Curiosity? Suspicion? Both equally dangerous. You turn your focus back to your 
work.

“Solas, I am a linguist. I read and write both as a living and as a passion. There are two main 
organizations that need people like me: the Chantry and the Circles. Therefore, those are simply the 
two things I know the most about. You’ve expressed little interest in the history of the Chantry, but I 
promise you I could ramble at just as great a length on that subject--probably moreso.”

“Are you Andrastian because of your study of the Chantry, or in spite of it?”

Your short bark of laughter startles you, almost making your hand twitch and nearly ruining a line. 
But you recover quickly. “In spite, perhaps.”

“Were you raised that way, then?”

You chuckle once more, briefly, then sigh. “Solas, I know you’ve been living in the woods for a 
while, but you should know that most people find discussing religion to be akin to discussing politics 
or sex: somewhat uncomfortable and better left to the professionals we pay to do it.”

Now it’s Solas’ turn to laugh, and it’s longer than his normal short chuckle. It’s quiet, but it rolls 
against the rounded walls of the rotunda, bouncing back against your ears until it seems to buoy you 
up. When it finally stops and you float gently back to reality, he says, “You’re very skilled at 
avoiding conversations you do not wish to have.”

“You never actually locked me in a room to get the truth out of me,” you say with a soft smirk, 
remembering his teasing threat in Val Royeaux. “So you can’t be that curious.”

You’d meant it as a joke.

The look in his eyes makes you think he may have taken it as a challenge.
“We’ll see,” he says. You feel a promise behind those words.

Ahaha… Oops.

- 

Despite accidentally inviting Solas to lock you in a room—now there’s something you feel ambivalent over—you manage to get a huge amount accomplished that afternoon. You barely want to stop for dinner, something you suspect Solas notices. Were you not responsible for his meals, you would definitely work through without stopping, but when Solas clears his throat rather pointedly about fifteen minutes after your candle says it’s time to go get dinner, you finally put your quill down.

You’re amazed by how much you got done in a few short hours. A lot of it is thanks to Solas checking your work for you. You’d been joking, before, about putting him to work… but Maker, you could really use him. And if he’s bored anyway, there’s no harm in it, right? He has his own studies and reading to do, and you’re certain he does work for the Inquisition, like whatever he’s doing with the shards, but… There’s no harm in distracting him every once in awhile, is there?

You hem and haw over that while you go and fetch dinner for both of you. You’re rather expecting to run into Servis, but instead, you run into Fenris. Honestly, between the two of them, Krem, Dorian, and Bull, you feel like you’re back in Seheron these days. This time when Fenris catches you, you already have Solas’ (and your) meal upon a tray, and are heading back up towards the stairs. He eyes the food with slight distaste, perhaps thinking about who you’re bringing it to.

“A meal for your not-master?” he says dryly. You try not to look too annoyed.

“Yes. He works me to the bone, don’t you know—assisting me with my paperwork, healing my injuries, and providing me a quiet working area. It’s amazing my exhausted body has yet to give out from under me,” you reply, a little more snippily than might be entirely necessary.

Fenris frowns, but that does seem to be his default expression. “My apologies; I wanted to thank you, not harangue you. Enough construction has been finished for all of the animals to be moved into place. Nell is speaking with some of the requisition agents to get supplies for the animals in place and figure out official jobs and pay for the people who will be working there. And Aelia has been apprenticed to that healer woman.”

“Navi. Is Aelia a mage?” you ask, surprised. You recognize the name—the tiny child, no more than eight, had caught your eye before. She’d been all skin and bones and long, fragile ears.

“No. But the woman said she had ‘a healer’s touch,’” Fenris replies. “You helped a lot of people find respectable work today.”

You want to wave him off, but your hands are full. Instead you just shake your head. “I did very little. The opportunity merely presented itself.”

“You give yourself too little credit,” Fenris insists, but you shake your head again.

“Will Nell still be leaving?” you ask, more to change the subject than anything.

“Ah… yes,” Fenris admits. “And a few of the others. I believe most will stay, but Nell… well, I can’t imagine her settling down to farm.”

“And yourself?”

“…I’ll be here for a while longer. Long enough to buy you another drink, at the very least.”
You flush despite yourself. This smooth motherfucker! “I’m afraid you’ll have to get in line behind Sera,” you say apologetically. Wow. What a problem to have! Too many attractive elves want to have drinks with you. Maker bless Skyhold. “She’s already claimed me for the evening.”

“Tomorrow night, perhaps?” Fenris asks, and your slight flush threatens to spread into full blown crimson.

“C-certainly,” you stammer, then mentally curse your own incompetent tongue.

“This… Solas of yours,” he begins, and you wonder idly if he will always be referred to as “that” Solas or “your” Solas. Does it physically pain people to speak his name without such modifiers? “Is he a Circle mage, then? I had heard a few had joined up with the Inquisition after the recovery of the Templars.”

After the destruction of the rebellion, more like. But you don’t say that. “No, he’s not. There are no Circles, not anymore. But even before, he wasn’t.”

Fenris’ eyes narrow slightly. “An apostate? He doesn’t look Dalish.”

“He’s not Dalish, and yes, he’s an apostate,” you say. “You can’t be that surprised. I know you’ve met plenty.”

“Yes, a blood mage and an abomination chief among them,” he snaps, and you bristle as well.

“You’ll be relieved to know he’s neither, then! Just a man who risked his freedom to help seal the breach and save the world!” you snap right back.

Fenris looks angry, then, ready to double down, and your temper is flaring similarly. This is why you knew this was a bad idea, honestly. Once you get past the tragic background, the two of you have nothing in--

Fenris puts his hands up, a gesture of surrender. “I am picking fights again. It is… a problem of mine.”

You hesitate, then laugh, and the tension is defused. “I’m sorry as well. Solas is a good man. It pains me that people see his magic and nothing else.” It’s not entirely a lie. What pains you that is so many see his magic as something evil instead of something amazing. See him as something evil. And, by extension, you.

They’re not as wrong as they could be, but they’re also not right if they think you corrupt for the wrong reasons. Your magic is not what makes you… Well. There’s no use dwelling on it now.

“Solas’ dinner is going to get cold, Fenris. But… drinks, tomorrow. Stop by the rotunda in the evening?” you say, a bit hopefully. You shouldn’t put him anywhere near Solas, but you kind of want to, now. To be a brat about it.

He agrees, and you’re quick to head back to the rotunda with Solas’ rapidly cooling dinner.

“Accosted again?” Solas asks as you scramble into the rotunda. You can’t blame him for the assumption; not only has it been something like fifteen or twenty minutes, this is becoming a regular thing for you. “The Tevinter mage or the Tevinter elf?”

You snort. “Don’t call him that to his face; he’s actually from Seheron, I think. But yes, it was Fenris.”
“Did he want to thank you, apologize, or ask you on a date?” Solas says mildly, as you pull the stool a bit closer to his desk to begin eating. You flush slightly.

“He thanked me,” you admit. And then he was an ass about magic. Again. You don’t actually say that, but you suspect your displeasure must show on your face, because Solas delicately lets the subject drop. You’re eating with him, but your mind is still on Fenris.

Despite Varric’s obvious intentions to try and pair the two of you off, the idea is laughable. The more Fenris learns about you, the less he’ll like you. You’re capable of keeping your mouth quiet on the subject of magic in the future, to avoid conflict, but you don’t like the necessity. And it’s especially difficult where Solas is involved.

And it’s all a moot point, because you can’t afford a lover right now—or ever, really, but particularly now, when you’re hiding underneath the noses of the entire Templar Order. You’d already gone through that with Sera, and almost wound up kissing her anyway. And you’d made a similar mistake with Solas. You can’t keep fucking up just because pretty elves pay you some attention. And, admittedly, because it’s been a really, really long time.

Your sour mood continues through dinner. And, of course, by the end of it, you’d utterly forgotten that you would never actually be rid of all the attractive elves paying you attention. At least until Sera throws open the rotunda door, reminding you sharply that all of them are varying degrees of insistent. You jump at the loud slam, although you note that Solas doesn’t, though he does look over.

“Awright, I’m here to steal ya back!” Sera proclaims loudly. It’s hard not to smile, despite your depressed mood. “Who knows what Mister Elfy Elf has been doin’ to ya this whole time.” She strides over cockily and puts a hand on your shoulder. “Any urges to run nekkid through the woods or dress like old dead guys and go on ‘n’ on ‘bout how great they were?”

You snort, more at Solas’ expression than what Sera is saying. “You’ll be the first to know if I feel like running around naked, Sera. Who else would do it with me?”

“For a chance t’see you in the buff? Half the fortress’d proly be strippin’ down,” she laughs.

Solas clears his throat. “If the two of you wouldn’t mind flirting elsewhere? Some of us actually do work.”

You flinch at the same time as blushing, probably creating an odd effect. “Ir abelas, Solas,” you say without thinking, and Sera gives you a look like you’d just called her mother a whore.

“Oh, you stop tha’ right now,” she says, grabbing your hand and pulling you up off the stool. “He’s gone and rubbed off on you, I knew he would.”

“I assure you, I have not,” Solas says, and you’re speechless, your brain stuck on multiple interpretations for Solas rubbing off on you. “Perhaps she simply has more depth than you thought.”

That snaps you right back to reality. How many elven catfights are you going to have to break up today?!

“Oh, because you’d know depth, you old—”

You grab your bag with one hand and then redouble your grip on Sera and pull her towards the exit to the rotunda. She resists your tug for a moment, glaring at you, but whatever expression is on your face seems to give her pause. You suspect you look a bit strained, or perhaps desperate. Everyone you know hates each other. She relents, and you all but drag her from the rotunda, giving an apologetic half-grin to Solas as you shove her out the door.
“Ugh!” she exclaims as soon as you close the door, leaving the two of you alone on the balcony overlooking the courtyard. “That stupid--”

You hate doing this to her, but you really want her to shut up. You slip your hand from a rough grip on hers to a softer one, interlacing your fingers. She stops mid-sentence, glancing down at your hands. “Before we go get drinks,” you say, shifting your face out of irritation and into something gentler. “I have something I want to give you.”

“I… Uh… Alright,” she says, looking slightly dazed. Train of thought: derailed. Of course, now you have to follow through. You sit down on the side of the balcony--there really isn’t a proper railing. A lot of Skyhold doesn’t have railings. Honestly, the whole fortress is a serious safety hazard. But you let your legs hang off the side, and Sera sits down next to you. You gently pull your hand from hers to rummage around in your bag.

“Here,” you say, pulling out the items in question. The first is--of course, a ribbon from Val Royeaux. It’s bright red, a shade you’ve seen her wear before. Frankly, you think it looks great on her. “I know your hair is a bit short for a ribbon, but it’s kind of a tradition,” you say with a nervous laugh. She’s just sort of looking at it, so you quickly put the second gift into her hands as well.

“These are a bit, more… well… everyone likes sweets, right?” you say as you hand over the small, wrapped box.

She opens it, and her face twists into something incomprehensible. Your heart sinks. Oh no. Is she allergic to nuts or something? “T-they’re my favorite from Val Royeaux, brown butter oatmeal with caramel and…” You trail off. “You hate them. I’m sorry.”

“No, no! I just, uh…” she shakes her head slightly. “I’m sure they taste great. I jus’... haven’t had cookies in a while.”

“You don’t have to lie,” you say with a frown. “Are you allergic? Or do you not like sweet stuff? I didn’t know what to get you so…”

“S great!” she insists. She bites into one, as if to prove her point. Her nose scrunches up in distaste, and your frown cracks into a smile.

“Okay, so I missed the mark on this one.”

“Sorry,” she says after she manages to smile. “I’m not much for cookies.”

“And your hair isn’t long enough for a ribbon,” you add with a laugh. “I went all the way to Val Royeaux and all you got were these shitty cookies.”

“M sure they’re really good! Fer cookies!” she protests. “And I’m pretty sure we can make this work.” She fingers the ribbon. “Ere, tie it around my wrist.” You do, although your mind flicks back to Solas’ fingers tying the strings of your mask behind your head in Val Royeaux. “There! Matches my shirt!” she says proudly, holding her arm next to her chest. It really does; you’d picked the shade carefully based on a lot of time spent staring at her chest. She has a fondness for a certain kind of red.

“I’m glad you like the ribbon, at least,” you say with a chuckle. “It’s just the tradition, in Orlais. When you go to Val Royeaux--”

“You bring the girls back home a ribbon! I know. Spent plenty o’ time in Val Royeaux, didn’ I?”

You freeze. You manage to go back to a relaxed posture fairly quickly, and you hope your expression is still pleasant. You’ve seen yourself when caught off-guard. You don’t have a lot of
tells, but you have a few. Fortunately, Sera doesn’t seem to have even noticed.

“You did? I thought you were from Ferelden,” you say as casually as you can. There are a lot of people in Val Royeaux. The chances of you ever having bumped into her twice in your life…

“I was! But Ferelden was no fun after the Blight. Everyone jus’ tryin’ to rebuild, y’ can’t mess with anyone there. Val Royeaux was perfect.”

“Perfect for… messing with people?” Now you really are confused.

Sera glances over at you, tilts her head slightly. You don’t get distracted by her large hazel eyes, the way her bangs fall unevenly into her face. “I can proly tell you. You’re with Leliana now anyway, right? I help people mess with poncy nobles, an’ Val Royeaux had tons. I was there for years. I’mma Red Jenny. I-”

You’ll probably never know exactly what else Sera was about to say, because at the word “Red Jenny” your entire body goes stiff; you can’t help it. You physically jolt jumping where you sit.

Where you sit, balanced on the edge of a balcony forty or fifty feet above the courtyard.

You feel the rock give way slightly, shifting, slipping, just enough to destroy what was left of your balance.

And then, falling.

Chapter End Notes

*ducks under thrown rocks for yet another cliffhanger*
Caught You

Chapter Notes

Sorry it’s a little late! I fell into an open fire on Friday! ID It's still Sunday though so technically I'm not late.

Elven Guide

   tu ma garas mi’adahl = old Elven colloquial for exasperation/frustration (lit. make me come onto a spiked plant)

There’s a half-second of confusion as you watch Sera skyrocket upwards into the sky before you realize she’s not going up; you’re going down, you’re going down fast and far and then your body finally reacts. The first thing you do is scream--and you continue to scream the entire time, admittedly. Maybe not the most noble way to die, screaming and hurtling through the air, but you’ve never been one to go out with quiet dignity.

You twist in the air like a cat, reaching towards the wall in the hopes of finding something, anything, to slow your descent. You don’t know if a body can survive a fifty foot drop and you don’t want to be the one to test those limits.

Your bandages catch and shred, your fingers quickly bloody and tear against the sharp stones of the wall as you try to stop yourself. Then you catch on something more sturdy. Your hands are grasping before it even registers to you what you’re gripping: one of the long banners hanging from the walls of Skyhold. Thank the Maker for the Inquisitor’s arrogance and sense of fashion, hanging these useless things up. Not so useless anymore! But it’s not designed to catch a frantic, screaming woman falling from great heights. It, of course, begins to tear and give way.

You hear shouting below, and when you look up you see Sera, who looks to be screaming nearly as loudly as you are. You make the mistake of glancing down. Oooooh Maker that is still a really, really long way. The banner rips again, loudly, and you jolt down another foot, causing the pitch of your screams to rise.

Shit! Fuck! You have to think… if only you knew that stupid spell of Banal’ras’--

The banner rips and finally gives way.

Embarrassingly, you suspect your last thought will be “this is a really stupid way to die.”

You twist yourself in the air again, giving up on breaking your fall by smearing blood against the walls. Maybe if you fall properly, you’ll just break your legs and not your spine-- The ground is rushing towards you. You brace yourself for the impact, close your eyes, and--

You feel a jolt, but it’s all over your body, akin to times you’ve fallen out of trees into large banks of snow. Your eyes flash open, and you see the ground--still a good ten feet below.

You’re floating.

Your first instinct is to check your aura--had you cast something without realizing, in your panic?
Shit. Fuck! Everyone’s staring, oh god, oh no, no no no, you should have just hit the ground, what have you done? But your aura is still tight in your stomach, a tense, terrified knot with barely any power to it.

Then…?

You see everyone’s eyes going up above you as you lower slowly onto the ground. No one moves to catch you. In fact, they all back away as you thud gently on the ground. The magic still grips you tightly for a few seconds before vanishing. You suddenly feel very heavy, the weightless sensation utterly gone. You crumple, but more out of your body’s unwillingness to hold itself up than anything else.

You roll onto your back and stare upwards. Sure enough, you see not one figure on the balcony far above, but two--Sera and Solas.

You can’t see Solas’ expression from here.

You’re really glad.

Sera disappears from sight, but Solas remains. You can tell he’s looking down at you. Sera’s probably running across the ramparts to get down into the courtyard even now

Did you seriously just fall off a fucking wall and almost die?

No, you reason with yourself, you probably wouldn’t have died. You had slowed your fall with the banner and the ground is relatively soft where you landed. You would probably have broken your legs, but it wouldn’t have killed you. Probably.

Wow, you really need to learn a levitation spell. Soon. Honestly, you should have ages ago, but there aren’t a lot of sheer fifty foot drops with nothing to grab onto in Val Royeaux.

A shadow falls over you, and you’re expecting Sera, but it’s actually a Templar, judging by the armor. You panic almost immediately and sit straight up. You’re almost amazed when that sudden movement doesn’t hurt--your brain is still informing you that you fell really far and should therefore be injured.

The man kneels down next to you. “Are you alright? What happened?”

“I… fell,” you say lamely, a little confused. “Off of up there.” You point vaguely upwards.

“Are you injured?”

“No, no, I…”

“You’re bleeding! Let’s get you to the healer’s tent…”

“I’m…?” You look down at your hands. Oh, yeah, you tried to catch yourself on a rock wall. Your hands and upper arms are kind of cut up. The bandages on your hands have totally come loose, and what’s left of them is splattered with blood. “Oh, tu ma garas mi’adahl, Solas is going to kill me!”

“You may have hit your head, you need to come with me,” the man is saying gently. Hit your head? You levitated down, how would you have hit your head? You don’t really want to go with him. You’re still pumping full of adrenaline and fear and your mind is having trouble catching up with what’s going on. Your instincts are not to go anywhere with a Templar.
“No, I didn’t hit my head; I’m fine,” you say, though the amount of blood on your hands is distressing—if only because of the thought of what Solas will do when he sees. He hadn’t yelled at you for using your hands all day, too! You’d figured you were more or less healed, and now this! He’s gonna be so mad!

“Elf? Em, are you alright?!” You’re more than a little relieved to hear Sera’s voice, even as panicked as she sounds. She can make the Templar go away.

“I’m fine! I’m fine, Solas caught me.” You say the last bit rather loudly, as if to convince both the Templar and everyone still curiously gathered around as to what had happened. The last thing you need is rumors that you’re an apostate.

Sera kneels down next to you. “Oooh, your hands look bad. Andraste’s tits, Em, why’re you always fallin’ off of things aroun’ me?”

“Clearly, you make me feel so light that I forget I can’t fly,” you say dryly. She flushes and shoves your shoulder.

“Don’t joke aroun’ now! We gotta get you to the healer’s tent, c’mon.”

“She’s right,” the Templar says seriously. “Hand injuries are serious, and you might have other injuries from the fall.” He moves to help you stand, and you practically ricochet up.

“Alright…” you glance up at the balcony. Solas isn’t there any more. Maker, is he heading down here?

“Yeah, let’s go.”

You let the two of them lead you towards the healing tent. Sera insists on helping you walk, even though you keep telling her that you’re fine; it’s just your hands. She might feel a little guilty, since you keep falling dramatically around her. It’s a shame you can’t actually become involved with her, because your mind is producing good pick up lines at the rate of one every five seconds or so. I can’t help falling for you. I tried to climb into the heavens for your love, but I was cast down. You make me feel weightless. They won’t stop!

You don’t recognize the healer who winds up looking at your hands. He’s a younger man… clearly he was a Circle mage, by his garb. You’re glad the Templars are letting him serve here and not locking him in a tower somewhere for the perceived crimes of his brethren. You know that’s probably just because healers are in desperately low supply during any war. No one loves mages more than when there’s a war on, honestly.

The healer cuts the last of the bandages off of your hands as Sera breathlessly explains that your hands are really important. You don’t even twitch as the man sinks his aura into you; yours is small and already safely locked up far from anywhere he’ll be poking around. Your mind is still on Solas and the Templar still beside you. Why is he still here? You already said it was Solas… is he suspicious?

“There’s magic here,” the healer says, pouting. You and the Templar both stiffen for two very different reasons. “A strengthening spell, but also…” he frowns, and you feel a slight stabbing inside of your hand. “I’ve not seen this before…”

“That’s hardly my fault,” you snap as pain lances through your hand, as if the tendons were being tabbed with tiny needles. “Ask Solas!”

“Solas? The apostate? You said he… caught you?” asks the Templar, placing a gauntleted hand on your shoulder.
He won’t use spell nullification in a healing tent; people would die. You could slice right through that over-bold arm with white hot fire, so he’d never lay a hand on another--

“I work for him.” You barely manage to say it, rather than snarl it. “He often places enchantments on my wrist to help my writing be more steady, and he’s been healing an old injury of mine. If you’re fascinated by his handiwork, as him about it, not me. I’m just here to *stop bleeding.*” You say that last bit rather pointedly.

The Templar frowns. “He what? Women are not *tools* to be enchanted at convenience!”

You don’t bare your teeth and growl, but you feel like doing just that. How *dare* he act like some sort of protecting knight! As if he needs to protect you from Solas! The *gall*, the absolute, wretched…

“It’s some sort of long-lasting…” the healer is saying, drawing both your attention and your ire.

“Heal me or don’t!” you snap. “But if you don’t intend to, let me find someone who will, please! I am *bleeding*!”

“Oh, right,” the man says, looking sort of sheepish. “Right, sorry.” You feel the familiar tingling sensation then as your flesh stitches itself back together.

“So, you work for Solas?” the Templar says. You keep your face neutral.

“I do.” You probably shouldn’t be telling people you work for the spymaster, anyway.

“He’s notoriously aloof; I wouldn’t think him the kind to take on an assistant. But you’re not even a mage? Have you known him long?”

This man is pestering you, you realize, not because of suspicions about you, but in an attempt to gather information on *Solas*. He must have *seen* that it was Solas who cast the spell, and wanted to investigate. Seems the Templars aren’t leaving him alone as much as you’d thought. Perhaps they simply don’t pester him directly because of the Inquisitor’s influence… respect for the alliance.

But these are still Templars. Templars do not suffer apostates to live freely except under extreme circumstances… wealth and influence being the two primary ones. Solas has neither.

“No,” you say shortly. “I came to the Inquisition not two months ago.” The healer is bandaging your arms now. Perhaps he sees no reason to heal those cuts, since they won’t keep you from working. You can’t begrudge him that; mana is precious in times such as these.

“Why did he--”

“Can you not ask him these questions yourself, ser Templar?” you ask mildly. “I work for him, but not as a diplomat.”

“What *do* you do for him?”

“I’m his assistant. I assist him.” The healer ties off the last bandage, and you stand. You want to get away from this curious Templar, but you don’t want to go back to the rotunda and face Solas. You head towards the exit to the tent, hoping the Templar takes the hint and stops bothering you. Not that there’s *really* anything you can do to stop him. Which he doubtlessly knows. Templars are supposed to protect people, but even before this stupid war, that’s never been your experience.

“Are you sure yer alright?” Sera says, clearly worried. “Maybe you should lay down or--”
“I’m fine,” you say shortly as you push your way out of the tent. “Let’s just go somewhere… Somewhere Solas won’t find us. I want to avoid my problems for a while.”

“I would recommend against that.”

Maker damnit.

“Solas,” you say with a wince. You don’t even have to turn to see him. His voice is so familiar that you could probably recognize it while asleep. You turn to look, bracing yourself. There’s steel in his eyes.

Sera steps defensively between the two of you. “Oy, don’t give her that look! She’s not yer kid, you don’t get to lecture her—”

“Sera, it’s alright,” you say gently, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“It’s not alright!” she snaps. “Why is it even your business anyway? It was an acci-”

“Sera,” you say, more firmly. She glares over her shoulder at you. “It’s fine. I’ll catch you later, and maybe we can actually get those drinks. Closer to the ground next time, huh?”

Your joke falls remarkably flat.

Kind of like you.

Heh.

Okay, okay, not funny.

Sera glares one last time, at you and then at Solas, and storms off. Ouch. You sigh at her retreating back. It’s apparently just your fate to have everyone you like mad at you. And normally because you’re trying to mediate between a bunch of elves who hate each other for no damned reason.

Oh. Right. Now you have to deal with Solas.

You eye him nervously, trying to gauge his mood. Is he mad, like when you fell off of the horse or jumped in the way of that Chevalier’s swing? Or concerned, like after the fight where Revas almost died?

He seems to be eyeing you in a similar manner. Finally, he sighs. “How?” he sounds… a little exasperated, honestly.

“Sera and I were sitting on the edge,” you confess. “It seemed safe enough… but some of the rock gave way when I shifted, and I lost my balance.”

“...You were sitting on the edge? Of a ledge fifty feet off the ground?”

“I, uh… yes.”

Solas rubs his forehead, seemingly at a loss for words. “...I know you are fond of high places, Emma, but you need to be careful,” he says finally.

“Ir abelas, Solas,” you say. Honestly, this could be going a lot worse. He’s not angry, and seems to understand it was an accident. Seems you and Sera both were worried for nothing. “I forget Skyhold is so old… I’ll be more careful.”
“Please,” Solas says, a bit dryly. “I will not always be so conveniently located, and although you may think you can fly, you don’t seem to have figured it out yet.”

You snort, and then, unable to stop yourself, begin to laugh. It starts as a chuckle and then grows as relief floods through you. You’d been unaware of how tense you still were… First the falling, then the Templar, then… You begin to shake, but you can at least hide it in the laughter. Solas places a gentle hand on your shoulder, seeming to understand, as everything sort of hits you. You could have died. Unlikely, perhaps, but possible. And in such a stupid manner. It’s terrifying to think about.

Solas pretends not to notice that at some point, you start crying through your laughter.

You manage to wrest some sort of hold over yourself despite the dizzying flood of emotions. “Thank you, Solas. I’m… not really sure what the protocol for having one’s life saved is,” you chuckle wetly, wiping your eyes off.

He looks surprised, almost… taken aback. With as subtle as his expressions usually are, his shock nearly screams. “I… It’s not… There’s no need,” he manages finally. Why is he so thrown? Technically speaking, he’d probably saved your life multiple times, what with his barriers in both bandit attacks. And he’d saved Revas’ life already. You’d thanked him those times, hadn’t you? Obviously not enough, if he’s surprised now.

“It seems like something more than just a ‘gee thanks for keeping me from turning into a fine paste’ is in order,” you begin to insist, but he cuts you off.

“No ceremony is necessary. I’m simply glad I was able to get there in time.” You frown slightly. Well… maybe you can think of something that you can do that won’t make him feel awkward or put-upon. You’ll give it some thought.

“As am I,” you say, letting it drop for now. “They really should do something about all these ridiculous drops. It’s like whoever designed this had no concept that people can’t levitate.” You chuckle, but it comes up sounding nervous and sort of broken. Seems your nerves are still high. You’re no stranger to near-death experiences, honestly, but there comes a certain… sensation of security, when you escape one through your own luck or skills.

You’re not entirely sure what to do with the feeling of being rescued, and you’re not sure what to do with the sudden realization that it’s barely even the first time Solas has swooped in like this. You’re reminded of the time you’d slipped while running across a rooftop in Val Royeaux. Your mentor had caught you by the arm as you dangled off of a distressingly high ledge. You remember the way those red eyes glinted in the darkness. The sudden relief and being saved, and then--

‘Tell me, do you know what they say about baby birds?’ Falling, frightened, forsaken. That wasn’t a very good lesson,” Cole says disapprovingly. You don’t even jump when you hear his voice any more--you’re growing accustomed to him popping in and out.


“That doesn’t make sense. Why would you agree if you think I’m wrong?”

You sigh, but Solas is the one who begins to explain. “It means she doesn’t agree, but has no wish to argue,” he says simply.

“Oh,” says Cole. You shake your head. You would have gone into a much more complicated explanation than that. Seems like Cole isn’t the only one who seems to know just what to say. Well, Solas has much more experience with spirits than… Well, anyone. Anyone you’ve ever met,
anyway. Even the mages you’d known had no real interest in interacting with them beyond means to an end.

“You do fine,” Cole assures you. “Solas is just older.” You flush slightly. Your odd, one-sided conversations with Cole are a bit awkward when Solas is there to hear half. “He doesn’t mind,” Cole informs you cheerfully, then pauses. “Oh! I should go. Carts don’t need three wheels.”

“Cole, wait, I--Aaaaand he’s gone,” you say with a sigh. “Tell me, does he actually pop around, or does he just make me forget him leaving?”

“A bit of both, depending,” Solas answers. He begins to walk, and you automatically follow him as he heads up the stairs towards the Great Hall. “Should you not find Sera? She seemed cross.”

“She’s always cross when you’re involved,” you reply, not really thinking it through. Solas makes a little huffing exhalation through his nose. Irritated. At you, or her? Probably her. “I’ll find her later… tomorrow, maybe, and apologize then.”

“Apolo--” You shrug lightly. “For falling off a wall when we were having a nice time. For casting her off to talk with you.”

“Neither of those strike me as things you need to apologize for, given the circumstances.”

“Apolo--” You shrug lightly. “For falling off a wall when we were having a nice time. For casting her off to talk with you.”

“You shouldn’t admit so readily to giving empty apologies,” he scolds.

“They’re not empty!” you protest. “I am sorry. Particularly if she’s angry with me.”

“You’re sorry you fell off a wall?” he asks dryly. “Afraid it might have inconvenienced her?”

“Your disapproval and sarcasm are both noted, Solas,” you reply, just as dryly. You hope he’ll pardon you for not taking any advice on how best to handle a woman who loathes him. He’d been here from the beginning and was chiefly avoided and feared. You’d been here for a month and a half and had made better progress on being accepted.

Of course, it’s quite likely that’s simply because it isn’t a priority for him.

- You do manage to get a decent amount of work done after recovering from your fright. Maker, it’s been a long day. Solas doesn’t even have to shoo you off to bed; you go on your own. You doubt you’ll be able to sleep, but you’re bone-tired and really want to just lie down for eight hours, sleep or no.

And you do sleep a little; you even catch wisps of dreams. The second your dreaming mind sees a hazy vision of Solas, however, you ricochet awake. More an instinct than anything--your last encounter with Solas while sleeping was burned into your mind. This probably hadn’t been him. Your connection to the Fade had been so tenuous this time that you doubt even a somniari could have visited you.

At least you know your previous, more… questionable dreams featuring Solas hadn’t actually been him. The man who says “it’s not right” to kissing because you don’t know it’s really him is not the man who will take you into a shadowy corner of the Fade and finger you halfway to orgasm. You
have only your own subconscious to blame for that.

You don’t go back to sleep, but you don’t roll out of bed, either. It’s getting towards time to meet up with your “trainer” for practice, but honestly? Fuck that. You’re exhausted, your arms hurt, you just fell off a fucking wall... It’s a waste of your time, and it’s painful every time. You’re not going. What’s Argent going to do? Assassinate you? Tell on you to the Spymaster? Leliana would be an idiot to punish you for not going to her moronic training when you’re still the only one she has to translate that tome.

So you stay in bed reading one of your dragon books until you feel like getting breakfast.

You never even wind up getting all the way to the breakfast hall. Sera is waiting just outside, and some things are more important than eating—though you’re absolutely certain that Solas would disagree. Loudly.

Instead of going into the breakfast hall, the two of you wander off across the courtyard. There’s a small amount of commotion by the main gate, probably merchants, so you head the opposite direction, out towards where the new farm is set up. You need to check on it anyway.

“Sorry about ditching you yesterday,” you start things out, mentally scowling at Solas. It’s a good strategy, damnit, and you are sorry. You’ll probably do it again, lots of times, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t sorry.

“Eh,” Sera says, her half-hearted shrug showing it actually bothers her more than it looks like she’s going to admit. “Did Solas yell at you? Because he’s gettin’ spiders in his room if he did,” she threatens. You snort.

“No, he didn’t yell. He mostly just wanted to make sure I was alright, and find out how I happened to wind up falling off a fifty foot drop in the first place.”

“You shoulda told him we were kissin’,” Sera says, sticking her tongue out. “Then he’d leave ya alone! Old perv.”

You ignore the tiny twinge of irritation. She’s joking. You know that. “Really, Sera? Is that your experience, that men leave you alone after they see you kissing other ladies?” you say dryly.

“Yeah! You just gotta kiss ‘em really vigorously. Guess you haven’t been doin’ it right.”

Oh. This turned into flirting really fast.

She stops short of the obvious follow up, ‘want me to show you how?’ You kind of appreciate that, because it makes changing the subject easier, especially when you’d like nothing more than to pull her behind the barn and show her exactly what you know about kissing ladies.

“Duly noted. I’ll add subpar girl-kisser to my list of traits,” you joke.

“Har har. I’m glad that old arse didn’t give you a hard time, anyway,” she says, rolling her eyes. “I thought for sure he was gonna.”

“I thought he might too,” you admit. “But I would have let him yell if he’d wanted to. He did save my life, which is... awkward.”

“Awkward?” Sera asks, tilting her head. The two of you have come to a stop by one of the brand new fences. One of the goats trots over to say hello, and you fondly pet its nose while you think over your response.
“I’m not sure how to react to having my life saved. I’m not really put in those sort of situations often,” you half-lie. “It seems like it should be a thing. You know?”

“Yer over thinkin’ it,” Sera replies. “You gotta remember, Solas is out in the field with us all the time. Savin’ each other an’ bein’ saved all kinda blurs together. You get used to it. It’s not, like, a big heroic thing like it is when a normal guy jumps in to save another normal guy.”

“I’m a ‘normal guy,’” you point out.

“Yeah, but Solas isn’t, tha’s my point,” she says. “S’proly not even a thing to him, just like it’s not a thing to him when he saves Bull’s bacon—heh, bull bacon—in the middle of a fight.”

You actually give some thought to what she’s saying while the goat idly chews on your sleeve. She’s probably on to something, actually. You’re not really the adventuring type, as many times as your life has been in danger, especially lately. You don’t save people as a profession. You don’t fight; you’re not a soldier or a hero or a warrior. Solas, though… It’s hard to think of him that way, but he’d leapt into the fight both times you’d been attacked by bandits, and been perfectly ready to injure or even kill the Chevalier who’d struck you.

You think of him as a surly but kind-hearted fellow who uses his magic for research and healing, who reads dusty tomes to you and tells you stories. And he is that. But he’s also someone who expertly used his magic to control the flow of a battlefield, who protected allies and murdered foes without blinking. And who clearly knows enough about how death can affect those unaccustomed to it to be concerned for your well-being both times he saw you kill a man.

No apostate would have led a peaceful existence in the woods, as you’d suspected. And maybe he hasn’t always been alone. He certainly isn’t now… and he probably saves lives every time he leaves Skyhold, as Sera said.

“I suppose you’re right,” you agree, after a long time of being silent and feeding a goat part of your tunic sleeve. You pull your sleeve from its mouth and give it a scratch on the chin. “Feels weird, though.”

“S’just what you do, when you fight,” she says with a shrug. “You don’t think about it; you just do it. Guarantee yer the only one dwellin’.”

“You fight a lot then, ‘Red Jenny’?” you ask coyly, seizing on the opportunity to both change the subject and question her more on something you’re brutally curious about.

“You recognize the name, then?” she replies, just as coy.

“I lived in Val Royeaux as a servant for years, of course I do,” you say. Only slightly untrue. “And that’s you? You’re her?”

“Sort of,” she says, and launches into an explanation that would be a bit hard to follow if you didn’t already know how “Red Jenny” and her “friends” worked. You were one of her little cogs for a long time, depending on how long she, personally, had been in Val Royeaux. Even back when you were running with the elven underground, Red Jenny was one of the only one who could actually make things happen. You heard about her long before you realized you were her “friend.” Red Jenny used folks; she didn’t necessarily tell them. It was a good system. An unlocked vault here, a secret spilled there, and she tied them together like strings to make something happen.

And then, later, you and she had traded information now and then. She was concerned with messing with nobles who hurt their servants, mostly, and that overlapped with your own ends from time to
time. You’d never met face-to-face.

Lucky. You would’ve been wearing a mask, but still. Lucky, lucky. That’s two near misses with Sera. The two of you have been bumping into each other your entire lives, it seems.

“No wonder you’re in the Inquisitor’s Inner Circle, then,” you say finally, when she’s done explaining in her unusual and colorful manner. You want to absolutely pepper her with questions. You’d sent some information ‘Red Jenny’s’ way while you were in Val Royeaux. Will she get it? Or is there a new Jenny there now? Had it always been her, for the time you were in Val Royeaux? Or had she switched in? Does she remember Banal’ras, and what does she think of that little sneak? Probably not much, all things considered, but enough to trade information.

She’d probably love knowing all the things you’d like to tell her. Too bad you can’t. Even Solas barely knows the surface of it, and you’re still kicking yourself over that little lapse in judgment.

Instead, you do what you’d said you would do in the first place, and catch up with her, giving her a tastefully edited version of what happened on the trip to Val Royeaux, including the bandit attacks and the “coincidences” that allowed you to complete the job as well as you did. She seems kind of overly-trusting now that you know who she is, or was, or whatever. But there are always players of the Game who don’t realize they’re playing, or express distaste for it even while playing. Some people just can’t admit they’ve been pulled in like everyone else.

By the time you wind things up with her, it’s well past breakfast. You’ve watched the ex-slaves come out to the farm and begin tending to the animals, and still others continuing to help set things up and tend to the tiny fields. It’s nice to know it’ll continue to run even without your help… though you should speak to Lady Montiliyet or one of the requisition agents about arranging for some more livestock to be brought up before the chill truly sets in for the winter. You’d like to get more goats-- all three of the ones you have are female and with a male or two, you could get a little breeding population going. If you get three men, you could have three litters that could interbreed… and just slaughter the men after, for meat. You need to--

You need to go do your actual job and worry about the goats later.

You say your farewells to Sera, who seems much less cross with you. As you’re leaving, you see her pull the red silk ribbon out of her back pocket and finger it briefly before tying it around her wrist. A good sign, you think. All in all, things are looking--

The blood in your veins freezes solid as you hear a horrifyingly familiar baying bark.

No, that’s not-- you would have seen before… You’re hearing things. Not enough sleep; it was only a matter of time before--

WHAM
Drama! Dogs! New friends! Old friends! And a widdle someone. Keeping Secrets delivers. ID

Elven Guide
Ara ma'desen melar = I will hold you here

You'll want this for later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

WHAM

You scream as you’re hit from behind, though not hard enough to knock you over. You spin around, stumbling away, and sure enough, there’s a fucking Mabari attacking you. You need to learn to trust your fucking instincts! You back away, hands up as if you could convince the slobbering beast not to attack. It charges again, of course, and this time, knocks you right onto your ass. Everything is fur and fangs and you scream again, your arms flying up to protect your face, your knees curling in to protect your core, an automatic reaction.

You’re not being torn apart, but the dog is on you for what feels like a very long time, shoving at you with its nose and covering you with slobber. You’re barely aware of that fact, however.

Baying of the hounds, only means one thing. Get to the orphanage, get to a building, any building.

She locked her door, oh god, why, why would you do that, no please, please, let me in. Baying gets louder; you hear a child’s scream.

Something is kicking you. You twitch, curl up tighter. Your arms are locked in front of you in deathlike rigidity. They can shred your arms, you’ll heal, gotta protect your vitals, gotta…

“Emma… Emma?” your name, coming from a long way away. But that’s not your name, your name is--

“Emma?”

Your eyes snap open and fix onto the nearest person.

Varric?

Fog clears slightly in your mind, but only slightly. You untwist yourself. Your eyes slide off of Varric and onto the hound, being held by its collar by--

Hawke.
You’re not even a little surprised. Ferelden men are all alike. You suspect your disgust shows on
your face; you’ve lost your ability to hide your expressions at the moment.

“Emma, are you alright? You were screaming?” Varric says, causing your gaze to fix back on him in
a snap. He actually flinches a bit when it does; your face must be a fright.

“I’m… fine,” you force out, cracked throat straining. “For someone who was just knocked down by
a dog who probably weighs more than me.”

The dog, as if knowing that you’re talking about it, lunges forward. Despite the fact Hawke has a
grip on its collar, you scramble backwards, kicking up grass as you do.

“Oh, she’s harmless,” Hawke says with a snort. “She was just playing.”

Playing.

*He* used to let his dogs “play” with the elven children, too.

“The slaughtered like dogs, she said.”

Leah wasn’t here to slaughter *this* man. You’d like to do it yourself.

It’s a good thing your aura is a pittance of its normal self, or you’d find it even more difficult to stop
yourself.

“Hawke…” Varric says, shaking his head.

“What?” Hawke protests. “It was cute!”

Cute.

The grass around your hand is wilting, too slight to be noticeable by anyone but you.

It’s time to leave, lest you do something regrettable.

You shove yourself onto shaky legs.

“Emma, are you sure you’re--”

“I’m fine, Varric,” your voice is cold, flat, not betraying the screaming in your head. “I simply need
to get to work. You know how Solas gets.”

“I think I left a bad impression,” you hear Hawke decide as you stalk off.

“You think?” Varric snaps. You don’t hear whatever comes next. You need to find someplace quiet
to hide. Ride it out. That’s what you do. But your instincts are *screaming*. If you stay outside, the
dog will be able to find you. A building, you need to go in a building. Four walls and a door that
closes and you’ll be safe.

Objectively speaking, the rotunda is not necessarily the best place for you, in your current condition,
but you thought “safe room,” and your body took you there. You can’t complain, in the end—the
second you walk through the door, Cole is beside you.

“Inside, walls and roof and doors. Solas, close the doors,” the spirit instructs, taking you by one hand
and leading you towards the couch. You’re all bristles and tension right now; just the sight of Solas
moving out of the corner of your eye makes you physically jump. Then a bird caws and you nearly
scream. You need to, you need to--

“He’s gone now, long gone. A decade dead, he can’t hurt you. He can’t hurt anyone. Like dogs, she said, butchered like dogs, and you prayed she butchered the dogs, too. She did.”

“How can you know that?” you say hoarsely as Cole pushes you gently down onto the couch.

“I can see them, a little, through you. Emma, look. The doors are shut.” You glance around the room. “You’re safe.” Your eyes almost slide over Solas entirely. He’s standing perfectly still. But your eyes latch onto him briefly. “Ara ma’desen melar.” The voice is Cole’s, but in your memory it belongs to Solas. “You’re safe.”

You stare at Solas for a moment longer, then let your eyes slide shut. You focus on the steady, relaxing waves of Cole’s words. Whatever method he uses to calm you works; Cole’s voice is like a spell. You feel the panic grasping at your chest and sliding off, as if it can’t get a grip on you. Bit by bit, you relax, leaning more and more against Cole and the back of the couch. You can feel the Fade tugging at the corners of your mind. It wouldn’t hurt. You just… just emptied. You could just slip away, and--

“Is she alright, Cole?” Solas’ voice is quiet, soft. Not enough to rouse you completely, but enough to keep you from slipping further. Your eyes can’t quite focus; Solas is a vague, tan blur.

“Yes. She’s scared of dogs.” An apt explanation.

“Is she going to sleep?”

“She might. She does sometimes.”

You let your eyes slide the rest of the way shut even as your mind pulls back more from the tenuous grasp of the Fade. If you pretend to sleep, might they talk further?

“No,” says Cole. “We can both tell.”

You open your eyes.

“Sorry we woke you,” says Cole, and he does sound sorrowful.

“It’s fine,” you say, slowly taking in your barings. Solas is kneeling by the couch. You’re lying against Cole’s chest, feet tucked up on the couch. Ugh, you’ve got your dirty shoes on Solas’ furniture. You shift and sit up, irritatedly kicking your shoes off. They feel like a prison for your feet at the moment.

“It’s fine,” you say again. “I shouldn’t sleep through the day, anyway.”

Cole and Solas share a look.

“You should,” says Solas.

“You really should,” says Cole, almost at the same time.

You roll your eyes at the both of them, then point to your desk. “Is that a missive I spy, Solas?” Solas hesitates, then nods. “Then it seems my day starts now.” You force your body into motion, ignore the way your legs shake slightly under your weight. Your bare feet on the stone feels reassuring, so for now you just leave your shoes off. No one here is going to judge you for it. No one here cares.

“You should sleep with Solas,” Cole says, and the honest concern in his voice does nothing to keep
your whole body from freezing mid-step. You swing around to stare at him. “You would both sleep a lot better,” he adds, frowning.

He means it literally, of course. You close your eyes and take a deep breath to keep from losing your temper at the poor spirit—he’s done nothing to deserve it. “Cole,” you say as you open your eyes.

Aaaaaand he’s gone.

You rub an incredibly tired hand over your eyes, massaging the bridge of your nose.

“He’s very literal,” Solas comments, voice perfectly neutral.

“He’s a brat,” you grumble, though there’s no real irritation in your voice. “Spirits can be brats, who knew? Have you ever met a spirit of brattiness, oh wise Fade mage?”

“I? None, other than you,” he replies snippily, and despite your still-strained nerves, you laugh. “If you intend to begin your work, let me look at your hands and enchant your wrist,” he says with a light sigh.

“Alright,” you reply, handing your hand over to him without a second thought. It’s as he unwraps the bandages on your hand that you remember the healer’s confusion the day before.

“Solas, when I was being healed before, the mage said there were two spells there. One seemed to be the strengthening spell you use, but what was the other one?”

“Long term healing,” Solas replies, frowning with concentration. You feel his mana begin to seep into you. “Which the healer made a mess of, I might add.”

“Long term…?”

“The damage to your hands was substantial… and if I’m correct, not the first of similar injuries. I could have simply healed the recent mutilation in a single day, perhaps two. I took my time so that I could repair some of the older damage as well… tendons torn and torn again, healing poorly each time.”

You stare at him blankly, not even paying attention to the sensation of his magic within you for once.

“You said before that the cold gives you pain in your hands. That should no longer be an issue.”

...What?

“In the future, you should be more careful,” he chides. “Your hands are your livelihood.”

It’s not very often you’re speechless. But your words fail you utterly. He… healed damage that old? How much effort did that take? So that was why he kept your hands bandaged long after the damaged seemed to have healed. And part of why he offered to enchant your wrist every day, no doubt… it allowed him easy access to continually heal you.

He hadn’t even mentioned it… Wasn’t he going to ask for anything in return? That kind of healing would cost a fortune, if you could even find a mage who could do it and then get clearance from the Circle to allow it… Normally only nobles…

Solas seems to notice that you’re staring at him with wide eyes and a slightly slack jaw. He blinks. “Are you alright?”

“Y… you…” you stammer hoarsely.
“Emma?” He looks concerned now. He looks concerned. Like something might be wrong.

S’proly not even a thing to him. You don’t think about it; you just do it. Guarantee yer the only one dwellin’.

You shake your head slowly. “You have absolutely no idea what you’re worth, do you?” The awe-filled words slip out of your mouth without you thinking, but they seem to give Solas quite the start. His eyes widen slightly, his eyebrows raise. Then he looks… confused. “Ma serannas, Solas.” It’s all you can really say.

“It… it is nothing,” he replies, his face returning to its normal, neutral expression.

“It’s not,” you disagree. It’s so much. “But I can see why you might think that.” You chuckle softly. Living outside the Circle, you suppose he wouldn’t have any idea about the imposed limitations of such magic. Or rather, he might know about it objectively, but having never lived that reality…

One of these days, you’re going to have to figure out a way to repay him. For now, though, you’ve made it awkward enough. You head to your desk to start the day, only about a half-hour late, all told.

The missive is interesting enough that you don’t even get annoyed with the Spymaster for sending it to you. It’s Qunlat. And it has to do with magic. Those two things don’t overlap very often, and it’s certainly an area of particular interest to you. Qunari don’t do a lot of research into magic, generally speaking. They’re worse than the Chantry with their fear of magic. So this must be something special. You take extra care while translating it—any nuance could have meaning you don’t understand. You’ll want to deliver this one yourself. You’ll need to explain it to the people involved, to make sure they grasp the intricacies and possible variations of the translation.

You glance idly at the list. No Commander Rutherford for once. No, this piece of arcane knowledge is going to three people who can actually do something with it. Dorian Pavus, Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast and… Dagna? The name seems Dwarven. And familiar. Dagna, Dagna… Ah! That’s right, you know it from request forms… and Dorian. He’d mentioned a dwarf who studied magic. Dagna, that had been her name. She’d been all over those requisition forms, and her requests had been esoteric and vague. They’d been a delight to fill. Her requests had given you several hours of sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with Solas in that inn room.

So the only one you need to dread is Seeker Pentaghast, then. After your last run-in with her, you can’t say you’re looking forward to meeting her again. She seemed nice enough for a Seeker. But the fact she even knows you exist is utterly horrifying. In its own way, it’s worse than Cullen Rutherford knowing about you. The Commander is a “retired” Templar. He might well have no particular interest in the execution of apostates (ha, sure), but a Seeker?

There is no way for that to end well. You’ve already utterly failed at making yourself uninteresting thanks to Cole. You’ll have to just shoot for “utterly harmless” instead. Either way, you’ll put that off for as long as possible. You go up to the library first, ensuring you have your little bag of gifts, which is getting lighter every day, thank the Maker.

You don’t see Dorian right away, so you sidetrack over to Mahvir, who seems surprised to see you.

“How are the new books settling in?” you ask him.

“Wonderfully! I can’t believe how many you got!” he says, and you’re satisfied at how pleased he sounds. Technically, you suppose, he’s not really your boss or anything, not anymore, but he’s doing
good work with this library. “It’s taking us awhile to get them all organized and shelved, but once we’re done, I expect the foot traffic here to really rise!”

“That’s wonderful,” you lie. More Templars and noise upstairs is not your idea of a victory, but whatever. “Have you seen Dorian anywhere?”

“He stepped out for something. I expect he’ll be back momentarily,” Mahvir replies.

Well… while you’re here… “That reminds me, Mahvir, I got you something in Val Royeaux,” you begin, slipping a hand into your bag. He blinks in surprise.

“Not a ribbon, I hope?” he jokes, and you snort.

“Something a bit more useful to you, I think, though I’m sure those luxurious locks deserve silk,” you tease right back. “Here.” You slip the package into his hand and glance around idly for Dorian while he opens it.

“A bookmark!” he exclaims. “And so well crafted… is this halla leather?”

“I’m not going to lie and say it’s Val Royeaux’s finest,” you say with a chuckle. “I wasn’t even sure if it was real halla leather; I bought it from a shop near the Alienage. I thought you might like it.”

“Buttering up your boss? Shame you got a promotion,” he laughs, running a thumb across the fine leather.

“That was the intent,” you agree. “But you should have it anyway. With all these new books, I’m sure you’ll need it.”

“Yes, thank you,” he says, tucking it away into a pocket.

“Oh, also… could you get this to a Miss Helisma Derington?” you ask, pulling one more package out of your bag.

“The Tranquil?” he says, frowning at the wrapped gift. “You know, whatever it is, she won’t… she can’t really…”

“I think it will be useful to her.” The package contains a single dragonling claw. Not much, but… a present she might actually… well, not enjoy but…

Whatever.

It is what it is.

Fortunately, Dorian walks in right then, saving you from further awkwardness.

“Ah, Dorian,” you say, flitting over to him the moment he walks through the door.

“Oh dear. You never come visit me. What do you need?” he asks teasingly.

“Well, I have a missive for you. And a present, but if you’d prefer I keep it strictly business, I suppose I can give it to someone else,” you reply, tapping your chin thoughtfully.

“Shush. Give me both, then.”

“Missive first,” you say, and then launch into an explanation of the document, your translations, and what they could mean. Dorian doesn’t just passively listen. He interjects, he bickers. You don’t mind
at all—he knows far more about magic—and far more about Qunari magic specifically—than you. His interjections are actually quite helpful and between the two of you, you manage to nail down the meaning a bit more. You knew coming to him first was a good idea.

You wind up on that ridiculously plush chair of his again, him sitting in it and you resting delicately on one of the large armrests. It’s as easy to work with him as it is to work with Solas in some ways. In other ways, it’s easier, since you’re not being constantly distracted by your screaming libido. Plus, you spent a good portion of your formative years around Tevinter mages—one in particular. You’re familiar with how their minds work.

You do eventually remember that you have two more people to deliver this to, however. You can’t spend all day discussing the intricacies of Qunari enchantment with Dorian. Even if you kind of want to.

“Before I go,” you say, reaching once again into the Pack of I Bought Too Many Fucking Presents. At least it’s getting lighter, and you don’t have to hunt too much before finding his. It comes in a little box and everything. You stand as Dorian unwraps and then opens it, curious. His eyes narrow as he pulls it out.

"Loud and ostentatious," you say cheerfully. "Just like you."

"Ha ha," he says dryly as he runs a finger along the blade of the letter opener. It's quite nice, and the handle is styled beautifully after a bright blue peacock. "I suppose I should have expected this from someone who speaks Tevene."

"Pavus, Pavus. It's a good name. Flamboyant, just like you," you tease. "Actually, I just saw it and thought of you."

"Do random words in other languages normally pop into your mind when you look at something?" he asks, voice still a bit drier than you’d expect from someone who just got a gift.

"Yes, actually. I hadn't given much thought to the Pavus/peacock thing before that. Most of the old houses have names that translate curiously in ancient Tevene. You’re quite lucky, actually. My old master’s name translated to ‘locust.’ Accurate, but not flattering."

Dorian seems momentarily distracted from his curious examination of the letter opener. “Wait, Bruchus? I know-”

“We’re having a moment, Dorian,” you say sourly. “Don’t ruin it by telling me your father went to grade school with the man who purchased me, or something similar.”

“Noted,” Dorian replies. “Thank you for the gift, Emma. I’ll have to pick out something similarly… suited for you, in the future. When’s your naming day?”

“Never telling!” you say cheerfully. “Now, I really must deliver the rest of these. Which reminds me, where can I find this ‘Dagna’?”

“Dagna? She’s in the Undercroft, almost always. Take the door directly to the right of the throne and follow the stairs all the way down. Might wear an extra layer… Gets chilly down there.”

Chilly? Undercroft? “I’m surprised you’re not lurking down there, Ser Necromancer.”

“Are you kidding? It’s wretchedly cold in the south enough without seeking it out.”
You do manage to find your way to the Undercroft, and without bumping into anyone unpleasant, at that. It’s down quite a lot of stairs, which get rougher and slightly… damp, or dewey, as you go. You realize why upon reaching the place in question. It’s a giant cavern, open to the cold mountain air, with a giant fuck-off waterfall roaring loudly, though you can’t see it. Damn! What a place to work!

You see a grumpy looking man working at a forge, but that’s obviously not Dagna, so you leave him alone. You do see some interesting looking devices, however--probably for enchantment--so you head towards those. You’re curiously leaning over one when you hear a voice.

“Hi! You lost?”

You turn to look, and… yes, that’s a dwarf. “You must be Dagna. I’m here to deliver a missive.”

“I haven’t seen you before. Are you new?” she asks curiously as you hand her copy over.

“I’m not a messenger. Well, I am in that I’m delivering this, but that’s not my normal job,” you explain. “There are a few details I should go over--”

“Multiple possible translations huh? Oh, did you go over this with Dorian? I’d recognize his thought patterns anywhere.” Okay, that’s kind of weird.

“I did, yes. I managed to narrow down the meaning some, but it’s still kind of--”

“This one’s right, I think” she says, pointing. “This is what I’m looking for. Here, here and here. I’ve got it, thanks!”

Huh. Well. Okay, whatever, your job was just to translate it and bring it to her. If she’s some kind of eccentric genius, that’s fine. You should probably just leave well enough alone and exit, no matter how curious you are. But you can’t help sending one last, lingering glance over the strange equipment. You can taste the sting of lyrium in the back of your mouth. Bitter and biting, not smooth and tempting like the stuff embedded in Fenris’ skin. This is more raw. More rough.

“It’s for enchantment,” she explains, and you can’t help rolling your eyes.

“Nooo, I thought it was for styling hair,” you say before you can stop yourself. She blinks, then laughs.

“What gave it away? The glowy blue bits?”

“That was a hint,” you agree, grinning. “I also operate under the general assumption that the weirder something looks, the more likely it is to be used for magic.”

“That’s a… pretty safe assumption, actually,” she admits. And then she launches into a very complicated and very fast explanation of the device. You don’t follow everything she says, not even close. But you probably grasp more than she expects you to. You eye her thoughtfully as she babbles energetically. How much should you let on? Her knowledge is tempting in its own way. But if she’s this eager to explain, you can probably get it out of her even if you pretend to be simple. Like with Dorian.

The truth is, you’ve studied enchantment at some length. Enchantment isn’t as “questionable” as magic. A non-mage studying it could be seen as eccentric, or a tinkerer, or even just a merchant who wishes to understand his wares so as to better sell them. You couldn’t enchant--as a mage, the lyrium would drive you insane remarkably quickly. But more of the theory crosses over than conventional Circle wisdom would have you believe. You don’t know how the device in front of you functions exactly, but you know the basics. The way the runed grooves serve to steer liquid lyrium, the little
claws that hold raw or roughly refined lyrium in place to minimize contact.

Still.

Dumber is always better in these situations.

However, you no more than reveal that you know one doesn’t just use liquid lyrium in enchantment before Dagna is eyeing you.

“You said you’re not a messenger, and you’re delivering this missive about magic… are you a mage?”

Why do people keep asking you that? You laugh, a comfortable, light sound that bounces against the stone walls. “Me? No, I’m just a linguist.”

“Oh… Oh! Elven linguist!” she says, snapping her fingers. “You’re the one who got me my books! Ella… Anna…?”

“Emma,” you correct. Nice that someone around here doesn’t know your name off the top of their head. “Yes, that was me.”

“I was hoping to meet you!” she says, bouncing up onto the balls of her feet and then back onto the heels. She’s jittery… kind of like Sera, but where Sera’s constant fidgeting seems to be out of some subconscious nerves or inability to relax, Dagna’s feels like sheer energy being contained in too small of a package. Like an overcharged rune, ironically. “You did a great job with my requests! I didn’t even know what I needed for some of them!”

“I remember yours,” you say with a smile. “Solas and I spent some long afternoons in the library figuring out how to best fill them. You should be thanking him.”

“I already did!” she says, and you blink. Someone else actually talks to Solas? Thank the Maker. “He said to thank you. You two are kind of alike, huh?”

“A flattering comparison,” you say politely.

“You study magic, like me! That’s what Solas said. Another non-mage who studies magic… we must have so much in common!”

Maker damnit Solas! Come on! Ugh. You’d rather the whole fortress not realize that; you’re having enough damn trouble with Templars just working with a mage.

“I… yes, though not to the extent that you do, obviously,” you say graciously. It’s probably even true. She has the luxury of openly and honestly devoting her life to magical study. There’s no one to suspect she’s secretly a mage. She’s a dwarf! Lucky. “It’s simply a side-effect of doing so much work for the Circles.”

“I’m impressed you know this stuff as well as you do,” she says, tapping the missive. “Did you feel a calling? I kind of did, when I was down in Orzammar. I knew I just had to study magic. Nothing else made me feel so…” She pauses, giggles slightly. “Alive!”

Maker’s breath, she’s adorable. Dorian wasn’t wrong when he’d said the two of you would get along. But this kind of disarming personality is a known weakness of yours. You still have to be on guard. “No, nothing like that,” you say with a chuckle. “I suppose it started back when I was learning Ancient Tevene, or Elvhen. Most tomes and scrolls you can find in those languages have to do with magic. To understand the language, I needed to have at least a rudimentary understanding of
magic and how it worked. When I was in Tevinter--"

“Oh! You’re Tevinter, like Dorian?” she says, her voice chipper despite the quick way the pleasant smile fades from your face. But you recover your polite mask quickly—it had simply been yet another unpleasant reminder, like with Dorian earlier. “That makes sense. You don’t look Tevinter, though. Oh, is that racist? I don’t mean because you’re an elf; you’re just so pale.”

“No, I was…” You clear your throat. “Imported.”

“Oh, so you studied…?”

“I was a slave. I was sold into slavery to the Tevinter Empire,” you say bluntly. “I was born in Ferelden.”

“Oh. Oh! Awkward, sorry!”

“It’s nothing, I--”

“Say, did anyone experiment on you while you were there?” Your whole body goes rigid as she continues on babbling. What kind of a fucking question... “It’s just, you look a little strange out of the corner of my eye, like--”

“No, nothing like that,” you say bluntly. You don’t feel bad interrupting—it seems the only way to get a word in edgewise once she gets going.

“Are you sure? Maybe you didn’t notice…”

“I think I would have noticed that!” you say with a forced chuckle. “No, no magical experiments were performed on me in Tevinter.”

“Hmm…” she says, peering at you.

“And I intend to keep it that way!” you add pointedly.

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t… well, not without permission, anyway. Although, if you want--”

“I need to deliver this missive to Seeker Pentaghast. I’m afraid I’ve already dallied for longer than I should have,” you say politely. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Enchanter Dagna.”

“Oh, that sounds so official. You can just call me Dagna! I’ll just call you Emma. You should come back when you have some more free time! I bet you know all sorts of fun things!”

You have to say goodbye twice more before you manage to leave, and you do so feeling slightly exhausted, like you’d just run a marathon. What a strange woman. Interesting, if a bit scary. What in the Maker’s name did she mean by “you looked weird”? There’s no way she’s picking up on your magic. That’s literally impossible; she’s not even a mage, and frankly if you can hide from a somniari poking into your mind, there is quite possibly nothing you can’t hide from. It had to have been something else. You just can’t imagine what.

Chapter End Notes

Consider stopping by the new RP blog for Emma and asking her some questions! Or
just read through her archive; she's had some very amusing banter with Zevran.
I’m amazed I managed to get this out on time, considering I was bedridden (or hospitalized, at one point) all week with a decently dire illness... and then got my period. But here it is, in all it’s elven glory.

It’s time to deliver this missive to the person you’d been putting off… Seeker Pentaghast. The last time you’d spoken with her, she’d point-blank asked if you were a mage and then quizzed you on your friendship with Cole. You’re not really looking forward to speaking with her again. If anything, she’s more dangerous to you than even Commander Rutherford. Your own personal thoughts on the impossibility of “retiring” from the Templars aside, the Commander is outside of the Order now. But Seeker Pentaghast? She’s a Seeker, for one, which is like Templar Plus. And she’s still a Seeker. Those are still her priorities.

Maybe she won’t be there. It’s the middle of the morning. She’s probably off… doing… Inquisition-y things. If she isn’t here, can you just leave it in her room? No, probably not. You do need to explain it somewhat, and that seems like sketchy messenger behavior. Of course, there is the little fact that you’re not a Maker damned messenger, so…

You’re halfway up the stairs to her loft when you hear the crash. You freeze in your tracks and then duck down--your instinct upon hearing a loud noise. You duck partway behind a pillar at the top of the stairs, and do your best to peek and eavesdrop without being seen. Also your instinct, although perhaps not as good of one.

“First Hawke and now this?” Seeker Pentaghast is shouting at Varric, violently gesticulating with some book in her hand. “Is this your idea of an apology? Of a joke?”

“Look, I had nothing to do with that! Maybe you have a secret admirer!” Varric replies, voice a little snappish but… mostly just nervous. Probably scared. You’d be terrified to have Seeker Pentaghast bearing down on you the way she is on Varric. She holds still long enough for you to get a look at the book in question.

The Randy Dowager.

……. Oops.

“D-don’t be ridiculous!” the Seeker snaps. “I know you were behind this, you wretched little sneak!”

Alright, it is time for you to get the fuck out of here. You turn to tiptoe back down the stairs, but you must turn too fast, or step a little too loudly, because Seeker Pentaghast stops mid-curse.

“Who’s there?” she calls out.

Fuck.

“Show yourself at once.”

Fuckity fuck. Well, at least you have a valid reason to be here.
You step nervously onto the landing, fingers clutching desperately at the missive as if you hope to use it as a shield. Varric is shooting you frantic looks and mouthing “help me” from behind Seeker Pentaghast. You try to ignore him.

“I-I’m sorry, I wasn’t--” you begin, but she immediately cuts you off.

“What are you doing here?” she demands.

You hold the missive out like a sacrifice. “I was supposed to deliver this to you!” you don’t quite yelp, but it’s close.

“Just put it there and leave!” she says, clearly exasperated. Your eyes fall to Varric who is shaking his head violently and shooting you what can only be called “puppy eyes.” Ugh. Damnit.

“I, um… I’m supposed to explain…” you begin meekly. The glare she gives you has your knees knocking. Oh Varric is going to owe you for this one.

“Oh, fine! Varric, I’ll deal with you later. And don’t think you can sneak away--we’re both leaving for Crestwood tomorrow.”

“I have no reason to run! I’m innocent!” Varric says as he bolts down the stairs. He actually is innocent, of the book at least, but you’re sure as fuck not copping to being the one to leave it on her nightstand now. Make that two gifts gone horribly wrong, then.

Now Seeker Pentaghast’s full focus is on you. By the Void, what did you do in your life to deserve this? You swallow, hard, and begin to nervously explain the missive. Her irritation fades noticeably when she realizes what it is--apparently this actually is important enough for you to be bothering her, thank the Maker. She listens attentively to what you’re saying and reads along in the missive after you hand it to her, not interjecting like Dorian or Dagna.

She nods along and seems to actually be taking you seriously, which is… kind of nice, if also kind of terrifying. You’re a nobody; it’s telling of her personality that she’s willing to treat you with respect. But also, the more she listens to you, the more she’ll know who you are. You’d rather stay a nobody, or even just “that weird servant who Cole likes.”

“Thank you for delivering this,” she says at the end, considerably calmer than when you started. Her eyes fix onto you and you know then that she definitely remembers who you are. “You’re the woman who is befriending… ‘Cole’.” Damnit. “Do you still speak with him?”

“I… yes. He’s… my friend.” You say the last bit hesitantly. It feels like a damning admission, but the way she speaks of Cole is irritating. You feel the need to defend him, against your better judgment.

It’s not dismissal you see in her eyes, however, or hatred, but concern. “You know he is a demon, do you not? It’s not safe to be around him.”

You know she has good intentions; she’s just stupid. Brainwashed like every other Chantry fool. But you bristle; she called Cole dangerous and a demon. And she’s trying to protect you. How dare she? As if you need to be protected from your friend, rather than from her! As if she has ever done more good than harm in her entire wretched career. The ones who watch the Templars, ha! The ones who cover up Templar rapists and silence the mages who would make a fuss, more like. That she dares to pretend she has your best interest in mind when she’s infinitely more deadly than Cole could ever be, is--

Your aura is twisting in your stomach like an angry snake.
You need to control yourself.

A deep breath.

“How so?” you reply flatly.

“How so?” she repeats, sounding dumbfounded.

“How is he so dangerous? I’m an elven woman,” you rush on, cutting her off as she attempts to reply. “Every human man in Thedas could kill me and get away with it.”

“That’s not tr--”

“Do not do either of us the disservice of pretending that’s not the way the world works,” you say, scowling slightly. “Whether you, personally, would seek justice were I murdered is not the subject here. The fact of the matter is, an elf is raped, an elf is killed, and by and large, human society doesn’t care. That makes every single one of them a potential threat. This is my point.”

She hesitates. “I see where you are going, but it is not the same thing.”

“Is it not? Cole is already in this world. The Chantry teaches us that demons attempt to possess the living because they desire to be part of our world, but have no bodies of their own.” Your voice is flat, dull. It reminds you of a Tranquil, and you want to scream. But you need to be calm. “Not so for Cole; he already has his own body. There’s no need for him to possess me. And unlike most human men, I can be assured he will be killed if he harms me--by you, most likely.”

Seeker Pentaghast is quite stiff. “Have there been human men who have hurt you and gone unpunished?”

The question is so absurd that you laugh. You can’t help it… what kind of a question is that? She must mean within Skyhold, but even then. What would she do if you said yes? If you pointed her at the men who threatened you? The man who planned to assault you, who Bull stopped? Or to any of the men in your long life who had “hurt” you and “gone unpunished”?

“Good day, Seeker Pentaghast,” you say instead, bowing your head politely, and turning to head down the stairs.

She lets you go.

-  

It’s a bit early for Solas’ lunch yet, but you decide to fetch it anyway. You don’t want to start working only to have to stop in half an hour. An early lunch won’t kill the man. As you’re bringing both of your meals into the rotunda, however, a messenger enters just as you’re setting the plates down.

“Excuse me, Miss Emma?” Oh, Maker, what is it now? You fix the man with an unamused stare.

“May I help you?”

“Lady Montiliyet requests your presence for lunch. She’s asked me to take you to her, if you’re free.”

You glance down at the tray you’re carrying, clearly holding two meals, and then back up at the man. Does it fucking look like you’re free? Still… you shouldn’t get into the habit of saying no to
people infinitely more powerful than you. Lady Montiliyet, despite her polite, kind demeanor, is most definitely that. You glance over at Solas, uncertainly.

“Go, if you wish,” he says mildly. “I can simply share your lunch with Dorian. I’ve been meaning to discuss something with him, at any rate.”

Well… you suppose that’s that, then. You set the tray down on his desk apologetically. “I’ll see what Lady Montiliyet needs. My apologies, Solas.”

Lady Montiliyet, as it turns out, is dining on one of Skyhold’s numerous balconies, overlooking the courtyard. She’s already sitting at a small table for two. The setting is private, and rather intimate. You wonder if she sees many people here; it’s a perfect setting for one-on-one diplomacy.

You’re not feeling overly wary or guarded as you sit down. This is Lady Montiliyet. Anything scary will doubtlessly be reserved for Leliana. And she had mentioned wanting to speak with you personally about what transpired during your trip to Val Royeaux.

“Ah, Miss Emma! I’m glad you could make it on such short notice,” Lady Montiliyet chirps when she sees you wandering out onto the balcony. “Please, sit.” You do so, and she continues on. “I’ve been wanting to speak with you since you returned from Val Royeaux, but trying to make both of our schedules match up was… a challenge. This was the soonest I could manage it. Please, help yourself.”

Lunch is a rather splendid array, probably her standard for treating people. Or perhaps just what she normally eats. It’s all Orlesian, you note, in style, in flavor, and in presentation. She was the ambassador between Antiva and Orlais, so it wouldn’t be too surprising if she held a fondness for that sort of food. You do, in fact, help yourself, though you’re much more restrained than you would be were it just you and Solas. If Solas minds your tendency to gorge yourself, he’s never mentioned it. In fact, he often reminds you to clean your plate if you grow distracted talking in the middle of a meal.

“I wanted the chance to personally thank you for your work for the Inquisition,” Lady Montiliyet is saying. You’re mildly distracted trying to eat a delicious Croque Madame, made with fish—likely from a nearby river—and eggs—likely from the very chickens you’ve placed under new management. Did Gaston make this? You need to find out who made this. What kind of cheese is this?

Oh, she’s still talking. You should be paying more attention.

“You’ve only been with us for two months, but it’s clear you’re going to be a very valuable asset for the Inquisition,” she’s saying. “You took over for Baptiste; it’s only thanks to you the mission wasn’t an utter waste of resources and lives.”

“Thank you, Lady Montiliyet. I… I’m sorry, about Baptiste. If we had been faster on the uptake… If we had been paying more attention…” You sigh. The truth was, there was nothing you could have done to change it. And the soldiers, Solas… they had all done their best. It was just one of those things. But you still feel guilt, and when you think about the face of his daughter in the inn room, the way Baptiste’s grandson had cried. “It was a waste,” you finally say, managing to keep your voice from cracking, though it wavers slightly.

“It was,” she agrees softly. “But that is… simply the way of things, even in times of peace. Baptiste knew the risks when he took a position with the Inquisition. He accepted them. Compensation and flowers have been sent to his survivors, and… time marches steadily on.”

“Oh.” When will you have her again? You might as well. “Compensation and flowers… that
reminds me.” Lady Montiliyet tilts her head in curiosity when you reach into your bag, which is growing steadily lighter now. Her eyes widen in surprise when you place a jar on the table between the two of you. Apple jam, one of many you picked up in the markets of Val Royeaux. Tied around it is a deep, royal blue silk ribbon. Lady Montiliyet seems to recognize both, as she picks up the jar and runs a thumb across the label.

“Oh… this was Baptiste’s favorite,” she says sadly.

“He mentioned,” you say. “I thought… Well. I know the two of you had history, both through your work and as friends…”

“Yes, I… Thank you,” she says. “That was so thoughtful of you. In fact, that reminds me; I have something for you, as well. But first, to business.”

“Business” turns out to be a run down on quite literally every action you performed as “ambassador” to the Inquisition while in Val Royeaux. You did so well getting tomes and liasoning with the Chancellor that she has no wish to “officially disavow” your actions since that might make you more difficult to use in the future. That means you were actually the Inquisition’s ambassador, just… retrospectively. Fortunately, you weren’t too much of an asshole while in Val Royeaux, so it shouldn’t be too difficult for her to clean up after you. She even has plans to twist the concept of sending an elven ambassador to Orlais to the Inquisitor’s advantage. As you’d thought to yourself when you’d first heard that you and Solas would be traveling to Val Royeaux… if the Inquisitor had intended it as a statement, it was certainly a strong one. You’re quite confident he hadn’t meant it like that, however.

After that, the two of you spend a little bit longer than is necessarily reasonable discussing the personal affairs of Lord Bellemont, and how much truth there might be to those shocking rumors about him and the Choffards. You don’t remind her of her “gift” as she’d requested you do, but she remembers anyway when you hand over the ribbon for Leliana. In the end, you don’t have the courage to hand it to the woman yourself, nor any desire to seek her out.

Interestingly, Lady Montiliyet laughs and says she’ll “make sure Lels gets it.” That’s quite more familiarity than you were expecting, though you had noticed before that the two seemed to know each other. As for her present to you, it’s… nail polish, of all things. An unofficial “thank you” for your work in Val Royeaux.

You finger the small glass vial as you head back down to the rotunda. You do have a fondness for such things… and green is your favorite color. It’s not even an easy color to produce, as such things go. You suspect this is a lucky case of regifting, since you’ve given no one any indication of your tastes for this sort of thing—and this shade of green would look unflattering on anyone of Lady Montiliyet’s skintone.

It would go rather well with the dark green footwraps Solas gave you… Elven footwraps and Orlesian nail polish. Yes… you rather like that idea. Whether or not you’re brave enough to actually wear something like that out and about it another thing altogether. Maybe Sunday. Sunday is your day off.

You could ride Revas while wearing footwraps! Oh, you have those leggings you purchased in Orlais— You’re so distracted by your thoughts that you’re in the rotunda and heading towards your desk before you realize Dorian is actually in the rotunda. Physically present, not just shouting down from above. The sight startles you into a sudden stop.
“Ah, looks like your protegé is back, Solas,” Dorian says, noticing you as well. “I suppose that means I’m no longer needed. Wouldn’t want to intrude on your… private time.”

“Private?” you interject, voice mild. “Is that what you call this large, open room with no ceiling? I feel bad for anyone you shared work space with in the past, then.”

“Plenty of privacy away from the center of the room… like where your desk is located, for instance. Or the couch,” Dorian replies slyly. You don’t dignify that with a response; you simply roll your eyes and begin to gather the dishes.

Dorian is gone by the time you return from the kitchen. You simply get to work. Your morning was lost to the missive, but it’s only just past high noon now. If you work hard, you can still finish the illustrations tonight. Not even half an hour after you set to work, Solas meanders over again. You’re unsurprised, but relieved. You wouldn’t have had the courage to ask him, but you really could use his assistance and clever eye for mistakes if you’re to finish this without staying up later than he’d approve of.

To your joy, he continues where the two of you had left off, inspecting the work--he almost seems to be enjoying looking at it--and pointing out small errors. You have a very good memory, but it’s getting difficult for you to keep in mind all the things he’s pointing out while still working, so… you hand him a colored pencil, one whose lines can easily be erased without disturbing the ink. And, well…

At some point, this turned into a repeat of Val Royeaux, working shoulder-to-shoulder with Solas. He’s sitting directly to your side and utilizing part of your desk to mark his corrections. It’s just as distracting now as it was then, if not moreso. Your eyes keep dragging away from your paper towards where his hand rests on your desk, long fingers delicately gripping your pencil, effortlessly and gracefully sliding its narrow point along the paper, marking them as he sees fit.

Nnngh.

It’s a miracle that you manage to actually finish your work. You do, however, by working straight up until dinner. You inform Solas you’re going to fetch both of your meals as he’s inspecting the very last image for the tome. You’ll have to make corrections, but you feel like that won’t take you more but an hour or two. Essentially all you have left between now and being completed is lettering--a lot of lettering--and binding. You’re getting close enough to the end that you can almost taste it.

You and Solas settle back at his desk to share dinner, and while you eat, you inform him that Fenris will probably be stopping by at some point in the immediate future, because you said you would get drinks with him. You only mention it to give him a heads-up before Fenris comes barging in. It’s not like the two are best of friends. Solas, however, seems vaguely amused by the concept.

“Your date is picking you up here? Am I expected to play the role of the overzealous father? Should I tell him to have you back before midnight?” Solas says, then chuckles again, possibly at the sight of your reddening cheeks. You hardly know where to start! It’s not a date! You’re just having a drink or two. Your brain picks the absolute stupidest thing to focus on first, however.

“You’re not old enough to be my father!” you blurt out with a scoff. Really, brain? That’s what you’re going to find the most issue with out of that line of dialogue? Ugh. When Solas says nothing, however, you eye him up and down. There’s no way. He has to think you in your mid to upper twenties; most people do. You had assumed him to be in his upper 30s, perhaps forty or so at the most. He has the personality of a grumpy old man, perhaps, but certainly not the body of one. But… Maker, what if he looks younger than he is, the same way you look older than you are?!
“...Are you?” you add, less confidently.

“Certainly, I’m sure,” he replies, and the sureness with which he says so floors you.

“How old are you?” you demand.

“Old,” he replies mildly.

“Ass!” You’re curious now. How old does he think you are, at that? If he’s successfully guessed your age, then it’s not surprising for him to be “old enough to be your father.” A particularly unlucky 37 year old could be your father without much difficulty. But if he thinks you’re older... “Over forty?” you hazard to guess. His face remains impassive. “Over fifty?” Nothing! Is he over fifty? Maker! And you’re the one who gets stiff in the mornings! How embarrassing.

Frustrated, you give up and throw up your hands in surrender. “You must be like a wine then,” you say with a scowl. “Only growing finer with age.” You freeze, mildly horrified, as his eyebrows rise. You had not meant that the way it sounded. “That… would have been a fantastic line if I’d done that on purpose,” you say, cheeks turning a darker shade of pink. You’ve only succeeded in embarrassing the both of you; he clears his throat somewhat awkwardly.

“I… uh… I’m going to just… take care of these dishes and get back to work,” you decide quickly. No point in shoving your foot even further into your mouth.

-  

Fenris is late enough that you begin to worry that he’ll not show up at all, meaning you humiliated yourself in front of Solas for no reason. You’re just finishing up the last of your revisions when you hear a quiet knock from the doorway. You glance over and see Fenris… standing in the open doorway, knocking on the frame, and looking rather uncertain. Oh, Maker, that’s adorable.

You note that Solas looks amused as well, but he doesn’t pass up the opportunity to be kind of a dick. “You may enter,” he says, causing a potent scowl to form on Fenris’ face. Really, Solas? It’s like angry tomcats. Hopefully they don’t start peeing to mark their territory any time soon. Despite his obvious annoyance however, Fenris attempts to ignore Solas as he enters the room, focusing instead on you.

“Are you ready?” he asks, and you do well by only being distracted by his voice for about five seconds instead of fifteen.

“Just let me finish up this last piece, if you don’t mind. It will only take me a second...”

He glances around at the walls while you work, and then comes to stand near the desk and watch over your shoulder as you finish the very last of your corrections. You don’t like when people lurk over your shoulder, but Maker, for him, you’ll make an exception.

“You’re very good,” he comments, and you flush.

“Oh, no, these aren’t original, just copies,” you say with laughter that, you admit, comes out slightly nervous. He’s standing close enough that you can feel the lyrium in his skin sing. It’s very distracting. You point to the book, which he turns to investigate, giving you some slight relief.

“This is from Tevinter,” he says, sounding surprised.
“Yes, shocking no one, I can read and write ancient Tevene. I’m semi-fluent in modern Tevene as well, obviously, but I don’t really write—”

“Shocking no one? Where is one’s knowledge of a dead language not shocking?” Fenris points out. “If anything, it’s more surprising given that you were a slave, not less. They’re not exactly lining up to teach us to read and write.”

Oh, right. You’re an asshole. You clear your throat. “I was a different sort of slave. Prized for my intellect, not my strength. A proper education made me infinitely more valuable. ...It was actually my master who had me educated in ancient Tevene. He intended to use me in... well, in much the way I use myself now,” you admit. “I suppose the joke’s on him, since I now use the education he gave me to secure my wellbeing.”

“How did he keep your knowledge from spreading? Slaves are kept ignorant for a reason. Did he isolate you?” Fenris asks.

“He tried, but it was a war zone. Everyone had more important things to worry about than my whereabouts every minute of every day. As for how he kept my knowledge from spreading… Well, he didn’t. Not for lack of trying but… these things find a way.”

“You taught the other slaves?” Fenris asks, sounding shocked.

“In secret, yes.” You pause to clean your quill. Finally. Finished.

“That is… very admirable. I’m sure you would not have escaped punishment were you found out.”

Your hand freezes on the quill as your mind spins away into the past. **Pain, blood, screaming, first time you fought back, first time it hurt this much.** The quill creaks as your grip tightens. **Blood drips down your legs. Away, across, this ends now.**

“I…”

**I swear to the Maker, he will never lay a hand on any of us, ever again.**

“I was. And I didn’t.” You force your hand to unclench from the quill, set it down in its holder. You feel a gentle hand on your shoulder and turn without thinking, against sense expecting to see Solas’ concerned eyes. It’s not Solas, of course, it’s Fenris, and you can feel the lyrium, even through the cloth of your undershirt and tunic both. You want to touch it with your bare hands, trace fingers, tongue, aura over it, make it sing, make him-- You force your mind back into the present violently, away from the blood and fog of Seheron, away from your perversion.

“You are all the more brave for it, then,” Fenris says. Against better sense, you take his other hand to help you rise from your chair. Your feeble aura jolts in your stomach at the touch of the lyrium on the inside of his palm. “Let’s head to the tavern.”

Solas gets in one last quip as the two of you exit, Fenris’ hand still on your shoulder.

“Play nice, children,” you glance over your shoulder at him, see the little smirk on his lips, at the same time you take in the scowl on Fenris’ face, the way his grip tightens on your shoulder. “Don’t do anything Mother Giselle wouldn’t do.”

You’re going to kill him. Fifty years of dodging Templars wasted. A shame, really. You glare at him as you exit, and his only response is to smile more.

Ass.
Well, you know what they say. The best revenge is living well... and you've got a "date."
I'm not really in love with this chapter but I wanted to get it out so I can move on already. Looking forward more to writing the next few days. Ugh. Fenris. Why you gotta be so all up in my story; you're a pain to write.

The tavern feels empty, still, without Bull and the Chargers. Maker, where are they? How much longer are they going to be away? They left the same day as you, so it’s been… what, nearly three weeks? They could be gone much longer, you have to admit. Months. Where had they even been sent? You have no idea.

You miss them.

But right now, you’re a bit distracted from thoughts of Bull and Krem by Fenris and the warm buzz of Skyhold’s shitty-but-effective ale. Fenris is confessing that he didn’t know how to read or write until a few years ago; you’re confessing that you already knew that because Varric is a little shit who writes that kind of crap down and then publishes it.

Varric, of course, picks that exact moment to show up, earning a glare from Fenris. You’re too busy glancing around behind him, though.

“No Hawke this time,” Varric says, correctly guessing who you were searching for. “He’s getting ready for tomorrow. We’re heading out.”

“Who’s ‘we’ this time?” you say with a scowl. “And why are you going to Crestwood, anyway?”

Varric blinks. “How do you--”

“Cassandra said the two of you were leaving for Crestwood tomorrow morning,” you interrupt. “If the two of you are going, I’m willing to bet the Inquisitor is, too. And Hawke?” This has to have something to do with why Hawke is here in the first place. At least this means his shitty dog won’t be here after tomorrow.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you why… Though Fenris knows, anyway.”

“Don’t deflect this onto me,” Fenris says with a scowl.

“He just doesn’t want to get into more trouble with Cassandra. What was that about, anyway?” you ask.

“Ugh! Someone left a shitty romance book on her nightstand. Probably the Inquisitor, honestly; that man has absolutely no idea how to woo a woman. She thought it was me.”

“I got that,” you say. “I meant about Hawke. She said ‘first Hawke.’ What did she mean?”

Varric eyes you sourly. “You’re inquisitive today, Stutter.”

“It’s the ale,” you reply dryly. “I’m a curious drunk.”
“He hid Hawke’s whereabouts from the Seeker while she was interrogating him,” Fenris explains. “Now that she’s found out about, I imagine she’s less than pleased.”

“You hid his whereabouts? Why? What in the Maker’s name did Hawke have to fear from a Seeker?” you say with a disbelieving scowl. “He was Viscount! They practically made him an honorary fucking Templar after that mess in Kirkwall.”

“Yeah, why would I hide the whereabouts of my friend from the terrifying woman interrogating me so she could find him for unknown reasons?”

You pause, then nod. “Yeah, alright, good point. You owe me for that rescue, though.”

“Alright. Fenris is really sensitive at the base of his neck and his--” Varric is fast on his feet, and short, so he ducks under the empty mug you chuck at him rather handily.

“She threw one! Take a drink!” someone shouts from another table. You scowl darkly, ears flaming and cheeks bright red from more than just the drink.

“I hope you never need me to hide you from Pentaghast, Varric, because I will sell you out so fast,” you say darkly.

“Oh, does that mean you don’t want the signed first edition Hard in Hightown omnibus I just had delivered to your room?” he says slyly, leaning an arm onto the table.


“Thanks for waiting til it was empty to throw it, love,” she says dryly.

“Should I throw this one too?” you ask snidely. “Seems like I’m selling drinks for you.”

“If you’re going to, do me a favor and chuck it at that Templar there,” she say, gesturing with a tilt of her head. “I’ve got money on it.”

You simply place your head down in your hand. You have never needed to drink more in your life. Good thing you’re in a tavern.

Your drinking only increases when you finally get the news out of Varric of who is going. You had known Solas wasn’t; he would certainly have told you. That Madame de Fer and Cassandra are going is a delight--Skyhold will be much more pleasant without them. Blackwall as well, but you could care less about that. No, you’re sour because the Inquisitor is taking Cole with him again.

Another long, unknown period of time without your friend, wondering if he’s alive or dead. It’s as bad as if Solas was going. Worse, in some ways. With Solas gone, you could have at least enjoyed some freedom--or perhaps privacy--even if it would be lonely. You gain nothing from Cole’s absence. There is no silver lining.

Despite your intense, sudden-onset melancholy, you try to enjoy your evening with Fenris. He’s an extremely pleasant distraction, more and more so the more and more you drink. Fortunately, he’s more than keeping up with you. The man can hold his liquor, but he’s no Bull. He’s not even a Krem. He’s damn near as drunk as you are.

Which is substantially.
You’ve actually managed to avoid the subjects of slavery, magic, or war for a good half hour now. You even mention how you traveled through Kirkwall back in… was it 35 or 36? Eh, you can’t remember.

“No offense, but it smells worse than Ferelden there,” you’re saying, nose wrinkling at the memory. “It smelled worse than the boat I took to Ferelden. Maker.” Fenris is laughing, which only eggs you on. “Three different people tried to mug me, Fenris. Three! I was there for all of thirty-six hours!”

His laughter is deep and hearty and warm, and you’d like to keep hearing it, you think, but he’s giving you a look now. You’re too drunk to identify it properly, but it’s a sly look that says “got you.” You rather like it.

“Tried to mug you? All three failed?”

Yep, he got you, though not in the way you would like. You scoff it off; it’s easy to deflect, even when drunk. ‘They weren’t very good.’

“In other words, you were better?”

“Ass!” you laugh. “Maybe I just didn’t have to be very good; they were that shit. We can’t all stick our arms through people when they piss us off, y’know. Some of us have to just run away.” You snort, then your mind drifts back to Varric’s descriptions of the way Fenris used the powers his lyrium tattoos gave him to kill. Your eyes trace idly over his bared arms. The term ‘walk quietly and carry a big sword’ were basically made for him; he’s all lithe muscle.

“Maker, what I wouldn’t do to see that.”

...Oh, that was out loud.

“What? Why?” Fenris says, looking appropriately confused considering you’d just stated you’d like to see him stick his arm through another man’s chest.

“Well… it’s normal to be curious about something like that, innit?” you deflect, eyeing your mug. Why isn’t there more drink in it? “S’not like I’ve ever seen someone stick their arm through a solid object.”

Fenris snorts. “Well, seeing as how there’s a distinct lack of slavers around, I suppose you’ll just have to go on wondering.”

“Can you only do it on people?” you wonder. “What about like… a training dummy?”

“Are you asking for a demonstration?” he says with a laugh.

“If I was, would you do it?” you inquire.

His laughter pauses; his head tilts as he realizes you’re serious. He seems to consider for a moment, and then, “Maybe if you show me how you managed to escape three Kirkwall muggings unharmed.”

You can’t help but to laugh. It seems you get to know more men this way… Really, you should be thanking Bull for introducing you to the concept of befriending people by sparring. Who knew violence was such a good way to meet people?

- 

You’d known the out-of-the-way training ring you and Bull used in the past would be perfect for
this. But you hadn’t quite taken the weather into account. It’s *fucking freezing* outside. You’re chilled
to the bone in about five minutes, and considering Fenris isn’t even wearing sleeves, the fact he isn’t
frozen solid is astonishing to you.

You also had not predicted the effect his lyrium would have on you, once he lit it up like the sodding
White Spire. If it had hummed before, now it sung like an Orlesian choir. Your aura doesn’t even
struggle for freedom; if anything it lays down and rolls over like a fat dog. Oh, Maker. *Oh, Maker.*

He turns it off again in short order, but you’re already higher than a high dragon on the combination
of alcohol and lyrium. And then he fixes his eyes on you and gives a little half-smile and says, “Your
turn.”

Well.

Alright, then.

The cold clearly isn’t enough to sober you, because you’ve stripped off your tunic in record time.
There’s no way you can do anything that requires any sort of athleticism within its tight confines.
Besides, you’re wearing a comfortable cotton shirt underneath; your trip to Val Royeaux meant that
your clothes weren’t all shit anymore.

You’ll later justify to yourself that you started things out perfectly tame. You demonstrated on a
training dummy, like a good little Andrastian woman who just so happened to be standing scantily
clad with a similarly scantily clad man. Particularly one she’d like to be even less clad with,
somewhere more private. That just didn’t hold out for very long, however.

The next day, you’ll probably have a hard time explaining to yourself how the evening went from
“drinking in the nice warm tavern with Fenris” to “outside in the freezing cold, trying to
recreationally punch Fenris.” But honestly, it seems like the natural sort of progression for you these
days.

You’re too drunk to be much good. Fortunately, Fenris is drunk too, so it’s not like he’s doing much
better. You actually have a nice little time of it. Fenris plays the part of the mugger, threatening with
a nonexistent knife, and you demonstrate a few basic moves that you’re certain he already knows,
one that you explain away by telling him a bit of your times as a petulant street rat in Antiva City.

“It’s no surprise I fell into a bad crowd after escaping slavery,” you explain with a grunt as you twist
his arm, causing his hand to flex open. A knife would be dropped, if he had one.

“No,” he agrees. “There aren’t a great many opportunities for gainful employment, particularly when
one is in hiding.”

“I hid for years. Must have changed my name six times by the time I started going by Alix in Orlais.”

“Is Emma your birth name, then? Or just another title taken for yourself?”

This throws you off balance; you pause momentarily, and Fenris thuds his closed fist into your side,
as if stabbing you with a knife. “Your money or your life,” he says jokingly, and you chuckle as
well.

“It’s not like Fenris is *your* birth name,” you point out. “Sometimes names are what we make of
them.”

“I agree. Fenris was a title given to a pet, but I’ve made it a name to be feared by Tevinter slavers
and magisters alike.” He swings a little harder then, and your arm jars slightly when you block. You
give back a little harder in return, and the two of you begin sparring a bit more in earnest, your chatting voices becoming slightly breathless as more and more effort goes into it.

You’re panting quite heavily by the time you stop, one hand on a knee, and one up to indicate a pause. You’re drunk, and it’s hard for you to keep this sort of activity up and talk at the same time. When you turn your back, however, Fenris must decide to trip you up one last time. It would be cute, under most circumstances. He would poke you in the side and you’d jump and then have a good laugh.

But this is you. When you feel an unexpected hand on your side, beginning a grip, your mind goes blank. Whether you’re thinking of Seheron, or Orlais, or Iron Bull’s training, or simply working on automatic, you don’t know. But you grab his arm and yank, spinning Fenris off balance—and flipping him clean over your shoulder. You’re used to using a lot more force when attempting to yank someone off balance, thanks to over a month spent wrestling a Qunari every single morning. Fenris is taller than you by a few inches and solid, lithe muscle… but he’s sure as hell no Qunari.

Of course, he has instincts of his own, as evidenced by the fact that he doesn’t let go of your arm when you let go of his, and instead drags you tumbling into the dirt with him. The two of you roll a few feet together before thudding to a stop. You sit up with a groan, your head spinning heavily. Rolling plus alcohol. Not a good combination. You might be slightly ill.

“Maker, sorry,” you groan out, holding your head to make it stop spinning. “I’ve got a fuckin’ Qunari training me here, I’m used to having to be a lot more forceful. You alright?”

“Fine,” he replies, but his voice sounds a bit strained. You crack open an eye to make sure he isn’t injured or bleeding.

The nausea fades away as if it never was when you look down and realize that you’re sitting on top of Fenris. Straddling his torso, as a matter of fact. You freeze for a moment, just sort of… taking the sight in. Fenris is flushed despite the cold night air, panting from the exertion, and--Maker’s balls, one of his hands is on your leg! Then you ricochet off of him, sending yourself sprawling into the grass.

Cold is the last thing you’re feeling at that moment. Fenris sits up with a bit of a groan, one hand on his neck. “I think I feel sorry for those lowtown muggers,” he says, twisting his neck as if to un-kink it.

“Sorry!” you exclaim. “I learned that from a Qunari, and well, he’s a lot… heavier.”

“You can throw a Qunari over your shoulder?”

You snort, loudly enough that it actually hurts your nose. It’s when you go to rub it that you realize how freezing cold you are. You’re damn near completely numb! Whose idea was it to wrestle in the middle of the night in Kingsway in the mountains? Oh, right. Yours. “No way,” you reply. “He’d crush me. But he’s the one who taught me, and even the guy I practice on is heavier than you, if not much taller.”

“And you train with Qunari… why?” he asks, but his voice is devoid of the accusation that normally carries with that question. Normally, people speak as if it’s something you shouldn’t be doing—it is—and something you need to justify—you do. But you appreciate what appears to be genuine curiosity on his part.

“It’s an odd story,” you admit. “It started almost as a dare, or a bet… But I found that I worked better with exercise first thing in the morning, so I just kept it up.”
“And now you can throw men over your shoulder,” Fenris says with a chuckle. “As good a reason as any for a hobby.”

You laugh. “I suppose so. Still, I’m sorry. ...Only so sorry, though, since you never stuck your arm through anything. Tease.”

“Perhaps next time,” he says with a small smile.

You’re in your room preparing for bed before you fully process that means he intends for a “next time.”

---

You have, fortunately, finished with the inevitable necessary reaction to straddling a panting, flushed Fenris by the time Cole pops into your room the next morning. Though he could have given you more time and more warning--you were literally cleaning your hand off, and his presence makes you jump.

“Cole! You’re up?” you ask, before realizing you have no idea if he sleeps. He probably doesn’t, actually. Spirits don’t sleep, do they? That’s just silly, and he doesn’t actually have a human body to need such things. He doesn’t seem to eat or drink, either.

“I wanted to tell you before I left, but you were busy yesterday. And then last night. And then until right now.”

Thank the Maker no one else is in the room right now, but you still flush slight pink.

“Varric told you; I’m glad,” he continues.

“He did,” you say, recovering from your embarrassment with a sad sigh. “Do you have to go?” you ask, even though you know it’s stupid.

“I do,” he replies. “I’ll be helping people; don’t worry.”

“I’ll worry anyway,” you grumble. “Thanks for coming to see me before you left, though. Are you all heading out at dawn?”

Cole nods, and you finish standing out of bed, stretching slightly. It’s almost dawn now. “Let me dress, and I’ll accompany you out. I’d like to see you off, at the very least.”

It’s effortless to strip in front of Cole. He just squats and starts fiddling idly with the lock on your chest. “You keep secrets in here,” he comments as you yank on fresh underwear. “You keep them everywhere, but you keep a lot in here. Important ones.”

“Sure do, Cole,” you say distractedly as you fumble your way into a breast band. “That’s why there’s a lock on it.”

“My precious Dirth’len, no one can ever know. I’ll keep you safe, I’ll keep you warm.”

You freeze with one leg into your trousers.

“One day you’ll know, but not today, not today, I’ll--”

“Don’t poke around in there, Cole,” you say, your voice dark. He stops for a moment, and then...

“She loved you more than anything.”
“I know.” You finish yanking on your trousers. “There’s no hurt there for you to fix, Cole.”

“That’s not true,” he protests. “You wondered, when she left you again and again, if--”

“It was for both of our safety,” you snap. “Cole. Enough. My mother is no one’s business. Not even yours.”

He falls silent, but keeps fiddling with the lock on your chest as you yank on a shirt and tunic, pull your hair back into a bun, and then, as an afterthought, pull on a hat you’d picked up in Val Royeaux. It’s knit, and a dark, dull green that will no doubt fade with washing, but it’s somewhat stylish and, more importantly, warm and bulky enough to contain both your hair and your ears without awkward bulging. It’s getting cold out there, and everyone already knows you’re an elf. Your pride won’t matter if your damn ears fall off from frostbite.

“Let’s see you off then, tesoro,” you say with a heavy sigh. “Do you know how long you’ll be gone?”

“They don’t know. Days, or weeks. The trip won’t be long, but what will be waiting for him?” Cole replies, and you sigh again. Not even a timeframe. Just like with Bull and the Chargers, you’ll be left metaphorically standing on a widow’s peak, fluttering your scarf dramatically into the wind and wondering when your friends will come home. If they’ll come home.

“We’ll be okay,” Cole attempts to reassure you. “And so will you. Solas will be here.”

“I’d rather have you,” you grumble, slipping your hand into his as the two of you exit the somewhat-warm building into the freezing pre-dawn air. But you are relieved that Solas isn’t leaving as well. You won’t even deny it. You would be extra frantic if Solas was going. You know, logically, that he can take care of himself, but the man is still flesh and blood, something Cole has an advantage on. As a spirit, he can still be destroyed, but he’s a bit more resilient to death than most. Solas, like all mortals, is always just one well placed blade away from death.

The progression out of Skyhold is already preparing when you and Cole arrive. You see the Inquisitor towards the front, adjusting the saddle on his horse. Cassandra notices you damn near immediately, her eyes latching onto the figure you and Cole must cut, standing in the cold winter air side-by-side, hands naturally latched together. She immediately frowns darkly, but then seems to catch herself. Her eyes flick to yours, and you keep your expression carefully neutral. She pulls her bottom lip into her mouth, almost like a nervous habit, then glances away. She returns to her work with her blade.

You wonder if Cole is in any danger from her. Immediate danger probably not, but… it’s possible she’s just looking for an excuse to murder him. She is a Seeker. You know little of the order, but none of it is good.

“Cassandra won’t kill me unless I need to be killed,” Cole assures you, but it does little for your nerves.

“I don’t like to think about what she considers needing it,” you grumble under your breath, not wanting anyone to overhear. “Be careful, tesoro.”

“Stutter! I should be surprised!” comes Varric’s cheerful voice. “Here to see your little spirit boyfriend off? I thought Mabel might have kept you away.”

“Mabel?” you begin to ask, but your voice is cut off by a loud barking.

FUCK.
You duck behind Cole as “Mabel,” apparently the name of Hawke’s wretched Mabari, comes bounding over. She butts her head into his stomach—*that’s how unnaturally huge they are*—and he playfully ruffles her ears.

“She likes you,” Cole comments, but you note that he blocks her with a hand when she tries to duck around him to get at you. “Be good,” he says, and it takes you a moment to realize he’s speaking to the dog and not you. She sits down and tilts her head, whining slightly. You clutch to the back of Cole’s shirt, shaking like a leaf, but Cole seems to have more control over the dog than fucking *Hawke* had, at least.

“Oh good, are you two making nice?”

Goddamnit. Speak of a demon and one will appear...

Hawke.

“She doesn’t bite unless I tell her to! Go on, you can pet her.”

You try not to glare from where you hide behind Cole’s shoulder. Fortunately, Cole answers for you. “She’s allergic.” Maker’s breath, he’s capable of lying?

Hawke blinks, no doubt taking in the fact you’re actively hiding behind Cole, moving around behind him so that the spirit is always between you and the dog as she bounds around cheerfully from person to person.

“Must be one serious allergy,” he comments, then directs his focus to you again. “You and Fenris play nice, hmm? He breaks easy,” he says with a lascivious grin that you wish you could smack off his face—if only that wouldn’t result in serious injury on your part. Fortunately, he turns and mounts up, and it seems like most of the party is, so you’re spared from replying.

Unfortunately, that means it’s time for brief goodbyes to Varric and Cole. Cole, you note, doesn’t seem to be intending to ride a horse, though there is a dark colored horse with no rider, you note. You help Varric up onto his almost-a-pony and make sure not to let yourself cry until the portcullis is closed behind them.
Homecoming

Chapter Notes

A little backstory: I originally was not planning on keeping this ending, I was going to continue the chapter on further, but some wonderful readers encouraged me to keep it as is. Keep that in mind after you finish. <3

Elven Guide
athim las enaste = humility grants favor
emma tel'isala athim = I'm not in need of humility
ma solas him sulevin = my pride has purpose
da’nan = little vengeance

You watch from the battlements until the progression is out of sight, sulking the same way you had when Solas and Cole left for Crestwood. This time, however, there’s no Iron Bull to come harass you and snap you out of your depressed fugue, so you have to pull yourself out of it.

It’s too early to head into the rotunda just yet, but you don’t feel like eating breakfast. You wind up just sort of vaguely walking around the battlements for lack of anything better to do. It’s cold as the Void up there, but you’re pretty well bundled up. It won’t be enough to keep you from being chilled as the weather continues its slow descent into winter, but for now, you’re comfortable enough. But you’re not the only one walking the battlements that morning. You’re so unlucky that you’re almost not surprised when you see Commander Rutherford gazing out over the mountains… or when he immediately turns and spots you before you can hightail it.

“Ah, ‘Just Emma,’” he says cheerfully, and you approach, a forced smile on your lips. At least you know that after years of practice, it looks natural. “Out for a morning stroll, or do you have another early-morning delivery?”

“Just out for a walk before work, Commander,” you reply politely. Hopefully he won’t keep you long.

“I’m glad we happened into each other,” he begins, and you groan internally. What is it now? Another chess game? Does he want your opinion on something that your opinion really doesn’t matter on? “We were interrupted, before…”

“By a goat, as I recall,” you say, squinting out over the mountains. “With our luck, this time it will be a horse thrown at the walls. Whatever happened to the people responsible, anyway? I’ve been so busy that I haven’t really been listening to the rumor mills.”

“It was an Avvar chieftain, the father of the man the Inquisitor tangled with in the Fallow Mire,” the Commander explains. “Apparently it’s their tradition to smack our holdings with goat’s blood.”

“So they threw goats over the chasm,” you say, rubbing your forehead. “That’s… creative. Did you run them off?”

“We captured the chieftain. The Inquisitor had us give the tribe all the weapons we could share and ‘exiled them’ to Tevinter.”
You stare blankly for a moment, blinking… and then, despite yourself, begin to laugh. “You’re kidding me. Was this the Inquisitor’s idea?”

“It was,” the Commander replies, chuckling a bit as well. “It will be more trouble than it’s worth, but I can appreciate the humor. In any case, I wanted to ask you a few more questions about your trip to Val Royeaux.”

Well, you suppose it could be worse. This could have been about the present. “Yes, ser?”

“The people you traveled with on the way there, the soldiers. What did you think of them?”

The question is so bizarre that your confusion has to show on your face for a brief moment. What you… thought of them? “They were… all perfectly respectful,” you begin slowly, hunting for what the Commander is looking for. Is he worried about the problem of racism in the ranks?

“How well did they perform their jobs? Did anything of particular note stand out to you?”

Why in the Maker’s name is he asking you this? He should be asking Solas… or has he already? Is he simply looking for corroboration? “If this is about Baptiste’s death, I do believe they did the best they could. The arrow took us all off guard; I believe Baptiste was struck first out of simple bad luck. We were the closest to the road at the time of attack… dumb luck that it was him and not I,” you add ruefully.

“Did anything about any of them stand out? How did the one in command do with the attack and sudden death?” he insists. You’re still not quite sure what he’s looking for, but you answer to the best… well, okay, not to the best of your ability, but to what you want to appear as the best of your ability.

“The youngest, Kelsie, was a little shaken after the battle… fair enough, so was I. She recovered well with the support of her fellow soldiers and seemed fine by the time I met up with them for the return journey. Elaine and Emilio handled themselves well.” You could add that Emilio obviously has experience fighting with mages, but not only would it be odd for you to notice that, it’s probably something you should keep to yourself. “As for Garrick, he reacted quickly and was ready to make the necessary changes to the mission to account for Baptiste’s loss. He was originally planning to send Solas and I back to the safety of Skyhold, likely with a more heavily armed caravan, and continue their own mission. Solas and I were the ones to insist we continue on and attempt to finish the job in Val Royeaux.”

The Commander is nodding thoughtfully, which is slightly unnerving. “The bandits themselves, did anything stand out to you about them?”

At this point, you’re just assuming he’s asking everyone. He’d better be asking everyone. If this idiot is counting on you to have some insight onto the bandits that trained soldiers don’t… “Nothing you probably haven’t already heard,” you reply, eyeing him warily. “The second group was significantly better armed than the first… They may have already successfully taken out many travelers. They seemingly passed up an armed merchant’s caravan from Orzammar that had come from that direction. True, that caravan had double our guards, but their cargo was far more valuable than ours… I can’t guess as to why they chose to attack us and not the others. It could be the size of our party, or they had some way of detecting magical wards on the dwarven caravan.” You scowl, unable to help yourself. “That a bandit group of that sheer size was operating on the Imperial Highway for any period of time is a testament to the sorry state of Orlais right now.”

The Commander nods, somberly. He begins to walk, and gestures for you to follow him. Grand. “The civil war in Orlais could not have come at a worse time,” he says with a sigh as the two of you
walk in a slow, measured pace along the battlements.

“It never ceases to amaze me how men will take advantage of disaster to further their own ends,” you agree sourly. You’ve not been alive so long, and yet you’ve seen it over and over and over. Hell, you’ve even taken advantage of chaos to suit your ends a few times yourself… although you certainly never held the power to make any sort of difference one way or another. Taking advantage of the Templars absence to steal from them was hardly on the same scale as staging a coup.

“It never ends, apparently. That is why it’s so important that we…”

Somehow, the two of you end up talking. And talking. And talking some more. The conversation meanders as much as your walking does. It starts with the civil war, travels through the perilous waters of the mage/Templar conflict—not a conversation you’re comfortable having with a Templar, ex or no--and continues on to Skyhold, it’s defenses, and the betterments thereof. It’s at that point in the conversation that you find yourself in the Commander’s office, both of you leaning over his desk as he shows you outlines for improvements he’s planning.

You’re making a few suggestions; this isn’t something you have much experience with… Skyhold really is your first fortress after all, but you’re explaining some quick-but-sturdy “overnight” walls that you learned in Seheron… or, that you learned in Seheron as far as he knows. There are, after all, some rather large gaps in the fortress’ walls that have yet to be repaired fully. Never know when those might need to be plugged up in a hurry.

It isn’t until the two of you are interrupted by an agent coming in with a report that you realize what in the Maker’s name you’re doing. How did you go from a walk on the battlements to him showing you plans on his desk? You have actual work to do! And also, you shouldn’t be talking to the Commander, damnit! You take advantage of the agent’s arrival to quickly apologize and take your leave… but you don’t miss the sour glare the Commander levels at the unfortunate agent.

Trouble, trouble.

You need to get to work anyway, though. You just won’t mention to Solas where you were… or that you’d skipped breakfast two days in a row.

-

There’s no missive for you today, and the art for the book is essentially done. Now for the “fun” part… writing. Just… writing. Writing, and writing, and writing some more. Writing with a flourish. Writing evenly, with rulers and soft lines in pencil that get gently erased afterwards to present the illusion of perfection. It’s actually extremely soothing… some people might find it tedious, but you get to read as you write, each word perfectly preserved on paper and in your mind. You have a good memory, but this process turns every book you’ve ever written to solid stone, a memory to return to and pluck through even if the tome itself is lost.

Still, this will be a good one. You’re looking forward to having your own copy, and you’re quite confident this draconologist will be enamored with your work. This tome will be… well, not one of a kind—you intend for there to be three, at minimum—but still. Unique and glorious.

Solas enchanted your wrist before you even started to work, so it all goes ridiculously smoothly. You once had your focus compared to that of a Tranquil—something they meant as a compliment and severely disturbed you to hear. But today, you can almost see it… particularly when you sit back to stretch and look at the pile of completed pages, ready to be bound or to be flourished further if you so feel.
Yeah. You destroyed work today. It’s a good feeling. But the candle you use to help you keep time is informing you that you’re perilously close to being late with Solas’ lunch. He’s not said anything… perhaps he wanted to allow you to work, or maybe he’s too caught up in his own efforts. He’s been--as far as you can tell--practicing runecraft by drawing them out with ink, not mana. An interesting technique you’d like to try yourself, given how rarely you get any time alone with your mana. But how to translate the ability to draw the runes by hand with-- You’re getting sidetracked again. Lunch.

Still, it’s a shame you can’t get him to show you.

...Lunch.

It’s never that easy, though. You talk a bit to Celia while you prepare your meal and Solas’, in between moments spent eyeballing Kelsie’s “sister”--because you’re nosy and don’t know when to mind your own business. You’re starting to think you’ll get back to work in record time when Servis stops you on the way back to the stairs. Because of course he does. Your hands are full of two lunches, but yes, certainly you don’t look extremely busy or anything. You can totally stop to chat.

“I believe you forgot something in the book you fetched for me,” Servis says, holding a soft, decorative snakeskin bookmark between two fingers. “Unless it came with the tome, which seems unlikely.”

“I didn’t forget it; I left it on purpose. Have you never received a gift before, Servis?” you ask dryly. The man blinks, and for a moment you think perhaps he hasn’t. But that’s absurd, gift giving isn’t a thing in Tevinter culture like it is in some others.

“Why?” he asks simply, and the honest bewilderment on his face is kind of refreshing. You see suspicion there as well… Though you can’t really blame him. You’d be suspicious if he got you a gift.

“I got many of them for many people in Val Royeaux. I saw it while I was shopping, and for some reason the idea of a scaly creature that sneaks around on its stomach reminded me of you,” you reply dryly.

“Har har,” he says. “But--”

“If that’s all you wanted to know, ser, I do have a delivery to make,” you say pointedly, nodding down at the tray full of food.

“Wait--” he says as you begin to sidestep around him.

“Nope!” you reply cheerfully. “Try again later.”

You hear him let out a sound of frustration, between a snort and a displeased grunt. You can’t stop the slight smile that spreads on your lips as you walk. Tevinters. So easy to baffle, and it never does get old.

You do take a bit of time to relax and unwind at lunch, after a morning of frantic work. The pile of finished pages soothes you--more than most scribes would complete in a full day, completed in half of one thanks to Solas’ enchantment and your considerable talent. Solas seems to note the way
“You certainly seem pleased with yourself today,” he comments idly as the two of you munch away at your respective lunches. You don’t always speak at length over your meals, but today he’s looked up from the book he’s been reading all morning to engage you. His notebook of drawn runes lays sprawled open on the far corner of the desk.

“I am. Exceedingly,” you reply matter-of-factly. “I’ve already completed the work of two lesser scribes in only the first half of the day. That enchantment of yours takes my pace from ‘fast’ to ‘neck breaking.’ I adore it.”

“Athim las enaste,” he says dryly, and you laugh even while a pleasurable chill runs up your spine from the sound of Elven on his tongue.

“Emma tel’isala athim,” you reply as brattily as you can manage. When his eyebrows rise, you double down. “Ma solas him sulevin.” He snorts, and you grin at your little victory.

“Him,” he corrects, and your smile fades a bit as you realize it’s quite possible he was laughing at your poor pronunciation and not your affectation of arrogance. Ah well. A laugh is still a laugh, even if it’s at your expense. “You just pronounced ‘athim’ correctly, but you fail at ‘him’?” he says, chuckling again.

You flush slightly, glaring down at your cheese. “I said ‘athim’ correctly because you just said it,” you mutter sourly. “I thought it was ‘ath-im’ before…” You can blame the Dalish for this one, at least—you learned that word from them, dammit. Not that you’d admit that to Solas. He’d just say what you already know—that’s what you get for learning from Dalish. But you don’t turn up your nose at knowledge, even from the Dalish. You just have to sort of… screen for creative interpretation.

“You say you learned primarily from books and scrolls… what books and scrolls?” Solas asks. “The ancient elves aren’t well known for leaving a great deal behind.”

“They left more than people think!” you protest. “You just… have to know how to look for it,” you add with a sigh. “Most modern historians mistake Halamshiral-era ruins for Elvhenan-era ruins. And, true, most of what even I have is Halamshiral era. But if you know that, you can sort of cross reference it with other records. The Dalish copy Halamshiral, Halamshiral copied Elvhenan. But Ancient Tevinter, they copied Elvhenan even more directly, and they kept records. I speak Ancient Tevene, and by comparing Elvhen writings with Ancient Tevene ones, I can see similarities in the languages. Not in the words themselves, but in the terminology they use.”

To your surprise, Solas is… listening. He seems engaged, even. Curious, but about what you’re actually saying. For once, you don’t get the feeling he’s prying for personal information. He… does he actually want to hear your techniques?

“Do you have actual Elvhen tomes, then?”

“A few. Most of them, I had. I lost a great deal when my house burned down,” you say with a scowl. “Although ‘tomes’ is probably a misnomer; none of them are really that complete—or large. Thankfully, most of the more valuable pieces I had already passed on to collectors with more secure vaults, after producing my own copies. The only ones in my house were copies or ones I was in the process of copying.”

“But where did you get them?” Solas insists. “Such tomes are extremely rare, often in states of extreme disrepair…”
“Anywhere I could,” you say with a sigh. “What do you want me to say? I don’t think I got any two pieces the exact same way. I borrowed, I stole, I hunted, I dug. I had friends and sources that would bring things to my attention. I made it my business to know, and when I had the money, I paid people to brave dangers I could not to bring me back scant scraps of paper or tracings of writings on an ancient temple wall.”

You lean back on the stool, balancing idly on your tailbone while gazing upwards, thinking. The crows overhead remind you that you’re never going to be alone enough to talk to Solas honestly, never going to be safe enough to tell him the roots of your education in ancient Elven.

“In truth, a lot of pieces I got from private collections. People often did not know the value of what they had, or misidentified Elvhen pieces as Halamshiral-era due to where they were found. Of course, for every one Elvhen piece I found, there were probably dozens of Halamshiral pieces… and those were not at all common. It’s always been something of a needle-in-a-haystack search,” you admit. “But by cross-referencing all available sources… by comparing Tevinter records with Orlesian records with Dalish legends with ancient murals and field journals… by refusing to throw out even the smallest clue… I managed.”

You twist your hands together anxiously, pull your bottom lip into your mouth and bite down, then lower your gaze back to Solas. “Didn’t I?”

You had been more sure before you met him. A damn Somniari, something strolling straight out of legend with more knowledge than you and an air of casual expertise. Someone who could probably get answers from ancient spirits so deep in the Fade that you could never dream of running into them.

“What you’ve done is…” Solas pauses, and your breath stills in your chest. “Remarkable, given your resources.” You let out your breath. It’s hardly unmitigated praise, but it’s something. “So you learned from the Dalish, as well?”

Damnit. He would pick up on that.

You frown. “I… didn’t discount anything. The Dalish’s oral tradition isn’t considered history in the academic sense, and it’s often overly embellished, or has unrelated morals shoved in. But I’d be an idiot not to take it into account when studying Elvhen culture. We have so little, and they have more than most anyone. I can’t afford to throw anything out just because I find the sources irritating and condescending.”

“That is a very reasonable outlook,” Solas replies.

“And that is a very neutral response,” you say dryly. Solas merely smiles, ever so slightly.

Frustrating.

“Well, that’s my life story,” you say, and he snorts. “So why not tell me what that’s all about?” You point at the notebook of runes.

“This?” he says, blinking with surprise. “I don’t think you would und…” But then he pauses, before grabbing the notebook and pulling it over. “I am studying the difference between the runes I am used to and those used by modern Orlesian Circle mages such as Madame de Fer. I noticed a stark difference while we were traveling together.”

“And the runes you’re used to are…?” you ask, pulling the notebook closer to yourself to glance at the runes. They look alien to you in ink, somewhat similar to diagrams you’ve seen but… not quite. Solas is, you suspect, using some form of shorthand you’re unfamiliar with.
“I am self-taught,” Solas replies in a wondrous display of not actually answering the question. You’re slightly distracted trying to understand the runes, however. You run a finger over the page, as if you could send your magic tracing into it the way you would a real, magical rune in order to learn its secrets.

“I feel like I’ve seen this shorthand before,” you murmur to yourself. “You say you’re self-taught, but surely you learned your techniques somewhere. From books, like I… learned Elven.” You squint at the book, then flip it so that you can look at it right side up, frowning. “I once translated a book of runes from ancient Tevinter. They were… similar, but not… Not this sort of rune. I can’t…”

Your lunch lies forgotten as you run soft, inkstained fingertips along the curves and bumps of the rune. There’s something here, just beyond what you can see, and it’s frustrating. It’s that quiet in the room as you examine the book, all else pushed from your mind, that allows you to hear what you hear. It comes from just outside the door, a shouted announcement you might have missed under different circumstances.

“The Chargers have returned!”

You slam the book down, standing so fast that you knock the stool over in your haste. It clatters loudly to the stone floor, breaking the spell of silence that had fallen over the room. You stare apologetically at Solas, eyes wide, almost asking for permission.

“Go on, then,” he says, and you bolt out the door, notebook forgotten on the desk. Down the steps, into the courtyard, just as fast as you can, nearly knocking people over in your haste. You catapult across the courtyard and to the gates, where you already see a pair of familiar horns sticking a head above the crowd. You shove your way through, ignoring loud complaints and a few swears. The fuss is enough to have Iron Bull and a few others looking over at you, and when you break through the crowd with a curse of your own, Bull swoops you up, hands around your waist.

You shriek a bit as your feet leave the ground, but are too shocked to struggle. Bull hoists you up like a parent might do to a small child, and once again you’re in a bit of awe about how light you seem to him.

“You beat us back to Skyhold!” he says as he sets you back down. You stand dazed for a moment as he ruffles your hair, knocking it loose of your bun.

“I… yes,” you say, shaking your head in an attempt to dislodge his hand. It only serves to muss your hair further. “I got back a few days ago. I wasn’t sure when you’d be back.”

“Oy! Da’nan!” comes a cheerful voice.

“Dalish!” you say excitedly, and she and Skinner both pop out from around Iron Bull. “Skinner! That jacket of yours saved my ass, you know.”

“Good. That was the point,” she replies matter-of-factly as Dalish joins in messing up your hair… despite the fact you’re a good four inches taller than her.

“How was Val Royeaux?” Dalish asks

“Shitty and Orlesian,” you reply, glancing around them. “Where’s Krem?”

Dalish immediately falls silent, and you go stiff. All three of them are looking down and to the side, not meeting your eyes.

“…Bull?” you say, suddenly moving around him to try and look at the rest of the group. That’s when
you notice that a lot of the Chargers are sporting fresh injuries, and there are medics carting a few of them off towards the healing tent… including some on stretchers. The color begins to drain from your face. “Bull?” you ask again, panic rising into your voice. “Where’s Krem?”
“Bull? Where’s Krem?”

You don’t like the way none of them are meeting your eye, or the way they’ve all stopped smiling.

“Skinner?” you ask, your voice raising an octave. “Don’t mess around, where is he?”

“Krem… got hurt pretty bad,” Bull says with a sigh. “He’ll make it, but… Well, let’s just say he won’t be showing up to morning training any time soon.”

“Where is he?” you demand, eyes falling to the other injured Chargers. “Is he already in the healing tent? Why are we just standing around here, we—”

“Calm down, Emma,” Bull says firmly, putting a hand on your shoulder to block you from bolting off towards the tent—which you’d been just about to do. “We’d only get in the way. The healers will let us know when we can see him.”

He’s right, you realize. If you wouldn’t out yourself to save his life—and you wouldn’t, you couldn’t even do it when the only person at risk of knowing was Solas—then you would just be dead weight.

Poor… poor choice of words.

“When can we see him?” you ask, voice still too-high and cracking.

“When they say we can,” Bull replies with a grunt. “I’ve learned not to rush healers. C’mon, kid, does no good to dwell. They’ll let me know as soon as anything changes.” Bull steers you along with a hand on your shoulder to block you from bolting off towards the tent—which you’d been just about to do. “We’d only get in the way. The healers will let us know when we can see him.”

Your neck stays craned around towards the healing tent, as if you can see inside from here. Is Krem going to survive? Is he going to be permanently crippled?

It’s an unpleasant reminder of the reality of having a bunch of mortal soldiers and mercenaries as friends. They don’t have the longest life expectancy, and those that do survive don’t necessarily survive well.

You realize, belatedly, that you’re just sort of walking along with the Chargers, allowing Bull to steer you about as they drop their things off in their barracks and, inevitably, head to the tavern. You can hardly blame them; you’d want a drink if a quarter of your comrades were injured… some possibly dead, though you don’t want to ask. You should probably get back to work, you realize, but when you move to exit the tavern and head back to the rotunda, Bull stops you.

“Nah, you look like you could use a drink first,” he says. “Why not stay here with us for a bit?”

“I don’t want to intrude,” you begin, but another one of the Chargers snorts.
“No mercenary party is complete without a bunch of pretty women!” he exclaims.

“You’re not even drunk yet,” you say with a scowl. “What’s your excuse?”

The man just guffaws in response, and you roll your eyes, but you do sit down at the offered chair next to Bull. A drink or two couldn’t hurt… you’re feeling pretty shell-shocked, and you doubt you could get much work done in this state. The relaxed demeanor of the remaining Chargers is addictive, even if you don’t understand how they can all be so calm while their friends are hurting. Or maybe this is just how they cope. This sort of thing probably happens a lot to them… ugh.

A mercenary group in your pocket was one thing, but you shouldn’t have become friends with them.

But you really shouldn’t have become friends with any of the people here; you’re just that big of a fuck-up.

You limit yourself to nursing a single mug. It’s too early in the afternoon for heavy drinking, and even the Chargers are sort of pacing themselves, not becoming too terribly rowdy. Probably saving that for this evening. You still have work to do, in the form of bringing Solas his dinner, if nothing else. You don’t want to see the look on his face if you showed up to that drunk, or, worse, missed it entirely.

Still, you do hang out with the Chargers for longer than you technically “need” to. There’s something comforting about the large, raucous group, and despite having not seen Bull for quite a while, you’re still not having a fear reaction to the sight of his horns like you did with Katari and even Sataareth.

Oh. Sataareth. That’ll… that’ll be fun to explain. Maybe you won’t have to.

Bull is, of course, full of questions about your trip. You dodge most of them for now, not feeling like getting into the grisly details of Baptiste’s death and your subsequent takeover of the mission, let alone your new “promotion.” He’ll find out from Leliana sure enough, you’re certain, and you’re sick of thinking about death. You have your own question about his trip. It had been a seemingly straightforward mission to scout the ruins of Haven, but things had quickly gone topsy-turvy. Refugees captured by what could have been Venatori or could have just been Tevinter slavers, a lot of unexpected fighting and then hunting down the Venatori/slavers who had already left with some humans and things looted from the wreckage of Haven. No wonder they had been gone so long, despite the relative closeness of Haven.

The refugees were apparently still coming, trailing on a bit behind with some Ferelden forces that had volunteered to steer them through the mountains so that Bull could get his wounded to the skilled healers at Skyhold a bit faster. You’re not too interested in the refugees, though… it sounds like they’re mostly or entirely human, which means people who aren’t you will actually take an interest in their well-being. Not your problem, this time.

Iron Bull does tease you about spending all that time “with Solas” in Val Royeaux, and he doesn’t even know the two of you were alone together yet. Maker, you’ll never hear the end of it once he does, especially since you aren’t being forthright with the information. But you’d rather put off discussing that for as long as possible.

It’s clear the Chargers would be happy to have you get increasingly drunk with them for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, but you make your excuses before too terribly long, citing a need to get back to work. You’re not too terribly intoxicated when you finally do manage to leave the tavern. It’s clear all the Chargers want you to stay… Well, most of them, anyway, and the rest are prone to herd mentality. But you have work to do, and not just bringing Solas his dinner. And
hopefully if you head back now, the stench of ale will be off your breath before you have to share a
desk with Solas.

When you walk into the rotunda, the first thing you notice is that Solas isn’t there. That’s not
altogether shocking. He has another workspace, after all, for magic he can’t comfortably work in a
rotunda he shares with you. And he doubtlessly has other places to go and other people to see. You
pay it no mind and turn your focus towards your desk, where—

Solas is… sitting.

Rather comfortably, you notice. You might be annoyed if you weren’t so busy being shocked; you
don’t like other people in your workspace, generally. Perhaps it’s just the surprise, but you find the
sight of Solas at your desk doesn’t raise any ire in you. He’s leaning against the back of your chair,
not hunched over the desk the way you tend to be, one arm hooked over the back while the other
holds one of the completed pages of the tome. You watch, in silence, as he leans forward just enough
to set it face-down back onto your stack of completed pages, then pick up another, lean back, and
continue.

He’s… reading your tome.

You put more effort then into your stealth than you ever have with Iron Bull or in Val Royeaux.
Your soft boots pad noiselessly across the rotunda as you carefully stay directly behind Solas, out of
his peripheral vision. He stiffens, almost imperceptibly, when you’re still a good ten feet back, so you
speak out then.

“You know, Solas, most people have to wait til it’s finished.”

His small jolt satisfies you; his posture goes from comfortable to rigid and his ass leaves the chair
ever so slightly as he jumps. Then he glances over his shoulder at you. “I am not most people.”

“No, you’re certainly not that,” you agree. Your fear for Krem still nags at the back of your head, but
the immediate anxiety and pain of it fades with the sight of Solas’ face. You take a few more steps
forward, purposefully noisier than your silent stride. Let him think he’d merely been caught up in
reading. He already knows you’re a sneak, regardless, but hiding is second nature to you. “Did you
find anything of interest?”

“The entire tome is of interest. The Inquisitor made quite a find… as did Leliana.”

“Oh, did Leliana have a hand in finding the tome?” you ask, stepping next to the desk to run a fond
finger along the inside of its spine, where its pages meet. It’s still open under your magnifying stand,
just for reference. “No wonder she’s so keen to see it completed.”

“No,” Solas replies, and you glance over at him, confused. “But she did find a remarkably talented
linguist.”

You laugh, your ears flushing slightly at the same time. “I suppose she did, at that. Though she
barely had to try; I hear the linguist just showed up on her front steps one day.”

“Such exceptional luck,” Solas says, side eyeing you and then looking back down at your desk. “To
have someone so remarkable conveniently show up and settle in out of the blue like that.”

You’re not entirely certain you’re still talking about Leliana.

“You’d be amazed, really,” you reply as evenly as you can manage, “At the kinds of people you can
find just wandering the countryside.”
Solas hums quietly to himself, but doesn’t reply. You stand there for a few more seconds, before growing bored. “Solas, do you intend to let me get back to work? Or were you planning for me to sit in your lap?”

You caught him off guard. His eyebrows shoot up, and so does his ass. He’s standing before he can regain his cool, though once he’s off your chair, he seems to collect himself quickly. Still, you’re pleased to have caught him off guard, and your lips are curling smugly upwards before you can stop them.

“Far be it from me to keep you from your work,” he says smoothly, already composed again. “Although I suppose it couldn’t be much different from sharing a saddle.”

Now it’s your turn to momentarily lose your composure as your mind flicks back to the warmth of his chest against your back, your rear nestled firmly between his legs, his— Fuck, you’re turning red. “No, I suppose not,” you manage, and your voice doesn’t sound too strained. You sit down almost as quickly as he stood.

The chair is still warm.

Nnngh.

You idly put a slip of scrap in the stack of papers to mark Solas’ spot as you reorganize your work back the way you had left it. He really hadn’t disturbed much. Solas goes back to his own desk, and it doesn’t take long for you to get back to work. You take a moment to marvel at the staying power of Solas’ enchantment. It’s not quite as solid as it was this morning, but it’s still there.

You’re going to sorely miss this when you leave. There’s no way any similar enchantment cast by you would last nearly as long. Solas knows how to make his magic hold in ways you don’t even understand. You wish you could make him show you, but obviously, you can’t.

Not here.

Not now.

Not ever.

You shake your head to clear it, and then just try to focus on your work. You can do good work while you’re here, and if you keep your head on straight, you might be able to come out alive. In the end, that’s the only thing that matters.

—

You work right up until it’s time to bring Solas dinner, and by the time that rolls around, you’re completely sober again, if slightly dehydrated. You’re also even more certain of your decision not to be heavily drunk around Solas. The last time that happened—in the inn room—is something of a blur, and with only two drinks in your system, you’d sort of offered to sit in his lap. Apparently your self control when drunk isn’t particularly admirable. Or, if Krem is any indication, you just really like laps when intoxicated.

The thought of Krem and his lap depresses you quickly, however, so you distract yourself preparing dinner. You barely even engage poor Celia in the kitchen—your mind is miles away.

Solas’ notebook is nowhere to be seen when you sit down with his meal, so you can’t even grab it and stare at it some more. On top of it all, the enchantment on your wrist is starting to wear off, probably because you spent most of the day actually working for once. Your work after dinner is
going to be annoying, but you’re certain if you ask Solas to re-enchant your arm, he’ll just tell you to take a break from working or something similarly ridiculous. You’ll just have to work more slowly.

Solas is still mostly absorbed in his book while you eat, and you’re perfectly entertained by the fact you can stare more readily when he’s distracted. He studies the runic stylings of Enchanter… Wensulus, looks like… while you study the way his fingers turn the pages. The sharp, angular lines of his jaw, cheeks, and ears make your own fingers twitch for a charcoal pencil, remind you sharply of the present you still have yet to give him. But you’re no good at drawing people, even when staring straight at them, and you’re too much of a coward to hand the gift over. Hardly your greatest failings, but failings nonetheless.

You’ve just finished up dinner and are gnawing on the hard crusts Solas left behind on his plate when the door to the rotunda slams open. You jump; Solas merely looks up from his book. Bull and like six chargers, including Dalish, pour into the rotunda. Oh dear Maker.

“Wh-what are you guys—” you begin with a nervous glance towards Solas. He doesn’t look irritated, just blandly neutral. But you’re quickly cut off.

“Da’nan! C’mon back, aren’t you done working yet?”

“Have you idiots been drinking this entire time?” you exclaim, exasperated. “It’s been like three hours!”

“We’re pacin’ ourselves!” one of the Chargers protests.

“C’mon, we’re about to have dinner. Yer done workin’, right? She’s done, right?” Dalish adds, to Solas.

“Why are you asking him?” you say, exasperated.

“M’just bein’ polite!”

“You know he’s not actually her boss, right?”

“Oh, really? I figured after the Val Royeaux thing—”

“I figgered af’er the Val Royeaux thin’, they were datin’!”

“Oh shut up, Rocky—”

“Okay, alright!” you exclaim. “I’ll go to dinner, let’s just… just leave.” You grab Dalish and one of the other Chargers by the sleeves and drag them towards the door with you. You glance back over your shoulder and mouth “SORRY” to Solas before shoving the Chargers out the door where Bull still stands.

—

You lose Bull somewhere between the rotunda and the tavern, but you can’t pay much attention, given how swept up you are in the antics of the Chargers. You suppose getting absolutely sloshed is certainly one way to deal with the potential death of a dear friend. You try to fish for information on how Krem is doing, but the way they all dodge the question is… worrying, to say the least. If he was dead, though, you’re certain they wouldn’t be partying like this.

...Probably.
You wind up having two dinners that way, one with Solas and then one with the Chargers. You’d like to lie and say you didn’t eat much in “dinner two,” but it would be a filthy, filthy lie. You eat nearly as much as you had in “dinner one.” Like you’re going to say no to two meals? Pff. There’s a lot of drinking too, though, and it quickly becomes clear that this is going to be what you’re doing for the rest of the evening. And you’re pretty sure Fenris shows up at some point, but that could be your mind playing tricks on you, because after the drinking contest—you came in third—things get really blurry.

You wake up dazed and confused in a pile of limbs. It takes you a while to figure out where you are what’s happening.

You’d honestly expected to wake up in Bull’s bed again, but apparently he’d decided carrying you off like a sack of drunken potatoes was unnecessary. He had come back to the tavern, hadn’t he? Thinking makes your head ache.

You lift your head up, trying to ignore the dull throbbing. You’ve had much worse hangovers, and you once woke up in Revas’ stall, so this isn’t really that bad. Your head had been on some sort of pillow… wait, no, those are legs. That’s a lap. Your head had been on someone’s lap. You’d like to twist to see, but you’re currently spooning someone else entirely. Pointed ears and the hint of vallaslin on her cheekbone reveal it to be Dalish. Alright. You’re spooning Dalish. Weirder things have happened. Both of you are fully clothed, as is the person whose lap you were on… That’s something.

You try to untangle yourself from Dalish, though it takes a bit of doing. She’s clutching one of your arms to her chest like a stuffed doll. Your wiggling seems to disturb the person whose lap you were resting on, though.

“I wish I could say this is the first time this has happened,” says a sleepy, hungover voice that you recognize.

Wow, you fell asleep on Skinner.

“It’s not?” you ask quietly, finally managing to dislodge your arm. “It’s a first for me.”

“Dalish gets cuddly when she drinks, ’n’ I hate walkin’ through that courtyard sloshed. One of these days I’m gonna wind up stabbing a handsy shem. Always more trouble than they’re worth.” She yawns and stretches as you finish sitting up. Dalish shifts slightly, then snorts loudly, but seems to go back to sleeping.

“Do you remember how I got here?” you ask, twisting your neck this way and that to try and work out the kinks. Skinner’s lap was an oddly shaped pillow, after all.

“I think Dalish said you were too drunk to ride home.”

“…Wow, we were tanked up…”

“Mm.”

“Ugh, why do I always do this on days when I… have… ...What day is it?”

“Saturday.”

“Shit.”
You managed to find your hat hanging from one of the candelabras, your shoes behind the bar. You’re half-hopping through the courtyard, yanking one of the shoes onto your freezing feet when you see the familiar shape in the familiar training yard, and only then does it occur to you how long it’s been since you did this.

And, come to think of it, had either of you discussed starting the morning sessions back up again? You couldn’t remember… you probably said something last night, while drunk. Like an idiot. You probably could have skipped this one and not gotten in trouble, but you had run out without really thinking about it.

“There you are, kid! Not too hungover, I hope?” Iron Bull booms too loudly and too cheerfully as you stumble into the ring.

“And who’s fault would that be?” you grumble. “Why do you always drag me out drinking on Friday and not Saturday?”

“Bad luck on your part,” he replies. “Now, I know you ran into a bit of trouble on the way to and from Orlais—”

You stiffen. You knew he’d hear about that sooner or later, but you’d been hoping for later.

“But other than that, did you keep up with your exercise at all? Or were you busy with elven-style spooning the whole time?”

“The answer to both of those things is no,” you say with a scowl. “I had more important things to do… than…” Oh. From the look on his face, that was the wrong thing to say.

“More important, huh? So, which one of these important things kept your ass from dying on the road?”

There is an obvious, snarky reply here, but you can tell you’re digging yourself into a pit as it is. You really shouldn’t—

“…Skinner’s coat, Belassan’s hart, and Solas’ magic.”

Damnit, self.

To your relief, Iron Bull laughs. “Oh? So knowing how not to get stabbed, punched, or grappled didn’t help in the least?”

“I didn’t say that,” you mutter.

“Well, clearly I need to work to make a bigger impact,” Bull says, cracking his knuckles rather ominously, in your opinion. “Can’t have our little ‘da’nan’ getting hurt, can we?”

“That’s very redundant; you just said our little little—whoah!” you jump backwards as Bull goes from standing casually to a sweeping kick that nearly trips you. “I guess we’re start—aah!”

It’s a good thing that you don’t really need to practice every day—muscle memory has yet to wear off for you—because Iron Bull isn’t really going easy on you. Quite the opposite, you’re pretty sure he’s going harder than he normally does, probably to prove a point about your need to practice. And you can’t move at anything close to full speed, so you get caught up and tripped a lot. By the end of practice, you’re pretty sure your bruises have bruises.

Solas is going to be mad. Looks like today is gonna be a long sleeves day, for sure. You wince as
you stand up out of the dirt. You need a change of clothes—you’re still wearing yesterday’s, and they’re filthy to boot. It’s cold enough today to justify wearing hose under your pants… and the extra cushioning will help your poor ass, bruised and throbbing after too many collisions with the frozen ground.

“Satisfied?” you grumble. You’d landed only three good blows the entire time. A far cry from where you’d started, just punching him. “I miss beating you up. We need to get back to that.”

“You’ve got more important stuff to worry about then throwing a punch. Besides… I hear you’re really good at throwing. How many bandits do you think you dropped with those knives of yours?”

You stiffen, face falling into a blank mask automatically.

“I read the reports. You had it pretty rough. Glad you made it out alive.”

“Not everyone did,” you say, quiet voice hard as steel.

“Look, we both know that wasn’t your first ride,” Iron Bull says quietly. “But if you need to talk—”

“What I need,” you say, voice seeming overly loud after the subdued tones you’d both been speaking in. “Is a bath and a change of clothes. I smell like a Qunari’s backside—offense completely intended.”

Iron Bull eyes you for a moment longer, but your smile doesn’t waver. He, fortunately, takes your meaning—you don’t want to talk about it. If you were going to talk about it to anyone, it would be Solas, not him. Solas was there. He saw it. You don’t want to talk about having to kill to someone whose similar experiences could easily have counted you among their number. You saw enough slaves butchered by Qunari to know that they rarely differentiated. In honesty, you even understood why. You saw enough Tevinters use their slaves to deliver poison, explosives, anything. To trust a slave was to lose one's life. But that didn't make you feel any better about it.

“...First,” Bull says, after too long silent, too long spent scouring your expression for meaning. “We should get you to a healer.” You open your mouth to refuse, but he immediately cuts you off. “No arguments. I was rough on you today—you'll need it. Even Skinner would need healing after that many falls.”

You sigh. You suppose it’s been awhile since you were last at a healer, and… it’s better than risking Solas’ ire, isn’t it? Although you wouldn’t mind his hands all of the places you were bruised… Your mind flashes back his hands ghosting scant inches from your ass, the insides of your thighs, as he healed bruises and saddle sores from the rough ride to Val Royeaux.

... Better to go to the healing tent, yeah.

As soon as you’re there, however, all you can think about it one thing. Somewhere in this tent is Krem. You can tell Bull is thinking the same—he looks distracted, and you’re certain his bluster, like bluster of all the Chargers, is to distract themselves from terrifying reality. Hadn’t you done the same thing last night? But your hangover is largely worn off, you’re exhausted and sore, and all you can think about is how much you want Krem to be alright.

“Bull, have you… seen him yet?” you ask quietly as he holds the tent flap open and the two of you duck inside.

“Not yet,” Bull replies, just as quietly. “It was pretty bad, and the Chargers have a reputation for being… rowdy. They’ll probably keep us out for as long as possible.”
“Not you again!” one of the healer’s snaps, making you jump. You’re immediately guilty, but you realize quickly the woman’s not addressing you, but Bull. “I told you, use your own damn stock of potions or learn to play nice—oh, Maker,” she sighs, cutting herself off and taking a curt step over to you. She pulls your unbuttoned shirt wider, exposing your bare and already bruising collarbone. She shoots Iron Bull the darkest of glares.

“Noooo, no-no-no-no, not this again,” you say, quickly grasping her hands. “My name is Emma. I work for the Inquisition and I am learning hand-to-hand combat from the Iron Bull.”

“What…? …Oh!” the woman says, and has the decency to look abashed. “Oh, I’m sorry, dear! I thought—”

“I know,” you say, a bit sourly. “But trust me. I look this bad because I neglected to keep up with my practicing while the Iron Bull was gone, so I was… out of practice. I apologize for the inconvenience, and for taking up Inquisition resources.”

“Oh, not at all, dear. A simple enough fix. Let me get you some bruise balm… and some for the road, if you’re training with this brute,” she adds, with a sidelong glance towards Bull, who’s grinning. She ducks away for a moment, and you take up her slack by glaring at him yourself.

“Seriously?”

“I ran outta potions once or twice. What was I supposed to do, just leave them like that?”

“Make sure you have potions before doing whatever it is you do, then,” you hiss. “Those poor women…”

“Men, each and every one of them,” Bull drawls. “And every single one did not listen to my warnings about stretchin—”

“Enough!” you say, throwing your hands up. “No more.” Fortunately, the healer comes back then with a small tin.

“Here. Simply rub a bit-sized dollop onto bruised skin. Let it soak in before covering the area with any clothing. If you need assistance applying it anywhere, one of us can—”

“That won’t be necessary,” you say quickly.

“Really?” Bull says, and you can hear him grinning. “How are you going to put it on your—”

“I will be just fine, thank you.”

The woman smiles gamely. “Be thorough with it. You wouldn’t want those bruises to worsen for lack of healing. Now, is that all you needed…?”

“Krem,” you say, the word escaping you in such a rush that even you are surprised. “The mercenary who was brought in here yesterday, the young man. How is he doing? Can he have visitors yet?”

“The young… man…?” she says, clearly confused, and you realize there were probably many young male mercenaries brought in from the Chargers alone.

“Human, not much taller than me, brown hair—” you begin, but Bull cuts you off.

“You know, my second in command.”

“Oh… oh! Yes, um… him. …He’s recovering, as well as can be expected. His life isn’t in any
danger, thanks to your medic’s quick work. I would not have thought to use gum tree sap in that way, but it did the trick…”

“What happened?” you ask desperately.

“Spear in the chest,” Bull explains, and you feel bile rising in your throat.

**Spear through his chest, bleeding out on the ground.** “Why did he—” you rasp, the words ‘grab a sword’ dying on your lips. **Idiot, idiot, they don’t kill slaves—**

“And right into his lung,” the healer says sadly. “He would have been dead of suffocation before he got here if not for some quick thinking. Fortunately, we seem to have staved off severe complication and drained the fluids. He’s healing, with the help of no small amount of magic. But he’ll be bedridden for at least a week, and no practice for at least a month, and then slowly,” she says firmly, eyeing Bull.

“Can I see him? Please,” you beg, already seeing her gear up for saying no.

She looks at you, and something makes her pause. Perhaps you just look pathetic enough, all banged up and dirty. She lets out a resigned sigh. “Fine. If it’s just the two of you. But keep that one calm,” she adds, pointing to Bull. “And don’t tell the rest of the maniacs that I let you see him!”

Iron Bull puts his hand on your shoulder, something you don’t quite understand until you come around the corner of a divider and see Krem. When you jolt, Iron Bull’s hand holds you steady, and when your legs go weak, it shifts to your back to keep you from falling.

He looks bad.

Krem’s bandaged from collarbone to just above his navel, but what really bothers you is the sunken look of his eyes, the smattering of sickeningly dark bruises along what flesh you can see. You bet he looks infinitely worse just under those bandages.

A strangled sound escapes your throat, and that seems to be enough for Krem to open his eyes. It’s a slow process, and his eyes are slightly glazed over, reminding you of too many other times. Memories cascade through your mind, threatening to overtake you. But despite the frantic thudding of your heart against your ribcage, you swallow the panic down. You can freak out later.

Krem’s mouth splits open in a weak grin, and for an instant, he looks far more himself. “Knew they couldn’t keep you out for long, boss.”

“They would’ve kept me out for a lot longer if Emma didn’t have the most damn convincing puppy-dog eyes I’ve ever seen,” Bull says with a chuckle. He gives you the gentlest nudge with his hand against your back, and you take a few steps forward before kneeling down by the side of the lifted cot Krem is laying on.

“Oh, you’re back from Val Royeaux,” Krem says, his voice slightly hoarse, but cheerful. “Bet you had a nicer time there than I did in Ferelden,” he adds with a weak chuckle.

“She nearly ran into the same problem,” Bull says when your voice fails you. “Bandit attacks, twice.”

Krem frowns. “Really? You okay?”

You snort. It’s the first sound you make, and it’s not a very useful one, but you can’t help it. “Am I... Yeah, Krem, I’m fine. I’ve still got both lungs and everything.”

“Did the soldiers manage to keep you out of the fight?” he asks.

“No, they were terrible,” you say with a grin. “They don’t make soldiers like they used to. Fortunately, some strapping young mercenary let me kick the crap out of him a couple of times, so I managed to handle the situation myself.”

Krem chuckles, and you mirror his smile with your own equally weak one. It’s a good thing you’re kneeling; you’re not sure you could stand. When was the last time you felt this? Back in Seheron? You’ve been keeping yourself arm’s length from everyone for a very long time… and it’s still there, that urge to hide yourself away and shut everyone out until you stop caring. But the weight of your bag against your back reminds you of something.

“Hey, Krem... I got you something while I was in Val Royeaux,” you say, and he really does look shocked. What’s the protocol here, seeing as how he’d had a bit of a crush on you? Ah, well... He’s
hurt. He deserves something nice right now. You shift your bag around in front of you. You barely
have to rummage through it; there’s not much left in there now, and his is one of the larger things.
You pull it out and unwrap it for him.

“A… box?” he says, curiously.

“Yep, a box,” you reply. “Here, give me your hand.” You set the box on the corner of his cot and
take his hand with yours, wincing at how light it feels, how it shakes as you put his fingers on the
little knob on the side of the box. You help him twist it, then open up the top. A dragon statuette
spins slowly in place, posed as if flying around in circles, and the quiet, tinny sounds of a music box
fill the healer’s tent.

“This is… is this from Tevinter? How did you…?”

“It was in a second hand shop. I have no idea how authentic it is, but it’s certainly in the Tevinter
style. If it’s authentic, it was woefully underpriced. If it’s not, I may have been ripped off,” you say
with a chuckle. “I thought you might like it, though. I don’t know if you ever get homesick, but… I
do, so I thought…”

“It’s beautiful,” he says hoarsely. “Can you leave it here?” he glances up towards the healer, who is
standing somewhat awkwardly in the corner. The woman hesitates, then nods.

“I don’t see the harm in it. Some people even say music helps the humors,” she says, and he smiles,
not a goofy grin, but a genuine sort of smile that makes you smile in return, unbidden.

“Thanks, Emma.”

--

The visit doesn’t last long after that, and is slightly less emotionally fraught. You mostly just stay
there, kneeling next to Krem while he and Bull joke and catch up. You’re glad you were able to get
Bull in to see him, even if it was a happy accident. He may have liked your present, but it’s obvious
seeing the Iron Bull is what really made him feel better.

You take a moment to compose yourself outside of the tent.

“Not used to seeing the injured, huh?” Bull asks, and you shudder.

“For the most part, no. If I ever saw someone who looked that bad, they were already dead. I’m glad
I couldn’t see under the bandages,” you admit. There’s no chance of you eating breakfast now… one
more lie to Solas. To Iron Bull, too, since he’ll want you to eat. “Before I forget, let me finish
emptying out my bag.” You twist it around. “I’m going to be so glad to be rid of all this stuff. I’ve
been lugging it around, waiting for you arses to get back.”

You pull what may be the heaviest thing out of your bag, save perhaps—perhaps—for your gift for
Solas, which still lays in the bottom of the pack. The present is simply wrapped up in trash
parchment; you didn’t bother to wrap it nicely. Bull looks as surprised as Krem had, despite having
just witnessed you give a present.

“What? Did you think I’d go all the way to Val Royeaux and not get presents?” you say with a
scowl. “C’mon, take it, it’s heavy.”

Iron Bull takes the bundle from you and unwraps it quickly but curiously, then stares at the item
inside. It’s a goblet… or maybe a mug, you’re not entirely sure what the difference is… but a big
one, carved in the shape of a dragon’s head. “It’s huge,” you offer. “And I know your Qunari are
weird about dragons, so I thought you might like it. If it’s a little too Tevinter-y, though, I ge--”

“It’s perfect,” he says firmly. “I bet you’re gonna say it’s too early in the morning to break it in, though, right?”

You snort. “Yeah, of course it is! It’s barely sunrise!” You glance around the courtyard, which is slowly starting to fill with more people as the sun rises. “I’ll need a bath and a change of clothes… but before I go, there’s one more thing. This is for the Chargers in general, but I’m going to let you handle distribution.” This time, you pull out a sack. Only two more hefty presents in your back. So close to being done.

You toss it gently to Bull, who catches the large bag in one hand, then bounces it up and down, listening to the rattling chinks of metal against metal. “A bag of silver? You shouldn’t have.”

You snort. “Try again.”

He hooks the mug onto his belt—of course he would—and then opens up the bag. His eyebrows raise yet again, and for an instant you can see his one good eye growing a little soft. Maybe he likes this even more than the mug. He pulls out one of the dozens of matching pins. “Bulls,” he says with a grin. “Little metal bull pins. Where the fuck did you even find these?”

“Being sold for three coppers a piece in a store,” you say with a snort. “You should’ve seen the look on the guy’s face when I said I would take them all. I’d bet anything that they’re off of corpses, but they were just way too perfect for me to pass up. Those little bastards started my little gift-buying spree in Val Royeaux. Once I’d gotten presents for an entire mercenary company, the rest just unfolded from there.”

“It’s perfect,” Bull says. “Oh man, the guys are gonna love these.”

“What is it you guys say? Horns pointing up?” you say with a snort. “Well, now it can be a bit more literal. Glad you like it, Bull.”

Bull startles you then, by wrapping you in a one armed hug and jerking you against him. You’re shocked, then shocked again by the lack of panic, especially given your state of mind. Actually, the physical contact feels… nice. It’s short, the quick, jostling hug that you’ve seen soldiers and mercenaries giving each other frequently. A sign of brotherhood, if anything. When he releases you, you sort of wish it had lasted longer.

How strained for contact are you? You can’t help but scold yourself. This is a damn Qunari! You can’t afford to be as weak as you’ve gotten.

“I need to go change,” you inform the Iron Bull again. “I’ll see you at practice tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday,” Bull reminds you. You blink. So it is.

“Then Monday.”

You get a change of clothes from your room and you do get that bath… in the human baths again, because you’re nothing if not a rabble-rousing knife-eared little shit. You skip breakfast—your appetite is gone and besides, you’d like to get to work as quickly as possible considering tomorrow is your “day off.”

You change into fresh clothes and head to the rotunda. Solas is already there and more than willing
to give you your “morning enchantment” so you can get to work. Fortunately, he never asks if you’ve eaten, though he sometimes asks if you slept well. You don’t feel comfortable lying to him about taking care of yourself, not now, not after he’s practically bribing you to do it. Better that he doesn’t ask, so you don’t have to lie.

You’re almost surprised to find your desk exactly as you left it, with no missive in sight. No missive in two days, no word from Leliana or Argent, no fallout for skipping out on your “morning training.” It’s too good to be true. Perhaps you’ve been fired, or are about to be? You can barely even bring yourself to care. The Qunlat missives were interesting, but delivering them was an annoyance that kept you in the eye of dangerous people like Commander Rutherford and Seeker Pentaghast. So long as you can finish your tome, you don’t care about the rest. Your position here in Skyhold is secure, and you’d rather it not be in service to the Spymaster anyway, if you had the choice. Even if you got fired, you’re willing to bet that Solas would be willing to hire you as some sort of personal assistant. You’re not worried.

With your enchantment in place, it’s nothing for you to smoothly speed through page after page. Not to say you rush--no, you take your time and ensure there are no mistakes. It’s simply that you’re excellent at your job, and with the added benefit of magic, you’re practically godlike in terms of speed and competence.

While you work, you puzzle over something you hadn’t had much time to think about, what with the Chargers’ sudden return and Krem’s injuries… Solas’ notes, his interesting and possibly unique runic shorthand. He’s not working on them again today--you looked, and didn’t see them on his desk while he was enchanting your wrist--so you can’t even grab them for a closer look. What had it reminded you of…? You call the images to mind, wishing you’d had more time to study them. They sort of remind you of some of the ancient Tevinter tomes of magic, particularly personal journals turned priceless relics by the passage of time. If only you had your books! If only you hadn’t lost everything in that blasted fire. It will take you a long time and a lot of sucking up to Banal’ras and others to get copies, even of your own works.

Off the top of your head, a particular mage’s journal you once translated, pre-Blight and absolutely priceless… seems sort of similar. You’d kill to be able to compare them side by side, but seeing as how you have access to neither at the moment… But why would Solas’ shorthand by similar to an ancient Tevene one, anyway? It’s possible it’s a coincidence… He claims to be self-taught, so it would make more sense if his shorthand were utterly alien and bizarre. Or maybe, like you, he had learned from old scrolls and books. You would say you are self taught as well, after all, for the most part, but that doesn’t mean you didn’t learn from books. Just that you had no formal education, no one group or person who taught you.

Though how would a self-taught Somniari avoid harm? Kidnapping, death, Tranquility, demons, possession? Or had he not avoided all of those things? You had wondered before that he might be an abomination. Given some privacy and a lack of fear for his knowledge or power, you could find out, but as it stands, there’s no real way for you to know. Even if you could rummage through him the way he rummaged through you… if he was aware of your doing so, he could hide it, or retaliate. And having seen him in combat, and knowing him now as a Somniari, you have no doubt he could crush you--abomination or no.

Terror of that situation aside, it really doesn’t matter to you if he’s an abomination. He’s not actively trying to stick a demon in you, so whatever. It doesn’t matter. Live and let live and all that. No, you’re more curious about where he got all that power and knowledge. Out of sheer desire to know, and also, well… you’re not above playing copy-cat. If it works, it works.

But honestly, how else could he have possibly gained the knowledge he possessed and avoided
contact with Templars to the point that--

…

“Solas?” you say out loud, deciding to give some voice to your musings.

“Yes?” he replies, and you slow slightly in your writing to focus on what you’re saying.

“Your techniques, your magic… Did you learn from Tevinter sources?”

The pause is long, so long that you actually hesitate in writing and glance over your shoulder. Have you hit the nail on the head, or just offended him? Asking an elf if they were from Tevinter was a loaded question in any context, really.

“Why do you ask?” he says, a guarded voice betraying him despite his neutral expression.

Honesty, then. “There was something familiar about your runic shorthand,” you explain. “It’s been driving me crazy. I was wondering if it might be similar to something I saw in Tevinter.”

“I have learned none of my techniques from Tevinter,” he says, just a little stiffly. “I suspect any similarity is mere coincidence.”

Coincidence? Really? Not that you can really argue otherwise without a side by side comparison. “Maybe you’re right. The ones they remind me of are in a pre-Blight journal I used to own,” you add, face just as carefully neutral as his. “And you could hardly have learned things from old tomes and ancient scrolls… What sort of strange person does that?”

To your relief, Solas laughs, seeing your jest. It lightens the tenseness in his shoulders somewhat, relaxes the atmosphere slightly. “Who indeed. However, this is not something I learned from a book. It is my own shorthand, hobbled together and altered throughout the years, picked through from memories in the Fade and then modified to suit my own needs.”

You hum, lightly. “Memories in the Fade… Maybe they were memories of the ancient Tevinters, and that’s why…” you murmur, mostly to yourself. It’s as good an excuse as any, though Solas looks significantly irritated. Although “from the Fade” seems to be his default excuse for his oddities, it may in fact be true. He is a somniari… though if he’s trying to hide that fact, he’s doing a terrible job of it. A mage might know such things would be impossible for a normal mage…

You find yourself suddenly slightly tired of the inescapable maze of lies you and Solas seem trapped in. How much is he lying? How much are you lying? Neither of you know, and yet both of you know the other is certainly hiding things. It’s an endless, exhausting dance of deceit and… frankly, you could use a break.

But there’s never a break, not if you want to stay alive long. You know that. Solas probably knows that, too. You let out a long, tired sigh.

“I’m hungry,” you decide. “Is it alright with you if I get lunch a bit early today?”

Solas blinks, as if momentarily uncertain why you’re asking him. “Feel free.”

You clean your quill and cap your inks and you’re out the door while an idea still formulates in your head.

--
Rather than heading straight to the kitchens--though you are quite hungry--you head to the little side-library where Servis so often lurks. As luck would have it, he’s there… although you’re not too lucky, since his creepy Templar “friend” is there too. Shame you didn’t see Solas’ rune crafting a few days earlier--this whole thing would be more convenient and less suspect if you could do it without the Templar there. Ah well. You lived in Val Royeaux for years, worked in and out of Circles. You know how to operate around Templars.

“Ah, my dear Emma!” Servis says grandly, making a show of marking his place in the book he’s reading with the snakeskin bookmark you gave him. Ugh, what a dramatic fellow. And Dorian is the one named “peacock”? They both strut. “To what do I owe this pleasure?”

“Well, serah,” you say with a polite smile. “I was asked to pass this note your way, and thought I might avail myself of this library while I was here.” You slip the folded note onto his table, then turn to peruse one of the shelves as he opens it, curiously plain on his face. He blinks, smiles briefly, and sets it aside. You see the Templar twist his neck slightly to look at it, but he’ll have no luck--it’s written in Tevene, and you sincerely doubt they’re teaching that at the Chantry these days.

“Looking for anything in particular? I may be able to help.”

You hum thoughtfully. “You have been here a while now… Do you have anything here on long-term runecrafting? Serah Solas has me hunting down resources for him…” The Templar is certainly listening now, if he’s any good at his job. Hard to tell in actuality--he’s wearing one of those shitty Templar helmets--you can barely see his eyes at any given time.

“As a matter-of-fact, yes,” Servis says. The legs of his chair screech and groan against the stone floor as he pushes it backwards and stands. He comes over behind you--stands a little too close for your personal taste, but you’re used to this sort of behavior. He’s testing to see how you’ll react. “Aaah… here.” He snags a book and pulls it out. “I suppose serving mages is a second instinct to you by now.”

That was a low blow. “Unlike most mages, Solas is helpful to me as well,” you reply blithely. “Reciprocation is not something understood by most, it seems.”

“Oh? Does he ‘reciprocate’ with all his servants?”

“Make no mistake, serah, I assist him, but I am not his servant. You do understand how that works, don’t you? Don’t tell me you think that because I fetched a single book for you, that makes me your servant?”

“Ah, hardly. If anything, perhaps I should be serving you out of gratitude. It’s been extremely useful to my own work.”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear it,” you say, wandering over to the desk where he was sitting moments earlier and plopping yourself down into the chair--the only chair. His. You move his things slightly to the side to set down the tome he’d just handed you, and open it. You relish the clear irritation on his face to no small extent. You always wanted to do that to a Magister--you suppose he’ll have to do.

“I doubt you’ll be able to understand that,” he says, loftiness in his voice ruined by the twinge of annoyance. “It is a magical tome, after all. Best just run it off to your mage and see if he can get some use from it.”

“What sort of assistant would I be if I couldn’t at least do this much?” you reply. “Although it’s true I don’t really understand most of it,” you lie. “I tried reading the tome I got for you, as well, but I couldn’t really make heads or tails of it.”
“I’m not surprised,” Servis replies sourly, walking around the desk to stand beside ‘your’ chair. “It’s hardly an advanced tome, but some knowledge is required.”

“I’m attempting to learn the basics of runic shorthand, at the very least, but…” You let your eyes fall to Servis’ papers, very carefully “accidentally” splayed out when you shifted his things. You pick one of the pages idly. “Serah, did you perhaps attend the Circle in Minrathous?”

“Of course,” Servis replies blithely. You’re willing to bet he knows you’re up to something. But so long as he plays along--and he will--you should be able to do this without making the Templar think anything odd of it.

“I thought so. Your shorthand reminds me of my old master’s,” you say, picking up a few more pages of notes and thumbing through them. “It’s much familiar than the bizarre scribbles that Solas uses… Ah, I know this one!” You point at the most basic rune of the lot, an absolute base fire rune. No one would actually use it for anything but practice. Servis, of course, chuckles at your seeming ignorance.

“I suppose that’s something, though if that’s all you know, your Magister neglected your education somewhat.”

“I was a child, and magical assistance wasn’t my main job,” you say with a shrug. “Not at that time, anyway.”

“You really must tell me how you got away some day--”

“Say…” you interrupt, running your fingers gently over one of the runes curiously. “I’ve seen Solas draw this same rune, I think. But I could barely make sense of it. Perhaps…” You glance over your shoulder at Servis, all servant’s politeness and doe eyes. “Might I borrow some of your notes? I could compare them to his, perhaps finally figure out that baseless scribble he calls shorthand…”

Servis hesitates, then smiles, certain at least of what you’re doing, if not why. Besides, it would be rude to turn you down after what you wrote on that note. “I don’t see why not. I don’t really even need them anymore. Most of those are from before you got me this tome. I was attempting to figure out the techniques I needed on my own. You scratched my back--I should scratch yours, yes? Reciprocation.”

You grin, more honestly than you perhaps should--but your back is to the Templar. “Thank you, serah. I believe this book is what Solas was looking for. I’ll hand it off to him with his lunch. Thank you again for your assistance.”

“Not at all,” he says demurely, with a slight little bow of the head.

Ah. Tevinter mages. It’s like slipping on a warm, familiar, comfortably disgusting pair of socks. Dirty, maybe, but worn in all the right places.

Chapter End Notes

This afternoon I'll be streaming with my brother as he goes into the Alienage in Dragon Age: Origins. This is a BLIND RUN so spoilers will get you kicked/banned (and on my permanent shitlist). Other than that, consider coming by to hear my extremely annoying voice pitch in uselessly with amusing lore tidbits.
A Wasted Opportunity

Chapter Notes

Why is this chapter named A Wasted Opportunity. Because this is Chapter 69 and it's completely SFW. _._. These two need to hurry it up. I better be able to put smut in chapter 169.

PS: Dear people in my bookmarks: did you know I can read what you write when you bookmark something? :D I can! Imagine a rude comment that you have absolutely no way of rebutting to or deleting: that's basically the Ao3 bookmark system.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The real question, you admit to yourself while actually fetching lunch, is whether or not you can get your hands on Solas’ notes to compare to Servis’ admittedly familiar script, and whether it will be useful to you. Servis’ classical Minrathous shorthand is far from the pre-Blight Tevinter scrawls you remember, and Solas’ is removed from even that. But you have nothing else to use. It’s better than nothing. It’s not as if the library has any old Tevinter magical tomes… though, come to think of it, Dorian might. You should hit him up, as well, after lunch. Between everything you can get from Servis and Dorian… Yes. The hard part will be getting your hands back on Solas’ notes.

You don’t actually know what you stand to learn, but something is nagging at the back of your head about it, and… well, your work on the tome right now is satisfying, but hardly intellectually engaging. You have this problem with curiosity, especially when you’re bored.

It’s not as if you have anything better to do.

Still, it’s not worth breaking and entering. Snooping, yes, but just in the rotunda, you decide. You won’t risk getting in real trouble over this hunch. If you can’t get your hands on his notes, you’ll just have to go from memory. Better than nothing.

Feeling sufficiently entertained for the moment, you try to keep your mind off of your suspicions while sharing lunch with Solas. Though you do give his desk a once-or-twice-over for the notebook he was writing in before. You don’t see it… if he’s taken it to his magical workspace, you’re out of luck, at least for the time being. There is nothing that could get you to break in there. Even his room is probably warded now.

Lunch is filled with pleasant conversation, the afternoon is filled with uninterrupted work. It feels like a miracle, honestly. Is this what it’s like to work without being bothered? You’d forgotten the sensation. You keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, but it never does... And thanks to Solas’ enchantment, you barely even need to take a break to stretch. Everything is going extremely well until about four hours in, when you shift slightly and your body reminds you that your hand may be enchanted, but the rest of you isn’t. Your back protests with a shooting pain that has your hand clenching around your quill in an effort not to splotch the ink.

Alright, time to stretch.

You cover your ink and clean your quill and then stand with all the speed and agility of an 80 year old woman. Your hand even goes to your back as you wince. You need a cushion for this chair, ow.
“Have you managed to injure yourself while sitting perfectly still in one place?” asks Solas mildly, no doubt taking note of your exaggeratedly slow straightening.

“No,” you say with a strained grunt. “Just getting old… can’t bounce back like I used to. I’m sure you understand, hahren.”

Solas looks remarkably unimpressed. “Strange. I am so much older than you, and yet I can sit at a desk for a few hours without pain. Perhaps you need to spend your mornings stretching instead of being tenderized by a Qunari.”

“Ouch. That hurt, Solas. That hurt worse than my back.”

“Then you can’t be in all that much pain.”

“Alright, I’m going upstairs where you can’t sass me,” you say with a snort. “I need to dig up one of my dragon books, anyway.”

“Your books are in the library?” Solas says, sounding surprised.

“Where else would I put them?” you ask as you make your way to the stairs. “They don’t give all of us entire rooms to fill with stacks of books, Solas.”

—

Unsurprisingly, Dorian is in the library—though you don’t see Thea. Also unsurprisingly, he comes to pester you almost immediately. Out of the sass-frying-pan, into the sass-fire. Sigh.

“Walking funny, I see!” the Tevinter mage says loftily. “Who should we blame that on? Your elven paramour? Or your other elven paramour?”

“You hadn’t heard?” you reply dryly. “Your hero, Bull, is back from the war. Shouldn’t you have swooned into his arms by now?”

“No, no, I leave the swooning to you. We nobles have to know how to delegate, after all.”

“Well, if there’s one thing you Vints know how to do, it’s to let an elf do all the work then take the credit afterwards.”

“What do you sharpen that tongue on? Diamonds?” Dorian asks with a faux-shocked gasp.

“As if I could afford diamonds. Fortunately, Tevinter egos are just as solid.”

“And just as sparkling,” Dorian agrees. “Just as expensive to maintain, just as beautiful to behold—”

“Ah, good, you’re talking about yourself. I can sneak out while you’re distracted.”

“Works every time. That’s how I lost my last three lovers, in fact.”

You snort, breaking the back and forth by turning back to the bookshelf. “...Did someone actually check out *Dragons of the Free Marches*?” you say, frowning. “Or am I once again flummoxed by the library’s seeming lack of any real organizational system?”

“Oh, Helisma took that,” comes Mahvir’s voice from a few shelves over. “I’m sure she’ll return it if you need—”

“No, no,” you say quickly, moving your hand a few books over to another of the tomes you fetched
in Val Royeaux. “This one will do fine, let her keep it until she’s finished. I’m just surprised anyone else is reading the things. But I suppose, with her research… I’m glad these books will be useful to more than just me, considering I used the Inquisition’s money on them.”

“So,” drawls Dorian. “If Bull is back, I take it that means you’re back to wrestling him every morning?”

“Yes, though our hearts were hardly in it this morning,” you say, your eyes sliding back to Dorian. “You did hear, yes? His second in command, Cremisius Aclassi, was injured in a fight with Venatori.”

“Oh?”

“Rather gravely. Perhaps you should steer clear; neither one of them are particularly happy with Vints at the moment.”

“But Cremisius is Tevinter!” Dorian protests.

“Yes, and who hates the place more than the lower class?” you snort. “You’d be feeling sour if you had Venatori stick a stave halfway through your lung.”

Dorian winces. “My. Perhaps I should get the poor man something…”

It’s an effort not to smile as an idea quickly forms in your head. “That’s not a bad idea, actually. I’m sure he could use the reminder not everyone from the Tevinter upper class is a shit,” you say, with the air of someone considering something. “Maybe… Oh, I know! You could bring him his favorite food. The crap they give you in the healing tent is awful.”

“You know his favorite food?” Dorian says, eyebrows raising. “You really get around, don’t you?”

“If you’re going to be like that, I won’t tell you,” you say with a scowl.

“Oh, go on. What is it?”

“Pickled fish.” Dorian’s expression says everything—he clearly thinks you’re having him on (you are). “No, seriously,” you insist. “I know it sounds weird, but he really likes them. Apparently he got a taste for them while his previous mercenary company was working out of the Anderfels. The kitchen has pickled herring in stock. I got them for him when he was feeling under the weather—ask the kitchen staff if you don’t believe me.”

“I just might,” Dorian says, eyeing you. “Pickled… herring?”

“Mmhmm. I was thinking of bringing them to him myself, but I’ll let you take this one. I’ve got lessons tomorrow, anyway.” You finish grabbing the last book you want, then turn to head back down the stairs. “If you don’t bother, just let me know, and I’ll do it some other time.”

Dorian is looking thoughtful when you head back down the stairs—you don’t let yourself snicker until you’re most of the way down the stairwell. Ah, to be a fly on that wall…

--

You alternate between reading—sprawled comfortably out on Solas’ couch, stockinged feet in the air—and working at your desk, until it’s time to pick up Solas’ dinner. All in all, you get a mind-boggling amount of work done. You could have gotten even more accomplished had you been interested in running yourself ragged, but thanks to Solas’ enchantment, that’s hardly necessary. Plus, the
enchantment is wearing off already, probably due to so much heavy use, and there’s no way you’re going to ask Solas to refresh it. All in all, it’s a fantastic day, and you’re in excellent humors when you sit down to share your dinner with Solas.

“I believe this is the first day since we returned that I’ve seen you spend an entire day working here,” Solas comments as you set to devouring your well-earned dinner.

“I know! I’ve been waiting for Sera or Fenris to charge in, or for a missive to come, or something. I’ve gotten so used to constant interruptions, even down here in your rotunda.”

“You seem to get busier every day. Do you even have time for your constant lessons?” he asks dryly.

If he starts sassing you again, you’re going to win this time. You may have difficulties out-bratting Dorian, but Solas just doesn’t have the capacity for being annoying that you do. “I’ll have you know I had a lesson with Bull just this morning,” you say loftily. “And tomorrow is Sunday, which means lessons with Belassan.”

Solas raises an eyebrow at your affected attitude. “Your schedule must be quite hectic. Do you finally have your fill of teachers?”

Pff… asshole. He already knows the answer to that. You’ve never stopped chasing after him to teach you. The only thing that’s changed is the number of things you want him to show you, which seems to grow by the day. He’s teasing you, like dangling a steak near a starving animal.

“Very nearly,” you say casually, popping a bite of food in your mouth. “The only thing I would clear my schedule for now is someone very interesting.”

“Is that so?”

“Mnhmm,” you say, with an air of forced indifference. “The only one I’m particularly interested in, well, they keep turning me down, so…” You shrug.

“Well, their loss is my gain, then,” he says, and you lose control of your casual air as you focus in on him sharply. “Assuming you’d be willing to clear your schedule, of course.”

Now it’s his turn to sit casually eating while you attempt to figure out what he means. Is he taunting you? “Oh?” you say cautiously.

“Assuming you’re still interested in improving your Elven, of course…”

You’re nearly knocked stone cold on your ass by the sudden flood of emotions that wash through you. No way. No way! Is he serious? There’s no way it would be this easy! You’ve been trying for months now! You’re staring, aren’t you? You’re probably staring. Pull it together!


“Elven. The language? Although if you’re not interested…”

“No! I mean yes! I mean, I am!” Get your shit together. You clear your throat. “But… what changed your mind?”

"Before, you had nothing to offer me," Solas says matter-of-factly, with a light shrug.

"Oh?" you ask cautiously. "What changed?"
"Now," Solas says, his voice a bit lower than normally--or is it just your imagination? "You have something I want."

Your throat goes tight and dry, your thinly held hold on yourself shatters. "O...oh?" you say, your own voice jumping up an octave. "What might that be?"

"Your company," Solas replies, and you fear your hammering heart may burst from your chest. Is this the Fade? Are you dreaming again? What’s happening here? "I seem to have grown accustomed to it in Val Royeaux. Now that we are back in Skyhold, you have so many hangers-on… So, I will steal your Sunday afternoons for myself."

You feel as though you might faint.

“Besides,” Solas adds casually. “Your Elven needs to be corrected now, before you teach any more unfortunate bakers.”

Your mind has officially stopped functioning altogether. You should be thinking rationally about this. There is almost certainly more to his sudden offer than just wanting your company--that’s fucking ridiculous. But you have no capacity to analyze right now. Your mind is filled with a blissful buzzing that pushes out everything else.

“Y-yeah…” you say dazedly. Your brain attempts to form something vaguely similar to suspicion, but fails spectacularly, and all you get is, “All you want are my Sunday afternoons?”

Fucking Void. You need to go roll in a snowbank until your faculties come back; this is ridiculous. Worse still, that sounds like you’re coming on to him more than inquiring after his intentions. But all he does is smile slightly--hell, it’s almost a smirk, though that might be your hormone-flooded mind.

“Perhaps the evenings, as well.”

You’re gone. Your mind is gone. You’re done. You give up. He could tell you to your face, ‘oh and also I’m doing this so that I can learn all your dangerous secrets and expose you to the world’ and you’d probably still just be like ‘oh, well, okay then, sure.’ Fuck. You need to lie down. And a cold bath. Seven cold baths.

Solas continues to eat and talk, and you, eventually, at some point, remaster the ability of putting food in your face, though words continue to fail you. You listen to Solas intone about what things you’ll need to be taught and supplies you’ll require--all of which you already have because doy, you literally do language for a living.

“The rotunda should work well enough for our purposes,” he decides, glancing around the room as if considering it. “People do bother you here, but few enough. It will be on you to turn them away if an interruption presents itself.” He eyes you pointedly. “I take my commitments seriously--so should you. You may run about Skyhold every other minute of every other day if you wish, but there will be no interruptions while you are learning.”

You nod along, somewhere between dazed and eager. You can’t believe this is actually happening. But you’re not waking up, so it must be. He’s not even asking for much--your dedication is hardly much of a fee. You suspect he’ll get around to what he really wants eventually, but frankly, you don’t care. There’s nothing he could ask for that you wouldn’t give for proper instruction in Elven, or at least nothing you wouldn’t lie about giving.

--

By the time you actually clean up after dinner and get back to work, you realize Solas’ enchantment
is pretty much entirely gone. You glare at your work for a while—would it be worth working at a slower pace, or should you do some of your non-writing work? After some hemming and hawing, you just curl back up on Solas’ couch with your dragon books and do some reading. You’ve written enough today anyway, surely. Better to do some reading and then focus on writing when you have the benefit of magic on your side.

You’d like very much to study Servis’ notes, but Solas is right there and with your luck, he would definitely take note and wonder what you were looking at. You’re still planning on snooping as soon as you get the chance, so you should probably avoid studying Tevinter runecraft directly in front of him. So dragons it is.

The tome is unfortunately dry. Your Free Marches book would have been more interesting and more along what you actually need—it details a real, modern High Dragon that was found in the Bone Pit outside of Kirkwall three years ago. It was slain by Hawke and company—Fenris had been with him, according to the reports, so you can always ask him additional questions if you need to—but there had been an autopsy, and Hawke had answered a lot of interview questions about it. It was one of the most well-recorded cases of modern High Dragon behavior and biology.

Instead of that book, however, you’re reading a rather dull piece, translated from Tevene from someone who did not quite have a knack for the subtleties of the language.

It’s extremely boring, but you only set it down—on your face, to block the light—for just a moment to rest your eyes. So you’re quite surprised when you open them back up again and, upon moving the book, realize the entire rotunda is pitch black.

You must have fallen asleep. You have a brief moment of panic when you feel weight on you, thinking that Solas had once again covered you in his enchanted blanket while you slept. But no, you realize quickly, this isn’t the same blanket. You would like to say you checked it for magic, but in truth, you simply recognized it was made of a different material. A quick sniff confirms that it is one of Solas’ blankets, however. Not that you will be informing anyone you can recognize him by scent now, apparently.

You try to think through the blind panic, force yourself to calm. You had fallen asleep? Maker, how? Had Solas done something? No, no, you hadn’t dreamed. It wasn’t sleeping so much as falling unconscious, the blackout of the severely intoxicated or ill. Sleep without connection to the Fade… rest for your body, but not much else. Embarrassing, though, that you had fallen asleep right in front of Solas. He could have done anything to your sleeping mind while you laid, helpless. You need to be more careful around him, damnit! Just because he hasn’t been able to figure you out yet doesn’t mean he can’t. He could probably sniff your aura out if you were unconscious. He would have time, and you wouldn’t be awake to realize you needed to take extra precautions to hide…

Not that you have any real way to keep yourself from passing out. Your exhaustion mounts with every passing day, and there’s no end in sight.

You glance around the rotunda. It must be very late… it’s completely dark, though the slightest glow from the top of the tower informs you there are still spies hard at work, as always. But everyone in the library has gone to bed, and all the candles have been put out. Fortunately, you’re an elf, so you can still see outlines. Not well enough to read, but well enough to make your way over to your desk and light a single candle. This isn’t how you had planned on snooping through Solas’ things, but you don’t intend to look a gift horse in the mouth.

You keep the candle covered as best you can. There’s probably only a handful of people all the way up in the spy quarters, but all it would take is one of them happening to glance over the edge to see that there was someone snooping. You’ll have a great deal of explaining to do if anyone catches you
at this. So you keep the light as covered and dim as you can and rely on your elven sight to help you find what you’re looking for. Fortunately, Solas keeps his desk relatively organized.

Unfortunately, the notebook he was writing in before doesn’t seem to be here. You rummage quickly through his papers and notes, looking for anything of use, and you do find some sort of… notebook, or journal. Curiously, you flip it open and angle it towards the candle.

...This is written in Elven.

**Who the fuck writes notes in Elven?**

Other than you, anyway, although you tend to use ancient Tevene instead. Less suspicious. You do it all the time, a lazy way of coding your own thoughts against the nosy--the nosy like you, apparently. You wouldn’t be surprised if Solas does it for the exact same reason. Well, too bad for him that this nosy woman is semi-fluent. You close the book and tuck it under your arm, then continue to quickly dig around for anything interesting or useful.

Nothing else really jumps out at you, though, and the longer you spend at his desk, the more likely you are to be spotted. So you take your little prize back over to the couch. After a few moments consideration, you sit down and pull your feet up onto it, then pull the blanket over your head like a cloak. You tuck the candle carefully between your thighs, and then open Solas’ notebook. The blanket should block pretty much all of the light from the candle, and you’re under the overhang of the library to boot. Plus, you’re just reading. Nothing suspicious going on here, nope.

...Either this is coded, or you’re more stupid than you thought. You can only understand about a quarter of the words, and you can’t make heads or tails of it. At least not right away. You can do this, you tell yourself. You’re one of the forefront experts on ancient Elven in Orlais! Not that there’s a great deal of competition, but… You have done some very questionable things in the pursuit of this exact knowledge. Your pronunciation may be questionable, but your knowledge of the *written* word, surely, is considerable.

But after half an hour of pouring over page after page of flowing, foreign script, it’s getting… depressing. Coded it may be, but it’s also just increasingly clear how superior Solas’ mastery of the language is. It’s *clearly* Elven words, not a cipher using the alphabet. You recognize enough to know that. But you flat out don’t know enough of it to translate it. You would need days, weeks. Resources. For a fucking notebook. A fucking stupid notebook, written by an asshole somniari who makes you look like a fucking idiot. You’ve dedicated your life to this! But apparently that’s nothing compared to--

No, no. Be fair. Solas is easily twice your age (apparently). He’s had longer. Plus a possible Tevinter education or a deal with a demon, or both. When you’re his age, you’ll be just as knowledgeable… maybe more, since you intend to pry every ounce of knowledge out of him if you can.

You’re not a failure. Not a waste, not an embarrassment.

But you have no chance of figuring this crap out right now. However... if Solas is really serious about instructing you in Elven, you may be able to in the future. But you can’t exactly steal his journal… Good thing you’re a linguist sitting in a room full of quill, inks, and paper.

Obviously you can’t transcribe the whole thing in a few rushed hours, hiding under a blanket. You would use magic if you dared--there's no one here--but the risk of there being some residue on Solas' journal keeps you from risking it. You do it the old fashioned way, and get as much of it down as you can before blowing out the candle and returning Solas’ notebook to its spot on his desk. You fold the blanket before you leave--you’re sure Solas will be in the rotunda before you return.
It’s a little less than an hour before dawn when you creep into your room. You have no intention of sleeping, or even resting--you had apparently done that in Solas’ rotunda, and so soundly that he had covered you with a freaking blanket. No, you’re simply here to change clothing. You’ve been looking forward to this day off for a while now, and you want to take your time and actually enjoy yourself for once.

You strip down and take some time to apply the bruise balm you’d been given. It’s a bit awkward in places, and you wind up laying completely nude on your bed for a while as you wait for it to soak in completely. But it is extremely soothing, easing the aches and pains where you had repeatedly smacked into the ground, or been yanked by Bull.

Once you’re sufficiently dry, you rise and stretch a little bit, working out kinks in your back and neck from the day before. Then you pull on a breast band and, after a moment’s hesitation, some of the cuter underwear that you’d purchased in Val Royeaux. If today is going to be about self-indulgence, you’re going all-out.

You can’t help smiling to yourself as you pull on clothing you actually like for once. Tight, brown leggings--tighter than they should be, you realize with a frown. You’ve gained weight… That’s to be expected, but you’ll be sour if you have to let your pants out to make allowance for your own ass. Good thing you’ll be wearing a tunic, because the leggings’ grip on your rear and hips would probably get you thrown out of a Chantry... or at least lectured by one of the Revered Mothers.

You pull on a red tunic to help "cover your shame," so to speak. It’s not quite as long as you’re used to, but the style for servants in Val Royeaux this year is a shorter hem. It goes down to almost mid-thigh and hey, you are wearing leggings. Then comes the real self-indulgence--you pull your legs up on your bed, open the drawer in your bedstand, and pull out Lady Montiliyet’s gift.

You--obviously--haven’t painted your nails since disaster struck your home, but you used to do it with some regularity. It's stylish in Orlais, and while you never really got involved in some of the more intricate paints and patterns used by the nobles--Madame de Fer’s nails are often something to see, even here--you did enjoy it. It was both a tool and a pleasure, like your masks or jewelry or more posh outfits. Now, however, you’re painting your toenails for pure enjoyment, and, because, well… it would be a shame to let the paint go to waste. It was a gift.

Sitting back and waiting for them to dry reminds you fondly of more pleasant times in Orlais. How many times had you and Banal’ras done just this, decorating yourself like a baker's tarts before sneaking into one ball or another as servants? Casually discussing your plans for theft and ruin while blowing lightly on your nails... The memory is bittersweet nostalgia, but it does serve to put you in a good mood.

As they dry, you take the time to thoroughly comb your hair. Nothing else to do while you’re just sitting there, and you enjoy the sensation. Banal’ras used to comb it for you while you worked, and vice versa. He had the most ridiculously thick hair you’d ever handled, and he’d swear at you while you hacked away at knots that formed because he didn’t brush it frequently enough.

You admire your reflection in the mirror you purchased as you work through your hair. It’s been awhile since you got to admire your hair down like this. It was a conscious decision to always wear it in the same style--people get used to it, associate you with hair pulled back in a bun, don’t know how it frames your face when it’s down. The severe, pulled back style makes you look several years older, as well. But you’re just prideful enough to admire how nice it looks down.

Once your nails are dry enough not to risk smudging, you wrap your feet in the foot wraps Solas had
given you, winding them up over your ankle and shin, over the tight leggings around your calf. That gives you warm, fuzzy memories that have absolutely nothing to do with Banal’ras. You wonder if anyone will even notice you’re not wearing shoes? How many people really look at feet? Sera probably would. If she sees you today, she’ll probably yell at Solas for rubbing his elfiness off on you.

Ew. That sounds weird.

Sounds like something she’d say, though.

You run your hands idly through your hair. You’d like to leave it down, or braid it, but that’s a step too far. You’re already playing it risky by dressing up the way you like to today. You wouldn’t do it at all if not for the fact you’ll be spending the entire day with Belassan and then Solas, locked up away from sight. Then… maybe you can let your hair down with…?

No, no. You’re being silly. With a sigh, you pull it back into the same bun you always wear, then stand. You curl your bare tones into the cold stone and smile. It’s a rare day where you can say you feel a bit more like yourself.

Chapter End Notes

This afternoon I’ll be streaming with my brother as he goes into the Landsmeet in Dragon Age: Origins. This is a BLIND RUN so spoilers will get you kicked/banned (and on my permanent shitlist). Other than that, consider coming by to hear my extremely annoying voice pitch in uselessly with amusing lore tidbits.
Lessons

Chapter Notes

Those of you who don’t check my Tumblr regularly are probably wondering what the hell (maybe I should get Twitter for easier updates to more people?). So what happened was this: I couldn't find a good place to stop. I didn't particularly want to cliffhanger this section. So I asked my readers: would you rather have a short update now or a long update next week? They voted long. So, Happy Valentine's Day, and this update is brought to you without any cliffhangers courtesy of patience.

Elven Guide
ma ashi = my man
da'dinan = little death

Qunlat Guide
Vehlalit-an = two people that hate each other but respect each other. Carries connotation of "rivals" as well as "respected enemy" and, when noted by a third party, often "they'll either fight or fuck."

The day dawns slow and dreary. It’s thickly overcast, murky grey clouds promising a cold, miserable day. It’s still quite dark because of the thick cloud cover, so you swing by the mess hall for breakfast instead of going straight to the stables. When did you last eat breakfast, anyway? Solas would probably scold you. But no one really needs three meals every day. You’re pretty sure the concept of breakfast/lunch/dinner is entirely arbitrary. In Rivain, the demonstration of wealth was to have four meals a day, and Orlesian nobles have “brunch” with enough frequency to probably bump them into five meals a day.

You spot Thea in the hall and sit down across from her. She seems a bit surprised to see you, but you can’t blame her.

“You skip breakfast more than you don’t,” she points out. You shrug.

“I get lunch and dinner every day no matter what I do, so it doesn’t really matter if I skip breakfast,” you explain.

“Yeah, and your lunch and dinner are probably better quality than this stuff,” she says, spooning a bit of gruel out of her bowl sourly. “Pass that honey of yours over here. Every morning you skip breakfast is a morning where I miss it.”

You snort, but pull the jar out of your bag. It rattles against Solas’ present, and you bite your lip. Maybe today...? You could pull it off as a “thanks for teaching me Elven” present. The longer you wait on it, the more embarrassing it’s going to be, because he is going to realize you bought it in Val Royeaux and then held onto it. This might be a good excuse for why.

“So, you still use Sundays as a day off?” Thea asks after the two of you have glopped a decent amount of honey into your gruel.
“Mmhmm,” you reply through a mouthful, then swallow. “I’ve got lessons all day today.”

Thea snorts. “Listen to you. Lessons. It’s like you’re a page.” She sighs. “But I suppose you’re still young. Have to learn while you have the chance, hmm?”

“Still young?” you say with a laugh. “And just how old are you, to be talking like a grandma?”

She glares at you. “They don’t teach elves that it’s rude to ask a lady her age?”

“Nope!” you reply cheerfully. “Age is pride for an elf. You rub it in people’s faces. ‘I didn’t live to be thirty-five by being an idiot!’ ‘If you want to see your second decade, you’ll stop playing the fool on the streets at night!’ And on, and on…”

Thea rolls her eyes. “If you must know, I’m thirty-two.”

You choke on your food slightly. “What, really?” She just glares, and you have to laugh. “I thought you were closer to my age!”

“Yes, yes, rub it in,” she says with a sigh. “How old are you, anyway?”

“Oh, well…” You rub the back of your neck, a bit sheepishly. “I don’t know, exactly… orphan and all that. I didn’t get dropped off at the orphanage with tags, you know.”

“…Oh. Yeah. I didn’t think about that sorry.”

“It’s fine,” you say, waving your hand as if to dismiss her concerns. “I’m somewhere in my mid-twenties. Not thirty-two, that’s for damn sure.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up…”

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By the time you leave the mess hall, it’s drizzling, an icy cold sheet of water falling steadily from the sky. You should have worn Skinner’s coat, but it’s thick and armored and not exactly the kind of thing you wear just to keep the wet off. And your Orlesian cloak would have made you stick out like even more of a sore thumb than the outfit you’re actually wearing. You bolt to the stables, not wanting to get too wet, but even in that short time it feels like your ears are going to freeze off. You should have at least worn a hat.

Belassan is waiting for you by the harts’ stables. You note right away that he’s done exactly what you suggested; he’s turned the little halla horns into earrings. The bone white of the ironbark perfectly matches his vallaslin—which is to Ghilain’nain and therefore also styled after halla horns. It really does look as though it was done intentionally—no wonder he liked the present so much.

“You look like a frozen calf,” he says with a laugh as you rub your arms to try and urge some heat into your hands.

“I wasn’t expecting it to rain,” you grumble. “It would wait until my day off to get so cold.”

“You can’t ride out like that,” he points out. “Hold a moment.” As he walks off, you turn to Revas, who is snorting and straining against the side of his stall.

“What is it, ma ashi? Use your words,” you tease him. He takes a deep breath and, before you can stop him, lets out a loud, screeching honk. That, of course, causes three of the other harts to begin honking as well, and pretty soon you have a cacophony of honks and neighs.
“I was joking,” you hiss as you sidle up next to him and put a freezing hand on his nose. “You’re terrible.” He only wuffs hot hair against the palm of your hand in response, then lips it as if looking for treats.

Belassan returns a few moments later, grinning. “They misbehave around the ladies the second I leave,” he says with a soft tut. “At this rate the harts are going to start trying to mount the mares.”

“Don’t blame me for any interspecies trysts,” you say with a snort. “Say—what’s that?” You gesture at the pile of cloth he’s holding. Doubtless, it’s what he left to get. A blanket for the hart, maybe?

“A spare coat,” he says, handing it off to you. It’s clearly his, you realize as you hold it up. It's large, broad around the shoulders. It's also Dalish--very clearly Dalish. A dark green in color that you find rather pleasing to look at, the coat is all flowing sleeves and tails with a thick, padded hood. The hood, sleeves, and hem are all lined with a thick, fluffy fur.

“This is abhorrently elfy,” you say with a laugh.

“Then it will match,” he replies, with a deft glance downwards. He noticed your footwraps, then. “If you are not used to going barefoot, I fear for your toes around snow and hoofed animals,” he points out.

“It’s just for a day,” you reply. “I’ll watch my toes around Revas. And if I can avoid falling off, snow and puddles shouldn’t be an issue.” Belassan does you the favor or not inquiring further as to why you decided to suddenly dress up like this. Doesn’t matter--you had a joke prepared about “running off to find a Dalish” to deflect with, anyway.

You’re a bit surprised when, after you’ve saddled up Revas and are leading him out of his stall, you see Belassan leading one of the other harts--not Ashi’lana, but one you don’t recognize.

“I thought we’d ride out into the mountains today,” Belassan explains. “We’ll just tear up the fields if we ride around in the rain here, and I need to see how much that trip through Orlais improved your skills.”

“Not much, I’m afraid,” you say with a chuckle as the two of you lead your harts out of the barn. “I fell off rather spectacularly on at least one occasion, and half the trip back I spent riding with Solas because Revas nearly got himself killed saving my hide.” You glance back at Revas as you say this; the scar is still boldly visible across his side and stomach, and probably always will be. A constant reminder of what a shit you are.

“A week of travel is a week of travel,” Belassan says firmly. “That you’ve improved isn’t in question; the question is how much.” Once the two of you are outside the barn, you both mount up and head out of Skyhold. It always feels a bit strange, going across that ridiculously long stone bridge. It’s the only way in or out of Skyhold that you’ve discovered, and for that reason alone it’s ludicrously well guarded at all hours. Even though you live in Skyhold, work for the Inquisition, have permission to be going in and out… the eyes of the guards on the back of your neck makes your skin crawl. Just a reminder of how poorly things will go for you if--for whatever reason--the Inquisition decides you are no longer an ally.

You notice it almost as soon as Revas’ hooves hit the dirt past the bridge. This isn’t rain anymore--it’s sleet. You glance over your shoulder at Skyhold. It’s impossible to tell if it’s changed there or not, but you’re willing to bet that if you turned right around, it would be raining inside the walls of Skyhold.

Enchanted bathtubs with running water. A green garden this high in the mountains. Rain instead of
sleet, snow, hail. There’s no doubt in your mind—Skyhold is magical. Very magical. Tevinter, this far south…? The ancient Tevinters performed wonders with magic, yes, but this… Perhaps it’s Elvhen? Their ruins are scattered seemingly randomly across Thedas, and the way Skyhold is perched in the middle of nowhere with no roads absolutely screams Elvhen to you.

You make a mental note to ask Solas about it. This sort of thing is his area of expertise, and if he’s been in Skyhold this long, there’s no way he hasn’t explored the Fade nearby and found all sorts of interesting answers. This is Solas. Of course he’ll know the history of the giant magical castle he’s living in. Perhaps today, if you get the chance, but you don’t want to distract too much from your first Elven lesson, particularly when you just got him to teach you… Maybe--

“It’s good that you’re comfortable enough on Revas to allow your mind to wander,” Belassan comments, snapping you out of your thoughts.

“Oh! Sorry, Belassan. I was just thinking… about Skyhold. It’s an odd place.”

Belassan’s laughter is light but hearty. “Now that is an understatement.”

His laughter is contagious, and you find yourself chuckling as well. “Admittedly, but I meant the physical castle itself. Look at these trees,” you say, gesturing around. “Evergreen, all of them. But inside the castle grounds, there are several kinds of trees, seemingly from all over. There’s one large one in the garden that I don’t even recognize. And there’s a garden. In the mountains. I would swear I saw ghouls’ beard when I was there last, and that normally grows best in a hot, arid climate.”

“You have suspicions, I take it?”

“Magic, it’s gotta be,” you say with a frown. “But that’s pretty vague. I’ve heard of weird things happening above ground and it turned out there was a large quantity of unmined lyrium underneath the surface. Places where the veil is thin, or warped, places where powerful abominations have caused havoc, old Tevinter and Elvhen ruins… Saying ‘I think it’s magic’ is probably the least useful conclusion one could have.”

“Do you have a lot of experience with this sort of thing?” Belassan asks, sounding surprised. You blink. You always forget he ignores rumor and doesn’t really speak to much of anyone. He’s always a few steps behind in ‘shit people know about you.’

“My work is mostly in history and—thanks to the Circles—magic. So… magical history, it comes up,” you say with a shrug. “When there are weird things like Skyhold, people write it down. When other people explore them later, they find old Tevinter or Elvhen writings, they need someone to translate it.”

“Your job must be very interesting,” Belassan muses. “Do you do much work with ancient Elvhen?”

“No, not really.” It’s not really a lie. Almost all of the Elvhen things you dig up, you’re hunting down, not being paid to look at. “My speciality is actually ancient Tevene. But there’s a lot of overlap… everything pre-Blight blurs together, since we have so little records.”

The two of you chatter your way through the woods outside of Skyhold. At one point, Belassan has you break into a run. You surprise yourself by staying on Revas without too much difficulty. This is mostly because Belassan is in front and that means Revas can’t break into a bound like he did back the Dales. You’re quite certain if he did, you’d come flying off just as quickly.

“You’re improving excellently,” Belassan informs you when he slows to a stop. You’re panting despite the fact you weren’t the one running—it’s not effortless for you to stay on a running hart.
Your legs are going to feel like over-boiled chicken bones when you dismount. “And to say Revas has grown attached to you would be a colossal understatement. I hope you are here for the long run, Emma. If you left, he would likely become distraught, or break out trying to follow you.”

You stare at Belassan, trying to determine if he’s joking. He doesn’t appear to be. You run a hand along your hair, looking down at Revas, who tilts his head to eye you. It’s as if he’s saying “I would, you know. You’re stuck with me.”

...Great.

“Well, I guess I better stay with the Inquisition, then,” you say jokingly. “Because I can’t afford to buy a hart.”

Hopefully when you do leave, you can steal him or leave on good enough terms to take him with you. You don’t need a pissed off hart trying to track you through the countryside… though Belassan might be exaggerating about that. But… you do kind of owe him.

The two of you—or four of you, in a sense—spend several hours out there despite the frigid weather and determined sleet falling from the sky. It’s not so bad under the tree cover, which breaks up the worst of the wind and protects from the icy sleet. And Belassan’s coat is quite warm—being Dalish, it even has extra padding around the ears. After the two of you finally do return to Skyhold you note that it is, in fact, raining there. The temperature is dropping, however, and you suspect that it might start freezing before too terribly long. What a miserable day… to spend inside Solas’ rotunda learning Elven.

Maybe… sitting right next to him at his desk… pouring over an old tome… Or sitting at your own desk while he leans over you from behind, pointing out errors in your script… Or maybe--

“Emma?” Belassan is leaning onto the stall door, having already finished brushing down his hart.

Oh, you’ve been brushing Revas in the same spot for a while now, huh. Even Revas is giving you a knowing look.

“Sorry, I was just, uh… thinking about my plans for the rest of the day,” you explain.

“Busy with work again?”

“Something like that,” you murmur, smiling a bit despite yourself. You can still barely believe it. You keep feeling like you’re going to get there and he’s going to reveal that it was all a dream or something.

“Are you being elusive for a reason, or just for fun?” Belassan jokes, and you laugh.

“Solas has finally relented and decided to teach me some Elven,” you explain. “Just for the afternoon, but… if I’m lucky, it seems like this will be a regular installation of my Sundays.”

“You’ll be eager to finish riding every week now,” Belassan comments, and you’re not sure if he’s teasing or genuinely displeased by it. You have no idea what displeased would look like on Belassan; you don’t believe you’ve seen it before.

“I’m sure he’ll scold me if I start showing up too early,” you say with a laugh. “He has other things to do. Besides… I’m eager to start today, but it would take a lot to keep me away from Revas,” you add with a fond pat to the hart’s nose. You finish brushing him off and exit the stall.

“It’s pouring rain,” Belassan comments, and you nod. Even inside the barn, it’s just about all you can
hear. It’s coming down on the roof in sheets. You’re not looking forward to bolting across the courtyard. “Keep the coat for today,” he tells you. “You’ll freeze the second you step outside, otherwise.”

You eye Belassan. You’d normally say yes right away, just due to the sheer amount of cold and wet involved, but after that kiss from last time, you’re a little hesitant. But… he’s been perfectly normal all morning. He’s wearing the earrings, but neither of you called any attention to them. That probably was just a bizarre cultural thing from his clan. And if he’s not going to make things awkward, you sure aren’t going to either.

“…Thank you,” you say finally. “I’ll get it back to you as soon as I can.”

“No need to rush,” he says with a shrug. “It isn’t as though it’s my only one.”

Even after you finish brushing Revas, it’s still a little early for lunch. After a moment’s consideration, however, you decide to fetch it early anyway. You don’t want to get started on your lesson only to be distracted by a meal.

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You suspect you’re at least an hour early with lunch—it’s hard to tell when it’s this stormy out. But rather than being annoyed or amused at your eagerness, Solas seems pleased.

“I am never quite sure how long your ‘riding lessons’ will last,” he says. “Let alone when something else will waylay you. It’s good that you are a bit early. We will begin and soon as you’ve eaten.”

You pout slightly. “We could start—”

“Eat,” he says pointedly, and you sit on your stool with a thump, frowning deeper.

“I did eat breakfast, you know,” you grumble.

“Is that supposed to be an occasion worth celebrating? You should be doing that every day.”

“I… That…” After a moment of trying to think of a retort that isn’t insipid, you give up and start eating. Solas gives you a look that says ‘that’s what I thought,’ but says nothing as well, simply starting his own meal.

You eat quickly, then shift anxiously while you wait for him to finish. As soon as he sets down his fork, you’re staring at him expectantly. He pushes his plate backwards away from the edge of the desk. You watch. He reaches for a book. You wiggle slightly in your seat.

“We will need use of the desk for this.” You’re about to ask him what the hell is stopping him from using the damn desk already when he gestures to the plates.

Son of a…

Wordlessly, you gather up the damn plates and take them to the fucking kitchen. You see Servis on your way there, and you’re pretty sure he intended to talk to you—but whatever expression he sees on your face stops him dead. You pass him without a word and drop the plates off in the kitchen where, coincidentally enough, absolutely no one talks to you.

You’re mentally daring Solas to come up with one more thing for you to do--you don’t care how old, smart, or strong he is, you’ll kick his ass, dammit--but when you return to the rotunda, he has your desk chair, not the stool, pulled up to the other side of his desk. The sight makes you hesitate for
some reason. It seems… you’re not sure. Important, somehow. Solas is seemingly still setting up a bit--a scroll placed carefully on the desk, a journal placed next to a quill and ink.

It looks so… official. How many of those soft, leather-bound books on his desk are for this purpose? That quill with its own little box, is that his? That blank journal, did he get it just for this occasion, or is he like you, with half a dozen blank books lying about at any given time? You had thought his offer to teach you sudden, but… Maybe it hadn’t been, for him. Maybe he’d been thinking about it. Since you got back? While you were Val Royeaux?

How long?

Had he been making preparations? Or did he throw these things together in a day or two? Which was more impressive?

“Ah, good,” he says when he spots you standing, stunned, near the doorway. “Now that we’ve done away with any distractions, let’s begin.” He gestures to your chair, and your legs move on their own, carrying you through the room and plopping you down. Unbidden, your hand moves to the quill, and you feel a slight tingling where your fingertips brush along the spine.

“...Solas,” you say, at once distracted out of your stupor. You pick up the quill and hold it up to the light. You recognize it now, but would you have if you hadn’t felt the lyrium running through its core? “Is this your quill? It feels odd.” And looks extremely familiar, but you’re not going to point that out just yet.

“No, it’s--” he hesitates for half a breath, and then rushes onwards. “Yours. Consider it a gift. Now, if you’ll consult the scroll in front of you--”

“No, it’s--” he hesitates for half a breath, and then rushes onwards. “Yours. Consider it a gift. Now, if you’ll consult the scroll in front of you--”

“Solas,” you say again, eyeing him over the desk. “Do you believe for one second I am going to allow you to give me what I believe very much to be an enchanted quill and then brush away from the subject as if it’s unimportant?”

Solas, to your amazement, refuses to meet your gaze. He clears his throat, and you realize he seems… embarrassed? “It was an impulsive purchase, but I have no real use for it--” he begins.

“This is the quill the dwarves we met on the road were selling, isn’t it?” you say, a grin forming on your lips. “The one I kept looking a--” The grin fades quickly when you remember the price of it.

“You bought this?”

“I was impressed by the dwarves’ clever use of enchantment,” Solas says, a little defensively. “It’s inlaid with lyrium. When placed in ink, it pulls it up into a hollow reservoir inside the quill. I’ve examined it to my satisfaction, but I don’t write enough to make proper use of it.”

Bullshit. Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit. But you’re not going to say that. This thing had been priced at three sovereigns! He expects you to believe three sovereigns was an impulse buy? And you saw him buy other things from those same dwarves! How much does the fucking Inquisition pay him, anyway?! “Solas, I’m not sure I can accept--” you begin, reluctantly. You want it, yes, but that is a very expensive present, and…

“Please,” he says with a wave of his hand. “I have no real use for it, but I have yet to see a day pass where you don’t write something.”

“I… thank you,” you say, after trying to think of something else.

“If you are quite finished stalling--”
“Not quite, actually,” you say quickly, setting the quill down. If you don’t do this right now, you never will. “So long as we’re awkwardly exchanging gifts…” You reach into your bag; you don’t even have to hunt, your hand goes straight to the heavy box. You place it over on his side of the desk, push it towards him slightly.

“What is this?” he asks, clearly confused.

“You are familiar with the concept of how gifts work, yes?” you say dryly. “It was going to be a thanks for teaching me Elven, but now I suppose it’s a thanks for the incredible magical quill instead. Seems a little lackluster at this point.”

Still looking bewildered, he opens the box. You memorize his expression, the way his face shifts through stages of shock, the exact tilt of his eyebrows, the way his lips part, mouth opening as if stunned, however briefly.

“I don’t know if you even use watercolors,” you mutter to yourself when he doesn’t say anything right away. “But… the place where I buy quills and ink a lot in Val Royeaux had them, new color boxes from Renaud. If you can’t use it, I–”

“No, it… I can use it,” he says quickly, snapping the box shut. “You… got this in Val Royeaux?”

You flush. “Yeah, and you got the quill on the way back from Val Royeaux.”

“Was it-- No, nevermind,” he says, and you’ll be wondering what he was about to say for the next six months, no doubt. “Thank you.”

Is he slightly flustered? Flushed? Only fair, you’re both in spades. But now the atmosphere in the rotunda is more than a little awkward.

“So! Elven,” you say, clearing your throat.

“Oh. Yes…” He lifts the box and sets it underneath the corner off the desk. “Before anything else, I need to understand how much you already know. Open the scroll in front of you and begin to read. If you do not know a word, you may either attempt it to the best of your abilities, or skip it and move on to the next.”

Oh, Maker, this is going to be embarrassing, isn’t it? “Please attempt to refrain from laughing,” you mutter as you begin unraveling the scroll. “Var… Var’landivalis him sa'bella… bellanaris san elgar…” If Solas finds listening to your hesitant reading painful, he doesn’t show it on his face, which you appreciate. He doesn’t stop you or rush you, he simply listens, occasionally scribbling something down, as you read. After you’ve been reading for about ten minutes, he stops you.

“Do you believe you can translate this?”

You gaze at the scroll for a moment, considering. “With a margin of error, yes,” you say finally.

“Attempt it,” he instructs.

You gaze at the first line for a moment, and then speak. 'Our belief became... or maybe 'transformed'... sa'bellanaris is odd to me... sa as a prefix means 'one,' or 'a single one', but bellanaris means 'eternity' or 'always' or even 'permanently.' One eternity doesn't make a great deal of sense, so it probably has another meaning. Elven is... poetic. There are a lot of very confused scholars out there that still haven't figured out that da'dinan means--'

"Focus."
"Sorry. The last three words, sa'bellanaris san elgar... Elgar is spirit. Spirits are mutable. Did their belief transform a spirit in some way, perhaps? That seems likely. San could be a place, or a land... Our belief transformed... one eternity, one place... Or, could san elgar be talking about the Fade, maybe? Place of spirits? Or... containing the spirits in one place? Forever?" You make a disgruntled noise, gripping the magical quill without thinking and beginning to scribble down notes in the blank journal. “Our belief transformed everything... Our belief transformed everything in the place of spirits?"

"Continue on to the next section," Solas instructs.

"But--"

"This is not a riddle, lethallin. I am simply gauging your knowledge."

You sigh. "Alright, alright... Melanada him sa'miras..."

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It continues much the same throughout the afternoon. He really is just trying to figure out how much you know... which is perfectly understandable, but also makes you exceedingly nervous. It’s necessary, so you’re as honest with him about your knowledge as you can be. Honestly, you wouldn’t even know which parts to hide. It helps that he has yet to ask how you know any of this, possibly knowing that he’ll just get the same vague answer you always give. ...Or that you would turn around and ask him the same question.

All you can really do is hope that he doesn’t realize just how suspicious your knowledge is. Although you suspect you’re just fooling yourself. But if he finds the amount you know suspicious, he should realize the amount he knows is infinitely more suspicious, so whatever. It’s not like you’re the only liar here.

You’re mulling over the translation of a particularly odd phrase when the door slams open. It’s so loud in the quiet rotunda that both you and Solas jump and turn to look. You’re not sure what you were expecting, but a pissed-off, damp Dorian is not it. Your eyes flick to Solas. Solas' eyes flick to you. Which one of you pissed him off, anyway?

The question is answered when he wordlessly storms over to the desk, slams down a bowl of pickled herring, and levels you with a powerful glare.

A grin blossoms on your face. “Been to the healing tent?”

“You... you... vishante kaffas!” he swears, throwing his hands up. He turns dramatically on his heel and storms back out of the room, muttering angrily under his breath about uppity elves who pull pranks on poor, beleaguered mages for no reason. You’re biting your tongue to try to keep from laughing.

Solas turns to you. “...Would you mind explaining why we were just delivered a bowl of fish by an angry Tevinter mage?”

You burst out laughing, nearly doubling over from the force of it. Maker! Oh, Maker, he looked so annoyed! And the dampness just made it; you can’t believe he went over there in the rain! That poor bastard! Oh, Maker, the look on Krem’s face must have been... Oh, you really have to go see Krem tonight or tomorrow to get his side of the story. This is amazing.

Solas clears his throat delicately. “I believe I mentioned that I wanted your focus, free of distractions?” he says pointedly. You take a few deep gasps of breath and yourself calm... or at least
“Ir abelas, hahren,” you say with a final chuckle. “Let’s continue.”

And you do, though the bowl of fish doesn’t go ignored for long. You find yourself idly snacking on the tiny fish whenever you have to puzzle your way through a particularly hard to understand segment, or while demonstrating your mastery of the script for Solas. He makes a face at you--complete with an adorable crinkled nose--quite similar to the one he makes when you drink your strong tea. But he says nothing, and so throughout the course of the afternoon you wind up eating the entire bowl. Waste not, want not.

The day slips by without you really noticing how much time is passing. Your strengths and weaknesses hopefully become clear to Solas. He seems quite pleased by your mastery of the script, but that doesn’t really fill you with much pride. Anyone can copy letters. And in everything else, you feel yourself falling short. Pronunciation was a problem you already knew you had, but your lack of knowledge of the actual language itself is rearing its ugly head. There are too many words you just don’t know, or words with alternate meanings you’d never considered. You try to tell yourself that you’ve done your best with the resources you’ve had, but it’s still… discouraging. Although Solas doesn’t seem to think so; if anything, he seems to find the oddest things you grasp delightful. When you mention--off-handedly--that you think modern scholars are relying too much on limited Dalish lore and have been mistranslating certain words for centuries… he practically glows.

“It’s not their fault,” you say, frowning over the section. “The Dalish have limited knowledge, segmented from clan to clan. They practice an oral tradition, which means that every time a Keeper dies unexpectedly, a little bit more lore could be lost. And only one or two clans really share their knowledge with outsiders willingly. So human and non-Dalish elven scholars--like myself--are working off of a tiny piece of a fragmented chunk of a once-great whole. I’ve seen one other scholar suggest that we were relying too much on Dalish lore for the translation of certain words--harellan, in this case--but he never gained much traction. But I think--” you glance up. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“The vigor with which you have pursued knowledge is admirable,” Solas replies, eyes crinkled in a smile that his lips don’t quite follow through with.

“And I suppose knowledge just falls into your lap, does it?” you retort, though your ears are flushing slightly with the praise. “Some knowledge impresses itself onto you whether you want it or not--the sharpness of a Chevalier’s blade, for instance. But by and large, if you want to know, you have to find out.”

“Very true. So tell me, what does your inquiring mind make of this section here?”

And back to work you go.

He must have every Elvhen book in his and the Inquisition’s possession on this desk, including one that appears to be a collection of ancient Elvhen poetry that you would--absolutely literally--kill for. But this time, no one needs to die. If you continue to please Solas, he should continue to teach you, and eventually he’ll probably have you copying down and translating those very poems for study. Amazing. Incredible. The idea of something like that being the point of an interaction, not just a side benefit that you have to struggle through unpleasantness to get…

You wonder, vaguely, if he has even the slightest notion of what this means to you.

It seems as though he’ll be getting Sunday evenings as well, as the two of you work on and on, by candlelight after sunlight ceases to stream in from the windows above. You probably wouldn’t have
stopped at all if not for one of your elven sentences being interrupted mid-syllable by a long, low grumble. Your eyes widen in unison with Solas’ but he begins to flush as both of you realize that sound was produced by his stomach.

You glance over at the candle on your desk, the one you use to tell the time. It’s quite low.

“Maker! It’s got to be two hours past dinner!” you say, aghast. “Ir abelas, Solas.”

“Not at all,” he replies, still looking more than a little embarrassed. “I had forgotten as well.” He glances down at the desk, which is strewn with work. “I suppose now is as good a time as any to break for dinner.” You feel a pang of regret--you don’t want to stop. But it’s only fair; he’s been working with you for hours now.

“I suppose so. You’re getting old, after all. Can’t go as long as the younger teachers without needing to take a break,” you tease good-naturedly.

“I’ll straighten the desk while you and your smart mouth fetch us both something to eat,” he says dryly.

Your fantastic mood must show on your face, in sharp contrast to how you’d looked fetching lunch. Celia comments as you prepare two meals that you look like you’re floating a few inches off the ground. You certainly feel like it. Either that or you’re just getting stronger in the upper arms; the tray barely feels heavy at all as you climb the stairs.

Solas has cleared the desk a bit when you return… enough that the two of you can eat, anyway. Dinner as a “break,” however, lasts all of about ten minutes before you say something that has Solas reaching for one of the books again. The two of you wind up going over more elven as you eat. You’re amused to see that Solas has similarly mastered the technique of “eating food anywhere but over the book, even while writing or reading.” One only has to drop a bit of porridge on a book once to pick up that skill, you suppose.

The dishes are cleaned and then lie forgotten beside the desk as the two of you dive straight back into your efforts. Your mind makes a few idle jokes about “stamina,” but you’re too busy focusing on the actual task at hand to bother voicing them. The hours begin to slide by again as Solas begins to explain the basics of when, precisely, one uses an apostrophe during contraction. A ludicrous overuse of apostrophes is perhaps the most telling sign of a novice in the language, after all. It’s a problem you had with Luvian when you were teaching him. The man wanted to put the damn things everywhere!

The two of you probably would have continued on through the night, interrupted by only by Dorian’s snide remarks bouncing down from above, if not for an untimely interruption.

The library has long since emptied of all but the most determined worker; even the rotunda is dimmed as you and Solas work by the light of several nearby candles rather than trying to keep the whole room lit up. Solas is watching over your shoulder as you attempt to translate a poem in to Elven. Then the door slams open--really slams, the loud bang makes you jump.

Both you and Solas twist around to see what in the Void is happening, but who you see is the last person you expected.

“Sataareth?” you say, blinking. You haven’t seen him since you arrived in Skyhold--you hadn’t even been sure whether or not he’d been sent out already.

“Your dark elf sent me!” he snaps in Qunlat, before seeming to remember you’re in mixed company,
and then continuing in Common. “The cat is giving birth. He sent me to fetch you and your saarebas.”

You snap back in Qunlat with as little thought as he probably gave in speaking it initially. “I don’t care how much training you’ve been doing with Katari, call him my saarebas one more time and I’ll break you over my--wait, did you say giving birth?”

“Yes! Your sssssSolas is needed, and you should be present, as well. It is your cat.”

You glare at him, both for his not-at-all-subtle save and for calling Asaaranda your cat. “Stop calling things mine! He’s not mine! The cat is not mine! Nothing is mine!” you snap. “But…” You turn to Solas. “There must be complications if Belassan is asking for you. Solas, will you please--”

But Solas is already pulling on his thick, wool-and-fur coat. You yank on the hooded coat Belassan gave you, and the three of your quickly head out into the courtyard.

It’s still pouring freezing rain, because of course it is. Your toes flare with pain from the cold, but quickly grow numb as you splash and crunch—the water is beginning to freeze—across the courtyard.

You immediately realize what one of the problems is when you enter the barn—it’s cold and drafty despite the sheer number of warm bodies inside. Not so cold that a horse would be uncomfortable, but a pregnant cat?

Sataareth leads you towards the back, where you find Belassan and Horsemaster Dennet of all people hunched near Asaaranda. You barely need his help finding her—her yowls let you know where she is as soon as you’re within twenty meters.

“Where is the healing lady from before?” you ask, entering the stall as well. “Shouldn’t she be here?”

“She is providing healing to some of the Chargers’ injured,” Belassan explains. “They can spare no healers for a pregnant cat tonight.” In unison, all four of you turn and look towards Solas. This explains why he was requested. You’re ready to turn on the puppy-dog eyes and start begging, but it turns out to be unnecessary. Without so much as a sigh, Solas enters the stall.

“Who here has actually overseen an animal birth?” Three hands go up. “Sataareth, out of the stall. Who here has actually overseen a feline birth?” Everyone’s hand drops except for Dennet’s. Solas points at you and Belassan. “Out. Emma, go find a small crate of some kind and some clean, unperfumed blankets or towels. Belassan, get that blasted horse out of the next stall; it’s distressing her. Dennet, you’re going to be--” He glances over at you. “Is there a reason you’re still standing there?”

You turn and scurry off. You fetch the crate first—that’s easy enough. Then you bolt across the courtyard to the laundry to get absolutely clean, unperfumed towels and blankets. You put them in the crate to keep them dry as you bolt back across the courtyard. You wish Cole were here. He can fucking teleport. Not you, and you’re also not wearing shoes while running through steadily freezing puddles of water as rain threatens to turn to snow. You’re fairly sure you won’t be able to feel your toes for the rest of the night.

Sataareth is gone when you return. You hand the crate over the stall door to Dennet, then look to see how Asaaranda is doing. She is determinedly licking her crotch, which you suppose is fair enough. After a few licks, she lays down and makes an awful squalling noise, which… is also fair enough. You also note that while it’s still frigid in the barn, Solas has taken his jacket off. A moment’s examination reveals why… he’s placed a fire glyph on the ground to help warm Asaaranda. Impressive. You’re certain if you—or even most mages—tried that, you’d ignite the hay on the floor of
the stable.

“How long has it been?”

“About an hour. We were getting worried, that’s why Belassan decided to send for the two of you.”

Which is of course when it occurs to you that Belassan had operated under the assumption that the two of you would still be together this late at night, still in the rotunda. You don’t know whether to be pleased, embarrassed, or annoyed. In any case, he hadn’t been wrong… Better than him sending Sataareth to Solas’ room, anyway.

“Where’s Sataareth?” you wonder aloud.

“Boiling water,” Solas replies, and you snort.

“Do you actually need that, or did you just do that to get rid of him?”

“It can be both. Emma, get in here and line this crate with blankets. Dennet, hold this towel--”

Solas playing kitty midwife would be an entertaining sight if you weren’t actually kind of worried. Should it be taking her this long? How long do cat labors last? How many kittens could possibly survive the process? And what about her health, if they’re all already dead? You would hate to have prolonged her life, nursed her back to health, dragged her through the Frostbacks, just to have her die here in labor.

“Ah, she’s crowning!” Solas’ exclamation breaks you out of your worries. You glance over to see and--oh ew. Eeeeeewww.

“Is the discharge supposed to be…”

“No,” Solas replies tersely. “She’s in distress… She’s not cleaning the kitten. Dennet--”

“On it,” the Horsemaster says, using a towel to gently grab the tiny, slimy ball that is supposed to be a kitten.

“Emma, get that box ready. Ah, Sataareth, good. Give Emma the water bottle--Emma, put it next to the box.”

“No good,” Dennet says as Asaaranda begins to yowl and strain again. “It’s not breathing… Stillborn.”

You swear under your breath. You’d known that would be the case, but still… part of you had been hoping.

“Keep it to the side. Here comes another-- Ah! She’s cleaning it.” A few terse seconds pass, and then a high pitched, plaintive squeak.

“It’s alive!” you say, stunned.

“A tiny little thing,” Dennet comments. “Looks like they’re all going to be runts.”

“That it lives at all is sheer luck and perseverance, considering what the mother has been through,” Solas points out, before moving the kitten from its mother into the warm, blanketed box you’re holding. “Here comes another.”

The third is stillborn--it’s easy to tell because Asaaranda attempts to eat it once she’s cleaned the
goop off of it. You make a sickened retch, and Dennet quickly pulls the little kitten corpse away from its mother, likely only to spare you. Nature is disgusting.

You’re starting to think the one kitten will be all that survives, but number four proudly squeaks as its mother cleans it off. That one gets bundled up, cleaned off, and then placed into the box with its sibling.

“Is she done?” you wonder. Four is a good number of kittens, isn’t it?

“She’s still contracting--Ah, here comes another,” Solas replies.

The would-be fifth kitten takes only a single weak gasp outside of the womb before passing--not enough strength to survive outside the mother, Solas explains, as Asaaranda lets out more tired wailing. Another tiny, disgusting blob forces its way out of her--you will be quite happy if you never witness another birth--and you’re expecting it will be stillborn as well. That certainly seems the case; the mother ignores it, prompting Dennet to pick it up and clean it himself. Asaaranda is exhausted, but, it seems, finally done birthing kittens. You turn your attention to the two in the box.

“Will they make it?” you ask Solas nervously.

“That remains to be seen,” he replies, which doesn’t comfort you in the least. But then, a tiny squeak catches your ear.

“It’s alive!” you exclaim.

“Not for long,” Dennet says with a sigh. “It’s tiny. Too weak; it’s half dead already.”

You turn your eyes to Solas, gaze wide. “Lethallin--” you begin. Solas sighs.

“Give it here. Dennet, get the mother in with the kittens as soon as she is able. I don’t want to risk them to the cold.”

You hand the box over to Dennet and move to see if you can assist Solas at all--though you’re certain you can’t.

“You realize if this kit survives, it will require near-constant attention for the first week, yes?” Solas says as he runs a glowing finger onto the shaking kitten’s stomach. It looks like a particularly gross molerat, not a kitten, but you suspect you didn’t look too great straight out of the womb, either.

“That is fine,” Belassan says, and you realize he and Sataareth are both watching from the stall door, leaning in to see better. “Sataareth, Dennet, and I, have already discussed who will take what shifts with the kittens. We assumed that if any survived, they would need attentive care.”

“You, Sataareth, and Dennet?” you repeat, genuinely uncertain about which part of that shocks you the most.

“I will likely be leaving Skyhold on my first task within the next few weeks, but until that time, my training has slowed enough to allow me to spend evenings here,” Sataareth explains, though that is not what you were confused by.

“I am simply lucky that the Horsemaster is fond of cats,” Belassan adds.

“Every barn needs a few good mousers,” Dennet says defensively. “Look! They’re nursing!”

You’re not too proud to admit that you join in the cheering.
“How is the littlest one, Solas?” you ask after gazing at the two tiny, nursing bumps, who are being enthusiastically licked by Asaaranda.

“I have done all I can,” Solas says with a sigh. “Who will be taking first watch?”

“That would be me,” Dennet replies.

“Excellent. Watch that all three nurse well. If she neglects the smallest, you may need to pump milk from her, but hopefully that will not be necessary.” Solas stands. “Let us move her some place quieter. Emma--get a shovel or something, clean this.” He says, gesturing to the dirtied hay.

He leaves with Dennet as Belassan quietly chuckles, likely at the disgruntled look on your face.

“Worry not, Emma,” Belassan assures you. “I will clean the stall. Why don’t you take the opportunity to catch up with your Vashoth friend? He mentioned it had been some time.”

“Thank you, Belassan.” Normally you wouldn’t risk disobeying Solas on something so minor, but you’re fairly certain he only ordered you to do it because you were there. And you badly want to talk to Sataareth. Belassan fetches a pitchfork, and you and Sataareth walk to a more quiet corner of the stables.

“So… You’ve been training with Katari?”

“Do not strain yourself trying not to sound disapproving, Valo-Kas,” he says wryly.

“Is it so obvious?” you say with a chuckle.

“Yes,” he replies. “But I understand… the two of you are… I’m not sure what the Common word is. Vehlalit-an.”

You can’t help but laugh at the absurdity. “I think you’re giving me a bit too much credit. I’m probably more like an extremely mouthy gnat.”

“You challenged Katari’s authority on several occasions,” Sataareth points out.

“Yes, and he couldn’t run me through because it was literally his job not to. But enough, I didn’t come to argue with you about him. You said you’ll be sent out soon?”

“Yes, with Katari and a few other elite. I suspect we will be gone for… months.”

You’re surprised by the sensation of sinking in your chest. “Oh.” You pause for a moment, then clear your throat. “Well, I’m glad you’re finding a place, at any rate. Even if it is an odd one, with a Tal-Vashoth and some kittens,” you add.

“You and your--” You cut him off with a glare. “The saare--”

“Third try’s the charm.”

“The elf,” Sataareth says finally, rolling his dark eyes. “You were together quite late at night.”

“Yeah, and you were in the stables making plans with an elf and a human,” you say brattily. “You don’t see me giving you a hard time over it.”

“Saarebas of any kind are dangerous, Valo-kas,” Sataareth warns you. “It is unwise to--”

“If you finish that sentence, Sataareth, I will demonstrate for you how the Iron Bull taught me to ride
a Qunari’s horns,” you say with a glare. “You’ve finally put on enough muscle that I could jump on without causing you to tip over, I bet.”

Sataareth grins. “It is good to talk to you again, Valo-kas.”

“Yeah,” you admit, leaning back against a stall. “I think I’ll miss you when you’re gone, Sataareth. Hopefully we run into each other in the stables… and… let me know before you leave?”

Sataareth nods. “I will. And I will write, while I am gone. The other soldiers all write to people. I believe it will help me… fit in.”

“I’d like that. I’ll write back.”

A moment of pleasant silence is shared then, only to be interrupted by a pained yelp from Horsemaster Dennet. “Blasted cat! I’m trying to help!”
Sorry this chapter is a day late. ~Drama~ kept me from finishing it on time, but here it is, in all its elvhen glory.

Watching Dennet interact with the cats is more than amusing to you. But the night is only getting colder as it gets later. You have a freezing room to return to, probably as cold as or colder than the barn. You have to pretend to sleep after all, or Solas will get cross with you.

Ugh.

Solas seems to remember this as well as you're standing by the exit, sullenly eyeing the freezing rain. He comes to stand next to you.

"Heading to bed?" he inquires.

"Yes, yes. No need to nag me," you say with a sigh. "I'm just dreading walking through all this wet. I'll be soaked and freezing by the time I get to my room..."

"Perhaps I can be of assistance?" he asks. You turn to him, confused, but then note that the rain in front of you appears to be splattering and rolling over an invisible barrier. You hadn't even noticed him cast.

"This is... what you used in Val Royeaux?" you ask in wonder, stepping out underneath it and then reaching up. It's quite wide. "And for the books, on the way back."

"Yes," Solas replies, stepping under it with you. "It's a simple enough spell, though maintaining it that large for that long was... trying."

You feel a stab of guilt. Just remembering the state of him is enough to cause anxiety to course through your chest. Your fault, your--

"I thought I would make up for leaving you to run through the rain in Val Royeaux," he says with a chuckle. "Lead the way."

You run your hands along the bottom of the spell for a while longer, until Solas laughs. "Are you hoping to discover how to do it yourself, using just your hands?"

You snort. "Oh, let me be. You mages don't get it; this stuff is mind-blowing to anyone else. You can summon a magical umbrella and it's blasé to you, sure, but some people go their entire lives without ever even seeing a mage."

"If it interests you so much, I could explain the theory to you sometime," Solas says.

"Really? That would be--oh," You realize as you drop your gaze to him: he had been joking. "That's the sort of thing I'm supposed to laugh of as being boring, isn't it?"
"Or a waste of your time," Solas agrees. "I suppose I should have known better. Do you intend to spend the rest of the night examining the spell?"

"No, but only because I know you'd scold me if I said yes," you reply, then stick your tongue out. "I won't say no to dry passage, though. I've already lost all feeling in my damn toes."

"A poor time to experiment with footwear," Solas agrees, glancing down. You cover one foot with the other, as if that will somehow hide your state of dress.

"I didn't know it was going to rain. Or freeze. Or that I'd have to run through it multiple times," you grumble.

"Did you dress this way because of your morning riding lesson with Belassan?" Solas asks as you begin to make your way across the courtyard. He follows alongside you, and the magic follows above. You can't help but stare up at it, watching the water spatter against and pour over the invisible surface.

"It's his coat," you say, plucking at one of the sleeves of Belassan's jacket. "But other than that, it has nothing to do with him. ...Other than that I assumed you two would be the only people I'd see all day, and that neither of you would give me shit for dressing the way I wanted." You sigh. "I got nice clothes in Val Royeaux, you know, but I wind up wearing the same sort of outfit day in and day out for work. I thought I'd wear something a bit nicer for my day off."

"A reasonable decision," Solas agrees. “Though you spent much of the day writing anyway.”

You laugh. “That was scribbling. If it's not a formal script, it barely counts. And besides, thanks to that fancy quill of yours, I didn't have to worry about dipping my sleeve in the ink.”

“Fancy quill of yours,” Solas reminds you. "If it was so useful in just your lessons, I imagine it will be infinitely moreso in your actual work.”

“It will,” you agree, eyeing him. “It's much more useful than my gift to you. And more expensive.”

Solas waves away your concerns… literally. He flips his wrist casually. “It was nothing, I assure you. And your gift was...” His eyes flick away, down to the side, as he pauses. “Very generous,” he says finally.

You don't believe him, not for an instant, but you wish you could get him to understand that if it were true, that would be almost more alarming. Who just throws around that sort of money? No apostate hobo, that's for damn sure! But you can't decide this is more evidence that he once lived a comfortable life, or…

Something else.

If Solas notices you're taking a winding route to avoid puddles, he doesn't comment on it. He's as barefoot as you, after all, and while he probably has some ridiculous spell to keep his feet comfortable, dry, and clean, you sure don't.

You move the conversation off of gifts, if just to spare both of you further embarrassment… and because the thought of what an expensive gift like that might mean is enough to send your heart pounding into your ears. Instead, you switch the subject back to Elven… something you can both talk about for hours with absolutely no complaints, according to the events of the day.

You duck into the hallway containing your room, and are somewhat surprised when Solas enters the doorway as well. You'd assumed he'd just walk you to the building... Does he want to make sure
you actually go to bed, or just that you get there in one piece? Ah, no, he’s just continuing the conversation, lecturing on about verb tense. He probably doesn’t even realize where he is. He certainly doesn’t seem to, not until you open your bedroom door and pause in the doorway. He stops behind you when you do, and glances around, seeming to notice his surroundings for the first time.

You take another step into the room and pause. You almost want to invite him in. Is that where this is going? You’ve been in his room and nothing bad happened. But your room is… well…

“They have you in a closet,” Solas says, knocking you out of your thoughts.

You laugh. “It does feel like that, doesn’t it?”

“No, I think this is literally a closet,” Solas replies, leaning in slightly to glance around. “Or was, in any case. It’s certainly a bedroom now.”

“All the rooms adjacent are bigger,” you admit. “But they also have at minimum, two people in them. If anything, I lucked out.”

“I suppose there’s much to be said for privacy,” Solas agrees, and you feel heat rising to your cheeks while he continues on, blissfully unaware of where your mind is. “But it makes me consider all the space the Inquisition has wasted on me, with such a large private room…”

“Maker someone make him stop.”

“I really don’t mind,” you say quickly, before he continues to ruminate on all that space he has, all alone, and such a large bed! or whatever oblivious nonsense he was going to torment you with next. “I don’t need much space. I wouldn’t mind a place for a wardrobe of some kind, or an armoire, even just a set of drawers… But really, this is quite… You hesitate to say sufficient when there’s cold air seeping in from the tiny, prison-esque window even now. “Adequate.”

“A wardrobe indeed,” he says with a short laugh. “I understand now why you store all of your books in the library. Where are you even hiding all the clothing you purchased in Val Royeaux?”

“Under the bed,” you say with a snort. “Like a dirty secret. It’s not like I ever get to wear it, other than today.”

Solas gets a slightly odd look on his face, and you wonder what he’s thinking about, but it’s gone as quickly as it came on.

“I should let you rest,” he begins, but you cut him off.

“Look, Solas, before you go…” You clear your throat awkwardly. Best to just get it over with. “I wanted to thank you, seriously… For the Elven.”

“It’s not nothing!” you exclaim, interrupting him. “You might think it is, but it’s not! And not just that, I mean, there’s the kittens, and, and even just Asaaranda in the first place, keeping the books dry, saving my life twice in those fights…” You trail off, suddenly a bit overwhelmed by the sheer number of things he’s done for you. Revas. Comforting you after every battle, during every breakdown in Val Royeaux, large or small. For having your back when it came to Sataareth, even though he was clearly upset you’d gone behind his. “You’ve--” Your voice cracks. You glance up, expecting his normal, neutral face, or even a bit of embarrassment at the situation.

His eyes are a bit wide, but he doesn’t look upset or embarrassed. If anything, he looks a bit…
“You’ve been looking out for me. I don’t know why, but I… appreciate it,” you say finally.

“It is…” he pauses, and seems to reconsider what he was about to say, which was almost certainly going to be ‘it is nothing.’ “You are welcome.”

There’s another moment where you just sort of stare at him. Your breath hitches in your chest, and you take a nervous step forward. The gift, and all the things he’s done for you, and then he walked you to your room… Are you reading this wrong? Surely you are. But he knows you’re interested, in Val Royeaux, he…

You take another half step towards him, tucking your arms behind your back almost in reflex to not reach out and grab him. You can’t do that, you can’t, he--

He clears his throat. “Goodnight, Emma.”

He turns, and he’s gone, down the hallway and back out into the courtyard. That fast.

You’re left standing in your doorway, feeling like a complete and total idiot.

Thank the Maker you didn’t actually make a move. You wouldn’t have, you remind yourself, but in that moment you probably also wouldn’t have stopped him if he had, which was almost just as bad. Fortunately—as you already knew—he’s not interested in you that way. And it’s honestly for the best. You can’t afford any complications like that right now! That’s why you hadn’t involved yourself with Sera, and part of why you had turned down Krem. It’s good that one of the two of you has some self-control and sense.

So why do you feel so shitty about it?

--

You sulk on your bed in the freezing cold, but you’re kept from being too terribly frozen just by the number of blankets you pile on top of yourself. You sleep, a little, out of sheer exhaustion, and have fretful nightmares throughout the night, seemingly every time you drift off even for a minute. Vague snippets of backs turned and doors closed. Dogs chasing you in the night through a strange, black city. Curtains slipping shut as strange eyes peer out at you and deem you unworthy to hide in their homes.

All in all, it’s not very restful, and when you finally roll out of bed into the frozen pre-dawn air, you’re in a foul mood. After dressing, you take one of your old, ratty undershirts and—with some doing—fashion yourself a make-shift cover for your tiny window. It keeps out the worst of the wind. There’s not much else you can do for the chill, but at least you can try and keep it from seeping in from outside so quickly. It’s only going to get colder from here.

Outside is the picture of winter coming to fight off autumn once and for all. You cringe as you step out into the icy air. As you suspected, the water on the ground froze overnight and the lower sections of ground have a sheen of ice over them. You stick carefully to the raised paths, not wanting to slip on the ice and injure yourself. Bull is already in your little practice area, cracking the ice with a long stick to ensure it’s safe.

“No day off for terrible weather?” you grumble, rubbing your arms despite the fact they’re clad in Belassan’s coat.

“Not unless you can’t take the cold,” Bull informs you. “You’ve got a lot less muscle mass than I do to keep you warm, but you’re wearing a shirt.”
“No one’s stopping you from putting on a shirt,” you say smartly. “In fact, most of Skyhold would thank you. Someone could put their eye out on one of your nipples at this point.”

“You’re right about at eye level there too,” Iron Bull notes, placing the flat of his hand on top of your head and then bringing it to his chest.

“Yeah, it’s a hazard,” you say dryly. “For my personal safety, I feel like I should be allowed to go inside where it’s warm and erect-nipple free.”

“I dunno, I feel like if you and Solas are in the same room, there’s gonna be some erect--” Bull catches your leg about three centimeters away from his side as you swing into a swift kick. “Oh, I didn’t realize we’d started.”

As always, attempting and partially succeeding at causing the Iron Bull some pain and indignation does make you feel a little bit better. It’s nice to have someone you can take out your frustrations on, and you’ll admit you’re thinking of your entourage of Mixed Message Elves when you land a kick directly onto Bull’s stomach like you’re trying to kick down a door.

Bull always manhandles you worse, though, so you’re filthy and half--no strike that, completely--frozen by the time the two of you are done. You make your excuses and head to the human baths to clean and change into your work clothes. The colder it gets, the less willing you are to use the elven baths, since the water is significantly hotter here in the human woman zone. You really need to do something about that, but you haven’t quite figured out a plan for it yet.

You skip breakfast again--there’s no one here to stop you--and instead swing by the healing tent and beg your way in to see Krem again. You have to hear his side of things after seeing how pissed off and wet Dorian was.

“Hey, Krem-puff, you not dead yet?” you say by way of a greeting as you come around the separator that keeps him sectioned off from the other injured.

“Ugh, you sound like the boss,” Krem says with a groan and a laugh. “You’re pranking like him, too. Pickled fish, Emma, really?”

You grin. “Yeah, but it wasn’t perfect. I didn’t get to see either of your faces.”

“I was just damn confused until I realized you must have put him up to it. He looked a bit horrified until I asked him if he knew any red-headed elves, then he just looked pissed… and really embarrassed.” Krem snorts.

“Aaah, I wish I could have seen it! He stormed straight into the rotunda and slammed them down on the desk!” you laugh, shifting to sit down next to Krem’s cot. “Totally worth it.”

“Getting out all the pranks you wish you could’ve pulled back when you lived there?”

“Absolutely. And Dorian has just enough guilt to let me get away with it. If I pulled any of this shit on you--”

“I’d kick your ass,” Krem says, and you both laugh.

--

After catching up with Krem, you finally head into the rotunda to get to work. If Solas noticed you were practically begging for him to come into your room last night, he doesn’t act it. Thank the Maker one of you has some fucking decorum, because you, apparently, are a shameless hussy who
doesn’t know how to take no for an answer. You settle in at your desk to start work, but are immediately thrown when you see the magical quill there on your desk. Of course it would be, but… You just stare at it for several minutes, much longer than is reasonable. It makes you happy and it makes you sad, a chaotic churning of emotion in your chest that makes you feel like you’ve got a deepstalker in there, chewing its way out through your sternum.

Well, whatever his reasons for getting the thing, it’s yours now, and you can’t deny it will be useful. You work slowly at first, feeling out the different strokes of the quill, but once you’ve got the hang of it, you’re flying through the pages. You keep pausing and going to dip it in ink before remembering that you don’t have to—years of muscle memory are throwing you. You actually use up all its ink and have to let it refill several times before lunch, but it only takes about a minute to slowly pull the ink back up into its compartment. The tingling feel of magic in the air as it does so is enchanting, no pun intended. It’s like a combination quill and toy.

You would have kept working through lunch if not for your candle reminding you of the time. Thank the Maker for candles. You knew some people who stick nails in them so that when they got down to a certain point, the nail would fall and make a loud clanking noise. You used to do it yourself, but you think that would probably annoy Solas.

You fetch lunch and share it with Solas. It’s very easy to just pretend like last night never happened, especially since the whole thing was in your head, and then just you beating yourself up about it. Since the two of you got pulled away yesterday, he takes the opportunity to give you some Elven “homework” to do between lessons.

“There isn’t very much to do,” you comment to yourself as he hands you, essentially, a list of words.

“That is because, though you may have forgotten, you have a job,” Solas points out. “You already take on far too much as it is. If I gave you more to do, even if I stressed that it was optional, you would do it at the detriment of time you should be using to rest.”

You make a face, but you can’t say much since… well, he’s right. You’re desperate to learn, and you would absolutely shove everything else to the side to do every little bit of Elven he gave you. And since he’s finally teaching you, you don’t want to push it.

Instead of getting back to work after lunch, or delving straight into the elven, you head for the barn after returning your dishes to the kitchen. It takes a bit of hunting, but you find the kittens—and Belassan—in the back, in one of the empty stalls. He glances up when you approach, and smiles.

“Come to see how the kittens are?”

“I wanted to see if they lived through the night,” you admit. “How are they doing?”

“The smallest is struggling, but the mother is letting him feed, so we’re hopeful.” He gestures for you to come into the stall. You do, and squat down next to him. The crate in the stall is obviously where Asaaranda and her kittens are. It’s covered completely with numerous thick blankets, and he lifts one slightly off the top so that you can peek in. Asaaranda glares up at you and lets out a sullen yowl.

“They’re already so fluffy,” you marvel. “I thought they would be naked for some reason.”

“Thankfully, no,” Belassan says with a chuckle. “Hard to say now, but judging by their mother, I would guess they’ll all have thick coats when they’re older. Good, considering how cold it gets here.”

“How long will their eyes be closed?” you ask, squinting. “They look like furry deepcrawlers, not
cats."

“About a week.”

“And the littlest one, he’ll make it?”

“Hard to tell,” Belassan admits. “I have to move him right to a teet to get him to nurse, and it’s hit or miss. He’s weak and requires near-constant attention. We may need to have Solas come out to take another look at him.”

“Are they all boys?”

“Two boys and a girl.”

You pepper Belassan with questions while you watch the useless, squirming masses that, you’re assured, are in fact kittens. You would volunteer to help take care of them, but that sort of defeats the point of making other people do it in the first place. You did your part when you dragged Asaaranda out of that log and nursed her back to health on the way to Skyhold. Solas is right—you take on a lot as it is. You need to focus on your work and your studies. But when you reach in to touch one of the kittens and Asaaranda doesn’t maul your hand to shreds… you have to admit, it’s a good feeling.

You leave the barn with the intent to head back to the rotunda, but being on this side of Skyhold, you can’t help swinging by your other pet project… the farm. It’s only been a few days since the Goat Incident, but it seems like people are already getting used to the presence of the mini-farm. You recognize several of the ex-slaves tending the area, including several children half caring for, half playing with the goats.

“S’kinda nice, innit?” A familiar voice says, and you turn to see Sera, approaching to lean against the fence the way you are. “Reminds me of the way some of the folks in Denerim used to keep goats in their backyards.”

“We used to sneak into the enclosures and milk them right into cups to drink,” you chuckle.

“They would come out with brooms, screechin’! ‘Get away from my goat you lil brats!’”

“And we’d duck and scurry away…”

“But you bet your ass we’d never spill a drop of that milk!”

“Some things never change,” you say, pointing. One of the kids is lying under one of the goats while another tries to milk the goat directly into his mouth. The sound of their giggles echoes across the courtyard and buoys your mood.

“Kids are kids. Doesn’t matter where you are. I bet they have giant horned kids up in Seheron or wherever, and I bet they still milk goats and run away from brooms.”

You chuckle. “They’re not born with the horns, actually,” you say, tapping your forehead. “They grow in as they age.”

“That makes sense,” Sera admits. “I was feelin’ kinda sorry for the ladies. Though, thinkin’ about it, I bet they lose… woof.”

“That’s a word for it, I suppose. I guess a lot of people have never seen a female Qunari, since the soldiers are all men. If you go to Rivain, though, you can find groups of Vashoth living together. There are women there.” You avoided them like the plague, of course, but you had seen one or two
women from a distance. They were tall, grey, and horned. That was all you really needed to know.

“Maybe I should visit Rivain when this is all over…”

You can’t help laughing. “You would hate it! They’re a lot more lax about magic there then they are here in the south.”

“They’ve still got Circles, though,” Sera points out.

“They did,” you say darkly. “In Dairsmuid. But the cultural attitudes are different. The mages could travel freely, they kept traditions of magic that weren’t necessarily Chantry-approved alive. They were annulled last year.” You can’t hear the children’s laughter anymore.

“You know a lot of stuff about magic.”

“I used to do work for them,” you say simply. “And I used to live in Rivain.”

“Where didn’t you used t’live?” Sera asks with a snort. “Yer more well-traveled than I am, I think!”

“Nah, I’ve barely been to Ferelden at all,” you say with a laugh. “Just Denerim, when I was little. And I’ve never been to the Anderfels.”

“Who has? Nothing there but dust and Wardens.”

“Good food, though.”

“Yer literally the only person who thinks that.”

“They make a very interesting cactus salsa,” comes yet another familiar voice. “Come to check on the farm, Emma?”

“Hello, Fenris,” you say, straightening up off the fence. “I thought I’d see how it was. Are they settling in okay?”

“The people, or the goats?” he asks with a chuckle.

“Both, I suppose.”

“The goats are taking to it faster, but the sudden frost last night is giving them something to do. Have you spoken to anyone about getting more animals?”

“Lady Montiliyet, briefly. I think we can expect some within the next few weeks.”

“Well, I can see you two have shop t’talk,” Sera says, a bit sarcastically.

“Oh, sorry, Sera. Have you met Fenris?”

“I don’t believe so,” says Fenris. “I’m pleased to meet you. Are you a friend of Emma’s?”

“Sure am. Weird tats. They Dalish?” Her voice is slightly wary, but you feel like rolling your eyes. They don’t look Dalish at all. But he must get that a lot, he answers smoothly.

“No, they’re lyrium.”

“Lyrium?” Sera says, taking a step backwards.

“He’s not going to explode, Sera,” you say dryly.
“Why’d you get lyrium tattoos? You a mage or something?”

“No, they were seared into my flesh by my Tevinter owner, who is now dead,” Fenris says flatly. Sera blinks, then looks to you.

“Ohhh, is that how you know him?”

You can’t help but laugh. “No, Varric introduced us.” This was a bit surreal. But at least they weren’t fighting. It would be nice if some of your elf friends actually got along. Solas and Belassan were polite but cold to each other, Fenris and Solas were a disaster waiting to happen, Sera and Solas were a disaster that happened regularly, Sera wouldn’t even go near Belassan… You felt like strangling each of them in turn, sometimes.

“So, do they hurt, or…” You take a half-step back as Fenris and Sera continue to converse. No explosions, no shouting. A few dumb questions on Sera’s end, but totally understandable. It’s not like she’s seen anything like this, or knows his history from reading Varric’s books. And Fenris is handling it well… he probably has answered these exact questions a hundred times over.

“So you’re from Tevinter, huh? I wonder if Dorian--”

“Hey, Sera!” you interject quickly. “What happened to training, anyway? We haven’t done a single thing that broke any of my limbs since I got back!”

Sera perks up, immediately distracted. “I figured you were too busy now! You haven’t stopped movin’ all week.”

“I’m never too busy for you, Sera,” you begin, but when she fixes you with a withering look, you reconsider. “Well… Except for all the times I, uh… have been.” Fortunately, she laughs.

“Well, I’ll have to put somethin’ together then. Somethin’ that doesn’t involve high up places,” she adds with a shudder.

“But we love high places,” you point out.

“Yeah, and you love fallin’ off of them. We’ll go underground next time!”

“We could go to the Undercroft.”

“There’s a giant cliff!”

“I’m sensing several interesting stories,” Fenris comments.

“Oi, Maker, she falls off of everything. Walls, buildings…”

“Mostly walls,” you interject.

“And always while I’m there!”

“You make me feel like I can fly, Sera.”

“And she always does that!”

“Classic deflection,” Fenris notes. “Varric does it every time you try to ask him a serious question.”

“You know, I came out here to have a good time,” you begin dryly, only to have Sera cut you off.
“Oh, go feed a goat! They like flyin’ through the air too, no wonder you get along.”

“Actually, I should probably get back to the rotunda,” you admit with a sigh. “Leliana is leaning on me a bit to finish the transcript.”

“I was wondering why you work in there,” Fenris admits, and Sera snorts, between derisive and irritated.

“Wouldn’t we all like t’know.”

“It’s quiet,” you say, eyeing her sourly.

“It’s elfy.”

“We are three elves talking near a farm run entirely by elves, Sera.”

“And no one had to point it out!”

“You’re the one who brought up elves!”

“You’re the one expectin’ us to believe you’re in there for the quiet!

Fenris clears his throat awkwardly. “Ah, I heard you were learning elven from the apostate, Solas. Is that why…”

“You’re learnin’ what now?”


Sera frowns. “I thought you already knew that stuff, anyway.”

“Not as well as Solas. And yes, Fenris, that’s partially why. I’ve been after him to teach me for months now,” you admit.

Sera rolls her eyes. “See? Elfy. Why d’you even wanna learn that stuff, anyway?”

“It’s my job!”

“How many old elf manuscripts you come across? They’re all dead!”

You stiffen. A sharp, cruel retort dies on your tongue. “There’s nothing wrong with knowledge for its own sake,” you say, finally. “And speaking of my job, I need to actually do it.” You spin around with only a nod to Fenris, and storm off towards the rotunda.

Chapter End Notes

I now have a Twitter to help people keep up to date with updates, delays, etc. Ten years and I finally give in to the looming blue bird. I barely know how to use it, so don’t expect a lot of tweets; I’m mostly just using it because people keep missing Tumblr announcements.
BOY HOWDY this one was a long time coming, huh? For those of you who don't follow my Tumblr or Twitter, basically: bigots, broken AC, broken internet, broken limb, visiting family, horrifying nightmares, in that order. \o/ Wow! What a series of misadventures. __. (Take me out back and shoot me like a dog with rabies.)

ANYWAY hopefully we won't see too many more delays as I attempt to drag myself desperately back into the saddle. Thanks so much for your patience! Even if you don't have a Tumblr, I suggest you drop by my [links page](#) for a convenient listing of everywhere I am, all in one place! Bookmark it~ <3

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**Elven Translation**

El falon tel'dirth. El emma tu harel? = Our friend doesn't understand. Should we trick him?

Ena varel = that seems excessive

Vel, hahlin = yes, sir

atisha’hamin = have peaceful dreams (essentially "good night")

Ma mana! = you stop! (sort of like, "will you stop?!")

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You’re in such a foul mood when you re-enter the rotunda. You see Solas glance up, as if he’s about to say something to you, and then immediately stop. You storm over to your desk, slam yourself onto your chair so hard that the legs skip across the stone, and fume as you begin to work again.

Is it so fucking wrong that you want to learn more about the lost elven heritage?! Is it so fucking wrong that you’d like to improve yourself in whatever ways possible, given that you’ve no possible chance of ever measuring up to what was? Is it so fucking wrong that you want to know?!

You don’t know what the hell Sera’s problem is. Maybe it really is just with Solas. They really don’t seem to like each other. But if that’s so, she needs to stop taking it out on you. You should be able to be friends with two elves without getting caught up in some kind of freakin’ grudge match. Solas never looked particularly cheerful when you ran off with Sera in the past, either, come to think of it, but that could be for any number of reasons.

You work out your anger on your tome for a while, just sulking and working to avoid snapping at someone who doesn’t deserve it… namely Solas, since he’s the only one in the blast radius. You’re a bit calmer by the time dinner rolls around, but your mood is still pretty sour. You had been having a really good time with Sera and Fenris. Nothing was exploding or anything. Why did she have to go and get all weird about elves again?

You fetch dinner for you and Solas but, you have to admit, you’re not feeling too talkative. It seems Solas isn’t either, however… he’s still nose-deep in the book he’s reading. So you just grab one of your own books and read while eating as well. It’s peaceful. Despite the fact you’re sitting at the desk, both of you are eating and reading without feeling the need for forced conversation. Mornings with Thea--or whomever happens to be in the mess--you’re often forced to make small talk even when you’d rather just eat your damn gruel in peace.
“I can’t decide if this is awkward or adorable,” comes Dorian’s voice from above. You glance up to see him leaning on the overhang’s railing. “Thea, darling, help me out here, what am I looking at?”

“People better suited to being in a library than you,” Thea’s voice echoes down from somewhere above.

“Not all of us feel the need to fill every waking moment with senseless prattle, Dorian,” Solas says mildly, not looking up from his reading.

“Even if we did want a constant running background of chatter, we wouldn’t need to say a word. Not with you so nearby,” you add.

“It’s true. Why listen to yourselves talk when you could listen my luxurious voice instead?” Dorian agrees.

You roll your eyes to the heavens. Then an idea strikes you. You’re not sure if Solas will play along, but it’s worth a shot. “El falon tel’dirth. El emma tu harel?” you ask, a light smile on your lips.

Solas’ face remains completely neutral, save for a single raised eyebrow. Your answer, however, comes in the form of his words, short, simple and smooth Elven. “Ena varel.”

Dorian, of course, reacts exactly as you knew he would. “Wait, what? What are you two saying?”

“But you know how these Tevinters are, you continue, awkwardly slipping a word of Common into the Elven, both because you don’t know the Elven word for Tevinter (was there even one? Did they differentiate between shemlen back then?) and because you want Dorian to understand. “They think everything is about them.”

“I heard Tevinter!” Dorian exclaims. “What are you saying?”

“Is the reason you wished to learn the language simply to taunt our friend?” Solas asks mildly. You’re pretty sure that’s what he said, anyway. You missed the exact verb he used, but it was probably something like taunt, given the context.

“Can’t it be a benefit?”

“I’m leaving now!” Dorian announced huffily. “I won’t be party to your petty mind games!”

“How many times have you done that to someone, and in how many different languages?” asks Solas, in Common, after Dorian storms off.

“I couldn’t even begin to count,” you reply with a smile.

--

Though you doubt it was his intent, Dorian’s antics cheered you up a great deal. But your enchantment has long since worn off and you’re honestly a bit fatigued, so rather than go back to work, you curl up on Solas’ couch with some of your books. You surround yourself with both the little bit of Elven he just gave you and a few work books. If he thinks you won’t spend every spare moment on Elven just because he didn’t give you much, he’s sorely mistaken. You once spent the better part of a week on a single recovered paragraph. However he obtained his knowledge, yours primarily came from hard work, dedication, and sheer, single-minded obsession.

You lie on your back, shoes carelessly discarded by the side of the couch, bare toes curling into the cushions. You will never stop appreciating and loving this couch. Some days it feels like Solas has
given you a hundred things and helped you in a hundred ways. You don’t know if you should try to keep it mind or try to bury it, lest you be overwhelmed by his generosity and do something as stupid... as you had last night.

You have your new quill with you, because you can actually take it away from the ink jar and still write. The possibilities are sort of endless, actually. You tap it idly against the page, and are astounded when a bead of ink stains the paper.

“Andraste’s tits!” you exclaim, no doubt startling Solas. “This thing can write upside down?” You give an experimental scribble. *It totally can.* “Wow, this really *is* magic.”

You hear a chuckle and the scrape of a chair leg against the stone floor of the rotunda. “The ink is stored in a reservoir inside the pen. The enchantment pushes the ink out to the tip of the quill steadily.”

“But upwards? That’s incredible,” you murmur, still distracted by scribbling. It’s only when a slight shadow casts over you that you realize Solas has come to stand next to the couch and is, in fact, squatting down to be on a more even level with you.

“I hadn’t even thought to attempt to write while upside down,” he says mildly. “Clearly, my decision to give it to you was a sound one.”

“Glad to provide you with sound research particulars,” you say, and you’re not even being sarcastic. Honestly, you would be happier if you could convince yourself that was why he gave you the enchanted quill. Everything else is too confusing to think about.

Solas watches for a few moments as you scribble upside down, mostly just in awe of the quill. He explains a little more about the enchantment as you try to adjust your hand to the new writing position… it’s remarkably awkward, and your writing looks more like chicken scratch than it has in years. Solas pauses mid-explanation, however, when he realizes what you’re scribbling.

“Are you already working on the Elven I gave you?”

“Of course,” you say with a snort. “I couldn’t leave it alone for any longer if I wanted to; I get twitchy when there’s knowledge nearby. Like a Mabari near squirrels.”

“That… is an amusing yet apt description,” Solas says, with a slight shake of his head. “I wonder how likely it is that you pester me for more before your next lesson?”

“I’ll try to refrain… emphasis on try,” you reply. “I don’t want to make a nuisance of myself.”

Solas snorts, loud enough that you look over, eyebrows raised. “Forgive me, but if you’d taken that stance sooner, I doubt you would be here in the first place.”

You don’t whether to laugh or cry… especially considering that he’s right. You had essentially set out to annoy or charm him into giving you what you wanted--whatever worked. You’re still not sure which of the two you managed.

--

Solas goes back to his desk, and you go back to your reading. You get caught up in the Elven, very much so, time slipping by without so much as a glance upwards from you. You don’t notice the rotunda getting darker and darker, don’t even notice that the candle by your desk--the one whose light you’re writing by--is the last lit candle in the room. Not until it’s blown out as well, a sudden puff of air sending you careening into darkness and finally startling you out of your studies.
Your eyes adjust quickly, as elf eyes are wont to do, and you glance up to see what caused your sudden plunge into near pitch blackness. What you see, however, is two eyes like yours, glinting like a cat’s in the dark. Only the shape of them—narrower by far than the elven eyes you’ve grown accustomed to seeing—makes your mind go to Solas. Every other part of you splits off to different memories: Banal’ras in the dark alleyways and rooftops of Val Royeaux; late nights in the Alienage, where superior elven sight meant darker streets after sundown; secret lessons in hidden corners of the fortress in Seheron, a dozen wide, reflective eyes mirroring yours as you gave lessons on letters by candlelight.

“Is that the best way of getting my attention?” you ask, finally finding your voice.

“Yes, given that you were not responding to your name.” Solas’ voice ought to sound the same, you reason, but it’s different in the dark. It fills the space around you, echoing softly in the empty tower. The only other sounds—and the only other light—trickles down so softly from Leliana’s spy perch far above that it might as well not exist at all. “I believe we had a deal regarding your sleep schedule that you’re beginning to neglect.”

You sigh. He’s right, of course. “My apologies, Solas. I got caught up reading.” You stand from the couch and place your quill back in its holder on your desk… no need for light, you can see well enough for that. You’ve turned to head out of the rotunda when—to your shock—Solas’ hand on your wrist stops you.

You freeze as if your entire body has been paralyzed, his touch like a poison locking your muscles in place. You make no attempt to fight or protest when Solas’ other hand removes the papers—the ones on Elven, that he’d given you—from your grip. “Leave these here,” he says firmly.

Were it light enough for him to see the details of your expression, you would grin sheepishly to hide your fluster, as if he’d caught you with your hand in the cookie jar. But your eyesight is not good enough to see his expression, therefore his is not good enough to see yours, and you let your face show genuine emotion in that darkness, eyes wide, confused, questioning... Frustrated. Solas is not Sera—he does not let his hands casually brush against yours, he does not sit thigh-to-thigh with you on rooftops. You can never interpret his touch.

You swallow—both the lump in your throat and your confused, unreadable emotions—and when you can trust your voice, you say, “Vel, hahlin.”

Solas’ grip tightens on your wrist, almost spasmodically, then snaps away, leaving only the ghost of warmth on your skin as proof it was ever there. You hear the padding of bare feet on stone as he takes the papers and places them on his desk—not yours. You wouldn’t dare come back for them after he told you to leave them so firmly, but doubly so with them on his desk... which he no doubt knows.

He heads for the door first, and you watch the outline of his shoulders in the dark, unwilling to drown out the gentle sounds of his feet on the floor with your own booted footsteps. He hesitates at the door frame, however, and the last works that echo through the rotunda that night are atisha’hamin. First from his lips, then from yours.

--

You’re glad for morning practice with Iron Bull to brutalize the traces of Solas’ voice—which echoed from the rotunda and all the way into your dreams that night—clean out of you. And brutalize it does… with Krem still in the healing tent, fighting to recover from a wound that could have killed, a new volunteer has been drafted into service. The one beating you this morning will not be the Iron Bull, but Skinner.
It’s a clever ploy you don’t fully comprehend until it’s already happening. You could never accept Bull swinging his sledgehammer-like fists at you… the very thought is enough to send you into a panic. But Skinner, who is several inches shorter than you and with whom you have much in common? You don’t even realize he’s sneaking being punched into your education until your hands are closing around Skinner’s fists, the most basic of basic blocks.

Dalish is there as well, although she’s not participating. You rarely see her and Skinner that far apart, so you’re not particularly surprised. She mostly serves to shout encouragement to each of you in turn. Mostly at you, since you definitely need more of the encouragement. Krem was easy to fluster and never wanted to hurt you, and Bull was always extremely cautious not to deal you any serious injury with his significantly larger bulk. Skinner? Yeah, not so much. You caught one faster than average punch just because had you not, she would have creamed you right in the jaw. You scowl at her.

“Skinner, I’m sure Bull appreciates your enthusiasm, but if I come into that rotunda with a black eye, neither of us will live to see tomorrow.”

“Has our apostate gotten that protective of you?” Bull says, his voice teasing.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” you mutter under your breath, then quickly block another blow from Skinner.

“Ma mana!” you snap at her.

“That won’t work on me,” she says dryly.

“Your accent is weird,” Dalish comments through the dried, cracker-like bread she’s chewing on.

“I don’t want to hear that from you,” you retort.

“True, you’d much rather hear it from Solas, eh?” is her response. You glare at her for a beat too long and catch a blow from Skinner on the shoulder.

“Ow, fuck!”

“Get good enough to learn counters and maybe you’ll get to hit me back.”

“I’d rather hit Dalish, right now,” you say with a scowl.

“Maybe I can have her come in here eventually,” Bull suggests. “Help you practice against--”

“Bows?” you interrupt, and Skinner snorts loudly.

“All I’m good for!” Dalish says cheerfully.

“One up on Emma here, then,” Skinner comments, and you laugh, but not for too long… despite the unintended hilarity of that statement, all things considered.

--

Skinner tenderizes you pretty well that morning, and you’ve already decided to swing by the healing tent—both to see Krem and to make sure you’re not going to turn purple and blue while you’re sitting in Solas’ rotunda. But before that, all three of your would-be trainers whisk you off to the mess hall for breakfast. As luck would have it, a good number of other Chargers are there too, and before you know it, you’re sitting at a long table that appears to be more or less occupied entirely with Chargers.

Breakfast with a mercenary company. Your life has gotten really weird since coming to Skyhold.
But if anything, this is just more evidence that you’re succeeding in winning over the Chargers--all of them. You’re pretty sure you’ve drunkenly come to blows with at least two of them, but if anything, that and your mug-throwing prowess has made you more liked. That’s mercenaries for you.

They’re certainly not more loyal to you than their current employers, the Inquisition… particularly not Bull, who you’re quite certain is only doing all of this for whatever mysterious reason he started in the first place. It may or may not still be on Leliana or the Inquisition’s behalf… but you doubt he has the capability for pure intentions. And you’re certainly one to judge.

But if you needed any of their help for something that didn’t run counter to the Inquisition’s goals, they would probably assist you… and there's time yet.

The healer overseeing Krem’s recovery refuses to let all of you in to see him at once, so you volunteer to stay behind and get yourself glanced over by one of the healers while Bull, Dalish, and Skinner go in to see him. He’ll be much happier to see the three of them than he would be to see you, anyway.

You head to the rotunda before any of them have even left, determined to get some work done… enough that Solas won’t make faces at you for studying the Elven more in the evening. But though he enchants your wrist and you’re sitting at your desk and everything should be primed and working… You’re struggling. Your mind is everywhere but on your work. Despite the ass-kicking you’d received, your mind quickly recedes back to the night before. The memory of Solas’ grip on your wrist makes your heart pound even now, thanks entirely to the way your dreams had interpreted such a grip last night.

It’s more than a little ridiculous. You already know well that your hand is more adept for the situation than any man is, no matter how attractively dextrous his fingers might be. But your hand can’t kiss you, your mind traitorously reminds you. And it is the kissing you miss, if you’re being entirely honest. No matter how much your dreams might heat up, they mostly focus on that contact. Skin to skin. The most contact you get is in fighting, and that--

“Futuo,” you swear as you realize you’ve been writing despite being out of ink for half a line. You plunk your quill back in the ink, frustrated. You can’t get your head out of the fucking Fade.

“Problems?” Solas asks, completely unaware, and you want to punch him. Instead, you let out a long, weary sigh.

“I’m simply having trouble focusing this morning. I did not sleep well.”

“Moreso than usual?” he asks, concern in his voice evident.

“I just need a walk to clear my head,” you decide.

“I was in need of a few clippings from the garden,” Solas asks, and you immediately assume he’s asking you to run errands for him--Leliana certainly does so often enough. But he continues, “Would you like to accompany me?”

Oh yeah. That’s just what you need to clear Solas from your mind. More Solas. “Certainly, thank you,” your traitorous mouth replies.

You don’t know which one of you is worse at this point, as you walk beside and slightly behind him, towards the gardens. You have to go through the Great Hall to get there, and you notice a few things as you walk. One is that people don’t give Solas any real berth at all, other than the servants. Neither the soldiers, nor the diplomats, nor the visiting nobles--though that last one doesn’t surprise you at
all—seem to have any idea who he is.

The other is that the group that does notice him is just as telling as the ones that don’t. You see several Templar helms shift your way as the two of you cross the Hall. Seems like at least they got the memo… You would blame the Commander if not for the fact the Inquisitor is just as likely of a culprit. Or anyone, really. They probably have Templars watching Dorian, too… Though you’d never particularly noticed them. This Inquisition is, after all, just another version of the Chantry, with an added level of chaos because there aren’t any rules or restrictions in place. Their behavior is unpredictable and they’re rapidly building a huge standing army.

And they don’t much care for mages. Or Solas, despite the fact he’s helping them. And, you’re quite certain, they’d have no spare fondness for you, either, if you had been as brave—or foolish—as Solas, to out yourself to them.

This isn’t doing much to clear your mind, really.

You shadow Solas, expecting him to go to one of the gardeners or alchemists for what he needs. You shouldn’t be as surprised as you are when he simply walks into the garden and kneels down by a small collection of rashvine nettle plants. Not rashvine proper, thank the Maker. Hopefully they don’t actually grow that where people can get into it. Still, when he reaches for it without gloves, you make a strangled noise in your throat and quickly fall to your knees beside him to catch his wrist, an unwitting mirror of what he’d done to you the night before. Solas turns his head to stare at you, eyes wide with surprise.

“Are you out of your mind?” you exclaim. “Wear gloves!”

His shocked expression dawns with understanding, and then, starting with a slight twitch of his lips, fades into amusement. “It is a simple enough spell,” he begins, and understanding dawns on you as well. You release his wrist like it’s on fire, the beginnings of humiliation coloring your cheeks.

“Do you use magic for everything?” you grumble, to cover your mortification.

“There was never a reason not to,” he explains. “I have tried to do more things mundanely, since coming here but… old habits.”

“Don’t let me stop you, serah mage,” you say, unable to keep your face from continuing to flush darker. “I’ll just be over here, admiring the…” you glance around, unsuccessfully, for a plant worth admiring.

“Elfroot?” he suggests, a slight grin still on his lips.

“You know what, yes,” you say flatly. “I’m going to go admire the elfroot.” You hope that nettle burns straight through his magic and he has to spend the rest of the day licking his hands like… Like… Fuck, now you’re stuck on that mental image. You stalk over to the royal elfroot and squat down to glare at it, cheeks and ears flaming.

Yeah. This is the cure for your fucking distraction alright. What were you thinking?

Despite your embarrassment, you find yourself turning to watch Solas as he carefully breaks off a few branches of nettle. What does he even need this for? Had there been an alchemy table in his work room? You had been slightly distracted when you’d been in there. You watch idly, either unable or unwilling to look away, as he gently wraps the cuttings in a cloth and ties the bundle together with a strip of leather. You can’t feel the magic this far away, but when the light catches on his hands in just the right way, you see a slight sheen.
What a useful spell... one more thing you wish you could learn from him. You can just imagine him off in whatever forests he called home, gathering herbs and using magic to do it, simply because there was no one to tell him not to. No one to chide him for arrogance, no Templars to decide that such behavior was the hallmark of something worse. You sigh, a twinge of regret for a life that could have been lived, had your luck mirrored his.

You have enough sense to turn your gaze back to the elfroot before he looks up.

Chapter End Notes

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“Is the elfroot everything you’d hoped?” Solas asks, clearly teasing you.

“It’s everything I’d dreamed,” you reply dryly. “You sure you’re not from Tevinter?”

Solas stiffens instantly. Fair enough, though you hadn’t meant it in a rude sense. You’re still working off your embarrassment, it seems.

“What makes you ask?” he says tensely, almost irritably.

“The way you use magic for the most mundane tasks,” you explain. “People here think Dorian’s flashy, but honestly, he’s playing it down now that he’s in the south--I don’t believe for a second he’s not absolutely theatrical back in Tevinter. He’s probably just trying to avoid frightening the locals. My old Master used to magic chess pieces across the board. Totally unnecessary.”

“Did your old Master make a habit of picking his own herbs?” Solas asks. You pause.

“Good point.”

“I may use magic out of habit now, but the root is convenience, not showmanship. I neglected to bring gloves; I would have to pester one of the gardeners here for a pair, and at that point, I may as well simply ask them to do it for me. If I’m capable of doing a task myself, without burdening another, there is no reason not to. Magic or no.”

That many words in a row out of Solas almost qualifies as a lecture. “I didn’t mean to offend, Solas,” you say apologetically. “Tevinter is simply the only place I ever saw magic being done openly... casually.”

“Of course,” Solas says, shoulders relaxing slightly. You had offended him, then. “There are groups of apostates everywhere, but you would hardly have found yourself in their company.”

“And I would have run if I had,” you mutter, causing Solas to tilt his head slightly, questioning. You brush dirt off your knees as you stand. “Apostates are the worst kind of trouble magnets. There would probably be Templars chasing them, and somehow I doubt Templars would take the time to learn my life story if they found me with a bunch of maleficar.”

“No,” Solas agrees. “Most likely not.”

“I suppose that’s the point, though.” You say it as though you’re musing, even though it’s an obvious conclusion, one that you came to years and years ago. Solas is walking through the rows of the gardens, and you follow along beside him almost without thinking. “I saw my neighbors killed for sheltering escaped mages. Just children, really. If a mage had come to me after that, I would have turned them away out of fear. If everyone is too scared to help the mages, it just makes it all the harder for them to survive without the Circles.”
“Yes,” Solas agrees. “Though it’s interesting to hear you say so. Is your opinion of Templars influenced by your friendship with Ba--”

“No, and I’ll thank you not to bring that up,” you interrupt, scowling. Solas can’t just go throwing that name around, or the fact you know him! What is he thinking? He has to know you’re lying, as well, but you can’t just mention out loud that you have sympathies towards mages due to a friend. That’s as much as admitting you’re friends with an apostate, even if they didn’t recognize the name. “I just know what it looks like when someone tries to keep slaves.”

“Speaking of Templars,” Solas comments, just before you look over towards the gazebo and see for yourself.

Fuck.

“Why is the Commander always here when I go for walks?!” you hiss to yourself, even though there have been several times you’ve been here that he hasn’t.

“If you wish to avoid him, it--ah, too late,” Solas says as the Commander looks up and sees you. Perhaps the fact that you are with Solas will be enough to--nope, here he comes.

“Good morning Solas,” the Commander says, and you pray for a moment that his business is with someone other than you for once. “Is Emma assisting you with anything?”

The... the fuck. Why do people always ask Solas if they can borrow you? You’re not his fucking handmaid! And the Commander knows that! He knows your actual job; he has no excuse. You keep your face placid, however, as Solas replies.

“We were simply both going the same direction, Commander.” A nice, neutral answer... that, as it turns out, doesn’t really help you, as the Commander then turns to you.

“Are you busy? I thought I might steal you away for another game. Dorian was supposed to meet me out here, but... some nonsense about a new rune of Dagna’s, or something.” You would much rather be down in the Undercroft looking at whatever Dagna came up with that stole Dorian’s attention. Before you can respond, however, Solas interjects.

“A game?”

“Yes,” the Commander says, turning back to Solas. “Emma here plays chess. One of the few I’ve managed to find here in Skyhold who knows the game.” Lucky you.

“A game?”

“Ah, she mentioned the two of you had played.”

“Solas does, as well,” you say, cheerfully throwing him under the wheels.

“You do?” the Commander says, eyebrows raising. “Play it with spirits, did you?”

“I have a passing familiarity with the game,” Solas says smoothly. You suspect the Commander doesn’t recognize the brief sideways glance Solas gives you. He certainly recognizes what you’re trying to do here. He can scold you later; one awkward game of chess for him is nothing compared to what playing a game with a Templar is for you.

“Then, perhaps Solas can--” you begin, moving in to cinch the deal.

“Play the winner?” Solas interrupts smoothly. “That’s just what I was thinking.”
You stare at him, between disbelief and loathing. Meanwhile, the Commander is still talking. “The winner? Well... I suppose I may have the time,” he muses. “Most of the men have their day off today...” he glances over to you. “Is this amicable to you, Emma?”

Only then does it hit you... you can finally twist Solas’ arm into a game of chess with you. All you have to do is beat the Commander... to whom you’ve purposefully lost twice... and do so in a convincing and non-suspicious manner. Your eyes narrow as you size up Solas. What’s his intention with this? His eyes on yours betray nothing.

“...Alright,” you agree, eyes finally sliding from Solas to the Commander. “Perhaps I’ll finally beat you this time, Commander.”

--

Not for the first time and not for the last, your trickiness has put you into a corner, one that might not have been there if you had more of a propensity for honesty. But honesty had gotten you into far worse pickles than possibly missing out on a chess game with Solas, so you’ve no intention of changing.

The issue at hand is that you lost to Commander Rutherford twice, on purpose. You want to beat him this time, but you can’t suddenly be amazing; that would be extremely suspicious. He’s also good enough that beating him would take skill, even ordinarily. So what you have before you is a challenge to beat the Commander--but only just--without him noticing your chicanery. It will be much harder than just beating him outright would have been.

To make things even more interesting, Solas is watching the game, as well. Your... your days are really weird, lately. Breakfast with mercenaries... playing chess with an ex-Templar-slash-Commander-of-the-Inquisition and a mysterious elven apostate who is probably nearly as much of a liar as you are...

A few months ago, you think to yourself. It was just me and my mule.

All that being said, however, beating the Commander is within your capabilities. You’re very good at chess. Your master was a skilled player and you continued to play in countries across Thedas. Not to toot your own horn... but you’re damn good at the game. Still, you don’t want to look like a sudden chess master, so you distract Commander Rutherford throughout the game.

You bring up his family, get him talking about them, then his history in the order--which he seems incredibly uncomfortable talking about. He keeps making sideways glances towards Solas, who is simply watching wordlessly. That’s fine though... uncomfortable is distracted. For your part, you’re extremely focused, glancing up from the board only to occasionally gauge the Commander’s mood. Finally, a well timed line about how “women like a man in armor” has him flustered enough to not pay too much attention to the movement of your knight.

“Commander, I believe that’s checkmate,” you say cheerfully, distracting him from his fluster. He looks down at the board in surprise--he still has most of his pieces, after all, despite the game dragging on quite a long time.

“So it is,” he says. “It seems like the third time was the charm for you.”

“I suppose luck had to favor me eventually,” you say with a grin. Luck had nothing to do with it.

“As much as I’d like to stay and watch the follow up match,” the Commander says, glancing out of the gazebo and upwards. “I should really check on Jim. I don’t like leaving him in charge of
paperwork this long.” Somehow, you suspect he would have made time if it was him playing Solas, but you’re actually quite pleased with this turn of events.

“Thank you for the game, Commander,” and are surprised to find yourself meaning it. You hadn’t wanted to spend your morning this way, but the Commander has helped place Solas exactly where you want him.

“No, thank you, Emma,” he says with a bit of a chuckle. “It was... a needed distraction. Do let me know who wins, won’t you? At this rate, I could start a chess tournament... The Inquisitor plays, as does Dorian, Solas, you...”

“Iron Bull too,” you comment, and both men pause to look at you.

“Oh, does he?” the Commander says. “I didn’t know.”

Of course he does; he’s Ben-Hassrath. You’re pretty sure they teach them that in training; you’ve never run into one that didn’t know the game. But you decide to keep that tidbit to yourself. “A tournament could be entertaining,” you say instead.

“It would be a fun distraction for the troops,” he muses. “Sera is always harping on about morale, and she’s not wrong... even if her definition of morale is a little... different.”

“Not just the troops,” you point out. “There’s not really much to do here in Skyhold, other than work. I’m sure the troops aren’t the only ones who get bored. There are informal groups all over; people who get together to drink, play cards, anything to pass the time after the day’s work is done. Spread the word of something like a chess tournament, put up a small prize, and I’ll bet you half the fortress will be tripping over themselves to learn the game. Those that don’t play will watch, simply for something new to do.”

Both men are looking at you. The Commander is practically staring. “That’s... Hmm.” He brings his hand to his face, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Where do you come up with these ideas, Emma?”

“A tournament was your idea, Commander. I merely extrapolated.”

“Hmm... I could...” You doubt he’s even listening, at this point. “I need to go. Work to be done. Do let me know who wins, will you?”

“Of course, Commander,” you say, with a bow of your head. He wanders off through the gardens... probably off to plan a chess tournament, which you’re totally going to enter... and then lose as soon as you play someone you have to lose to. Still, should be fun.

Solas clears his throat. “Perhaps we should get back to work as w--”

“Oh no you don’t,” you interrupt grimly, pointing at the chair in which the Commander had been sitting. “Sit.”

Solas raises an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize I was in such high demand.”

“You said you would play the winner,” you say simply. “I won. And I look forward to seeing how they play chess in... where did you say you were from, again?”

“Not Tevinter, at any rate,” he says, sitting down. “I didn't think you would be so eager, given how much you tried to avoid a game with the Commander.”

“What do you want me to say?” you ask with a sigh as you reset the pieces. You give Solas white.
You want him to set the tone of this one, plus you never like making the first move. “That I prefer your company to his? I do.”

Solas seems surprised to hear you say it so bluntly, but it should be obvious. You wouldn’t say you can relax around him, precisely, but...

“I was not fishing for compliments,” Solas says, and you wonder if your enjoyment of his company is a compliment. “I was simply wondering why you wished to avoid a game with the Commander, if not a concern of time.” He moves his first pawn, and the game begins.

You snort. “Just one reason will do? Very well: he's the military commander of the fastest growing army in Thedas.”

“Do you dislike soldiers? You seemed comfortable in the company of the ones we traveled with before.”

“I'm uncomfortable around people who outrank me to the point of absurdity,” you say with a frown. “They could do anything, and they know it.”

“You seem much more skittish than your knight,” Solas comments, moving his bishop out of its attack radius.

“My knight has less at risk.” You move your knight again, advancing aggressively. You want to see what he’ll do. He moves his rook... defensively, again. ...No, wait...

“You played a defensive game with the Commander,” he comments as you ponder the board, trying to see more than three moves into the future. “And not nearly so well,” he adds when you finally make your move, snatching a pawn to see if he’ll snatch back.

“He’s the Commander of the Inquisition,” you say with a sigh. “Despite my apparently lofty company, I am a remarkably average linguist who currently depends on the Inquisition to stay alive, sheltered, and fed.”

“So you've been throwing the games,” Solas says. It’s not a question.

“I have.”

“Until now.”

“Yep.”

He moves his rook again. What is he up to over there?

“The Commander may be many things, but he’s not a man to hold a grudge over a lost match of chess,” Solas points out. You shrug.

“Have you ever heard the phrase ‘better safe than sorry,’ Solas?”

“I have, in fact. You’re hardly playing it safe now, however,” he says as you spearhead another attack.

“What I need to be?”

Solas is silent as he considers the board. You hope he’ll take this as a sign to stop pestering you about the Commander. Solas knows things about you that the Commander doesn’t, and you’d prefer it stay that way. You don’t have to pretend to be less intelligent around Solas; he already knows
you’re a clever little sneak from your time together in Val Royeaux. Good-but-stupid people don’t
break their friends into the White Spire as a favor. The Commander probably knows as much as
Leliana does—that you have connections that allow you to obtain books of questionable legality.

More than that, neither of them really needs to know, and some days, you regret doing the job as
well as you did. You could have half-assed it and probably still come back looking good. Although
your new wages are a nice incentive for doing your best... as is the respect Solas seemed to gain for
you during the trip.

You’re trying to learn something about Solas through this game, but most of what you learn is that
he’s doing the same damn thing to you. He responds to the way you play—when you attack
aggressively, he bats you away, only slightly less aggressively. When you set up a long play, he sees
it coming and cuts you off halfway through, leaving you with pieces placed erratically across the
board and no strategy.

But by about halfway through the game, you’ve stopped caring. Solas drops the subject of your
compulsive lying, and instead the two of you wind up talking about a dozen different subjects. What
he needs the rashvine nettle for (alchemy, as you’d suspected, specifically a modified lyrium potion),
how your tome is coming along (fantastically), how the baked goods in Val Royeaux stacked up to
ones he’s had elsewhere (admirably), the most alarming wildlife you’ve ever been chased by (a bear
for you, a swarm of giant spiders inhabiting a ruin for him), and even an exchange of stories. You tell
him about some of your antics as a newly escaped slave in Antiva, and he tells you a much, much
better story about a spirit he called the “Matchmaker.”

“She reminds me of Cole,” you say with a faint smile, as you attempt to sneak a pawn through his
defenses and to the back of the board.

“There are similarities,” Solas replies. “They both wish to help.”

“Still I hope she was better at setting people up than Co--oh, shit!”

“Too late,” Solas says cheerfully, as he makes the move you’d just seen.

“Fuck. Is there... damn. No, you’ve got me in two.”

“You could try to get out of it,” he suggests.

“Struggle for the sake of struggling?” you say with a snort. “Why? Just to give you the pleasure of
saying checkmate? No thank you. The game is yours, serah.”

“Were you going easy on me?” he asks, a teasing lilt to his voice.

“No, but thank you for trying to give me a chance to save my pride,” you say with a laugh. “I’ll win
next time.

“Next time?” he says, sounding amused.

“Are you going to tell me I’m being too assumptious?” you laugh as you reset the pieces for the next
person who feels like having a game. “Maker, it’s getting late, isn’t it? I should fetch lunch.”

“It is past the time we normally eat,” Solas agrees, standing. You feel a cheap little thrill. ‘We eat.’

You stand to head to the kitchen, and Solas trails you through the garden, continuing your
conversation about spirits and helping. It isn’t until you reach the doors to the kitchen that you realize
Solas has followed you the entire way. You hesitate outside the doors. “I’m not sure you should
come in,” you muse.

“‘To the kitchens?’ he asks, clearly amused. ‘Might they be too dangerous for me?’

“Ha ha. You might cause a panic. Have you even been in the kitchens before?”

“It isn’t exactly a forbidden land,” Solas points out.

“No, just one filled with men and women who bribe me in hopes of ensuring I continue to deliver your meals so they don’t have to.”

“Your friend brings breakfast every morning,” he points out.

“Yes, and I have to p... Never mind her. Even Celia would lay an egg to see you waltz into the kitchen.”

“I have no intention of waltzing, if that’s your concern.”

“Stop being cute!” you snap.

“What would you have me do?” Solas says, still amused despite—or perhaps because of—your seriousness. “Go upstairs and wait in the rotunda for you to bring my food?”

“That will work, yes.”

Solas gives you a long, level look which you return, unblinking.

“...Very well. It wouldn’t do to upset someone so fragile as a cook.”

“If you’d met Gaston, you’d know that isn’t a joke,” you say pointedly. “Upstairs with you. I’ll be up shortly.”

Solas turns, shaking his head slightly and heads towards the stairs.

--

Solas is sitting at his desk, arms crossed, when you bring in his food. He doesn’t look annoyed... more like bemused. But your little stool is by his desk, and that’s all you need to see to know everything is fine.

“I suppose I’ll have to actually spend my afternoon working,” you say, eyeing your desk.

“You are the one who insisted on two chess matches in a row,” Solas points out.

“I don’t do deferred payment plans. If I hadn’t gotten it out of you then, I might never have.”

“Do you truly believe me so flighty?” Solas asks, seemingly feigning hurt.

“Absolutely. You’re like trying to pin down a live butterfly. On and off the board,” you add with a snort.

“Still, you seem in a better mood than you were this morning,” Solas points out.

“Yes... I am,” you agree with a soft sigh. You hadn’t come to any good conclusions, hadn’t steeled yourself for getting over your little crush... If anything, you were making it worse for yourself. But you did feel better. For now. “Hopefully now I can get some actual work done.”
“Perhaps the next time you have writer’s block, we can skip the gardens and simply have a game of chess?” Solas suggests. Your heart leaps into your throat and then sits there, pounding uncomfortably. You struggle to swallow your food.

“That would be... um. Yes. That would... work.” Wow. Smooth. “The, uh, the table is in the gardens, though.”

Solas waves his hand as if shooing the thought away. “I have a travel set in my room.”

His room. Your grip on your fork tightens to the point you fear you might bend it in half.

Yeah that’ll definitely help the next time you get distracted by thoughts of Solas. Going into his bedroom. How is he this clueless after you kissed him?! Either he’s extra oblivious, or you’re extra perverted. Maybe both. He had said it was a travel set, after all. He could easily bring it here, or anywhere.

Despite Solas’ unintended... whatever... you manage to get through lunch intact. Afterwards, he touches up the enchantment on your wrist--which is just a joy for you to sit through, as tightly wound as you are--and you finally get back to work on your tome.

You probably only have... maybe two weeks work left? A week and a half? Less, if you could really buckle down and focus. But you need to be honest with yourself; you don’t really see that happening. Skyhold is full of distractions. You can’t really lock your doors and bury yourself in work the way you had in the past... and moreover, you don’t really want to. You enjoy your foolish asides, be they with Solas, Sera, Fenris, the Chargers... You’re coming to enjoy being at Skyhold, in some ways.

Fortunately, your last distraction--Solas--leaves the room around mid afternoon. And doesn’t return. You notice when he leaves, and you notice a few hours later that he hasn’t come back, but you assume he’s just working on that potion of his. It’s not as though he doesn’t have his own work, and not all of it can be done in the rotunda. So you focus on work... and don’t lose focus again until Solas re-enters. You glance up upon hearing a noise, eyes straining to readjust after so long spent peering at paper on a desk.

“I thought you would still be here. Have you eaten, Emma?” he says. You blink owlishly, trying to clear your eyes and thoughts both.

“Is it dinner time already?” you ask, glancing at the candle you use to tell time, which is... oh, it’s burned out.

“In that it’s scarcely an hour before midnight, yes,” he says dryly.

Whoops.

“I, uh... lost track of time,” you mutter sheepishly.

“Yes, I awoke briefly and suspected you would have,” he says with a sigh. “Here. I’ve brought some food; no need to pester the kitchen staff this late.”

“Awoke? You were asleep already?” you ask, to cover for your embarrassment.

“Yes, I was speaking to one of my friends,” he says off-handedly. It throws you a little bit, however, how casually he says it. Yeah, just off in the Fade, talking to my friend, cause, you know, I’m a real life Somniari and don’t feel the need to be even slightly secretive about that fact. Ridiculous. How is he real?
Well, if you’re being fair, he never said it in so many words... it had taken you literally having him waltz into your dream to realize. Because those weren’t supposed to be real anymore, not really. Or so rare as to practically be fiction. Who would ever guess that he was something from a story book? So he didn’t even need to hide it, really. The few people around here who knew enough about magic to figure him out either wouldn’t go tattling on him (Dorian) or didn’t talk to him enough to bother finding out (Madame de Fer). His secret was safe in the most ludicrous way possible.

Meanwhile, Solas was setting bread and what appeared to be an entire gallon of wine on your desk. “Stop working. This is what I get for enchanting your wrist in the afternoon,” he adds with a frown. “Eat.”

“Yes, a healthy dinner of bread and an entire gallon of wine,” you say with a chuckle, and he glares slightly.

“You could have had a decent meal if you’d been paying attention.”

“Sorry, sorry, you’re right,” you say, raising your hands in surrender. “I really didn’t realize how late it had gotten normally, you-- well...”

“Normally I’m around to pester you,” he says with a sigh. “How did you function, living alone?”

“By your standards, I probably didn’t,” you admit. “But if I stayed indoors too long, Bella would headbutt the shutters in.”

“I’m pleased I can provide the same services as a mule.”

He’s cross with you, you realize, extremely belatedly. Your mind finally catches up to the situation-- he’d literally woken up and left his bedroom to make sure you’d eaten... and you hadn’t. Your cheeks begin to heat and your ears begin to redden as the reality sets in. “I’m, um... I’m sorry, Solas. You didn’t need to go to all this trouble, really, I...”

“Are utterly incapable of taking care of yourself and apparently require a sitter,” he finishes for you, and your blush deepens. “Eat,” he says again, firmly. You push your work to the side and move to do so. He waits until you’ve crammed some bread into your mouth, as if needing the guarantee that you’re actually going to eat. “And then go to bed,” he adds. “If you continue to lapse in your sleep and diet, the enchantments... and the lessons... can lapse as well.”

You make a muffled, protesting noise through a mouthful of bread.

“If you don’t have time to eat, you don’t have time to learn Elven,” he says pointedly, crossing his arms.

“Ir abelas,” you manage as you choke down the bread in your mouth. Solas makes a dissatisfied sound, clearly unconvinced.

“Remember. Food, then sleep.”

“Yes, ser,” you say, opting to avoid the Elven this time.

You expect him to stick around to ensure you do just that, but he leaves, probably to return to bed, where he would have been this entire time if not for the fact that you are, apparently, twelve, and still need to be tucked into bed and fed dinner.

You glare at the loaf of bread with a profound sense of self-loathing, feeling the uncomfortable burning of tears that you refuse to shed. Losing time isn’t anything new for you, but this is the first
time it came with any consequences. After years of being good at most things you attempted, the sensation of failing miserably is alien and uncomfortable. And the sensation of disappointing someone? Not nearly so alien as you wish it was.

You uncork the wine and realize, sourly, that Solas has failed to bring you a cup of any kind. Well, whatever. You take a long drink directly from the bottle to wash down the dry bread. The kind Solas had while camping, you realize... implying this was his own stock of food he’d raided for you.

The self-loathing intensifies.

You eat the bread in miserable silence, washing it down with increasingly long swigs of wine. He’d given you an entire fucking gallon, after all. Eventually, the bread lies forgotten to the side, and you just keep drinking the wine instead. You should just head to bed, you know, but you tell yourself the wine will help you sleep. Not the way he wants; nothing will help you sleep the way he wants. But at least you’ll be able to look him in the eye and honestly say you were unconscious all night.

It’s during a particularly long drink, when you’re leaning back in the chair and just sort of letting the wine pour into your mouth, that you lose your balance. You manage to get the wine bottle upright and onto the desk before the chair tips sideways and you spill, cursing, onto the floor. You realize, as you struggle to stand and the room swims around you, that you’re more of a lightweight than you thought and that is an entire gallon of wine, yes. That’s a lot.

You consider, briefly, just remaining on the floor and bringing the wine down to you. But, no... the sideways chair is something out of place in the rotunda, and it fills you with a sense of acute anxiety. With some difficulty, you manage to get the chair back upright—it’s heavier than it looks—and then, with some thought, pull yourself back into it. Right. Where were you? Drinking, that’s where.

“Drinking alone, Emma?” you hear a familiar voice come from the stairwell.

You snort. “Who else am I gonna drink it with?”

Dorian enters the room and walks over to the desk, eyeing the large bottle of wine. “My. What’s the occasion?”

“As you can see,” you say with minimal slurring. “I was given an entire gallon of wine.”

“As good of an occasion as I’ve ever heard!”

“I rather thought so, myself.”

“I have cups,” he informs you. “If you would prefer to drink your giant bottle of wine with a touch more dignity.”

“There’s a dignified way to drink a gallon of wine?” you ask with a sardonic chuckle.

“There is! Allow me to show you,” he says, pulling over the little stool on which you sometimes sit, and then setting two cups on the corner of your desk. You stare at them.

“You just had those on you?”

“I don’t drink out of bottles,” he says loftily. “But I do drink frequently. Therefore, cups in the library.”

“Brilliant. This must be the sort of thing they teach in the Circle of Minrathous,” you say dryly.
“More than you might believe.” You note, of course, that he’s got two cups and he’s filling them both, but you suppose that’s fair enough. You’re almost relieved to have someone to drink it with... when Solas asks how you managed to go through an entire gallon of wine, you can point at Dorian, who’s a bit more notorious for this sort of thing.

Even with a drinking partner, however, your mood is still dire. You’re not even beating yourself up over missing dinner anymore so much as you’re just generally reminded of what a terrible, awful, fucking inconvenience of a person you are. Maker, really. You’re practically a Blight on Solas’ life! Constantly begging favors out of him, dragging him out of bed for something as stupid as making sure you’ve eaten, as if you’re a dog that needs to be fed. Always worrying him, risking hurting him like you had on the trip back from Val Royeaux. Making him do all the things you were unwilling to. Protecting you, protecting your books, protecting your fucking heart. All things you could have done if you weren’t such a pathetic, secretive little liar, as if your life was more important than--

“Kaffas, what is this?” Dorian says, curling his nose at the cup of wine, which he’s just taken a gulp of.

“I dunno,” you admit. “Solas brought it.”

“Solas brought you a gallon of wine? Wine that tastes like it’s used to clean iron?”

“I think it was just whatever he had laying around,” you admit.

“The idea that he drinks this for fun is alarming,” Dorian says.

“No one’s forcing you to drink it,” you say with a scowl.

“No, no, I approve. I just didn’t take our Solas for much of a drinker.”

You think back to the times you’ve drunk with him. You got really drunk that one night in Val Royeaux. Drunk enough that you can’t actually remember the night clearly. Had he seemed intoxicated, particularly? You can’t remember.

“Say, is that the tome of necromancy I lent you?” Dorian says, pointing to the corner of your desk.

“You glance over.

“Oh, yeah. I don’t really let that one leave the rotunda. Can’t walk around with a book with a giant fucking skull on the front,” you say with a snort.

“Are you actually reading it?”

“No, I’m using it as a paperweight,” you say with a scowl. “Of course I’m reading it.”

“And you can grasp it?”

“Parts of it, with some work. My master was a big fan of the entropic school of magic. There’s a lot of overlap.”

Dorian snorts. “The four schools of magic are a distinctly southern concept.”

“Yes, well, my master wasn’t lending me Tevinter books of magic,” you say with a scowl. “It was only after I came south and began translating for Circles that I found the words to describe the horrors he inflicted upon us with his magic.”

Dorian winces, and you rush the conversation on, not wanting to drown him in Tevinter guilt at the
moment. “And anyway, the general concept is the same, even if the words they use to describe it aren’t.”

“Actually, I’ve found that the practices of magic in the south are remarkably different from those back home. In fact...”

And that’s how you and Dorian wind up sitting at your desk debating schools of magic and the differences across Thedas, while getting increasingly drunk... you moreso than Dorian.

“No, see, yer lumpin’ the whole south together like that,” you huff at one point. “I’ve worked fer Circles across southern Thedas, in Rivain, Ferelden, Antiva, an’ Orllais. They all do it a bit -hic- a bit diff’rn... diff’rently.”

“But the rules are all set by the same Chantry,” Dorian protests. You firmly shake your head, enjoying and mildly distracted by the way it makes the room spin.

“They preten’ it’s all coming from th’ top but really, new rules are added at each tier,” you explain. “’N some are taken ‘way by more lenient enf... enforce... enforcement,” you manage finally, “in places like Rivain an’ even some places in Orllais. So in Ferelden an’ Kirkwall an’ Starkhaven y’get these mages who write manifestoes on the inherent sin o’ magic, then in Rivain y’got people not-so-secretly passin’ down ancient forbidden arts... S’totally different stuff.”

And so the night goes, with Dorian explaining the politics of the northern Circles—which you’d honestly known nothing about, really--and you explaining the politics of the southern Circles. Dorian had erroneously believed that mages just went to whichever circle was geographically closest. You correct him, explaining first about the differences between apprentices and enchanters. how enchanters are sent different places depending on different factors. He seems to know about the Harrowing in the south already, which is good because you’re not going to explain it to him. You’re not even supposed to know about it, no one really is. But people talk. You explain to him how mages tend to be sent to different Circles politically more than anything else, how there are Circles in Orllais just for the well-to-do, how the Circle in Ferelden and the one in Ostwick might as well be two different worlds, how it’s so much different than just being lucky as to where you were born.

All in all, it’s a fun evening, even if you can barely walk by the end of it. It’s only over when you go to refill your glass and find, against all odds, that you and Dorian have worked your way through the entire bottle.


“That’s fine, dear. Oh my,” he says, going to catch you as you abruptly stand and then sway rather dramatically.

“Nah, nah, I got it. I’m good.”

“Why don’t you just sleep on the couch here?” Dorian advises, and you laugh.

“Nooo way. I got a fuckin’ bed. Just gotta get to it.”

“That’s a big just,” he mutters as you swagger towards the door.

Dorian shadows you out into the courtyard, catching you multiple times as you stagger down the stairs. He winds up following you all the way to your room... the second man to do so in a week, and you’ve got precisely as much of a chance with him as you do with Solas, pfff. For the same reason, maybe? You wouldn’t know; it’s damn impossible to tell with Solas.
“There we go, safe and... that’s your room? I thought that was a closet,” he says, peering around you as you stumble in. “Is that your bed, or just a pile of blankets someone left there?”

“S’big enough fer one,” you grumble, flopping onto it dramatically and then squirming uselessly in an attempt to get under the blankets. It’s fucking cold, even if you’re too drunk to feel it properly.

“Oh, no guests in m’lady’s bedchamber?” Dorian asks, helping you get at least somewhat covered in your multitude of blankets. You glare at him from your blanket burrito sourly.

“Oh fuckin’ please, Dorian.”

He holds up his hands. “Alright, alright. I just thought that maybe you’d need someone to keep you warm in a room this cold.”

“Unless yer signin’ up, out you go!” you snap, and with a chuckle he heads to the door.

“Sweet dreams, dear.”

“Oh go fuck a nug,” you grumble as the darkness of unconsciousness finally overtakes your mind.

Chapter End Notes

If you like my writing, please check out my links page for ways to support me and/or get more of it!
Birdwatching

Chapter Notes

Well that only took a month.

I don't know if everyone saw the status updates on Tumblr and Twitter or if I just have the nicest group of readers ever, but I'd like to thank everyone--literally no one sent me a "hey when are you going to update??" message or comment during the... seriously, like, solid month since the last update. I was able to really take something of a vacation. I think it was maybe a bit overdue... I feel loads better. I didn't realize how much the regular update schedule was stressing me out.

That being said, I enjoyed being able to write a chapter that was as long as it needed to be this time, instead of rushing to hit the deadline, so I'm tentatively planning on switching to longer chapters biweekly. They might go up sooner if I finish them early... I'm going to keep a slightly looser update schedule for a bit, possibly move the update day around to suit my editor better, we'll see. Either way, you'll still be getting the same number of words every month (possibly more), so fret not. ^_^

Now, I've rambled enough. Let's get to the good stuff, yeah? And by good stuff I mean: trigger warnings for racism, sexual harassment, violence, and rape mentions. It gets ugly in this chapter, so the break before the section with the rough stuff in it, I used ~~~ instead of -- for the break... just to give people who need it a bit of a head's up. See you at the bottom!

You wake up with regrets.

But you had spent the night in blissful, blissful, dreamless unconsciousness, so the regrets honestly only go so far. On the plus side, you’re in your bed, though you don’t remember how you got there. On the not-so-plus side, however, you have a splitting headache and your mouth tastes and feels like you were waterboarded with acid. And you’re fucking freezing despite your cocoon of blankets. You realize why when you peel one eye open. The sun is already beginning to peek in your window--your uncovered window. The cloth you’d put over it only a few nights before has been torn.

You groan unhappily as you roll out of bed. You’re still in your clothes from yesterday... no big deal, honestly--you’re going to have to start sleeping in more and more clothes as it gets colder and colder. Before you change into your “getting beaten up by a Qunari” clothes, however, you stumble over to the window, a single blanket still draped around your shoulders. How had this been torn? You peer out the window and see something out of place immediately... there’s a bird feeder outside your window, hanging from a metal hook drilled into the stone that had very much not been there yesterday.

You eye it with a frown, and then your eyes focus on a man just past it, a man who’s pulling weeds growing up by the wall.

“Excuse me,” you say, loud enough to be heard--and to make your head ache, as it turns out. The
man turns, and you see pointed ears. Good to see the Inquisition still uses elves for all the fun tasks, like weed-pulling. “Do you know where this bird feeder came from?”

The man tilts his head slightly, then smiles. “Why, you got it in Val Royeaux, miss!”

You stare at him blankly for a few moments as he wanders away. You got it in...

FUCK.

Your hand snaps out to the bird feeder and you all but yank it off its hook and pull it inside. You take a step back from the window and set it on your bedstand, swearing quietly and breathlessly. He wouldn’t, he wouldn’t...

He would, as it turns out. There’s a compartment in the bottom of the birdfeeder. You couldn’t see it without flipping the damn thing over and spilling it, ordinarily, but this is hardly your first time. A few minutes of careful prying and you get it open, and yank out a small, folded piece of parchment. You’re going to kill him.

You unfold it and glare down at the message. It’s an old code you and Banal’ras developed years ago. It reads like a birdwatching manifesto, which makes its placement brilliant. No one would be that thrown by a birdwatching document in a bird feeder, and the compartment wasn’t well hidden enough to be that suspicious. This had better be damn important.

You don’t even need to pull out paper to work the translation; something you’re this familiar with and you can read it like a language, easily.

*Found you, fire. Killed six of your boss’ soldiers. They deserved it, but I thought I’d give you a head’s up. Left a calling card. Have fun with that. Ice.*

Yep.

You’re gonna kill him.

You crumple the paper in your fist, and almost ignite it yourself before thinking better of it and holding it to a candle instead.

*What the fuck had he done? He had killed Inquisition soldiers?! And left a fucking calling card? Just declare war on the place where I’m hiding, why the shit not, Banal’ras?! Was he hoping you’d leave? As your pounding head settles, however, you realize this is possibly more grim than you’d thought. Banal’ras isn’t an assassin. Never has been. It was possible that they had threatened him, leading him to act in self-defense, but if they had, a calling card would never have been left. That’s not how it worked. If he left a card, it was to leave a message.*

...What had those soldiers been up to? There were only so many options, and none of them pretty. For Banal’ras to slaughter all six, not maim, but slaughter... leaving not a single one alive with a message? Not entirely unlike him, but unusual enough that it paints an ugly picture.

Of course, whether or not it was justified doesn’t do a damn thing to help your situation here. Fortunately, Banal’ras had completely buried your connection to him, so Leliana would probably not come straight to you demanding answers. But she would hear about this... she may have already, in fact, depending on how fast Banal’ras’ messenger moved. Not as fast as a bird, you’re willing to bet.

That man, then, the old gardener, must be one of Banal’ras’. A good move... the people associated with Banal’ras were young upstarts, always had been. Still... that man had better be a retired bard or something good, because blowing his cover could quite possibly blow yours. Which Banal’ras
n knew.

Bastard.

Still, that man was probably the only one. It took time to put people in safely, and the more there were, the riskier it was. If you looked into the man, you’d need to do it discreetly. You couldn’t risk anything that might cause the Spymaster to look into him more. Or anything that might put you at risk if he was found out.

Fucking hell, Banal’ras, it wasn’t that important to communicate! You’re going to beat a lesson about sentimentality—and possessiveness—into his hide the next time you’re in Val Royeaux. Which might be soon, if he blows your cover. Or never, if he blows your cover and you’re killed.

Not much you can do from here other than tell him off, however. You coin a quick reply—with your left hand, no need to make this easy for the Spymaster—in the same code and shove it back into the bird feeder, trusting the old man to take it from there. Hopefully Solas doesn’t make a habit of visiting your bedroom (ha) because he’s the only one who might realize that you did not, in fact, buy a bird feeder in Val Royeaux.

You patch up the window cover as best you can, resigning yourself to cold nights until you can figure out a more practical way of blocking the freezing air coming in from outside. Then you quickly change into your get-a-beating clothes and head out to make your hangover all the better by being pulverised by a Qunari and/or an elf.

--

It’s only Iron Bull today, which is actually something of a relief. Technically, you’re late, but Bull doesn’t bring it up. You get to take out some of your frustration on someone who can take it and probably deserves it anyway. Between Solas, Banal’ras, and your own pathetic, ever-growing list of utter failures, you have a lot of frustration.

You wind up with Bull in the most amusing (and possibly least effective) headlock ever, which is really just you with an arm against Bull’s neck, traditional headlock style, dangling half a foot off the ground from around his neck. Your body weight is enough that it’s uncomfortable for him, and he spends several minutes trying to dislodge you while you cling to him like a furious koala.

“You know,” he says, rubbing his neck after finally managing to pry you off of him. “If that had been an actual fight, all a Qunari would need to do is fall backwards on you or have their buddy stab you.”

“That wasn’t an actual fight,” you point out, still sitting on the ground where you were dropped. “That was me hanging off of your neck for fun. Weren’t these sessions supposed to be for stress relief?”

“And here I thought I was teaching you something,” Bull says, clearly amused.

You shrug. “Side effect.”

And so the two of you spend the next hour on “stress relief,” which is apparently code for “wrestling each other.” It must look amusing from the outside looking in, given your size differences. Once, while crossing the Hinterlands in Ferelden, you saw a rather daring fennec fox harassing the shit out of a bear. It probably looks like that.

You use a bath as an excuse to get out of breakfast again. You don’t really feel up to socializing today, not with your head still aching and your irritation at yourself and Banal’ras still flaring. You
don't even know if you can face Solas... You have an empty gallon of wine to explain, and while you DO have the excuse that Dorian helped you drink, it was still Solas’ wine and neither yours to drink nor yours to share.

So you put it off a bit longer.

You head to the human baths almost without fully thinking about it—you’ve gotten into the habit. Every time you get a sour look while in there, it reminds you that you need to do something more permanent about the bathing situation in Skyhold, especially with winter coming. From what you’ve dug up, Skyhold actually has something like five bathhouses. They’re spread out across the grounds, and there’s really no reason for them to be segregated the way they are. You’d like to know whose decision it was, and how it was made... and also if the men’s situation mirrors the women’s.

You’re considering all this as you bathe—research and information gathering doesn’t cost you anything, after all, so you can do it even if you’re in no position to actually implement change. Your normal strategies won’t work here since you don’t want to risk sabotage for a multitude of reasons. But you’re buttering up to enough of the high ranking men and women of the Inquisition that, given time--

“Hey!”

You’re toweling off, and so deep in your own thoughts that it take you a moment to realize that the angry voice is, in fact, speaking to you. You look at the irate woman blandly. She’s clothed while you’re still clad only in a towel, but you’ve been confronted in more uncomfortable situations than this one.

“Why do you keep coming to this bath, huh?” the woman demands indignantly.

Ah. This conversation.

“I keep forgetting I’m in Ferelden, technically,” you say mildly. “Regular bathing is good for one’s health. That nonsense about winter bathing being unhealthy is--”

“Don’t play smart with me!” she snaps. “There are other baths!”

“I’m aware. But this one is closest to where I work, so obviously, I use it. If you’re having issues with it being crowded, I recommend coming during the slow periods around--”

“There’s no need for you to come here,” she hisses. “You’re making trouble!”

The altercation is starting to draw a crowd. Most of them stay back, but a few move forward. You wonder how ugly this is going to get. You’ve never been assaulted while wearing a towel before. It could be a first.

“Trouble?” you say blithely, and you see the slight panic in a few people’s eyes; some move to shuffle out of the bathhouse, not wanting to be witness to whatever happens next. “I’m sorry, I think I might have water in my ears.” You tilt your head and tap the side of it exaggeratedly. “I’m creating trouble by bathing?”

“You know damn well what she means,” another one of the women interrupts.

“I’m afraid I really don’t,” you say, placing a hand on one hip and jutting it to the side slightly. “How could I create trouble by bathing? Believe me, it would be trouble if I didn’t, given where I work.”

You’re not going to name drop Solas in this kind of a situation. He deserves far better than that from
you, and his reputation is bad enough without you kicking shit all over it. But if any of them already
know, it wouldn’t hurt to remind them.

“Go to your own baths!”

“Oh!” you say, laughing gently. “I think I understand.”

“Then you’ll leave?” the woman says with a scowl.

“I don’t know where you got the idea that I have a private bathroom, but I assure you, I don’t,” you
say with a friendly smile. “I’m not important enough for that.”

“You cannot be this stupid!” the woman explodes.

“She’s not,” another says with a frown. “She’s playing dumb on purpose.”

You blink slowly. “Pardon?”

“Look! We don’t want your kind here, and I think you know that!”

“My... kind?” you say slowly, tilting your head to the side. There’s a moment of tension amongst the
women, both those accosting you and the ones simply watching. Everyone who wanted to avoid the
show has probably already left. But you’re not going to give them the satisfaction that easily. You
want to hear them say it. “Redheads?” you say blankly.

“Knife-ears!” the woman practically shrieks. It echoes through the bathhouse. There are a few non-
bigots left, apparently—you can see shame clearly written on a few faces who were listening in.

You suck in a long breath. This is hardly your first time with this sort of thing, but no matter how
jaded you get, it never feels good to hear. But you win nothing by flying off the handle. The ones
who lose their tempers lose; she’s just proven that.

“So... you’re telling me this is a humans-only bathhouse?” you ask mildly.

The woman hesitates slightly. She has to know how it sounds. But then her shoulders square with
the strength of the institutions at her back. The Maker doesn’t look favorably upon the elves, after all.
There are no elven Revered Mothers, no elven Templars. The elves go in the cages, they don’t hold
the keys. Even here, in the Inquisition. Where are the elves in positions of power?

There aren’t any.

“Yeah, that’s right,” she says, voice a little shaky. “And every other knife-ear here is smart enough to
know it! You think you’re better than them?”

“I think they’re better than you,” you reply, not trying to keep the disgust from your voice. It doesn’t
matter if any of them lose their temper and hit you. It’s not like they’re gonna hurt more than Bull.
“There are dwarves here, too. I’ve seen at least three Qunari; you going to keep them out of the
men’s bath?”

The woman looks livid, but you just keep going. “Gonna get some Chevaliers to enforce it? Oh, but
wait...” You tap your finger against your chin. “You can’t. We’re not in Orlais. We’re in the middle
of fucking nowhere, and you’re powerless.”

The woman raises a hand, as if to slap you, but one of the other women catches it. “Don’t; she just
wants you to.”
“You’ll get yours, knife-ear,” the woman spits instead.

“Go file a complaint with the Commander,” you spit right back.

“I don’t have to,” she says, snapping her hand away from her friend. “These things always take care of themselves.” Then she turns and storms out of the bath. The other women stare for a moment longer before following her out, and the rest of the bathhouse returns to normal, slowly. All of the humans pointedly avoid your gaze... as does the one dwarven woman still in the water, who appears to be attempting to make herself look--ironically--as small as possible.

...Well. That was interesting.

You decide fate is punishing you for putting off the inevitable, and that your day probably can’t actually get much shitter. You dress quickly and head towards the rotunda. At this point you’re heading into work well over an hour later than you usually do. It’s time to face the music.

Solas isn’t at his desk when you walk in. The wine bottle--tellingly--is, however. It’s sitting upright on the corner of the desk; the cups are nowhere in sight. So like Dorian to take his cups and yet leave the empty bottle. You immediately assume that Solas’ absence at his desk means an absence from the rotunda, but that assumption is short lived. Movement draws your eyes towards the edge of the room, where he’s walking, possibly from one door to another. He seems to notice you at about the same time; you take a deep breath and prepare for... you’re not sure. A lecture? Yelling, like when you’d snuck the Qunari into your inn room? Punishment of some kind, such as a removal of any of the things he does for you? Or perhaps just... quiet disappointment. The kind you seem to inspire in him so often.

You’re not expecting what you see on his face first, however, before you can glance away, before you can turn your gaze down to the stone floor. He looks relieved.

It hadn’t occurred to you that he might be. Your mind had been dwelling on the inevitable anger--and you’re sure that will still come. But of course, with your penchant for making terrible decisions, it’s understandable if he had been worried you’d drunk too much and fallen off of something. It wouldn’t be the first time, honestly.

You stare pointedly towards the floor. When it becomes clear you don’t have the guts to speak first, Solas does.

“I’m... surprised to see you upright and intact,” Solas says finally.

“I didn’t drink the whole thing myself!” you blurt out guiltily.


“S-sorry! Dorian came down, and we were talking about the differences between Southern and Tevinter Circles, and well... Well, I...” The truth is, you don’t actually remember anything past that. “I guess the night sort of got away from us.”

Solas lets out a very long sigh. You risk a glance up, and see him rubbing his head. You’ve probably given the poor man a migraine. “Perhaps I should not have given you the entire bottle, but I’ll admit, I did not expect you to drink it all.”

“I’m sorry,” you repeat. “I didn’t intend for us to drink the whole thing.” You’ve gotten really good at technical truths over the years. “I was just going to have enough to help me sleep. I try not to depend on alcohol for that sort of thing, but I thought, since I hadn’t been sleeping well lately, if I could say I slept the whole night--w-which I did, I might add...”
“Unconsciousness is not quite the same thing as sleep,” Solas chides.

“Better than nothing, though, right?” you say with a very sheepish grin. Solas gives you a Look, but then glances away and sighs yet again.

“Are you feeling any more rested?” he asks.

“It’s hard to feel much other than the headache right now,” you admit. “And no, don’t offer to help me with it,” you interrupt as he opens his mouth.

“I was not going to,” he says. “I was going to say that after that much alcohol, you should be grateful a headache is all you have.”

You offer up a guilty grin. “Is it all I have? I thought I’d have an earful, as well.”

“A lecture on top of an aching skull might teach you something resembling a lesson,” Solas says, and you’re amazed to see him actually roll his eyes. The sass is like a breath of fresh air... anything but anger, anything but disappointment. You’ll take it, and gladly. “But neither of us have the luxury of time today.” Solas points over to your desk, and your face falls as your eyes follow his gesture. There’s a message on your desk.

“From Leliana?” you ask with a groan.

“I assume; the messenger was one of hers.”

“Thank you, Solas.” You wander over to the desk. “Perhaps I need a personal assistant.”

Solas chuckles, returning to his own desk. You glance at him over your shoulder. “You were quite good at it in Val Royeaux. Are you looking for a new job?”

Solas snorts, and you smile. Joking is good. Laughing is good.

“You practically do it anyway, making sure I eat, enchanting my wrist, bringing me wine...” you point out, teasingly.

“When you phrase it that way,” Solas says dryly. “Perhaps you should be paying me.”

“Name your price,” you say immediately.

Solas laughs. “I don’t need money, lethallin.”

“I didn’t say anything about money,” you rebut. “I’m serious, Solas. You do me a lot of favors, and I can only think of a few I’ve done for you. If you ever need anything... anything I can even possibly help with...”

“I... Thank you,” he says, seeming slightly taken aback at your sudden turn to seriousness. “I will keep that in mind, should anything come up. But for now, I believe you have a missive.”

“Unfortunately,” you grumble, picking up the message. What th... “This is Tevene,” you say out loud, scowling. “Surely she has other people for this! I’m not a bloody codebreaker!”

“I’m sure she sent it to you for a reason,” Solas says calmly. You only scowl more. Yeah, you’re sure she did too. You just don’t trust her reasons. Nonetheless, you sit down at your desk, moving a few things aside so you have room to work. For someone who wants that book done as soon as possible, she sure loves handing you distractions.
The code isn’t even a tough break. You’ve never seen it before, but it honestly is not that complicated. A spy in training could probably break that... Oh. You suppose that’s probably what you are, to her. She certainly seems to be attempting to yank your chain in that direction. You let out another irritated sigh. Between her and Banal’ras, you’re going to be pulled right back into the thick of things, kicking and screaming. But really... you have only yourself to blame. You practically jumped back in with both feet forward, what with your antics in Val Royeaux. Breaking into the White Spire, freeing an enslaved Qunari... You’ve been doing this shit for too long; it’s become second nature.

The only two people on the delivery list are the Commander and the Spymaster. Easy enough. It’s still very early in the morning, but you’re confident the Commander will be up and about. In fact, judging by the time of day, you might be able to catch him on his morning stroll of the battlements, if you hurry.

Surely enough, you find the Commander walking the exterior wall of Skyhold, taking in the constant construction efforts and some of the troops training in the yard. He’ll probably be down there with them within the hour. But for now, you’ve got him more or less to yourself. Thank the Maker for his punctuality... you could probably set a clock to him.

“Excuse me, Commander?”

“Hm? Oh, Emma.” He looks somewhat pleased to see you. You hate it. “I assume you’re not just here to tell me who won the chess match?”

“Not quite, ser. I’ve got another missive from Leliana. A basic cypher and written in... honestly, in extremely shitty, broken Tevene. Whoever wrote this, they’re not a scholar, that much is certain.”

“Ah, that would be the Venatori,” the Commander says matter-of-factly. You blink. Well, you suppose that does make sense. Even moreso when you take a moment to consider it further. They were trying to bring back the glory days, weren’t they? Makes sense they would speak in broken ancient languages. Same as the Dalish, in a way... though the Dalish, you note, don’t summon demons and go to war to try and bring back the good old days. They just hoard legends, which is a much safer way of doing it. Less effective, maybe, but safer.

Still, the Venatori have no excuse. One can actually still learn ancient Tevene, to a point. But then again, the average cultist probably doesn’t have access to Magister-level educations.

And now that education, given to a Magister’s slave, is screwing them over. Poetic! You like it.

“Thank you, Emma. So... who did win the match?” the Commander asks.

“Solas trounced me utterly,” you reply with a self-derisive chuckle. “I suppose luck only holds out so long. Have you given any more thought to a tournament?”

“Yes, actually!” the Commander says, brightening immediately. “I’d like to put up fliers of some kind, but I feel poorly about the idea of taking a scribe away from their work for something like this... I’ve been trying to do it myself, but ah...” he rubs his neck, almost sheepishly, and you have to struggle to keep a straight face as images of stick figures and squiggles dance through your mind. You’ve no reason to believe the Commander that inept, but it’s an amusing thought nonetheless.

“I’m sure it wouldn’t take very much time for a scribe to throw something together quickly, and surely you have mages that could duplicate the image,” you suggest. “As far as people who needn’t be wasting their time go, you’re near the top.”
“That’s a good point,” the Commander says with a sigh. “But I try not to ask the mages for favors. It’s astounding there are any here at all, really.” You privately agree, but keep your mouth shut on that subject.

“Ask Dorian,” you suggest. “He’ll like the idea as much as you, and if he can’t duplicate them himself, he’ll know someone who can. Or Varric, after he gets back from...” you wave your hand vaguely. “Wherever he is right now. I know he’s got either a mage or an enchanted press hiding around here somewhere.”

The Commander chuckles. “You’re quite good at logistics, aren’t you?”

You blink. “Pardon?”

“One of the first things you did here was find shelter, food, and clothing for refugees. Then jobs for ex-slaves, homes for goats of all things...”

“I just notice things that need doing--” you begin.

“And then immediately come up with a practical solution. It’s a useful trait to have in the Inquisition. I know the circumstances around your joining up were not precisely... ideal...” Is that what they were calling one’s home burning down now? Not ideal? “But we’re lucky to have you.”

“Thank you, Commander,” you say with a bow. It’s the safest thing to say. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to deliver a copy of this to Leliana, as well.”

“Oh... of course,” Commander Rutherford says with a nod. “Thank you.”

--

You’re not pleased to be climbing up to Leliana’s perch, but it’s rather unavoidable, particularly now that you work for her. It’s a reminder of how hard you fucking failed at being a nobody. You’re friends with half of the Inquisitor’s friends! You work for the fucking spymaster! Ugh.

For an “ex-bard,” you’re pretty shit at going unnoticed.

You hand over the translation without incident, giving her a similar rundown to the one you gave the Commander. You don’t mention that he brought up the Venatori. You’re never quite sure what will give you the leg up, particularly with the Spymaster, so you wind up hoarding secrets. You’re certain she does the same.

“How goes your training with the Iron Bull?” she asks, apropos of literally nothing. She catches you off guard, and you blink a few times as you take a moment to recompose yourself. You’d thought yourself in the clear from blowing off Argent after, like, two whole training sessions. Perhaps not.

“I’m not sure that it qualifies as ‘training,’ serah,” you reply. “But it goes well. It certainly wakes me up in the morning.”

“I imagine,” Leliana responds. “And the tome?”

“Well enough,” you say with a slight frown. “There are distractions, of course...” Like this bullshit. But you definitely don’t say that.

“Do you have an estimate for how long until it’s complete?”

“A week, perhaps? Less, if I push myself. The translation is complete, as are the illustrations. It’s all
calligraphy from here, and then binding. I’m assuming you have a person who makes duplicates?”

“Magically, you mean?”

“It will take a great deal longer to have a copy to send to the Inquisitor’s draconologist if we have to do them by hand,” you say with a thin smile.

“Have the pages sent to Dagna when you finish,” is the only answer she gives you. Dagna? Not where you would have thought to send pages for copy, but alright.

“I’ll take them myself,” you reply, and you mean it. Those pages aren’t leaving your fucking sight for a single second. You intend to keep the original, after all. Copies can be made for the draconologist and the Inquisition. Not an issue, considering you’ll be the one binding them.

“Don’t injure yourself, but finish it,” Leliana tells you firmly. You wonder if the need for it has become more dire, or if she simply wants you available for more of whatever nonsense she has in mind.

“Yes, serah.”

You’re dismissed, and you head back down the steps somewhat irritably. Meetings with the Spymaster always seem to put you in a certain mood, particularly since you got back from Val Royeaux. She’s essentially been poking you with a stick, and the both of you know it. It gets tiring, and it gets annoying. If it was just the missives, that would be tolerable, but that business with Argent had been equal parts irritating and worrying. And she’d had agents watching your training with Bull, ones that you noticed, but ones that were taking some effort not to be seen.

You’re damn lucky Banal’ras covered his tracks with you in Val Royeaux, or you’d be under painful--literally--amounts of scrutiny right about now. Does Leliana know about the dead soldiers yet? Will she wonder if you had anything to do with it? Half a dozen men dead either in or just outside of Val Royeaux... But hopefully, she doesn’t know of your bardic connections at all. Solas is the only one in the Inquisition with that particular knowledge, unless something’s gone horribly wrong. And hopefully he hasn’t already spilled the first damn secret you told him.

What in the Maker’s name had those soldiers done? To piss Banal’ras off badly enough that he slaughtered all six, leaving no warning, no message other than a calling card? And for him to leave a calling card, it would have had to have been an action against an elf, or elves.

You don’t know how much you trust his judgment, but he can’t have changed that much in the time you’ve been away from Val Royeaux. And judging by the kind of dangerous morons you’d run into in the ranks here, you can just imagine the fuckery they’d gotten up to.

Despite the chaos of the last twelve hours, when you finally get back to the rotunda, you’re able to actually buckle down to work. Solas places a quick enchantment onto your wrist, for which you thank him. Then--Leliana’s words sharp in your mind--you absolutely tear through pages. You complete each one in its entirety just to break up the monotony of constant writing, adding some decor and borders to each page. It slows your pace considerably, but you’ll be damned if you’re going to have a subpar book with your name attached to it. The Inquisition sent you to Orlais for two weeks. They’ll just have to deal with any delays due to that.

You barely remember to stop for lunch, but you do, scurrying to the kitchens and back with Solas’ meal. You almost want to take yours at your desk so you can keep working, but the sight of “your” stool at Solas’ desk stops you. And when you start bringing over some of your work to his desk, he gives you a Look. You sigh.
“Leliana told me to hurry, you know,” you inform him sourly as you sit down to eat--and not work.

“I sincerely doubt she wishes you to work unceasing. And if she does, she’ll simply have to be disappointed,” Solas says, and that’s that. You force yourself to eat at a decent speed rather than rush through your meal, and clean up his dishes and yours before tearing back to your desk to continue working.

Solas’ enchantment lasts you all through the afternoon. You can feel it beginning to wear right around the time you stop for dinner. You’re almost relieved. Your shoulder is killing you and your eyes are weary from squinting. You’ll likely work after dinner, but at a more leisurely pace. You’re getting fatigued more quickly than you’re used to--likely the lack of sleep. Every now and then you get hit with a wave of exhaustion--and often nausea--and have to just pause to regain yourself.

Despite how tired you are, and how your stomach complains, you force yourself to eat a decent--if small--supper with Solas. If Solas notices the way you pick at your food, he doesn’t comment on it. You try to get back to work after cleaning up the dishes, but it is--as you suspected--slow going. The enchantment is still there, but thinning, and the rest of your body is complaining, loudly, about your the treatment you’ve been giving it as of late. Your head begins to throb and your vision blurs as you try to focus on the page in front of you. How long has it been since you slept? Weeks? You try to count the times your mind touched the Fade in the last month.

You wonder if Solas would let you take that enchanted blanket of his back to your room, to use in privacy. But no, after the scare from last time, there’s no way he would risk it. If you let your aura out one night to sleep, would you be discovered? Yes, all it would take is a mage passing by your window in the night, a Templar doing exercises nearby. You can’t take that kind of a risk, just for one night’s sleep.

Why did they have to send Solas with you to Val Royeaux? You could have... could have slept... No, if Solas hadn’t been there, all of your companions would be dead on the road and you would be long gone.

Your mind is spinning in circles like a confused halla on ice, scrambling frantically yet getting nowhere. You lay your head down on the desk, just for a moment, cradling it in your arms. You want to sleep.

You wait for the wave of dizziness to pass, then pull your head up, grasp your quill again, and continue working on your tome.

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You head to bed when Solas does, and only because you know that if you stayed, he’d pitch a fit. Or the Solas equivalent, anyway, which tends to be more passive aggressive than an actual fit. He’d rarely raised his voice to you. The only time you can remember him really laying into you was when you’d snuck Sataareth in the inn room window. Maker, that had really been something.

You would have preferred to remain there working all night. It isn’t as though there’s any real point to your nightly trek to your room to lie mostly-conscious on a cold, uncomfortable bed for six hours. Other than allowing you to change clothes and keep up the appearance of a normal person. But that’s reason enough, in the end, so you say goodnight to Solas and head out across the frigid courtyard.

It’s still early in Kingsway, but you’re certain that you’ll be ankle deep in snow by next month, ancient magical weather enchantments or no. You wrap your arms around yourself and walk a little faster as a biting wind whips through Skyhold. You bought a proper jacket in Val Royeaux. Time to start using it.
“Heeeey there li’l rabbit, where you off to in such a hurry?”

Oh great. Drunken slurring. Just the cherry on top of your shitty, shitty day. You keep walking, hoping to get nothing more than a few angry slurs thrown your way.

“Don’t run away, li’l rabbit, we just wanna have some fun--” you feel a hand on your arm and snap away, spinning around as you do so. Drunken words you can ignore. Drunken grabbing, not so much.

You find you recognize one of the men. Lawrence Underhill, your mind supplies helpfully. The man you’d kicked off an escort job. He’d slurred at you as you climbed a wall, he’d drunkenly shouted at you at least once since. Apparently some of these bastard soldiers just make a habit of drunkenly harassing elven women... which is a worry. How many elves who weren’t you had they grabbed at? Ones who couldn’t defend themselves, or were too scared to? You don’t have long to consider it, however, because apparently, he recognizes you as well.

“Ah, fuck, it’s that uppity bitch,” he spits. You’ve been remembered worse ways, honestly. “That knife-eared apostate’s whore.” Like that. You grit your teeth as power throbs inside you, reminding you of how easy it would be, whispering in your ear about how much better the world would be if you made like your friend in Val Royeaux, if you made an example out of these scumbag soldiers.

“Elves fucking elves,” the other one--the one you don’t recognize--says, curling his nose in disgust. “Only a matter of time before she’s knocked up with a brood. You should do yourself a favor, lady. I’ll fill you up loads better, and a elf-blooded bastard is still better than a knife-eared--”

“One more fucking word,” you snarl. “And you won’t be siring any children.”

“Are you threatening harm to an Inquisition soldier, knife-ear?” Underhill asks arrogantly.

“Are you threatening to rape an Inquisition agent?” you spit back. He seems momentarily taken aback by the bluntness of your words. He recovers quickly, however.

“Like I’d even stick it in, whore,” he snaps.

“Then go back to your fucking barracks and jerk each other off,” you hiss. “I don’t have time for the half-cocked posturing of dogs no one’s bothered to neuter yet!”

The response is stunned silence. You doubt that will last, however, so you decide to leave now before it gets uglier.

Too late for that, it would seem. You get only a few steps away before you feel an arm close around both of yours, gripping them behind your back. It’s the stupidest thing the man could have done. Your vision flashes red; suddenly the cold air feels hot and sticky, full of rain that has yet to fall. The humid heat of a Seheron jungle in the summer. Instincts kick in. And you’re used to wrestling with a Qunari.

You slam a heel into his foot, and hear a sharp curse of pain. The grip loosens slightly, but he decides to make his bad decision worse by wrapping his right arm around your neck, wooden bar of a spear, tight, this is it, this is how you fucking die--

You slam your head backwards. Where on Bull it would have bounced uselessly off his chest, it hits this man square in the face. Your head throbs painfully, but you hear a crunch, a cry of pain. The grip on your arms loosens, and with a savage, full body flail, you wrench them free. Immediately your hands fly to the arm around your neck. You grip the wrist, the forearm, and twist, yanking it
away from your neck. His arm is extended over your shoulder now, palm upwards, and you slam the
back of his elbow down on your shoulder as hard as you can. On Bull, it would have been painful,
enough to make him swear and jerk his arm away. On this human, it is beyond that, and as you
throw your weight up against the bend of his arm, forcing it to bend the wrong way, you hear a loud,
satisfying snap, followed immediately by a blood-curdling scream. It fits right into the fog-filled
jungles where your mind currently resides.

You glance over your shoulder once, register the man as incapacitated as he staggers backwards,
clutching his arm, which is currently bent in a way arms were very much not meant to bend.
“Elbows don’t go that way,” Cole would have said. Then you bolt, the agility you’ve refused to
show to Bull, Argent, Leliana--even Solas--propelling you rapidly across the courtyard. You don’t
look back again, just tear into the nearest door, slam it behind you, and keep running.

--

It takes you a while to come back to reality. When you do, you find yourself in a dark corner, a part
of Skyhold you don’t recognize. Your arms sting where they were grabbed, the back of your skull
aches, and you just broke a man’s arm over your shoulder.

Worse, a soldier’s. That was likely his sword arm. What, you wonder, is the punishment for breaking
a soldier’s arm during wartime? Whipping? Having your own arm broken? Being injured, being
refused healing magic? You could run... No, you could explain to the Commander. He knows the
man’s friend has had issue with you in the past. Would he believe your word over theirs?

Their word... You realize that you’re being foolish. Would a soldier admit that he’d had his arm
broken by an elven woman while he was attempting to brutalize, possibly rape her? Or would he,
like you, make up a believable lie to avoid scrutiny by the healers, as well as mockery from his
peers? You are, after all, a rather scrawny elven woman. It isn’t commonly known that you spend
your mornings practicing hand-to-hand combat techniques with a Ben-Hassrath “turned” mercenary.
It would be humiliating, and furthermore, if you came forward with the bruises now forming on your
arms and around your neck, he would have a broken arm and a lot of trouble.

He will probably lie.

You quietly resolve to do nothing about it unless the man acts first. You would rather avoid it
becoming well known that you snapped a man’s arm... rather avoid the fuss and attention that comes
with an accusation of assault. You hold your arms tight as you wander through the corridors of
Skyhold until you find a familiar part... from there you make your way to your room, jumping at
shadows and occasionally breaking into quiet runs when something spooks you.

Your door doesn’t have a lock, but you move your large, heavy chest in front of it. It’s not
reasonable or logical, but it makes you feel slightly better. You tear your cloak out from under your
bed and toss it over your window, hoping that it will block the cold air somewhat. Then you wrap
yourself in a cocoon of blankets and sit on the far corner of your bed, knees tucked up to your chest,
to wait out the night.

Chapter End Notes

Phew! That was a wild ride. Feel free to leave your reactions below in the form of a
comment. :P If you like my writing and want to read more, or get swag, or learn how to
support, feed, or even just follow me on a bunch of social media, check out my
Consequences

Chapter Notes

TWs here for blood, violence, racism, dissociation, and Just General Unpleasantness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You don't sleep that night. That's not really surprising. You don't sleep most nights, and certainly not when you've had such a fright right before bed. You spend the night curled up in the corner of your room, eyes flickering between your covered window and your chest-barricaded door, as if expecting someone to come bursting through to assault you further.

You can't decide whether or not you should attend training with the Iron Bull. You'd be jumpy, and he'd be able to tell. He's been good about not asking questions lately... but you can't forget that he can get answers out of you when he wants them. He would certainly be able to get an answer out of you about this... you half want to tell him anyway. You resolve to just stay in your damn room until a more reasonable hour. Then you can just go straight to the rotunda. You don't think Solas will notice your mood quite so much, especially if you just keep your head down and work.

The birds begin chirping outside your window perhaps half an hour before dawn, a reminder of Banal'ras' little gift and all the troubles it would bring on your doorstep. Just when you don't need trouble, too... These things always did sort themselves out. An ordinary elven upstart would be in bad shape now, whether those men just wanted to rough you up or something worse. And even in defending yourself, you may have created just as much trouble.

Lost in your own dark thoughts, still curled up against the wall on the corner of your bed, you nearly jump out of your skin when a knock comes on the door. Panic clenches your heart like an iron fist. Fuck. No one ever knocks on your door! Who could that be? The Commander, or someone who works for him? Some agent of the Inquisition come to inform you that you'd been named as the person who'd broken a soldier's arm?

You don't want to answer it. You sit, frozen, on your bed, undecisive. You can't just dive out the window--your ass wouldn't fit anymore, for one. You've gained weight since you arrived at Skyhold.

"Emma? You in there?"

To your shock, it's the Iron Bull's voice. Of course... you missed practice. The sun is now beginning to climb over the horizon and about now, you'd normally be eating breakfast, or taking a bath to avoid eating breakfast. He probably wanted to see if you were sick or something. You don't even bother unwrapping yourself in your blanket before stumbling to the door. You pause, having to shove the chest away from the door--with great effort, damn thing was heavy--before opening it. You do so slowly, half expecting him to have someone with him. "Fortunately," it's just him.

"Bull?"

"There you are! I wanted to make sure you hadn't fallen off of something. Almost checked the healing tent first." The Iron Bull is almost comically large in the narrow hallway. You'd thought you'd gotten used to the sight of this Qunari, at least, but the sharp reminder of his size makes you
feel slightly ill.

"No, I'm just... not feeling well," you say, a little more curtly than intended. You don't like having the door open.

"Maybe you should go to the healers’ tent, then," he suggests. You scowl.

"No need to bother the healers; I'm just feeling a little under the... How did you even know where my room was?"

"Ben-hassrath, remember?"

As if you would ever forget. Your scowl deepens. "That's the opposite of comforting, Bull. Why would anyone want to hear that the Ben-hassrath took time to ensure he knew where they slept?"

Iron Bull chuckles. "Actually, I just made a point of asking Thea, after you started making a habit of drinking until you were damn near unconscious."

Yeah, fair. You rarely ever made it back to your room after a night drinking at the tavern. You’d woken up in Bull's room, in Revas' stall in the stables, in an elven pile with Dalish and Skinner... but rarely in your own bedroom.

“Look, I’m sorry I missed practice. I just felt a bit ill and wanted to stay in bed. I’d still be there if Leliana wasn’t riding me to finish the manuscript.” That’s true, actually. You’re not looking forward to crossing the wide open courtyard, even in broad daylight. Right now it feels like every corner could be filled with a pissed off racist.

“Ill, huh? I’ve never heard of a sickness that could give you a bruise necklace like that,” Bull says, pointing a single finger down at your neck. You immediately pull the blanket up higher, instinctually, frowning.

“You probably did that. I get more than my fair share of bruises practicing with you. Solas has even lectured me for it.”

“He has, has he?”

“I’ll put balm on it,” you say shortly.

“Emma, if something happened--”

“I’m fine Bull!” you snap. “I’m just sick! It’s been known to happen!”

You’re not the best liar when under this kind of strain, but Bull seems to take the point... or at least understand that he’s not getting anything out of you right then. “Alright, alright. You wanna grab some breakfast, or are you just gonna go back to bed?”

“I...” you take a deep breath. “I'm just gonna lay back down for a bit.”

You sink down against the door as soon as you close it. Well Bull definitely knows something’s up. You rub a hand along the painful bruises on your neck. You want to put balm on them, want to forget they’re there, but you might need them if that asshole goes to the Commander. As much as you hate it, they’re evidence you can’t really afford to lose until you know you’re in the clear. So instead you just change into clean clothes, including a tunic with long sleeves and a high collar. It’s cold enough that no one will even bat an eye. In fact, you pull on the coat you got in Val Royeaux over it, just for good measure.
You don’t want to go to breakfast, but you also don’t want to head straight for the rotunda. You’re still a bit shaky, and Solas is almost as insightful as Bull. And Bull had seen through you in about three seconds. While you can snap at Bull to get him to back off, you seriously doubt that would work nearly as well on Solas. Even if it worked, you’d feel terrible about it all day. Instead, you take to the walls. There aren’t too many people up there this early, just the early morning shift guards, and they’re very sparsely placed. It feels safer than wandering around the courtyard or the castle, where there are more nooks and crannies to get caught in. Sometimes exposed is good. The only person you really run the risk of bumping into up here is the Commander on his morning stroll... and frankly, that man wouldn’t know your moods if you screamed them in his face. He still hasn’t figured out you don’t actually like playing chess with him.

And the walk does help. The air is crisp and clean, if cold. It’s a far, far cry from the dank humidity of Seheron, and the briskness helps clear the fog from your exhausted mind. Unfortunately, there’s one thing you hadn’t quite taken into consideration. Guards. Soldiers. What were the odds that there would be someone who didn’t like you standing guard that morning?

Just high enough as it turns out.

Because the Maker has a personal vendetta against you Lawrence Underhill is on guard duty that morning. Something you don’t realize until you’re walking by him, halfway oblivious to his presence, and hear a hissed, “you’ll get yours, knife-eared bitch.”

You freeze in your tracks, momentarily bewildered as to where it had come from. It was like the air of Skyhold itself had decided it hated you. But no, you realize where it came from quickly, and as he half turns to glare at you, you recognize his face.

“How’s your friend?” you reply coldly. “Did the healers see to him, or did they put him down for dog food like a lame horse?”

Underhill makes an aborted move towards you; you take half a step backwards. But he seems to think better of it. “You just wait, you whore. You can’t hide behind your betters forever. We’ll get you eventually, and make sure you suffer for it.”

Something snaps in your mind, like a thrown switch. Your panic is gone as if it were never there. In its place is a familiar, comforting, cold logic. You glance down the battlements in both directions. There are no other guards close enough to see... Which is doubtlessly why he decided to speak up now. Escaping would be easy, probably just a matter of walking away. But that's just delaying the problem... A man like this is a knife in the dark. You'd rather not sit back and wait for him to find the perfect time to strike. He's the idiot for showing his hand early, and making such a plausible, immediate threat out of himself.

You eye him coldly, the bland stare that men who try to intimidate and bully inevitably hate. "Eventually? You'll 'get' me eventually.' How terrifying. Will it be before or after I die of old age? Honestly, if you want a broken arm too, just roll down the stairs; Skyhold has plenty of them."

"Listen, you fucking knife-eared bitch-" Underhill hisses, moving in closer, hand reaching towards his blade. That won’t do. A knife fight on the battlements is the last thing you need.

"Knife-ear this, knife-ear that," you say, boredom dripping from your voice. You step in closer, a single deft hand hooking around his belt. It’s clear Underhill was expecting anything but that. He should have known better after seeing what you’d done to his friend, honestly. But men, particularly this breed of brash human man, are woefully predictable. You drop your voice into a more sultry tone. "So fixated. I know what you’re after." Swift fingers work the leather around his sword sheath as the other hand pulls him closer by his belt, taking advantage of his confusion. He notices only
when the weight of his sword drops from his waist, but by then, it's too late. You deftly toss the blade, sheath and all, over the battlements down to smash on the rock below.

"Oops."

The man is furious. He reaches for your neck, you smack his hands to the side. You have more than enough power to do so after well over a month of training with a Qunari twice his bulk. "You're all the same," you taunt. "Too inadequate to please a human woman, so you chase after the wee little elven girls." He lunges, again to grab, not to strike. You side step. Not good enough. "I'll let you in on a secret, shemlen." You spit the word like an oath. "You're not man enough to please the elven women, either. Even we need something with more... substance."

You only move your face slightly to effect where his furious swing strikes. Your pride won't allow you to lose any teeth over this.

You allow him to bloody you quite effectively, having worked him into a rage. He's too furious to notice that you won't allow him to grab you by the neck or pin you, that you let him batter one eye, but keep the other fresh so that you can see. Even as he punches you into the ground, climbing on top of you, he doesn't notice your knee dangerously close to his groin, an emergency exit should you need it. He's too far gone to notice that even as you lay on the ground underneath him, you twist your arms, deflecting the worst of the blows to avoid becoming disoriented. You pace the beating out, making him work for it.

Still, it's beginning to go from "very painful" into "crippling". Hopefully the Commander hasn't picked today to delay his walk, because another two minutes of this and you'll be paste.

"What is the meaning of this?!" A familiar voice rings across the battlements. Just like clockwork, bless that man's heart. You relax slightly against the stone ground. The soldier straddling you freezes halfway through the act of pulling you up towards his fist by your shirt, tearing it. You risk one, single, bloody, mocking grin before dropping into the act of a terrified servant. Let him know that you know exactly what you’ve done. It’s too late for him.

You can say one thing for Underhill: he's dedicated to his hatred. He strikes you one last time before Cullen reaches the two of you, and you let him catch your good eye, knowing that your rescue is at hand. Two black eyes will look less suspicious, anyway. You hear a crack; not your face, but his hand. He'd hit you hard enough to break a finger; you wonder briefly if you've broken any bones to this, as well. The raging man is literally dragged off you by an equally furious Commander Rutherford.

"Commander," the man begins, glancing between his bloodied fists and your bloodied face. There's no excuse for this, and all three of you know it.

"One more word, and I'll run you through right here," the Commander swears between clenched teeth, voice dark and low. You feel a flush coming on despite the pain you're in... He sounds good mad, and that vengeance directed at your enemy is oh, so sweet. It's all you can do not to grin like the wicked little fiend you feel like in that moment. You had expected the Commander to find you beaten, but in the act? It was the best outcome. But you have to play your part.

It’s rare enough anyone cares that you’re beaten bloody and raw; this isn’t something you get to pull often. Might as well enjoy it, play it up a little bit. You took a beating for it, after all.

"Commander," you whimper, and when he glances your way, you force a tear out of your bloodied eye. It’s not difficult; you actually are in quite a lot of pain, and adrenaline only goes so far. You make a show of trying to move, and the murderous look in the Commander’s eyes as he surveys
"Emma," the Commander breathes, caught between horror and fury. His eyes swing back to the man, who's slowly realizing just how poor of a position he's in. Of course, he doesn’t grasp what you always knew... He was dead from the moment he made himself a genuine threat. It was only a matter of how to drop the axe.

"Move, and I'll string you up myself," he hisses to the man, before dropping him unceremoniously on the ground. The Commander closes the distance between the two of you in one long step, kneeling down beside you to check the severity of your injuries. It looks worse than it is, of course... After daily sparring with a Qunari--and now fucking Skinner--you know how to take a beating, and frankly, you've always been good at managing pain.

"I'm... I'm alright," you choke, managing to spit up some blood right as you speak. You don't really need to play it up as much as you are; at this point you're just enjoying yourself. Fury is a good look on the Commander. It's a fantastic feeling to see the rage of a Templar turned against your enemies, for once. This might be the first time you've managed it.

The Commander swears, loudly. Hate burning in his eyes, his hand goes to the hilt of his sword, and for a moment, you believe he really is going to run the man through right there. He doesn't get the chance, however. One of the many messengers who inevitably hover around the Commander chooses that moment to run up, and is horrified by what she sees.

"Maker!" the woman swears. "What... what happened?" You feel it should be somewhat obvious.

"Get some guards," the Commander snarls at the woman. You're glad not to be in her shoes. He’s a damn scary man, as much as he seems to think he’s not, most days. He turns back to you, voice still hard. "Be still. I mean it."

You wouldn't move if someone kicked you.

He turns back to the man, watching him until the woman returns with guards, both of whom look at you and lose the color in their face. You must look really bad. You run careful fingers across your face and wince. Your nose is certainly broken, and your hand comes back covered in blood. One eye is rapidly swelling shut, and your shirt is dramatically torn in front. Yeah... You're a mess. You just hope they get you to a healer before Solas has the chance to see you like this.

"Take this man straight to the dungeon," the Commander orders the guards. "He's to be locked away until the Inquisitor returns and we decide what to do with him." The guards both nod quickly, and they and the messenger scurry off with Underhill--the prisoner--in tow. Heh. Prisoner. Again, you remind yourself that the time for smug self-satisfaction will come later.

You shouldn't be startled when Commander Rutherford picks you up, but you are. There's no warning; one moment he's glaring at the man being dragged off, the next he's beside you, arms slipping under your shoulders and knees.
"C-Commander!" you protest. "I can walk!"

"The last time you said that to me, it turned out you had a dislocated hip," he says firmly. "You're clearly a poor judge."

He has you there.

"This is my fault," he snarls as he carries you down the stairs into the courtyard. "I knew that man would be a problem after he was taken off the escort job. He was clearly angry. I should have discharged him the first time."

"If you discharged every man who was rude to me, you'd have a very small army," you joke, wiping away blood that's dripping too close to your good eye.

The Commander's face is still serious, and he looks you dead in the eye. "I knew there had been incidents, but... nothing like this. This... I will deal with such things seriously in the future. You have my word."

You're momentarily stunned, mind floating halfway back to reality from whatever land of blood and strategy it inhabited in times like these. Could your petty vengeance actually make an improvement for the elves in Skyhold? It would be almost too good to be true. Likely, he's all talk, speaking in the heat of the moment. Even if he tries briefly, you doubt it will go far. There's a lot working against good intentions in this world. Still. You're amazed he even thought to offer. You'd assumed his anger was mostly because he knew you personally. You weren't just a servant, you were Emma, Who Plays Chess. A person. Your one remaining eye narrows slightly, as if searching for the trap. But there doesn't appear to be one. He's barely even looking at you, instead focused on getting across the courtyard as quickly as possible.

"I... Thank you, Cullen. Commander," you correct yourself. "You're... you're a good man." You glance away quickly, embarrassed by your own words, and how close you'd come to meaning them.

Fortunately for your embarrassment, you’ve reached the healer’s tent. Maker, these people must be absolutely sick of you. But you receive no jokes about how you got your injuries when carried in by the Commander himself. Cullen sticks around only long enough to see you in capable hands and learn that your injuries aren’t severe or life-threatening, and then he’s gone. He likely has more important things to deal with, or, possibly, is off to do something about the soldier who put you in this state.

Either way, your pain quickly recedes to a more manageable amount as first healing magic, and then the gentle touch of a medic soothes your injuries. Magic is only used for the worst of it, as well it should be. Once your nose is unbroken, and the swelling reduced somewhat, the rest can be handled with a cold compress (the benefit of living in such a snowy area) and bandages. You suspect your friends will kick up a fuss when they see you next, even with the worst of the damage healed. You barely pay any mind to the variety of healers who hover about you. You can’t believe their numbers; you’ve got something like three healers on you at one point. You’re particularly annoyed by their attentions, given the fact you know Krem is in here, in Maker only knows what kind of condition. You try to assure them that it looks worse than it is, once, but you’re only shushed. After that, you simply let them bandage you in peace. Fortunately, your jaw is fine and you didn’t lose any teeth (though one is feeling a little loose, to your infinite displeasure) so you’re fully capable of chewing up the herbs they give you for the pain. They make you feel even more exhausted, but you can hardly afford to fall asleep here, as much of a relief as that might be. There are mages about, ones who have every reason to prod your sleeping body with magic and stumble over something you don’t want them to.
There are protests, but you overrule them, and you leave the healer’s tent with only bandages and strict instructions to come back that evening.

You had expected your friends to be angry when they saw you, but you quickly realize the implications of your beating are going to spread a little further and more rapidly than you’d originally anticipated. The humans look shocked, but the first few elves you see are already whispering. Who had spilled the beans, you wonder? The messenger who’d tripped over you, Underhill, and the Commander had been an elf. She could have told someone. There were easily a dozen elves in the healing tent, including the mage who’d first healed you... you think. You can’t actually remember her face very clearly. Or perhaps it’s simpler than even that... and the other elves know what to think of an extremely battered elven woman.

You sigh slightly. The rumor mill is certainly going to have a blast with this one. How long before you have a very angry Iron Bull to deal with? Not to mention Solas... ugh. You decide to avoid the rotunda a bit longer, even though that strategy had put you in this position to begin with. You just don’t know what you’re going to say to him. He already knows you’re a wicked little thing, to some degree. He knows you can handle yourself in a fight. Will he believe you had simply been jumped and beaten? Do you want him to? You honestly don’t know how much you want to tell him.

You sit on a bench in the shade of the one of the many large stone buildings in Skyhold, kicking at the ground with your feet and just trying to stay out of sight. You run your fingers along the bandages on your face, examining the damage. The most embarrassing part is the way the bandages cover your nose. The break has been healed with magic—an entirely unpleasant sensation you hope to avoid in the future—but it’s still quite painful to the touch even with the medicine you took. The eye that was only punched once is perfectly serviceable, but the other one has been bandaged over to prevent infection from setting in. It will be a strain to work with only one eye.

Your face is the worst part... he’d been focusing there, and you could only deflect so much while still making it an effective beating. Your arms had been quite battered... all defensive injuries from blocking and shielding yourself. You’d been given some basic healing followed by a rather unpleasantly sticky coating of some kind of elfroot poultice, then bandaged. Tellingly, perhaps, was the fact that your hands were undamaged. You hadn’t thrown a single blow. Fortunately, that means you’ll have no issues writing.

All in all, you decide after examining yourself, you’ve had worse. You’re honestly more concerned about the anger of your friends. You don’t feel bad for Underhill, of course, but you’re starting to wonder if he’s going to be alive for the Inquisitor to deal with. Solas is first and forefront in your fears. You don’t think he’ll yell at you, but you remember that time with the Chevalier who backhanded you. If you hadn’t stopped him, Maker only knows was Solas would have done to the man. Apostates could be a bit unpredictable in that area, and while Solas didn’t seem to have too bad of a temper, he was a very powerful mage.

And even the Commander had been livid to see what had been done to you... Hopefully you didn’t look quite so bad now that you’d been bandaged up, but bandages looked bad in their own way. You were certainly going to be a sight with your face like this.

In the end it’s only realizing that it’s almost lunch time that gets you moving. You don’t particularly want to head to the kitchens looking like this. If news hasn’t already spread, that’s a way to guarantee everyone in the entire castle knows about what happened within the bloody hour. So instead, you head directly towards the rotunda, steeling yourself for whatever Solas’ reaction might be.
Sorry for the delay on this one, and sorry that it's a bit on the shorter side. I was going to have it be longer, but then I decided, nah. :P

If you like my work, please click this for links on how you can find more or support me!
While whispers erupt around you wherever you walk, it seems as though the news hasn’t yet reached Solas, judging by his reaction when he sees you. He’s at his desk, not sitting, but leaning over it, sleeves rolled up. A cursory glance is enough for you to tell why, even with only a single eye working. He’s painting something... with the box of water colors you’d gotten for him in Val Royeaux. Your flush of happiness at the sight, however, is quickly washed away by the expression on his face when he glances over his shoulder to see who entered.

His eyes widen, his jaw goes slack, and he actually drops the brush he was holding. You smile nervously as it clatters to the floor, still uncertain as to what kind of a reaction, precisely, you’re about to see when the shock wears off.

“What... what happened?” he chokes out, staring a moment longer before crossing the rotunda in quick strides.

“A man named Lawrence Underhill. He happened to my face, actually, with great enthusiasm.” you reply. You hadn’t banked on exactly how awkward it would be to tell people what happened— you’d been so busy celebrating your victory that you’d barely even formulated anything resembling a story.

“You’re joking now? No, never mind.” Solas reaches towards your bandaged face, but stops just shy of touching you... which you appreciate, actually, since you’re still a bit tender despite the herbs you were given. You feel... well tenderized, in general. “Someone did this? You were attacked, here?”

“Yes,” you reply as evenly as you can. Solas’ eyes are blown quite wide, and you think he’s a bit more pale than usual. You haven’t exactly looked in a mirror, but just judging from the reactions you’ve been getting since Underhill took to your face, you must be quite the sight. “On the battlements. Luckily, the Commander happened by during the, uh... struggle.”

“A soldier? Templar?”

“Soldier.” Solas’ hands catch your shoulders as you learn forward a bit too far. You’d barely even noticed you were teetering. “He and I had less than pleasant interactions in the past. I may have said some slightly rude things about his manhood.”
“That is no excuse for this!” Solas almost hisses, but it doesn’t alarm you since it’s not aimed at you. “Ah... sit down, you’re nearly falling over.”

“It’s just the medicine,” you assure him as he leads you to the couch, one arm wrapped around yours as if you’re an infirm old lady. “I’m actually not that badly injured; it’s all face and arms.” You flop down on the couch, then hold up your hands, wiggling your perfectly intact fingers. “See? All good.”

“...Yes,” Solas says, and you register belatedly that his tone is a bit steely. “Such a relief that your fingers are intact.”

“W-well... it’s the important part...” you mutter. You realize it’s the wrong thing to say as soon as it leaves your lips.

“Is it? Your hands? Not your skull?”

“I... um.”

“Perhaps you need a basic anatomy lesson, Emma. Your skull is where your mind is,” he says icily. “Without that, your hands will do remarkably little.”

“Sorry,” you mumble sheepishly, intertwining your hands nervously. You had walked in ready for a lecture, but forgotten to guard against it that quickly in the face of his concern.

Solas sighs. “No, I shouldn’t be scolding. You said the Commander interrupted? So I take it the man has already been dealt with.”

You nod, and regret it somewhat as it makes your head spin a little. “The Commander arrested him.”

Solas looks slightly displeased. Perhaps he, like you, had been halfway hoping for a bit of on-the-spot justice dispensation. But you’re quite content with what you got. That man isn’t going to be getting out of jail anytime soon. You have at least until the Inquisitor gets back, and even then, you sincerely doubt he’ll risk keeping the man as a soldier... or even alive, hopefully. You may need to set a few discontented whispers going around, so that they can reach the ears of the Spymaster and Lady Montiliyet, but... You may barely have to do anything, if you look as bad as everyone seems to think.

“You ought to have stabbed him,” Solas says with a scowl. “I hope you didn’t refrain merely because you were worried about the consequences.”

“I wasn’t expecting him to actually take a swing at me,” you lie. Even if you were going to tell him the truth, this wouldn’t be the place for it. “He caught me off guard, and the first hit to my face disoriented me.”

There are holes in your story, ones only Solas could pick out. He knows your history as a bard. While it’s possible for you to be caught off guard and disoriented, he—and only he—would know it was unlikely. And honestly, if he wants to quiz you in Elven, you would probably tell him the truth... or a version of it. But you can’t, not in Common and right underneath the Spymistress’ nose.

But if Solas does think anything odd about your story, he isn’t questioning you now. “I’ll send for lunch,” he says. “Do you mind if I take a look?” he asks, gesturing at your face. “I won’t remove the bandages, but I’d like to examine the damage... and the healing.”

“You don’t think the healers did a good job?” you ask, though you have no real objection.
“I think that they let you out alarmingly quickly,” he replies. “Were it me, I would have kept you in bed for at least a day.”

You... don’t even think you can form a coherent response to that. “Go ahead,” you say instead, gesturing to your head.

Solas kneels down on the ground in front of the couch before taking your face--very gently--into his hands. You hadn’t been completely prepared for that, and you suspect he can probably feel your heartbeat in your ears. Maker, being high isn’t helping at all. In the end you just close your eyes as you feel his magic gently press into your skin, not trusting yourself to be able to maintain any kind of dignity.

“How’s the damage?” you ask, to distract yourself from the sensation. You can’t say you actually like the feeling of his aura probing around your skull. It’s making you feel dizzy. Fortunately, your aura is at a comfortable medium, not so anemic that it’s starving, nor overly fat and in need of exercise. And frankly, you’ve gotten good at dodging Solas. You can predict the way he’ll move.

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“Considerable, judging by the amount of healing they piled into you,” Solas replies. “Was this soldier armed?”

“Only with fists and righteous fury,” you reply. “Fortunately.” You crack one eye open. Solas is giving you a look that, quite plainly, says he thinks you’re not telling him something. You can’t blame him; he’s right. You force yourself to hold eye contact with him for several seconds longer than you’re comfortable with, then, pointedly, look upwards. He follows your gaze briefly, then drops his eyes back to yours.

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“Fortunate indeed,” he replies finally, then falls silent as he continues his prodding. Finally, he sighs. “The healers did adequately, given their capabilities. Your body can only take so much healing in one sitting, especially given your...” he pauses. “...Frame.”

“Is... that your delicate way of calling me underweight?” you ask, almost laughing at the absurdity of it.

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“You make me dizzier. “I’ll have you know I’ve gained considerable weight since I’ve been here.”

“Solas!” you exclaim, then laugh. It makes you dizzier. “I’ll have you know I’ve gained considerable weight since I’ve been here.”

“I actually think you’re correct, which makes your current weight no less alarming,” Solas replies dryly. “Regardless, if you have no protests, I can layer in some slow healing that will not tax your limited resources overmuch.”

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“Alright,” you agree, almost without thinking about it. That kind of magic would normally make you nervous, particularly on your skull, but after the small miracle he performed on your hands, you’re willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps you shouldn’t. You can certainly hear warning bells ringing deafeningly in your ears as his magic seeps into your flesh and bones. Now that you realize what he’s doing, however, you can investigate the magic yourself. Maybe you’ll even learn something. You don’t know a damn thing about healing, but you’re confident in your ability to recognize most other things an asshole mage might think to sneak in there. Or at least that something was out of place.

You keep your eyes closed, more for the sake of your own sanity than anything. Solas’ hands on your face is hard enough to deal with, and with the way he’s kneeling in front of you, you just... No. It looks like a pose on the cover of one of the terrible romance novels that you absolutely don’t read.
You feel the magic leave your skin, but Solas’ hands remain on your face. The corner of your mouth twitches towards a frown that you barely manage to suppress. You shouldn’t be able to tell that the healing is done. But he really needs to remove his hands from your face now. You hear him sigh again.

“Fenedhis,” he says softly. “You look terrible.” He drops his hands, finally, and you open your eyes to see something like irritation on his face. Aimed at you? “One would think you would be more safe from harm within Skyhold’s walls,” he says, voice becoming tight again. You thought you’d distracted him, but it seems he’s still angry. “But look at you. One of the Inquisitor’s own soldiers, doing more harm than bandits or the Red Templars.”

“To be fair,” you pipe in. “The Red Templars probably would have done much worse if I hadn’t run when I did. And Templars killed my mule.”

“...Red Templars killed your mule?”

“No, the regular kind.”

“Why in--never mind,” Solas says. “The point remains. This should never have happened. And the Inquisitor isn’t even here to deal with the imbecile he recruited.”

You’d like to attempt to calm him down, but you’re not sure how to do so without sounding like you’re defending the Inquisitor... something you have no particular desire to do. Especially considering how he and Solas clearly feel about each other.

“It really must look much worse than it is,” you say instead, reaching up to touch the bandages on your face. “Honestly, I feel sore, but I think my ass hurt worse than this from riding Revas on the way to Val Royeaux.”

“That would be the herbs they have you on,” Solas says dryly. He snaps his fingers directly in front of your eyes. You blink owlishly about two seconds later. “You’re high as a bird. You can’t even sit up straight.”

“I can’t?” you wonder, looking down. Hm. You are sort of slouched over to one side, as if your body is insisting that it’s time to lie down without asking you first. “Oh. Huh.”


“If you go the kitchens, they’ll know something happened to me,” you insist. “And I promise you, their little imaginations will go wild, particularly with you bringing me lunch. I’ve been avoiding it, but I would rather have them know the truth than whatever ridiculous nonsense they can come up with in an afternoon.”

“Fine,” Solas says with a sigh, in a tone of voice that makes you suspect he just doesn’t want to argue with you. “I’ll send someone to the kitchens and have something brought here. But you will stay on this couch.”

“Alright,” you agree. “...Thank you, Solas,” you add, belatedly, as he’s heading out the door.

You’re not sure how long he’s gone. Without something to focus on, your mind spirals away, and you realize that Solas was quite right. Whatever they’d given you had been potent. You somehow manage to keep yourself from prodding at your face overmuch or unwrapping it to feel the damage. You’re wildly curious. Apparently you look horrible, and if they have you on this much medication,
the damage must be considerable. Either that or they hoped it would knock you on your ass and you
wouldn’t be able to leave the tent. Actually, that seems likely too, thinking about how much those
healers hadn’t wanted you to go.

Well, whatever. Once you get some food in you, you’ll be able to get some work done. Leliana
wants this tome done, and you can’t let your personal issues interfere so much with your work. It’s
unprofessional, frankly.

Solas returns some indeterminate time later. It probably hasn’t been very long, you reason. He likely
just caught the nearest person and told them to take a message to the kitchen. They seem to have a
very loose definition of what constitutes a messenger here at Skyhold. You hope Celia gets roped
into actually bringing the food. You can probably convince her to be quiet about your condition.
News will get out sooner than later, but you need to perfect the details of your story and make sure
what you want to be heard is exactly what is heard.

Or at least close.

“I half expected to walk in to see you at your desk,” Solas comments.

“Oh, half? That’s a lot of credit you’re giving me,” you reply dryly. Then you sigh. “I’m too dizzy,
there’s no point.” You see Solas nodding out of the corner of your eye. “By the time I got settled, the
food would be here,” you continue. “And I’d just have to stop and then get settled all over again.
Might as well just lay here.”

“That’s... certainly a reason.” You glance over; Solas is making a bit of a face. He probably wanted
to hear you say something like you’d seen the error of your working ways and were intending to take
the whole day off, or something similarly ridiculous. Pfft. Maybe if you didn’t have the Spymaster
breathing down your neck. No, even then, you’d get bored.

“This soldier... you knew him?”

Oh, for... really? He knows damn well you’re watching what you say. Why doesn’t he just wait and
ask you in private?

“Yes, to an extent. I’d had a few run-ins with him in the past... none pleasant.”

“Did you have any reason to suspect he’d do something like this? Had he made threats?”

You pause, uncertain of what to say. “Not really anything I thought I needed to take seriously. You
know how shems like that are, Solas.” You run a hand over the top of the bandages, realizing only
now that your hair is loose. It’s more comfortable when you’re lying down like this, but you’ll need
to fix it soon. “They’re normally all talk. I had no idea he’d get violent, and certainly not so
suddenly.”

“No, I suppose not,” Solas says with a sigh. “I don’t mean to sound as though you hold any
responsibility for what happened. That rests sorely with the soldier in question... and the many higher
ups who failed to prevent this,” he adds darkly. “I am simply wondering if this sort of thing has any
regularity amongst the troops.”

“You mean, how they treat the other elves? Well, what do you expect when there’s an elf-only
bathhouse?” you say with a snort.

Solas is silent just long enough for you to glance over. You sort of wish you hadn’t. You thought
you’d gotten past being scared of Solas... around the time he was shirtless and shouting at you Elven.
But his expression is... yikes.
“There is a... what?”

“Oh, you uh... didn’t know,” you say with a nervous chuckle. Whoops. “Yes. I don’t believe the higher-ups necessarily know about it. It seems to be something that’s only unofficially enforced. I was simply given a different location for the bathhouses than my human friends... I didn’t even notice until Sera took me to the ‘human’ one. We got odd looks for being there, but we were hardly thrown out into the snow.”

“Ridiculous,” Solas says darkly. “Why do they even bother?”

“The human baths are hot,” you answer, watching as his hand contracts spasmodically into a fist. “As opposed to the elven ones.”

“And those in power are too busy with their private baths to even notice,” Solas says, through gritted teeth. You really should have sugar-coated this a little bit more. At this rate, he’s going to lose his temper. “This needs to be brought to the Inquisitor’s attention. He is quite eager to talk about how important his elven allies are.”

Wow, any more venom in Solas’ voice and you’d probably be poisoned just from being in the same room. Yikes. “Not it,” you say jokingly, trying in vain to lighten the mood.

“Of course not!” he snaps, then seems to catch himself. His body tenses, and then relaxes—he’s likely forcing it. “From you, it would be disregarded. I will... speak to the Seeker, when she returns.”

To Seeker Pentaghast? Well, he knows her better than you, but you can’t really imagine a human Seeker giving a single flying fuck. In fact, even the idea that he’s on speaking terms with her seems ludicrous to you. But he did say he’d been around from the beginning, and Seeker Pentaghast had essentially founded the Inquisition, along with the Nightingale. Maker only knows what sort of agreement a Seeker and an elven apostate would come to for Solas’ current arrangement at the Inquisition to be what it is.

You manage to keep from saying anything sarcastic or derisive. Now really doesn’t seem the time, even though the concept of a human Seeker being any use to you at all is seriously laughable. But who knows. The Commander is proof; humans get upset when you mess with their elves. If Seeker Pentaghast feels that way towards Solas, maybe she would even look into it.

Fortunately, the food comes then, and even more fortunately, it is being carried by Celia. Less fortunately, she nearly drops the tray when she sees you, the plates clattering dramatically. Solas steps in to help—oh sure, he’ll help her with a heavy tray--and manages to bring balance back to the tray before everything slides off.

“I’m sorry, thank you, sorry,” Celia says in a nervous burst as she gets a handle back on the tray and brings it over to his desk. Her eyes are squarely on you as she walks, however, and she keeps glancing back your way as she sets out the food on his desk. She takes a few awkward steps backwards towards the door, slowly, and finally you just wave her over. She scurries over in a rush, tray still in hands, and squats down by the couch.


“I’m fine, Celia. Well, I mean...” You gesture at your face. “But I’m recovering quickly thanks to Solas and the healers. I’m sure I’ll be out of the bandages in no time.”

“If they let you out of them any sooner than three days, I’m rebandaging you myself,” Solas
comments mildly from his desk. You glare over Celia’s shoulder at him. Now is not the time for his antics.

“How did it happen?” Celia asks again. “What happened?”

“A soldier... Lawrence Underhill,” you reply. Her eyes go flat. Perhaps he has a reputation amongst the elves. If he didn’t before, he would now... if he even lives long enough for that to be an issue. “He caught me up on the battlements this morning.”

“Thank the Maker you’re not dead,” she breathes. Finally, someone who isn’t going to ask why you didn’t gut the man in self-defense. “Who knows?”

“Hard to say. The Commander happened on us while he was...”

Celia’s eyes go harder, then glance to the side, over towards Solas. “If you don’t want to talk about this here...” she begins.

“No, nothing like that. Not at the point the Commander found us, anyway; he was just pounding my face into the stone.”

“Just,” she says with a little sigh. You can tell she’s relieved, but likely hates that she has to be relieved to hear that. You know the feeling. “What did the Commander do?”

“Pulled him off of me, had him arrested, and then made sure I got to the healing tent,” you reply. You don’t want to downplay Commander Rutherford’s heroics, but you don’t really need any rumors about the two of you floating around. Best to leave out the part where he carried you.

“That’s good to hear.” She looks at you again, and you can see her wince. “Maker’s breath. Is your eye going to be alright?”

“No one has told me it’s not,” you inform her. “And I think I someone would have mentioned.”

“Will I need to bring dinner, as well?”

“No, I’m sure by then I’ll be able to make it down to the kitchens--” You hear a sound of protest from Solas, but simply raise your voice. “It’s just the herbs they have me on making me dizzy. Besides, I have to face the girls eventually.”

“Do you want me to tell them anything?”

You sigh. “Yes, you might as well. News will be all over the place sooner or later. Just let them know what happened--that I was attacked, but I am okay and the man responsible has been arrested already. If word is going to be flying, I’d rather it be accurate word.”

“Alright. Maker,” she says again, shaking her head. “You should try to rest.”

“Hypocrite. I couldn’t tell you to stay in bed to save my life when you were sick. You were back to work almost immediately,” you joke.

“At least I took a single day off!” she counters. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“You’ve already helped, Celia,” you say with a smile. “Thanks. You better get back to work before Gaston starts his screeching.”

Celia leaves, which means all that’s left for you to do is make it over to Solas’ desk. He sees you hesitate and stands, probably to help you, but you shake your head. “I’m certain I can at least walk.
It’s not like he broke my legs,” you say with a scowl.

“I’d rather not have you fall,” Solas points out.

“Then I won’t.” You sit up, testing to see how much the movement will make your head spin. You do feel a brief surge of dizziness, but it passes quickly. Solas is still standing, one hand slightly away from his body as if he might reach you from there. You’ll be damned if you’re going to be hobbled across the friggin rotunda. It’s like half a dozen steps! You stand, and close your eyes to fight the surge of dizziness, fight to keep your legs straight instead of letting them wobble. And after a few moments, the dizziness does fade away and you take the few tottering steps to Solas’ desk successfully.

“See?” you say as you sit down on your stool... too far to the left, and slide off onto the ground with a thud. “Fututiones...”

“Would you like assistance, or is sitting on a chair a beast you must fight alone?” Solas asks mildly.

“Oh, shut up,” you say with a scowl. “I can...” you make a single failed attempt to stand before deciding you’ll lose less dignity just letting him help you. “Fine. Fine, help me get up,” you grumble.

“Are you sure? You look like you have things under control, and I wouldn’t want to be condescending.”

“You should be nicer to me when I’m injured,” you whine.

Solas doesn’t quite laugh, but his shoulders shake slightly in a silent, suppressed chuckle. “You’re right. Let me help you.” You let Solas grip your forearms and heft you back onto your feet. You move towards the stool again, but his grip stops you. “Perhaps it would be better if we traded chairs for this?” he suggests, gesturing with his head towards his high-backed desk chair.

“Oh, I... I couldn’t...” you begin.

“It’s just a chair, lethallan.”

It’s the “lethallan,” that does you in. Solas probably even knows that. You let him steer you over to his chair, and nervously, you sit down in it. You’d slept on his desk, but you’d never actually sat in his chair. It feels like it dwarfs you.

Solas’ mood, which you’d worked so hard to improve, plummets again as you begin to eat. Celia hadn’t known your condition, so the food is just the sort of thing you would normally eat... however, normally you can chew. You hadn’t realized your jaw was in bad shape until you tried to open it wide enough to take a normal sized bite and, quite simply, couldn’t. You resort to cutting your food up extremely small, only to find that chewing is rather painful, even with the medicine you’re on.

Solas watches you struggle to eat with an expression that turns from concern into thinly veiled fury as you continue to struggle. You really wouldn’t want to be in Underhill’s shoes right now. But then again, that had been the entire point. He was the one who’d turned it into him or you.

You manage to struggle down enough food to satisfy Solas, at least. He clears the plates off his desk and onto a side table, and you just sort of sit in his chair for a few more moments before rising to make the journey over to your own desk. Solas intercepts you about halfway.

“You should lay down,” he protests. He must have realized you were going to your desk and not the couch.
“Sitting on the couch, sitting at my desk, it’s the same thing,” you say, moving to walk around him.

“Resting is not the same as working,” he counters, though he doesn’t step in your way again.

“You’re right,” you agree. “One accomplishes something.”

“Healing yourself is accomplishing something.”

“And I can do it while sitting up. Multitasking!” you reply as you--carefully--sit down in your chair.

You expect Solas to sigh, but what you actually get is less a sigh and more an exasperated groan combined with a frustrated grunt. Well, too bad for him. He can whine all he wants; you're getting work done today. It’s bad enough that Underhill’s stupid antics have inconvenienced you as much as they have. You’re not letting them get in the way of your work. You won’t even allow him that much of a victory. The sight of you bloodied and smashed is all he gets. You hope it brings him comfort in fucking prison.

Work is slow, as you expected it would be. Your head feels thick and heavy, and you find it difficult to concentrate. So you just focus on getting words on the paper. You can worry about your elaborate decorations later; they’re way more fun than just the writing anyway, and will be a pleasant break from the slog of transcribing once you’re feeling better.

Solas keeps bothering you, too. Twice he comes to linger briefly over your shoulder--one of these days you’d like to climb onto his shoulders while he’s casting and ask him how he likes it--and both times he makes you pause so that he can check you for fever and remind you that you should be resting. You suspect he intends to annoy you into compliance. Fair enough; that was your strategy for him this whole time and it totally worked. But he’s underestimating how damn stubborn you are.

After you’ve been working for a bit over an hour, you get a surprise visitor. You had been expecting--now that the kitchens knew--that word would be rapidly spreading across the whole castle. It’ll be everywhere after the dinner run... so you had been wondering if you might get guests. What you hadn’t been expecting, however, was Commander Rutherford himself to come into Solas’ rotunda. He looks bizarrely out of place despite his office being just a short walk away.

“Commander,” Solas says by way of a greeting. “I assume you’re not here for a chess match.”

“You assume correctly. I wanted to see how Emma was doing.” He glances over towards you. “I checked the healing tent first, but to my amazement, they said you’d insisted on leaving.”

“I was healed first, Commander,” you point out, gesturing to your bandaged face.

“Not even eight hours ago we were scraping you off the battlements. Most soldiers would still be bedridden at this point.”

The words ‘toughen up your damn soldiers then’ die as you bite your tongue. No need to antagonize him. “My job is much less vigorous than a soldier’s, Commander. Sitting here or sitting in bed... it makes no real difference.”

He opens his mouth, likely to protest, but to your surprise, Solas interjects.

“Commander. If you have a moment, there’s something I would like to discuss with you.”

Cullen’s eyes flicker away from you to Solas. He looks momentarily annoyed, probably at being interrupted, but any protest he might have been about to voice dies when he sees the steely look in Solas’ eyes. Both of their gazes flicker back to you, and you have little doubt exactly what Solas
would “like to discuss.”

“Of course, Solas. If Emma will be alright here...?”

You don’t need a fucking sitter. You bite those words back again, however, and simply reply, “I will be fine, Commander.”

The two of them leave together, and you wish you were in good enough condition to risk shadowing them. You’re damn curious about what Solas is going to say. He has a rather serious expression on, and you’ve little doubt that whatever they’ll be discussing, it will involve you. Perhaps the fate of Underhill, or the fact a man with such violent tendencies was not weeded out of the Inquisition earlier. You would suspect he might bring up the subject of the bathhouse if not for the fact he’d specified an intent to bring it to Seeker Pentaghast’s attention... for whatever reason.

But you simply sit and try to focus on your work while burning curiosity damn near consumes you.

--

Solas returns some fifteen minutes later. He dodges your casual attempts to get him to tell you what they discussed, so you let it rest. Given how irritated he looks, you fear it hadn’t gone well. Best not to force the matter.

You work--or attempt to work--for the rest of the afternoon. You had been worried that others might come into the rotunda, after the Commander had, but perhaps the effect Solas has at keeping people away is working, or perhaps word just hasn’t spread very far... or, perhaps, no one actually cared to come visit. Either way, it works for you, since the only one you have to worry about pestering you is Solas. And pester you he does. Despite his constant checking and fretting, however, you do manage to get some work done. You’re a bit grumpy about it by the time dinner rolls around, however, because it’s not quite as much as you would like... and because your medicine is starting to wear off and your face is starting to really fucking hurt.

But less medication means you can walk, at the very least, so despite Solas’ protests, you leave the rotunda and head down to the kitchen yourself. You’ll be damned if you’re going to risk chewing on tough meat for a second time today.

Of course, walking into the kitchen all banged and bandaged up is its own painful venture. It seems like half the kitchen staff abandons their stations to swarm you... The elven half. The humans stay a distance away from the small mob of elves, mostly looking guilty or uncertain, some trying to look as though they’re minding their own business and don’t notice the little elven swarm. At least they have the capacity to recognize they should be feeling guilty. You quickly find out why, as not one but three of the other kitchen workers mention that they’d had trouble with a man by Underhill’s description as well. They’d have to see him to be sure, they say, but even more have been harassed by soldiers or other workers in Skyhold in general. Nothing so serious as what happened to you, mind, but enough that this incident isn’t going to be filed under “soldier versus the help” so much as it is “human soldier versus elf.” To the elves, at least.

Good.

You love to see this sort of thing. This much elven dissatisfaction coming together can be used. You’ve done it in the past... sometimes more successfully than others, if you’re being honest. But you’re damn near an expert at it now. If you had half a mind, you could likely tear the Inquisition apart from the inside. At least cripple them. But you have no real desire to do that. The Inquisition is the only standing force really attempting to do anything about the chaos in the land right now... or the only one strong enough to do it, perhaps. It wouldn’t be beneficial to you or anyone to damage it
right now.

Still, it’s a shame to let all this energy go to waste. Perhaps you can steer it in a more productive direction.

Your mind is spinning with ideas as food is essentially gathered for you. You get several offers to help you carry it up the stairs, but turn them down. Your legs are just fine, you point out. The sheer number of people fussing over you is quickly becoming intolerable, but you suppose you can endure it for the sake of getting everyone focused in the direction you want them to be focused in. Although you still have to figure out exactly what you want to do with all this energy.

You head back up the stairs—with some difficulty. It’s much harder to walk without your arms to help you balance. You wind up essentially leaning against a wall half of the way back to the rotunda, but you do manage to make it without spilling any... well... much of the potato chowder that had been given to you.

Still, when you get back to Solas’ desk and try to eat, you find that even the mild stew is giving you difficulty. You blame the weakening of the herbs. They had given you more; you should take them. But you’re loathe to spend the rest of the evening dizzy and useless. Instead, perhaps you should try to get some work done, then take them before “going to bed.” That time is all but wasted anyway, thanks to Solas’ stubborn insistence that you “sleep.”

Solas, however, clearly notes that you’re having trouble. His mood had been rather dour all afternoon, despite—or perhaps because of—his conversation with the Commander. You half expect him to drag you to the couch, or to the healers. But instead...

“If you’re going to insist on working,” he says with a sigh. “At least let me help with the pain. It’s been long enough now from the original healing... your body should be able to take a little more.”

You brighten up at that thought. Surely magic can dull the pain without making you so damnably dizzy? You agree immediately, despite the realization this means he’ll have his hands on your face again. You’re never going to get used to that, no matter how many times it becomes necessary. You try to focus on the magic and not the warmth in his hands as he places gentle fingers on your jaw, and then lets them trace upwards as his spell takes hold.

The pain does fade, almost immediately. Not completely, but enough that you can focus a little more clearly and eat a little more easily... which you do, wanting as much food in you as possible to help with all this healing and medication. The sooner you get visibly better, the sooner less people will be fussing over you.

You return the dishes to the kitchen happily, but as you return and sit down at your desk, you begin to recognize another sensation catching up with you... exhaustion.

It’s no surprise. You’d been through the wringer these last twenty-four hours. You haven’t slept in... how long? You have no idea anymore; you can’t remember. You’re not even certain how long it’s been since you returned from Val Royeaux. How long had it been since you sparred with Fenris in the courtyard? A week? A month?

You tell yourself there’s no helping it and simply try to focus on the work in front of you. Solas’ magic will be wasted if you’re unable to get anything done. It doesn’t even matter if you lay down and close your eyes like your body is screaming at you to do. You wouldn’t be able to sleep. You’d just be wasting time.

Despite your determination, however, you keep catching yourself trailing off halfway through a
word, staring blankly downwards at nothingness, mind drifting towards an oblivion it can’t reach.

“If you are tired, feel free to lay down,” Solas comments. You glance over your shoulder sluggishly, and he gestures towards the couch. You eye it, tempted, but shake your head. Come to think of it, you had gotten tired after you’d let him put more damn magic in you. There’s no guarantee he didn’t do something. You’d like to trust that he wouldn’t... you’d like to. You don’t. He had, perhaps, learned his lesson with the blanket, but would that necessarily expand to other forms of magic, if he thought he could get away with it?

Your cover hasn’t been blown so far, even with him strolling right in on you in the Fade. But that’s damn near a miracle, and he could have well been distracted by your... ahem... actions... There’s absolutely no reason to push your luck. No. You need to stay up, for any number of reasons. Work, work, work, you tell yourself. Focus on that, and you’ll catch a second, third, fourth wind. Always.

But not even ten minutes later, your eyes are drooping and your arms feel like lead. You resolve to rest your eyes for a few minutes. It isn’t as if you’ll be able to really fall asleep, particularly not at your desk. You’re a finicky sleeper even when you’re not forcibly separated from the Fade like this. So you lay your head down on your arms and rest.

You don’t sleep, but you drift into a daze. “Five minutes” stretches into an indeterminate amount of time. You’re vaguely aware of the sound of Solas’ quill against parchment, of crows cawing from above, the soft pad of feet on the ground, but it all blurs and fades. Not sleeping, but resting. It does feel good.

You stir slightly when you feel a weight on your shoulders. How long have you been at your desk? You’re going to get a crick in your neck doing this. You focus slightly more as the weight shifts to cover your back. A blanket? You lift your head slightly to look. Not a blanket, you realize. A pelt... Some kind of pelt, grey and dusky off-white. Your eyes slip off the pelt to the hands putting it over you.

“Mm... Solas,” you say sleepily, shifting further upwards. You should get back to work. You’ve rested enough, more than enough.

Solas shushes you, his hand against your back gentle but firm, encouraging you to stay down. “Hamin, lethallan,” he says softly.

You sigh gently. You never can seem to say no to that elven voice. You lay your head back down onto your arms. Just a little bit longer.

Chapter End Notes

Please check out my webpage for links to where I am elsewhere online and for how to help out the story!

Also, those of you who follow me on Tumblr likely already know this, but this June/July I’m driving across the country with a few friends. If you’re interested in meeting me/buying me lunch/letting me and my friends sleep in your living room or backyard, please let me know! You can see a vague outline of our travel route here as
well as places we've already got places to stay. Maker willing, I'll have a batch of single-run Keeping Secrets buttons to give the people who feed or house me along the way! <3 Something to commemorate our little adventure!
You Believe Him

Chapter Notes

WOW man it sure has been a... period of time! For more (important) details about my trip and Keeping Secrets, please read the notes below the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You awake in a burst of panic to the sensation of magic. You sit bolt upright, the weight of a wolf pelt falling from your shoulders. You’d known it! You’d known it, that bastard, he must have... must have drugged you and been poking around, that son of a...

The sensation of magic fades, but the air is still thick with the remnants as you try to clear your foggy head. You shift around in the chair, looking for Solas. There he is, on the... opposite side of the room, sitting on the floor. What was he doing from there?

“I apologize for waking you,” he says. The air tastes like ozone... what had he been doing? Your question is answered--somewhat--when he stands and sets down on the desk one of the large, thick shards you’d seen him fiddling with in the past.

That, then? He was just casting magic nearby?

Suspicious, you run your aura through yourself carefully, testing for magic. It lights up like a carnival around your skull, of course, all the residual healing magic... But you don’t detect anything else. Are you wrong? Or can you just not tell?

Solas is looking at you strangely, however, and you remember rather belatedly that the sensation of magic waking you up should be an impossibility.

“You didn’t... I don’t think,” you say slowly, as if confused, despite the fact your mind is racing. You rub your eyes sleepily. “I must have been having a nightmare.”

“Oh? What did you see?”

Bastard. “Fire,” you reply, going with the easy lie. “I didn’t realize I’d fallen asleep.” You rub your eyes, both for effect and because you’re still groggy despite the burst of panic. “I’d say you shouldn’t have let me sleep, but...”

“That would be roughly as effective as me telling you to sleep, I think,” Solas replies, effectively finishing your thought. You snort.

“What were you doing?” you ask, gesturing towards the shards.

“Investigating,” he replies simply.

You pout. “You’re allowed to say ‘you probably wouldn’t understand it,’ you know. I won’t be offended.”

Solas chuckles softly. “Very well. You probably wouldn’t understand it.” When your frown deepens, he adds, “You don’t look very unoffended.”
“No, no, you’re right,” you lie with a sigh. “I probably wouldn’t. But I am curious.” The air even looks a little sparkly. Or would a non-mage not be able to see that?

“Normally, I would perform a spell this involved in my work space,” Solas admits. “I do apologize if it disturbed you.”

“Unless a side effect of casting magic is weird dreams... Well. I suppose it might be, honestly,” you say with a laugh. “They both come from the Fade, right?”

“In a sense.”

“So why did you do it here, then?”

Solas hesitates. “I, ah...” Were you right? Was he up to something? You try not to let your suspicion show on your face, but you’d like very much to wring the truth out of him right there. Though you suppose he gets that same urge with you on occasion. “In truth,” he admits with a sigh. “I did not want to leave you unguarded.”

...Oh.

You wonder briefly if he’s lying, but he looks slightly embarrassed, an expression you haven’t really seen on him much. You don’t think he’s faking it. Or, a voice in your head suggests, you just don’t want to think he’s faking it. You’d gotten this way with Aimée, too. Hadn’t wanted to believe what your gut was telling you. It never ends well.

But it adds up. The shard still resonates with mana, practically glowing from the amount of energy he was putting into it. You sense nothing in your own head but the spells he put there earlier, for pain. And you hadn’t actually been dreaming... you were very nearly just as tired now as you had been earlier. You hadn’t slept.

Slowly, subtly, not wanting him to know what had been racing through your mind, you release the tension in your shoulders.

You believe him.

And now, the flattery of what he’d said catches up with you. He hadn’t wanted to leave you unguarded?

“I... Thank you, Solas. I don’t think that’s necessary, however,” you add. “Even if you were absent, surely no one would dare to cause any kind of trouble here. Most people are too skittish to even enter the room.” You gesture upwards. “And we’re literally right underneath the Spymaster’s nose.” You pause. “...I wonder if I should have reported in to her, actually...”

“I’m quite certain she knows,” Solas says. He’s right, of course, and you don’t relish speaking to the sharp Nightingale when your mind is fogged from pain and drugs and magic.

“Ah, of course... but that just proves my point, does it not? No one would try anything here. And besides,” you say with a laugh, gesturing at your face. “Surely the worst is over?”

You’re joking, of course, but Solas’ expression is quite serious. Not angry, at least not now, but serious. “I do not wish to alarm you, but you should be wary of further retribution. The man was arrested and the Commander has every intention of seeing him pay for his crimes. Publicly. You have upset the status quo. It is a dangerous position to be in.”

You blink in surprise. Not at what he’s saying; you know that already. But at how much thought
he’s put into this. “Speaking from personal experience, Solas?”

“Some things never change. The weak subvert the strong. The strong fight back, viciously, to maintain their power. I have seen such things happen countless times in memories in the Fade. Your intent will not matter, nor will your innocence, if you are seen as stirring up trouble.”

“I didn’t do anything!” you protest, not because you believe it, but because you’re suddenly very interested in his advice on this subject. “I was the passive subject in this situation, Underhill’s fists were the active ones!”

“You are right, of course. But Underhill’s friends will not care. They will see you as the cause for his arrest. The Commander spoke of coming down harder on his soldiers, a no-tolerance policy. It is not a bad plan, but if you are seen as the catalyst...”

“Oh, Maker,” you sigh. “I see your point. You... really think someone else may do something? Even attack me?”

“That is my fear, yes. But perhaps if we can get you through the next few days intact... It may blow over. If you heal, you will no longer be so visible. In time, as rumor takes hold, they may even forget it was you, specifically, who was attacked.”

You nod. He has a point. Particularly if you want to stir up this little rabble of elves into something with a purpose. You’ll hardly be at the head, but even being seen as a catalyst is dangerous. Being seen at all is dangerous. Humans have proven over and over again their willingness to slaughter anything that even resembles a threat.

“Alright, Solas. If you think it wise, I will avoid being alone for the next few days. Thank you for your concern... hopefully, you’re right, and it will all blow over soon. I’d prefer it if I could just get back to work in peace, after all.”

“Yes,” Solas says dryly. “That much is evident. Should I even attempt to convince you to lie down?”

“No, don’t bother.” You pull the pelt up over your shoulders, then pause. “I... suppose this is yours?”

“Ah... yes. I was lacking in a blanket, but I did not want you to become chilled in your condition.”

You snort. “My ’condition.’”

“You would do well to take it seriously,” he says, and you hear the edge of irritation in his voice. “Healing magic can only do so much, so quickly. And when you are this weak, it is easy for other illnesses to set in. Neither of us will enjoy it if I need to burn sickness out of your blood later because you failed to care for yourself now.”

You hold up your hands in surrender. “Alright, alright... Very serious over here, extremely serious.” You should return the pelt. But instead, you tug it up around your shoulders and wrap it around you like a shawl. He had said you needed to keep warm, and this... brings back memories. Good ones, for once. You let your hand linger in the fur, briefly, before scooting your chair back up to your desk and looking down to take stock of your unfinished work.

Ugh... Well, considering your condition, you suppose you should be happy you got anything done at all. You pick your quill up, and of course Solas’ voice interrupts you.

“It is quite late. Perhaps you should go to bed?” he suggests.

You let out a long, irritated sigh. “I just slept, Solas. What good would going to bed do me?”
“Allow me to rephrase: I am tired."

“...Oh.” Right, you had just finished agreeing you wouldn’t wander around Skyhold alone. Walking across the Courtyard around the time the drunks are leaving the tavern, alone, is very much not the sort of thing you should be doing. Still, the thought of sitting in your room doing nothing chafes at you.

“Do you believe your room to be safe?”

“Yes, safe enough, though I would be happier if the door locked.” You grin. “Why? Would you take me to your room if it wasn’t safe enough?”

Solas eyes you, looking thoroughly unimpressed. “To the healing tent, actually.”

Alright, you deserved that. Still, you make a face. “Alright, alright, I’ll go to my room. Like a grounded child.”

“If I thought for a second grounding you would make you rest, I would do it in a heartbeat,” Solas replies.

“Lucky for me I’m so impossible, then,” you reply snidely. He essentially is grounding you anyway, but any one of your friends could serve as an escort, at least. You already spend your mornings with Iron Bull, so it’s not even that inconvenient.

Although you’re really not looking forward to explaining all this to Bull. At all.

You take a few minutes to tidy up your desk, and then stand. Your head doesn’t spin with dizziness... the herbs have worn off. You should probably take the rest that they gave you before bed... or maybe in the morning? If you wait too long, it’ll hurt to chew them. The idea of sitting on your bed all night, stoned out of your mind, is not a pleasant one, but wandering around all day in a daze isn’t much better. And you really shouldn’t be too out of your mind when you talk to Bull, which will almost certainly happen in the morning at some point.

You let the pelt fall off your shoulders with some regret. You’d like to steal it, but you’re the one with a coat. Solas’ approach to keeping warm really does just appear to be “and then add a pelt.” You can’t imagine he has more than the one. You lay it across the back of your chair as you struggle back into your jacket. It’s a bit cumbersome, but at least it’ll keep you warm against the biting chill you know is waiting for you outside the Great Hall.

Solas picks his pelt back up, and you suspect it will become one of the many things the two of you just silently agree to pretend never happened.

Having Solas walk you back to your room turns out to be a better idea than you could have anticipated. You do get a few sideways looks as you cross the courtyard, but every irritated face falters when they spot Solas beside you. That being said, you’re fairly confident no one would have actually jumped you, not after what just happened. You would have been astounded if you even had a verbal confrontation. Though you might have gotten a smug earful if any of the humans from the bathhouse heard you. Maker, they must be just rolling in it. You make a mental note to go back there just the second you’re out of these bandages. You don’t want them to have the satisfaction of thinking you’d been driven out.

Another glare falters at the sight of Solas, and that’s when something horrifying occurs to you. You’re dragging his name through the mud, again. All your efforts to avoid bringing him up in your various troublemaking schemes... And here he is being seen escorting you back to your room like a
freaking guard dog! Damnit! You hadn’t thought this through at all. This stupid fucking injury, the healing, the medicine, your own exhaustion... You’re not thinking clearly! Solas is damn right, you need to rest. Outside of Skyhold, away from him. Someplace safe. But you can’t possibly slip out now, when he’s paranoid something might happen to you. He’ll be watching you extra close. So will Bull, once he learns what happened.

Fucking Underhill. Even in going down, he’s made your life difficult. At least you’ve made his a lot worse. And shorter, hopefully.

In short order, you’re once again faced with the sight of Solas at your bedroom door. As if that weren’t bad enough, he actually follows you in!

“There’s not really room for two in here, Solas,” you say, forcing a frown to cover for your embarrassment.

“You’re right,” he says, glancing around your small room, which feels significantly smaller with him in it. “There are rooms in this castle fit for nobles. Plenty of them. And I would be willing to bet many of them are, at this very moment, empty, waiting for guests of the Inquisition considered worthy of their size.”

“I don’t need a large room, Solas,” you interrupt, seeing quite clearly where his irritated mind is headed.

“Your door,” he says, turning to place his hand on the knob. “Does not even have a lock.”

“My chest does,” you say, pointing at the chest by the foot of your bed. “And that’s where anything valuable is.”

“The most valuable thing in this room is you,” Solas says bluntly, and you feel heat rushing to your cheeks. Wow, really? You understand his meaning--you think. Someone could open the door and attack you. The thought had occurred to you as well, but you had comforted yourself with two things: few knew where you slept, and fewer cared. Who would bother tracking you down to hurt you in your “sleep”? 

Well, you have the answer to that now. Underhill. Who is now behind bars, but... You can’t blame Solas for being skittish that there might be more.

“Going to magic my door shut?” you suggest, keeping your voice mild and joking despite the probably-visible flush to your cheeks.

“No, but I am going to find you a lock,” he replies. As you sit down on the edge of your bed--for lack of anything better to do--he wanders to your window. “Wanders.” Pff. It’s like two steps away from the door. He runs his hand along the side.

“Too small for even me to get in and out of,” you quip. “Don’t worry, Solas.”

“It is difficult for you to tell me not to worry when you look like that,” he replies, gesturing at... well, all of you, really, but probably mostly your face. “But you’re right. You should consider shutters, however... to keep the cold out, if nothing else.”

You nod. You’d been thinking that yourself. As it gets colder, you dislike your little prison-style window more and more. If you hadn’t flared out at the hips, you could probably squeeze through there, but you’re not particularly worried that any tiny elves are going to try to break into your room through the window.
“I’ll be fine, Solas. I’ll see you in the morning.” It’s the most polite way you can really think of phrasing ‘please get out of my room this is so uncomfortable.’ He seems to take the hint, though, or at least your room has passed the security inspection, so he nods.

“Try to rest, Emma. You need it more than ever,” he says, and then leaves the room, closing it firmly behind him.

You briefly consider moving your chest out in front of the door again. You’d been trying to comfort Solas, but in truth, you were already a bit paranoid that something might happen. You can’t be sure of what the general attitude in Skyhold is going to be. So far you’ve seen sympathy, but mostly from elves. Maker only knows what the humans are thinking. What the soldiers are thinking. You stand and head towards the door, considering, when you feel the tingle of magic nearby. You freeze automatically, tucking your aura deeper and tighter inside of you, but it’s not moving. It’s... the doorknob.

Solas.

You listen at the door briefly, trying to determine if he’s still outside. You hear the fading sound of footsteps. Then, cautiously, you drop your hand to the doorknob. You should probably just leave it alone entirely. This is Solas’ magic, you don’t really want to risk anything that would alert him. But you’re also sour about him enchanting your fucking doorknob without asking. You’re willing to bet he wouldn’t pull this shit if he knew you were a mage; he’s doing it because he thinks you won’t notice. Little bastard.

You carefully let your aura into your palm, just enough that you can maybe detect what he’s done without touching it directly. It feels like an alarm of some kind. You don’t feel any power twisted in, it’s not going to explode if you open it. You suspect he’d just stuck a silent alarm on there so he’d know when it was opened. You make a face, but remove your hand, unwilling to probe any further. You’re good with alarm spells, but you’ve no real reason to risk blowing your cover over something so menial. You’ll find a damn lock tomorrow, to appease him.

You head to bed, admittedly feeling slightly more secure knowing that Solas will be alerted should someone open your door that night. Of course, now for the hard part... trying to rest.

--

You bundle up in every blanket you have, but the cold still seeps through, mostly onto your face. It makes your injuries ache agonizingly. You wind up taking some medicine despite having wanted to put it off... You’ll have to go back to the healer’s tent to get more, at this rate, and you wanted a clear mind for dealing with the Iron Bull. The herbs help, but the ache feels like it goes down into the core of your bones. Before the sun has even risen, you’re crawling out of bed, bundling back up in as many layers as you can reasonably put on, and heading for the door.

You have no real intention of going to practice with the Iron Bull. There’s nothing you can do in this condition. Actually, you just sort of want to go to the Great Hall for sheer warmth. You’ll even lay down on Solas’ couch if he wants you to, anything to get out of this cold. You don’t get that far, however.

You feel Solas’ little alarm going off as you open the door. Silently, it buzzes away, off to tattle on you to Solas. You’ll probably have to deal with that later. Hopefully he doesn’t come running. Hopefully it doesn’t even wake him. It’s perhaps an hour, half an hour, before dawn, but it’s still a perfectly reasonable time for you to be getting up.

It’s not Solas who finds you as you pass nervously through the courtyard, however. It’s Bull.
He grimaces when he sees you, but his lack of reaction past that tells you that word has, in fact, gotten around.

“Can I skip practice, boss?” you say with a lopsided grin.

“You look completely fucked, so yeah, think I’ll give you a pass,” he says, scowling slightly. You don’t really like the look on him. He normally kept a pretty cheerful expression on around you, and seeing him upset is reminding you of how skittish you actually are around Qunari. “I heard you got jumped by some soldier?”

“Yeah. Lawrence Underhill,” you reply. You honestly want that name on as many tongues as possible. “I guess word’s already gotten around, if you’ve heard.”

“Like wildfire,” Bull said with a snort. “You didn’t think it would?”

“Well, no one kicked down my door yesterday, so I assumed either no one had heard, or no one was particularly alarmed by the news.” It’s mostly true. You’d been thinking that most of the people you would count as friends if someone asked, at least, would be coming to check the damage.

“Solas was turning people away from his rotunda all evening,” Bull says, and you blink.

“What?”

“He said you were asleep, wouldn’t let anyone in. He had a damn serious look on his face too. I thought Sera was going to shoot him.”

“...Oh. Well, he wasn’t lying,” you admit. “I was asleep pretty much the whole time after dinner.”

“I’d expect some guests today,” Bull informs you. “So... you wanna tell me what happened?”

“I’d hope it’s the same as what’s going around,” you say with a scowl.

“Well, Dalish told me she’d heard you’d been jumped by some soldier on the battlements, but that story seems to be missing a few key elements. You already told me who, but I was wondering if I could get the why. All my guys are pretty pissed off, and I’m pretty sure Skinner’s already been down to the prisons. Some answers might calm them down.”

You have to work really hard to keep a straight face. Hahaha, oh shit. Skinner. She’d killed a bunch of shems for doing pretty much what Underhill had done to you, or had tried to do, anyway. You hadn’t even thought about that. You rub your face to hide the fact you really want to smile. Underhill, you poor bastard.

“You sure he’s still alive, after Skinner was down there?”

“There are a lot of people in those prisons. I told her to behave but... well, you know Skinner. I’d rather she get answers that satisfy her, though. I think we’d all rather have answers. No one’s even told Krem yet... he’s still in the healing tent, and we’re all a bit worried about how he’ll react.”

You grimace. “Fair enough, but it’s freezing. I’m only up this early because the cold is killing my face. Can we go inside somewhere?”

Bull agrees, and the two of you duck into the tavern. There’s no one in there this early, not even passed out in the corner. It’s weird, to see it empty. There are doubtlessly people in the rooms upstairs, but they’re probably asleep. Either way, it’s warm, and that’s what matters.
So you sit at a table and try to explain to Bull what you’ve explained too many times already. That you were attacked on the battlements. To him, you explain a bit more about the details of what happened... Both because you’d gotten your story hashed out in your head overnight, and because he’d want to know how you got overpowered. You’d mouthed off to the man, and started turning to walk off when the first blow came. It disoriented you. You managed to deflect a lot of the blows, you think, hence the sorry condition of your arms, but it happened so fast. Once you were knocked onto your back, you tell Bull, you didn’t have a chance.

Bull listens, and nods. You briefly go over the Commander’s timely appearance, him arresting Underhill and bringing you to the tent. From there, you explain, you’d just gone straight to the rotunda with the intent to work, but had in reality spent most of the day asleep.

Iron Bull has, as you expected, a few follow up questions. Only one throws you.

“So, this Underhill... he have anything to do with that necklace of bruises you were wearing yesterday morning?”

You hesitate, considering. You hadn’t told this to Solas--or anyone--because it was unnecessary. But Bull had seen the bruises, so he knew something was up. Was there anything here that could trip you, poke holes in your story?

“Yeah,” you say finally. “He and one of his buddies were drunk the night before and started pestering me as I was going across the courtyard to get to my room. It got pretty ugly and one of them grabbed me. I managed to get away, but I did some damage in the process... probably something to do with learning this stuff on a Qunari,” you add dryly. “That’s what Underhill was pissed about on the battlements. I didn’t even really taunt him,” you lie with the tone of an admission. “He was already pissed from that. I still didn’t think he’d punch me in the face in broad daylight, though...”

“Were you gonna tell anyone? About the first attack, or that he threatened you on the battlements?” Bull asks gently. You can see the tension in his shoulders. He’s trying hard not to spook you, but he’s probably beating himself up. He’d been with you not an hour before you were attacked, had noticed something was wrong, and had left because you’d made him.

“I was considering it,” you say with a sigh. “I was worried, because I’d injured a soldier, even in self-defense. I thought I might be in more trouble than either of them.” You make a face. “I can tell you’re kicking yourself right now, Bull, but don’t. Even if you’d been there, what? He would have seen I was with you, waited until some other time, and probably done the exact same thing. Maybe worse. Maybe more premeditated. He’s locked up now, that’s all that--” You force your voice to crack slightly. “That’s all I want to think about.”

“You can rest assured he won’t be an issue for you anymore,” Bull says firmly, and you struggle to keep your smile reasonably sad and not as wicked as you feel.

“Thanks, Bull. You should, uh... Probably try and keep Skinner from assassinating him,” you say with a nervous laugh. “I don’t think the Inquisitor would take kindly to the murder of his prisoners.”

“Yeah,” Bull said. “Lucky that the Commander is so punctual with that walk around the battlements.”

Mm. A bit pointed. But you just smile. “Yeah. I’m trying not to think about how that could have gone for me.”

Bull shakes his head. “Yeah, I don’t blame you. Try not to dwell on it. We’ve got your back now.”
“Solas doesn’t want me wandering around alone,” you confess. “I was just going to head into the rotunda early... honestly just to get some place warm.”

“Why don’t you grab breakfast with me and the Chargers?” Bull suggests. You hesitate. “It’ll do them good to see you,” he insists. “Even all banged up like this.”

“If you think it won’t just piss them off more,” you say with a reluctant sigh. “For once, I hope the kitchens made gruel.”

--

The Chargers are, in fact, extremely happy to see you. There are a lot of outraged expressions, but it seems that word of how bad you looked had proceeded you, so you were spared anyone dramatically dropping things. Dalish and Skinner sandwiched you at the table, one on either side, and despite Dalish’s normally curious nature, she mostly seemed intent on distracting you. Skinner didn’t say anything at all, but, well... That was Skinner. Hopefully she wouldn’t do anything stupid. Angry elven women with a vendetta were a wild card, as everyone in Thedas should have figured out around the time Leah Tabris slit the throat of an arl’s son.

Bull was right, though. He manages to keep conversation light, and off of the subject of the, ah... unique state of your face. A few of the Chargers do have questions, but Bull brushes them off before they can get more than one or two in. You’re grateful; you hate having to go over the same story again and again. And despite the fact it had been your idea, the image of being beaten into the stones isn’t going to be on your list of favorite memories.

You’re already tired of talking to people by the time you escape the Chargers. Skinner, Rocky, and a few others quite literally escort you to the Great Hall. No one calls it that, but you’re not stupid. But finally, finally, you’ll be able to just get inside the fucking rotunda and--

“Em!”

Ah, fuck.

“Friggin shitbiscuits, Em, you look... Fuck!”

“Hey, Sera.”

“Hey? Is that wot you have to say, ‘hey’? I don’t see you for a few days an’ next I hear you’re bein’ scraped off the bloody battlements!”

“That’s hardly my fault.”

“I didn’t say it was! What the frig happened?”

You sigh, glancing around. It’s still early, so there aren’t too many people in the Great Hall... but there are enough. You can hardly take her into the rotunda so... back out into the fucking cold, looks like. You gesture for her to come with you, though she probably would have anyway, and head back out down the front stairs.

“I got attacked, up on the battlements. How much have you heard?” you ask as you carefully make your way down the steps with Sera beside you.

“ Heard you got stomped into the ground by some bloody pissbucket arse of a soldier,” she says with a scowl. “An’ I tried to come by last night but fuckin’ Sol-ass wasn’ lettin’ anyone in!”
“I was asleep,” you admit. “He wanted to let me rest.”

“Well...” Sera makes a vague grumbling noise. “Glad he at least had a reason. So what happened?”

“Pretty much what you heard. Remember that asshole you almost shot an arrow through that time we were climbing walls?”

“What? That arse-picker? Cullen told me he’d take care of ‘im!” Sera explodes. “Can’t trust any of these high-up pricks to do their jobs!”

“Well, he’s taken care of now. Cullen arrested him on the spot, had him dragged off to rot in prison,” you say, trying to calm Sera somewhat. Though if she put an arrow through Underhill, you have no doubt she’d get away with it.

“Shoulda shot him when I had the chance. That bastard attacked you?”

“Yeah, there was an... altercation,” you say with a hollow laugh. “He shot his mouth off, I shot mine off back. I thought that’d be it, but he had another point he wanted to make.” You point dully at your face.

“That nug-humping, arse-licking son of a--”

“It’s alright, Sera.”

“It is not”!

“Alright, no, it’s not, but it’s as right as it’s going to get,” you say with a sigh. “I’ll heal, and with any luck, Underhill won’t live to see the end of the month. Just depends on when the Inquisitor gets back, and what he decides to do with him.”

“Oh, the Quizzie had better fling him off the bloody ramparts,” Sera says with a deep scowl.

“I would watch that,” you agree mildly.

“You’re way too calm about this!” Sera protests. “Look at--” her voice cracks a little, then she clears her throat. “Look at your face, Em!”

“Sorry, Sera,” you say, and you mean it. You don’t like that what you had to do is causing your friends this much distress. You had banked on anger and a desire for justice, but it’s getting harder to enjoy when they’re so obviously scared for you. “I think it’s the medication they have me on. And I’m just trying not to... dwell on it, on how it could have gone under slightly different circumstances,” you lie. As if you hadn’t carefully set up those circumstances. In other circumstances the only difference is that Underhill would be mutilated or dead by your hand, rather than the Inquisition’s. And that would have been a hell of a lot messier.

“That rat bastard,” she says darkly. “Y’know, there’s nothin’ sayin’ he has to make it to trial.”

_How many people are going to casually offer you an assassination today?!_

“He’s in the Inquisition prisons,” you point out. “Which I’m sure are very safe.”

“Not safe enough,” she counters.

“Safe enough,” you say firmly. “I’d prefer to see justice done.”

“Justice don’t care much for the little people,” Sera points out.
You grin. “In this case, I think justice is going to make an exception. Let’s just wait it out, Sera.”

“Wish Cullen hadn’t stopped me shootin’ him,” she grumbles. You can’t really disagree. Would have solved you some grief, that’s for damn sure. But the repercussions would have probably been worse.

--

You spend some time wandering around the courtyard with Sera, ignoring the way the wind makes your whole head ache. You’d taken the worst of the blows to your arms, but arms are a lot less delicate than faces in general. Seems like the most damage was still stone there, to your cheekbones, jaw, and nose.

You do eventually calm her somewhat, if only through sheer determination and cheerfulness. Just when you’re starting to head back towards the Great Hall, you see the Commander. You go a bit to the side, not wanting to disturb him or risk another long conversation where he asks after your health or whatever. But he seems thoroughly distracted by the conversation he’s in which you--of course--”just can’t help” overhearing.

“I’ve tried telling the Seeker, but of course nothing changed. And now there’s been an elven woman beaten half to death by one of the men--”

“A soldier, not a Templar,” the Commander interrupts.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” the other man snaps. You glance over, see pointed ears and a robe. Interesting. “Soldiers take their cues from the Templars here, and with tensions what they are, any one of my people could be next. What would have become of that woman had she not been discovered? What could become of a mage in the privacy of the tower? We need the Templars kept out not ushered in to watch us like it’s their birthright--”

“The Templars are practical to have around in case of magical accidents,” the Commander begins, his voice fading out of your hearing range as you and Sera continue to walk.

Oh, now that was very interesting. You head towards the rotunda with a thoughtful smile on your face. Seems it’s not just the elves who are concerned with this little incident. You wonder what you can do with that.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, so! I'm leaving innn less than 48 hours on a one month trip about 6000 miles through 20 of the lower 48 states. Holy shit! You can read more information about my route here, and also see that I have unique pins for everyone I meet along the way! If you're interested in meeting me, it's not too late! Shoot me a message on Tumblr or send me an e-mail at solitaire_lee@yahoo.com with your information and we'll see if we can't meet up along the way! If you're mostly along the route, I'll go out of my way about an hour or so for a free meal, and I'll go pretty far out of my way for a place to stay. (I think I haven't heard back from the Nashville stop so I'm REALLY in a need to stop somewhere in Tennessee or Kentucky, ASAP)

This trip will be more fun the more people we get to meet (and I have to do something with all these buttons :P) so don't be shy. ^_^ I'll line up as many of you as I can.
Now, as for KS. Obviously, even just the planning and prep for this trip seriously through me off my schedule. I'm not optimistic at my chances of actually getting a chapter out on the road; I'll just have too many things distracting me. And that means... hiatus. But! I will try to spend the trip outlining the next arc (we're almost to the end of one now, I had hoped to reach it before the trip but that didn't pan out) so that my mandatory "outlining hiatus" won't be as long.

I'll be updating stuff on Tumblr and Twitter, so feel free to follow me either of those places to see trip updates as we go!
Fussing

Chapter Notes

It's August, and that means I'm back with an update! Make sure to read the notes at the end of the chapter for info on future updates and whatnot. Also, I did all the Italian in this chapter myself so uh... it's probably terrible. >///<

I'm trying something new, so computer users can try hovering their mouth over the Antivan text to see the translations. Unfortunately, it doesn't work on tablet and phone, so I still included a translation guide.

**Antivan Guide**

Sì, certo, nobildonna. = Yes, of course, my lady.
Ho vissuto in Antiva per diversi anni. = I lived in Antiva for several years.
Meraviglioso! = Wonderful!
Così molti qui parlano Orlesian, naturalmente, non è difficile rimanere in pratica, ma mi manca la mia lingua madre! = So many here speak Orlesian, of course, it isn’t difficult to stay in practice, but I do miss my mother tongue!
--direttamente di fronte agli ospiti! = --right in front of the guests!
Perbacco! = Goodness!
Maleducato = no manners/rude
Così, ovviamente, la serata era completamente-- = So, of course, the soiree was completely--

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Knowing you could tear Skyhold apart from the inside is an amusing feeling. You’ve no actual desire to do so, of course; this place is important. No matter your personal feelings on the Inquisition, the Inquisitor, or any of the advisors... They’re doing something that needs to be done. Arguably.

None of the other nations are in a position to do shit against what apparently actually is an ancient magister darkspawn with a dragon, at the very least.

With that in mind, you weigh your options as you climb the steps to the Great Hall. Sera leaves you in front of Solas’ rotunda door, eyeing it with obvious distaste. It’s just as well. Isn’t that why you work in there? People don’t go in. You can work in peace.

Relative peace, you remind yourself, as Solas accosts you seconds after you walk in. You liked him better when he was ignoring you. No, you didn’t.

“Did you sleep in this morning?” he asks as he looks over your healing. You have to force yourself not to make a face. He knows damn well you didn’t--he would have gotten an alert when your door opened. And as it--hopefully--hasn’t opened again since, he has to know that was you getting up in the morning. You hate dealing with spies.

“Relatively, perhaps, but not particularly,” you reply, deciding on honesty since there’s no point in lying when he’ll know you are, other than to annoy him. “But fear not, I’ve been with people since I awoke. Bull, the Chargers, and then Sera ambushed me in the Great Hall.”
“No surprise. Both came to see you yesterday, while you slept, but--”

“You turned them away to let me rest. They told me. I appreciate it, actually.” Particularly Bull. It was helpful to have him fielded off long enough for you to get your story somewhat in order for a man who actually knew certain things about you. Solas and Bull were the only two who had any clue you could actually defend yourself. To everyone else, you were a helpless little elven maiden, and you being beaten half to death by a soldier was surprising only in that the soldier had done such a horrible thing.

“Did you go back to the healing tent this morning, then?” Solas asks as he probes his magic around in your face—a sensation as uncomfortable and unpleasant as ever.

“Erm...” You were supposed to go back yesterday evening, weren’t you? You’d fallen asleep and then just never bothered. “Not as such, no.”

Solas draws back slightly to give you A Look.

“I... forgot?” It’s as good an excuse to any, and fairly close to the truth. You’d at least partially forgotten. You’d only thought about it when you realized you would probably need more herbs to chase off the pain. Solas could arguably do any actual healing required, and while being fussed over by him was its own unique torture, it was preferable to the publicity of the healers’ tent.

“Well, since you shouldn’t be alone, perhaps I’ll bring you to them now--” Solas begins, voice holding just a hint of darkness. One of these days, he’s going to lose his temper with you; you just know it. You’d seen it once already, in fact, but that had been...

Well, he’d been shirtless, in your defense. And you very much hadn’t enjoyed the cold shoulder he’d given you afterwards.

“Emma? Is that your irritated cadence I hear?” a familiar voice comes from above.

There’s a steady, quick thumping down the stairs, and then one of the doors is shoved unceremoniously open.

“Vishante kaffas! You’re a mess!” Dorian says with horror apparent in his eyes, striding over to you. “Did I hear right? Some brute of a soldier attacked you?”

“Lawrence Underhill. Yes,” you reply. You want that name known to literally everyone.

“Why?” he demands, grasping your shoulders, pulling you slightly away from Solas so he can have a look at you.

“I told him that just because his dick was too small to pleasure human women didn’t mean that any elven women would be interested, either.” You see Solas’ eyes widen slightly; you hadn’t been quite so crass with him the day before.

“Ha! I take it he was being a bit too free with his affections?”

“Free and loud,” you reply with a frown. “I’d had problems with him before... Sera and I both, actually. I knew he was a pig; I just didn’t think...” You choke up just the smallest amount, your throat seizing. A subtle act, just enough to be picked up by the two perceptive men. You can see the anger in both their eyes.

“Ridiculous,” Dorian says darkly. “I can’t say I’m surprised to find such a man among the ranks here, but I had hoped for better. I trust the Commander took care of him?”
“He’s been arrested, yes,” you reply, not having to try very hard to put relief in your voice. “The Commander, thank the Maker, stumbled across us.”

Dorian’s mind goes where everyone’s goes--what might have happened if he hadn’t? You know, obviously... you would have kneed him in the crotch and hurled him over the battlements. It wouldn’t have been as pretty, but you would have still had the injuries to prove your story, and the tears to make it believable. He had attacked you. It happened in the struggle. But there would have been more of an investigation. It wouldn’t have been so beautifully open and shut as this has been. Only Bull seems to suspect there might be anything more to the story at all.

Dorian fusses over you a bit, then turns to pester Solas about your healing. That gives Solas the perfect opening to pointedly say, “Actually, I was just about to take her down to the healers’ tent.”

“Take her?” Dorian asks with a sly smile. “Does she need an escort?”

“Tell me,” Solas replies evenly. “How comfortable are you with the concept of her walking down all those stone steps with only one eye working?”

Dorian winces. “A fair point.”

“I can walk, you know,” you say sourly.

“You trip down stairs with every part of your body functioning perfectly,” Dorian counters. “And off of walls, as I recall.” If you live to be one hundred, you will never live that one down. “And now you’re high as a kite—I can tell—and half blind. Let the nice elf take you to the healers’ tent.”

You scowl. You hadn’t actually been protesting Solas taking you there. Just this idea that you’re an invalid. It wasn’t that serious of an injury. All your limbs are intact, none of your organs are spilling out, and your eye would heal on its own eventually, even without all the magical intervention you’re getting.

“You two play nice,” Dorian adds as he’s heading out of the door, presumably to climb back up to the library.

“As opposed to what?” you grumble, mostly to yourself. “Solas pushing me down the stairs himself?”

“Come on then,” Solas says, ignoring your little aside.

He leads you down into the courtyard. You’d like to say you spite everyone by walking down the steps perfectly, but you do stumble slightly. Solas catches you before you can even catch yourself, a firm hand on each of your shoulders, from behind.

“I’m fine,” you mutter, shouldering his grip off of you. It isn’t as though you would have fallen; you’d just stumbled a bit. You hate to admit it, but there was a bit of truth in what Solas and Dorian had said. While you can see just fine, it’s a bit difficult for you to tell how far off things are... including steps. Most, you can do by instinct, but you’ll still be very happy to get this bandage off of your face.

“What in--oh! There you are!” one of the healers exclaims when she sees you. Not necessarily a good sign. “Thomas, get Yuli. Maybe now she’ll stop whining.” The woman turns back to you. “Please, lay down over here. Where have you been?”

You resist the urge to give a catty response. You know she’s just being concerned as a healer, but you really wish she just... wouldn’t.
“She’s been asleep,” Solas replies evenly when it becomes clear your focus is on not being overly rude, rather than actually replying. “I have been keeping an eye on her. I thought it better that she rest--”

“There she is!” The accented voice is unpleasantly familiar. The accent part is, anyway. You look up to see a Dalish elf, of all things. Apparently you hadn’t hallucinated the vallaslin yesterday. You’d rather hoped you had.

“Serah Solas has been keeping an eye on her,” the healer you’d been speaking with informs her. The Dalish woman is wearing a smile that couldn’t possibly look more forced. What’s the point? If you’re going to look like a grumpy asshole, go for it completely. Dive in with both feet. At least when you smile, it looks genuine.

“She shouldn’t have been allowed to leave in the first place, as I’ve said,” the Dalish says, voice just as falsely cheerful as her expression. “She should have been here, where real healers could keep an eye on her condition.”

You feel a little burning heat in your chest. Unfortunately for everyone involved, the Dalish continues. She grabs you, hands on your shoulders as Solas had. You’re even less pleased about it than when Solas did it. She guides... or perhaps pushes... you to a cot, where you sit, trying not to look as irritated as you feel.

“Now, how are you feeling?” the Dalish asks, finally actually addressing you.

“In better condition than everyone seems to expect,” you reply evenly. “It isn’t as though I’ve been going without healing. Serah Solas has been--”

Her eyes slide over to Solas briefly, where he waits near the entrance, then back to you. “That’s all well and good, but with injuries like these, you need actual healers, people with expertise, who know what they’re doing.” She continues on, rambling about how injuries like yours can quickly take serious turns for the worse, blah blah blah, head injuries, blah blah, eyes. You don’t really hear it. All you can actually hear is the blood rushing in your ears. Solas can clearly hear the woman. He barely even looks annoyed... just tired. You, however, are far beyond annoyed. It’s bad enough you have to listen to Dalish prattle on about how superior they are in general. To hear Solas maligned and belittled by her is more than you can stand, for multiple reasons. Not least of which is that he knows more than you. By acting as though she knows more than him, she’s also putting herself above you.

Which she certainly would have done anyway, but this was arguably the worst way she could have.

You don’t know if she can see the anger in your one good eye. She doesn’t appear to, continuing on as if she’s the only thing in the tent.

“All I actually need,” you interrupt, “Are more of the herbs, for pain.”

She pauses, as if momentarily caught off guard. “Actually, you need more healing. This sort of an injury shouldn’t be left alone to--”

You glance over at Solas, as if questioningly. “Well, I’m not sure about that... Solas, that won’t interfere with the long term healing you’ve already placed, will it?”

Solas blinks, seeming surprised that you’re addressing him. “Ah... No, unless she purposefully unravels it or prods at it too much.”

You turn back to the healer, who looks even more surprised than Solas did. “I suppose that’s fine, then. Just watch out for Solas’ healing spells.”
Her surprise fades into mild irritation, then she forces the smile back. “I’m sure I can manage. I’ll need to take these bandages off, and--”

You turn back to Solas. “You said something about not wanting them removed?”

Recognition glints in Solas’ eyes. He’s figured out your game now, if not why you’re doing it. “They need to be replaced anyway,” he tells you. “The bindings were slightly haphazard to begin with.”

Back to the Dalish, smiling. “That should be fine, then.”

She smiles through gritted teeth. “Wonderful.”

This continues essentially the entire time. Every time the woman suggests something, you turn for Solas’ opinion before allowing her to so much as apply an elfroot salve. You’re also just difficult in general, protesting or requiring explanation for, frankly, things you already know about. Each time, you buck her suggestions, but immediately defer to Solas’. By the time the woman leaves to fetch more of the pain herbs, she looks ready to scream. Or perhaps throttle you. Fair enough, you’ve wanted to scream and/or throttle her since she opened her mouth.

When she does finally leave earshot, Solas, who had moved to your side about halfway through your pettiness, turns to glare. “What purpose could you have for antagonizing that woman?” he scolds.

You cross your arms, glaring right back, but saying nothing. Solas looks increasingly frustrated, but the Dalish returns before he can say much else.

“Here are your herbs,” she says, sounding somewhat tired. “They should last you for another few days, but don’t take too many at once.” She eyes Solas sourly. “I’m sure Serah Solas here knows the proper dosage.”

You smile, mostly to yourself. Annoying people into submission really does work so well.

As for your actual healing progress, well... It’s coming along nicely for what it is, but--though you’re loath to admit it--your injuries had been serious. Not life-threateningly serious, or any such thing, no matter how people are acting... But serious enough you can’t just pop in and out of the healers’ tent and be done with it. Unfortunately.

Unbandaged, you’re able to tell that your left eye is making some progress. It’s not swollen all the way shut anymore, and you can kind of see out of it, though your vision is extremely blurry. You confess some worry about that--to Solas, anyway, though the healer is present--and are reassured by both that it’s just due to the fact you haven’t used it in a day. There is no damage to your vision.

The cracks in your bones will take the longest to heal, apparently. No surprise there. Bone is, by its nature, slow and reluctant to grow. And, as both Solas and the Dalish inform you, your body is too weak to handle as much as healing as a soldier’s could. The Dalish surprises you somewhat by going on a sour, clearly oft-repeated rant about the diet of the servants of Skyhold versus the diet of the soldiers.

You privately agree, although your thoughts are also on the diet of the nobles and the Inner Circle. Those with clout in Skyhold seem to have no issue getting food much better than that served in the mess halls. Even Solas is served better food than most... if you’re being completely honest with yourself, the mages probably are too, at least Madame de Fer’s mages. The common servants are simply at the bottom of a long chain.

It’s probably practical. It likely has good reasons for being there, or at least what those in charge
Despite your secret agreement on this single issue, you’re happy to have your herbs and get out of the healing tent, once she’s done. She’s given your head a thorough bandaging, as well as replaced the bandages on your arms--which just seems unnecessary to you. You immediately head back towards the steps to the Great Hall, when Solas pipes up.

“Perhaps you should rest?”

Your nerves are rather thin at the moment, all things considered, so you have to stop and physically square your shoulders to prevent snapping at him. “No. It can’t even be three hours after sunrise. I am going to work.”

“Seeing as how I seem to be your primary healer--” he begins snarkily, clearly still annoyed by your behavior in the tent.

You cut him off. “My room is freezing. There is no fireplace. There is no heating. I could not rest there even if you dragged me back and magically bound me in bed!” you snap, with more vehemence than you really intended.

Solas’ eyes widen slightly; you meet them only briefly before your gaze slides off him and onto the ground, embarrassed by your outburst but still frustrated with everyone needling you.

“I had not realized it was so cold,” he said finally.


“The cold makes your injuries ache,” Solas answers for you. The glint of an idea in his eyes tells you that your outburst may have been a mistake on multiple levels.

“Yes,” is all you say, however. “So I would prefer to head into the nice, warm rotunda, and get some actual work done. Injured though I may be, I am capable of sitting... and if I need to rest, there’s a couch right there.”

“You’re correct, of course,” he says, beginning to move again, leading you up the stairs. “I suppose it’s pointless for me to say, but do try not to overwork yourself.”

You roll your eye when he’s not looking. Forget your injuries, the most annoying consequence of your scheme to remove Underhill’s threat from your life is everyone’s incessant fussing.

--

Despite half of Skyhold apparently being determined to baby you, you do manage to get some actual work done in the hours before lunch. To your surprise, Celia arrives with lunch before you can so much as rise to fetch it. Solas must have said something to her, asked her to. You hope against hope he’s at least paying her... but that’s nonsensical. Technically, this sort of thing is her job. You’re just paying her to fetch Solas’ meals to earn her friendship and discretion.

Still, you rise to help her with the plates and thank her profusely.

You can’t help but notice that today’s lunch for you is soup... and Maker, are you glad. You’re trying to minimize your useage of the herbs, which keep you uncoordinated at best and downright stupid at worst. It makes it difficult to work, yes, but also they make you sleepy and vulnerable. Solas no doubt realizes this, which is why he’s being so ridiculous, but the fact of the matter is... his
“protection” doesn’t make you feel any safer. In some ways, it’s quite the opposite.

He’s the danger.

One of many. Even if he doesn’t realize it.

You dwell on that fact grumpily as you eat. It’s your fault and your fault alone. You’d known he was a mage, but you’d planted yourself down here anyway, just because it was quiet and you were cocky. And then you just kept making it worse for yourself, because he was interesting and smart and knew Elven.

Now you’re beat up and weakened next to one of the biggest threats to your safety in all of fucking Skyhold, and it’s your own damn fault.

Solas seems to notice your pensive mood, though what he attributes it to, you have no idea. General bitchiness, maybe. Either way, the two of you share a mostly silent meal, with only a single inquiry as to your condition. You manage to answer it neutrally.

After lunch, you want nothing more than to swipe the wolf pelt off of the back of his chair, curl up on his couch, and go the fuck to sleep. Instead, you clean up the dishes, though he stops you from returning them. Celia arrives to do it for you before much longer anyway.

You flop back down at your desk, glaring blearily at the pages and pages of work you have left to do. Thanks to your injury, you’re working slowly when you can work at all; there’s no way you’ll finish as quickly as you told Leliana. Hopefully, she’ll understand that being beaten causes delays, but somehow, you rather doubt you’ll get as much sympathy as you’d like.

It’s perhaps another two or three hours into the afternoon—around midpoint between lunch and dinner, really, which is the only way you bother to tell time lately—when a messenger arrives. You ignore him completely other than glancing up when he enters, assuming he’s there for Solas. You might think Leliana somewhat stone-hearted, but surely she wouldn’t pester you with a missive when everyone thinks you’re supposed to be bedbound.

The messenger approaches your desk however, and you glare up at him sourly. He doesn’t look like one of Leliana’s. He quails at your open glare, whereas Leliana’s all just fix you with a steady gaze and get on with it.

“U-um, Lady Montiliyet requests your presence at tea?” he says uncertainly. “If you’re up to it.”

“If I’m up to it?” you repeat dryly.

“Th-those were her words, yes.”

It’s only then that his words actually register for you. Lady Montiliyet wants you for tea? Is that her polite, ambassador-esque way of requesting your presence? Leliana would just summon you up to her chambers, but Lady Montiliyet is an ambassador... and just plain polite, beyond that.

You stand, then glance sourly down at your clothing. It’s nothing that you would wear to any sort of tea in Orlais. You’d sooner mug someone and steal their clothes. But you doubt she’s expecting you to dress up, or she would have sent the message sooner. Plus, your face is bandaged. You’re going to look a sight, no matter what.

The man is just staring at you.

“This is the part where you take me to Lady Montiliyet,” you say, a little more gently. Is this his first
day on the job? Or maybe he’s just nervous, being near Solas.

“Oh! Yes! Right this way!” he exclaims, then leads you out of the room. You give Solas an apologetic shrug. You could hardly say no. You doubt she’s invited you to tea just to catch up on the latest gossip...

--

As it turns out... she has.

Well. Not quite. Actually, Lady Montiliyet, after doing the appropriate--if mildly confusing, given your comparative societal ranks--“thank you for coming, so nice to have you” song and dance, informs you she’d been hoping to have you for lunch yesterday, but given the, “um... incident...” thought it better to postpone. Not very long, however. You suppose she has greater estimation of your stamina than anyone else in Skyhold.

You’re quite surprised to learn she’d been intending to speak with you before your injuries. You’d assumed it had something to do with them. But while she does ask after your health and recovery, once you assure her that you’re healing well and in good hands with both the healers and Solas, she does her best to move on... though she does occasionally wince.

The spread is... well, you regret that you don’t have complete usage of your jaw, and also that Orlesian manners prevents you from actually doing anything more than polite nibbling. Could you get this sort of thing from the kitchens? You remember how Solas had eaten a tiny cake with an actual fork. You would pay to see him eat some of these tea foods.

As for Lady Montiliyet, well... She does have business on the roster. Your injury, the steps being taken to prevent other such incidents (not much, but you know she has to say something), your work with Fenris, the ex-slaves, and the spontaneous little farm in the courtyard. It’s clear, however, what she actually called you here for.

“So, Leliana tells me you can speak Antivan?” she asks, polite voice masking excitement in her eyes.

“Sì, certo, nobildonna. Ho vissuto in Antiva per diversi anni,” you reply evenly.

Lady Montiliyet nearly glows. “Meraviglioso! Così molti qui parlano Orlesian, naturalmente, non è difficile rimanere in pratica, ma mi manca la mia lingua madre!”

You get it now, and more as the two of you continue to chat.

She’s homesick. She misses Orlais, but more specifically, she misses Antiva something terrible. There is enough here to remind her of Orlais, at least, but Antiva is a very, very long way off, and it’s clear that it’s been a while since she’s been back. There are surely others that speak Antivan within Skyhold, but it’s quite possible none of them have your grasp on not only Antivan politics, but Orlesian politics as well.

While the two of you speak mostly in Antivan, you do slide into Orlesian once or twice as well, and the discussion roames cheerfully around Thedas, though it does stay mostly in the affairs of nobles, as well as her own amusingly petty complaints. Well. Petty is the wrong word. So is silly. She does serious work, as serious as the Commander or Leliana. Diplomacy keeps the wheels of organizations such as the Inquisition from getting stuck in the mud of political discourse, and she really has her work cut out for her, given how genuinely unpopular the Inquisition tends to be with foreign powers.

But it’s still extremely amusing for you to hear her exasperatedly expound on the lack of social graces of most of the Inner Circle--particularly Sera and Blackwall--as well as pause to irritatedly
admit that they have to keep stopping a certain noble from treating the elven servants here like the ones “back home.” You’ve no doubt the man is Orlesian, and also no doubt that Lady Montiliyet could mean all number of unpleasant things.

So no, her complaints aren’t petty. They’re quite serious. But somehow, it’s hard to keep that in mind as she pouts about them over a delicate, light blue teacup.

As for you, you’re semi-astounded over your good luck as of late. A chance to butter up the Ambassador? Yes, please. You let her carry on long past what is reasonable for tea. It’s not particularly a struggle; you could always use practice in Antivan, and her stories are genuinely interesting. Both in the sense that they give you insight to what the higher ups of Skyhold are engrossed with, which you can barely see from all the way down at your level, and in the sense that some of her stories are genuinely hilarious.

“--direttamente di fronte agli ospiti! Perbacco!” Lady Montiliyet is finishing, clearly exasperated.

“Maleducatò!” you agree, clearly amused. You’re used to seeing such things. People in Orlais treat the elves like furniture half the time. It’s what makes spying so damn easy. You’d think people would learn that bards are as often elves as they’re not, but there are always idiots in the Game who never learned.

“Così, ovviamente, la serata era completamente-- Oh!” Lady Montiliyet follows your gaze behind her, and sees the person who’d just walked in, drawing your attention. “Leliana!”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Leliana says, sounding just as amused as you were feeling a few minutes ago. It’s a strange tone of voice to hear coming out of her mouth. You’re so used to her being a bit more... somber (terrifying, deadly). “But you wanted to discuss--”

“Oh! Maker, yes,” Lady Montiliyet says, looking a bit flustered. She turns her gaze to you, apologetically. “I’ve kept you far longer than is reasonable, Miss Emma!”

“Not at all, Lady Montiliyet,” you reply, surprisingly honestly. “It was a pleasure.”

“Perhaps you would... like to join me again?” Lady Montiliyet asks hesitantly, and you blink. Seriously? You don’t have to force the smile that comes to your lips.

“I would very much enjoy that, Lady Montiliyet.”

Lady Montiliyet’s smile back seems just as genuine, though you’ve no doubt she has a fake smile to rival yours and the Spymaster’s. “Next week, then. I’ll work out the details. And... please, call me Josephine.”

--

You feel like you could fly, on the way back to the rotunda... or perhaps that’s just the effect of the healing herbs, since you took another dose right after leaving “tea” with the Ambassador.

You now have connections to three of the five main powers of the Inquisition... and you want no connections to Seeker Pentaghast or the Inquisitor himself. Mind, you didn’t want connections to Commander Rutherford, either, but that’s already a done deal. Of all of them, Lady Montiliyet is the only one you’re comfortable with. She’s the only one whose power and favor you would have actively sought out, if left to your own devices.

She’s a known quantity, in part because you already knew of her, as the diplomat from Antiva to Orlais, and in part because you know her kind, quite well. The Spymaster pries and digs and is just
generally dangerous. The other three are either Templars or worse. Lady Montiliyet, she was predictable. Known. Safe. And powerful. A beautiful combination in, admittedly, a beautiful woman.

She must be very popular at soirees these days.

In any case, you’re beyond pleased to have a tie to her, and such a friendly one! Tea, of all things! You could kiss Fenris; though you doubt he knows it, this is thanks to him. Him and his little elves... They’d given you an excuse to talk to Lady Montiliyet, though that hadn’t been on your mind at the time. Or perhaps it’s Baptiste you should be kissing, though it’s... a little late for that. Rather than blame you for his death, Lady Montiliyet had seemed appreciative that you did everything in your power—which was a lot—to complete the mission after his death.

Whatever the cause, you now had an open line to continue befriending Josephine Montiliyet... one of the only friendships here you could actually see being useful after you inevitably left the Inquisition.

Solas notices your mood as you enter the rotunda; you’re practically floating.

“Good news from the Ambassador?” he asks curiously.

“We had tea,” you say simply, smiling broadly.

“Ah,” Solas says, seeming to understand. “Lady Montiliyet is a very pleasant woman.”

You just beam. “I’ll be having tea with her again, next week. She misses having someone to speak Antivan with, I think.”

“Ah... homesickness,” he notes. You nod.

“I have, uh... passing familiarity with Orlesian politics as well as Antivan politics, so I suppose my company is suitable to her.” Solas gives you a bit of a look. Passing familiarity, is that what we’re calling it now? Not that either of you can say much. Some days you miss the relative privacy afforded to you by the little inn room in Val Royeaux. It’s much more oppressive here, living under the Inquisition’s thumb much more directly.

Speaking of the Inquisition and the fact that you technically work for it... You have an actual job to do. You manage to sit down and get some work done, though it’s slow going. You’re loopy and light-headed from the medicine, and have to work slowly and with focus to keep that from affecting your handwriting.

It feels like you just sat down, but the modest stack of pages informs you that you’d been working for a while when your stomach begins to grumble. You ignore it automatically, but it quickly becomes more insistent, letting out a growl that you think Solas must be able to hear across the rotunda.

Dinner time then, you suppose.

It’s a bit embarrassing to be using your own stomach as a gauge for such things. You actually feel a little twinge of guilt as you head down to the kitchens. You often joke about using Solas for his food connections, but going down specifically because your stomach is telling you makes it feel true. It’s silly... You know if you had put off fetching the food, Solas would simply have reminded you, in his way. Not only him, but essentially everyone wanted you to eat regularly, and injured as you were, it was doubly important.

You still feel a bit like you’re using Solas.
What a stupid thing to feel guilty over. You’ve done so much worse than use a man for food.

That sobering thought does nothing to cheer you up, however.

What cheers you up slightly is the greeting you get in the kitchens. There’s a rather delightful smelling chowder waiting for you, and you’re loaded up with various extras, all of which seem to have been carefully selected for minimal chewing. Many times, you have gotten extras for taking the burden of dealing with Solas off the skittish kitchen workers. This time, however, it feels as though the extras are for you. A way of wishing you well.

It’s... touching, in a way, and while you still feel sort a looming sense of fault, you can’t help but smile as a no-nonsense human woman instructs you not to let “that apostate” steal the sweet muffin she’s setting on the corner of your tray.

You smile a little bit more when you share half of the sweet muffin with “that apostate,” though.

Chapter End Notes

Alright, so! I'm actually not back at my home yet; I'm still in Alabama with my father (health problems, but I should be back by next weekend). You might notice this is a kinda huge delay. That's partly due to complications in the trip... Without getting into it too much (because I don't want to), I almost died. And that kinda has a way of fucking with your head. So, what does this mean for the story, and for you guys?

Well, I'm going to finish out this arc as quickly as I can, hopefully by the end of September. Because then, I'm starting a shining new chapter in my education... trucking school. Yes, I'm serious. As it turns out, I'm REALLY good at driving cross country, and I really like doing it. I want to see more of the US, and I want to do it safely and without depending on other people. Hence. Trucking. Now, class starts in September and it's hardcore. Every weekday from 8am-5pm, thru the first week of December. Hard. Core. That's essentially all of my free time.

During this period, I'll be focusing mostly on outlining the next section. It's a hell of a doozy... You'll see why in a few more chapters... And regular updates probably won't be A Thing for KS until the outline (and, arguably, school) is done. I'll still be writing, both in the sense of the KS outline and other projects. You can probably expect to see updates of Yes, Ser, Curious, Tiny Secrets, and even Take It All In, probably. But they'll be a bit sparse as I focus on my education--and hopefully, my career.

That all being said, one of the reasons I'm gravitating towards this as a possible career is because once I'm done with school, it will allow me the free time to continue writing. Not as much as when I was working on it full time, but I don't get paid enough to keep doing that. x'D But hopefully, after I graduate, I'll come back full force. Well. Partial force, at least.

TL;DR: Updates will continue every week or two until I finish this arc. Then, KS hiatus probably til December at least (but other stuff will hopefully update during that time). Then, updates more regularly, hopefully biweekly, as I wobble nervously into a new workforce.
Despite your determination to share your food with Solas, there’s still quite a bit left after the two of you have eaten your fill. There’s a fairly good chance you’d just keep eating it if you brought the leftover soft, baked sweets to your desk, but you think of a better idea. You gather the sweets, excuse yourself, and head up into the library. You acquiesce to give Dorian a muffin, but your aim is Thea, who you find shelving returns on the other side of the library.

Her expression is one of surprise, then alarm, then relief. Thea never has been particularly good at hiding her expressions; she wears them on her face, and now is no exception.

“You look just as bad as I’d heard,” she says sympathetically, reaching out towards your face automatically, then stopping, as if realizing what she was doing. “I’m sorry I didn’t stop in to see you... I wanted to, but... well...” Her eyes glance over to the circular hole in the library, where, if you looked down, you could no doubt see Solas, still at his desk.

“It’s fine; I was unconscious most of yesterday anyway,” you reassure her, following her gaze. “He doesn’t bite, though, you know.”

“I suppose you’re an expert on what he does and does not do with his mouth by now—”

You fix her with a withering glare. “Why are you so skittish of him, but not Dorian?” you ask, deciding not to rise to her bait... or allow her obvious deflection.

She chuckles a bit. “Well, to tell you the truth, I was nervous as a virgin on her wedding night when he first settled in at the library. I couldn’t believe there was a Tevinter Magister, here of all places—”

“Altus,” you correct absent-mindedly.

“Yes, so he said as well,” she says with a snort. “But it really is six of one, half a dozen of another, innit?”

“Magisters are members of the government, the Magisterium,” you begin. “An altus is just—”

“Oh, don’t you start too. They’re both scary Tevinter mages with a bunch of power.”

You can’t really argue with that. “So what changed? I’ve seen you hit him with a book. Not scared of getting hexed?”

“I will be if you say that enough,” she says with a scowl. “And I’ll have you know, he deserved that. But Dorian, well... He’s a charming sort of fellow, y’know? He gave me flowers, once.”

You snort. “He charmed you like a pony.” It’s her turn to glare at you, but you can’t help but shake
your head, smiling. “No wonder you don’t like Solas. He couldn’t charm his way out of an Orlesian purse.”

“ Seems to have you charmed well enough,” Thea says archly.

“Au contraire, mon ami,” you correct with a grin. “I have him charmed.”

“Oh, of course,” Thea says, rolling her eyes, but smiling as well. “Wrapped around your finger. Y’know, he’s almost less scary ‘cause of you.”

“Oh?” you say, although you’d intended for that to be the case.

“Yeah, almost. I think it makes you more scary, though, more than it makes him less.”

You snort, then gesture to your heavily bandaged face. “Not scary enough, apparently.”

Thea winces. “Yeah, I guess not.”

It’s nice catching up with Thea. Solas being intimidating isn’t particularly news... Although it is sort of annoying. Instead of aggressive assholes being intimidated, and nice people feeling comfortable coming up to say hi, the opposite has happened. Solas’ scariness doesn’t rub off on you enough to keep away people like Lawrence Underhill, and your... subtle charm or whatever... doesn’t rub off on Solas enough for most people to feel comfortable talking to him.

You suppose it would be too easy, otherwise. Sigh.

Back down in the rotunda, you try to get some more work done, but it seems like fate just isn’t on your side today. Not very long after dinner, you get a guest... or guests, to be more accurate. A lot of them.

You hear the door open, but it barely even registers; you’re focusing on your work. It isn’t until Solas says something that you glance up... and see Fenris standing in one of the doorways, looking a bit uncertain.

“--but if she’s busy...” he’s saying, glancing from Solas over to you.

“I’m not busy,” you say immediately, setting down your quill. “Do you need my help with something, Fenris?” You pointedly ignore the look Solas is giving you. He probably thinks you aren’t in the condition to help anyone. Well, nuts to him.

“Oh, not at all,” Fenris replies, giving you an alarmingly similar look to the one Solas had. It’s the face bandages, isn’t it? They make you look like you’ve got one foot in the pire. Hmph... Lady Montiliyet hadn’t seemed to mind. “I... that is we... were just hoping to stop in and... ah...”

Sheepish is a very, very good look on Fenris. You should probably chime in to help him, fill in the gaps, reassure him that he can visit you whenever. Instead, you take a moment to enjoy the way he’s awkwardly looking down and to the right, body sort of folded in as if he’s trying to hide himself.

Fenris, your long time hero, is being bashful. At you. The man who shoves his fist through slavers’ chests is a bit nervous because he thinks he might be bothering you while you’re recovering.

Aaaaah... life is good.

Finally, you have some mercy. “Of course, Fenris. Please, come in. I was just trying to get some work done, but honestly, I could use a break.”
He looks a bit relieved as you finally break his awkward explanations with an invitation in. You don’t get to enjoy it for long, however, because at your invitation, a little mob of much tinier bodies bursts through the door, several at a time, pushing around him.

Oh, he’s brought some of the ex-slaves! At least, you assume they all are... to be honest, you’re not entirely sure. The four children are, certainly, but you would be hard pressed to identify all of the adults. The woman with the long, white-blonde hair doesn’t seem to be present, and she’d been the adult who had stood out to you the most amongst the ex-slaves.

“Miss Emma! Miss Emma, I heard a shem hit you, is that true?”
“I heard the Commander rescued you!”
“He’s a shem too, though...”
“I keep telling you, Elpis, they’re not all gonna punch people.”
“I haven’t seen any that don’t!”
“Sure you have!”
“Yeah, what about Ser Blackwall?”
“Just cause he hasn’t yet--”

You clear your throat gently, unable to prevent a slight smile from quirking at the corners of your lips. “Where did you hear that, Elpis?” you ask the first child, rather than answering the question. You remember him. He came in with the ex-slaves, and took rather fondly to the goats right away. You’ve seen him out there a few times now, showing the others how to milk them.

“All the adults are sayin’ it!” he announces firmly. You glance over at the adults who filed into the room in a much more orderly fashion than the children. They’re pointedly avoiding eye-contact, including Fenris.

“Well... it’s true,” you admit, squatting down a little so you can talk to the children more directly. “But it’s also true that Commander Rutherford arrested him right away. He’s in the prisons now, so you don’t have to worry about him.”

The children all exchange glances. They’re not stupid. One of them, the one who expressed concern over Blackwall and the other ‘shems,’ finally voices what you know they’re all thinking. “It’s not like he’s the only one...”

You sigh. “No. He’s not the only one. But it should mean something that the Commander arrested him, right? I’m not going to lie and tell you something like that could never happen again... but it’s not like Tevinter, here. He’ll pay. He’ll never be in a position to do anything like that again.”

The nervous child shifts uncomfortably, but says nothing.

“If Ser Blackwall and the other humans make you uncomfortable, Elpis, you don’t have to talk to them,” you assure him. “But I think Ser Blackwall is a fine man. He’s a Warden, you know, and the Wardens have always held elves and dwarves as equal allies within their ranks.”

“Yeah! The hero of Ferelden was an elf!” another child chirps in.

“That’s right, she was,” you agree. “And while Ser Blackwall didn’t know her personally, they would be comrades.”

The boy makes a face, but seems to be a bit less nervous. “He smells worse than the goats, though.”

You can’t stop yourself from snorting, especially when another child chimes in, “Well, southerners don’t even bathe, I heard!”
“I wish! The bathhouses always have people in them!”

“Just ask Belassan to spray him off with a hose the next time he washes the horses,” you say, trying hard to keep a straight face and failing.

“You didn’t come here just to complain about our hosts, did you?” one of the adult women says to the children sternly.

“Oh! Right! Give it here, Elpis.”
“No way, I wanna give it to her!”
“You got to carry it over, that was the deal!”
“Let’s just all grab one! She can put them back in the basket!”
“That’s stupid!”

The children fuss over a covered basket that one of them was carrying, and with a bit more bickering and struggling, manage to produce something... or several somethings... out of it.

“...Cheese?” you say, blinking. It’s something of a dumb question; it’s very obviously cheese, just judging by the layer of wax and general shape.

“The first batch,” one of the women chimed in, smiling broadly. “Or some of it, anyway. We’ve got some that we’re going to keep for longer, obviously, but well... we were all pretty excited to see if it worked.”

“It’ll be easier once we have more goats,” a man adds in. “But now that we’re producing milk and cheese, even if it’s just a bit, we think the Inquisition will be more enthusiastic about getting them to us.”

“I’ve spoken to a few people about it,” you say absent-mindedly, examining the cheese. “I’m hoping there will be some coming within the next week or two. It takes a bit of doing to bring goats up into the mountains, but the sooner we bring them, the better. Skyhold’s first winter is bound to be an experience, and anything we can do to help pad out our food storage will be a blessing.”

“I’ve spoken to Lady Montiliyet, as well,” Fenris chimes in. You glance up from the cheese. “She assured me that goats and ‘a few other things’ are already on their way here.”

“A few other things? From anyone else, that would be alarming,” you say mildly. “When did you build a cheesehouse, Fenris?”

He laughs. You would pay him to do it more. “It wasn’t me; it was Ser Blackwall and Hawke, and a few others.”

You snort. “The Champion of Kirkwall built a cheesehouse?”

“I wasn’t even a little surprised; that is a man enamored with cheese,” Fenris says. He scrunches up his nose. You’ve noticed he does that, sometimes. Solas does too, but differently... maybe because their noses are so different? Or maybe because their personalities are. Perhaps personalities inform the manner in which one’s nose scrunches. “I’m told it’s a Ferelden thing.”

Now it’s your turn to laugh. “Oh, yes. Well, so the stereotype goes, anyway. I’ve yet to live anywhere that didn’t have a strong fondness for cheese.”

“Perhaps you simply noticed because you’re Ferelden.”

You laugh again. When was the last time you laughed this much? Definitely before you got your
face bashed in. It doesn’t hurt to laugh anymore, either because of the healing or because of the pain medication.

“In all seriousness, Emma,” he says, his smile faltering somewhat. “I’m relieved you’re alright. We all are.”

One of the women nods. “We heard the news, that an elf had been attacked on the battlements. There was a lot of rumor all day. Some people were saying it was a spy that did it. Some people were saying it was a soldier. Then rumor started saying you were the one who got hurt, and that you’d been rushed to the healing tent. But no one knew what happened, not really.”

“And then Serah Fenris said he’d been to see you and they weren’t letting anyone in...” someone else added. You glance over at Fenris.

“I came by the rotunda,” he explains. His eyes dart over towards Solas, who most people seem to have forgotten is there.

“I was asleep,” you explain, both to Fenris and to the gathered elves.

“We were a little worried they’d killed you,” one of the elves admits quietly. You're a bit startled, both that they would have been worried about you dying... and that they, in particular, would have been worried about you dying. But you suppose it makes sense, if they were worried about “an elf” being killed, rather than you, specifically.

You suspect that’s the source of the frustration and even anger you read on the faces of the assorted elves. They had come a long way to escape elves being killed like cattle. To come to the other side of the world, be told you’re finally safe, and then have an elf you know--an elf who was seen to be helping you--attacked, perhaps killed...

“It was one man. His name was Lawrence Underhill,” you find yourself saying. “I knew him. I knew he was trouble, although I underestimated how much. He had bothered me and my friends before. I didn’t tell any of the Inquisition authority because he was a soldier, and I was a scribe. Because he was a human and I was an elf. Because he was a man and I was woman.” You let your gaze drift along the small crowd, meeting the gaze of each of them in turn as you speak. You see recognition and frustration in a lot of eyes.

“Maybe that was a mistake on my part,” you continue. “Maybe it wasn’t. I can’t really know whether or not my words would have been taken seriously, because I never voiced them. But I can assure you one thing... the sort of behavior that led up to this won’t be underestimated now.

“It was Commander Rutherford who saw Underhill attacking me and stopped him. He arrested him on the spot, had him dragged off to the dungeons that instant. I told him what had happened, and what had happened between Underhill and myself previously. I believe he will be on the lookout for other such men... especially now. If any of you--or all of you--go to him with a similar complaint, I believe you will be listened to. If you have complaints about the way things are here, I believe now is the time to voice them... but to someone who can actually change them, and in an organized manner.

“If you’re too nervous to talk to the Commander, I don’t blame you. Find Sera. Find Belassan. Find someone you can trust, someone who can get the word where it needs to be. You don’t have to suffer in silence. The Inquisition says it is an Inquisition for all. Make them--make us--live up to it.”

--

The aftermath of giving a speech is always a little awkward. Fortunately, you have cheese, which
serves as a ready distraction. You also still have some sweets leftover from dinner, which you distribute to the children. You sit on the couch; so does Fenris and one of the other elves. Another pulls your desk chair over. One sits on the armrest of the couch. The children clutter onto the floor, swapping pieces of sweetcake and chattering amongst themselves. You’re a little uncomfortable, having brought a small crowd into Solas’ rotunda, but he doesn’t seem to mind. He’s sitting at his desk writing as if he hasn’t a care in the world, least of all about the little mob of ten elves gathering in his room.

You talk about kitchen work, and farm work, and cheese and milk and eggs. The children here are all ones that are kept busy working the farm. They’ll be kept more busy when it’s more of a farm than three goats and an assorted gathering of chickens.

Eventually, the elves filter out, dragging the children along with them. It’s time to bathe before bed. You smile slightly at the thought of the elves bathing as a group, but your smile falters when you remember the cool water they’ll be doing it in. Hmph. Speaking of change, it really is getting towards time for you to do something about the state of the bathhouses here. It won’t take much to take the tense energy of the elves and turn it towards something productive.

Fenris stays though. It’s not quite being alone with him, since Solas is still at his desk. The way he’s pointedly ignoring the two of you, it feels sort of like a father chaperoning when his daughter has a boy over for the first time. You’re pretty sure that comparison would annoy him, which makes you want to point it out all the more.

“I should thank you for introducing me to Lady Montiliyet,” Fenris comments. “She’s been extremely helpful in getting everything set up for the elves here.”

“I’m glad,” you reply with a faint smile. “Having a small supply of animals here really is a very good idea, but I was a bit worried it wouldn’t be seized upon by dint of it being elves that came up with it.”

“Yes... the Inquisition has a lot of egg on its face in regards to how elves are treated, right now,” he says, eyeing your bandaged face.

“I would say the actions of one soldier don’t reflect upon the Inquisition, but...” you say with a sigh. “I’m fairly sure that’s what the actions of soldiers do by definition. At the very least, I can say it was dealt with swiftly.”

“A man arrested still isn’t ‘dealt with,’ unless there was a sentencing I didn’t hear about?”

“I’m sure that will have to wait for the Inquisitor to return,” you reply simply. “I wonder which will get here first... Him, or the goats?”

“Either way, I doubt I’ll be here to see it,” Fenris says. “I’ll be leaving in a few days... a favor to the Inquisition.”

You blink, a bit surprised. “For the Inquisition?”

“Yes. I’m not sure I can call it a favor if they’re paying me, but...” he shrugged. “I do the occasional mercenary job, anyway.”

“Bankrolling all the slaver murder?” you ask with a smile.

He laughs. “Something like that.”

You’re not surprised he’s leaving, at least... You hadn’t even expected him to show up, let alone stay
as long as he had. Part of you wishes you’d seized upon the opportunity and spent more time with him. But, ah... After you’d essentially climbed on top of him during that sparring match, well... It had been fairly clear to you that some degree of avoidance was necessary to prevent doing anything stupid. Just being around him now is filling your mind with some very stupid things, not even all relating to how the lyrium in his skin sings out to you like sweetest candy.

No, avoiding him had probably been the right call. Still, you can’t make yourself regret having had the chance to meet him. It’s not every day a person gets to meet their idols... and certainly not every day that they wind up living up to expectations. Awkwardly, you try to find a way to voice this, without actually admitting any of it out loud. It proves difficult.

“I, ah... It was really nice meeting you. After reading the book, er, that is, not just after reading the book, but. Um. Let me start over.” He looks amused, but lets you fumble on. “When you read about a person, I think it puts a sort of... image in your head, of what they might have been like... or in this case, what they might be like. But that’s just a guess, colored by what the person writing the book thought, even by their own self-image if it’s a journal, and then again by your own perceptions. Erm.” You grope desperately for a conclusion. “What I’m trying to say is, you don’t actually expect people to be like how they’re written. So when you meet them, and they are, it’s... nice.”

Wow, that was the most convoluted way any person has ever expressed appreciation for another person, ever. Good job, you.

Fortunately, Fenris seems to have followed. “I’m not sure I should be pleased that Varric’s descriptions are so accurate,” he says dryly, but clearly amused.

“Oh, well, he didn’t get everything right,” you say. “You’re nicer than I might have guessed.”

“...Nicer?”

“Friendlier... kinder?” At this point you’re just listing synonyms. “It’s a good way to be different than your written representation,” you assure him. You’re already a bit flustered. If anyone could manage to insult someone by calling them nice, it would be you.

“I... Thank you,” he says. You would say he glances away, but he’s not really someone who maintains firm eye contact to begin with. “It was interesting to meet you, as well. Varric, as always, has interesting taste in friends.” He said interesting twice. You’re either fascinating or the kind of thing that inspires people to hesitantly say “interesting” in lieu of any other, more accurate adjectives, like “bloody weird” or “kind of awkward really.”

“I’m sure we’ll run into each other again,” he adds, a bit more confidently. “You work for the Inquisition, and I’ll be doing work for them as well... for a bit, at least. It’s... really something, having Hawke and Varric back in the same place again.”

You can’t imagine what people see in Hawke. You really can’t. He’s like a ball of slime that rolled in grease. With a dog, because no horrible person is complete without a horrible dog, apparently.

Not that you say any of that to Fenris, mind.

Instead, the two of you share equally awkward--at least they feel that way to you--goodbyes before he finally leaves. You just sort of lean against the wall for a moment, trying to collect yourself. Maker. This is all way too much to deal with while under the influence of this healing herbs. You’d managed to tie your head on straight for the time the elves were here, but now it’s threatening to fly off like a rogue pidgeon.
“That was interesting,” Solas comments, before you can so much as stumble back to your desk.

“Not you too,” you mumble absent-mindedly. Your head feels halfway detached from your body. “Interesting. Everything’s interesting today, I suppose.” You realize, belatedly, what he probably meant... he’d just had a random assortment of complete strangers wander into his workplace. Shit, yeah, that was probably actually really rude of you. “I’m sorry, I didn’t even think; having them all in here like that...” you begin, trying to find footing for an apology.

“I did not mind,” Solas interjects as you try to grope your way towards a semi-coherent statement. “It isn’t as though I was doing something from which I could not be disturbed.”

That’s true, you suppose... and no one would have come in if he was doing magic, or probably even if he’d been painting. Still, the little twinge of guilt is there, telling you that you’d definitely done something wrong, no matter what anyone told you.

“You seemed concerned that the elves might do something rash... and equally concerned that they felt helpless. Scared,” Solas observes.

“I love it when you state facts to me,” you say, finally starting the tentative process of wandering back to your desk.

“Do you often find yourself managing the hopes and fears of the masses?”

You scoff. “When you put it like that, it sounds so dramatic.” C’mon legs, walk straight. “It’s nothing like that.”

“Is it not?” Solas says mildly. “I must be mistaken. I could have sworn you were assuaging their fears and turning their passion in a productive direction at the same time.”

You give him a withering look as you finally lean down against your desk. Sweet, solid desk. Phew, you’re dizzy. Maybe you should have something to drink. “They needed something to focus on, to help them feel less vulnerable. People do stupid stuff when they’re scared and angry. Whatever I think of the Inquisition, they’re safer here. Those kids deserve stability, especially. As much as anyone can give, in the middle of a war.” You manage to sink into your chair and almost instantly feel better for being off your feet.

“Whatever you think of the Inquisition?”

Ah... oops. “I’ll admit, I’m feeling a little bitter about being beaten into the healing tent,” you “confess” with a sigh. “I know it’s not anyone’s fault but Underhill’s... and I’m sure that will actually be a comfort to me when more time has passed. I’m not an exception to the ‘stupid when scared’ rule, after all.”

“I... simply meant that you have remarkable care for the downtrodden. It’s admirable.”

You can’t help a snorting laugh, leaning around your chair and looking back at Solas with a somewhat amused expression. “Solas... I am the downtrodden.”

--

You do manage both a drink and some work, that evening after things have settled down. The work is thanks to your own unflappable work ethic. The drink is thanks to Solas, who actually brings you tea. Of course, it’s not the dark, strong tea you prefer, but a light chamomile. But you’re hardly about to complain... it’s good, and you can’t believe he brought it for you, and an entire pot. Did he go to the kitchens and get it? Maker, that must have been a sight. Hopefully the staff didn’t have a
You continue working on into the night, drinking tea and slowly but steadily working your way through line after line. There’s a sweet spot about four hours after you’ve taken the herbs for pain, where the pain is neutralized but your head isn’t dizzy and spinning. Once you hit that stride, you finally begin to make real progress.

Before you know it, the rooms in the tower above have gone dark, the echoing murmur of voices has died down to silence, and your daily candle has burned away to nothingness. You probably would have continued working into the wee hours of the morning, if not for Solas. You don’t really register the noises he makes as meaning anything until a gentle hand lands on your shoulder. You jump slightly, but his touch is light enough that it brings up no bad memories automatically. You glance back and up at him, only realizing upon looking away how strained your eyes feel.

“You have been working for hours,” he informs you. “If you’re satisfied with your progress, perhaps now is the time to rest?”

You almost smile. That has to be the gentlest request for you to go to bed yet. Perhaps he’s trying to improve his bedside manner?

“I won’t be satisfied with my progress until I’m done,” you say, glancing back at the work. “But I suppose.”

“You mentioned earlier the chill of your room was causing your injuries pain--” Oh dear. “The rotunda does get a bit cold at night, but I suspect it’s significantly warmer than a room with an open window. You might consider resting here, for the time being.”

Diplomatically put. But you shake your head despite the fond memories of sleeping on his couch with that delightful blanket. “Despite the cold, thanks to these herbs I’ll be able to sleep regardless,” you lie.

“It might be--”

“I’d be much more comfortable in my own room,” you say, cutting him off. “It can be difficult enough for me to sleep comfortably without adding a semi-public place and a couch into the situation.”

In truth, you simply don’t want to sleep anywhere that gives him such easy access to you. Not after that little trick with your doorknob. True, that was likely only because he was worried for your safety, and wanted to ensure no one entered your room, but... He’s shown a few times now his willingness to cast magic on and near you, thinking that you can’t tell. He’s not exactly trustworthy on that score, no matter what you’d prefer to believe.

You really shouldn’t let down your guard. That’s when things get ugly.

“Very well,” he says, thankfully allowing it to drop. “Let me at least walk across the courtyard with you. This late on a Friday, there may well be intoxicated soldiers roaming about.”

You agree, and the two of you head out of the Great Hall and down into the chill of mid-Kingsway. You can’t quite decide if this month is speeding by or dragging. It’s certainly been eventful.

This time, you stop at the door into your hallway, turning around there and thanking Solas for walking you. You don’t want to give him another chance at your doorknob... He could follow you in later and do it, of course, but you’re not going to make it easy on him. You want him to feel like a creeper if he does, waiting until you go into your room and then following you there. Whether that
will stop him, you have no idea, but you’re more than willing to be passive aggressively difficult for its own sake.

He doesn’t follow you, though. You wait about fifteen minutes, staring at the doorknob, then go over and run your hand along it. No magic. No silent alarm waiting to go off if someone kicks down the door.

You return to your bed.

Ten minutes later you get up and shove your storage chest in front of the door, and then return to bed again.

You try to sleep.

You don’t.
Morning Shock

Chapter Notes

I'd like to dedicate this chapter to Anachromystic, who was a very skilled writer in this fandom, who was driven off by rude messages on Tumblr and especially Ao3, which continues to refuse to implement any sort of blocking system to protect people from this sort of bullying.

I like to think that none of my readers would overlap with this crowd, since the bullying was centered on her OCs and my readers are almost categorically chill with OCs. However, I would still like to remind you all that negative comments are never useful or helpful. I suspect you all know that. I suspect the people who left them knew that too, but it can't hurt to repeat.

There is a near-infinite supply of fan fiction in this world. There are more books at a library than you will read in your life. Stop wasting your time with something you dislike. Read something else instead of leaving a comment with """criticism."""

Now, with all that out of the way... Let's check on Krem.

You take medicine when the cold starts sinking into your sore bones, but while it makes you just as loopy as ever, it doesn’t put you to sleep. You spend the night staring vaguely up at the ceiling, wondering what you’re going to do all winter, when it’s too cold to leave the fortress and sleep in the woods outside Skyhold. You almost hate yourself for hoping it, but if Solas gets sent on another mission, you could probably find someplace to safely sleep... If not your room, where other mages or Templars might trip across you, perhaps his. Any stray magical tingling might be attributed to him, and you get the feeling people avoid it. The only thing that concerns you is how near it is to Madame de Fer’s room.

But barring that, you’ll just have to tough it out for as long as you can, and seize any opportunities for sleep that come your way. You’ve been through worse. That you’re having trouble thinking of anything right now is a sign that you’re exhausted and nothing more.

You wander out of bed shortly before dawn, honestly somewhat pleased with the opportunity to escape your room and the hollow, echoing trap of your own thoughts. You bundle up a bit excessively, and then head out into the courtyard. You meander towards the training rings, more out of habit than anything. While it’s not necessarily too cold for outdoor practice, you doubt you’re in any condition for it. Bull is out there, though. Not in your normal ring, but in one closer to the edge... closer, you note, to where your room is. Is the door to your hallway visible from there? Probably not, but he’d doubtless see you crossing into the Great Hall were you going that way.

He waves as you approach, stopping in his lone practice to walk over and lean against one of the posts that mark the edges of the ring.

“Don’t get me wrong, I like dedication,” he comments as you get close enough to hear. “But I don’t think you’re in condition for much right now.”
You nod, somewhat grimly. You’re in the inbetween stage of medicine right now... your head is clear, but the pain hasn’t set all the way in yet. It’s a good place to be dealing with Bull.

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” you say, voice lighter than you feel right now. “And tomorrow’s Sunday. Looks like I’m off the hook until Monday.”

“So why’d you come over? Just to make sure?” Bull asks.

You give a nonchalant sort of shrug. “I was up... and if I’m going to be cold, I’d rather be cold out in the open with other people, rather than bundled up in my room with nothing but my thoughts for company. Plus, I think Solas still doesn’t want me to be alone, after what happened.”

“How you been handling it?”

“I’m healing,” you reply. “I’m hoping I’ll be out of these bandages before too much longer...” You run a hand gently over your bandaged eye. “The longer I go without using this thing, the more nervous I get.”

“Adjusting to one eye can be hard,” he says, and you snort a bit--you hadn’t really thought about it, but yeah, he’d know about losing use of an eye, wouldn’t he? He’s being serious, however. “The loss of side vision is the worst. Anyone snuck up on you yet?”

You chuckle ruefully. “I’m not super observant on the best of days, and the medicine keeps me loopy. Solas can normally sneak up on me pretty easily, even without a blind side--” But as you say that, you pause. Come to think of it... Has Solas come up on your left side at all, these last few days? Every instant you can think of, he’s standing to your right, touching your right shoulder, saying your name to alert you of his presence.

You make a mental note to pay more attention to that in the future, out of curiosity. You wouldn’t put it past him to be doing that on purpose, but you don’t want to give him credit too soon.

“So, really... how are you coping?” he says, and you give him a slightly annoyed look.

“I just told you. With some luck, I’ll be out of these bandages before Monday, and--”

“I don’t mean physically,” he says, tapping the side of his head. “You got jumped and hurt pretty badly... and as I recall, you weren’t looking too hot right before that happened, either. How are you doing?”

Oh.

You size him up, uncertain of what you should be saying. You suppose it would be weird if you were just fine after that. You aren’t, if you’re being perfectly candid, but that really is mostly due to the physical injuries.

Ah, you’re even lying to yourself now. Haven’t you been dragging your chest in front of your door pretty much every night? Aren’t you more twitchy, glancing over your shoulder whenever you’re alone? Solas has had you staying in other people’s company, but the truth of it is, you’re a bit shaky when you’re by yourself, even just overnight.

It’s not even Underhill himself... It’s how much what happened with him has brought up old memories--and old habits--that you don’t like thinking about. Focusing on what to do with the increasing tension with the elves in Skyhold has been a helpful distraction, as has your work, but... it’s only been two days. You’re still...
Of course, you don’t really want to admit any of this to Bull. You sigh, rubbing your neck.

“I don’t know,” you say finally. “I’ve been drugged since it happened. I’m jumperier, but that could even be due to having just the one eye working. Sometimes, it just seems like, oh, yeah, that’s a thing that happened. Like an accident. Like I tripped or something. Other times...” You shrug. “I... can’t really make heads or tails of it yet.”

Bull gives you a pat on the shoulder. His hand covers pretty much the entire distance from the edge of your shoulder to your neck. Ridiculous.

“That’s pretty normal, especially if you’ve been on herbs for pain. Look, I don’t know if I’m really the person you’d want to talk to this stuff about—” You snort, and he grins ruefully. “Yeah, didn’t think so. But, y’know, Skinner’s a good listener, and Krem’s bedridden, so he’s got literally nothing better to do...”

“Has anyone told him yet?” you ask curiously. “Yesterday you said you were keeping it from him.”

“Don’t think anyone’s told him. He might have heard through the grapevine by now, being in the healing tent and all. I was actually gonna stop in and see him after breakfast, and give him the news if his condition is stable.”

“Would it not be?” you say with a worried frown. “He’s been getting better, right? He’s been there for over a week!”

“Well, he’s not getting worse, but he’s not healing the way they want him to,” Bull admits. “Problems with his lungs, and ribs. We’re having them take it really slow and easy to try and prevent any permanent injury. This is the kind of thing that could lay him out permanently if it doesn’t heal right... or even give him the kind of long-term weakness that can you get killed prematurely in combat, in this line of work. I’d rather have him in bed for a month now then dead in two years because we rushed the healing.”

You nod. You hadn’t ever particularly worried about that, despite your, uh “line of work” in Orlais. Bards had a short shelf-life anyway, and while you’d had no real intention of dying, you’d honestly just been very confident of your ability to survive anything... much like Banal’ras is now. He had learned it somewhere, after all.

Not a day goes by that you don’t wonder whether not the two of you had ever done each other any good at all.

“You worried about that with your own injuries?” Bull asks, bringing you out of your thoughts.

“Yes and no... I’m worried about the eye,” you answer, bringing your fingers up to the bandages covering it. “But I also have a lot of faith that if it was actually at risk, Solas would be even more up in arms about it. He seems to think I’ll make a full recovery with minimum risk for complications... Though he sure does wish I’d spend the whole time on my back,” you add sourly.

Bull snorts, and you glare at him, realizing belatedly the second meaning of what you’d said. “You ever consider actually listening to him?” Bull asks, instead of taunting you about how much Solas wants you on your back--he doesn’t, but people sure do love teasing you about it.

“I do! Within reason,” you say with a frown, crossing your arms. “I almost have to; he’ll nag me into an early grave otherwise...”

“I think he’s more worried about nagging you out of an early grave,” Bull begins, but he trails off, his eye flicking to something behind you.
Your eyes follow Bull’s, and you see a man rushing towards you. “Excuse me!” he shouts out, only a second after you’ve noticed him. “Ser, um... Bull?” You would laugh, under different circumstances, but the man looks nervous. Something about the urgency with which he’s running towards you—at this hour, too—puts you on edge.

“Yeah?” Bull says, all business, ignoring the awkward butchering of his name.

“Um, the uh... mercenary, the one in the healing tent, he’s yours?”

“What’s wrong with him?” Bull says, deadly serious. You feel a knot of dread twist into your stomach.

“He’s taken a turn... I was sent to find the next of kin, and well, that’s... you.”

Next of kin?

You wonder if you look nearly as pale as Bull does. You hear a ringing in your ears; the man’s voice seems to echo. Bull’s jumping over the rope and running in the direction of the healers’ tent. After a moment of dizzy confusion, you’re following him.

What makes someone get the next of kin?

You know the answer to that question, but it’s still rattling around in your head. You trail behind Bull... not because you have no hope of keeping up with him, but because he’s tearing across the courtyard and you have just enough presence of mind to remember you don’t want Bull knowing just how fast you can move. By the time you catch up to him, he’s at the tent, and two people are standing between him and the entrance. To your surprise, he isn’t rushing in... But it looks like he’d really like to. You dart up to his side.

“--in surgery now, you’ll have to wait out here, but the healer wants you here in case.”

“In case?” a voice says weakly, shaking. You realize it's yours only when one of the people glances over at you.

“The, um... Krem, has taken a turn. There's internal bleeding, and... Well--”

“Do you have some relation to him?” interjects the other one, apparently more concerned with protocol.

“I’m... I’m...” you stammer, mind reeling.

“Yeah,” Bull says simply, and while the second person man seems a bit skeptical of the vagueness, they both accept it. “When can we go in?”

“We’ll let you know absolutely as soon as we can,” the first one promises. “For now, please wait out here, both of you.”

And then the two of you are left standing outside the healers’ tent. Helpless. You gaze frantically up at Bull, but he’s not looking at you. His face is horribly neutral, but he’s betrayed by the tension in his muscles.

You wonder, briefly, how Qunari deal with grief. What death means to them, culturally, religiously. Then you cut off that line of thought. You don’t want to have cause to learn how Qunari deal with death. Krem isn’t dead, he’s just in surgery. He’ll be fine. Obviously, he’ll be fine.
He has to be fine.

You want to stand stoically still like Bull. You don’t want to cause a scene, but you’re antsy. You wind up pacing back and forth outside the tent, rubbing your arms in an attempt to ward off a chill that has nothing to do with the mid-Kingsway weather. Time crawls by as the sun continues to rise, likely over the horizon but not yet over the walls of Skyhold. A few times, you open your mouth to say something to Bull, but stop short. You don’t know what the right thing to say is, and you’re quite confident you’d only make it worse. A few times, you wonder why you’re even here... You’re not even a Charger. You’re far from “next of kin” to Krem.

If you hadn’t been standing right next to Bull, you’d probably be off getting breakfast, no idea that Krem was... that Krem could be...

“Bull? Emma?”

You stiffen at the sound of a voice you weren’t expecting, and glance over to see Dalish, looking equal parts quizzical and concerned.

You’re glad Bull’s there, because you have no idea what in the Void to say.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, her eyes glancing over to the tent.

“It’s Krem,” Bull says finally, and Dalish tenses even further.

“What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s bleeding, inside. They’re treating him but we’re... well, we’re waiting.”

Dalish nods tersely. “Is it okay if I tell the others...?”

“Yeah, go ahead,” Bull says with a nod. “I don’t want to leave, in case... something happens. But you should get the others.”

You wonder briefly if it didn’t occur to him to ask you to get them, or if it just isn’t your place. Thinking about it, it’s sort of weird to have the Chargers and you waiting outside. You start to feel acutely out of place, especially after Dalish runs off and other Chargers begin showing up, most at a run. Do you really have any right to be here? Not that you’re going to leave... Your stomach is twisted into knots, your heart hasn’t stopped pounding in your chest. You can barely even comprehend it, that something could happen to Krem, after he was safe here, safe with the healers. You’d just taken for granted that he’d recover. He’d seemed fine, when you last saw him... Well, not fine at all, but healing.

By the time people have stopped arriving, there’s nearly a dozen of you milling about in the courtyard outside the healers’ tent. You all look up when a person steps outside, and the woman looks a bit startled to suddenly have so many eyes on her.

“Erm... Are you all here about Krem?” she asks. You nod wordlessly along with everyone else. The woman takes a deep breath. “The good news is that he’s stabilized. He’s lost a lot of blood, but he has two healers sitting with him. He should be fine.”

There’s a sort of collective exhalation, the release of pent up tension and fear, as a group. Your vision is spinning; you actually feel light-headed. It feels a bit like your heart just started beating again after lying dead in your chest, though you’re acutely aware it had in fact been racing the entire time.
“Is he awake?” Dalish is asking. “Can we see him?”

“Not all of you!” the woman says quickly, holding up her hands as if to ward them off. “He’s still in a delicate state, and he’s going to be at risk for illness. One of you can see him for a few minutes, but the rest of you will have to come back later... one or two at a time, preferably.”

All eyes go to Bull. There’s not even a question about it, for any of them--or even you. As much as you would love dearly to see Krem, you know exactly who has the right, and who Krem would most want to see. Bull is “next of kin” for a reason.

He enters the tent, and the rest of you share anxious looks. It’s a huge relief to know he’s alright, but it doesn’t sound like he’s really out of the woods yet.

“Do you think the job is gonna be delayed?” one of the Chargers asks another.

“I dunno... Maybe? You know the boss isn’t gonna want to leave with him like this...”

“I don’t really want to leave with him like this either,” adds another, eyeing the tent.

“Damn, I thought he was getting better...”

“Yeah, same here.”

Yeah. You too, though you don’t voice your concerns. You wish you had something to lean on... you feel like you might fall over. You can’t even feel the chill in the air; your whole body is numb. How close had he come? How long would it take him to recover? Would he recover? When can you see him?

You shouldn’t, you realize suddenly. If he’s been in rough shape, he probably doesn’t know what happened. Doesn’t know about the state of you. Why would seeing you bandaged up and looking like you’d been savaged by an ogre make him feel better?! It would do the opposite! You can’t see him looking like this! You want to claw the damn bandages off.

Fucking Underhill. You wish you could just take Skinner or Sera up on their offer, just... just to be rid of him. But Solas had mentioned that the Commander wanted to make an example of Underhill, perhaps even in public. That would be much better than a private assassination. The wheels of justice grind slowly, but you’d rather a spectacle of the man’s fate. It would be good for the elves, if nothing else. They deserve to have that satisfaction, with how much fear this attack has instilled. And the humans deserve to have to see it too, so that they know what might happen if they do the same.

You don’t know how long it’s been when Bull finally comes out. You were lost in your thoughts the whole time, standing shakily in a corner. The Chargers flock to him, and you realize rather quickly that you’re going to be intruding on what should be private time together if you remain with the Chargers. So, despite the fact you’re still somewhat in shock, you make your excuses and leave. No one even particularly tries to stop you; they’re all distracted. They must deal with this sort of thing regularly, but would anyone have been expecting it here, in the middle of a safe spot? Krem had been healing, heading for a full recovery. The sudden turn for the worse had probably caught them off guard the same way it had you.

You don’t even really remember walking up the stairs or through the Great Hall, but here you are in the rotunda. You say something vague to Solas when he remarks on how haggard you look. How he can tell, you have no idea--your face is still bandaged. How can anyone read an expression when you’re in this condition?

You slump down at your desk. You have work to do, but your mind is still swimming. Relief has
begun to sink in now, but the adrenaline wearing off just leaves you feeling sicker. You give it a few minutes to get better, realize it isn’t, and then peel yourself off your desk to power through it anyway.

You blame the herbs for the foggy state of your brain, so you let them wear off rather than taking another dose, working slowly—painfully slowly—all through the morning. It’s perhaps a good three hours before noon when you feel like they’ve worn off completely. Your mind is less foggy; you can almost focus. The pain is its own distraction, but you’ve healed to the point where it’s a manageable level of pain. It aches, but it’s easier to work through pain than work through the dizziness.

You have to wave Solas off a few times throughout the morning. He’s wanting you to sleep, of course. When is he not? He finally stops pestering you when you tell him that if he wants to help you so badly, he can enchant your wrist. There’s so much active magic on you right now that it’s a terrible idea, honestly, though you think you could handle it. Solas is having none of it, of course, but at least he stops pestering you to lay down.

You actually get hungry before the candle tells you it’s time to get lunch. You’ve actually been hungry for a while, but a loud grumble in your stomach causes you to actually notice. Come to think of it, you had skipped breakfast, in all the chaos. That’s not particularly unusual for you, mind, but you’re fully justified in an early lunch. It’s not like Solas will complain. And you’re getting nowhere slowly on your work.

You put your quill away, after taking a moment to admire it. It really does make the work more smooth. That quill is going to be traveling with you everywhere, like your journal and your other valuables. No way you’re leaving it behind if you have to cut your losses and run.

You make your way sort of slowly towards the kitchen. You feel a bit dizzy despite having not taken more medication... probably the last of it wearing off. All you really want to do is get to the kitchen and get some food, then get back and sit down. As soon as you noticed your hunger, you were suddenly ravenous, and now all you really want to do is eat.

A few people in the kitchen want to know how you’re doing. You make yourself sound as cheerful as possible, emphasize how quickly you’re healing, and how you hope to have the bandages off soon. While you know there are benefits to playing up sympathy, at this point you are honestly just sick and tired of everyone’s concern.

You finally manage to exit the kitchens, a little more irritated for all the attention. There is a limit to how much fussing one person can stand! So it’s Servis’ misfortune that he happens across you then. He’s standing in the hall, leaning up against the wall and reading. His Templar is nowhere in sight. You don’t know if you should be happy you don’t have to deal with a Templar’s attention, or irritated that he’s doing such a poor job of watching the Vint.

Servis glances up at you, then does a bit of a double take. Then he frowns—Maker only knows why.

“You know, your not-boss could give you a break from fetching his meals given the fact I’ve raised undead that look more alive than you right now,” he comments sardonically.

Oh, good. You can take your mood out on him without feeling guilty.

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“It’s my food,” you snap back. “And I loathe being waited on. Some of us aren’t as naturally comfortable being served as they are in Tevinter. Comes from not being raised thinking the world and everything in it is your birthright, I think.”

To your disappointment, he just holds up his hands— one still clasping the book—in apparent surrender. “Did that book ever do your mage any good, then?”
You have to think for a second before you remember what the hell he’s talking about. Right... the book of runes you swiped, along with his notes. You’d barely had any time to look over it, in all this chaos. “He hasn’t sent it back yet,” is all you say, then turn and stalk away before he can get in any more probing questions you haven’t prepared answers for.

You’re feeling extremely dizzy on the way back... as bad as when you’d first been injured, although the sensation is different enough that you’re willing to just blame the herbs. You glare bitterly--and if you’re being honest, a bit nervously--up the stairs. You begin to climb shakily, and you’re glad there’s no one around to see how frequently you have to balance the tray on one arm and desperately grasp the railing to keep from losing your balance. You take your time, however, and manage to make it up, though the arm on which you were balancing the tray is trembling violently by the time you reach the top.

Well, now that that’s done, you just have to cross the Great Hall. You’re certain with every step that you’ll begin to feel better, that the dizziness will level out. Instead, it’s only getting worse. Maker, you need to sit down. Maybe you’re having a side effect from coming off the herbs after taking them consistently for days? The healers hadn’t mentioned that, but of course, they hadn’t intended for you to stop taking them.

You focus on keeping your steps as even and normal-looking as possible as you enter the rotunda, not wanting to deal with Solas if he sees you staggering about like a drunk. You can barely see straight by the time you get to his desk, but your stool is definitely there... you accidentally kick it with a foot.

You begin unloading the food onto his desk. You think Solas might be saying something, but he’s saying it really quietly... you can’t quite make it out, despite your sharp ears. You glance over at him, and then frown in confusion as the room begins growing dim. What happened to the lights

The room tips sideways as everything goes dark.

Chapter End Notes

Even just preparing for school is keeping me very busy, hence the delays, but I'm still chugging along. My goal is, of course, a chapter a week til class starts, but there's a lot of studying for my CDL Permit and a lot of medical screening, so I can't promise anything.

If you'd like to support me or buy me a present or something, check out my links page, with all the convenient places you can do just that.
You awaken in a bolt of pure panic to the sensation of probing magic. Your eyes snap open, you bolt upright, and you shove the person looming over you full in the chest. Your first instinct is to run now and figure out where you are later, but your head is spinning violently enough to give you pause. Your vision goes blurry and the world threatens to go black.

“Emma, it's just me!” a familiar voice calls out, but it gives you no comfort. It doesn't matter if you know them, because no one knows you. You feel a hand--large, male--grip your arm and you yank away again, despite your blindness. You half-fall off of whatever surface you're on, catching yourself awkwardly with one arm.

“Lethallin, hamin!” the same voice exclaims, and this gives even your panicked mind pause. Elven. Not Dalish. Lethallin. Friend.

You stiffen, but don't fight the grip that pulls you back up onto the plush surface you'd been lying on. Your mind begins to make sense of your situation and your vision begins to return, though you can't quite make your eyes focus properly. Both senses come to the same realization at the same time.

Solas.

That does little to assuage your fears, however. You'd felt magic.

Solas says something incomprehensible in Elven. Either he's speaking too quickly, or you just can't keep up thanks to your dizziness.

“Come again?” you say, your voice feeling thick, like it sticks in your throat.

“You fell. Blacked out,” Solas explains. “I moved you to the couch and was checking for damage.”

“Damage?” you ask, looking down--stupidly--as if to ensure that you're fully clothed. The things your mind worries about when panicked, honestly.

“Your head,” Solas explains. “I feared you might have cracked it, in the fall. Particularly given you're already injured.”
Your hand goes to your face. The bandages are still on... part of why you were having so much trouble focusing, probably. You only have one eye to do it with. “How long was I out?” you ask, worried at how long Solas may have had access to your unconscious mind and body.

“Not even five minutes,” Solas replies. “Which is arguably a good sign. You don't appear to have any additional physical damage on your skull.” He runs a hand along his head. “You have a remarkable knack for falling. Off a harn, off a wall, even unconscious. You always seem to avoid the worst of it. You barely missed falling into broken porcelain.”

“Broken... porcelain?” Your one eye manages to focus past Solas, and you see what he means. You hadn’t fully unloaded the tray of food before passing out, it seems. The wooden bowl that held your soup has made a mess, and there are shards of broken pottery from the cups and saucers. “Futuo!” you swear, eyes widening. “Mea culpa, me paenitet,” you begin, then pause. Wrong language. Not even close to the right language, in fact. Wow, did you scramble your brain that badly?

“I’m not particularly worried about broken cups,” Solas says with a sigh, seemingly ignoring the fact you’d just started speaking in Ancient Tevene... or perhaps not. “I’m more concerned about whether or not you’ve scrambled your head. And what caused you to black out. If you would lay back down-”

“I’m sure I’m fine,” you say, bringing a hand to your head. “I think it’s just the medicine... it’s been making me so dizzy, so I stopped taking it, but since I stopped, I’m even more dizzy...”

“The herbs would make you light-headed, but you should suffer no side effects from coming off of them. How long has it been since you last had some?”

“Last night, late... or possibly, technically early this morning, depending on how you count it.”

“Was the pain keeping you awake?”

“Something like that,” you say with a sigh.

“How long has it been since you slept for four hours or longer in a row?” Solas asks, bringing a hand to your shoulder and pushing you--gently--back into a lying position. You go, regretfully. Lying down on the couch while he kneels next to it is beyond uncomfortable.

“Um...” You hesitate, trying to figure out how best to answer the question, which is more complicated than Solas could even know. “I’m not sure, really... The medicine... everything since the attack is a blur.”

“I suspect you’re simply exhausted... though nothing is ever simple with you,” he adds dryly, and you’re almost surprised by how sardonic he seems about it. “I would like to finish examining your head, to be sure there’s no further damage. These things are best treated immediately.”

“Fine, fine,” you say with a sigh, laying your head back down against the couch. It feels really good to be horizontal, anyway. You really are quite tired, not that you can do much about it. You’re fairly certain at this point that Solas had indeed been focusing his searching on your skull... Your aura was still knotted tight in your gut, the last place he’d be checking for head injuries. And while Solas may be difficult to read, you’re fairly certain that if he had just discovered you were a mage, his expression would be very, very different.

You feel his magic probing back into you. It’s normally a somewhat pleasant sensation, one that makes your aura behave like a cat in a sunbeam. But you haven’t liked the way it feels in your skull... it’s a bit too personal, perhaps; too close to your mind. It makes you feel nervous, exposed.
Solas’ expression is tense, perhaps worried. You can’t blame him. If you’d seen him—or anyone, really—collapse right in front of you, you would be in an absolute panic. So you lay in cooperative silence until he’s finished and withdraws his magic from you.

“You seem unhurt, physically,” he says, sounding unconvinced of his own words. “And I see nothing that would cause you to pass out, other than sheer exhaustion.”

“Well, that’s good news,” you say, hoping to lighten the mood. “I must have just pushed myself too fast, what with all my energy going into the healing and all. I’ll have to take it a little bit more slowly, I suppose. Maybe you can write me a healer’s note to get out of practice with Bull on Monday,” you add as a joke. It falls rather flat.

“What you need to do is sleep,” Solas says firmly, and your expression must fall slightly. Yeah. You know you need to sleep. If only. Now that you’ve stopped being terrified that you’ve been found out, you’re beginning to be worried about consequences.

“I’ve been trying, Solas, I swear,” you... whine. You’re not proud of it, but you don’t want to lose your Elven lessons right after earning them.

“I know,” Solas says with a sigh. “I’m not sure how much of this is typical, for you, but you must realize you can’t continue this way.”

Yeah. Yeah, you’d come to that conclusion yourself. You just didn’t have a lot of ideas on how to deal with it that didn’t involve risking your life.

“If you would allow me to help—” he continues, and you stiffen.

“Solas,” you begin warningly, but he holds up his hand.

“Please. At least hear me out.”

You hesitate. It’s a poor idea; whatever he suggests will probably be an excellent idea and very tempting, but impossible or inadvisable for any number of reasons that you can’t actually tell him. But you can think of no reason to refuse to even hear him out, so you just nod.

Of course, what he produces then makes you want to either lay down and cry or bolt from the room... you can’t decide which.

That fucking blanket. That stupid, fucking, wonderful-smelling, enchanted blanket.

You’d had some very good experiences with it while he was gone, not having realized it was enchanted. You’d also had one very bad experience with it when he placed it on you after you were already asleep, inadvertently trapping you in a nightmare.

You eye it with longing tempered with fear and caution. It’s not safe, not with him here. You could deal with nightmares, though they were unpleasant. Forewarned is forearmed; you would know what was happening if you couldn’t wake up. But being unconscious around Solas is a terrible idea. If he examined you like that, he might actually trip over your hidden, unmoving aura. If he saw your mind in the Fade, he might realize you were a mage... though he hadn’t in the past. Just because you’d always been lucky before didn’t mean you should keep pushing it.

“I cannot blame you for being afraid, not after what you’ve been through, and particularly not after... last time,” he added, glancing guiltily away. You’re glad to know he’s still feeling bad about that. You’ve long since forgiven him—you had within a day of it happening, in fact—but guilty is a safer place for him to be. Though you hate yourself for thinking that.
“However,” Solas continues. “This time, I could keep an eye on you. I could ensure you suffered no ill effects, and intervene if you began to.” His tone of voice is almost begging, and it breaks your heart in two. Because if he’s offering to be right next to you, keeping an eye on you and your sleeping mind for anything odd? You definitely can’t agree.

That realization sinks into your chest like an iron anchor. You can’t. Even if you want to, you can’t. You can’t sleep. You can’t trust him. You definitely can’t combine the two and trust him while you’re sleeping. And it’s not even his fault, or anything untrustworthy about him at all. It’s you. It’s completely and utterly you.

You feel crushed. Deflated. You feel like you’re coming apart at the seams. You just want to scream, or cry, or hit something, or hit yourself. You can actually feel tears brimming to the corner of your one good eye, and wonder if your other one is in the same state, dampening the bandages around it.

Solas must mistake your tears for fear. “Lethallin...” he begins, voice soft, gentle. You feel the tears spill onto your cheek.

Shit... Why does he have to say it like that?

“I would be right here,” he assures you. “I understand if you’re uncomfortable, but I could keep you safe.”

You want to jump off the freaking battlements.

“I promise.”

You need to jump off the freaking battlements.

You’re embarrassed to be crying, but you can’t help it. He’s saying the exactly wrong things, the exactly right way. You can’t risk this. But it hurts so much, and you’re so, so tired. You want to sleep. You would do anything to sleep. But you can’t, you can’t.

You taste blood in your mouth; you’ve bitten a tear in your lip. Your one remaining eye opens and fixes on Solas. You wonder what kind of expression you’re wearing?

His is one of pure concern.

Fuck.

“Don’t... don’t go poking around in my head when I’m out,” you begin hesitantly, and you see a flare of hope in his eyes. “I mean it,” you add. “I want to trust you. No... no freaky mind-magic,” you say, remembering how you’d convinced him of your fear of such magic... and reinforced it after the incident with the blanket last time. “Nothing. Just... if something’s going wrong, if I look weird, just wake me up. Right away. Don’t... don’t try to ‘fix’ it, just wake me up.” You’re begging. It’s not even subtle.

He looks guilty again. Remembering what he did before, or thinking about what he’d been planning on doing? Could still be planning on doing.

You’re not sure you can go through with this.

“At the first sign of any problems, I will wake you,” he promises. You’re hopeful, but unconvinced. But how long can you last without sleep, if you’re blacking out from exhaustion? Solas isn’t wrong. If you do that in the wrong place, you’ll get seriously injured, or even die. There’s no shortage of dangerous places in Skyhold, as you’ve experienced a few times already. But it seems like your odds
with possibly passing out in a poor place and falling to your death are better than your odds if Solas, or anyone, finds you out.

Or maybe not? You know better to count on mage-mage sympathies, but you could imagine him giving you a chance to run. But even then, with your identity here tied to your identity in Orlais, your entire cover would be blown. You’d have to start over entirely. You could never go back home.

When framed between possibly falling off a cliff in an unconscious haze, or moving to somewhere like Ferelden, perhaps you would take the cliff.

You’re joking with yourself, of course, but the dilemma is still here. Solas is looking at you, hopeful, patient, nervous.

“No magic while I’m asleep,” you say again, firmly, warily. He nods. If he’s thinking that—being a non-mage—you wouldn’t be able to tell if he was casting magic even were you awake… he doesn’t say it. Now would so not be the time. He seems to accept your paranoia at face value. You suppose in comparison to someone like Fenris, who still reacts to magic and mages like a furious cat, a bit of irrational fear seems almost reasonable.

“Fuck it,” you say with a long sigh, collapsing limply down on the couch. “I’ll just have revenge if you do something weird.”

“I won’t,” he promises again. Then his lips quirk upward slightly. “Though I’m curious about what your revenge would be, given what you’ve done to Dorian in the past.”

“It would be so much worse than pickled fish, Solas,” you promise somberly. “I’ll tell every elf in Skyhold that they should be saying andaran atish’an when you pass by. And I’ll tell them all the wrong pronunciation. That weird one that southern Dalish clans use.” He makes a brief expression, like he’d just smelled sour milk. “Yeah. That’s the one. And I’ll tell every single Dalish in Skyhold that you’re doing a study on Elvhen history and want their valuable insight. I’ll tell Sera how to get into your bedroom. She’ll put mice in your bedsheets, I bet.”

Solas chuckles, holding up his hands. “I surrender.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” you say with a faint smile. “Alright.” You take a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

You expect him to just hand it to you, but instead, he spreads the blanket across your prone form, even tucking it around between your back and the couch. It’s delightfully warm and soft, just as you remembered. You have just enough time to grasp a corner and curl it up around your face, taking in the sweet, warm smell. The Fade is already tugging at the corners of your mind and, for once, you let yourself go.

--

You wander through the mists of dreams, only sometimes aware that you’re asleep. Being conscious of having fallen asleep helps, but your connection to the Fade is tenuous despite the enchanted blanket’s help. You have little time to consider the technicals as worlds fall in and out of existence around you, in the hazy way of the Fade.

Solas is a frequent guest in the half-formed scenes, particularly ones in the inn room in Val Royeaux. The bathtub there features at least once, as does the one you used in Iron Bull’s room. Every time you realize which way the dreams are going—and with whom—however, you twist out of them, waking yourself up just enough to “reset” the scene of your dreams. Perhaps it’s disturbing your rest,
but after what happened last time you “dreamed” about Solas, you’re not taking any risks.

You believe you would be able to recognize him now that you know what he is, but you’ve no desire to test that theory. You have some senses, after all, but nothing compared to what a somniari must have. If you can exist in the Fade without him realizing what you are, he can definitely do something similar if he so chooses.

You feel the presence of a few curious spirits around the edges of your consciousness, but you ignore them. You suspect regular people would have no real awareness of what was and was not a spirit within the realm of dreams, and you’re still behaving as if Solas is watching. Perhaps due to the fact that you know he’s watching you physically, at least.

If you think about the fact he’s watching you sleep, you really will wake up, enchanted blanket or no. So you let yourself sink back into a dream that’s forming about your garden back in Orlais. Sun in your hair, gloves on your hands, Bella-the-mule’s soft lips fretting around your shoulders and neck as she tries to beg snacks out of you. It’s a good dream. Or at least it will be until the monsters come.

You sense something amiss around the time your sleeping mind is remembering that you can’t have nice things and twisting your pleasant dream into a nightmare about the night the Red Templars destroyed your village. Your mind shifts back to being a bit more aware, remembering once again that this is a dream, that you are asleep. You feel a presence around the edges of your consciousness, one you hadn’t felt earlier. A spirit? No... Not a spirit. You recognize it, recognize the way the Fade seems to solidify around the presence.

Solas.

You resist the urge to yank yourself awake, though the dream twists angrily around you as a sense of profound betrayal settles into your chest. Instead, you bring yourself out of it gradually, as if floating to the surface. You won’t bolt awake in reaction to the barest hint of Solas’ presence. That would be a very stupid idea.

It’s a struggle at the very surface... the effects of the blanket, no doubt. But this time, you do wake. Though it takes you a moment to realize... your surroundings are bewilderingly dark.

Your first thought is that Solas had actually moved you while you slept. Your second is a simple realization that you’re still in the rotunda. You’d just slept through the entire afternoon, and, by the looks of it, half of the night. The tower is dark and quiet. Even Leliana’s birds seem to be asleep. The only light is a candle placed on Solas’ desk... burning very low, but still burning. It perfectly illuminates Solas... where he’s seemingly fallen asleep on the floor.

His back is against one of the arm’s of the couch, his head slumped slightly forward, his legs sprawled out on the ground in front of him. It doesn’t look like a particularly comfortable position to sleep in. His face is... not that far from yours, as he’d leaned against the arm by which your head had been resting. Candlelight flickers oddly across his skin, making the contours of his face dance.

You realize that it’s unlikely he fell asleep like this on purpose. How late is it? It has to be past midnight. Had he been here all day, ensuring you faced no ill side effects from the blanket? A thought both comforting and chilling. You’re honestly a bit cross with him for falling asleep without waking you up. What if something had happened? Idiot had just promised six ways from Sunday to watch over you, and then he’d gone and fallen asleep.

But you can already see what likely happened. He wouldn’t want to wake you, so he’d stay awake himself. Longer and longer into the night, pushing himself to stay upright so he could let you sleep with a clear conscience.
Then he fell asleep. So close to you. No surprise you’d felt his presence in your dreams. You know enough about the Fade to know that physical location does matter. For all you know, he’d just fallen asleep. You shift slightly. He seems like he’s really out, though. He’s this close to you, and isn’t even reacting to your movement on the couch. You could probably reach right out and touch him and he wouldn’t--

Oh.

You’re doing that.

That’s a thing that you’re doing.

Your hand trembles gently as the tips of your fingers ghost over his cheekbone. He shifts, slightly, and you yank your hand back like he’s on fire. What the Void are you doing?!

But he’s still asleep, and his face has shifted just enough that you have a near perfect profile view. He looks hauntingly attractive in that flickering, fading candlelight. You’re about as close to him now as you’re likely to ever be, and he’s asleep, totally unaware of your staring. He watched you sleep all day... turnabout is fair play, right?

Maybe it’s the light, but you would believe he was carved from marble into the exact form he has now. You’ve long admired his jawline; this close, you can really see the way it angles upwards. Slightly concave, beautifully angular and sharp at the corner where it turns upwards to meet his ear.

His ears... they caught your eye right away. As soon as you noticed them, you’d found yourself staring. In your very first meeting, you had been so distracted, and at such a distance, that you hadn't even realized he was an elf. But upon seeing him closer, you’d been astounded by your own lack of awareness. How could you have missed those ears? Particularly considering his baldness; there was nothing to hide them.

They weren’t quite so long and thin as yours, but they were definitely more angular than a lot of elves you knew. They were also delightfully straight from his angle. The tops seemed parallel to the tops of his cheekbones, the bottoms parallel to the general line of his jaw, continuing along straight as an arrow til they met at a fine point. You wonder idly, if he ever pierced them? Some elves did, some didn't. It seemed more common amongst the Dalish than the city elves in the south, but when you'd been a slave, your master had decorated you and many of the other elven slaves with a dozen different piercings, some connected with dangling chains. Your ears still bear fine scars from those holes, even now, years later.

You admit he’d look fetching with dangling earrings like Belassan wears, but you rather like the idea that those ears have never once been pierced. You almost snort. Virginal ears. In truth, it’s just because ear piercings are, for you, all tied up in memories of Tevinter. You hadn't worn them in Antiva even though it had very much been the style.

Your eyes continue their gradual journey across the contours of Solas’ face. That his cheekbones were godlike almost didn't need to be stated. Most elves you’ve known have had high cheekbones, and Solas is no exception. But where faces like Sera’s and Fenris’ are soft, round, with wide eyes... Solas’ is sharp, angular, eyes narrow and bright. It had grabbed you from the first moment you’d seen him... he just looks so odd for an elf. Not that his face could ever be described as looking human. He’s very clearly elven, and not just because of his pointed ears. From the high cheekbones to the strong browline to the tall ridge of his nose, he is every bit an elf.

He has little crows’ feet around his eyes, you notice, and smile to yourself in the darkness of the rotunda. He does have wrinkles in certain areas, betraying his age. Which, apparently, is
considerable. Perhaps if he had his hair grown out, it would be streaked bright silver? You wonder if that's why he keeps it so meticulously trim. Or perhaps he's naturally bald? You hadn't noticed him shaving while you were traveling or in Val Royeaux.

Of course, this is Solas. He uses magic for so many little things. Could he possibly shave magically? Maybe if you ran a hand over his head, you'd feel stubble. You certainly don't see it right then, in the dim light.

What color would his hair be? Probably a medium brown, matching his eyebrows, which were the only hair you'd ever seen on him. You try to imagine it, but your creativity falters out. You've only ever known him bald; you can't imagine him with hair at all. What sort of hair would he even have? Straight and thin, like Celia's? Thick and curly, like Banal'ras'? Or the sort of tight ringlets that naturally clumped together into thick, strong locks of hair, like Belassan's? You would probably never know.

Your eyes travel down from the dome of his head back down to his eyes, which rest gently closed, surprisingly long lashes laying against the tops of his cheeks. He looks remarkably peaceful. Solas' natural waking expression is somewhat severe, which probably serve as one more thing that makes him scary to the staff and soldiers of Skyhold. Asleep, however, his eyes and brows are both relaxed, giving him a peaceful, content expression. He looks so defenseless like this, like a child almost. Which is ridiculous, of course... as a somniari, he's arguably more deadly when asleep.

He has the high, strong bridge that you associate with elves... that most people associate elves, though not everyone has them. His isn't as straight as Fenris'... Not in any dimension, actually. You know from seeing his face from every angle just how angular it was, just how many turns it took. It's harder to tell from your view now, but you suppose that's the benefit of seeing different sides of him.

Ha... too bad you're just seeing physical sides and not different aspects of his personality. You know, for all your secret keeping, do you really know any more about him than he does about you? It's so obvious he's not telling you everything... or even possibly anything. Your eyes trace down to those lying lips of his. His resting face is more relaxed, more peaceful than you would have thought, given his normal waking expression. Actually, looking at him, it's more just the absence of a frown; the line of his mouth is almost perfectly straight, neither upturned nor down.

As you examine, puzzling out his face, his lips part slightly in his sleep, and your mind races back to the Fade, to the memory of how they felt pressed against you. That glorious second where you could swear he was kissing you back, before he realized what the Void was going on pushed you away.

Your face colors bright red; the heat you're giving off could probably warm even your freezing bedroom.

You are laying here, a foot from his face, staring! Maker, you're a total creep. Like he was doing this to you; he was just watching to make sure you didn't spontaneously combust in your sleep or start having nightmares you couldn't wake up from again. You have no bloody excuse at all.

You quickly stand up, practically bouncing off the couch. Your legs tremble underneath you, displeased at the sudden expectation of holding your weight after lying down all day. To your surprise, Solas still doesn't stir. Should... should you wake him? Let him know he can go sleep in his actual bed? No, why wake him to let him know he can sleep? That's stupid. Should you move him onto the couch? No, that's ridiculous, and you sincerely doubt you could lift him.

You stare in indecision for a few more minutes--definitely not just staring at his peaceful, sleeping form--before tearing your eyes away to search the rotunda for ideas. You find them on the back of his desk chair.
His wolf pelt looks ominous in the flickering light. You've made your peace with wolves (as opposed to dogs) thanks to an old friend of yours, but the dead thing makes your skin crawl; in this shifting light it looks almost alive. Your mind dances back to a few of your own run-ins with wolves in the woods. Your little adventure on the way to Val Royeaux had not been your first such encounter, though it had ultimately ended much better for you. You shiver in the darkness, and your mind shifts to Dalish legends of Fen’harel, stalking the darkness around a camp.

You snort. That's apparently what you needed to feel foolish and superstitious for being momentarily frightened. As boogeymen go, Fen’harel doesn't make a particularly good one. Most scary things actually, you know, exist. You're as likely to run into a Dalish god as you are to be killed by a dead wolf pelt. Less likely, in fact. A mage like Dorian could stick a spirit in a dead thing like Solas' pelt, and absolutely murder someone with it.

You shake your head at your own foolishness, and fetch the fur off the back of the chair. The fur is surprisingly soft, as you'd noticed before. You always expect wolf fur to be sharp and bristly, for some reason, even though it never is.

You bring the pelt to Solas, squatting down in front of him. Hesitantly, you wrap it around his shoulders, letting it trail down over his prone form. He stirs slightly in his sleep, but doesn't seem to wake. You shift the pillows you'd been using on the couch to support his head a bit better... You don't want him to wake up with a crick in his neck, though you suspect his back will be hurting him a bit no matter what you do.

It's kind of remarkable what he can sleep through. You're a very light sleeper, even when your mind can connect fully to the Fade. Of course, you're more vulnerable than most while asleep, and Solas is less vulnerable than most while asleep. You're two ends of a long line.

...Ah. You're staring at his face again. Admiring how it looks from the front, the sharp angle of his ears away from his head, making his ears so much more obvious than yours. From this angle, it probably looks like his are longer than yours. You take a moment to mentally refresh the image of his nose in your mind. You wonder idly if he ever broke it, in his youth. You would believe it.

He smiles slightly in his sleep, the twitch at the corner of his lips drawing your eye. Unbidden, you smile yourself. Pleasant dream? Conversation with a spirit? Maybe he's talking to one of the ones that was watching you, asking them what they saw. Creepy. But you're kind of jealous, actually. You miss talking to spirits. Cole notwithstanding, obviously, though you miss him, too.

He must be having some kind of nice time in the Fade; you don't see him smile all that much. Infrequently enough that it's a pleasure every time, even now, while he sleeps. You'd love to see him smile more. He had while you were in Val Royeaux, but of course you'd both been more relaxed there. Free from the responsibilities of Skyhold, from one thousand prying eyes.

But to hear him laugh freely like that again...

Ah... You really would like to see him happy. Happy with you. Your smile falters. There are words for that, none of which you're comfortable applying to yourself, let alone to the relationship between you and Solas. You suppose you can no longer lie to yourself about how much you're attracted to him, though you really would prefer to.

You're really attracted to him. Like, a lot. Enough that you're jeopardizing everything just to stick around... though he's far from the only reason for that.

That is a terrible reason to make any sort of risk.
You really should just...

...

You stand with a sigh, and pause only long enough to pull your coat on before softly padding out of the rotunda and then into the cold night.

Chapter End Notes

If you like my stuff, I'd really appreciate if you checked out this list. Mortals gotta eat and all that. I cannot, as it turns out, be sustained PURELY on your tears.
You realize halfway down the stairs from the Great Hall that you’re doing the exact thing you promised Solas you wouldn’t do. Leaving, alone, to walk through the night where there are probably any number of humans who might want to finish the job that Underhill started. While still bandaged up. So, basically, with a huge lyrium-lit sign announcing who you are and how easy it would be to jump you.

Sigh.

You could just try to bolt across the courtyard. It’s not like anyone could catch you, unless they’d somehow known you would be wandering around three hours before dawn and planned a Maker damned ambush. But if Solas woke and found you gone, he’d be upset, and rightly so. You had given him your word.

Which is worth approximately three times less than unprocessed mule shit. And yet still, you feel a guilty twang and the burning urge to head back inside. You’ve given that man enough disappointment in the short time you’ve known him.

Muttering sourly under your breath, you go back into the empty Great Hall. And it is empty, save a few stoic looking guards that your eyes always tend to glaze right over. Interestingly, there’s one posted at the entrance to the tower you’ve learned leads up to the Inquisitor’s quarters, despite the fact it’s ostensibly empty. The man is still in Crestwood, as far as you know, with Seeker Pentaghast, Blackwall, Vivienne, Varric, and, of course, Cole. Oh. And Hawke. But hopefully he’ll be left there.

You suppose it wouldn’t do to have someone sneaking up in the Inquisitor’s absence, something you instantly want to do the second it crosses your mind. Not even for any real reason, other than the fact that it’s someplace you totally shouldn’t go full of secrets that you absolutely shouldn’t have and probably don’t even really need.
You’re not going to, of course. You’re not an idiot. But the urge is there, as always. Instead, you head back into the rotunda. Solas is, no surprise, still asleep on the floor right where you left him. Well, you don’t want to disturb him, but there’s plenty you can do in the dark. Rather than go back to creepily staring at him or resting on the couch, you leave both alone and instead go to your desk. Irritatingly, your collected assortment on runes is all in your room, and you don’t feel comfortable trying to rummage through his desk while he’s in the vicinity, unconscious or no. So instead you turn to your work.

You’re feeling much better after your nap. Much, much better. You still feel like you could sleep for six years, but you’re no longer feeling completely sick with exhaustion. That sleep will probably last you... what, at least a week, right? Yeah, definitely. You’ll have time to figure something else out... no need for a repeat performance of this stress-inducing adventure, no ser! And in the meantime, you can work.

You try to work in the dark for a while, but it’s way too difficult and this is way too important, so you wind up carefully lighting a candle and keeping it on the corner of the desk as far away from Solas as possible. Hopefully your body will block the light from him somewhat. He seems to be a pretty solid sleeper, or maybe he was just really damn tired from staying awake for so long. He seems to be a man very accustomed to getting his eight hours. With the added light from the candle, it’s much easier for you to get work done on the tome. You idly pass the morning hours scribbling away. It’s actually very peaceful. You do occasionally glance over to look at Solas, but that’s just to check on him.

You do take stock of your aura, carefully and internally, while Solas sleeps. It’s a bit larger than it was before, but not anything you need to be concerned with. A night with even tenuous connection to the Fade had been good for your mind and your aura, but not enough that it would be fat and bloated any time soon. You’ll keep an eye on it anyway... You can’t let it build up again like before. You’d nearly killed Bull, for the Maker’s sake, and if that kind of thing happened around a mage or Templar, well... killing someone else would be the least of your worries.

As you work, life begins to filter back into the centerpiece of Skyhold. You hear the changing of the guards--that happens around dawn. You hear people beginning to filter into the library above... none of them enter through the stairs that wrap around from the rotunda up the library, but that’s not unusual. They probably don’t even think anyone’s down here; it’s still dark. But they’re still not gonna risk taking the stairs. Ridiculous... Or maybe they’re all creatures of habit. Can’t fault them for that; you are too.

Eventually, Solas begins to wake. You notice immediately... not because you’re watching him or anything. The movement just catches your eye. You try to not look like you’re staring at him as he stirs, focusing instead on your work until you notice his gaze turn to you; then and only then you look over, as if just now noticing he’s awake.

He looks confused, and half-asleep, both of which are completely adorable expressions on him. He makes an aborted movement with his arms, then glances down, blinking slowly. You can practically see the wheels in his head turning as he looks at the pelt he’s wrapped in. After a moment, he shifts it down onto his lap, then rubs his eyes with one hand.

Completely adorable.

He seems to be slowly piecing two and two together. He looks at you for a moment, as if still trying to figure out what to say, then, to your surprise, chuckles.

“I fell asleep. Not much of a guardian after all, I suppose. I apologize. Though I take it from our mutual positions that nothing particularly dire occurred.”
You smile despite yourself, your anger and betrayal last night less than a ghost of a memory. “Yes, and I won’t be hiring you as a bodyguard any time soon,” you joke. “You could have simply woken me, Solas. I’d prefer that to us both being asleep, with that blanket involved and all.”

“I wanted to let you rest,” he admits, looking a bit chastised, which is nice. “I did not intend to fall asleep. Normally I don’t have such an issue with staying awake…”

“Old man falls asleep on accident... Yes, that’s very unusual. This might be the first time it’s ever happened.”

“I see sleep has improved your mood,” he says dryly.

“I believe so, yes,” you admit. “I do feel worlds better. I suppose all I really needed was a nap.”

“That’s certainly a word for a fourteen hour mini-coma. How did you sleep?”

“Soundly, I believe. I’m relieved there were no complications this time.” *Particularly considering you fell asleep.* Not that you’d actually say that. You’d just think it really hard. “Perhaps we were worried for nothing.” Perhaps next time he can just give you the blanket and walk away. Hint. Hint. Hint.

Solas, however, pauses in a way that makes you smile falter.

“...There weren’t any complications, right?” you ask, eye narrowing.

He hesitates again, and you feel a bolt of pure dread. “We... could discuss that somewhere quieter. Over breakfast, perhaps?”

Somewhere quieter? There’s barely anyone in the entire tower. Somewhere private is what he means. A fist of ice has closed around your heart. You’d assumed he would act immediately if he discovered your magic, and that meant you were in the clear. Perhaps you were wrong.

“Certainly,” you say, wiping off your quill and ‘absent-mindedly’ pocketing it as you stand.

What are the chances that you can take him off guard? Is he the kind of person that could be incapacitated without being seriously harmed? Would he be able to follow you if you escaped by slipping between spaces? If he knows you have magic, could you possibly surprise him with it, enough to get away? Without really hurting him? If you needed to really hurt him to escape, could you? He was a strong mage, with far more control than you. It didn’t matter if you had more raw power if he could make his last longer and go further.

Maybe magic is the wrong way to go about this, you realize as you follow along behind him. He’s taking you upstairs for some reason; your eyes are on the back of his neck. You’re armed; of course you are. A quick blow to the back of the head... You could do it now. But it’s premature. He wouldn’t be expecting it now, perhaps, but you’d feel awfully stupid if he intends to inform you that you masturbate in your sleep or something else mortifying enough to warrant privacy.

You’re a restless sleeper, and you had been dreaming. Had you said something in your sleep, perhaps?

You’re trying to convince yourself more than anything else. You don’t want this to be what you’re almost certain it is, because you don’t want to have to leave. And you definitely don’t want to try your capabilities against Solas. The only person you’d like to fight less is Seeker Pentaghast.

As you exit onto the walkway that leads to his room, you see Celia standing uncertainly at his door,
hand raised as if she had just been knocking, or is contemplating it. Ah, right... breakfast. That’s why he’s leading you to his room.

Solas, mercifully, clears his throat rather than walking right up to Celia. She jumps anyway, plates clattering ominously as she spins around. Solas moves quickly despite the distance between them, hand gripping the platter to steady it. You had hoped that time and interaction would heal her fear of Solas, but in that moment, she looks ready to dive over the railing and into a tree to get away from him. You can sympathize. You’re reminded sharply of the time in Val Royeaux when he grabbed you and shoved you up against a wall to hide you from a Chevalier. It’s the last thing you want to be thinking about right now.

“O-oh! S-sorry, serah, I didn’t realize you weren’t in!” she stammers out. Her eyes glance briefly over to you; she seems to take your presence in quickly. You see thoughts flickering behind her eyes as her expression briefly melts from fear to confusion to curiosity, and then quickly back to fear as Solas speaks.

“There is no way you could have known. Thank you, Celia; I can take this from here.”

She releases the tray like it’s made of raw lyrium and then skirts quickly around him, back thumping against the railing as she clearly attempts to put as much distance between the two of them as possible as she passes. Her eyes flick to you again and she scurries past, a clear question in her expression. If you survive this and aren’t running for your life in five minutes’ time, you’ll certainly have a fun time explaining what you and Solas were doing together at such an unseemly hour.

Solas unlocks his door and gestures you inside. You feel very much like you’re walking into an ambush; if he had been a Templar, you wouldn’t have gone in at all. But if nothing else, you’re confident in your ability to get out of a room quickly.

He sets the platter down on his desk almost absentmindedly. He’s clearly thinking very hard about something. You would like very much to know what, exactly.

You take a quick moment to take in his room. It’s been quite a while since you’d seen the inside of it. After the time he’d given you a small heart attack by making you strip—in order to heal your accumulated injuries, of course—you’d avoided it like the plague. You should have kept avoiding it; seems like every time you’re in here, he’s giving you the fright of your life. First, he had you convinced he was going to assault you, and now... this. Frankly, you’d prefer the assault.

“Please, eat,” he says, gesturing towards the food. He sits down on a nearby armchair, which makes you only slightly more comfortable with the idea of sitting down.

“It’s your breakfast; I normally sup with Thea, in the mess house,” you reply.

“I’m not particularly hungry. If you don’t eat it, I suspect it will just go to waste.”

Oh, well, when he puts it that way, of course you’ll sit down, turn your back to him, and munch away! Bastard. You do sit down, however. You shift the chair so that you can face him a bit more directly; it would be awkward to have a conversation with someone behind you under any circumstances. You take a few nervous bites of food as he seems to gather his thoughts. You sincerely hope he doesn’t notice you’re eating with just one hand, the other resting on the desk chair... close enough to your waist that you could grab your dagger quickly.

“I have some... theories... about the source of your insomnia,” he begins finally. The food in your throat threatens to reverse course immediately as your insides churn violently. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. FUCK. This is happening. “I’m not certain as to the exact cause, but your connection to the Fade is...
tenuous, at best.” Or not. You struggle to force the food down, wondering if your panic showed despite your ice cold demeanor. “I suspect whatever is causing it is causing your insomnia as well.”

Well, he’s not wrong. So it’s not your magic he picked up on, but he did notice something was very wrong. The way you pin your aura keeps you from connecting to the Fade, even when you sleep. It’s both an upside and a downside, but it’s doubtless what has allowed you to escape his detection this long.

He’s still talking while your mind races to a conclusion, to a plan. “I could investigate, find the underlying cause. If I’m correct, it may be possible that you--”

“Solas,” you interrupt, cutting him off. You take a breath, composing yourself for what must come next. Not nearly as bad as it could have been. Could be, if you don’t take care of this, now. “What you’re telling me is, essentially, is that you’ve been poking around in my mind?” He makes a little noise of protest, but you sweep onwards without allowing him to interject. “Despite the fact I asked you for one thing and one thing only, to keep your magic out of my mind?” you phrase it roughly, angrily, on purpose. “And while I was asleep, right after you promised--”

“I did not!” he protests.

“You’re telling me is, essentially, is that you’ve been poking around in my mind?” you demand, letting your voice crack in anger that doesn’t reach past the surface. Inside, you’re hollow. But your question brings him up short. He hesitates; that’s all you need. “I only asked one thing, Solas! I let myself be vulnerable around you, I trusted you--” Your voice echoes through you as if it’s someone else’s. You distance yourself from your angry words, take yourself miles away from the venom you’re spitting. You probably couldn’t repeat exactly what you said; your mind shuts down everything that isn’t necessary to do what needs to be done. The words ‘trust’ and ‘hypocrite’ get thrown around a lot. The irony would be enough to kill you if you weren’t already gone.

Particularly as he begins to look less angry, less upset, and more abashed, more ashamed.

“I just want to help!” he protests once more, and the words echo like Cole’s and give you pause, threatening, horribly, to bring you back to full awareness. “I could help you!”

He sounds so desperate. His eyes look so hurt.

Maybe he could help you. He probably could. In ways he doesn’t even know, isn’t even thinking. He could really, really help you. He could... but--

“I can’t,” you say, voice momentarily as hollow as you really are.

You can’t. And he sees you as a puzzle to be solved. For as much as he frets over the Iron Bull’s intentions, they both look at you the same way when they think you don’t see. Curiously. Wanting to know. That sort of desire can’t be trusted.

You learned that the hard way. The hardest way.

“I can’t,” you repeat again, shifting your eyes away from him. You can’t bring yourself to see his expression anymore. You want to storm out of the room, make a scene. Make him regret it. Make him regret you. Make it worse. Destroy it, destroy this, burn the bridge and sever the cord and be safe again.

“...Please just let it be,” a voice says, quiet and weak. It’s yours. Because you are weak.

“Emma, I...” he begins, then trails off.
“Just let it go, Solas,” you say, not looking at him. And then, because you never learn, because you’re stupid and wretched and you deserve the death that you’re no doubt expediting right now, “I want to think you’re telling the truth. That you just want to help—”

“I am! I do!” he interjects, but you shake your head, still looking away, towards the door.

“It’s too scary to think about. Just the concept I-- My stomach twists into knots; all I want to do is run and hide. It’s--I can’t.” Your voice cracks; it isn’t forced, and neither are the tears now leaking, unbidden, out of the corners of your eyes. “Maybe one day I won’t be scared, but right now I can’t.”

You force yourself to look over at him, because you know you need to be able to gauge his reaction. “Right now, I just want to be able to trust you. Trust that you won’t do anything that I don’t want. I can’t... You can’t keep doing this, Solas.”

Silence stretches out between the two of you. You see frustration, you see fear. You see no small amount of self-loathing and shame. Finally, it’s his gaze that drops. “Ir abelas, ma falon.”

The air in your chest seizes; you try to collect yourself as he continues.

“You’re right. I cannot blame you for being afraid; not after all you’ve been through. I did not believe I was doing anything you would find issue with, but I see now that I was mistaken... and it was not a risk I should have taken, particularly when you were already extending trust to me in good faith.

“But... I hope that one day, you can understand that magic isn’t to blame for the harm it can do. It doesn’t need to be feared. And there are those you can trust not to use it to hurt you.”

You bite your lip. You wish you could tell him what really scares you. The real hurdle of terror you can never overcome. The real reason you can’t trust him, or anyone. But...

“I can’t.” you repeat softly, “...Ir abelas, ma falon,” you echo, and then take the few steps to the door, and leave.

Chapter End Notes

I’d like to strongly recommend that you check out this page and find a place that isn't Ao3 you can follow me, like Tumblr, Twitter or Patreon. It’s essentially impossible to do any sort of announcement over here, and there are things like upcoming contests, giveaways, and opportunities for sneak peeks that you won't want to miss. I mean, probably won't want to miss. I don't want to assume. :P
The More Things Change

Chapter Notes

I was gonna wait til Sunday to publish this because that was obviously the intelligent thing to do, but then I just.... didn't. So please consider this 2 days early instead of 5 days late pfff.

This is not, in fact, the end of the arc, but we are coming up on it. Once we hit that, and I'll let you know when we do, I'll be hiatusing for a while to get the next arc 100% set up to my satisfaction. During that time I'll still be updating Curious and Tiny Secrets, because I'm physically incapable of not writing at all for any period of time longer than a week, but KS will be on pause. I didn't get the outline for this section as firm as I wanted before I started it, and it haunted me the whole way through, slowing the process immensely. This time, I'm taking my time, getting EVERYTHING lined out, before I even start the next arc. It's a doozy, which I believe you'll realize by the end of this chapter~

As always, you can hover over foreign language words for their definition, and as always, for people on mobile devices, I'm including the translations here as well.

Minor tw for self-harm in this chapter

Qunlat Guide
Bas = Literally, "thing;" foreign to the Qun; purposeless. Often used as a neutral term to describe non-Qunari people
Vehlalit-an = two people that hate each other but respect each other. Carries connotation of "rivals" as well as "respected enemy" and, when noted by a third party, often "they'll either fight or fuck."

Elven Guide
din’samahlen = brat

You can’t possibly return to the rotunda, but the last thing you want is to deal with Bull. He’s probably not even planning on training today, what with everything that happened with Krem yesterday--

Ah... Yesterday was Saturday. That means, you realize belatedly, today is Sunday. A blessing and a curse. Belassan, Revas... but also Solas, elven. You're not sure you're comfortable taking a lesson from him after what you just did. You're also not sure he'd be willing to give one.

Sunday gives you an excuse to get out of Skyhold, perhaps, but you find that the idea of facing anyone, even Belassan, is too much for you to bear at the moment. You feel disconnected from your own head. You're not even confident you could form words properly anymore. Instead, you wander the courtyard of Skyhold alone. You could honestly care less about your promise to Solas right then. It isn’t as though you’re going to hurt him more. That’s practically impossible at this point.

Unsurprisingly, you find yourself near the ever-growing farm. There’s not really anyone there this
early, so you hop the fence and find a bit of peace amongst the goats. It’s silly, but their little noses remind you of Bella, your now-dead mule... and they don’t judge you when you curl up against a wall, wrap your arms around your legs, and cry into your knees. They just chew on the edges of your tunic.

They’re no Cole, but you feel a little better for their presence anyway.

It would be very easy for you to spend hours--or days--berating yourself any number of ways, but you don’t have the patience for it right now. No, you need to deal with this quickly, and the goats aren’t going to get you there. Fortunately, you have ways, and a surplus of solid, grey stone walls.

You distance yourself from the goats, find a private corner near where the elves have planted some seeds that are just now beginning to sprout. A rough stone outcropping from the wall gives you the perfect target, and after rolling up your sleeves, you slam your fists against it repeatedly. You curse at yourself in Qunlat as you do it; the rough language lends itself to the task. The pain brings you back to reality. Surely there is nothing more solid than the stone, and nothing more real than your blood splattering against it. The beratement of your words reinforces aloud why you’re feeling this, and why you deserve it.

You stop before you’re satisfied, which is more painful to you than the actual scrape of flesh against stone had been. You’ve learned a lot about how to punch without breaking your fingers from the Iron Bull--you’d never been a hand-to-hand fighter. But you still don’t want to risk an injury serious enough that you can’t explain it away. There’s still guilt screaming in the back of your mind, but you think you can handle it. Enough to function, anyway, for now. Perhaps you can take some spills off of Revas... that, at least, you could explain away without arousing suspicion.

That requires facing Belassan, however. Of all the people you might have to face, he’s the easiest, admittedly. He’s distinctly incurious, he doesn’t listen to rumor, and he always seems to accept what you say at face value. He’s the exact opposite of Solas in a lot of ways, actually, but you still find yourself dragging your feet all the way to the barn.

You hadn’t realized it until you got there, but this is the first you’ve seen Revas since you got injured. Despite the fact he’s just an animal, he definitely seems to be able to tell you’re injured, and lets out a very distressed, very LOUD honk as he sees you. You pick up your pace, rushing to his side. Rather than butting his head against your chest, as is his normal greeting, he whuffs right in your face, sniffing the bandages. He lets out a displeased snort.

“I’d heard you were hurt, but seeing it... It’s really quite bad, isn’t it?”

The voice is coming directly from Revas. You take a step backwards, wondering if perhaps you were suffering some strange side-effects from that blanket after all, such as dreaming while awake. But then Belassan pops into view, taking a few steps away from Revas and towards the side of his stall. He’d been in there! You hadn’t even noticed.

That’s right, he hasn’t seen you since you were injured, either. Absent-mindedly, your hand goes to your face.

“I suppose... But really, I’m due to have these taken off any day now. I’m sick of not being able to use my left eye.”

“Still, if they weren’t able to just heal them overnight, it has to be very bad,” Belassan says with a frown. He puts his hands on the stall gate and, to your surprise, just vaults himself over as if it’s completely effortless. Well, you suppose those muscles aren’t just for show. People in the Inquisition sure are fit... “Solas must be frantic.”
A stab of guilt pierces your chest. You twist your hands together, putting pressure against the area that you bruised against the wall, reminding yourself until the pain in your chest becomes less than the pain in your hands. “How are the kittens?” you ask, the first thing that pops into your mind as a distraction. It works. Belassan’s face lights up, his toothy smile shining white against his dark skin.

“Their eyes are starting to open. They’re eating regularly, and the runt... the runtiest runt, anyway... has more or less stabilized. Would you like to see them?”

You find you sort of do. Cats aren’t really your thing--most animals typically kept as “pets” aren’t--but who doesn’t think kittens are at least a little cute? And you did go through an awful lot to get their mother here in one piece--er... alive, at least.

The kittens actually look like kittens now, rather than slimy, slightly hairy deepstalkers. One already has the same sort of spotted, striped, tabby pattern that Asaaranda has, though in a faded shade of grey rather than Asaaranda’s dusty brown. Another one is an odd, faded combination of greys and oranges, in mismatched splotches. As for the runt, well... he can’t seem to make up his mind. It’s like someone took Asaaranda's coloring and then spilled white and orange paint on it in random spots.

They’re actually quite adorable, and when Belassan picks up the biggest one--the grey one--and hands it to you, you’re strong enough to admit your heart melts a little bit. Kitten therapy, it seems, goes even further than goat therapy.

You coo at the kitten for a bit while Asaaranda eyes you dourly. She trusts you enough to hold her week-old kittens, at least, so that’s something. Their eyes are beginning to open... the runt actually only has one eye open, making him look like he’s perpetually winking. Belassan assures you that by next week, all six eyes will be fully open, and the little fluffballs will be starting to crawl around on their own.

It’s a fairly loud, impatient honk that brings you out of your kitten-induced reverie. Belassan rolls his eyes.

“He’s getting to be quite spoiled, isn’t he?” he says jokingly. You snort.

“Maybe, but I don’t see him every day, so it should be fine if I spoil him while I’m here, right?” you joke right back.

“He fusses on days you don’t come,” Belassan informs you. “He tried to step on my foot, yesterday.”

“Well, I’ll take him out for a nice, long walk today, and maybe he’ll settle down.”

To your surprise, Belassan frowns. “Ah... No offense meant, but I don’t think you’re in any condition to be riding.”

You raise your eyebrows, no doubt looking very unimpressed. “No offense meant, but I don’t think you’re in any condition to stop me.”

“You only have one eye!”

“And he has two. Between us, we’re above average.”

“You won’t be able to tell how far away things are--”

“I don’t see a lot of harts walking into trees by themselves.”
“Harts can’t tell how far away things are either!” Belassan counters. “They have a wide range a vision, not a deep one--”

“Are you planning on physically stopping me? Because if you grab me in front of Revas, it might be interesting to see what he does.”

Belassan actually glares at you a little bit. You grin a little smugly; you’re not confident Revas would do anything at all. He’s probably closer to Belassan than he is to you. But it would be interesting to see. And it’s funny to see that kind of irritated expression on Belassan, no matter how short-lived it is.

“Fine, but you’re at least taking someone else with you. I won’t let you fall off a cliff out of sheer thick-headedness.”

You shrug. Riding with Belassan isn’t particularly inconveniencing. You don’t need to drain your mana right now or anything. You just want to get out from inside the walls. “Fine, pick a hart. I’m going to get Revas ready.”

“I can’t go,” Belassan informs you. “I have work, and it’s my shift to watch the kittens. Sataareth will have just left.”

Damn... you just missed him? Ah, well. It’s probably for the best. You’re not in a steady enough state of mind for dealing with Qunari, anyway.

“Not quite left, actually,” a familiarly accented voice comes from behind you and to the right. You straighten like someone shoved an iron rod up your spine, even though it’s obvious who it is. Sure enough, you turn around and it’s just Sataareth. The weeks in Skyhold have been good to him; he’s finally starting to look less starved. Of course, that just serves to make him seem larger and broader, which means his sudden presence only alarms you that much more.

Like with Bull, your mind wants to make an exception for Sataareth, but only gets about three-fifths of way. With as strained as your morning has been, it’s no wonder your heart starts pounding. It doesn’t help that his black and gold eyes narrow in obvious anger.

“Valo-Kas. I had heard an elf was attacked and beaten quite brutally, but had scoffed at the whispers that it was you. You were clearly too strong to let something like that happen. After all, it would be very embarrassing for someone’s Valo-Kas Karasten to be beaten by a common human thug.”

You struggle to contain a laugh, which would probably only frustrate him more. But you can feel the corners of your lips twisting up in a shaky smile despite how you struggle to keep a straight face. Your chest is still pounding with fear that has nowhere to go, but this, at least, gives you something to focus on.

“What an extremely Qunari way of looking at things,” you manage finally, voice shaking with suppressed laughter. “Fortunately for you, you’ve certainly managed to get a real sword by now. You’re spared from the humiliation.”

Sataareth’s scowl deepens. “A technicality.”

“Wonderful, isn’t it? In Orlais, we live and die by them.”

“Sataareth,” Belassan interrupts. “Emma needs an escort to leave Skyhold. Do you have training right away, or...?”

“I have free time,” Sataareth replies, and just like that, it’s settled. Before long, the two of you are
preparing mounts... Or you and Belassan are, anyway. Sataareth is standing nearby and giving Belassan a run-down of how the kittens had done over the last four hours. All the times you had tried to find two of your elven friends that could get along, and the friendship that winds up blooming is one between a Dalish elf stablehand and a Tal Vashoth ex-slave.

Skyhold is a weird place.

Sataareth’s reaction to your injuries is somewhat refreshing, though. You can deal with that sort of irritation... He’s not trying to baby you. He’s not scared that you’ll break, and he lacks Bull’s inherent suspicion. He doesn’t think you’re hiding something; he’s not wondering what you’re up to. He’s just pissed off that you let your guard down and got pummeled by an idiot.

It’s a nice change of pace, really.

You’d been wondering what sort of horse would support Sataareth now that he’s gaining weight and muscle. As it turns out, a great beast of a horse, quite similar to the huge creature you’d seen Iron Bull riding once before. Its shoulder is taller than even the top of Belassan’s head... and therefore taller than the top of yours. You’re just as glad it’s his job to handle that giant horse and not yours.

Where Iron Bull’s mount had been cream colored with a black mane and tail, this beastie is solid, deep, rich black with a white streak down its nose and solid white around each of its hooves. And a lot of fur around its hooves. Or... hair? Do horses have hair? What are manes and tails made out of, actually? You could probably ask, but instead you file it away as a curiosity to read about later when you’re bored. No point in looking stupid in front of your friends.

Revas seems to notice you admiring the horse, however, and pokes you right in your ribs with a tip of one of his horns. You jump back and wince, rubbing the spot. “Jealousy isn’t an attractive look, Revas.” The hart merely snorts and steps pointedly between you and the horse. “I couldn’t ride something like that anyway. It wouldn’t even notice I was on its back,” you say with a snort, and go back to saddling Revas.

The horse doesn’t look any smaller when you’re up on Revas. If anything, being closer to it makes it look larger. Still, it seems friendly, at least. And Sataareth looks a bit more natural on its back than he had on the normal-sized horse he’d ridden back from Val Royeaux.

“She is no Asaarash,” Sataareth comments, noting your stares. “But she is solid.”

“Technically, she’s a draft horse,” Belassan informs you as you and Sataareth begin walking your mounts out of the barn. “All the ones we have here are from Horsemaster Dennet’s breeding line of Ferelden draft horses. They’re the only things that can really support Qunari, but their temperament isn’t good for battle.”

“Good,” you say with a snort. “None of the Qunari here need any encouragement to run headlong into battle.”

The two of you mount up--with minimal difficulty on your part--and head out of the keep. You get more than a few long and even hostile looks on your way out. The confused expressions you’re willing to forgive; the two of you are a weird and mismatched pair. The hostility, however, makes your skin crawl.

“A human soldier?” Sataareth says disdainfully as you clear the bridge and your mounts begin making their way into the trees. “One single human soldier, Valo-kas?”

“He caught me off-guard,” you lie with a sigh. “He and I had several verbal altercations in the past,
and they never went further than that. He caught me in the head as I was walking away, and the first blow dazed me.”

“Am I expected to believe that? You fought as well as any bas before, and armed with only a dagger. This is more of your trickery, Valo-kas.”

You glance over your shoulder at him, sourly. Twice now he’s caught you off-guard by being more astute than you expect. Though he’s surely not the only one to think that... the Iron Bull, and likely Solas as well, suspect the same. “Watch your language, Sataareth. You’ll wind up sounding like a Qunari again, throwing words like bas around. Does Katari allow that sort of talk?”

“Katari cares little for what comes out of a mouth,” Sataareth says with a snort.

“Really? He certainly seemed to mind what came out of mine,” you say, rolling your eyes and turning your focus back to the trees ahead of you just in time to get a face-full of pine needles. You splutter a bit as you shove them away, then flick the back of one of Revas’ ears. “Watch where you’re going, din’samahlen.”

“I have not seen him come even close to the level of irritation you inspired in him,” Sataareth comments, and he even sounds a little amused.

“Oh, good,” you say dryly. “I’m glad I’m the sole point of antagonism in the life of a seven foot tall Tal-Vashoth mercenary. That makes me feel excellent.”

“I told you before, you are vehlalit-an.”

“That makes me feel worse.”

“It was not my goal to comfort you.”

You snort. “You must be great with those kittens, Sataareth.” You drop your voice to mimic his low tones and thick Qunari accent. “Why do you crawl at the side of the box, sightless thing? You will only fall from the warmth of your mother. See? I told you. Stop crying, it is your own fault.”

“I do not sound like that.”

“You only sound exactly like that.”

“You are not funny, Valo-kas.”

“‘It was not my goal to amuse you,’” you mimic mockingly.

“This is why you frustrate Katari.”

“And everyone else,” you agree. “Are you discovering now why they say ‘separation makes the heart grow fonder?’ I’m told I’m far more appealing at a long distance. Such as out of earshot.”

Sataareth snorts. “I find that unlikely, given the manner in which so many in this castle seek you out. Katari is far from alone in holding you in high regard.”

“Is that what you call it when a Tal-Vashoth kind of wants to break your neck? High regard?”

“Yes.”

“I hope you keep me in low regard, then,” you say dryly. Honestly, the idea that the Tal-Vashoth still remembers you, particularly less than fondly, is the kind of terrifying that would have you shaking in
the saddle, were you not still reeling from what had occurred that morning. As it is, it just sort of
seems like your due in life.

“Do you truly find that ‘separation makes the heart grow fonder’?” Sataareth asks, jumping back a
few lines of conversation in a way that leaves you momentarily confused.

“Ah... Well, it’s just a saying, but I suppose there’s some truth to it,” you lie. Actually, you treasure
separation for the exact opposite reason. Distance is distance; physical distance leads to emotional
distance and vice versa. The disastrous wreck of Val Royeaux, which climaxed today in a rather
brutal manner for poor Solas, is enough proof of the stupidity you get up to when in close contact
with a person for too long.

“I suppose that’s fortunate, then,” Sataareth seems to muse to himself.

“Why? Did you have a beau back in Val Royeaux you never told me about?” you tease.

Sataareth eyes you sourly. “I am leaving on my first task for the Inquisition soon. I wonder at those I
leave behind.”

Your eyes widen in shock, both about the fact he’s leaving, and the fact he’s made enough friends to
worry about. That second one is arguably a good thing, though. You don’t know if friends outside
the Qun helps Tal-Vashoth stay Vashoth--just look at the Iron Bull--but it can’t hurt.

“You’re leaving?” you ask, deciding to only voice that first surprise.

“Yes. With a small group. Katari, myself, a dwarf, and an elf.” He wrinkles his nose. “The elf speaks
Qunlat as well. Is that common here? I had never thought to see it outside Par Vollen, and yet now I
am drowning in elves who speak proper language.”

An elf who speaks Qunlat... despite Sataareth’s grumbling, no, that’s not particularly common.
“White hair?” you hazard to guess. “Big sword?”

“Admirably so, yes,” Sataareth says, and you manage not to choke with laughter about the concept
of Sataareth admiring Fenris’ sword. “Particularly for his frame.” You quickly cover your bark of
laughter with extremely violent coughing.

“His name is Fenris; he’s a... an acquaintance of mine.”

“Ah!” Sataareth exclaims, as if struck by some great realization. “The two of you have history
together?”

“That’s... putting it a little strongly, I think...”

“Was he with you in Seheron?”

You stiffen. “How do you even... No, he wasn’t with me in Seheron. He was in Seheron, and I was
in Seheron, separately. Years apart.”

“Ah. I assumed you must have known each there. How many escaped elves fluent in the language
could possibly convene in the same place on coincidence alone?”

“Two, as it turns out,” you reply snippily. This line of questioning has left you a bit sour. “We didn’t
know each other at all up until recently; he’ll tell you the same himself.”
In any case, you’re actually a bit glad Fenris and Sataareth will be traveling together. And Katari, for all you fear him, is an extremely capable warrior. You’re a bit less worried, knowing they’ll all have each other’s back.

The two of you pass the rest of the ride swapping anecdotes about Sataareth’s soon-to-be traveling partners. You tell him a bit about Fenris. Nothing personal, mind; you stick mostly to his personality and prowess on the battlefield. Well, and you might have stressed how important it was Sataareth not refer to Solas as “yours.” Just a little bit.

At the same time, Sataareth feeds you tidbits about Katari. It’s clear the Tal-Vashoth has earned Sataareth’s respect... and, it seems, admiration. You wish you knew more about him, independent of Sataareth’s rose-tinted glasses. It’s a little late now, you suppose, but you do wish you knew for sure you could trust the man coming to influence Sataareth so much.

Not that it’s your problem. At all. Just like the cat, you’d effectively handed him off to someone else... Someone more equipped to deal with him, with an actual desire to. Simple as that.

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You manage to only get smacked in the face by a dozen or so branches during the course of the ride, and by the end of it you’re getting fairly proficient in ducking quickly. If nothing else, regular practice has rendered you significantly better at riding a hart. You still doubt you could ride a horse unless your life depended on it--the gaits seem too different--but a skill is a skill, no matter how unlikely it is to come up much after you leave Skyhold.

Although if Belassan is right about Revas’ attachment to you, it might be a skill that comes up regularly for the rest of your life. Who knows.

There’s a fuss at the gates as you cross the bridge. A big one. You wonder, excitedly, if traders have arrived. Normally, you wouldn’t care at all, but you’re expecting some goats and a few other farmyard animals. It’s a bit sooner than you expected, but...

No, it’s not goats. You really wish it had been, once you realize that it is, in fact, the Inquisitor and his party. Or rather, it was, and the crowd is just the remnants of the excited masses discussing his Holiness’ return.

To you, it’s a mixed bag. The Inquisitor is someone you dislike and fear in turns... mostly the latter. With him might well be Hawke, who you also dislike and fear in turns... mostly the former. Not that Hawke isn’t to be feared; he has the blood of dozens, arguably hundreds of mages on his hands. It’s just that it’s hard to remember he’s a holy terror--in every sense of the word--when he’s not-so-subtly suggesting he’d like to have a three-way with you and Fenris. Or you and Solas. Or any two elves in the entire keep, probably.

But on the flip side, it also means the return of Varric, and of Cole, both of whom you missed more than you care to admit to yourself at any given time. Although, you realize with a sinking sensation, Cole might be less than happy to see you, given what you’d just put Solas through, and why. Cole is the only one you can’t fool.

Oh, and Madame de Fer and Seeker Pentaghast will be back, too.

Yeah, you would have preferred the goats.

Between arriving back in Skyhold, returning your mounts, saying goodbye to Sataareth, and making it into the Great Hall, your sharp ears pick up a few tidbits of information. The Inquisitor had arrived,
and then he and the Seeker had headed directly into counsel. Whatever happened in Crestwood, it must have been interesting. No doubt Leliana, Lady Montiliyet, and Commander Rutherford are in there with them now.

You pause outside of the door to Solas’ rotunda. It looms ever-larger in your mind, like an impassible barrier. It’s almost always closed, but to you in that moment, the fact it’s closed feels like a sign, like proof that you’re unwelcome and unwanted. But, of course, if that’s not the case and you avoid him, you’ll do even further damage to the all-but-wrecked… friendship, or partnership, or horrible one-sided crush or whatever the fuck this mess is.

You should let it crash and burn.

But if you were going to do that, you wouldn’t have tried so hard to salvage the wreckage this morning.

In the end, you wind up heading to the kitchens, instead. You find some comfort in the basics… bringing Solas meals. That was the very first thing, really, the absolute first brick in your relationship with Solas. Since then, the frequency of your shared meals has been a constant comfort in the chaos of the Inquisition.

You fend off a few questions about your general wellbeing as you pick up meals. You want these wretched bandages off… but you definitely don’t want to upset Solas by removing them too quickly. Perhaps you should go back to the healing tent at some point… You were probably supposed to anyway, though you honestly don’t remember that insipid Dalish’s instructions whatsoever.

It’s only the strange looks you get, milling nervously outside Solas’ door, that finally pushes you into entering the rotunda.

Cole is already there, which seems like it would obviously be the case once you think about it. He’s sitting on the corner of Solas’ desk and conversing with him in soft, low tones. You pause in the doorway, taking the scene in. The two look so natural together. A mage--no, a somniari, even--and a spirit. Solas is comfortable with Cole in a way you’ve never seen him. Contrasting it with how you and Solas must look together, or you and Cole… for the first time with the two of them, you feel like an unnecessary and awkward third wheel.

“Comfortable and content. They fit together like pieces of a puzzle.” Cole looks over at you, not by turning around, but by leaning backwards, resting his weight on his hands and tilting his head back until his eyes meet yours. Ridiculously, you wonder how his hat is staying on. “Some things need three wheels. Most need four.”

You smile a bit, despite yourself. “I missed you, Cole.” The words spit out, unbidden, but you seem to be the only one surprised by them.

“He missed you, too,” Cole says, in that matter-of-factly nonsensical way of his. “He was worried you wouldn’t come.”

Your eyes flick over to Solas, who glances away.

“She was worried you wouldn’t want her to,” Cole adds.

“Yes, yes, communication is so easy when you have someone to do it for you,” you interrupt before Cole can continue. You’re worried he’ll bring up why, exactly, the two of you were worried. “I trust things went well in Crestwood? Everyone make it back intact?”

“Varric didn’t,” Cole says, and your stomach drops into your feet. “He stayed in Crestwood with
Hawke and the Warden. They’re going west.”

“The Warden? Blackwall, you mean?” you ask, frowning. Why would the three of them split off from the rest of the group?

“No,” he says succinctly.

“It’s my understanding they were meeting a Warden friend of Hawke’s in Crestwood,” Solas informs you. “I suspect we’ll all be brought up to speed after the Inquisitor is done in the War Room.”

“All of the Inner Circle, you mean,” you say with a snort. “I doubt the Inquisitor will be rushing to tell his linguist the details.”

“He might, if he weren’t such a fool,” Cole says, and both his words and intonation startle you before you see the embarrassment and minor irritation on Solas’ face—those had been his thoughts. Upon realizing that, it’s your turn to be embarrassed.

Cole glances between the two of you. “Oh! Three wheels! I get it now!” he exclaims, and vanishes.

You belatedly reach out a hand, as if to stop him, then sigh. Like that would work. You’re still carrying a rather heavy tray.

Cole did a bit to break the tension, but the awkwardness is rising again now that it’s just the two of you. Walking over to Solas’ desk is a struggle, and he’s rather pointedly looking anywhere but you. It’s only because of Cole’s words that you know it’s because he’s feeling as guilty and self-loathing as you are, rather than because he’s angry with you.

Of course, you’re the reason he feels that way, you absolute piece of shit. You clear your throat to help wrest control over your own tear ducts. You have self-control, if you ever bothered to practice it. Refusing to cry is much harder than crying on command, but you can still manage it. It helps that you about cried yourself dry earlier.

Your foot catches on something unexpected and you trip dramatically forward, hopping desperately on one foot to regain your balance as plates clatter. Solas’ “totally not looking at you” act falls apart immediately as he’s on his feet in an instant, but you’ve already caught yourself. You shake your right foot to get it loose from whatever it tangled into; the stool Solas always places at his desk clatters to the ground.

Ah.

You hadn’t been expecting that to be there.

“Are you alright?” Solas asks, still standing, arms slightly out as if he still expects he’ll have to catch something.

“Yes... Sorry. I’ve been running into everything since getting these stupid bandages put on. I don’t know how Bull deals with it.”

“Years of practice, I’m sure,” Solas says, taking a few plates off the tray and setting them onto the desk. You join him after a moment’s hesitation; he’s unloading your plates onto his desk as well. Between that and the stool, well...

It’s nice to know that some things don’t have to change.
That being said, conversation over lunch is more than a little stilted and awkward as you both fumble around the bronto in the room. It’s probably only the mutual knowledge—thanks to Cole—that neither of you want the friendship to end that gets you through. No doubt that’s exactly why Cole said it. He’d probably sensed Solas’ hurt clear across the keep—Ah, there’s that familiar stab of guilt again. You were worried, for a moment there, that you’d go for a whole five minutes without loathing yourself.

“Given all that has passed this week,” Solas is saying, “It would be perfectly reasonable for you not to have completed the assignments I gave you. And yet, I have absolutely no doubt that you did them anyway.”

You blink for a second, confused, before you realize what he means.

“Therefore,” Solas continues, “We should be able to move forward in your studies relatively uninterrupted despite—”

You’re already pushing your food to the side and standing to fetch your papers. Solas looks alarmed, so you state your intentions as you jog over to your desk. “I’ve got them right over here; I finished them before things even went to shit—ha, and you were laughing at me for doing it the next day—”

“You know I’m going to insist you finish eating first. You have to,” Solas says, and the dryness in his voice is almost comforting. “I’ve been doing it every day for over a month now.”

You turn to look at him, papers already in your hands.

“Sit,” he says, pointing across the desk. “Eat. The elven language won’t disappear in the time it takes you to make a nominal attempt at maintaining your health.”

“You know I’m going to insist you finish eating first. You have to,” Solas says, and the dryness in his voice is almost comforting. “I’ve been doing it every day for over a month now.”

You shrug as you sit back down at the desk, placing your papers to the side. Perhaps you do... it’s hard for you to say, really. You never thought yourself particularly unusual in this matter, of all things. But maybe Sera is the average, with her disdain for all things elven. You can’t help doubting it, however. If you’re unusual in anything, it’s that you’ve developed the means to actually do something about your “keen sense of loss.” Something most elves will never be in a position to do.

Well, the nice thing about knowledge is the manner in which it spreads... Like wildfire in the dry
season. And you’ve always had a talent for lighting flames.

--

The afternoon passes remarkably happily. You can almost--almost--pretend the morning didn’t happen. Solas is a bit more... on edge... than normal, but you’re able to dodge the worst of his poor mood, and the rest you’re more than willing to accept as your due. You don’t know if he’ll leave the subject of your sleeping mind alone or not. He may just begin to employ more subterfuge. But at least you can still keep him close enough to watch.

And you’d accept a lot worse than a few tongue-lashings to be able to keep learning the elven language from him, of course.

Between your attempts to focus on your studies and your constant, swirling thoughts about what Solas might be thinking, might be planning, you barely even have a thought to spare for the returned Inquisitor and his companions. That is, of course, until the early evening, when the Inquisitor all but kicks in the rotunda door.

The sound of the slam has you just about jumping out of your skin, flight reflex flooding through your bones. The desire to quickly make yourself scarce only grows when you spin on your stool and see who it is. The Inquisitor is smiling, but it’s a thin smile, and he looks either angry or extremely tired. You don’t know him well enough to say for sure.

“I need to talk to you,” he declares. You quickly gather your things off Solas’ desk, deciding your instincts are right. The Inquisitor is clearly here to speak to Solas... and you don’t really feel like your presence would help things any. “No,” he interrupts as you scoop your things into your arms and begin to rise. “Both of you.”

Both of you?!

You swallow, but turn again on your stool, feeling like a deer frozen before a wolf. What could he possibly want with the two of you? It must be about the trip to Val Royeaux... That’s the only thing you and Solas have ‘together,’ in any professional capacity.

“Welcome back to Skyhold, Inquisitor,” Solas says. His voice is very polite and neutral, but brings with it a level of frostiness that chills you more surely than the coldest mountain wind.

“No for long,” the Inquisitor replies. He runs a hand along the side of his face, and you see now that he certainly is tired--there are dark bags under his eyes. His facial hair is ragged and unkempt from two weeks on the road. “I leave in two days, for the Western Approach. Or, we do, I should say.”

Your stomach sinks into your feet. Solas is leaving in two days? And he’s going all the way to the Western Approach?! It would take at least two weeks’ fast travel just to reach the very edge of the huge Blight-struck desert that encompasses most of southwestern Orlais.

Solas seems to draw the same conclusion as you. “I expect we’ll be gone for several months, then?”

“Yes, though much depends on what exactly we find there. There’s no time to waste--begin preparations for a long trip immediately.”

You’re depressed at once... months. What are you going to do here, without Solas, for months? Well... survive, obviously, and probably much more easily. You should probably be pleased by this news, but you’re positively despondent. The Inquisitor is turning to you, however, so you have no time to dwell in your misery yet.
“Leliana tells me that you’ve yet to finish the dragon tome.”

“Ah... yes,” you admit, fear followed by irritation at Leliana sparking inside of you. Maybe you would have finished by now if she didn’t insist on constantly distracting you with trivial bullshit. “My sincerest apologies, Inquisitor. I did think it would be done by now... A few more days solid work, perhaps? I’ve run into some... delays, as of late,” you admit, running a hand over the bandages on your face, which the Inquisitor must see but hasn’t seemed to take much note of.

“I cannot give you solid days, unfortunately. You’ll just have to finish it to the best of your ability on the way.”

You blink in confusion. “On the way where?”

He gives you a look that’s a mix of pity and contempt, as if you’ve said something truly stupid. “They must have you on something strong for that injury. The Western Approach, I said.”

Chapter End Notes

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You tried to say no. You really did. Within the confines of manners and your own respective positions of power (the Inquisitor being something akin to your boss’ boss’ boss who also has an army), you really tried to refuse. But the Inquisitor not only wasn’t having any of it, he barely seemed to be aware of your protests. Either that or he was just ignoring them.

So, on Tuesday morning, you’ll apparently be leaving to join the Inquisitor on a trip to the Western Approach.

As soon as the man leaves, you sink onto your stool, dazed.

“W... what just happened?” you ask Solas, numbly.

“In my experience, that is the manner in which the Inquisitor normally invites his advance party,” Solas says, voice still rather icy and irritated with the residue of dealing with the Inquisitor. One of these days, you’d really like to learn why those two dislike each other so much. It’s got to be more than racial prejudice or a dislike for mages... both Dorian and Sera appear to have a much more neutral opinion of the Inquisitor.

“Really?” you say sarcastically, honestly in no mood to baby Solas down from his pissy perch. He’s a grown man, he can handle his own damn emotions. “He normally invites random, low-ranking menial workers along?”

Solas glances over at you, and seems to take in your state of distress a bit more completely. “...No,” he admits. “That was a first. Although you’re hardly menial, neither are you prepared for the sort of rough travel and frequent combat his advance group usually encounters.”

“Frequent combat?!”

“Yes. My first guess would be that it has something to do with that book of yours... but it seems a poor reason to drag you along for this. He could simply wait a week for you to finish and then have it sent along behind him,” Solas muses. You nod; you’d been thinking the same thing yourself, in a much more panicked manner.

“Should I talk to the Spymaster?” you wonder aloud. Did she have something to do with this? Technically, you work under her jurisdiction. From what you understand, pretty much everyone in Skyhold eventually falls under either Lady Montiliyet, Commander Rutherford, or the Spymaster. It just so happens that thanks to your antics in Val Royeaux, it’s a much more direct chain of command than it used to be.

“Perhaps. She may be able to shed some light on the Inquisitor’s thought process, since he didn’t feel the need to enlighten us himself.” Solas is back to sounding annoyed. You don’t blame him, but you sort of wish he’d focus on your impending doom instead of his squabble with the Inquisitor. “I doubt she’s yet back from the War Room, but later, perhaps...”

You rest your elbows on his desk and place your face firmly in your hands. “What am I going to do?!” you groan out loud. A fucking advance party to the Maker damned desert?! You came to Skyhold to be safe! This is the literal opposite of safe!
“Pack?” Solas suggests lightly, and you fix him with a powerful glare. He squats down next to the stool; doing so puts him beneath you, his face about level with your chest. It’s disarming, which is no doubt his intent. “It is best to be prepared. I will investigate the reasoning behind this decision myself, but now more than ever, you need to focus on healing and resting. If the Inquisitor’s mind cannot be changed—and if it can, neither of us are the ones to change it—then you have my word I will keep you safe.”

“Solas, we left Skyhold for two weeks and I nearly got impaled twice! And that was just along the Imperial Highway! How are you going to protect me traveling across all of Orlais?” you protest.

“For one, I will not be doing it alone. The others in the Inquisitor’s Inner Circle are much more skilled in battle than any of the guards we had, and we will be protecting only ourselves and you.” Solas places a hand on your shoulder. He’d done something similar in Val Royeaux, while trying to comfort you. It works better than you’d like to admit. “For now, dinner, and then the healing tent.” He stands. “We’ve no more time for slow healing; you must have those bandages off tonight.”

Despite all your protests and fussing, Solas all but drags you to the healing tent after the two of you have eaten. You don’t understand why he can’t just do it; he as much as admits he’d been planning on taking over looking after your recovery, after your little bitch-fit the last time you’d had to deal with the Dalish healer.

“You are a mess,” he explains as he all but pushes you out the door. “It would be one thing if I was healing a single injury, but every time I blink, you acquire new ones.” He gestures at your hands, which of course are bruised and scraped from your earlier one-on-one match with a wall. “And your overall health is poor. If you’re to travel across Orlais and into a desert, you must be in as peak condition as you can be. Therefore, you will be looked over, by multiple experts. Perhaps if they declare it a miracle you aren’t already dead, the Inquisitor will even reconsider taking you.”

Well, you suppose you can’t argue with that.

Though you do, pretty much the entire way.

Fortunately, the Dalish, Yuki or Yuli or whatever, doesn’t appear to be here. Probably because it’s quite late. Instead, you get a different healer. She focuses on your facial injuries first, unwrapping your head and, as Solas explains the situation to her, absolutely pouring magic into the remnants of your injury. It’s enough that you feel surges of violent dizziness, which she assures you will pass, though you can barely hear her through the rushing in your ears.

After it’s over, however, you find you can open both eyes. Your vision is violently blurry and unfocused, which only serves to further your dizziness and make you equal parts concerned and nauseated.

“I suggest you wear an eyepatch for a bit,” the healer recommends as you frantically wave a hand in front of your eye, trying to get it to focus. “And practice using it a few hours a day.”

“I don’t have time for that,” you snap irritably. “And besides, Iron Bull and the Chargers would never shut up about it.”

“You haven’t used it for days, and it sustained some damage. It would—”

“Assume I’m not going to wear an eyepatch and move forward with your advice,” you say shortly. You don’t have time to be diplomatic, and you definitely aren’t in the mood for it. You have to figure
out what to do about this Western Approach nonsense.

First, however, you’re put through a rather uncomfortably invasive physical. You’d like to say the “now cough” part is the most unpleasant, but that dubious honor actually goes to the magical portion of the exam, during which you have to play keep away with your aura. Thankfully, she’s not that thorough. She’s not looking for magic; she’s looking for physical wellbeing.

Apparently, she finds neither.

“Well. ...How long have you been in Skyhold?” she asks, frowning.

“Just over or just under a month, depending on your definition of ‘in Skyhold,’” you reply shortly.

“Well, you show signs of long term malnourishment and extreme exhaustion, as well as a just being generally banged up. You appear to be gaining weight, which is a good sign, but you could stand to sleep for about a week--”

“Yeah, not the first time I’ve heard that,” you say dryly.

“Would you say she’s not fit for travel?” Solas questions.

The woman rubs her jaw thoughtfully. “I don’t think it would kill her, though I wouldn’t feel comfortable recommending anything other than a lot of sleep and a lot of good red meat.”

“I feel I’m unlikely to get either.”

Both of them are ignoring you. “If she does travel, I will be there. Is there anything you recommend?”

“Well, you’re not walking, right? Good. I’d say try to limit her time on horseback to--” You lay back on the cot, tuning the two of them out.

Solas is far too accepting of the inevitability of this situation for your liking. For all he seems to hate the Inquisitor, he seems to assume that once his Holiness gives a command, it will be followed. He’d had a similar laissez faire attitude when the two of you had been sent to Val Royeaux... everyone had, really. You’d gotten the definite sensation that the advisors were used to sort of... working with and around the Inquisitor’s orders. Lady Montiliet had sent the two of you, as ordered, but also her own diplomat. Leliana had doubled the guard for the trip back in a somewhat-successful attempt to prevent a repeat of the disastrous trip there.

Still, you should probably speak to Leliana about this, though you’re not really looking forward to it. You never look forward to talking to her. But where’s the benefit in dealing with her, if not here? Surely she can convince the Inquisitor it’s a poor idea to drag a linguist into a desert. If anyone can.

Solas and the healer are discussing your diet now. It’s more than a bit degrading, an opinion that you voice.

“If you were listening, I would not have to,” Solas retorts.

“Does that mean that since you’re here, I can leave?”

“You could take your health a little more seriously--”

“Why? “ you snap, angrier than you should be. “Why should I take it seriously? Would eating right
and sleeping eight hours a night have saved me from Underhill? From the bandits’ arrows and blades? From whatever Maker-damned demons I might run into next? Why should I fuss over my health while everything in this fucking place endeavors to kill me?”

Solas and the healer both look taken aback. So do the nearest ten people or so. You hadn’t really meant to shout that. You run a hand over your now bandage-free face, glad your eyes won’t focus enough to let you see Solas’ expression clearly.

“...It could help?” the healer suggests awkwardly.

You clench your teeth, then take a deep breath and sit up. “I’m going to talk to my ‘boss,’” you say sourly. “I need to know what’s going on.”

“I know this day has been... tumultuous, lethallin,” Solas begins. Your glare isn’t as passionate as it could be. Describing the day as “tumultuous” is ridiculous enough that you can still glare at him despite the gentle way he said “lethallin,” but it does weaken your anger somewhat. “But Leliana is certainly still going to be in the War Room, or otherwise occupied. Storming off to find her now will most likely simply leave you outside a locked door.”

“At least that’s something!” you snap. “I’m not going to just march across the damn continent just because--”

“This conversation is best finished elsewhere,” Solas says quickly, and you belatedly realize that shouting the Inquisitor’s plans in a public area is probably a poor idea.

“You’re right,” you say with a sigh, rubbing your left eye again. “Am I done here?” you ask the healer. “I still can’t see properly. How long will it be like this?”

“Not more than a full day, if you avoid straining it. Which is why I’d recommend the eyep--”

“You heard the lady, I’m done,” you say, standing up. Then you pause. “...Is Krem still in here?” you ask, turning back to the healer. “Mercenary guy, with the Chargers.” The healer’s expression is blank. “Got run through with a spear, having some complications?” you add hopefully, and there’s a glint of recognition in her eyes.

“Oh, yes, I think so.”

“How is he? Is there any way I could visit? I didn’t get a chance to see him yesterday...”

She paused. “Well, I don’t see why not... I think they’re changing... his... bandages now?”

You’re a little worried about how uncertain she sounds about pretty much every word in that sentence, but you’re not going to question it if she’s intending to let you see him. “I won’t be in the way,” you promise.

She waves for the two of you to follow her. You think Solas does so just because he isn’t done with you and doesn’t want to give you a chance to escape. A shame... You honestly don’t feel like bickering with him anymore. You can probably do more for your case without someone looking over your shoulder. You’ll just have to ditch him later. Right now, seeing Krem is the priority, especially if you’ll be leaving in a matter of days.

“He should be just through there,” the healer says, gesturing to one of several curtained off sections of tent. They did what they could for privacy with the space they were given, but really... couldn’t they have repurposed something indoors for this?
Your mind is on this, and what can be done about it, when you push the tent aside and step into Krem’s space.

Your first thought is that you’ve gone into the wrong room, but that’s definitely Krem. It’s just that, they are definitely changing his bandages, and it’s just that, you’re realizing you never saw him shirtless before right now.

Krem gives a startled shout, and the healer tending to him looks up, surprised at the sudden entrance. Ridiculously, you turn around, flushing, only to find that Solas is doing the same. That makes sense for him, but it only serves to demonstrate how silly your actions are. It’s nothing you haven’t seen before. But in your confusion, it’s the first thing you thought to do.

“S-sorry!” you exclaim into the curtain. “Sorry, I’ll just, um! Go!”

Had you been calling him the wrong words, this entire time? No, that’s stupid, everyone calls him a guy.

“No, wait, hold on,” he says, sounding strained.

“Don’t stand up!” his healer exclaims.

“I can come back later,” you begin to offer.

“No, I want to talk to you,” he says, firmly.

“I’ll just... give you some privacy, shall I?” Solas says, sounding just as strained despite not being the one who had a spear through his lung.

“Do I need to explain it to you?” Krem asks.

“Not at all,” Solas replies, still looking away.

“All right, thanks, then,” he says, and Solas leaves before you can finish really processing what’s going on. Your mind is still grasping at straws. You had been a boy before; back in Antiva. Was it something similar? Or maybe like your numerous disguises since? But you can’t imagine the ‘why’ in any of those scenarios, and none of them feel quite right to you. All you know is that you feel like you’ve definitely done something wrong and probably rude; you’re just not sure what.

“Can you finish up here?” Krem asks, and you realize belatedly that he must be talking to the healer.

“Let me just leave!” you exclaim. “I’ll, um, wait just outside and she can send me in when she leaves?”

There’s a pause, and then, “...Alright. Just don’t run off before I can explain.”

You’re not really sure what he needs to explain, but you have to admit you’re curious. You step out of the curtained area. The healer who’d brought you here had made herself scarce, possibly realizing she’d done something she wasn’t supposed to. Or maybe just that she’d accidentally caused awkwardness.

Standing there gives you time to get your thoughts in order, though. You keep feeling like you’ve been accidentally referring to Krem as the wrong gender this entire time, and it’s making you feel a bit guilty. But he’d definitely been introduced to you as a guy. All the Chargers referred to him that way, right? You hadn’t just seen him, assumed he was a guy, and then just never been corrected? How much of an asshole are you here, exactly?
But assuming that’s not the case, you’re not an idiot, and Krem is in fact a guy... Well, it could be something like Nikolas had been for you, you suppose. You don’t know Krem’s life story. You’d presented yourself as a guy on and off your whole life. It was hard to think of Krem as someone who needed to do that, though. He had the whole of the Chargers supporting; what doors could being a man open that they couldn’t?

You still haven’t come to anything resembling a conclusion when the healer leaves and you duck back into Krem’s ‘room.’ He’s sitting up, but only thanks to a goodly number of pillows helping him do so. He’d looked bad, underneath the bandages. You’d noticed that even while you had been, uh... distracted.

“How are you doing?” you ask nervously. “I was with Bull when he got the news... yesterday?” You realize you genuinely aren’t sure. The days were all blurry and disjointed. “But they weren’t letting people in to see you.”

“It was a stupid complication,” Krem says with a scowl. “They’ve been healing me slow, to make sure I’m not crippled, but they took their damn time a bit too much, and I got a sickness in my blood. Burning it out is more painful than the damn spear was.”

You wince. Solas had talked once before about how you’d been risking a blood sickness with your poor treatment of your own injuries, and how unpleasant you’d find the treatment. “Why are they going so slowly?”

“One of my lungs was punctured by the spear, straight through. It was at risk of collapsing. I don’t pretend to understand everything they say, but I don’t have to be told a mercenary with only one lung isn’t much good.”

“Andraste...” you murmur. “...Are you going to be okay?”

Krem snorts. “Takes more than this to keep a Charger down.” Then he eyes you, a bit cautiously. “I’m assuming you have some questions?”

You twist your fingers together nervously, glancing over to the side. You just can’t beat the feeling that you’ve been stupid, and anything that you say now will only be outlining exactly in what manner you’ve been stupid. “Um...”

“I wasn’t sure whether you knew or not,” Krem says conversationally. “But the look on your face kind of confirmed you didn’t.”

“It’s just... I’m not actually sure what it is that I... didn’t... know?” you say cautiously. “I mean, I’m not sure anyone ever sat me down and said, ‘that Krem, he sure is a fellow, that’s for sure,’ you know, in that many words, but I was pretty sure that... I mean, am I wrong?” You’re blathering.

“You’re not wrong. It’s just... complicated.”

You sit down on the stool the healer had been using, not wanting to stand in the corner like a scolded schoolchild for any longer. “Could you, uh... explain it? I want to figure out in exactly which ways I’ve been an ass.”

Krem snorts. “You haven’t been. But there’s always room to try.”

--

You leave the healing tent slightly enlightened and slightly confused, but generally with a deeper understanding of the world.
The idea of someone having an issue with their gender had never occurred to you, though perhaps it should have, given your life. It was just like when you’d learned that some people were strictly attracted to one set of genitalia or another. In retrospect, you’d been exposed to the concept your whole life, you just hadn’t been paying any attention to it. You’d deemed it unimportant to the world and moved on, only to find out later that it was very, very important to some folks.

Now, as then, you sort of felt like the last person to be brought up to speed on something everyone else knew. How many times had you heard “oh, so and so, he likes to wear girl’s clothes!” with either giggles or shrugs afterwards depending on the company you’d been keeping at the time? You’d never thought much of it. Your own gender had been discovered by one or two of your closer ‘friends’ in Antiva, but the conversation you’d had with them hadn’t at all resembled the one Krem had just had with you.

You have little time to sort out your thoughts on the matter; Solas is waiting outside the healing tent.

“Maker, you’re determined,” you say without thinking.

“I didn’t think our own conversation was finished, but seeing your injured friend was a greater need... as was the conversation he needed to have with you,” Solas replies evenly.

“Did you know? Did... everyone? I’m trying to figure out if I’m stupid.”

“I was not surprised, but I had given it little thought,” Solas says, which really isn’t anything resembling an answer to your question. He has dodging questions down to an art, even when it seems pointless to do so.

Truly, a role model.

“This has been the most fucking... I don’t even know what’s happening with this weekend anymore,” you say, pulling your hands through your hair. It’s a mess; absent-mindedly you let it drop so you can pull it back into a better, tighter bun. “I can’t even remember what day it is, or when anything happened. I’m fairly sure we were fighting this morning, and then the Inquisitor happened, and that blew everything else out of my mind, and now this, and that blew that out of my mind... I can’t keep anything straight.”

“You need more sleep,” Solas comments, but you shrug.

“You can keep harping on that, or you can tell me something useful.”

Solas scowls, but doesn’t push it. He’ll have to be feeling a little once-bitten-twice-shy with anything regarding your sleeping habits right now. And you should be kinder and more delicate, but it has been a remarkably long day, and you’ve run short on the desire to temper your attitude.

“I should speak to Leliana... but I don’t know when she’ll be available. Do you think she’ll be around tomorrow morning?” you ask, frowning.

“I have no real way of knowing,” Solas admits. “But I will keep an eye out for her myself, as well as a few others. I need to speak with Seeker Pentaghast now that she’s returned, in any case.”

“Seeker Pentaghast?” you ask, eyebrows rising.

“Do you not remember? About the bathhouse situation.”

“Oh. I’d completely forgotten, actually.” You finish pulling your back into a bun and let your hands drop, fighting the urge to rub your eye more. It’s less frustrating in the dimness of the courtyard, but
it still feels uncomfortable and out of focus. “I can’t keep track of anything these last... how long has it even been?”

“Three days,” Solas replies, and you groan.

“It feels like it’s been five months.”

“It’s surely been an ordeal for you, and I apologize that this is coming on its heels.”

“Why are you apologizing?” you demand, far more rudely than is called for.

“It seems unlikely that anyone else will.”

That brings you up short. But lacking in any real target for your anger, you wind up overcome instead. You sink down towards the ground, squatting rather than sitting and soiling your clothing in the loose dirt around the healing tent. You cradle your head in your hands again, trying to just think, you just need a second to fucking think because there has to be a way out of this, or an upside you’re not seeing. Something to make it worth it, something to make running not the smart answer, because it’s the only smart answer you see.

Solas squats down next to you, and places a hand on your shoulder, hesitantly. Before he can say anything, however, there’s another figure on your other side, another hand on your other shoulder.

“There’s a draconologist, and some ruins, lots of ruins,” Cole’s voice informs you. “Old. Tevinter. Records and memories lost to the ages, and we didn’t have anyone with us to take notes.”

You hear Solas laugh, just a short laugh, which turns into a snort at the end. “Are you attempting to bribe her, Cole?”

“She’s looking for a reason,” Cole says. A bit evasively, in your opinion. You’d been looking for a reason not to run. Anyone else might assume you’d been looking for a reason why you were being brought along. Maybe you’re a good influence on him, after all... Or maybe not, considering how he’d been more than happy to blurt out your thoughts--and Solas’--earlier. Maybe he’s just capable of being sneaky when the situation calls for it.

That thought would probably alarm most mages, but you find it a comforting familiarity. “...What sorts of ruins?”

“Tevinter, as Cole said. One, the site of a magical incident that tore the Veil... I expect it’s largely collapsed in on itself now. And the second was an old prison.”

You perk up at the sound of that. Prisons kept records... meticulous records. That could be interesting. So could the draconologist, but neither is a good enough reason to risk your life... or an explanation as to why you’re being brought along. The Inquisitor doesn’t need your expertise on ancient Tevene... he has Dorian, who, as a bonus, is actually a capable fighter and unlikely to get slaughtered by a giant lizard or something. And if it was just a matter of the book, he could drag Solas and all of your other distractions away from you, stick you in a room, and order you to finish it at once. You’d be done inside of a week, and could send it after him with someone actually capable.

There’s so obviously something else going on here... Solas knows it too. It can’t just be that the Inquisitor is a moron... right? But if the alternative is him targeting you in some way... you’d prefer he just be an idiot. Or was someone else behind it? Madame de Fer, or Leliana?

Ugh.
You have so much work to do, and no time to do it in. Two nights and a day before the Inquisitor intends to drag you out of the castle. Damnit, you had plans! You need to get word to Banal’ras. He’s already got eyes here; you can borrow them while you’re out of the castle. And you need your own… you’ll need to speak to Thea and Celia. It’s getting late, but you might be able to catch them before bed. One of them, at least.

You glance over at Cole, who’s looking at you with calm, knowing eyes. Maybe him? Or maybe not; you don’t trust that people wouldn’t be suspicious enough to read any mail he got. And you’re not Solas, you can’t just fucking walk here in your sleep.

“I’m going,” Cole tells you.

“Going where?” you say absent-mindedly. “Is the Inquisitor sending you out again? I guess he think just because you’re a spirit, you don’t need to rest.”

“Going to the Approach. A lot of us are, I think. He thought very hard about it; balance between speed and strength.”

You blink. Solas and Cole.

“Who else is going?” you ask with a frown.

“I’m not sure,” Cole says apologetically. “Blackwall. Varric is going with Hawke.”

“The Seeker? De Fer?”

“I don’t know.”

You hum thoughtfully. There’s got to be some method to the Inquisitor’s madness. “Why bring a linguist if he needs strength and speed?” you muse, more to yourself than to Cole. “I’m the opposite of both.”

“Perhaps we can discuss this somewhere that’s not directly by the entrance to the healing tent?” Solas suggests, standing. “I fear we’ll be in the way momentarily.”

Oh. Good point. You stand as well, mind still racing. “Solas, I’m going to go to bed,” you lie. He opens his mouth, but you cut off any protestations. “If you’re still worried, Cole can walk me there. You don’t mind, do you, Cole?”

“I don’t mind.”

“See? If you get the chance to talk to anyone about what the Inquisitor’s thinking, I’d appreciate it... It might be taken better coming from you than me. But don’t stay up late on my behalf... You’re leaving in a few days as well.”

Solas’ eyes are piercing. He obviously thinks (knows) you’re up to something, but it’s not like he can really do anything based on vague suspicion.

“...Alright. Do your best to rest more. I’ll attempt to speak to Leliana or Seeker Pentaghast before I retire for the night.”

After your goodnights are out of the way, you wrap your arm around Cole’s. “Alright, my valiant protector. To safety!”

Solas rolls his eyes, but heads off himself.
“We’re not actually going to your room,” Cole says, a bit accusatorily.

“Sure we are; we’re just not staying there. Come on.”

--

“You’re going where?!”

“Sssshhh!” you hiss, glancing around. There doesn’t seem to be anyone else in the corridor outside the kitchen. “I don’t think I’m supposed to be telling people.”

“Then why are you telling me?”

“Because it’s weird! Isn’t it? I’m not cut out for this sort of thing, Celia!”

“Did Solas ask him to bring you?”

“No, Solas was as surprised as me... we got the news at the same time. Do you think anyone else would have?”

“I can’t imagine who...”

“Me neither,” you say with a sigh. “I just don’t understand what the Inquisitor is thinking. Anyway, since I don’t know how long Solas and I will be gone, I wanted to give you an advance--”

“But you only pay me to bring food to Solas! There won’t be anything for me to do.”

“Do you think I’d be raring to spend money in the desert? I’d rather it go somewhere it can do some good. Besides, you can keep an eye on things for me, right? Like the farm... they’re working with the kitchen anyway, right?”

“That’s true, but what on earth can I do with the farm?”

“Just make sure they’re okay. If they need anything, can you write it down for me? I might get to a place where I can send and receive mail; who knows. If nothing else, if I get back in one piece, I can deal with it then.”

“Don’t you think anything they need would have been taken care of by then?” Celia points out.

“If it does, then it’s a moot point,” you say with a shrug. “But I don’t have any delusions that anyone will be bending over backwards to help the elven farm out without Fenris here to lean pointedly over shoulders.”

“Well, it’s no skin off my nose to just keep an eye on things and listen to what they need,” Celia says with a shrug.

“Thanks, Celia. Do you mind keeping an eye on Solas’ room and workshop, too?” She stiffens.

“You don’t need to go in or anything, just walk by every now and then, make sure no one’s tried to mess with it.”

“Do you think someone will?”

“No, but I didn’t think anyone would punch me in the face, either.”

--
Celia is taken care of, with more ease than you would have thought. You’re definitely doing a good job easing her into the concept of telling you things for money. If you weren’t leaving for a few damn months, you could make even more progress. Friggin Inquisitor...

You can’t go to Thea this evening; there’s no way you could get away with skulking around that close to Solas. You’ll have to catch her at breakfast tomorrow. You can probably count on her for a regular stream of gossip out of Skyhold.

Cole, Blackwall, and Solas are going. Not a bad group... Now that you know you can trust Cole, the idea of going on a long trip with him is appealing. He and Solas would definitely have your back...

Still, there’s nothing more you can do tonight. You meander back towards your room, thoughts in the clouds.

Tomorrow is going to be a very busy day.

Chapter End Notes

Do you enjoy my work? (I hope so because this is chapter 84 and if you've been not enjoying yourself this whole time... well that's a long time to suffer) You should check out my links page for various ways you can support and/or stalk me. You should follow me for sure: every (most) Wednesday(s) on Tumblr I do WIP Wednesday where you can get sneak previews of upcoming works, Patrons get all kinds of shiny perks, like seeing Curious chapters 3 days before everyone else, and Twitter.... uh. Well. I mostly got a Twitter because people wanted me to get one. ¯

We're inching closer to the end of the arc, probably only another 2 or so chapters to go. I'm not looking forward to the hiatus; outlining is very time consuming and draining, and I have to power through it, to boot. But I'll work hard to get it done as quickly as possible so I can get back to regular updates. ;;
A few important things to go over before you dive right in (I'll mention the really important stuff again at the bottom if this is tl;dr).

Thing one: I know all of you, particularly my American readers, are hurting and scared right now. God knows I am too. It wasn't easy to push through and get this done, just like I'm sure being productive and working or studying is all extremely difficult for all of you, too. But I wanted more than anything to get it done, because we need to be there for each other. I needed to be there for you guys. A distraction might not be much, practically, but I know distractions are exactly what I turn to in times like these.

The next chapter will most likely mark the beginning of my hiatus. But know I'll be working my ass off to bring updates back as quickly as I can. I'll be working on other projects, as well, Curious and Tiny Secrets and little things for other fandoms I enjoy. If you don't already, now's a good time to follow me on social media (links to everything under the chapter): Tumblr if you're ambitious and Twitter if you just want the important stuff. I'll also be updating Patreon throughout the hiatus for those interested in my outlining process. (I'm a bit overdue there; this last week and a half has absolutely wrecked my shit, but there should be an update today or tomorrow.) It's currently the last day on a contest you would have known about if you were following me, but if you hurry, you can still enter. :) I'll also be having a little announcement on my Tumblr on Thanksgiving, so keep an eye out for that, too. Also, I'll be in an official Keeping Secrets chatroom beginning at 4PM EST. Links and instructions can be found on my Tumblr here.

It's a little early, but on the subject of giving thanks, I really want to take a moment to thank all of you for sticking with me through all of this. It's been years since DAI came out, and I'll probably be updating right up to the release of DA4. I know most people move on to other fandoms in this sort of a downtime, so I really appreciate everyone who's still with me, and everyone who still discovers the story, sees "450,000 words", and still decides to give it a look.

I'm doing more work outlining this next arc than I did outlining my last novel... but I think it's going to be way longer than my last novel, so... fair. Thanks for sticking it out guys, and remember: be good to each other.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Monday morning normally means a return to training with the Iron Bull, but you’re not sure you have the energy for it. You suspect the burst of anxiety and panic the last few days has inspired in you drained away any excess energy you got from sleeping for a whole day. Which is a pity, because you could really use that energy now that you’re about to embark on a brutal cross-country journey through a war-torn Orlais and into a sparsely populated Blight-caused desert.

Ugh.

You had spent the night getting your things in order. You’re now entirely packed, All of your
valuables are in one bag that you intend to keep on your back at all times. Your other, less important items, are in another that’s designed more to be tied to a mount rather than carried on your person. You can leave it behind in a pinch. You’ll be seeing how much work you can get on the dragon tome before you pack it and your supplies away, but you left room for it in your primary bag. If you have to run, that damned book is coming with you, as is your translation. The Inquisitor can eat his own ass; perhaps next time he wouldn’t bring a linguist on a dangerous outing like this. Idiot.

Before you leave, however, you poke your head into the chill air outside your tiny window. The bird feeder is still there. You pull it inside quickly, and check the little cache with two fingers. Empty... So your message was sent, but nothing back yet... obviously. It’ll take awhile to get messages in and out of Skyhold. You pen a quick one, in the same code, informing Banal’ras of what’s going on here, and that you’ll be incommunicado for a while. You roll it up small and shove it into place, then hang the bird feeder back up. As you do, you see the old elven man who so delicately balances your cover in his hands.

You wave him over; he ambles amicably. It’s the kind of movement that deserves alliteration. You feel like congratulating him on it; he probably practiced for a long time. You often wish people would compliment your smile or laugh for that very reason. But now really isn’t the time for that.

“Excuse me, sir, but I’ll be leaving for an indeterminate time tomorrow. I see you around here often... Would it be too much for me to ask you to keep my feeder filled?”

“Not at all, miss,” he says with a pleasant grin. It’s much more grin than smile. You wish he’d work on that. Well, at least he probably won’t blow your cover while you’re gone. That would take abysmally bad luck or lack of skill.

You remove yourself from the window; it’s really uncomfortable leaning out like that, especially as you’re beginning to put on weight. You give your room one more once over, just to make sure you’ve packed everything important, and then you head out to face the day.

You wind up heading to the training yard just before dawn, not out of any desire to train, but out of a desire to see Bull before you leave. You have things to catch up on, if he’s not going with you.

He’s not, as it turns out. He’s staying behind with the Chargers. The Inquisitor had another job he wanted them all for; he wasn’t too happy about the state of Krem, and further unhappy with the idea that the Chargers would prefer to stay in Skyhold until it was determined their second-in-command wasn’t going to die. But they’re delaying the job a week, long enough for Krem to be out of the woods, hopefully, and then leaving without him.

Poor Krem. He’s had a shittier couple of days than even you have.

Fortunately for you, Bull also doesn’t feel like pummeling you into the ground that morning. He does look at your eye a bit, and wave his hand around your face to “test your range of vision” or whatever. Your eye feels better than it did yesterday, but it still feels sort of... out of focus.

“I just hope it goes back to normal soon,” you say with a scowl, closing your eyes but resisting the urge to rub at them vigorously. “It’s starting to give me a headache.”

“It should. Just try not to over-strain them by, say, spending all day peering very closely at small writing,” Bull replies. You open your eyes just to roll them.

“Of course. Well, I’m sure they’ll have plenty of time to be rested from that sort of activity when I’m on the road for a bloody month.”
“If anything, you’ll want them sharper then,” Bull advises. “You’re going to be with the Inquisitor’s away team. Shit will go down, it’s just a matter of when.”

You groan. “That’s not what I want to hear, Bull.”

Bull scoffs. “I’m not going to lie to you about it--”

“You’re a hissrad, that literally means ‘liar’--”

“If we’re only our names, I think you, me, and Solas are in trouble.”

You sigh, then rub your eye. Bull pulls your hand away from it. “This is bullshit. I shouldn’t be going on this kind of a trip. I’ll either wind up dead or getting someone else hurt.”

“You’ll be fine once you get there. The Inquisitor will probably drop you off at Griffon Wing Keep and then run about doing the actual dangerous shit with actual dangerous people. You just gotta survive the trip. Keep your exercises up; don’t get lazy like you did on the trip to Val Royeaux.”

“Yes, mom.”

“Keep those daggers Sera gave you close. It’ll be too hot to wear the padded jacket for most of the trip; I’ve got my boys working on something there. Stay with the party; do not wander off to go traipsing through the woods.”

“That happened one time!”

“That happened so much more than one time.”

“How do you even know? Does Solas complain about me at the tavern on Tuesday nights?” you ask with a scowl, crossing your arms.

“Solas wasn’t the only one there,” Bull reminds you. Your scowl only deepens at the thought of the others talking about you... like Katari, who you had very pointedly been trying not to think about since you’d learned that you apparently hold a special place in his heart. Right between impalement and evisceration, probably. “So this time, stay close to him, and--”

“I’m actually going to be getting this lecture from him a few more times,” you say with a sigh. “So I’d prefer to skip it. I’ll be careful, Bull. I know how dangerous the Imperial Highway has gotten by now. Although hopefully, with a party of such obvious warriors, we’ll be left alone. I think we would have been on the way back, if not for the fact we were obviously moving goods.”

“Probably,” Bull agreed. “Those bandits must have been bold or desperate to take on a caravan with a Tal-Vashoth guard.”

“Two,” you add with a sigh. “Two Vashoth guards. At least, as far as they knew; I expected Sataareth to be a less effective guard than me after what he’d been through...”

“Now there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you about--”

“Dalish, Skinner! Hi!” you shout, a bit louder than necessary, waving at the two. They’re still really far away, but you’d noticed them and needed a distraction. The Iron Bull gives you a look that says quite plainly that you didn’t fool anyone with that, but Dalish breaks into a jog and Skinner, after a moment, picks up speed as well.

Their arms are both full, which makes them running a big of an amusing thing to watch. When they
finally get close enough for you to talk without shouting half of Skyhold awake, you speak up.

“What on earth are you two doing up this early? And what are you carrying?” you ask curiously.

“Been up for a while, getting all this together,” Dalish replies, then unceremoniously drops her entire load on the ground. “Phew! I wish we coulda had more notice than this. S’gonna be a pain to remember what belongs to who.”

You squat down to look at the pile. It appears to be a bunch of loose hunks of leather and metal... on closer examination, you realize it’s pieces of armor... or perhaps shreds of armor, since no two pieces appear to go together, and you wouldn’t begin to understand how to put any of it on. Or even where it was supposed to go on the body.

“You’re going to have to try a lot on,” Skinner informs you.

“I told you my guys were working on something.” Bull says with obvious pride.

“Can’t just send you off to the Approach in yer panties, can we?” Dalish says with a scoff. “We’re piecin’ you together some armor from what we got.”

“There’s bound to be enough to fit all your various parts in here,” Skinner adds. “Even if we didn’t have time to measure you properly and get it fitted.”

You blink in surprise. You’d just been planning on wearing the jacket for as long as you could, and then... Well, honestly, you hadn’t really thought about it. Armor had never figured into your plans before. Even when you’d been... ungainfully employed... in Orlais, armor hadn’t really been a factor.

“Will I be able to move in it?” you ask uncertainly. “Or even put it on by myself?”

“This is all light stuff,” Dalish explains. “We’re not gonna put a first-timer in plate. Besides, it’d be useless in that heat.”

“We picked things that were light and cool... but still might keep you safe. It’s nothing like full leather armor, but...” Skinner trails off.

“Every little bit helps,” suggests Dalish.

“And you won’t be there alone,” Bull reminds you. “If you’re having trouble with it, ask anyone.”

“Ah, yes,” you say dryly. “I’m sure Dorian will be an expert on the clasps of armor.”

“I’m pretty sure he’ll know how to take them off, at least,” Bull quips right back, which leaves you almost as surprised as the sudden arrival of armfuls of leather had. Last thing you’d heard, those two had been at it like cats and dogs... in part because of you purposefully antagonizing them to get both of them off your back. Hm. Had something happened with you noticing? You can probe Dorian for details later.

So that’s how you wind up spending the early morning being “fitted” for armor... which is actually just you holding mostly still while two elves and a Qunari manhandle you repeatedly. You just sort of ragdoll along with it after a while, cooperating as best you can as they bicker over whether or not you’ll even wear a harness if they give you one. What you wind up with is as much a hodgepodge as the Chargers themselves... a set of bracers, greaves, cuisses, and both a full harness—which is, you’re informed, what you call a leather breastplate with a back—and some fiddly bit that just goes over your shoulders. They’re all different colors. They appear to be made from entirely different kinds of leather, in fact.
But you actually pay attention to the rushed instructions on how to put them on. They’re right; the leather isn’t too heavy. You can practically ignore it when you’re wearing just the neck-and-shoulders bit--gorget, apparently--and not the full chest piece. And you like the idea of having something between you and any incoming arrows.

You wind up being dragged to the dining hall for breakfast. You suppose it’s fine now, since you’ve gotten your bandages taken off... You hadn’t really felt like making a spectacle of yourself there while injured. The elves were already angry enough, so you didn’t need to get them more riled up. It was more likely that you’d piss off the soldiers who ate there, or worse, that you’d be fussed over by people. Like you didn’t get enough of that already.

And you have to admit, it’s nice to sit with the Chargers one more time... possibly one last time, though that thought makes you scowl. You’ve been working on so many little pet projects in your spare time here... The Chargers, Solas, Celia... hell, even the elves and the farm. And now you’re being dragged away from all of that before you had a chance to really finalize things with any of them. And if you run, all that effort will be wasted.

Fucking Inquisitor.

You really would love to know the exact reasoning behind this nonsense. Was he onto you? Or had someone tipped him off? Leliana, or the Iron Bull, perhaps? Although Bull doesn’t seem too happy about you being dragged off either. That could easily be an act, however, or just that he didn’t expect the Inquisitor to react in this way. It’s not as though you can trust him; your entire “friendship” was always based on the fact Leliana wanted him to investigate you.

Not that a lack of trust is anything damning. You don’t trust any of the people you’re sitting and grinning with. You appreciate the fact they hobbled together armor for you... In fact, the nature of it makes you feel a bit warm inside, like you’re going to be wearing little pieces of each of the Chargers to keep you safe. But that doesn’t mean you trust them. Trust of that nature is an unattainable absolute.

People talk about levels of trust. For example, you now trust that Solas will not assault you, because he has had the opportunity multiple times in the past, and not done so. That’s a form of trust. But it’s not really trust. That’s a tentative conclusion based on repeated evidence. Real trust would be if you had gone into his bedroom confidently the first time. Real trust is blind. And, generally, can only be given once it kills you.

Dark thoughts to be thinking while smiling and laughing with the Chargers, but it’s where your mind is right now, particularly after your little “spat” with Solas. He wanted you to trust him, and you refused. Now both of you are hurting over it.

Thea approaches about halfway through breakfast. She looks a bit uncertain to sit down with the Chargers, but you wave her over, and no one questions your right to do so.

“It’s nice to see you in the mornings again,” she comments.

“Enjoy the sight,” you say with a sigh. “It’s the last one for a while.”

She tilts her head curiously to the side, as you’d known she would. Curiosity from Thea is one thing you can always count on. “What? Why?”

You wave your hand in an annoyed, careless fashion. “The Inquisitor is dragging me off on his next adventure.”
“What?!?” she exclaims. “But he leads warriors! You’re a linguist!”

Finally! Someone reacts properly to this situation! “Yes, I know, and no, I don’t know why he’s bringing me. He said something about the book I’m translating, but I don’t see why he needs me there for that...”

Thea shakes her head slowly. “I can’t comprehend it... but he has to have a reason... right?”

“Well, he has to have a reason,” you admit dryly. “I’m not sure I’d understand if even if he explained, though...” You sigh. “I can’t believe I have to leave Skyhold. I feel like I just got settled in again.”

“And you’ve been so busy!” Thea says with a pout. “I don’t think you’ve stopped moving for two weeks, except maybe the last few days... And that’s just because you got punched in the face a lot.”

You have to laugh at that.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean--”

“No, I like that,” you say with a chuckle. “Punched in the face a lot. But it does bother me... I probably won’t be here to see what happens to Underhill.”

“Are you leaving so soon? We all sort of assumed the Inquisitor would deal with the people in the cells before heading out again. He’s normally here for a few weeks between outings, at least.”

“Has there been any announcement for a trial today?”

“Not that I’ve heard, no.”

“Then he probably won’t be doing it before we leave.”

“You’re leaving tomorrow?!” Thea exclaims. A few eyes in the room turn to her, and both of you sort of duck as if you can dodge underneath the stares.

“I told you this would be my last meal here!” you hiss quietly.

“I thought you meant you’d just be busy!”

“I’m always busy!”

“Tomorrow! The Inquisitor is leaving out so soon? He’s never... He normally stays for at least a week or two, to take care of things here...”

You can’t really blame Thea for being more concerned about the Inquisitor than you. The implications of one’s leader rushing away can be pretty alarming. You’d be curious about his reasons even if he wasn’t dragging you off too.

“Well, the good news is that there’s apparently a fortress out there... So once we get there, I’ll be able to receive and send mail.”

“Oh? That is good! Who do you think will be writing you? Your Solas? Oooh, or is he coming with you again?”

You make a face. That didn’t take her long. “I think it’s more accurate to say we’re both going with the Inquisitor, rather than him going with me...”
“Oooh! Across Orlais with your lover again!” she teases. You just roll your eyes. “With him there, though, who are you hoping to get letters from?”

“Thank you for the implication that I have no other friends,” you say with a chuckle, and she looks minorly aghast.

“Oh, that’s not what I meant! I just... Well, who are you friends with, actually?”

“You. And a few of the kitchen girls I suppose. And these lugs of course,” you add, gesturing to the Chargers, who are all engaged in their own conversations, some of which involve the throwing of bread rolls or the slingshotting of gruel. It’s never boring, eating with the Chargers.

“Oh, me,” Thea says with a chuckle, though she seems a bit flattered. Which had been the point, of course. “Are you hoping I’ll send you letters?”

“It would be nice,” you say with a sigh, listlessly dragging your spoon through your gruel. “A bit of word from home... I’ll miss so much, being gone. No one in the Approach is going to know Skyhold gossip. What are they going to tell me? Which camels are in a love triangle?”

Thea laughs, then reaches out to pat your shoulder. “Oh, alright. I don’t want you forgetting about me out there, anyway. At this rate, you’ll be spending more time away from Skyhold than here. I’ll see about sending you some letters while you’re gone.”

“Thanks, Thea,” you say with a cheerful smile. “That makes me feel much better.”

--

When you finally get out of the mess and away from the Chargers, you begin to make your way towards the rotunda, almost without thinking about it. But once you do think about it, it makes sense to go there. You need to touch base with Solas, maybe talk to Leliana... And get as much work done on that tome as possible.

As you’re beginning to climb the stairs, however, you hear the smash of armored boots--Templar issue, sounds like--against stone, followed by angry shouting. Instinctively, you glance behind you and then jump off the side of the stairs and into the bushes, pressing yourself against the stone. You run from shouting Templars. That is the most basic survival skill there is in this world.

“Cassandra, I’m sorry, but-- Cassandra, will you wait...”

You hear the clang of boots thudding rapidly down the stairs, two sets. You risk a glance over the edge of the stairs and see Seeker Pentaghast’s boots hitting the last step. The Inquisitor’s hand reaches out and catches her arm. She spins and snaps it away from him.

“There is nothing more to talk about. You’ve made your position clear,” she says, the ice in her voice giving Solas’ chilly anger a run for it’s money.

“Yes, but I don’t want you to leave furious with me.”

“If you don’t want me to be cross, let me go! It’s ridiculous--”

“You need to rest Cassandra! I’m leaving Vivienne behind too, my entire team--”

“You’re leaving Vivienne behind because the mages are about to try hexing Cullen out of sheer frustration,” Cassandra snaps. “And you’re taking Blackwall and Cole!”
“Cole isn’t human,” the Inquisitor says with a scoff. “Taking him is like taking a sword. He doesn’t get tired; you know that.”

“Blackwall--”

“Blackwall is a Grey Warden. This is his duty. This involves him intimately; he wouldn’t stay behind even if I told him to.”

“Oh, but I will?” Seeker Pentaghast snaps. “You’re bringing half the Inner Circle, but I’m expected to sit here on my laurels while this madness unfolds?”

Why do you always wind up hiding nervously while Seeker Pentaghast fights with people? The Inquisitor isn’t Varric, however; there’s no power in the world that would make you step in to help him with a timely distraction. Also, there’s no unsuspicious way to emerge from bushes.

“We’ll be on the road for weeks. Wardens are used to that kind of thing, but--”

Man, even you could tell him that was the wrong angle to take here.

“Oh, and I’m not, am I? Is a Seeker too fragile for this dangerous journey?”

You and the Inquisitor flinch in unison, although you’re smiling a bit. It’s kind of funny to watch him getting dressed down by a furious Cassandra Pentaghast.

“That’s not what I meant-- I just don’t want you to get hurt!” the Inquisitor protests.

“You speak of a Grey Warden’s duty, but magic is being abused! I can practically smell it! This is as much my duty as anyone’s. And it should be my choice!”

“I’m the Inquisitor,” the Inquisitor protests, which amuses you to no end. He sounds almost petulant about it. “That was your idea. I’m supposed to give orders.”

Seeker Pentaghast makes a little frustrated grunt. She even stomps her foot a little bit. This is hilarious. You want her to say “yes, but not to ME” next.

Unfortunately, what she actually says is, “You’re right, but I think this is the wrong one. I should go. You may need a Seeker’s skill... and you’re even taking a civilian along!”

The Inquisitor shushes her, which you think takes either a lot of bravery or a lot of stupidity. “We don’t need to be shouting that in the middle of the courtyard, Cassandra.”

“And what will you do if she catches a sword in the stomach? If words got out, everything will just get worse,” she hisses, more quietly.

“I’m fairly certain Solas will be keeping an eye on her,” the Inquisitor says with a sigh. “I’m not worried--”

“That’s what worries me!”

“Fine!” he says, throwing his hands in the air. “You’re right. But I want you to spend the rest of the day resting, Cassandra. We’re riding hard starting tomorrow. I can’t be worried about anyone becoming fatigued.”

“I’ll be the least of your worries,” Cassandra says sourly.

You hear the clank of her boots pick up again, then fade. Then you hear a long sigh, combined with
a bit of a groan. “You be the leader, Eugene. We trust your judgement, Eugene. Andraste’s tits... I need a drink already, and it’s barely past dawn...” And then the sound of shoes up the stairs. You give it a few minutes before carefully emerging from the bushes.

Well.

That was interesting.

You head into the Great Hall, mind spinning with the implications. The Seeker will be coming, which is a nightmare, but for once it’s not the first thing on your mind. She seems more interested in keeping you safe than suspecting you, which is bizarre. Of course, this means she’ll get a prolonged eyeful of you being friendly with Cole. You’re not going to act distant to him for her benefit... You’ve already basically told her to shove her suspicion of him up her ass, so there would be no point.

And what was all that about Blackwall and a Grey Warden’s duty? Are fucking darkspawn involved in this? You’ve never actually seen one, and you’re pretty happy about that. That’s one of the few things in your life that has gone perfectly. You’ve never been to the Deep Roads, you’ve never seen a darkspawn... You were in Tevinter for the majority of the Fifth Blight, and by the time you got back to Ferelden, some six years later, they had pretty much cleaned up.

You can deal with a lot of things very well, but darkspawn? You’re no more Blight-resistant than the average person. You’ll get sick and die with the best of them, and no amount of trickery could save you from that. If darkspawn are going to be there, you really don’t want anything to do with it.

You chew thoughtfully on your bottom lip as you enter the rotunda. You’ll need time to absorb all of this, but for right now, Solas is in the rotunda, and looks up as you enter.

“Good morning, Emma. Did you sleep?” he inquires.

“A bit,” you lie. “When it became clear I wouldn’t get any more sleep, I packed.”

“That’s good, I--” he pauses, tilts his head slightly. “...What are you wearing?”

You glance down at yourself, then blink. “Oh. This. Yeah, the Chargers gave it to me. I guess I should probably take it off, but I’d have to go back to my room to pack it... Does it look stupid?”

“Not particularly. I’m simply unaccustomed to the sight of you in armor. That was good of them. I am glad Bull and his Chargers are thinking in your best interests.”

“Yeah, me too. It’s probably stupid, but I do feel a bit better wearing it.” You chuckle, shaking your head. “Anyway. Have you had the chance to talk to anyone about my unexpected inclusion?”

“I’ve spoken to the Spymaster--who had remarkably little to say--but not to Seeker Pentaghast. I haven’t been able to pin her down yet... when I asked earlier, she was in the War Room with the Inquisitor.”

“Oh, I just passed her, actually, on the way in.”

“Ah!” Solas stands from his desk quickly. “Perhaps if I hurry, I can catch her before someone else does. Thank you, Emma.”

He breezes past you before you can even voice your question about what he learned from Leliana. Well, not much, from the sounds of it. You tilt your head back, staring up the tower, and listen to the echoing caw of a crow from above.
To the Void with it... You’re talking to her yourself.

You head up the steps quickly, in a half jog, just so that you don’t lose your nerve. You’ve been avoiding Leliana since you came back and she announced—out of nowhere—that you’d enter her employ... and then began not-so-subtly shoving you into “secret agent school.” You’re both Orlesian and neither of you are stupid. You know what it looks like when someone’s trying to nab someone promising to shape them into a little apprentice bard. It was done to you, it was done by you, and you’re doing it to this day. So you don’t really appreciate someone trying to do it to you again. It’s like someone trying to put you through initiation again after you’ve been in the club for four years.

There’s no avoiding it now, though. You need answers.

She’s up there, sitting at the desk where you often see her. There’s an agent speaking to her, but she waves him away when she sees you coming. You appreciate it; you’re not in a waiting mood. It probably shows on your face.

“I expected you’d be up to see me, after the tongue lashing Solas just gave me,” she says with a half-smile on her lips.

You’re a bit surprised. A tongue-lashing? From Solas? He hadn’t even seen that emotional about it with you. She must read the surprise on your face.

“He’s a very calm man. Any emoting at all from him feels like shouting,” she explains, lacing her hands together on the desk. “I’m assuming you’re here for the same reason?”

“Why am I being dragged to the Western Approach?” you demand, the firmness in your voice surprising even you. You seem to be too tired to be properly intimidated. “I’m a linguist, not a soldier. I joined the Inquisition to escape the chaos in Orlais, not to be repeatedly sent through it with four guards and a prayer!”

“It was the Inquisitor’s decision,” she says, as if that were both an explanation and a complete statement. You wait a few moments for her to elucidate. She does not.

“That does not even begin to answer my question,” you say flatly.

“Most people take an evasion as an answer in and of itself,” she replies.

“Well, that’s well and good for most people,” you snap, in no mood for Orlesian shenanigans. “But seeing as how this person has a very real chance of dying, and is ahireling, not a slave, she would appreciate an actual answer.”

“Our soldiers are hired, not slaves, as well, but they may still be called on to risk their lives in a war.” She sighs. “But you’re not a soldier... and you’re not wrong. Unfortunately, I doubt I can tell you more than what the Inquisitor has. Or at least, what I rather hope he has. He wishes you to come along to speak to the draconologist there directly.”

“Why not just bring the man here?” you demand. “It would be much safer for everyone involved.”

“Because he’s not actually a member of the Inquisition... the Inquisitor can’t just summon him. Besides, he’s glued to his outpost there, chasing after a high dragon in the area. When the Inquisitor first met him, he was all but surrounded by Venatori, with his entire team dead... and still determined to stay there.”

You rub your face. “Where we’re going has... Venatori. And a high dragon.”
“The high dragon hasn’t actually been spotted by any of our men.”

“Oh, well, in that case, it’ll be like a vacation! Why does the Inquisitor need me to talk to a draconologist?!”

“There hasn’t been a high dragon sighted there... and that’s almost an oddity, because so far there have been reports of high dragons at the Storm Coast, near Redcliffe, all across Orlais... and the Inquisitor apparently saw one himself while he was in Crestwood. The Inquisition is in need of an actual dragon expert somewhat desperately, and Professor Frederic is one of the best in a very small field... particularly outside of Tevinter. In fact, even Magisters hold him in high regard.”

“Wait... the draconologist the Inquisitor has his eyes on is Professor Frederic of Serrault?” you exclaim, immediately distracted.

“Yes. You know him?”

“I know of him. I’ve never been overly involved in the field before now, but at least half of the books I bought in Orlais are his, and the rest cite his works at least once. Of course, I got my research material at the University of Orlais, where he studied and taught, but still...” You pause, then shake your head. “Ugh, that doesn’t matter right now. I still don’t understand why I’m needed for this. He’s the draconologist, not me.”

“Because without him in the Inquisition, you’re actually the closest thing to a dragon expert we have,” Leliana says, leaning back with a sigh.

“...I’ve been studying them for a month.”

“Yes,” she says, looking pained.

You close your eyes for a moment and take a deep, strained breath.

“As much as we try not to appear as such, the Inquisition is something of a...”

“Ragtag bunch of would-be heroes and refugees that only formed six months ago?” you suggest.

“...Yes. That.” She sighs again. “You and Dorian are the two here most knowledgeable about dragons, and Dorian is only that because of the basic knowledge he picked up being an altus. You’re the only who has actually studied. You’re being sent along for the same reason the tome is... bribery. Temptation. To make the Inquisition look worthwhile.”

You stiffen immediately. “So I’m one of a few items being sent along to seduce him into joining?” you say icily. Leliana takes your meaning immediately.

“You’re being sent to speak to him. We hope that he’ll find your knowledge and curiosity desirable traits that speak well of the Inquisition. Nothing else,” she says firmly. You nod. It’s good to be clear in these things when words like “bribery” and “temptation” are involved. You haven’t done those sorts of jobs in a very long time, and you’ve absolutely no intention to start back up again.

Leliana smiles wanly. “Fear not, Emma; the Inquisition hasn’t stooped to prostitution just yet. Besides... can you imagine what the Commander would do if he heard we were plotting something like that? He’d probably challenge the Inquisitor to a duel at dawn.” Her brief smile fades, and she sighs. “I can tell you’re not pleased with this, and to be honest, I don’t blame you. While we hardly specified what would be needed of you when you signed on, this can’t be what you expected. But this sort of danger will be reflected in your pay, which will be doubled for the entirety of the journey and your time in the Approach.”
You perk up despite yourself. *Doubled?* You’re already getting a very considerable chunk of money. Doubling it would push it out of “silvers” and into “sovereigns.” The things you could do with that much money... and you’d barely even be working, just traveling. It would be dangerous, yes, but not *difficult*.

“And, of course, since you’ll be gone for so long, your first paycheck will be in advance. The rest you can collect in full when you return.”

--

You leave Leliana’s perch with a small pile of gold coins and a dazed expression. It’s not an impossible amount of money, but it’s certainly more than you’ve made translating... ever. Bribery so that you’ll consent to be used as bribery... ironic. But you can’t say much, since that much gold in your pocket has gone as far towards convincing you as anything Cole said.

Chapter End Notes

*For those of you who tl;dr'd out hard on that lengthy opening note, here are the highlights:*

[*] The next chapter will probably be the last one before hiatus.
[*] There's a [contest going on](#), you should check it out because it's the last day.
[*] I'm going to be in the Keeping Secrets chatroom from 4PM EST til... sometime when I get bored and wander off, with intermittent breaks for food. For information on the chatroom and how to get in (no sign up required, no e-mail address, no password!), please check my [Tumblr here](#).
[*] Follow me on social media! Links to everything can be found [here](#).
[*] Patreon will be updating with the outline process thru my hiatus; it's a great time to sign up.
[*] There will be an announcement on my Tumblr on Thanksgiving.
[*] Thanks for reading!
Hold Me Here

Chapter Notes

Buckle in guys, this one's long.

The hover over translations will be there tomorrow. I just don't have the energy to code them properly right this second.

Elven guide
vhass'durgen = coal (lit: fire stone)
da'elgar = little spirit
ma eth = you are safe
ar tu mala dareth = I will keep you safe
ma las eth = keep me safe
Ma desen melar = hold me here/hold me in place

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The coin sits heavy in your pocket, but it’s a comforting reminder. That much coin will make running so much safer... and if nothing goes wrong, you can come back to an even bigger pile at the end.

Thinking about it objectively... You’ve traveled across dangerous terrain alone before. The biggest risk isn’t surviving, it’s surviving undiscovered... as you well know. You’ll have to give a lot of thought to how much of your abilities you can safely show. Will Solas say something, if you suddenly become less competent than he knows you are? Perhaps you should speak to him. If you explain that you don’t wish for your checkered past as a bard to get out, will he understand and keep silent?

Of course, there might come a situation, like the bandits in Orlais, where you have to show some skill in order to survive. But if things get too dicey, you can always use the cover of a chaotic battle to flee. Come to think of it, won’t Revas be with you? He would make it very hard to blend in, but very easy to cover long distances...

You should look at a map. Have a plan for every inch of the journey. Better to have a plan and not need it, right? In fact, you swing by the library on your way back to the rotunda and get a modern atlas. You don’t know exactly what route you’ll be taking, but you’re willing to bet you can hazard a guess. After all, if speed is of the essence, it just makes sense to travel the Imperial Highway.

Solas isn’t in the rotunda when you return, so you drop the large book of maps onto your desk and take a while to peruse it. You’re not quite sure where in the Western Approach you’re going. There’s not... really a lot out there. It’s a giant blighted desert, not a tourist destination. So while you’re confident you’ll be on the Imperial Highway til at least Verchiel, after that is anyone’s guess. Perhaps you’ll break west through the Heartlands. Perhaps you’ll stay on the highway. Perhaps you’ll ferry across Lake Celestine for some godforsaken reason; probably because boats are terrible and life hates you.

But still, you make a few vague plans based on where your resources are, for various legs of the journey. You have a few old caches, but you doubt you’ll need them, with as much coin as Leliana
just handed you. You tap thoughtfully on your desk, feeling more comfortable with every escape plan you form. By the time Solas returns to the rotunda, you’ve got a dozen of them and are beginning to form a better sense of security surrounding the whole thing.

“How did it go?” you ask Solas as he enters, closing the atlas and crumpling up your vague, scribbled notes. “You were gone for quite a while. Were you speaking to the Seeker the entire time?”

“Ha. Hardly,” he replies. He sinks into his chair with a sigh, and rubs a hand down his face. “I spoke to the Inquisitor as well.”

“Oh. That must have been... ...fun.”

Solas gives you a particularly potent glare over his hand. It occurs to you that he’s just talked to someone he truly seems to despise, because of you.

Ah. Guilt. Your old friend.

“It was neither fun nor particularly enlightening, though I did learn there is to be a briefing this evening. Whether or not you will be invited, I do not know, though I certainly hope so. It would be even more dangerous to bring you and leave you in the dark about what we may face.”

“I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see. Did Leliana tell you much?”

Solas hums thoughtfully. “Yes and no. I cannot quite decide if she told me less than it seemed or more than she thought.”

“I often feel that way with her,” you say with a sigh, shifting the atlas off of your desk and onto the floor. Might as well get some work done on the tome now. “I went up for information myself, and came out with more coin than I’ve ever been handed at one time. Tell me, do you get increased pay when out on a mission?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Solas replies. “I don’t pay much attention to the ‘wages’ I accrue. I’ve little need for them.”

“Feel free to forward them to me,” you say dryly. “I wouldn’t want the burdens of coin to weigh you down.”

“So thoughtful,” he says, a smirk playing on his lips. “Tell me, have you eaten?”

“Breakfast? Yes. I took it in the dining hall with the Chargers and Thea.”

“It’s nearly lunchtime now.”

“Is it?” you ask, glancing at the long candle you use to tell time... which you never lit this morning.

“Yes. Are you getting hungry?”

You’re not, of course. You rarely get hungry... or perhaps it’s more honest to say you’re always hungry? You know the deep, painful, gnawing sensation of hunger very well, and you feel it rarely since coming to Skyhold. And when you do, it’s your own fault, because you’d just forgotten to eat or been too busy. But you always feel like you could eat something. If that’s hunger, then you’re always hungry.

But that’s over thinking the question, which is, you’re certain, largely rhetorical. Solas isn’t actually asking if you’re hungry; he’s delicately requesting for you to bring him food. Might as well have
lunch before hunkering down to get some work done on the tome. And with Solas here, you can even get a wrist enchantment now that your healing is over and done with!

--

You share a knowing glance with Celia in the kitchens, but neglect to mention your impending departure to the kitchen staff at large. You’re not sure of the secrecy surrounding the mission in general, but more importantly... you don’t want them to fuss. Last time, they’d sent you off with half the pantry, or so it felt.

They fuss anyway, though... but it’s about your face. You’re already getting accustomed to being able to see out of both eyes again, and your vision is all but back to normal... or perhaps you’ve just adapted to it. They fuss and whine, however, swarming about you and asking how you are, can you see out of it, are you still taking medicine. Blah, blah, blah. Exhausting.

You humor them as best you can, but you have a short fuse today. Everything has you on edge. So you make your excuses as quickly as possible and head back up to Solas. Even eating with him at his desk doesn’t put you in much of a better mood... You can’t help but sulk over the situation you’ve found yourself in. You’re like the frog in a pot of water, except you’re totally noticing it getting hot and just deciding not to jump out because there’s a really sexy carrot in the pot and hey, maybe you’ll like the heat...

Ugh.

You and Solas compare notes, so to speak. He hadn’t gotten much more out of Leliana than you had, which makes sense... she had to know the two of you would share with each other. She’d emphasized your competency to him, however, which was interesting. Solas knew your competency far better than she did... hopefully. But she didn’t know that.

Ugh. Orlesians just drag everyone around them into the Game, whether they wanted to or not. It was like a Sloth demon’s aura. Just being nearby was dangerous.

He’d found out some things from Seeker Pentaghast, as well. She hadn’t known about the bathhouse, but would be in little position to do something about it immediately, as she was leaving as well. You’d already known that thanks to your little eavesdropping session, so it’s not difficult to keep your face neutral. She had been against taking you, which you’d also pretty much figured out. She thought it was too dangerous for a linguist and that there were better ways to deal with the situation. That provided a bit more insight into the fight you witnessed between her and the Inquisitor, however, if they even bickered over decisions that didn’t involve her at all.

“So that’s... what? Seeker Pentaghast, Warden Blackwall, Cole, yourself...” you murmur, but apparently not quietly enough.

“And I as well!” Dorian announces cheerfully from upstairs.

“Eavesdropping, Dorian?” you ask sourly.

“It’s only eavesdropping if I was trying. I overheard.”

“Pentaghast, Backwall, Solas, Cole, Dorian, the Inquisitor... is that a bit large for an away team? I don’t know what he normally takes,” you muse.

“It’s a bit large,” Dorian agrees, apparently deciding he’s part of this conversation. “Perhaps he expects something?”
“Or perhaps he intends for the team to be there awhile. Our last venture to the Approach was cut very short by chaos here at Skyhold. Perhaps he intends to stay longer while things are more stable?” Solas suggests. You shudder at the thought.

“Well, there is to be a meeting this evening, I believe. I’m sure he’ll tell us everything then; no need to strain ourselves wondering,” Dorian says.

“I never asked you to strain yourself, your highness,” you say up at him with a scowl. “You just inserted yourself into the conversation.”

Dorian lets out a little fake hurt gasp. “Goodness! Well, very well then. See if I help you apply sunscreen to that pale skin of yours.”

You make a gagging noise. “Don’t even joke about that. I’ll be fine. I don’t burn that easily. In any case, I loathe being kept in the dark about things that concern me. I don’t even know if I’ll be invited to this meeting; it may be Inner Circle only.”

“You loathe to be kept in the dark about anything, whether it involves you or not,” Solas points out mildly.

“Oh, you can shut up too,” you say with a scowl, because he’s certainly not wrong.

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You return the dishes to the kitchen, fully intending to head straight back to the rotunda and buckle down to get some real work done. You don’t really want to try bookbinding in a tent, let alone scribing. Ridiculous working conditions, really...

Unfortunately, Sera snags you on the way back from returning dishes. Well, you say unfortunately, but it’s hard to feel unfortunate with her hand in yours, leading your into the courtyard. You should be working, but if anyone can distract you, it’s her.

“I heard you’re going out on the new run!” she says, and the cheerfulness in her voice gives her away.

“And you are too?” you hazard.

“Yep! S’gonna be great! S’bout time it’s my turn, too; Solas got to run around friggin’ Val Royeaux with you already!”

“You know he’s coming too, right?”

She scoffs. “Don’t matter! S’not like you have to hang out with him! Besides, Cole’s comin’, I’m sure they’ll be busy being all weird and freaky together.”


“So that makes the away party, what... eight people? Isn’t that a lot?” you ask.

“Hmm... yeah, maybe, but considerin’ how far we’re goin’, no surprise here. Proly he wants to rush there fast as he can, settle into that nice fortress we got set up last time, an’ then send us all of on missions from there. S’not like he’s plannin’ on havin’ you along in a squad meant to deal with darkspawn or whatever.”

“I certainly hope not,” you mutter.
“Ah, don’t worry!” she says cheerfully. “I’ll keep ya safe! S’gonna be a blast! And you’ll like the fortress there alright. Quizzie loves settin’ up fortresses. Heard they just got one started in Crestwood, too!”

“I’ve finally figured it out,” you say dryly. “This is my punishment for complaining about being in a freezing fortress in the middle of the mountains... transport to a burning fortress in the middle of the desert.”

“Could be! Least you’ll get a tan!” Sera says happily.

“Yes, by the end of the trip I’ll be a regular Dorian,” you say dryly. Sera is the other side of the coin from Thea, it seems... all blind optimism and not really thinking about how bizarre the situation is. “What a mixed group. I don’t think I’ve ever even seen Solas and Warden Blackwall talk. How does everyone get along?”

Sera snorts. “Can’t tell you shit ‘bout Solas. I try to pretend he’s not there. He ‘n’ Cole’ll pro’ly stick by themselves talkin’ weird. You, me, ‘n’ Blackwall, though... It’ll be grand, Em, trust me!”

“Warden Blackwall?” You think that you and he have come to an understanding, but he isn’t exactly your biggest fan.

“Yeah! You’ll get along great; he’s a riot.”

You can’t help it. “Warden Blackwall?” you repeat, this time with added incredulity.

“It’s never really a struggle for you to be in the stables. The smell has become a bit dear to you, unexpectedly. You’d never really spent any time at all around horses, but in the short time you’ve been at Skyhold, you’ve grown accustomed to the smell, come to associate it with Revas and Belassan.

Sure enough, there’s Blackwall. Also Belassan. Also Sataareth. Also Fenris. Also the Inquisitor.

You stop dead. “Ah... they look busy,” you protest when Sera walks boldly towards them. “I don’t want to interrupt them. It’s probably important.”

Sera rolls her eyes. “You’re gonna be traveling with the Quizzie, Em, so you might as well stop bein’ nervous ‘round him. He’s a weenie, anyway.”

One day. One day, you’re going to explain power differentials in a way that Sera can understand.

“It’s a lot of horses, your holiness,” Belassan is saying. It’s weird, hearing something like ‘your holiness’ said with a Dalish accent. “Between the two groups, it would be over two-thirds of the stables.”

“That’s fine. Once we get where we’re going, we can send half of them back,” the Inquisitor is saying. You try to hang back, but Sera grabs your arm and all but drags you closer. He doesn’t even seem to notice you approaching until Belassan, Fenris, and Sataareth all look towards you at the same time. Then, he spares a glance. “Ah, Sera.”

“M’gettin’ the lady, right?” she asks.

The Inquisitor shrugs. “I don’t see why not.” He turns back to Belassan; you’re rather pleased he’s ignoring you. “Just have Dennet gather eighteen... no, that’s right, Cole doesn’t ride... sixteen
“horses.”

“Ah... Well...” Belassan hesitates.

“Is there a problem?”

“I may have... heard incorrectly, your holiness, but I’ve heard tell that Emma will be accompanying your group?”

Suddenly, all eyes are on you, and you want to throw a horse patty at Belassan. Fortunately, the Inquisitor’s eyes only glance over you, while you stand like a steel rod.

“The linguist,” the Inquisitor clarifies, as if you’re not standing just there. “Yes, she is. Why?”

“Unless she’s been taking lessons behind my back, your holiness, she’s incapable of riding horses.”

The Inquisitor blinks, glancing over at you again, a confused look on his face. “What, did you walk to Val Royeaux and back?”

“Er... No, your holiness. I rode Revas... Um, a hart,” you stammer.

“Surely there’s no real difference,” the Inquisitor points out.

“I’m afraid there is. The girth and the gaits are completely different. And... if you’ll pardon me saying so, as I know a seamless group is your holiness’ preference... but including the harts in the group would help cut down the strain on the stables.”

The Inquisitor makes a face. “Even if we use all of them, we can’t all ride harts. And they’re damn picky. What am I supposed to do, stick the elves on them? How would that look?”

“Don’t even think about it, neither,” Sera says icily, glaring at Belassan. “Yer not gettin’ me on one of those stupid things for anything.”

“I’m certain I could find a mixture which satisfies all parties, your holiness,” Belassan replies.

“The harts were a complete hassle the last time we took them out. We’re in a rush; we don’t have time for dealing with uppity mounts,” the Inquisitor says with a scoff.

“Emma and Solas are both fair hands with them, your holiness. Emma in particular.”

“I don’t particularly want to just stick the two of them on harts,” the Inquisitor says with a sigh, glancing back over to you. “But I can’t have you slowing us down, either. How good are you with the harts?”

“Er... Well, I didn’t have any t-trouble with Revas and Ashi’lana on the journey b-before. They’ve never g-given me any grief,” you stammer, cursing your nervous tick to the heavens. Every time you think you’ve gotten a handle on it, something spooks you and back it comes. But you don’t want to try to have to learn to ride a horse while racing across Orlais.

He turns back to Belassan. “Alright. Four harts, twelve horses. Emma can be in charge of the mounts; it’s not as if she’s going to be doing much of anything else.” Wait what. “And get a pony, two draft horses, and... something for Fenris, I don’t really care what. Fenris, you can pick one of the remaining mounts yourself, if you want.”

“Thank you, Inquisitor. I’ll have a look at them,” Fenris replies, eyes flickering back to you after he’s done speaking to the Inquisitor.
“Alright. Am I done? Dennet’s never fucked up the horse selection yet, so I think I’m done,” the Inquisitor says with the sigh of a very put-upon man.

“It will be taken care of from here, thank you, your holiness,” Belassan says politely.

“Good. Fenris, thank you again for helping us with this. If you need to see me before you leave, I’ll be... Well, around. I don’t think I’ll be sitting still any time soon.”

You try not to breath an audible sigh of relief when the Inquisitor leaves. The atmosphere in general becomes a bit more relaxed. Sera beelines for Blackwall, but you take a moment for Sataareth and Fenris, first.

“Good to see you intact,” Fenris says, giving a nod towards your now-unbandaged head. You run a hand over that side of your face automatically. Still a little tender.

“Thank you. I’m glad the two of you are traveling together,” you say. “Please, Fenris, keep him intact.”

“I’m traveling with two Tal-Vashoth, and it’s me you want to be the guardian of the group?” Fenris asks mildly.

“You can put your hands through people’s chests,” you reply blandly.

“I could try,” Saatareth volunteers, and you can’t help but chuckle a bit.

“Are you leaving tomorrow as well, then?” you ask.

“We are, yes,” Fenris says with a nod. “I suspect we’ll be back far sooner than you will, however. The Inquisitor is taking you along?”

You let out a little groan. “Yes. Yes, he is, and no, I’m not entirely sure as to why.”

“I’m glad your--” Sataareth pauses a bit, catching himself. “…friend Solas, is going with you.” You give him a bit of a stink eye... You know damn well he’d been about to say “your saarebas.” You had just been over this! You hear Sera make a gagging noise from behind you.

“You won’t be making that face the first time you get stabbed and he has to fix you up,” Warden Blackwall quips.

“Won’t be a problem if I don’t get stabbed this time!” Sera scoffs. “Sides, Dorian is coming.”

“Dorian can’t heal worth a lick, unless you just want him to wait until after you die and use the corpse for something,” Blackwall says dryly.

Sera shudders. “Don’t even joke about that.”

“Dorian?” Fenris asks. “I’ve heard that name several times, but I don’t believe I’ve met him.”

“Yeah,” Sera says. “He’s a--”

“--Nother mage in the Inner Circle,” you interrupt loudly. “He and Madame de Fer.”

“I haven’t gotten a chance to meet her, either. A shame,” Fenris says. “Ah, well. Sataareth, we should find Katari before it gets any later. Emma... good luck. I hear Varric and Hawke will be meeting you out there.”
“I’m surprised you’re not coming along for a reunion,” you say with a snort.

“No,” Fenris says with a sigh. “Hawke and I do best with a few countries between us. But stick close to them. Hawke’s been known to do some rather stupid things to protect pretty elven women, so at least you’ll be safe.”

You think you’d rather just be stabbed, but you simply nod, and the two of them leave.

At least Saatareth is in good hands. Between Korbin, Katari, and Fenris, you can’t imagine he’ll be in much danger.

Belassan, who had wandered off a bit earlier, comes back now, just as Sera is beginning to try and get you to engage with Blackwall. “Emma, I’ll need to show you the mounts,” he begins.

“Erm, when he said ‘in charge of,’” you say, nervously.

“I hope you’re comfortable with horses,” he replies, offering up a bit of a half-smile.

“I wouldn’t know,” you say, with a long sigh. “I’ve never interacted with one before.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything. And you’re naturally good with every animal I’ve seen you near, even Asaaranda. I’m sure it translates. Come on.”

You hear a frustrated noise from Sera.

“It’s okay, Sera, you’ll have the whole trip with me,” you say, hoping to comfort her. “If I’m going to be in charge of the horses, of all things, I need any tips Belassan can give me.”

“Oh, fine,” she says with a long sigh. “S’not as if I won’t have you the whole time, true.” She flicks her hands the two of you. “Shoo, then.”

"There will be ten horses and four harts," Belassan explains as he begins to lead you further into the stables. "You will ride at a constant canter throughout the day--effortless for horse or hart to maintain when not carrying anything, but a speed that would exhaust them if they had to do it all day with a rider. Therefore, you will each have two mounts. You will stick strictly to the harts."

"You're already familiar with Revas and Ashi'lana. Here is your other mount. He doesn't have a name, but I selected him for you based on his easy temperament and remarkable ability to put up with Revas."

The hart in question is one you've seen a few times now, but never spent any particular time with, mostly due to your own shyness and Revas' particular brand of possessiveness. Even now, he's eyeing you pointedly.

The beastie in question is both taller and broader than Revas, but looks at you with a calm, placid expression. The mane covering his nose and chest is a deep chestnut brown. The fur covering the rest of him is a paler, softer brown without Revas' deep red undertones, save for his legs, which are stockinged a deep brown that's almost black. It's not black, however, and you can tell that quite easily because his gigantic antlers are. It's as if they're made of charcoal.

"Vhas'durgen," you murmur to yourself. You hear Belassan chuckle, but you're distracted. You reach out gently towards the hart; he leans towards your hand, gives it a curious sniff, then whuffs out hot air onto your palm before butting his soft nose against your hand.

"He's a gentle spirit; he'll treat you well and be able to put up with Revas' nonsense. He'll be your"
second primary mount. Now, this is the final hart that will be accompanying you."

You part with the hart that will now and forever be Vhas'durgen to you, with reluctance. The next hart is a solid, smokey grey from hoof to horn, save a paler splotch on his back legs, and the customary darker stripes from his rump around his hips.

"This will be Cassandra's secondary mount."

You blink in shock. "What? Seeker Pentaghast?"

"Yes, the two are quite fond of each other," Belassan says with a nod. "Not quite so much as you and Revas mind," he adds, nodding to the increasingly unhappy hart down the stalls. "But when I floated the idea that perhaps there should be harts coming along, she requested him specifically. She rarely gets a chance to ride him out due to the Inquisitor's preference for matching mounts."

You eye the hart curiously, wondering what in the world it sees in Seeker Pentaghast. It eyes you back, looking unimpressed with you as a whole.

"Does he have a name?"

"I believe Cassandra calls him Derreck."

You snort so hard that it physically hurts, and nearly have to bend over, clutching at your mouth and nose as barely-quelled laughter makes your whole body shake.

Derreck is the name of one of the male love interests in Swords and Shields.

Maker bless.

You manage to compose yourself, with great difficulty. Belassan is looking at you, amused. "I take it the name means something to you?"

"To tell you would be as good as committing suicide," you reply, then a giggle bursts from you before you can stifle it. "Maker. Alright... D... Derreck."

Derreck eyes you sourly. It's not his fault, the poor boy, but you're going to have trouble taking him seriously.

--

There are ten horses, which is... a lot. More horses than you've ever dealt with in your life, and you'll apparently be in charge of them. You make mental note of each horse's name, appearance, and the short description of their temperament that Belassan gives to you. There's Stormcloak, the almost mind-numbingly gorgeous huge black horse you'd seen Blackwall riding once before. You don't consider yourself a horse woman, but you could see yourself falling in love with a horse like that; he makes you want to learn how to ride them. He's apparently spirited, and can be a lot to handle if he decides he dislikes you, just due to his sheer size.

You're really glad Iron Bull isn't coming... the massive draft horses that carry Qunari are the only things larger in the stables.

Second place for most attractive horse, in your eyes, goes to Magnus, a dappled grey horse with a mane that seems to shift from dark grey to light depending on how the light hits it. You actually recognize his breed, though it's only because the other horses look different that you realize it's a cohesive breed. He's the sort of horse you saw in Tevinter often, slim yet muscular with long, thin
faces. There's a brown one of the same breed, named Azrael. Both are explained to you as vain, though Magnus is apparently infinitely moreso. They're picky, but faster and sturdier than they look with their long, thin legs.

Daine stands out to you because she's similar to Stormcloak in build, though smaller. She's apparently an Anderfel Courser, favored by Grey Wardens everywhere. She's got a sweet and even temper so long as she's unprovoked, and she tends to take charge and bully the other horses into behaving. Belassan suggests she'll be your greatest horse ally; you're inclined to believe it. You would never tell Magnus or Azrael, but you think you prefer that sort of stocky horse. She strikes you as more beautiful, in her own way.

Oddly plain, sort of, are "Spirit Dancer"--whose beautiful name you immediately want to translate to Elven--and Cinder. The former is a very average looking horse... that is to say, it's similar to what comes to mind when you, personally, are called upon imagine a horse. You don't actually know how average it is. It's a pale color, which you can identify as "palomino" only due to the obsession a friend of yours--the baker Sonia from Orlais--had with horses of that particular color. She is, unsurprisingly, spirited, but a cheerful and happy-go-lucky sort of horse. You didn't know horses could be happy-go-lucky, but you're going to believe anything Belassan tells you at this point.

The latter, Cinder, you're shocked to learn is Solas' secondary mount. When you'd heard there would be four harts, you'd just assumed they'd be for you and Solas, but no. It's such a normal sort of horse, too, a weird brownish color you can't quite place, speckled all over with mists of white as if she had rolled in the snow outdoors. Unsurprisingly, Solas has picked a mount who's calm but intelligent and has no patience for inexperienced riders. Hopefully Solas will help the two of you get along, or so Belassan hopes. You're not sure Solas is a good intermediary for any two people, let alone a person and a horse.

Then there's the tiniest of them all, a brown and white paint horse that's too large to be a pony, technically, but still somehow makes you think firmly of ponies. She's chipper and bright and, according to Belassan, extremely mischievous. You don't even have to ask who rides her; you can just tell. She's introduced to you as Zephyr, which is a pretty sort of name.

The last two are saved for last, in your mind, only because they're arguably the most important... the Inquisitor's favorite two mounts. A bizarre paint horse that's palomino and white--if that's possible, is palomino just that light cream color or does it mean something else?--named Jarek, and a glorious white stallion named Snowblind. You're not looking forward to keeping that white pelt white.

Fourteen mounts is more giant animal than you've ever really considered, let alone been responsible for. Why in the Maker’s name would the Inquisitor put you in charge of them? He’s the one who insisted you come along, and now he’s treating you like a useless tagalong! Ugh! Your frustration is probably palpable in the air around you by this point.

Sera has apparently decided not to just hang around the barn waiting for you to finish... You’re a bit relieved to find her gone, to be honest. It’s almost as difficult to say no to her as it is to say no to Solas, and she makes far more inconvenient demands than he does. Or... at least demands that are more difficult to lie about. Imagine if Solas went around demanding that you hang out together even when you’re busy, or run around getting into trouble with him. ... Ah. Now you’re distracted imagining that. Good job.

You do get back to the rotunda, however. You know it’s not unreasonable for you to be too busy to work, with all that’s going on, but you still want to get as much finished as you can. It’s going to be hard to work on that stupid book while careening across Orlais and caring for fourteen-odd mounts. For fuck’s sake! It’s like the Inquisitor doesn’t even care if you finish the damn thing! He could have
taken Belassan if he wanted someone who could care for mounts! Ugh!

All obviously suspicious behavior from the Inquisitor aside, you really do have to focus on your work. And you do... You get Solas to enchant your wrist for what feels like the first time in forever, and you immediately bury yourself in scribing. You hope your handwriting isn’t getting too sloppy from the rushing... You rely on the enchantment and on hawk-like focus to keep it from getting too bad. You even shout at Dorian to shut the fuck up... in Tevene... without even really noticing you’re doing it... when he starts bickering with Solas from over the library balcony. You suspect it only worked because you startled him.

Dinner comes far too soon. You’re in a flurry of work. In retrospect, there’s a good chance Solas said something or tried to get your attention, but you don’t actually look up until an interesting smell hits your nose. Only then do you pause in your work and glance around.

At some point, Solas has had food brought in. You really hope he didn’t go and get it himself, though he might have. You don’t really know what’s been going on around you for the last--you glance at your candle--five hours or so.

“Please, tell me what finally drew your attention,” Solas quips. “So that I can use it again in the future.”

You flush slightly. “I, uh... smelled something.”

“The food,” Solas says, looking amused. “Perhaps I should keep fresh meat pies around for when I need your attention quickly?”

“I mean, it would probably work,” you say with a sigh. “I grew up in Denerim, remember? You smell a fresh meat pie, you zero in on that pretty fast. I must have stolen dozens off of window sills when I was a kid. I was a damned menace to chefs across the city.”

Solas snorts. “I can imagine that easily. Come be a menace to this tourtière, then. Now that you’ve finally been distracted from your work, you should take a break and eat.”

You give your tome a final, longing look, but there’s really no competition. Your mother used to make a damn delicious tourtière around Satinalia. It seems like such a staple of your childhood that it pains you to think that you only had a handful of Satinalia tourtières with her in your life.

You doubt this one’s for any particular holiday, of course. They probably just killed an elk outside the gates, or something, and had a sudden surplus of meat that needed to be used quickly. It would be time consuming to roast it all, drying or making it into a soup would be a damn waste of delicious meat, so... meat pie. It made sense, even to an Orlesian cook like Gaston.

You hadn’t realized how stiff you were until you stood, or how hungry you were until you smelled that food. You’re a bit displeased with yourself. You used to be able to work a lot longer on a lot less. Are you getting old already? Spoiled, perhaps? Maybe you’ve been living the good life for too long.

You absolutely inhale the food, hands twitching for some actual work to do. Solas doesn’t say anything about your poor table manners, which is nice of him. Even you want to tell yourself to knock it off. But the food is very good, and you’re very much both hungry and in a hurry. Solas simply reminds you that this is your last opportunity to sleep in a real bed for a very long time, as you’re returning to work immediately after dinner.

He’s right, of course, and you do want to get some rest in bed if you can. The hard riding across
Orlais is probably going to exhaust you, and without being able to sleep regularly... ugh. Just thinking about it makes you tired. But you’ll have to be always on guard. You’ll be traveling with two mages, a Templar, and a Seeker.

Still, if you can get through this alive, you’ll have, if not a mountain, at least a sizable hill of gold, plus all your contacts within the Inquisition and maybe a few more.

Of course, if you do get caught, you’re super fucking dead. But maybe Cole would help you escape... You’re really glad he’s going too.

You’re just really starting to get back into the whirlwind of work when someone enters the rotunda. You don’t even notice until he speaks up, and even then you finish your sentence as he’s beginning his.

“Excuse me, Messieurs Solas and Emma?”

You’ve been upgraded to Messieur, suddenly.

“You’re presence is required in the War Room.”

Now that gets your attention. Looks like you’re being invited to the little powwow after all. You feel a complicated clashing of emotions. You’re a bit relieved that you’re not being singled out for exclusion. You’re also feeling an excited, hungry little tingle at the prospect of the information and knowledge you’ll be collecting. However, above all else, you’re nervous. You’d much prefer to be a fly on the wall... you’ve never actually participated in anything like this before. Or, well... not for a long time.

You quickly put away your quill. Solas appears to be taking his sweet time getting ready, but the sight of you nervously standing next to the messenger, shifting your weight from one foot to the other, bouncing up and town, and basically just telegraphing your anxiety to the world, gets him to speed up a little.

Despite your eagerness to be on the way, you trail behind Solas the entire way to the War Room itself. Well... trail might not be the right word. You glue yourself to his ass as if he can shield you from the world, walking so close behind him that if he stopped suddenly, you’d probably smash right into him.

The doors to the War Room are large and intimidating. The inside of the War Room is, unsurprisingly, large and intimidating.

There aren't really chairs, per se, and the majority of the room is dominated by a huge map of Thedas with all sorts of little figurines pinned to it.

"Pay attention, child, you're not just here for decor."

You shudder and try to shake off the-- oppressive summer heat, makes what little clothing you have stick awfully to your skin. Oh, there's Commander Rutherford, and Blackwall, and so many others, but eyes flicker over you, linger disapprovingly for a moment, then move on. They spend the rest of the meeting refusing to look at you at all.

You can't tell if you're breathing too fast or not breathing at all, but you realize Solas has moved closer to the table and you haven't. Your legs are jerky as you move, and you take up position behind him and a bit to the right... enough that you can see, enough that you couldn't be called hiding behind him, but...
"Can't we get the thing a damned chair?" Thank god there aren't any chairs.

"Now that everyone's here, let's get started," the Inquisitor and also a man from your past say in hazy unity. You try to pull yourself back to reality. You take advantage of the way you're half shielded behind Solas to reach up your left sleeve and claw at your arm with your nails, trying to ground yourself. Then you see Warden Blackwall, to your right, staring, so you have to stop.

"--to the Western Approach," the Inquisitor is saying. You try to force yourself to pay attention. This is important! "Once we're there, we'll meet up with Hawke, Varric, and Warden Stroud to investigate what the Wardens are up to. We'll have to play it by ear, after that. We might wind up rushing right back, or we might be stationed out there for weeks, so be prepared for anything."

"Finding the Wardens is your top priority," Leliana chimes in. "But given your sudden departure from the Approach before, there will certainly be other things to do. Our agents at Griffon Wing Keep have provided us a detailed map of rifts still open in the area. There's also the matter of the Draconologist, as well as issues with local wildlife that could use a more... experienced touch."

"Even if I wind up racing back, it's likely some of you will remain behind for a time," the Inquisitor begins again. "Once their second in command is stable, the Bull's Chargers will be following along to assist with non-Warden related problems in the Approach."

"Are we all on the same page, with the Wardens?" chimes in Dorian. "I know I've heard a little, but..."

"What we know for sure right now, is that the Calling is effecting all of them at once," Commander Rutherford says, with a glance towards Warden Blackwall, who nods. "And they're panicking. It may well be caused by Corypheus, somehow, but the Wardens believe they are all about to die."

The what and the who now? The fuck is the Calling? The Wardens are dying? What, all of them? Augh, shit, you'll have to just ask Solas about this later. You try to keep your focus on the explanation.

"Warden-Commander Clarel spoke of a blood magic ritual to prevent future Blights before they could happen," the Inquisitor chimes in, frowning. Around the table, shocked murmurs erupt from the people who weren't already privy to this specific bit of information. Solas turns stiff as a rod; the sudden lack of movement draws your attention. He looks alarmed... but then, so does everyone else.

"'Scuse me? A fuckin' WHAT?!" exclaims Sera.

"We don't know much more, unfortunately," Lady Montiliet says with a sigh. "Warden Stroud protested the plan, and was ousted, before he could learn much. But we know now where they're gathering. The Western Approach."

"No wonder the away team is so large. You expect trouble," Dorian says.

"And lots of it," the Inquisitor agrees. "Not just from the Wardens. We pulled out of the Approach too soon last time. Knight-Captain Rylen has been doing as best he can, but with unsealed rifts in the area, as well as hostile wildlife, reports of darkspawn, and that blasted high dragon... it's a miracle we haven't lost the Keep. The Wardens are our top priority, but we need to strengthen our hold on the Approach. We may need it sooner than later."

"Are there any questions?" Seeker Pentaghast asks the group at large. You have an imperial fuckton of questions, but you keep your mouth shut.
"What route we takin'?" Sera asks. "Along the Imperial Highway?"

"Yes, and before you ask, yes, Sera, we're going through Verchiel. We can meet your man there, so send word out ahead of us," the Inquisitor says.

"Least we'll have some good news," she says with a roll of her eyes.

"Ah, to address the question I suspect is on everyone else's mind as well..." Dorian begins. "We are plus one unusual companion. Far be it from me to complain about the inclusion of someone I actually enjoy talking to, but it seems an... odd situation?"

Oh, good, so that's what it feels like to have the eyes of the most powerful people in the world on you all at once. So glad you got to experience that.

"You all know Linguist Emma, so there's no need for introductions," the Inquisitor says with a sigh. "She's coming along to finish the tome on high dragons for the Draconologist, as well as speak to him about joining the Inquisition. If you're worried about her being dead weight, don't be. I'd like to believe that seven accomplished warriors and mages can keep one elven civilian safe. And she will be assisting with the mounts."

"I'm sure you're quite nervous, Emma," Lady Montiliyet says to you. "But please, think of everyone here as an equal in this, and speak freely."

Hahaha... Equal... Hahaha... speak freely...

You swallow, hard. "I..." Your voice cracks, you clear your throat, and try in vain to control your stammer. "I kn-know my m-inclu-inclusion here i-i-is a bit..." Small words, SMALL WORDS. "Odd. B-but I-I will do m-m-my best n-not to b-be a hinder-derence," you manage with great difficulty. "I-I'm s-sure ev-ev-everyone--" Your throat feels like it's closing. You wish you were wearing a mask. "W-w-will keep me s-s-s-safe."

"I'm sure we'll have to," says Blackwall dryly. "Not to question the Inquisitor, but is it really best to have her along in the lead team? Why not have her come with the Chargers, behind us?"

YES. DEAR MAKER. WHY NOT THAT

"It's best she reach the Approach as quickly as possible, with us. The Chargers could be trailing behind by weeks, or even waylaid entirely should something else come up," the Inquisitor replies.

Solas puts a reassuring hand on your shoulder, and swoops into rescue you like a griffon from legend. "Emma is not a fighter," he informs the group. "But she is neither helpless nor useless. I accompanied her to, from, and in Val Royeaux last month. Our group was waylaid twice by bandits, and in both cases, Emma was able to avoid harm. And that was with guardians much less skilled than the ones here."

"Not like she's a child," Sera interjects. "She 'n' I practice throwin' daggers for fun, and she's a better aim than I am with them."

"That's certainly interesting," Seeker Pentaghast chimes in. "But throwing a dagger into wood and into a human being are two very different things."

"I-I'd r-r-rather avoid th-that, y-yes," you interject quickly, just in case Solas is considering adding anything about the number of men you killed with throwing daggers already. But both he and Leliana remain silent on the matter.
"What do you think, Emma?" Blackwall asks suddenly, surprising you. "Do you have any concerns?"

**FUCK YES YOU HAVE SOME CONCERNS.** But you clear your throat and think first. "...I-I w-would be l-lying if I said I w-wasn't scared," you say finally. "B-but Lel-Leliana has assured me th-that my skills a-are needed. A-a-and I did j-join the I-Inquisi-sition t-to help. Th-this isn't ex-exactly wh-what I expected, b-but b-b-b--" Damnit! Too many fucking eyes on you, judging you, they know why you're really here and why--

"She wants to help," interjects Cole, who you hadn't even noticed was present. Possibly no one had, since everyone turns and looks in a bit of surprise. "Scared, shaking, too many new sights, but stands strong. 'I can handle this. I can do this.' She can trust. You'll keep her safe."

There's a bit of a pause as the room absorbs this and translates it into something their brains can more easily comprehend. You eyeball Cole, well aware of what he'd meant with that little 'she can trust' line. Keep dreaming, da'elgar.

"Well?" the Inquisitor says finally. "Does anyone else have any more protests about her presence, or can we continue?"

No one does, so the meeting continues on. You try your best to pay attention to it, but you're shaking quite literally now. You hope no one can tell. You tremble silently next to Solas, the War Room here merging with one from the mists of your memories, and you try to anchor yourself with his hand on your shoulder, which remains throughout the rest of the meeting as the Inquisitor lines the expected travel route along the map.

You barely manage to walk out of the room on your own two feet, and collapse onto a bench in the hallway just outside. All of your energy had been going into standing still and not freaking out, so now that you have a bit of relief, your limbs begin shaking like the last autumn leaves clutching desperately to the tree branches.

Solas follows you onto the bench, sitting beside you. It reminds you of Val Royeaux, on the couch. By now you suppose he's realized what a comfort a bit of physical contact is to you; ever since Val Royeaux--

A hand on each of your shoulders causes you to focus on him a bit more sharply. "Are you alright, Emma?" You nod, shakily.

"F-f-f-f-fine. N-n-not g-g-good at p-p-p-public sp-sp-sp--"

"You were fine in Val Royeaux," Solas points out.


"I don't think I've ever seen you look quite that scared," Solas says, and you can't quite decipher the look in his eyes. Pity?

"St-stammer wh-when I'm sc-sc-scared," you admit. "D-did i-it m-more wh-wh-when--"

"When you first came here. I remember," Solas finishes for you. "It's fine now. You'll be fine. Just breathe. In... Out." You try to breathe despite the spasms in your chest, making your lungs struggle and your whole body shake.

"Ma eth. Ma eth, lethallan. Ar tu mala dareth," he says, voice low and soothing. The words wash over you and stick, seeping through your skin.
"Ma las eth. Ma desen melar." Your voice shakes, but doesn't stutter. Elven always feels like it's leaking from you, rather than that you're speaking it.

Solas shifts, and then wraps an arm around your shoulders, pulling you in to lean against his side. Your face rests against his shoulder, and for the first time all day, you feel like you can breathe.

Tomorrow, you leave for the Western Approach.

Today, right now, you close your eyes. You let Skyhold drift away. You ignore the fact that you're sitting in plain sight. *Ar tu mala dareth.*

If you let yourself believe that, just for a little bit, then just for right now... you can relax. You can exist in just this moment until time steals you away again. And it will. And tomorrow you'll have to face to cold, scary reality. But right now, your eyes are closed and nothing exists except for what exists to your other senses. The warmth of his body. The thick, mildly herbal scent of his clothes. His arm around your shoulders might as well be one of his magical barriers.

Right now, here.

Right now, this.

Tomorrow can wait.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand that's a wrap folks! The end of an arc! I invite you to follow me on [social media](#) so that you'll know when to expect updates again. Otherwise, just subscribe to me or the story (or both) to keep up to date with what I'm doing here. I'll still be writing during the hiatus, but KS itself won't be updating.

I'm also in the middle of a Christmas 'event' on Tumblr, so I recommend checking that out. And tomorrow I should be in my KS IRC chat at... ssssome point. I'll post about it on Tumblr and Twitter.
Solas walks you to your room after your little... Whatever it was. Event. Fit. Embarrassing mental breakdown. You might stand closer to him than necessary and tell yourself it was because of the cold night air. You might want him to stay with you, might want to curl up against him and pretend it’s fine, might want more of that beautifully physical comfort he peppers you with ever since Val Royeaux.

But this is real life, so you go to your room alone and try to sleep.

You don’t really succeed, but you manage to drag yourself out of bed before dawn anyway. You triple check all of your things, making sure they’re packed and well hidden in all of the best and most nonchalant ways. You can’t believe you’re having to drag a bunch of illegal and very stolen tomes of forbidden magic across an entire country directly next to a Seeker. Honestly. At this point, the whole world is just fucking with you. But she has no reason to go through your bags and read a bunch of very boring looking books, and you have a lot of plans for running. Plus, the bags will be with you pretty much every step of the journey.

If anything, having to remain hidden in such illustrious and powerful company has done something for your confidence level—which was never exactly humble to begin with. If you can fool a Seeker and a Somniari, who can’t you fool? How good is your little trick; how unique is it to you? You’ve always assumed anyone could do it, if they bothered, but surely someone would have bothered by now? You do suspect some Dalish mages can probably do it, and probably others you’ve never heard of because... why would you have? All of you are hiding. And you in particular are doing it well, especially if this trick can fool the likes of Solas and Cassandra Pentaghast.

After a bit of hemming and hawing, you decide to put your armor on. You sincerely doubt you’ll be attacked directly outside of Skyhold, but it’s probably for the best that you get used to putting it on, wearing it, and riding in it. You probably look a little silly, in your mismatched leather, and you’ll probably look sillier amongst a group of practiced warriors, but you don’t particularly care. The Chargers gave you this armor, and it’s not like anyone else was lining up to give you lifesaving shit. Certainly not the Inquisition, who were the ones dragging you out into the blighted wastes of Orlais to begin with.

You check one last time to ensure you got everything you need, should you have to make an unfortunate escape. As it was during your trip to Orlais, you have your things organized into a bag you can run with, and a bag with mostly clothing and writing supplies and other things you can afford to leave behind. It’s a good practice to have, really.

Cole greets you just outside the door into the courtyard. He doesn’t say anything; he just sort of shows up. You don’t say anything either. Nothing really needs to be said, does it? He knows what you’re thinking, more or less. He knows what’s hurting you, and that’s pretty synonymous with what you’re thinking at any given time, at the very least.

You reach out almost without thinking, and he takes your hand in his. The simple, comforting gesture reminds you of Solas. You’ve always been one to find comfort in physical contact, a fact which has consistently fucked you over your entire life. But not with Cole. Cole understands, more than anyone else probably could. He would never make expectations of you, and he would also never do more than either of you were comfortable with at any given time.
You lace your fingers in between his, and the two of you make for the front gates together.

Of course, being hand in hand with Cole means that no one really takes note when the two of you show up. You take shelter out of the worst of the wind, leaning against the huge outer wall of Skyhold, and watch the bustle of multiple large groups of people gathering and all the supplies and mounts and little people that go into preparing both of those things.

You should just be one of those little people. It’s all you wanted here. You hadn’t realized how far the few skills you failed to lie about would carry you. ...Well, you hadn’t realized how ragtag the Inquisition was, actually. How desperately in need of skilled hands they were. They seemed impossibly put together from the outside, swooping in out of nowhere and making declarations and rebuilding areas. It was only after being with them for a while that you’d come to realize they were basically desperately falling upwards through a combination of skill and sheer need.

In short order, the mounts are all gathered. Ten horses and four harts is quite a crowd, and you’re at once intimidated to see them all lined up like this. Those are your would-be wards right there. Fourteen creatures significantly larger than you. It also serves to emphasize to you just how long your little caravan is. Surely it will be easy for you to go by quiet and unnoticed? Keeping company with Sera, or Solas, or Cole. The Inquisitor and the Seeker need not even realize you’re there, really.

Ha. Yeah right. When has your luck ever gone that well? But you can at least try.

Still, Cole’s supernatural ‘don’t look at me’ aura can only last so long. Eventually, you have to part ways from him somewhat to tie your bags off to your own mounts. Vhas’durghen gets the dubious honor of being pack mule for now, since you’d much rather start this journey on Revas and leave the confusing and uncertain parts for when you’re a little further out of the snowy mountains. You’ve gotten much better at riding over the months, but not that good.

You’re just starting to saddle up onto Revas, still largely ignored by most of the even busier away team, when someone runs up to the Inquisitor where he sits already mounted on Snowblind. Looks like a messenger. Looks like an alarmed messenger.

“Your holiness, news from the jails!” This causes the Inquisitor to stiffen, as well as most people within listening distance, including Cassandra Pentaghast. “There’s been a death amongst the prisoners!” Your own body language remains carefully neutral, but you can almost feel your ears twitching with this. There’s a certain prisoner whose fate you’re very interested in, who happens to have many, many people very, very angry with him.

“Calm yourself,” the Inquisitor orders as you pretend to not be listening with interest.

“Yes, your holiness, I’m sorry. One of the prisoners has died overnight.”

“Was there any disturbance in the jail?”

“None. Preliminary examination suggests that it was natural causes, but…”

The messenger didn’t need to say it. Someone dying in a jail cell was always a bad look.

“Was it one of our political prisoners? War criminal?”

“No, your holiness, just a common soldier. No one anyone should want to see dead.”

Well, no one important, anyway. Few people wind up in jail without at least one or two people being very, very angry with them. A soldier, could be Underhill…
“Do we know how he died?”

“Looks as though his heart gave out, sir. No trace of poison.”

“I’m looking into it,” an accented voice says. You recognize it instantly, and turn to glance over. Leliana has come down from her perch. “But so far, Inquisitor, it really does seem to be a simple health issue. He appears to have died in his sleep. We must, of course, be sure that the conditions in the prison didn’t lead to it, even then.”

The Inquisitor nods. “I’m sure you have it well in hand, Leliana. Seems there’s little I can do about it now. Please, investigate fully and send a report ahead to the Approach.”

Leliana nods and withdraws, but you’re quickly buried in your own thoughts. A few people had threatened, however idly, to take care of Underhill for you. But none of them, not even Skinner, have access to poison that not even Leliana can trace. This is a mixed bag… no public justice for the elves, but death means Underhill—if it is Underhill, as you suspect—is finally no longer any kind of threat, to you or anyone else.

Odd, to think that he could actually have just died in his…...Sleep…

Your eyes flick briefly over to Solas, who does not look nearly so grumpy as he did the last time the two of you left Skyhold this painfully early in the morning. Nothing in his face or body language could imply he’d be responsible for such a thing. There are rumors that Somniari could kill a man in his sleep by attacking his mind through the Fade; it’s part of what made them so feared. But you don’t really know the truth of such legends, and it seems a far-fetched assumption.

A shame you’ll be heading out. But you’re certain that if it was Underhill, Thea will absolutely tell you just as soon as she can get a letter out. You’ll know sooner or later.

Your spinning thoughts are interrupted by a cry that cuts through the frosty pre-dawn air. “Da’nan!” You glance up and over immediately, and see Dalish and a number of other Chargers waving as they jog towards your caravan.

“Dalish?” you ask, blinking in surprise, and slide off of Revas to meet them halfway so they don’t have to stand amongst a crowd of horses. “Guys? What’s going on?”

“Does somethin’ have to be goin’ on for us to see our buddy off?”

“Yeah, Dalish, cause it’s like half an hour before dawn and I’m pretty sure all of you were drinking last night.” You point at one dwarf in particular. “Ril, I’m not even confident you ever stopped drinking.”

“Guilty!” she responds cheerfully.

“There was a last minute gift,” Dalish says with a grin. “From our fearless leader-in-command.”

You blink. “From Krem? But he’s still on bedrest, right?”

“Yeah, and he’s been bored as fuck, to hear him tell it, hence this.” Dalish pauses, fumbling around in her pack. “Ah… here it is!” She pulls out a… stuffed… toy? She hands it to you with great aplomb and you take it, tilting your head.

“Is that a… stuffed goat?”

“Yep! Krem knits, and also punches very hard if you make fun of him for knitting, right Ril?”
“Super hard!” Ril chimes in.

It’s a dusty sort of grey color, made from rough wool yarn. It has a tiny beard. One of the legs is clearly shorter than the other three.

“This is the cutest thing I’ve ever been given,” you say, momentarily stunned.

“Oooh, dibs on tellin’ Krem she said that!” says Dalish, clapping.

“I was just in to see him,” you begin, still a bit off-guard and slightly confused.

“He just finished it, and I mean just finished it,” she said with a laugh. “No one was really expectin’ you to get dragged off.”

“Me least of all,” you agree ruefully.

“Emma, are you almost done? We need to head out!” comes Sera’s voice, loud over the hubbub. You glance around; you can see the horses prepared for Sataareth and Fenris, but they don’t seem to have arrived yet. Damn… you had been hoping you’d get one last chance to speak with Fenris. You’ve no idea the circumstances under which you’ll see him next, after all, or if there even will be a next. You’d been avoiding him half of the time he was here… You could have…

Well. You could have done a lot of tomfoolery, which is exactly why you’d avoided him. Shaking your head, you quickly say your farewells to the gathered Chargers, and head back to clamber onto Revas.

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Travel through the mountains is single file, a necessity due to the narrow passageways and paths. It stretches your fourteen mounts out to quite a considerable length. You and Seeker Pentaghast are bringing up the rear, with the eight spare mounts lined up ahead of you, and most of the time you can’t even see another person, thanks to her being behind you. There’s blissfully little chance for conversation, especially due to the whipping wind through the mountains, ensuring you’ll all have sore throats by the end of the day if you insist on keeping your mouths open.

It’s a miserable, if quiet, journey, the misery only aided by the presence of a Seeker directly behind you. Right in your blind spot. It’s nerve wracking, even if you’ve no reason to suspect her of suddenly and dramatically stabbing you with something.

Hours stretch on. At some point, you hear a rustling and glance behind you automatically--you’ve been trying not to jump at every sound Seeker Pentaghast makes, but that was just too much--to see the Seeker pulling lunch out of one of her saddlebags.

“Are we eating while moving?” you ask curiously. It’s fair enough; there’s not a lot of great places to stop to eat while going through the Frostbacks.

“For today, yes,” Seeker Pentaghast replies. “We are not riding the mounts hard through the mountains, so it’s reasonable to keep them going at a walk. Other days, we’ll stop to rest them, or to switch mounts.”

Lunch on the road wouldn’t necessarily be a bad thing. It would minimize the amount of forced contact you had with your ‘traveling buddies.’ But you’re going to get very sore, very fast, riding twelve hours a day or more. You think back to how sore you got on the way to Val Royeaux and wince. This is an even longer trip, with even harder riding.
Unfortunately, Seeker Pentaghast seems to take your words as invitation to attempt conversation.

“So what brought you to the Inquisition?” she asks from behind you. You try to project your voice enough that you don’t have to turn and face her, given that you’re walking along a slightly precarious ledge right now.

“I wanted to escape the chaos in Orlais. Unfortunately, it seems I’ll be spending most of my time traipsing through it, so I suppose the joke’s on me.”

The awkward silence afterwards is palpable, and yet still not enough to earn you silence for the rest of the day. She peppers you with questions on and off throughout the afternoon, each one slightly more awkward than the last. You have no idea if she’s trying to be subtle while interrogating you, or if this is genuinely just her terrible idea of small talk. You’d normally go for the first, but she’s just so bad at it. A Seeker, you feel, would be a lot better at fishing out secrets if they were actually trying.

You’re exhausted by the time word comes down the line--in the form of a very loud yell from Blackwall, given just how far down the line you and Cassandra are--that it’s finally time to stop for the night. Shelter has been found in the form of a number of shallow caves. They don’t really keep the weather or the chill off, but it means you don’t have to worry about setting up your tents in the snow, at least.

Now is your moment of truth, in a sense, because you have fourteen mounts of varying degrees of tired to take care of. Everyone just sort of dismounts outside the cave, so you bring the horses in under the shelter of some nearby pines, two at a time. It’s honestly a bit terrifying, but you try to take only one that might be a pain in your ass at a time, pairing each with a more well-behaved horse, and it generally seems to work out. You tie the horses, but don’t bother tying the harts. You’re not familiar with Derrick, but you doubt he’ll prove much different from the others, despite his entirely questionable taste in women.

Ten horses is a lot. You take your time with them, trying your best to get to know them the way you did Revas as you remove their bits and bridles and attach feeding bags. Later on in the journey, they’ll just be able to graze, but it’s too frosty up here for that still. Fortunately, Belassan had showed you how to do this sort of thing, and he was a very good teacher. It’s easy for you to spot which ones might be troublemakers, and while Zephyr does make a pass for your fingers with her teeth, you pull them back and give her a soft swat on her nose for her trouble. Go figure Sera’s tiny mount would be the one to give you grief.

Surprisingly, the Inquisitor’s two mounts, which you had been worried about from the start, give you little issue. Neither seem to really notice you at all, particularly not the white stallion, who clearly thinks being waited on hand and hoof is his lot in life. He does try to stomp on your foot while you’re checking his hooves, which is terrifying, but easily dodged. And mercifully, the ludicrously huge Courser, Daine, seems to take to you immediately and with great vigor, nuzzling against you enough to make Revas snort with obvious jealousy. You pause long enough to give him the stink eye; you absolutely can’t have him starting shit with the horses.

Taking your time so much with the horses, you miss dinner entirely. Well, dinner with everyone else, anyway; you sweep up the last of the stew into a bowl and wolf it down without much grace after you’ve spent at least two hours fussing over the horses and harts, dodging hooves and teeth, mostly successfully.

The first time anyone really bothers to talk to you or acknowledge your presence at all is, of course, for bad news. Tent assignment. As soon as you realize the tents are up, you remember the absolute humiliating snafu from last time. Surely… surely this time, they won’t presume to put you with Solas? Surely.
“Alright, so, on the guy’s end of things, me and Blackwall, Solas and Dorian?” the Inquisitor suggests. There are general nods of agreement, and you breathe a sigh of relief before the implications there set in.

“Roight, so Cassandra bunks with Cole all the time, that leaves me ‘n’ Emma!” Sera interjects cheerfully, and you freeze.

That.

That is very nearly as bad!

No actual danger, mind, like with Cassandra or Solas, but you only have so much self-control! You’re going to be up all night with her asleep next to you? What if she makes another move? What if you make another move? How are you supposed to say no when she’s right next to you in her skivvies? Oh, Maker!

“Well!” you interrupt quickly, voice almost breaking but managing not to. “I don’t at all mind bunking with Cole, so Seeker Pentaghast doesn’t have to.” A number of eyes fall on you, but you steel yourself, slipping a persona on like a mask. You smile slightly, blinking innocently. “I mean, we spend plenty of time together already, and I know a Seeker might rest ill directly next to a spirit.” You glance over, and find Cole is already beside you, probably knowing what you’re up to and why. “We need our best front-line combatant at peak condition, right?” you add, pouting a little nervously and glancing at the woods briefly as if you fear they might contain bears or demons or something.

Sera looks a bit hurt, glancing over at Cole with barely contained disgust. You can practically see her thought process--she sort of wears her emotions on her face. The opposite of you, and good indication of why she deserves a lot better.

Seeker Pentaghast is the only one to actually voice any concern, however. “I’m not sure our only non-combatant should be the one to room with a de--” She catches herself, possibly at your expression, which falls from “innocent servant doing her best” very quickly into something angrier. You slip your hand into Cole’s again, and look at her pointedly, willing her to remember your last disastrous conversation about the “demon” you’ve befriended. Not to mention the irony afterwards, of you being horribly maimed by one of the Inquisition’s own soldiers.

“...If you’re most comfortable that way…” she says instead, looking uncertain.

“Of course,” you say, immediately cheerful again, hand still in Cole’s. “We’ll be fine. If anything, I’ll sleep better knowing there’s someone nearby who doesn’t need to.” You laugh, a little ruefully. “I’ll probably be a little jumpy until we get to the fortress in the Approach,” you admit.

“Of course,” Blackwall nods. “That’s to be expected; you’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Don’t worry, dear!” Dorian chirps in, planting a comforting pat on your back. “We’ll keep you from getting impaled.”

“From anything she doesn’t want to get impaled on, anyway,” the Inquisitor adds, totally unnecessarily in your opinion, but you laugh along anyway. His opinion of you as the favored mount of Skyhold isn’t necessarily something you need to discourage since it’s a pretty harmless explanation for why you’re buddy ing around with all his people.

You head back for the mounts, having eaten, dodging a few people who are clearly heading towards you to make conversation--like Solas--in the process. They’ve already been cared for, but you spend
a while longer socializing, trying to get to know them. Horses are different from harts, you’re learning that very quickly. But they’re not quite as terrifying as their size seems to imply, and they have the soft, velvety noses and curious lips you associate with Revas and other cute, furry creatures. It also helps that you’re roughly twenty percent treat by volume, as you always are when you know you’re going to be around Revas for a while.

Cole appears at a distance while you’re bribing Snowblind, the Inquisitor’s proud and gorgeous white mount. You wave him over, but he hesitates.

“Horses don’t always like me,” he informs you, eyeing them cautiously.

You give Snowblind a final pat on the nose and make your way towards him, keeping your hands on the horses as you pass. You don’t think they can see very well, given how long they are and how weirdly set their eyes are. You’d rather them know where you are at all times.

“I’m definitely not set up to be horse ambassador,” you say with a chuckle. “I’m still working on making sure they don’t want to kill me. I could introduce you to Revas, though, if you want.”

“He tried to bite me,” Cole says warily, looking over at Revas, who looks back, still grumpy from how much time you’ve been spending with the horses.

“He’s a sweetheart.” you insist. “Revas, come over here,” you call to the hart. The hart glares at you for a moment, then looks away disdainfully. “Well…” you muse out loud. “I guess Cole can have this carrot, then…” Revas gives you a look that plainly says he knows what you’re doing, but immediately trots over anyway. He comes more than he needs to, in fact, butting his head against your chest and nearly clocking Cole with one of his horns before immediately trying to stick his nose into your trousers to find the treats hiding in your pockets.

“There’s a good boy,” you say, patting him, despite the fact he’s actively trying to de-trouser you. You’ve long since learned how to hide your treats from Revas, and you pull a carrot out of your back pocket and pass it off to Cole. “Hold it up, flat palm,” you instruct him as you rub Revas’ neck around the head that’s still butting against your chest. “Revas, look, Cole’s got a treat for you.”

Revas glances up at the word treat, and spots the carrot, which Cole is somewhat nervously holding up as you instructed him. He goes in a bit too fast and you tighten your grip around his neck. He wheezes a bit and then glares at you. “Gently,” you tell him firmly, glaring right back. He huffs his opinion of that, but when you let him go, does take the carrot nicely from Cole’s outstretched arm. He pulls it into his mouth quickly and then, still chewing, begins sniffing and nudging Cole, searching for more. Cole giggles, which is probably on the top three of cutest things you’ve ever seen in your life.

“He’s warm!” Cole announces cheerfully.

“Here, give him a pat,” you instruct him, taking his hand and guiding to the places Revas likes best. “I thought most animals liked you?”

“The small ones,” Cole says with a slight frown, petting Revas where you indicated while Revas begins to chew on the hem of his shirt. “And sometimes cats.”

You can’t help but laugh. “Funny, that’s been my experience, too.” You glance warily over at the horses, still uncertain of your ability to keep up with their care. “But Revas is a sweetie once you get to used to him. And he’ll be nice, right, Revas?” you ask pointedly. Revas gives you a pained look, but you don’t back down. He snorts and looks away, and you give him a thankful pat.

“That they do. I’m going to head to the tent… thanks for working with me on that, by the way. Come in and out however you like. I’m pretty sure you’d be able to tell even if I was doing something requiring privacy.” Cole nods, and you chuckle. “Perfect roommate. I’m not sure why they aren’t always fighting to tent with you.”

“I tent with Solas a lot! Or Cassandra. They don’t mind. Everyone else does.”

You roll your eyes. Seeker Pentaghast ‘doesn’t mind’ because she thinks its her sworn duty to exterminate him, probably. The rest are idiots. “More peace for me, then.”

You head to your tent and crawl in with your main bag, unfurling your sleeping bag, and then, after a moment’s consideration, laying down a blanket for Cole. Even if he doesn’t need it, it just seems polite. Then you pull out the materials you need to work on the next few pages of the tome. You do want to get it as done as quickly as possible… Although you certainly have an excuse not to make much progress. Still, it’s something to do, and something anyone can walk in on you doing without you having to scramble, which is more than you can say for anything else in your bag right now.

You light up the little lyrium bauble you bought the last time you were outside of Skyhold. You doubt it has many uses left in it, but you might as well use it up before trying to burn a candle or lantern of some kind in here. And then you simply settle in to work the night away.

Cole comes in at some point. You don’t notice him come in, but at some point you become aware of him being there. It’s a little jarring, but you’ll probably get used to it eventually. He watches you work for a little, and then begins to talk. It takes you a moment to realize it’s almost idle chatter.

“Bright, like the fish that kill you if you eat them. Can't hate you for hiding if you burn so brilliantly.”

“An old name burns inside armor that shouldn't fit, lit by faces of the children he couldn't save.”

“Hiding in plain sight, a light under a bushel that won’t be contained. Can’t help but glow, and they’re like moths to her flame.”

After a while, you just sort of tune it out, humming with idle interest whenever he says something, so you don’t realize when he stops talking to himself and starts talking to you.

“--you really should sleep.” You catch the end of it and pause in writing, glancing up. “Frayed and worn, coming apart at all the edges, how long til it comes all the way undone?”

You roll your eyes. “We’ve been over this, Cole,” you reply, voice hushed. “I’d love to take a nap, but this is hardly the time or place for it. I’ve got two mages, a Seeker, and half a Templar.”

“Solas is still awake,” Cole points out, and you blink in surprise. You figured he would already be asleep, for sure. “But the others are asleep. You could sleep, properly. I could keep watch, keep Solas away, awake. Pull you out of the Fade when he enters.”

“You… what?”

“I can see him, the outline of him, beyond the Veil, when he walks,” Cole informs you. “I would know when anyone comes close, in either place.”

“Are… are you serious?”

“Yes,” Cole says reproachfully. “I offered to help you sleep before.”
“I thought you meant that weird spirit thing you do where you make me calm or tired!” you hiss quietly. You drum your fingers thoughtfully on the side of your book, considering. Your aura is pretty small right now. No one would notice just walking by, not even a Templar, unless they actively molested you the way Solas--and only Solas--has. And a bit of proper sleep wouldn’t flood it enough to be an issue the way it had been when you first came to Skyhold. You eye Cole. “Stay here, wake me whenever anyone even gets close? And wake me as soon as Solas falls asleep?”

Cole nods enthusiastically, clearly just excited about the idea of you getting any sleep at all, even small amounts. You have to admit, you share his attitude. It has been a long time. With a conspiratorial glance around, you cautiously let your magic out from beneath your skin.

“You shine!” Cole says cheerfully, rolling over on the blanket you put out for him to clap quietly.

“Shhhhh, shhhhh,” you whisper, biting back a giggle. He’s reminding you of someone else, right now, and it’s a good memory. “It’s not too bright, is it?”

“Subtle shine, unpolished diamond,” he informs you, and you can’t hold back your giggle this time.

“Alright, but if you fuck this up, you have to stab whoever tries to run me through,” you tell him, half-joking.

“I’ll be careful!” Cole protests, pouting.

“I trust you. I think. Maybe I’m just delirious and really want a nap. That’s also possible.” You close your book and grab your lyrium light, twisting it off, then wiggle into your sleeping bag. “Remember. As soon as someone walks by, or Solas falls asleep.”

Cole nods excitedly. “Do you want me to help?”

“Will you still be able to wake me up?”

“Yes!”

You sigh. “Alright then. Might as well make the best of it. But never tell Solas I let you help me sleep, he’ll probably set me on fire out of spite.”

“He won’t set you on fire.”

“I super don’t like the implications of how you phrased that, but whatever. Nap time, before someone catches on.”

“Nap time!” Cole agrees, and taps the side of your head. At once, you begin to feel drowsy.

“Dangerous fuckin’ trick,” you mumble to yourself as you curl up tighter in your sleeping bag, but you just close your eyes and let yourself drift off.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! Miss me? :p

You can follow me (and find ways to support me) at my Tumblr. There’s also a Discord channel and all kinds of fun stuff. If you don’t follow me there, you miss heads up on
these sorts of shenanigans, an announcements like "I'll be updating biweekly!"
Important stuff.

Sorry if this chapter was a little stiff, still getting back into the swing of things~
Dreams and Drilling

Chapter Notes

Benefit of working ahead: I know I'll be able to update on time because the next chapter or two are already finished.

Downside of working ahead: I cannot fucking remember what happens in this chapter.

You don’t know how long you’ve been running through the woods, and you can’t remember why you’re running. Are you chasing someone? You thought you might have seen someone flit through the woods, elven ears definite in their outline, and you have a certain desperation in your chest. But you could just as easily be running. There’s a lot to run from. Sometimes it feels like running is what you’ve been doing since the day your mother birthed you.

The woods open up and you see a village in front of you. Thank Mythal! You sneak in the side, then try to look as though you’ve been there for a while, and haven’t been running. No one seems to take much note of you. Wonderful! You can get supplies here, bread for the road, refill your canteen at their well. If you can find this little place on your map, maybe you can figure out where you are. And such a small village, you’re confident you can be in and out without any trouble whatsoever. Finally, something good has happened.

There are Templars in the village square. You freeze when you see them, but they don’t notice you right away. You force yourself not to run or hide, trying instead to frantically grasp your aura and plunge it deep into your core. You can hide in plain sight if you do this right, you’ve fooled Templars in the past, in the Free Marches. You can do this, you can do this, you can–

“Wake up.”

You jolt awake, aura uncomfortably twisted half inside of you and half out, knotted. You’d been trying to hide in your sleep. Maker only knew what that had done to your connection to the Fade.

“Solas is sleeping now.” You blink a few times, clamping your aura down clumsily before you have time to collect your surroundings. Cole. Tent. Yes, sleeping, right. You rub your face and de-tangle and re-hide your aura a bit better than the clumsy mess it had been.

“What time is it?” you ask, groggily.

“Past the midnight hour?” Cole says. “But not much.”

“I’m amazed he was up this late,” you say, running fingers through your bed-messy hair to straighten it.

“I was with him most of the night while you slept, talking.”

You frown. Well, Solas’ tent is right next to yours. Cole would still have noticed if someone came to bother you. Probably would have even noticed their intent to do so, from a distance. You can’t blame him for multitasking.

“Is he alright? Is something upsetting him?”
“You,” Cole replies, and you wait for a further explanation that never comes.

“Me...?” you prompt, but Cole just nods. You sigh. Looks like you’re not getting more out of him. “Urgh...” You rub your face again. You’re beyond groggy, and really want to just roll over and go back to sleep. But a little sleep is better than no sleep, even if it feels worse. “Thanks, Cole. I guess I’ll get back to work for the rest of the night.”

You light your little lyrium orb back up, wondering how long you have until you have to start working by candlelight. Maybe you can see if Dorian can make you a little floating light ball or something. You could do it your damn self if not for the obvious. And Dorian wouldn’t fuss about you working at night the way Solas would. You’ve seen him running late nights in the library enough to know sometimes he can’t sleep, either. You suspect that’s why he drinks, or part of it. When you were younger, a child in Rivain, you used to do the same, praying a few shots of desi daru around bedtime would knock you out.

You get a bit stiff and sore being in the tent and working while laying on your stomach for so long, so you rise as soon as you hear other people up and walking around.

The one you heard, it turns out, was Blackwall, though you see Sera on watch. She glances over at you, but looks away, probably because she needs to be keeping her eye out for any trouble. You two do have a tendency of distracting each other. So instead of pestering her, you follow your nose to Blackwall, who’s sitting at the campfire stirring a large pot.

“Breakfast?” you ask hopefully, sitting on one of the several large rocks they’d pulled over to circle the fire and act as seats.

“Yes, though you’re the first one up,” Blackwall replies, pulling out the wooden spoon to taste. It looks like some kind of porridge, which is about as classic traveling fare as you can get, other than maybe hard tack and dried meat. “And just in time, I think it’s ready.”

Blackwall spoons out a healthy portion into a bowl for you, and you go right to town on it. Porridge is infinitely better while still piping hot, and while it’s not your favorite food under any circumstances, you never turn down a meal if you can help it.

“This is different,” you say, pleasantly surprised by the flavors of the dish. It’s no Rivaini or Antivan dish, but it’s thick and heavy and has a dark sort of flavor you’re not used to.

“It’s a Marcher army recipe,” Blackwall says, somewhat proudly.

“Oh, that explains it. I’ve barely been in the Marches–just passing through really. Not a lot of time to ask any army men to make me breakfast,” you add jokingly.

“How much of the Marches did you see?” Blackwall asks curiously. “There’s a lot there.”

“Barely any. I traveled with some caravaneers from Antiva, down through the Marches to Kirkwall. I don’t think we hit any major cities other than that, honestly.”

“That’s a real shame! Starkhaven is amazing during the fall, everyone should see it at least once–”

Blackwall is happy to tell you more about the Free Marches, and honestly you don’t mind listening. You’re still relieved that Blackwall doesn’t seem as hostile towards you as he was originally. If you’re being perfectly honest, it has more to do with your association of the Grey Wardens with Leah than any actual desire to be liked. Ideally, you would be at least passingly liked by everyone, if you couldn’t be a complete unknown. But his opinion means more to you than, say, Dorian’s, just because he’s a Warden.
By the time everyone else starts wandering up for breakfast, you excuse yourself and go to prep the horses for the morning. It’s a good thing you started early, because despite Belassan going over it for you, you have to resaddle a few of the horses because you got the damn straps wrong. And Stormcloak won’t stop trying to step on your feet, which is equal parts annoying and terrifying.

By the time you finish, camp has been broken and it’s time to leave. Thank the Maker. Single file again today, which means you can probably spend another day in relative, if slightly awkward, silence. Between this and Cole, maybe this trip won’t actually be so–

“I noticed Cole has added a charm to his belt,” Cassandra says, apropos of nothing, but with the tone of someone attempting to casually start a conversation.

“The nug with the hat. Yes, I gave it to him,” you reply, deciding to simply cut to the chase for the sake of this conversation being shorter.

“I had thought you might have. Truthfully, I’m not sure I can imagine anyone else doing it. Varric, perhaps.”

Yeah, it’s almost like you and Varric have that in common, treating him like an actual person instead of a freaky demon waiting to happen. Well, Solas too, but Solas has a more nuanced understanding of Cole’s being that you–and definitely Varric–lack. They fit together like two pieces of a puzzle.

“The two of you are clearly very close,” Cassandra continues, leadingly, and you realize this conversation somehow hasn’t ended yet. You’re about to point out that you got a gift for her, too, but quickly catch yourself. Varric had taken the blame for that particular gift, which had not gone over as well as you’d assumed it would.

“I consider him a friend,” you say, guarded and stiff but trying not to be overly hostile. For self-preservation reasons, if nothing else.

“That much is clear. How did the two of you meet?”

You consider the question. The way you and Cole met was witnessed by Sera and Varric both. Varric might keep your privacy, particularly from Seeker Pentaghast, but Sera wouldn’t know to. Besides, it wasn’t worth lying about.

“Cole calmed me down from a fit, my Lady. Several times, actually. I have them on occasion, ever since Seheron,” you reply, trying to keep it as short as possible. You don’t really like divulging something personal and embarrassing like that to Seeker Pentaghast, but perhaps she’ll realize the awkward situation she’s putting you in and stop. “I appreciated it and sought him out to thank him. The two of us became friends.”

“When did you become aware he was a demon?” Seeker Pentaghast asks curiously, and you clench your teeth, thankful you’re riding ahead of her and she can’t see your face. Revas shifts underneath you, all pent up energy, probably wanting to bolt or kick. You rub his neck to calm him down, which gives you time to calm yourself down as well.

“I became aware that Cole is a spirit thanks to Solas. I saw the two of them together shortly after I first met Cole, and asked him.”

“You sound like him. Solas, I mean,” she comments, and you stiffen.

“He’s been my primary source of education on spirits,” you lie. “Other than the Chantry’s teachings, obviously.”
“The Chantry warns about demons. Didn’t learning he was a spirit frighten you?”

You shrug uncomfortably. “A little, at first. But Cole had only ever come to me to help. During times where it would have been easy for a demon—or anyone—to take advantage. If anything, all the knowledge did was help me understand him better.”

“Oh?”

“No,” you say, voice carefully neutral despite your irritation. “Understanding each other’s natures is key to any relationship. For instance, you know I’m an elf, and the ways it affects how I am treated and therefore view the world. I know you are a Seeker, and therefore it is your nature to interrogate when matters of spirits or magic come up. This prevents me from taking offense where someone who didn’t understand your nature might.”

There’s a long pause, and then Seeker Pentaghast clears her throat. You resist the urge to turn around and see her expression to gauge her mood and how much you’d offended her. But you really hadn’t wanted this to be your entire trip through Orlais. You might have bolted out of sheer nerves.

The rest of the morning is spent in arguably tense, awkward silence. This is extremely preferable to you, so you don’t bother to break it.

You stop around lunch time to switch mounts. You’re starting to get out of the Frostbacks now... thank the Maker. You hate going through those frozen mountains. Still, that means—according to Seeker Pentaghast—that you can expect a faster pace soon. On one hand, you’ll be glad to be moving faster. On the other hand, you’re just barely managing not to be aching after a day and a half of riding at a walking-to-trotting pace through the mountains. You’re pretty sure you’re going to get really sore.

Rather than eating lunch with the others, you take care of the mounts, taking the saddlebags off the spares. You could just move them to the mounts you’d been riding in the morning, but instead you decide to take the time to rub them down as best you can without removing their saddles. This is as much out of a desire to avoid everyone as it is any real concern for the mounts, admittedly, but you’d rather work hard and not have anything bad happen that you can be blamed for.

“Diligent as a shield, meticulous in manner, no time for idle chitchat. Company of the hooves to avoid company of men.”

You barely even glance up from Revas, since Cole’s voice is among the least alarming things in your life right now. “Yes, that’s me,” you say with a sigh. “Are you going to lecture me about it?”

“No. It would be good to make friends, but you sort of are.” You glance up, and he gestures towards the horses. He’s standing a little ways away, actually, but you suppose he just doesn’t want to get in the way.

“I guess,” you say with a laugh as you turn back to finish brushing down Revas. “I’m trying, anyway. It’ll be easier if they don’t all want to step on me or bowl me over.”

“They like how you smell,” Cole suggests.

“That would probably be all the treats I’m hiding on my person right now,” you say with a snort. “Good to know it’s workinggseggggaaaaah!” You flail onto Revas as something butts into you from behind, then wind up clinging to him as he charges a few steps forward, snorting angrily, clearly aiming to headbutt whoever just knocked you onto him. “Oh no you don’t!” you hiss, grabbing one
of his horns near the base and twisting his head to the side. He snorts angrily, stamping the ground and tossing his head to try and throw your grip off. You can see, past his horns, Sera’s Zephyr trotting away, the little devil.

“Absolutely not, Revas. You need to \textit{behave}.” He tosses his head again. “Or next time, I will leave you behind!” His ears flick back, as if he can understand you. “I mean it. I’m already riding Vhas’durgen this afternoon. If you don’t behave, I might come to like him better.” You’re pretty sure that a hart cannot understand Common, let alone this complicated of a concept. But Revas does, at least, stop trying to trample Zephyr. Which is good, because she’s so slight compared to him that he’d probably massacre the poor girl.

By the time you get everyone settled, Cole has vanished off to wherever Cole goes. But you’ve gotten the horses switched over in time, and now it really is time to try riding Vhas’durgen. It’ll be the first time you’ve ridden a hart other than Revas, other than a few times on Ashi’lana with Solas... You hope you don’t fuck it up. You keep Revas close to the back, near you, so that you can keep an eye on him.

Vhas, for his part, is pretty similar in gait to Revas, once he gets going. He’s just a bit slower... longer legs, you think. He can cover more ground with fewer steps. He’s bigger in general; you feel a bit like you’re doing the splits. You’re pretty sure that you’re going to be really feeling it by the time dinner comes around, but hopefully you’ll eventually adjust. His canter is smooth, at least, a bit smoother than Revas’ energetic gait. Please let that be enough to make up for the fact it feels like you’re straddling a building.

Cassandra seems to be content to leave you alone for the time being, so you dig into your bag and pull out some bread to try to wolf down while you’re still traveling single file through the last of the mountains. You’d skipped lunch, and you don’t want anyone scolding you. Or, you suppose, to be weak from not eating, should something happen. Your body really has gotten used to regular meals in the time you’ve been at Skyhold, and you’re putting on muscle because of it. But muscle requires energy to sustain itself, so...

Eventually, the group comes down enough out of the mountains to take up a sharper pace, which is shouted down the line to you and Cassandra. You’re still in a linear formation, but you’re cantering full on now. Your first thought is that at least you won’t have to hold any conversations like this. There’s no way you could, you’re just sort of huffing and wheezing with the effort.

Not Cassandra. She is apparently used to this sort of thing. She calls out instructions to you pretty regularly, mostly to do with keeping the line of mounts in, you know, a line. A few times, one of you has to ride up the side a bit and jostle someone back into line like you’re herding sheep. You are... not great at it, and every time you have to speed Vhas up a bit, you fear he’s going to break into a bound and send you careening off his back and down a cliff or something. All in all, it’s a completely fucking exhausting afternoon.

By the time you stop for the evening, you feel like you’ve been taken, shaken, and repeatedly slammed against the floor. You circle the horses into a clearing that’s been selected for your camping that night. There’s barely any snow on the ground now, so that’s nice for the people setting up camp. It’s less cold, or so they say. You’re actually kind of frozen solid from the ride... You’re not actually confident that you could feel heat OR cold reliably at the moment.

Despite being an exhausted elf-cicle, you start taking care of the horses as soon as you half-slide, half-fall off of Vhas. Just like at lunch, you rub down all the horses that were in use, take off their saddles, check everyone’s hooves for stones... Dodge hooves aimed at your feet and smack a few noses for poking at you were they shouldn’t. It would probably be easier if you tied them all up first,
but they seem to appreciate being able to wander a little and mingle amongst themselves after so long on the trail. And you’re here to keep an eye on them anyway, so might as well let them enjoy themselves.

You spend a bit more time with the troublesome horses, particularly the Inquisitor’s mounts. Not because they’re the worst behaved... just because you’re the most worried about them. They’re horses of high standard. They probably have more value than you do, particularly to the Inquisitor. You’re just taking extra care to pull some burrs out of Snowblind’s mane when you hear a voice behind you.

“He’s a burr magnet. We weren’t even in that many trees.”

You damn near jump out of your skin, half-spinning around before you can stop yourself. You hadn’t been expecting the Inquisitor to sneak up on you. The two of you haven’t particularly talked one-on-one since he tried to make sure Solas hadn’t shanghai’d you into being his servant.

“Ah... y-y-yeah...” you mutter, glancing back over at Snowblind. “I-I th-think it’s b-because he kept w-wanting to break away d-during the af-afternoon.” If the Inquisitor has any opinion on your speech impediment, he doesn’t comment on it. You’ve probably stammered around him pretty consistently, actually, since he’s so consistently terrifying.

“Sounds like him. How are you taking to travel so far?”

W... what is he doing...? Is he trying to... check in on you or something? It’s his fault you’re out here, so it’s kind of late for him to be concerned. Maybe he’s trying to scope you out? Maybe he’s suspicious, and that’s why he dragged you out here in the first place. You try not to look visibly cautious, or like you’re sizing him up. Which you are.

“I’m adjusting,” you lie. You feel like your legs and crotch have been repeatedly punched, actually, and you’re stiff in muscles you rarely use. But you’re not going to start complaining to the Inquisitor.

“Good. I know this is hardly ideal working conditions, but I’m sure by the time we reach the Approach, you’ll be used to it.” The irritating thing is that he’s probably not wrong. You’re pretty good at adjusting, and this is hardly your first time on the road. You just sort of nod along while you focus on Snowblind’s mane. “You’ve become quite valuable to the Inquisition since you joined,” he informs you, and you struggle not to stiffen. “But it occurs to me that I don’t really know much about you. Leliana tells me you escaped the chaos in Orlais?”

Oh Maker, are you going to have to get into your personal history with the Inquisitor? Okay, no need to panic. You’ve done this a thousand times before. This is no different.

“Ah, y-yes, y-your holiness. I l-lived in a little v-village... n-not really that f-far from here. Off to the n-northwest. It was sacked by Red Templars. I managed to escape and fled to the Inquisition.” You pause in your work, sighing as you slip more comfortably into your role in the situation at hand. “Feels like ages ago... But I guess it really wasn’t that long.”

“I’ve found that time seems to be taking it’s time lately,” the Inquisitor says dryly. “And yet I still never seem to have enough of it.” You can relate. “You have been very busy since you arrived, that’s probably not helping. Solas, Sera, Iron Bull... the Chargers, several groups of refugees, a creaking wagonload full of books, a random assortment of goats, and a violent assault.”

Your hands tighten a bit spasmodically in Snowblind’s mane, though you cover it by running your hands through as if combing. “And none of those things were even my job,” you add neutrally, smiling a bit. “Particularly not the violent assault.”
“I am sorry about that,” the Inquisitor informs you. “We can’t really comb our men for that sort of tendency ahead of time, though Maker knows we try. Still, it’s unconscionable that you found yourself injured within Skyhold.”

“The man in question was arrested immediately,” you say with a thin smile. “Really, what more can a woman ask for?” You don’t think he picked up on the sarcasm there.

“Yes... although I’m afraid neither of us will get to see justice meted out properly. I’m unsure if you heard, but the man died just before we left Skyhold.”

You pause as your suspicions are confirmed. “Well... I suppose the Maker meted out justice for you, then, your holiness,” you say finally, and catch sight of the Inquisitor grinning. He gives you a pat on the shoulder that makes your tired knees quake.

“That’s an excellent way of looking at it. And hopefully, you’ll have much better luck on this trip than you’ve been having in Skyhold. The best of the Inquisition are here to keep an eye out for you.”

That was hopefully not meant to sound as threatening as it absolutely did.

“Oh, and...” The Inquisitor frowns slightly. “Don’t spend so long with these horses that you forget to eat dinner. It’s important for your health, especially on a journey like this.”

You can’t help it; it catches you so off-guard that you snort. He tilts his head to the side, and you clear your throat.

“Pardon me, your holiness, it’s just that you sounded like Solas just then.”

The Inquisitor grimaces, wrinkling his nose and making a truly disgusted noise, and you try very hard not to laugh again, although you’re sure your lips twitch into a shaky smile.

“The two of you have become... rather close,” he says, and that’s a statement but he seems to want you to respond to it.

“I suppose. We did a lot of good work in Val Royeaux. It was satisfying.”

“He seems very, uh... concerned with your health,” the Inquisitor continues, and you almost can’t believe how bad he is at this. Well you’re sure not helping him. You just nod. “The two of you got... very close, in Val Royeaux?”

He’s about as subtle as Blackwall. Which is remarkable, all things considered.

“It was a lot of work, unexpectedly, but we managed to finish it all between the two of us,” you say with a smile, as if you have no idea what he’s implying. “It was nice to work with someone so competent.”

“So, he’s someone you... just work with...?”

Maker, this is painful. How is he their leader.

“As opposed to?” you say, radiating pure innocence. The way the Inquisitor is refusing to meet your eyes is kind of hilarious, all things considered. He already thinks you’re a whore, so why is he bothering to ask...? He seemed more than willing to assume you were fucking the Iron Bull with only the slightest of suggestions. Then again, everyone fucks the Iron Bull so maybe that’s less of a surprise.
“Inquisitor, could I have your help with something?” comes Cassandra’s voice, and the Inquisitor almost bolts, saying something about “duty calling.”

For your part, you manage to wait until he’s gone before muffling your mirthful laughter against Snowblind’s side. What an idiot...!

You’re still finishing up work with the horses when you hear the first howl. You perk up curiously, trying to pinpoint the direction and distance. Howling wolves isn’t normally a major issue for you, unless they sound particularly close. Of course, you don’t normally have a dozen-odd horses with you, who immediately begin to spook at the sound. The Inquisitor and a few others immediately run over to help you get them all tied to trees so that you at least don’t have to worry about them bolting.

“They won’t come towards us, right?” you ask, frowning. You don’t like the idea of wolves running into tied-up horses.

“If they’re normal wolves? No, probably not,” Dorian replies. “If they’re possessed wolves, like we’ve been seeing thanks to the rifts? Almost definitely.”

“Possessed wolves?” you exclaim before you can stop yourself.

“The rifts are allowing untold numbers of demons into our world. Animals are significantly easier to possess than people, even mages,” Cassandra informs you. “There has been a sharp increase in the reports of possessed animals and animal attacks all over since the Rift formed.”

“Maker...” you mutter. Two days out of Skyhold and already it’s turning to chaos.

“We should double the guard tonight, just in case,” the Inquisitor decides. “Maybe they’re just wolves, but we can’t risk it. Cassandra, help me work up a schedule?”

Cassandra nods, and the two of them wander off. You stay by the horses, trying to comfort them, though all you really get for you trouble is bitten and knocked over a few times. You’re not sure whether to think “poor things” or “little bastards,” honestly. The harts are spooked too, and you have to duck swinging horns pretty regularly while trying to calm them down. It’s amazing you haven’t gotten knocked out by one of them by now.

You’re finally taking a break from the horses when you overhear the guard shifts. Cassandra and Solas have the second watch together... meaning you could, perhaps, get some well-deserved rest. You snag some late dinner and do a bit of work in your tent by the dying light of your lyrium ball while waiting. The howling continues, on and off, but you honestly can’t tell whether or not it’s getting closer. You’re still near the mountains, it’s not like wolves are uncommon here... But you’ve never seen a possessed wolf–let alone a whole pack of them–and you really have no desire to.

You’re relieved when the shift changes and Cole shows up in the tent. How he does it without needing to open the damn flap is beyond you, or maybe you just don’t notice him doing it... You suppose it doesn’t really matter.

“Solas and Cassandra on watch?” you ask hopefully. Cole nods, and you grin. “And no one even suggested I take a shift. I guess there’s some benefit to being dead weight after all.” You hesitate, briefly, as you climb into your sleeping bag. “...This is safe, right?” you ask finally. You don’t like how nervous your voice sounds. Scared. Younger than you normally sound but closer to your actual age, maybe. “You’ll wake me if someone comes even slightly close, right? You won’t leave without waking me up, no matter what?”
Cole nods seriously, and you bite your lip. It still feels dangerous. Maybe the nap you got last night can be enough to last you, and after this trip you can... hole up in a... cave and...

For as long as you’re with the Inquisition, you will never be able to sleep in real safety.

No matter how much you want to, you can’t go without sleep forever.

A calculated risk is better than a disaster later.

“You know that if they find me, I’ll run, and you’ll never see me again...?" you prompt Cole. He nods again, just as seriously. “And you still think it’s important and safe enough?” Another nod. You sigh.

You don’t like it.

But you really like being able to sleep.

So you curl up into your bag and let Cole ferret you away into sleep, the way he does.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys here’s your regular reminder to please follow me on Tumblr for more regular news than I can really reasonably deliver here. I also have a Twitter if you just want to hear about updates. I just remembered I had it, like, this week, but I'm gonna start using it again. (To announce updates. And like nothing else. I cannot be trusted to manage more than one social media account.)
Friends and Family

Chapter Notes

Good morning, hello, I am so tired! Whoo!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bandits, bandits. Always, it’s bandits. A toss up as to whether they’ll be a threat, a laugh, or a good time. Maybe a combination of the three this time because they might be able to do you a bit of harm, but that just means you have more of an excuse to defend yourself. You’ve had to be so careful since you left Rivain, but surely now you’re justified in cutting loose and having a pig roast—

The arrows come from all around you, your first indication that this is a dream. In reality, there had been many arrows, but all from behind you. Then the wolf had come.

Your eyes trace his vallaslin as he looks over the corpses. He’d ‘saved’ you, and you suppose in a sense he did, since a bunch of Dalish arrows in corpses is a better look than a whole copse of trees and corpses burned to ash. You’re trying to avoid Templar attention.

But the wolf...

“He’s a sweetheart!” the Dalish laughs as you run a shaking hand through wolf fur. “Look, he loves you.”

“Can they love?”

“Everything can love, falon!”

He is like a dog, but not like a dog. Looking at him, as you find yourself doing, his build is different, as is his temperament. He’s wild, he’s free, and he is not owned by the Dalish. He accompanies. He is a partner and he is a friend.

He is like an elf, but not like an elf. Looking at him, as you find yourself doing, his life is different, as is his spirit. He lives in the woods and climbs trees the way you climbed buildings. He is like you but so different, but you complement each other like long lost cousins.

“What Clan?”

“No Clan.”

He shows you how to tell if a branch will hold before you trust it with your weight, how to avoid roads and not get lost, how to sneak by shem towns without anyone knowing. You teach him how to dance like they do in Rivain, around a fire to nothing but the beat of hands on the ground. You learn to skin a rabbit; he learns to swipe pies off window sills.

You’re two sides of the same two-bit copper coin, beautiful and wretched and loved and hated, and
when you reach Kirkwall, you learn that not all Dalish love their cousins.

You wake peacefully, roused from a long sleep by Cole. It’s still dark out, and Solas will likely be asleep for hours still, but you wind up leaving the tent just to stretch your legs. The only ones awake are the current watch, Cassandra and Dorian, but they leave you alone. There’s still a biting chill in the air, and a wicked wind coming down off the mountains, but you lay in the grass and look up at the stars and think about the past.

The next person up is Blackwall, over by the fire. Preparing breakfast again? You wander over to him for want of anything better to do. You don’t really feel like digging into your books in the dark again. Working in a tent is uncomfortable all around, and you’re just not in the mood, feeling nostalgic and wistful after the memories in your dream.

“Are you our official breakfast chef?” you ask lightheartedly as you plop down next to him on the log someone had hauled over so that no one would have to squat in the snow.

“Not official,” he says with a throaty sort of half-chuckle. “I’m just used to getting up very early.”

You nod. “As am I.” You don’t mention that’s because you never sleep, and that when left in peace to forge your own sleep schedule you wind up sleeping halfway to noon. He doesn’t need to know that. You’re a early riser now, that’s all that matters. “Since I’m already up, and not much use on watch, perhaps I can be of assistance?” you suggest.

Blackwall shrugs, but doesn’t protest, so you settle in to help with breakfast. What else are you going to do? The horses are already set from last night; all you really have to do is saddle them. Although, frankly, you’d think these idiots could saddle their own horses.

He sets you to chopping apples and breaking up chunks of oatmeal, explaining as you do how the armies in the Free Marches “forage” as they go. You can’t help but snort.

“I’m very familiar with the concept of foraging. The Orlesian military is very fond of it.” You gesture at the pan in which Blackwall is beginning to cook the oats and apples down into a crumble. “This recipe, as well, I’ve seen from the Orlesian army. Probably because apples were the primary crop where I used to live.” You roll your eyes. “I suppose armies are much the same anywhere—ah!” You reach forward as he begins to season the food, wincing.

“What?” he asks, looking alarmed.

“Don’t just... pour it on like that, here...”

You wind up trading campfire cooking techniques, more or less. You’re not as good at it as you’d like to be, but the few things you do know, you know very well. It’s nice to pick up some new tricks, and Maker knows Blackwall certainly needed a few of yours, for the sake of producing food that didn’t actually taste like it was made by a soldier.

“Where did you learn this?” he asks curiously as you rearrange the pot over the fire.

“Not one place in particular. I actually haven’t traveled that much at all... until I joined up with the Inquisition, anyway,” you add, not as bitterly as you’d like to. “Mostly, from caravaneers and the like. Probably why it’s so different from military techniques.”

You stretch, wincing as strained muscles clench and twist. “Every time I’ve traveled in the past, there have been wagons involved,” you lie dryly. “A single trip to Val Royeaux and back did not prepare me for this.”
“You’ll pick it up soon enough,” Blackwall assures you. “You’re a clever one, and you pick up things well and learn them quickly. You couldn’t even ride a hart when you first arrived, and you’ve already mastered a few things I just showed you,” he says, gesturing down to where you’ve finished cutting apples as requested.

You flush a bit, in both surprise and pleasure at the unexpected praise. You couldn’t imagine the Warden saying such a nice thing to you, given your rocky start with him. It’s beyond satisfying. It hadn’t felt good that one of the only Wardens you’d had any extended contact with had basically hated you the second he laid eyes on you. Like he could smell the lies. It’s a relief he’s warmed up to you.

He’s not Leah, but if he approves of you, maybe she would have too. What would she have thought of the woman you’ve grown into...? Would she approve of your trickery, or be disgusted by it? Could you trust her with any of your secrets, if she were still here? If you met her, would she recognize you? Would she even remember you if you were brought to mind, or have you become another child’s face, faded over time, forgotten to too many sleepless nights spent trying to forget all those she’d lost?

You realize, belatedly, that at some point, more people had awoken and climbed out of their tents. Probably the smell of breakfast, or just the barest peaking of light over the horizon. Your eyes train on Solas automatically. He looks irritated, but he always seems to, in the mornings. Like he’s upset he even has to be conscious and vertical at all. You can relate, a bit.

You wolf down a bit of breakfast as quickly as it’s done, and head over to the mounts by the time everyone else is beginning to gather. Anyone paying attention is probably aware of what you’re doing, but whatever; you have a solid excuse. Those mounts aren’t going to saddle themselves.

Your formation is completely different now that you’re out of the mountains and into the plains proper, more or less. It’s still very hilly, but you’re not on some craggy cliff, at least. Also, there’s considerably less snow. It’ll probably be gone completely by the end of the day, as you continue to travel west away from the Frostbacks. It’s only halfway through Kingsway, after all.

You’re not quite on the Imperial Highway proper, yet, but you’re on a path well-cleared by the Inquisition. You’re in more of loose, chaotic mob of five, with a scouting group on ahead, well out of sight. That scouting group is comprised of Cole and Seeker Pentaghast, leaving you in the dubious company of the Inquisitor... but also Blackwall, Dorian, Sera and Solas. Not that it really matters, since now you’re all really moving. You understand, now, why they brought two mounts each. There’s absolutely no way a horse could keep this pace up with a rider all day. It’s not quite a hard gallop, but it’s fast enough that you’re struggling to keep your hair from flying loose.

You can barely breathe properly, let alone talk, but that doesn’t seem to be stopping anyone else, who bark conversations back and forth when necessary... or when utterly unnecessary, as is the case with Blackwall and Dorian. You don’t even catch the beginning of it, but your ears focus in on angry voices as soon as it can make them out, cutting through the sound of wind and hooves.

“You have something to say, mage?” You stiffen when you hear it, shocked that Blackwall would aim something so dripping with hatred at Solas. Had you ever seen them talk? Maybe that’s why Sera... but no, he’s talking to Dorian, as it turns out.

“If I had something to say, I’d say it,” he says, stiffly and with just as much irritation.

“That’s it? I’d expect more from a man who can’t stop talking about how clever he is.”
“And I'd expect no less from a brutish thug.”

Maker what in the Void is happening?! You look between the two of them in shock, but no one seems to be paying them much mind.

“Better that than a pompous brat,” Blackwall shoots back, and you’re just beginning to wonder if you should figure some way to break them up when the Inquisitor moves his mount between them.

“If we're going to fight at each other's side, we need to get along,” he says, sounding very tired. For once, you can’t blame him.

“Tell that to mister barely concealed envy issues!” snaps Dorian, huffing.

“You two are such men,” Sera comments dryly. You privately agree.

“Well, I'm a man,” Blackwall snipes, and you frown. Seriously?

“Best pound your chest so nobody doubts,” Dorian fires back, and you’re worried they’re going to start in on each other again, but the Inquisitor manages to stop them.

“Enough!”

They grumble, but at least stop bickering with each other. Maker, what was that? You’d noticed that Blackwall didn’t get along with Dorian before, but they at least hadn’t been actively at each other’s throats. Well. That you’d seen. That had been a while ago, and only for a short time.

You focus back on riding and not falling off of Revas. The hard canter is going to be the death of you, and it keeps going for what feels like hours but is probably not even one. But even a hart can’t keep that up forever, so eventually you slow to a more reasonable trot to rest the horses. Thank the Maker. You’re still breathing heavily, but everyone else seems more or less fine. How? Ugh.

“Do you use spirits as servants, Solas? You'd have no trouble capturing them.”

OH MAKER DORIAN NO. DORIAN. WHAT ARE YOU DOING, NO.

“No,” comes Solas’ short, predictable reply. He doesn’t sound as irritated as Blackwall had been, but you know damn well that he rarely does. “They are intelligent, living creatures. Binding them against their will is reprehensible.”

“How much ‘will’ do they have? They're amorphous constructs of the Fade.”

You run a hand over your mouth, then feign a yawn even though you don’t think anyone is looking at you, just to hide your expression. Dorian is batting zero for conversations today, and you’d like very much to pull him out of it, but this is a subject you need to stay very, very far away from. The Inquisitor is right there, and he has Templar training!

Solas hums noncommittally in response, and Dorian continues gamely on, as oblivious that he’s treading on cracking ice as he ever is with subjects his Tevinter education blind him on.

“There's no harm putting them to constructive use, and most mages back home treat them well.”

“And any that show any magical talent are freed, are they not?” Solas asks, his voice positively dripping sarcasm, or at least it seems so to you. You have to bite your lip not to make a sound, seeing immediately what he’s doing.

“What?” Dorian asks, obviously confused. “Spirits... don't have magical talent.”
“Oh, I’m sorry. I thought you were talking about your slaves.”

Dorian clamps his mouth shut, sending an immediate glance your way. You quickly look away, trying to pretend you hadn’t heard every word. Dorian might mumble something quietly in response, but he mostly just sort of moves his horse away from the others. Not banking to fail at conversation three times in one morning, perhaps...

Slowly, a realization dawns on you. People, uh...

People don’t like Dorian.

You don’t know why it took you so long to realize. The times you’d hung out with him in a group had been, what, once or twice? And every time, you’d noticed friction between him and the others. You’d even taken advantage of it, with Iron Bull, playing them against each other to create a bit of a break for yourself. You hadn’t thought a thing of it, really. He was so forward and friendly with you, you’d just assumed he was like that with everyone. And he seems to be, or at least be trying, with Solas, but...

...

Is... Is he... Is that why he makes time for you? Pops down to the rotunda when no one else even deigns to enter it, like it’s cursed. You’re an ex-slave, how in the Maker’s name would you be the only person willing to look past the fact he’s Tevinter? Or is it that why, are you just the only one who understands the culture he’s from? Does everyone else think...

You feel inexplicably bad.

Despite the fact you’re still lightly wheezing, you move Revas closer to him. You’re not the best at steering Revas, actually, so it takes a little bit of doing. Normally you just sort of trust the hart to more or less go where you need him to. He even tries to poke Azrael, Dorian’s mount, once he’s close enough. You give him a swat, though, and he stops, snorting and shaking his head. Ridiculous hart. He’s probably just still sour about having to share your favor.

“So... Dorian,” you say, voice coming out a bit hoarse. You glance over; he looks nervous. Does he expect you to say something about the slave thing? You suppose that in his position, that’s what you’d be worried about.

Maker. You never thought you would be in the position to worry about the feelings of an Altus. Not like this, in any case.

You had come here without anything resembling a conversation plan.

“...hhave you come out this way before?” you manage, which is a step above talking about the weather.

“Ah... yes. I was with the Inquisitor’s team when we first went to the Approach,” he tells you. Which you’d already known, come to think of it. Ugh. You’re terrible at small talk, and worse at making people feel better.

“Did you guys ride this hard the first time?” you ask, deciding this will be easier if you give up your pretense of not being absolutely miserable.

“Easily,” Dorian says dryly. “And harder on the way back. The Inquisitor is not fond of traveling so far away from Skyhold.”
“No?” You think he’s probably been more absent than he has been there, since you joined.

“I think he fears another attack like at Haven,” Dorian admits, glancing over at the Inquisitor where he rides at the head of the group. Your gaze follows him. Such an average looking man, even in his armor. Even knowing he’s the Inquisitor, it’s a bit difficult to believe. He certainly doesn’t have a commanding presence.

“Were you there for the attack?”

“Barely. I showed up perhaps fifteen minutes before the entire Venatori army.”

“Holy shit, really?”

“Did I never tell you the story of my dashing heroics?” Dorian says, sounding bemused. “That doesn’t sound like me.”

“Well, you have until we start galloping again to tell me now.”

“Oh? What happens when we start galloping again?”

“Fifty percent chance I fall off and roll away into the horizon, never to be seen again, one hundred percent chance I lose the ability to breathe and the only thing you get out of me is a mildly impressed wheeze.”

You serve as a bit of a distraction for Dorian, and stick with him even after you pick up speed and, true to your word, you manage little more than the occasional alarmed squeak. He certainly needs your company more than anyone else here.

Dorian shoots up a colored ball of light when you stop for lunch. It startles you, but he explains that it’s to let the ahead team know. Makes sense. And the presence of an ahead team means you’re probably significantly less likely to be stabbed by any bandits, which you appreciate. Well, that and the fact that you’re not carrying an overloaded cart of valuables.

After the others group up and join you, you take your time switching the gear around, unsaddling and re-saddling horses and harts. You’re... not super great at it. Oh, the harts you’ve long since gotten the hang of, but the horse saddles are different and Snowblind and Azrael keep trying to step on your feet. You’re reaching under Stormcloak to tighten his straps while Lady Knickers chews amiably on your hair--you’ve long since given up on stopping her--when she’s suddenly pulled away. You glance up, surprised, to see Blackwall with his hand on her reins.

“Thought I’d give you a hand, since you helped with breakfast,” he says with a bit of a smile, and you give a hesitant smile back. You’re supposed to be avoiding people, but right now, you won’t say no to a little help.

With Blackwall’s help, you manage to get the horses taken care of in time to grab a few bites of lunch, and then you’re clambering up on Vhas. Which means you feel like you’re doing a split basically immediately. And once you start a full canter?

You’re never going to walk straight another day in your life, you’re fairly sure.

You’re managing, however, with much wincing and wheezing and giving up on your hair and just letting it loose and tucking it into the back of your shirt. Until you see a ball of colored light shoot into the sky in the distance. The Inquisitor slows, and Vhas fortunately follows suit on his own,
because you’re too distracted to pull on his reins.

“Green, that means demons! They’ll need back-up,” the Inquisitor calls out.

“Uh...” you wheeze uncertainly. “What do I...?”

“Stay here, obviously,” the Inquisitor says.

“Alone, with seven horses?” Blackwall points out.

“Solas, stay with her,” the Inquisitor orders quickly. “Everyone else, with me, quickly.”

Blackwall, Sera, Dorian, and the Inquisitor all gallop off ahead while you and Solas gather up the spare mounts and bring them off the road. It’s more difficult for you than you’d like to admit; you’re hardly a natural herder. But you do get them out of the way, and then shift uncomfortably on Vhas’ back. Would it be alright for you to get off and stretch your legs, or should you stay on in case something happens? You’d probably be less sore riding Bull than you are right now.

“How are you?” Solas asks, startling you out of your thoughts. You must give him a blank, confused look, because he clarifies. “Unfamiliar company, unfamiliar job, unfamiliar mount. And now demons.”

“I’ll be fine so long as the demons stay far, far away,” you say, eying the direction the others rode off in. “They will, right?”

“Most likely. If there is a rift, the Inquisitor can close it.”

“And they do this all the time... right?” you ask, a bit nervously. “It’s not like they’ll be hurt, right...?”

“All of our companions are expert fighters,” he assures you, which isn’t quite a guarantee. But you suppose there are never any guarantees.

“... Do you think I’ll see any on this trip? Demons, I mean.”

“... Probably,” Solas admits, and you whip your head over to stare at him.

“Seriously?!”

“I’m not going to lie about it!”

“Maker, why am I doing this,” you moan, covering your face with your hands–and, incidentally, the reins.

“It will be fine. Even if you see one, I assure you, we’ll all do our best to keep them away from you.”

“Oh, well that’s fine then!” you snap. “As long as they’re out of claw reach I should be absolutely fine with all the demons.”

“Emma...”

You flop forward on Vhas, forgetting for a moment that he doesn’t know you as well as Revas, and groan into his mane. He twists his head back to watch you. “I don’t know why I’m still complaining,” you complain, voice muffled by Vhas’ neck. “It’s hardly going to help.”

“I’ve never found loud complaining to be a good demon deterrent, no,” Solas agrees, and you snort,
then sit up slightly, still slouching over Vhas’ back.

“This sucks. Vhas’durghen, you are fat and my legs hurt.”

Vhas snorts, looking indignant.

“A fitting name,” Solas says, sounding amused. “Do you name everything you find?”

“Yes,” you say flatly. “Do you want to hear what I named you?”

“Spare my poor ears that much profanity. Does this much riding have you stiff, then?”

“No, sitting at a desk for six hours makes me stiff. This has me tenderized. But I expect I’ll get used to it.”

“Rather than attempt to heal you on any regular basis—since I already know you’ll say no—”

“He can learn!”

“I could show you some stretches,” he continues, as if you hadn’t said anything. “They might help with the soreness, and prevent it in the future.”

“Did you learn them in the Fade?”

“You are very mouthy today.”

“I thought you liked my clever tongue,” you say, slipping into Elvhen that you know you’re getting right only because you heard him say it before.

“If Sera hears you, she may cry,” Solas says, and you can’t help but laugh.

“Alright. Stretches, then. The ones you do in the morning?” Solas nods as a slow motion flash of memories of his stretches, as viewed by you, play through your mind. “...Yeah, okay.” You are such a weak person sometimes.

“So I take it by your panic that you’ve avoided demons even after the rift opened?”

“Maker, yes. I’m sure I’d be dead if I hadn’t,” you say with a snort. Solas raises a single eyebrow, as if to remind you of all the things he’s seen you do. “I’m serious! They’re demons, Solas, it’s not like getting mugged. I wouldn’t even know where to stab one!”

You’re spared from any further interrogation on the subject by the sight of horses heading towards you. You stiffen, briefly, but it’s quickly evident that it’s just the Inquisitor and companions. You quickly do a head count, but they all seem to be there and upright. You even catch sight of Cole. Probably because he knew you’d be looking for him and wanted to make sure you knew he was okay.

There are a few injuries, but nothing even as serious as the injuries your group had gotten from the bandit attack on the way back to Val Royeaux. Solas has everyone looked after in short order.

“Another rift?” Solas asks the Inquisitor as he heals a cut on his shoulder.

“Just a small one. Cassandra probably could have handled it alone.”

“Not without your mark,” Seeker Pentaghast says with a snort. “Even if we cleared out the demons, more would simply arrive later.”
You’ve never actually seen the Inquisitor’s mark. If Solas’ guess about your future luck is correct, you probably will eventually, but you don’t really want to be close enough to a rift to see it in action. Oh, sure, you’re deadly curious... about the rifts and the mark, both. You’d love a chance to study them. But the descriptor “deadly” is there for a reason, and there are things so stupid that even you won’t do them. You’d learned a lesson about caution on such matters long ago, and you weren’t going to risk your life just for a chance at something you want to know.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, if you like my story, please check me out on other social media, especially Tumblr where you can support me as an author and also occasionally participate in fun stuff like ask memes and giveaways. There's also my Twitter and even a Discord (find the link via Tumblr!) but I'll be honest the Discord is mostly us shooting the shit with the random storyline sneak peek thrown in when I'm working at 2AM.
By the time you quit riding for the day, you’re dead on your feet. Or, well, dead on your ass, anyway. You quite literally fall off of Vhas, slumping off of him and collapsing directly onto the ground to just sort of. Lay. For a while. Without having to move. He bends his head down to you, snuffing directly into your face, then snorting, getting you nice and disgustingly covered in saliva. You shove his face away and sit up with a groan.

You have fourteen mounts to care for.

Uuuuuugh.

You creak to your feet and stumble through their care, getting shoulder checked a few times and nearly losing your foot to a well-placed stomp from Stormcloak. Rubbing them all down takes longer than it probably would if you could focus clearly, and you have to squint at each hoof to make sure you don’t miss any rocks. It’ll just be more work for you later if you do.

Much later, after they’ve all been seen to, you stumble over to the fire for some very belated stew. Everyone else has already finished, but at least they left you a bowl. Nice of them. You collapse down onto the ground, entirely missing the log someone dragged over to serve as a chair. You lack the force of will to get up, so you just sort of slump on the ground and lean against it.

“Hey you, look dead to the world, doncha?”

You don’t even have the energy to be startled as Sera plops down onto the log, right next to your head. You look up at her through half-lidded eyes, trying not to pass out into your stew.

“M’tired,” you mumble, then yawn, not bothering to even try covering it. “And I’ve been doin’ the splits on that fat hart for like twelve hours.” You hear a snort from over by the mounts and raise your voice. “You heard me, tubby.”

“Not sleepin’ well?”

“Not any more or less than usual. Which is a miracle, honestly, since this is less than ideal sleeping conditions,” you grumble.

“Your the one who wanted to sleep with the creepy,” she points out sourly.

“S’not what I meant,” you say, poorly stifling another yawn. Right, she’s probably kind of mad about that. You can’t really hold that against her; you’d dodged sleeping with her like it was an arrow aimed at your heart. Which it was, kind of. “I’m not used to sleeping on the ground. Or in a tent. Or anywhere but a bed, these days.”

“More comfortable than the beds back in Denerim, right?”
You snort. “Yeah, I guess so! Except for–” You cut yourself off, remembering that she remembers you, or sort of does. Remembers Dirth’len, but hasn’t connected the dots. Too much dissonance between who you were then and who you are for her now. Details would out you, when you’d just as rather she believe the kid she knew to be one more casualty. It’s just... easier.

“How about that?”

“Remember sleeping on the roof during the summer?”

“Maker, barely!” she says with a laugh. “Yer older than me, I could barely climb up by myself.”

You grin, remembering carrying toddlers up the building, tied to your back, so they could get out of the stifling heat inside the windowless orphanage. “Guess I am, yeah.”

“Too cold out here for that bullshit now,” she says with a snort, and you laugh, still staring up at the endless expanse of stars.

“Sure fuckin’ is. What’re the nights like out in the desert?”

“This time of year? Proly pretty cool. Depends on the weather, I guess.”

“Bet there’s nice stargazing out there, though.” You reach up towards the sky, idly. “Remember on clear nights, what it was like to be that high up? We used to dream about climbing up onto the top of Fort Drakon, so that there would be nothing to block our view. Just stars from horizon to horizon.”

“Yeah... An’ look at us, we still keep climbin’ shit. Old habits die really hard.”

“I think it’s normal,” you say, still staring up. “Everyone who starts low is going to try to climb high. We started with the roof of an orphanage and just never stopped climbing.”

“You stupid poetic sometimes, you know that?”

“Professional liability.”

—

"Elgara vallas, da’len
Melava somniah
Mala taren aravas
Ara ma’desen melar."

It echoes in the cave, until it sounds like a choir must be singing to you. You curl up tighter, eyes heavy. The flickering of the fire burns in the back of your eyes even with your lids closed, fighting to keep the winter winds away. It’s cold here, snow thick on the ground outside. But your mother’s lap is warm and safe. Nothing can get you here.

"Iras ma ghilas, da’len
Ara ma’nedan ashir
Dirthara lothlen’as
Bal emma mala dir.”

Tomorrow will be another long day of walking. It’s difficult for your short legs to keep up, but your mother had traded the mule away at the border. You haven’t been on roads in a long time. An animal would attract attention, bandits. People who might remember a single elven woman and child. So you walk, and your mother carries you when you can’t keep up, or trip and stumble over
too many roots.

"Tel’enfenim, da’len
Irassal ma ghilas
Ma garas mir renan
Ara ma’athlan vhenas
Ara ma’athlan vhenas."

It’s tiring, but every day brings something new, and this is the only life you’ve ever known. Sometimes on the road, sometimes with caravans, sometimes alone in the woods, but always moving. You once asked your mother if you were going anywhere in particular.

"Tel’enara bellana bana’vhenadahl,
Sethen’a ir san’shiral, mala tel’halani"

You’re always excited when you pass through villages. You want to see everything, taste everything, touch everything. Your mother warns you never to be caught stealing, or you will surely be killed. She wants you to leave everything to her, but you are a willful child. So instead of stealing, you learn how to swindle. And you tell your mother of your daring exploits around the campfire at night. You never stay in town; you have never known a shemlen bed.

"Ir sa’vir te’suledin var bana’vallaslin,
Vora’nadas san banal’hui emma abel revas."

“Why do we walk, Mamae?”

“It’s our nature, dirth’len.”

“Other people stay in one place. They have houses and things!”

“Do you want a house and things?”

You consider. “A little, sometimes, but I think I would get bored.”

Her laughter is the rain on a canopy of leaves. “You take after me.”

“Who else would I take after?”

"Ir tela’ena glandival, vir amin tel’hanin.
Ir tela las ir Fen halam, vir am’tela’elvahen."

“Wake up.”

“Athen da’mel, mamae,” you mutter sleepily, shoving vaguely at your mother.

“Solas is going to bed.”

“Quenathra solas...” You blink sleepily, eyes finally opening to take in your surroundings. Canvas overhead. The echoes of lullabies are just in your head. Right. Yes. You’d gone to bed. “Oh...” You sit up, then yawn. “How long has it been?”

“Not very.”

You’d fallen asleep with Cole’s aid, with your aura still hidden. You hadn’t slept very well, and you
feel even more well-tenderized than when you’d laid down. No choice, really; Seeker Pentaghast had first watch.

“Mmm... Cole, do you have watch this evening?”

“Much later.”

“Could you do me a favor? Another one, I mean.” You yawn again, as he nods. “North of here is d’Argent. There should be some elven refugees that have settled into the Keep, in service of the Comtesse. I’d go myself, but...” You gesture around at your surroundings. There’s not time for you to sneak off, but Cole can sneak very far, very fast. “Would you mind seeing if they’re there, if they’ve settled in and are being treated well?”

“Oh, okay,” Cole agrees, and in an instant, he’s gone.

You’re quite certain that everyone is taking that fellow for granted.

You spend the night puttering around in your tent, not really feeling like working on the tome but not wanting to dedicate yourself to getting up and dealing with people. You’re a bit worried about what all this time in the Fade will be doing to your aura. It’s still plenty thin, but eventually, that will change, and you’ll need to do something about it. The opportunity will probably present itself eventually, however. It’s only a matter of time before you can slip away unnoticed, or are given time by yourself. It’s easier on the road than it would be in Skyhold, with guards posted to every damned corner, that much is sure. You just have to be very careful of your company, because if the Seeker suspects anything at all, you are dead where you stand. Templars are one thing, but a Seeker?

Cole comes back in the wee hours before dawn with good news. The elven refugees you’d sent out to d’Argent, what feels like ages ago now, have indeed settled in well. Most work in the Keep. Cole even suspects several have been hired as spies. They have, actually, by uh, you. Or Banal’ras, rather, since that was the name you’d used in the first place. You have to actually tell him when you call in favors, and the opportunity had presented itself while you were in Val Royeaux. You’ll be able to get the Comtesse right back in your pocket in short order, no doubt. Particularly once she inevitably starts sleeping with more of the damn elves you’d shipped right to her front door.

You finally rise from lounging listlessly around your tent when you hear Blackwall outside. You see no reason not to help with breakfast again. It’s something to do, and he helped you yesterday. Plus you will need to tend to the mounts eventually, as well.

To your surprise, however, the two of you aren’t the only ones already up. Sera’s by the fire with Blackwall. She’s not fully dressed yet, just wearing breeches and a well-worn shirt that is very much not covering her stomach while she stretches arms up, yawning. You’re not staring. You’re looking away, quickly, to stare at a tree instead. Unfortunately, standing frozen in one spot, staring at a tree, is not super subtle, and Sera sees you right away.

“Em! You’re up early!” she says cheerfully.

“I told you she’s been up every—ow,” Blackwall hisses as she drives her heel into one of his feet.

“Yes,” you say, unable to keep a bit of a smirk off your lips. “I was going to help Blackwall with breakfast, but I see you two already have it covered.”

“N-no, I’m useless with a knife, remember?” Sera protests. “We could use help.”

“Are you going to be throwing the knives at the vegetables? Because otherwise, I’m sure there’s nothing I can do that you can’t. Maybe Cole needs my help with some spooky spirit stuff—"
“Oh, get over here, you ass.”

“Am I going to be a third wheel?” Blackwall says, sounding deeply amused, as you plop down onto the log next to Sera.

“Nah. She’s been trying to get the three of us hanging out since before we left Skyhold,” you say with a snort.

“And I was right, weren’t I?” she points out. “You two been gettin’ on fine over oatmeal.”

“Anyone could get on fine over oatmeal, Sera,” you inform her. “It’s the ultimate peacemaker.”

“Yes,” Blackwall says, nodding along. “Everyone knows that oatmeal caused the Llomerryn Accords.”

“If only the Tevinter Imperium and the Qunari could sit down over oatmeal—”

“Oh, you can both shut up.”

Sera gets the last laugh, really, because the three of you do get along quite well. The three of you finish cooking breakfast and eat it together while the rest of the camp begins springing to life around you. It’s easy to match their casual energy. Blackwall is more relaxed around Sera than he has been around you, or just about anywhere else you’d seen him. He’s quite deferential to Seeker Pentaghast and the Inquisitor, which you suppose is to be expected.

But his hostility towards Dorian is a bit bewildering to you. What had happened between the two of them? Surely it had to be something; the Inquisitor is a noble and way more of a dick than Dorian could ever dream. Maybe because Dorian is a mage? But he seems fine towards Solas, and Grey Wardens are normally pretty calm about mages. Because he prefers the company of other men? Blackwall seems fine around Sera, but some men are insecure or threatened in the presence of attractive gay men.

But then you’d think he’d be goddamn terrified of the Iron Bull, who is very interested in men and significantly more threatening in every way, including sexually. Maybe because Dorian is Tevinter? Could it be that?

You must have been staring at Dorian while musing it over, because Blackwall follows your gaze.

“Wouldn’t catch him helping cook,” Blackwall says dryly. “His royal highness probably couldn’t find a wooden spoon with both hands. Well, most noblemen can’t even find their ass with both hands, but he seems to have that covered.”

You frown, eyes snapping off Dorian to settle on Blackwall. His good humor quails somewhat, at the sight of what must be quite the glare from you. Wordlessly, you stand up, leaving your empty bowl by the fire, and stalk over towards the horses. Might as well get them saddled up and taken care of. Honestly, they’d probably be fine without you, but you’re annoyed and the horses have significantly less interpersonal drama.

You won’t have to deal with Blackwall for the rest of the day, at least. He’s in the advance team with Solas and Cole. Unfortunately, that leaves you with the Inquisitor, the Seeker, Sera... and Dorian, whom you gravitate towards immediately. You’re still a little cross with Sera, not because she’d done anything, but because she’s associated with your irritation at Blackwall. It’s not fair of you, but it’s there anyway. Perhaps if you were in a better mood, it wouldn’t be an issue, but...
Seeker Pentaghast is on Derreck. The hart. While his name is an endless source of amusement to you, the actual sight of her on him is brutally offensive to your eyes, infinitely fouling your mood. You know elves are slim pickings, and you can’t really blame the hart for working with what he’s got. You don’t blame the elves who settle in with humans, either, anymore than you blame a woman who stays with her abusive husband. You settle. You live. You hope for more. You fall, over and over, because a human is always a human, and when they need that power over you, all your years of love and all their words of humility will mean nothing.

It’s just a hart, you tell yourself. It doesn’t inherently connect to any other shitty thing humans have ever done and continue to do. A hart choosing a human out of need is not an elf choosing a human out of need is not that human inevitably abusing them. But you can’t help it. Your eyes hang on the Seeker, despite how you’re trying not to draw her attention.

They just take everything.

The Seeker and the Inquisitor wind up conversing between themselves and riding a bit ahead, so Sera ends up closer to you and Dorian. You’re between them, both literally and metaphorically, as they both attempt to make conversation with you whenever you stop galloping to rest the mounts and walk for a bit. It is. Exhausting.

Dorian is an idiot, Sera is a bitch, and you’re just trying to make sure neither of them idiot or bitch it up enough to start a fight. It’s a very thankless task.

You’re hugely relieved when you finally stop for lunch. It feels like you’ve been sandwiched between Clueless and Cretin for five years, not five hours. You are sick of being Buffer Elf. You’re looking forward to a little bit of time to yourself. Well, to yourself and a bunch of horses, but it is what it is. If nothing else, at least the horses give you an excuse.

Not that it actually works. Oh, sure, you tend to the mounts instead of, you know, eating like everyone else, but it doesn’t work to keep you from being bothered. Sera pops up when you’re on horse four of seven. Not to help, mind. Just to pester you, apparently.

“Ssssooo, why ya avoidin’ everyone?” she asks, because she is nothing if not direct. It’s actually the trait she has that you probably like best. It makes her difficult sometimes, but generally, it makes her significantly easier. You tend to always know where you stand with her, because she’d be terrible at keeping that secret even if she wanted to. “Thought it was jus’ me at first!” she continues on, lounging idly on the back of a horse that should probably be given time to rest rather than being used as a mattress. “But nah, s’everyone, innit?”

“I’m not avoiding people,” you lie. “I’m just trying to figure out how to do the job I have literally no experience with, that was assigned to me regardless.” You gesture, irritated, at the horse you’re brushing. Because the Inquisitor brought you instead of, oh this is just an idea, a stablehand.

“You don’t really hafta work as hard at it as you are,” Sera points out. “Normally we all kinda take turns an’ take care of our own mounts mostly.”

“Oh, well, that’s fine then,” you say, voice dripping sarcasm. “I’ll just slack off on the job the Inquisitor gave me, and assume there will be no consequences.”

“There proly wouldn’t be.”

“There would be for the horses, if no one bothered to take care of them for a few days,” you say with a scowl. “What if one of them got a stone lodged or threw a shoe? We could get delayed, or the other horse could get exhausted trying to carry someone for a full day. We’re kind of on an important
mission to save the Grey Wardens or possibly the world or something. I can’t just not do a shitty job I was given for inexplicable reasons because I don’t feel like it.”

Sera blinked, then laughed. “Yer work ethic is somethin’ else. You could jus’ tell us you can’t do it alone, we’d help!”

“No way,” you say, frowning. You’re not going to just say you can’t. You can! You can take care of these stupid fucking horses; you can deal with any bullshit they throw at you. You’re not going to admit defeat just because you keep getting stepped on, or bitten, or shoved around in general.

“We would!” Sera protests.

“No, I mean, I’m not going to say I can’t do it.” You point irritately at Snowblind, who snorts derisively. “He is not beating me. He is a horse. I am not going to be beaten by an animal.”

Sera bursts out laughing again, and you just scowl and keep working.

“Yer still avoidin’ people. Y’could hang out in the evenin’s!”

“I have an entire book to finish writing. On the road.”

“How much can ya possibly do in a tent? Y’should just do it once we get there.”

“I sincerely hope that if this was something that could wait that long, I would not have been brought along in the first place,” you say dryly, even though you very much suspect that’s not even slightly why you were brought. That’s still a nerve-wracking mystery to you, however. There are many possibilities, none of them good.

“Yer gonna burn out if all ya do is work! Ridin’ this much is tough, and yer not used to it. Y’need to relax and lay around.”

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

“C’mon! Just tonight, why don’t y’relax with me instead o’ goin’ right in to work on that dumb book?” She holds up her hands at the glare you level her with. “Sorry, ‘very important piece o’ history.’”

You sigh. “If I agree, will you roll off of Zephyr so I can brush her?”

“Her name’s Lady Knickers!”

“I’m not going to call her that.”

“I’m jus’ sayin’, he looks like he rolled through a fabric store ‘n’ it stuck to him!” Sera protests, gesturing vaguely at Solas as he takes off with the rest of the advance team.

“I think the fur adds a nice dimension of texture,” you argue. “Also, it’s easy to steal because he’s just sort of tied it on.”

“Are you sayin’ we should steal Solas’ fur?”

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t.”

“Do either of you have a lot of room to throw stones?” Dorian asks dryly. “Far be it from me to
defend our resident apostate hobo, but both of you look like you selected your wardrobes from a
collection of other people’s. None of your armor is even the same color, Emma.”

“I literally did exactly that, which renders your entire argument null and void,” you snipe back.

“I don’t think that’s how that works.”

“Yes, it absolutely is. Isn’t it, Sera?”

“Yes!”

“See?” you say, turning back towards Dorian. “Two against one.”

“I also don’t think that’s how that works.”

“But see, we do, so you’re outnumbered on that, too.”

Dorian lets out a very beleaguered sigh.

“S’not like anyone here’s a snappy dresser,” Sera points out, and you nod in agreement.

“Excuse me,” Dorian says, sounding mortally offended.

“Alright, aside from the three of us,” you allow.

“I don’t feel much better about that...”

The afternoon goes much more smoothly. Sera seems to have calmed down now that she’s figured out why you’ve been ‘avoiding’ her, and that means that she’s less snippish with Dorian. The conversation stays on fashion, more or less, for several hours. When you can talk at all, anyway, since you’ve not gained the capability to do that easily while cantering.

You pass through the territories of Lydes in mid-afternoon, though not through the city itself. The whole group stops briefly at a stables and inn to resupply, but you’re not stopping properly, which is a shame. You have things you could do in Lydes. You haven’t been this way in a while, and you have some contacts you could stand to touch bases with. Your retirement has rather spectacularly failed to stick, at this point. You’re probably going to need your old network just to survive this bullshit alive and unmaimed. You can retire again afterwards, if you survive.

But you’re not going in. You rest, instead, catnapping against the side of a barn while someone else takes care of resupplying the mounts. Everything was ready for you when you arrived, but it still takes time to pack these things. There were apparently also replacement mounts waiting here, if any had been tired out by the first four days of travel, but your mounts are all still in good condition.

No one says it’s thanks to you, but you decide it is anyway.

Being this close to Lydes makes you itch to be further into the city. Lydes had been very important in the days before civil war erupted in Orlais, and you have frankly no idea which of your contacts are still alive, let alone in position. Duke Remache’s death had left a power vacuum, and you hadn’t been around to take advantage of it, something that still leaves you twitchy. Banal’ras might have, but you haven’t had the chance to ask him about it. Or even the desire, because this is not supposed to be your life anymore.

You’d heard news of the Inquisition’s involvement in placing Duchess Monette in power. They’d moved fast and been one of the few organizations with the supplies to actually manipulate the
outcome. It had been a good move and given them a solid seat of power in Orlais.

It could have been you.

How nice it would be to have the Duchy of Lydes under your thumb. It would have been such a victory. You had shit on Carolina. But no, now you have Monette, and who even is she? A child, one you knew barely anything about.

Not that this should matter, because you’re retired and this is someone else’s job now. Contacts to survive does not mean actively trying to gain leverage and power. That sort of nonsense will just get you sucked right back in for the long term, because once you have ropes around the neck of a politician, you have to hold tight.

You yawn, idle plans you have no desire to complete flicking through your mind as you lounge in the sun. It’s almost relaxing, this constant background hum. It’s not actually, but... almost. It’s familiar, at least, but it leaves you feeling jittery, like you should be doing something.

The mid-afternoon rest leaves you... if not refreshed, at the very least ‘less exhausted’. You’re less dead to the world by the time you stop for the evening, and you don’t have to flop listlessly off of Revas. You even take a bit of time with him before getting to the rest of the mounts, letting him butt his head up against yours, petting his delightfully soft face.

Shame you can’t just spend the evening with him. Shame you can’t ride out a bit, have some privacy. Enjoy the Dales. A poor idea, given your luck in war-torn Orlais lately. But it would be nice, and a better way to relax and unwind than spending an evening with Sera. Privacy is in short supply for you as of late, and you’re coming to miss it exceedingly keenly. You can’t vanish into a crowd in Skyhold like you could in Val Royeaux... or anywhere else, really.

“Lemme help ya out, huh?” Sera’s voice comes cheerfully. “It’ll get done faster.”

“You think I’d say no?” you ask, not looking up from where you are, half-bent underneath Daine, brushing her stomach clean of dirt and burs. “You take Snowblind and Stormcloak.”

“Y’say that like I know which one’s which,” she says with a snort, and you roll your eyes and emerge partially from under the horse.

“Big black one and big white one. There and there.”

“Are they the ones that bite?” Sera guesses.

“Yes, but you volunteered to help.”

A helpful hand–even one clearly only slightly more experienced with horses than you–really does help work go a lot more quickly. The two of you still finish well after everyone else has eaten, but at least the food is still warm. You’d normally just wolf it down at record speed and wander off on your own, but you’re pretty well obligated to spend the evening with Sera, at this point. Not like you really wanted to go back to your tent and work on a tome in extremely shitty circumstances.

Sera seems to pick up on your antsiness and desire to be away from everyone else, or maybe she just shares it. Either way, the two of you wind up wandering out of camp. Close enough to still see and be seen—which is still closer than you’d like–but at least you have the illusion of privacy.

“Plus,” as Sera puts it, “It doubles fer watch!”

You don’t know how much watching you’re really accomplishing, and you for one would be a
really shitty first line of defense for any attacks. But if it functions as an excuse to be out of camp and away from the Inquisitor and Seeker, you’ll take it in a heartbeat.

“Far cry from Denerim,” you mutter as the two of you wander in vague circles around the Dales.

“S’a good thing though, innit? Fuck that place, right?”

You snort. “Well, I mean, yeah. I didn’t exactly race back after I got out of Seheron, that’s for damned sure. Although one alienage isn’t really much different from another, to be honest.”

“Did ya wind up in a lot of them?”

“Mm, yeah, I guess. Not really anywhere else to go, you know? Well, until I got to Rivain—it’s a lot more... mixed. But even then, we tend to congregate. Safety in numbers and all that, I suppose.”

“Stick mostly to th’ city?” she asks, and you simply nod in response. “Me too. Jus’ used to it I guess?”

“Yeah, I think if you’re raised there you just sort of are accustomed to life there. Although I guess I’ve spend my fair share of time in the Dales. It didn’t used to be dangerous like it is now. You could just wander out to gather herbs or visit your friend in Lydes or whatever.”

“Sometimes it feels like it’s always been a mess,” she says with a snort. “Stupid war.”

“Tell me about it. Sometimes it feels like I just dreamt up all my memories of home, before all this bullshit started... Oh, hey! Look!” You point, and Sera follows your gaze.

“A... rock?”

“Not just any rock! That rock’s got lizards underneath,” you inform her, squatting down next to it.

“How in the...”

“They always gather under this kind of wide, flat rock. I promise you, we flip this over, there’ll be a whole gaggle of them, especially this time of year. Gets cold at night in the Dales if you’re a lizard.”

“Why d’you even know that?”

“Dales lizards are an alchemy reagent. I used to sell them. It was easy enough to gather them when I was out getting herbs and whatnot.” You reach out and run your fingers along the edge of the rock. “Yeah, see, it’s warm to the touch. Means there’s a whole gaggle of squiggly bastards under there.”

“So how d’you catch ‘em?” Sera asks curiously, squatting down next to you to feel along the edge of the rock as well.

“Find me a basket and I’ll show you.”

One wild episode of lizard-flinging later, you and Sera have a basket full of wriggling, distressed lizards. Well you suppose technically it had been more than one. Sera had been so enthused by the concept of scooping and tossing and flipping that she’d demanded the two of you find more, so you’d tramped around near camp flipping rocks and scooping lizards.

“See, a haul like this would have netted us like five silver, easy,” you say proudly, sticking a hand into the writhing mass of lizardflesh. Several of them bite you, but it’s not like it hurts. “Most people
kill ‘em when they catch ‘em, but I figured out the knack for getting them alive without sacrificing quantity, and they go for way more alive.”

“Too bad we can’t ship ‘em back to the Inquisition,” Sera says with a snort. “I bet Adan could have a lot o’ fun with a lizard basket.”

“Yeah, maybe if we’d caught them before Lydes... but we wouldn’t even be able to keep them alive til the next time we stop, probably,” you say with a sigh. “A real shame.”

“What in the Maker’s name is that!?” comes a shocked voice from behind you. You and Sera whirl around in tandem, a few stray lizards sloshing out of the basket. Dorian is staring down at it, a combination of fascination and horror on his face.

“S’a... basket’a lizards?” Sera replies, holding it up slightly for emphasis.

“...Why do you two have a basket of lizards...?!”

“I was showing her how to catch them,” you explain, reaching in casually to pull one out and holding it out towards Dorian. “I used to sell alchemy reagents when I was between writing jobs.”

“Shame we can’t just send them back to the Inquisition...” Dorian muses, and the two of you nod.

“Yeah, we were just saying that,” you say. “It’s really such a good haul. I could never get this many on my own. Sera’s shockingly good at wrangling lizards.” Dorian choking out a laugh, and you grin. Sera just frowns.

“Why’s it shockin’? Just cause I’m from th’ city...”

“Yeah, I just didn’t think you had that much experience with lizards,” you reply, still grinning.

“Well, I don’t, but s’not like it’s hard to figure out.” Dorian makes a wheezing noise behind a clenched fist.

“Yeah, you’re right,” you say with a nod. “Doesn’t exactly take a master.”

“So,” Dorian interrupts, probably just to stop you. “What are you going to do with them?”

“Just let them go, I guess.” you say sourly.

“Yeah, maybe if we’d caught them before Lydes... but we wouldn’t even be able to keep them alive til the next time we stop, probably,” you say with a sigh. “A real shame.”

“Strongly disagree,” Sera interjects. “There are so many things we can do with an entire basket o’ lizards.”

“How many of those things would result in me getting my ass beat by a furious Seeker who’s covered in lizards?” you ask sourly.

“Proly like four.”

“Sera.”

“We can do one o’ the other things! Like, we could sneak ‘em into someone’s bedroll, they’d never even know it was us!”

“Right, because so many people here would catch a barrel of lizards and then fill someone’s bedroll with them.”
“Well they’d never know it was you anyway.”

“How’re we gonna get a bunch of lizards into someone’s bedroll without them noticing?”

“I believe,” Dorian interrupts with a bit of a flourish. “I may be of assistance.”

—

“Shh, shh, shh,” you giggle-whisper-hiss to Sera, who will not stop tittering as you overturn a basket full of lizards into Solas’ bedroll. He’s a safe target, because you can’t imagine him getting seriously furious with you for this. You have a good gauge for his anger at this point, since you keep pissing him off. This is nowhere near “and then he wakes up in the middle of the night to a half-naked Qunari climbing in his bedroom window,” and you survived that!

The lizards go right into the bedroll without much difficulty–it’s the warmest thing nearby. It’s their nature. The two of you scurry out of the tent, checking both ways for anyone watching first, then give the signal to Dorian, who’s risking life and limb trying to keep a very bored looking Solas distracted. Hopefully he’s managed not to say anything truly stupid about spirits this time.

It’s just as well Dorian had been distracting him, because nearly the second Dorian winds to a close and wanders off, Solas heads straight for his tent. The two of you stand, frozen to the spot, trying not to stare but absolutely staring. The flap of the tent closes behind him, and the three of you wait in tense silence, not even breathing.

And then the yelling starts.

“Partons en courant!” you exclaim, already turning to bolt, at the same time Sera yelps “cheese it!” and off the two of you scamper. You tear out of camp as far as you dare, then scurry up a particularly tall oak to watch the chaos finish unfolding from a distance. You can see Solas dragging his bedroll out of his tent, and you can hear the peels of laughter that unfold from everyone who doesn’t have to deal with a roll full of lizards. Dorian winds up getting the brunt of it, since he wasn’t very good at being an unsuspicious distraction, but that’s honestly fine, because double prank.

You and Sera crouch in the tree, giggling wildly and shushing each other, as if there’s any way they could possibly hear your laughter all the way over here.

Chapter End Notes

The elven in this was just a couple of ill-translated poems/lullabies. If you're really curious, you can read the translations on the Dragon Age wiki. This chapter WAS extra-long, thank you for noticing. My backlog weeps because of it, but it was Important For Pacing. (That's what I tell myself, glumly looking at my nearly-empty backlog and my broken-hearted desire to work on other projects as well.)

If you like me and/or my work, consider checking out my Tumblr, where you can find more of both!
I wanted to name this chapter #lizards but I have even less of an excuse for a title like that, tbh. Not that anyone reads the chapter names I don’t think.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You don’t leave the tree for a while. It’s relaxing, being up here. Reminds you of other trees and other people, but that doesn’t matter, because one friend in a tree is much the same as any other. At one point, Cassandra comes to check on the two of you—and let you know Solas has gone to sleep, so you don’t need to fear retribution for the prank you were very obviously the cause of—but Sera informs her that you’re not hiding, you’re keeping watch. And you continue “keeping watch” late into the night.

Sera tries one more time to get you to figure out how to shoot with a bow. You continue to be completely terrible at it, and she continues to be a wretched teacher, but between the two of you, you do sort of manage to actually draw the string, even if your arrows all miss the mark by about three feet.

“How are you so bad at this?” she asks, almost sounding impressed.

“That’s my secret, Sera, I’m bad at everything.”

“Liar!”

“No, I’m just really good at faking like I’m good.”

“Yer a terrible liar, too.”

“Yeah, see? Bad at that too. Oh! Hey, that one almost hit the tree!”

“Th’ giant tree that’s like ten steps away.”

“Almost!”

“How can ya be so good at daggers ‘n’ so bad at this?”

“It’s a completely different skill set.”

“Yeah but this one’s easy!”

You stay up through the first watch shift like that. It’s not like you could sleep even if you went to bed... Solas doesn’t even have a watch shift tonight. He’ll be out like a light, which means no naps for you. And Sera makes good company, particularly when no one else is around. You swear, sometimes it’s like she tries to be extra frustrating about “elfy” stuff when there’s an audience. In the quiet peace of the Dales at night, she doesn’t give you any crap about climbing trees barefoot. In fact, she joins you at it, because when it’s just the two of you, you can just be two girls climbing trees, and not two elves climbing trees.
You can see a little bit, why she might be the way she is, when you think of it like that, but you still can’t really understand it. Your history means too much to you.

“Shame we’re not here during the summer,” you murmur sleepily from where you lay, sprawled out on a branch, contemplating a nap. “Have you ever seen the Dales fireflies, right in the middle of summer? Like the stars all fell from the sky to flit around the Dales.”

“How can you be poetic ‘bout fireflies in the middle of Kingsway?” Sera asks with a snort. “Talk about snow or somethin’ if yer gonna.”

“Fuck snow, fireflies are better,” you say with a yawn, and Sera laughs. It sounds like trouble, like alarm bells from the guards. It fills you with a similar sense of pounding adrenaline and a desire to do something just as stupid. “Sera... do the Dales make you feel anything?”

“...Whaddya mean?” she asks, caution clear in her voice. She’s worried you’re about to ask her something elfy.

“I dunno, just, every time I’m out here, I just feel like running. D’you get that?”

“Not really. I mean, not myself. I get like that in cities sometimes, like, I just wanna climb shit.”

You chuckle. “Yeah, I do that too. I think that’s something we picked up in Ferelden.”

“Proly every kid in a city feels the same.”

“Yeah... probably.” But not every elf in the Dales, apparently. Maybe it’s because you’d spent a good portion of your childhood wandering through the south... and then a decent portion of your adulthood, too, really, depending on one’s definition of adulthood. Most of your elven research had been done here.

“You spend a lotta time out here?” Sera asks, as if reading your mind.

You briefly consider your answer. “I mean, yeah, I guess. I lived outside Val Royeaux, and then I lived in a little village...” You stare up at the stars through the fluttering leaves. “Just because it was easier than trying to find a place in the city. I never wanted to live in another alienage.”

“Pff... yeah, I don’t blame ya.” She’s quiet for a moment, and you’re content to half-drowse there on the branch. For a moment, you wish you didn’t have all these responsibilities. Places to be and secrets to keep. You think of your seemingly directionless wandering with your mother. Always going, but never going anywhere in particular, or at least so it felt to you in your childish view of the world.

You wonder, briefly, if Sera’s ever felt this listless wanderlust. You think you were probably born with it, or perhaps it was a result of your upbringing. You’d presumed, to some degree, that it was an elven thing. The Dalish traveled, your mother traveled. Or was that a coincidence? Was it no more elven than your love for bread? An aspect of your personality and no shared experience at all?

You wonder what Solas would have to say about that.

“Do you ever wanna--” “Do you ever think about--” both of you begin at the same time, then stop, then, still in unison, begin to laugh.

“Go on, then,” Sera says when the two of you finish giggling. “What were you gonna say?”

“Oh, nothing important,” you say with a sigh. “I was just... what do you think you’re going to do
after this is all over, Sera?"

“Back to business as usual, I guess,” Sera says with a shrug.

“Being Red Jenny, you mean? Back to Val Royeaux?”

“Or wherever. S’long as I can mess with the assholes who deserve it, I don’t really care where I am.” You nod along, understanding. “What about you? Back to Val Royeaux too?”

You hesitate. You’d been retired, living in the countryside, before everything turned to shit. Would you find another little house, buy it with the money Leliana was paying you for service to the Inquisition? Hide away again? It would serve the world right. It had done nothing for you. No one had ever done anything for you. Your mind flits to Banal’ras, to Val Royeaux, and then away again.

“No idea…” you say, reclining back down against the branch. “Not the foggiest fucking clue…”

The two of you go to bed late, though you don’t sleep. Everyone else is already asleep, for the most part. Including Solas. So you just rest your eyes some more, put in the pretense of sleeping in your tent like a normal person, even though you’d probably rest better and be more comfortable if you were still up in that tree. But you gotta appease the shems… and Solas, more importantly, who might not believe or understand you could sleep in a tree just as well as anywhere else.

You crawl out of your tent when you hear movement, just before dawn. At first you’re planning on just tripping over to the fire to help Blackwall with breakfast, but Solas intersects you partway there. Your first reaction is a sort of tense nervousness, expecting him to say something about the lizards. Why he would suspect you of that, though... Well, you did kind of out yourself as loving lizard-related pranks while you were in Val Royeaux, come to think of it.

But no, all he wants is to know whether you’re still interested in some morning stretching. Which you are, of course, because even spending half a night with a cute elf girl does not belay your desire to spend half a morning with a cute elf boy. You’re a weak person, in general, it seems.

“Did you sleep well last night?” Solas inquires, as if it isn’t a totally loaded question between the two of you at this point. He’s guiding you into stretches that seem as though they should be easy but still seem to pull your muscles into painful positions.

“Assuming a base level of ‘me, in a tent,’ yes,” you lie. You hadn’t slept at all, because he had. But you’re sleeping more than you would normally, thanks to Cole. Which is helping you feel less exhausted and anemic in general. Part of that is your aura filling back up, though, which is... a serious problem, or will be by the time you get to the Western Approach.

“That’s... something, at least,” Solas says, looking as though he doesn’t particularly consider it to be anything at all. “No lizards in your bedroll, I take it?”

That trips you up, literally, your leg twitching enough to send you off-kilter. You stumble to regain your balance both physically and within the conversation. “None whatsoever.” You say, as neutrally as possible. “Unfortunate about yours! But, you know, those lizards, they just look for as warm a place as possible to settle.”

“Ah, yes, so of course, they would naturally congregate to my bedroll, and mine alone.”

“You’re a very warm individual.”
Solas’ snort is audible, his intent clear to the point where you don’t even need to be able to see his expression to imagine it perfectly.

“Really,” you insist, laying it on even thicker. “I’m amazed Dorian hasn’t crawled in there yet.”

“If you think I’ve never woken up to an overly affectionate Tevinter, you would be very wrong. He wriggles out of his bedroll more nights than not.”

“Ohhh Maker, really?” you say, struggling not to fall over, your laughter turning a bit wheezy due to the nature of your strained position. “That is fantastic. Any issues with morning wood?”

“Emma!” Solas admonishes slightly, and you’re gleeful to see his own form wavering slightly.

“You’re the one who brought up overly affectionate!”

“That is not the kind of affection I meant.”

“More’s the pity. I’d love to give Skyhold something to gossip over other than my non-existent love life.”

“Fill the Commander’s bed with lizards instead,” Solas suggests dryly.

“First off, I wouldn’t even begin to know how to wrangle lizards—”

“Liar.”

“Second off, even if I was blessed with some kind of unholy lizard powers—” Solas scoffs, but you continue on. “I wouldn’t be able to find them that far into the mountains, and thirdly, Lady Montiliyet would be way funnier.”

“You’re a menace,” Solas informs you, and you can’t help but giggling.

“Me? I’m but a humble linguist, with no other useful skills.”

“Oh, stop.”

Stretches naturally transition into the two of you eating together before you run off to take care of the mounts. It’s a bit relaxing, since taking meals with Solas has become such a regular thing for you. You hadn’t even noticed you’d been missing it until you had it again. Plus, you already know his tastes, leaving you free to snatch foods he hates right off his plate. He won’t be eating those beets, so why bother burdening him with them? You’ll eat anything that holds still long enough, anyway.

The ahead team today is Sera, Cassandra, and the Inquisitor which is... spectacular, honestly. Of all the people you could have as a shield, Blackwall is the least frustrating. Plus Cole, Solas, and Dorian? That’s good company, no matter what they might think of each other. It’s a bit weird not having the Inquisitor leading the group, but no one else seems to think so. Blackwall takes the lead with no prompting, and everyone just sort of falls in behind him automatically. And without anyone you need to be really worried about nearby, you find yourself falling in with Solas. It’s nice, riding beside him again. Comfortable. You can almost forget you’re on a death march across the continent with a squadron of extremely dangerous people. You can almost pretend it’s just like you’re back on the road to Val Royeaux with Solas.

Almost.

“I mean, I got the basics, yeah,” you’re saying, in response to Solas’ question. “The Wardens are up
to some confusing shenanigans because they’re... all dying? I don’t know why they’re all dying, or exactly what the shenanigans are, but either way, we’re all rushing across the continent to try and stop them from doing some... evil blood magic ritual thing?”

“That... certainly is the basics, yes,” Solas says. “They’re gathering in the Western Approach to do something, the details of which we don’t know yet. We can, however, assume it is profoundly stupid.”

You snort with laughter, just at the unexpectedness of it. “Not a fan of mysterious blood magic rituals, Solas?” you tease.

“It’s less the blood magic and more the people wielding it, and for what ends,” he says sourly.

“Really?” you ask, tilting your head. “The Wardens worry you?”

“In this case? Yes. They do not have an understanding of the forces they deal with, nor a history of making excellent decisions.”

You hum noncommittally. That doesn’t sound right, but Solas does tend to know things you don’t. Your gaze is naturally drawn to Blackwall, who’s currently trying to steer his mount away from Cole, who appears to be keeping pace by jogging just fine. Heh. Spirits.

You gesture vaguely at Blackwall, since the man is riding far enough away–fortunately–not to hear your conversation with Solas. “What about him? Why isn’t he with the rest of the Wardens?”

“Warden Blackwall was recruiting in Ferelden when we found him. He doesn’t appear to have gotten the memo of the gathering.”

“What, like, oops, we forgot to tell Warden Blackwall that we’re all getting together for a blood magic orgy?” you ask with a snort. It’s not that you don’t believe him, it just sounds a little ridiculous.

“Something along those lines,” Solas says dryly. “The only other Warden we managed to get in contact with was Warden Stroud, through Hawke, and they had run off on purpose–and was being hunted by other Wardens.”

“Maker, seriously?” You shake your head. “That doesn’t sound a thing like the Wardens I know.”

“You must not know them very well.”

You glare at him half-heartedly. He’s not wrong; you can count the number of Wardens you’ve actually met on one hand. “Just stories, I guess. Being from Ferelden, well, you know, people say they’re heroes.”

“In your experience, do the heroes you know tend to make wise, well-informed decisions?” Solas asks.

Your mind flicks to Hawke, then to the Inquisitor.

“...Not particularly, no,” you admit. “Although I haven’t met enough heroes to really have a reliable pool to pull from.”

“I’ve seen many, through the Fade. A hero is defined by their legacy. The difference between a hero and a villain is whether or not the things they decided to do turned out to be the right things, in the long run. Unfortunately, it rarely has anything to do with wise decisions, so much as luck, good
Thinking again about Hawke and the Inquisitor, you have to agree. But you do so privately, because you’ve caught up a bit to Blackwall and Cole. You don’t really want the Warden to overhear Solas’ less than stellar opinion of Wardens; you finally got him to like you and you’d like to keep it that way. Plus, Cole is saying something weird, and you make a habit of listening to weird things Cole says.

“We played by the fire so she would be warm. No, it's summer, Liddy.”

“This thing you do? Maybe you should stop doing it,” Blackwall advises, sounding frustrated.

“Got her flower but they’d taken her. Left it on her bed. Next eight on the sill. Tourney sands.”
You’re absolutely lost, but it’s entertaining to try and follow along, despite the fact it is objectively none of your business. “A garden seat. Five to Chantry altars. One to a child with her hair. The sea? Too many to count. And thirty-six. Tossed off the battlements today.”

Dead someone, obviously. Childhood friend? Sister? It would be rude to ask.

“Go bother Solas,” Blackwall says hollowly.

“He’s busy.”

“Go bother Emma.”

“Don’t pony him off on me,” you reply lightly. “You don’t wanna hear about all the dead people I know.”

“Too many to count. They should all blur together but they don’t.”

“Yes, thank you, Cole.”

“How have you managed to see so much death?” Blackwall asks curiously, apparently not abiding by your ‘it’s rude to ask people about the shit Cole says about them’ rule.

“Seheron,” you say blithely. Blackwall doesn’t have any follow-up questions.

You spot the rock when you’re slowing down to stop for lunch, and eye it still as you dismount. You absent-mindedly grab Solas’ sleeve as he walks past you, towards where the others are gathering. He stops, and you point at the suspicious rock. “I think that rock has lizards under it.”

“…What?”

“That rock. It’s a lizard rock, I’m pretty sure. We should check it out.”

“You are doing a very bad job at maintaining innocence.”

“I’ve always been shit at maintaining innocence and you know it.” You glance over at him, grinning slyly. “Do you want to be stuffy about a good prank, or do you want to help me fit as many lizards as possible into Sera’s saddlebags?”

The answer, apparently, is as easy as you’d hoped it would be. You hadn’t really known that Solas would be down for pranking, but you’d suspected it based on how he’d behaved in Val Royeaux, and the way he hadn’t laid into you for your obvious part in the Bedroll Lizard Swarm. Which is
good, because Sera and Dorian are about the only other people you’d be comfortable pranking on this trip, and Sera is the obvious target for a lizard prank after last night.

To your infinite glee and amusement, rather than scramble through the dirt to catch as many lizards as possible, Solas simply surrounds the entire lot of them with a bubble of light blue magic, and lifts them en masse into your basket.

“That was the best,” you squeal as quietly as you can, bouncing excitedly. “Why don’t we do this all the time?”

“Why don’t we magically capture lizards all the time?”

“Not the lizards, just in general.”

“I’m still not sure what you could be referring to, if not the lizards,” Solas says evenly.

“Wait, now I remember why, because you’re a pain in the ass.”

Solas’ response is to flick a lizard at you, which startles you so much you almost drop the basket.

“Not fair! My hands are full!” you hiss, having to keep your voice down since you don’t want to draw attention. The mounts are between you and where everyone else is having lunch and relaxing, but still.

Solas doesn’t reply, but the corner of his mouth has turned upwards as he watches you. You quickly realize why, judging from the feeling of something scrabbling through your hair. “Solas, get your lizard out of my hair before it makes a mess,” you say, scowling.

“He looks happy there,” Solas counters.

“She.” You hoist the basket against your hip so you can hold it with one hand and fetch the damn lizard out of your own hair and plunk it back in with the others. “Dales geckos are an all female species, which is probably why we get along so well.”

“I’ve never run into that particular problem with you.”

“Yes, you have; you’re just persistent enough to have managed anyway.”

“We seem to have very different recollections of how this started,” Solas quips, and you laugh.

“I started it, sure, maybe, but you’re the one who didn’t wisely fuck off when I—” you trail off, uncertain of which example to give, or perhaps unwilling to remind him of literally any of them. “…C’mon, these lizards aren’t going to infest Sera’s things on their own.”

“Really? They seem to have found their way into my bedroll all on their lonesome,” Solas says dryly.

“Are you surprised that a race of all-female lizards would be attracted to your bed?” you counter slyly.

“All female? Yes, astounded. In fact, I’d expect them to head straight for Sera’s.”

You choke on laughter, and then duck behind one of the horses as Blackwall glances over towards you, pulling Solas down with you by the back of his shirt. “Ssshhh! You’re gonna get us caught! Have you never pulled a prank before in your life?”
“I can promise you I was making bad decisions before you were born,” Solas replies. “Although I don’t know that any of them involved this many lizards.”

“Then they weren’t bad enough.”

It’s hard to keep a straight face as you care for the mounts, but fortunately, no one’s really paying attention to you. That’s the nice thing about menial tasks, really. You become invisible when you’re doing them, no matter where you are or who you are. You could probably slip into Par Vollen and so long as you were scooping shit or washing tables, no one would even notice.

So you manage to make it all the way to mounting up without giving up the game by being unable to control your grinning. Cole also conveniently neglects to hint at anything, though you’re certain he knows what you got up to. You clamber up onto Vhas as Sera mounts up on Spirit Dancer… and manages to get about two steps on her before a lizard climbs out of the bag and onto her leg.

“…Emma…” she begins, but you’re already kicking a bit of speed into Vhas. “EMMA!” You glance back over your shoulder and see she’s reached into her saddlebag, and has about seven lizards on her hand. Then you give Vhas another kick and take off, with her spurring Spirit into motion just behind you. “OY. YOU LIL SHIT.”

You’re breathless with laughter and wind as Vhas canters broad circles around the others, who have yet to start moving. Sera has the advantage of being able to kick her mount into its fastest speed without fear of flying off, so she catches up relatively easily and chucks a handful of lizards at you. You catch one, the rest flop onto you and then cling desperately.

“Be careful!” you laugh. “It’s not their fault!”

“No, it’s yours!” she growls, but you can see the laughter in her eyes. “How’d you even get this many so fast?”

“I had an accomplice!”

“Who?”

“I’ll never tell!” you choke, giggling fiercely as she throws more lizards. You try to maneuver away from her, but Spirit Dancer is a lot smaller than Vhas. “I’ll take it to my grave!”

“It was fuckin’ Solas wasn’t it!”

“I tried to take it to my grave!” you shout out to Solas, who just rolls his eyes.

“If you two are quite finished,” the Inquisitor says, grinning broadly and looking quite amused. “We do have to get moving sometime while the sun’s still up.”

“An’ wot am I supposed to do with a bag full of lizards?” Sera demands, mostly directing it at you, as the two of you trot back to the rest of the group.

“Throw them at the next demons we run into,” you suggest. Sera flicks one at Cole, and you counter by peeling one off your shirt and flinging it back at her.

“If you told me I’d be watching two girls in a lizard fight, this isn’t what I would have imagined,” Blackwall comments.
“What *would* you have imagined?” wonders Dorian.

“Don’t they have snake wrestling in Tevinter?” you ask archly as Blackwall flushes behind his beard. “I’m sure that’s much more what Blackwall had in mind.”

It’s Dorian’s turn to flush, and you laugh at both of their expressions before kicking Vhas back into motion, towards the road. The whole group begins to move, some still chuckling lightly, and in a moment, the away team—including Sera—breaks off to go ahead.

Chapter End Notes

Now if only the lizards were actually a euphemism for sex

If you like my work, consider checking me out on Tumblr at elvensemi.tumblr.com! It’s a great blog if you like all the same specific things I do!
Your good mood carries you for a few hours, but you’re still moving pretty fast on a mount a bit larger than you’re accustomed to. By mid-afternoon, you’re sore and miserable all over again. Only this time you’re feeling less shy and more comfortable voicing your complaints, loudly, since neither the Inquisitor nor Seeker Pentaghast are within earshot.

“I’m not built for this,” you grumble. “I’m built for remarkably few things, actually, but this is definitely not one of them.”

“I don’t disagree,” Blackwall comments. “But that also doesn’t mean I want to hear about it for the next fifty leagues.”

“Tell that to the Inquisitor,” you complain sourly. “He’s the one who decided he needed a portable linguist without checking to make sure he got the non-bitchy model.”


“He’s not wrong. I think. Can you understand what he means when he talks?” Blackwall asks.

Yes, because I’m not a simpleton, you think, but do not say. Instead, you nod, before realizing that no one can really see you nodding since you’re all on moving mounts. “Yes. Mostly. But that doesn’t mean I have to concede he’s right.”

“Normally, I’d agree, but this time, I’m on his side. Which is uncomfortable,” Blackwall says. “You’re still thinking like you’re some servant we’re dragging along, but no one here thinks that. Not even Dorian. Probably.”

You roll your eyes, but say nothing. You don’t want to rise to his Dorian-bait. It’s too hard to stay on his good side as it is.

“We might not all understand why the Inquisitor is bringing you, exactly…”

“Do any of us understand that?” Solas asks mildly.

“But you’re here now, and you’re a member of the Inquisition like any of us. You can talk to us, as friends, and ask for help when you need it.”

You stew on your words a bit, not sure what to say. It’s easier to just avoid them, in some ways, but
it hasn’t even been a week and you’re already kind of failing at it. You don’t particularly want to talk to them as friends. You don’t want to be their friend, because that implies a level of attachment you try to avoid. But you suppose you could talk to them like friends, like you do to Thea and Bull and other people you don’t necessarily like or trust enough to actually be “friends” with. You’ve done that much before, plenty.

But the Seeker…

Will they notice if you avoid her and the Inquisitor, but not the others? What sort of excuse could you make if they do? Nobility? But Dorian… Well, you’ve always been a bit closer to Dorian, just due to both of your tendency to hover around the library. That could be an excuse for why you avoid the rest of the nobility and not him.

Ugh. The fact of the matter is, you’re probably not going to be able to get all the way to the Western Approach without some degree of socialization. Even with the Seeker and the Inquisitor, but hopefully that can be minimized. And in any case, if a Grey Warden is offering you anything resembling… even a pretense at friendship… you would be an idiot and an asshole to refuse.

“I… guess you’re right,” you say, forcing your voice into something resembling embarrassment or bashfulness. “If no one’s going to get upset about it, I guess I could just ask for assistance rather than complain about it afterwards. Maker knows we’re all going to be sore enough without me wearing down your ears, as well.”

Blackwall chuckles, and you smile just in case anyone happens to be looking at you.

“Most of us won’t be nearly so sore as you from this much riding,” Solas points out.

“That’s true,” Blackwall agrees. “We have experience that you lack. You should be careful; a back injury–or an ass injury–can make for a long and painful problem on a ride like this.”

“An ass injury?” you ask mildly.

“It can happen!” Blackwall protests.

“I appreciate everyone’s concern about the safety and condition of my ass,” you say. “But I’m sure I’ll manage.”

“Will you?” Solas inquires. “You’ve been complaining about your secondary mount since you started riding him.”

“He’s gentle! He’s just fat.” Vhas snorts and prances in a way that jostles you painfully in the saddle. “I’m not going to lie just to serve your pride,” you tell him irritably. “You’re half again as broad as Revas.”

“Not quite so drastic,” Solas says with a chuckle. “But a little tends to feel like a lot when you’re having to stretch around it.”

You bite down on your tongue, hard enough to hurt, but the confused look Cole shoots you is enough to let you know that he, at least, heard what you just thought.

“If you ever fear you might have been injured, do let me look you over,” Solas continues, oblivious to your perverted chain of thought. “Don’t just ignore it the way you always do.”

“If I always ignore it, how will I know to recognize the thing I shouldn’t ignore?”
Solas turns around to glare at you. You respond by sticking your tongue out. Just because he’s right doesn’t mean you have to be mature about it.

You manage to survive the afternoon ride, although you’re predictably exhausted by the time the group comes to a stop for the evening. You roll off of Vhas and onto the ground, only getting up when enough other people dismount that it’s possible a horse might tread on you for fun. You do have to actually take care of these mounts, too, no matter what Blackwall says about you ‘not being a servant.’

You manage to get most of them unsaddled, at least, before you start yawning, but you do wind up sort of… resting… by leaning your whole body up against Daine, arms and half your chest thrown over her back. She’s remarkably solid and unmoving. She’s huge, though, so you’re sure riding her would be even more painful than riding Vhas. But if you climbed up on top of her, you suspect you could just about use her as a bed. The idea is very tempting; there’s still a definite nip in the air and you wouldn’t mind such a warm mattress.

You’re still slumping over the blessedly sedate horse when the sound of footsteps on grass makes you look up. You’re surprised to see Blackwall and Sera both approaching, and force yourself to stand upright instead of passing out against Daine.

“Can I help you?” you ask, wondering why both of them are approaching you together while you’re working… or ostensibly working, anyway, you were more just being lazy…

“You already are,” Sera points out. “So throw a brush this way and let us help, huh?”

You blink in surprise, but toss Sera the horse brush you’d been using, almost without thinking about it. “You don’t have to help…”

Blackwall shrugs, picking up a hoof pick. “Normally this sort of thing would be rotated duty or just sort of done by whoever liked it best.”

“Yeah,” Sera agrees. “S’more unusual it’s just yer job this time, really.”

“Huh…” you glance briefly over towards the Inquisitor, who’s currently helping Seeker Pentaghast set up tents.

“He probably just did it so you wouldn’t feel like dead weight,” Blackwall suggests, a bit generously in your opinion. “So if you’re having trouble keeping up with it, don’t hesitate to ask for help.”

You really doubt that was the Inquisitor’s motivation, but you don’t really have many educated guesses as to what was. And you wouldn’t say anything even if you did. The Inquisitor has been mostly cordial to you on this trip, minus his clumsy investigation into your rumored love life. You’d like to keep it that way.

You finish quickly with the help of Blackwall and Sera, and you skip dinner to collapse straight into your tent, declaring yourself exhausted. That’s not really a lie, but you’re mostly doing it to beat Solas to bed. It feels nightmareishly dangerous to be sleeping with most of the camp awake, but Cole is there. And if you don’t get some kind of rest on this trip, you’ll just wind up coming apart at a very inopportune time.

The whole situation is wretched, but you don’t even want to think about how bad it would be without Cole helping you get some much-needed sleep. You tuck your aura close to your skin, wishing you could just keep it inside, and let Cole whisk you away to the Fade, praying that he’s as
capable of protecting you as he seems to think he is.

"Et enfin... Mesdames et Messieurs, merci d'être venu!"

A smoke bomb would be unnecessarily extra. A blast of steam caused by summoning ice and then superheating it all at once is so unnecessarily over-the-top that it could probably only have been done by your stupid friend.

When the steam clears, the two of you are on a rooftop together, far enough away to be safe, close enough to feel bold. You’re still in your work clothes, matching blacks, loose and flowing around your cores and bound tight at your forearms and shins. Matching masks perch on top of your heads, twelve red eyes watching as your laughs echo up into the sky.

“Did you see their faces?”

“How many dresses do you think you ruined with all that steam? It was like a sauna in there when I slipped out.”

“All of them, I hope. If your fashion can’t survive a steam bath, it’s not good fashion. How much did you get out of the vault?”

“Everything, lethallin,” you say with obvious relish. “Do you think they’ve noticed the fire in the record room by now?”

“Oh, definitely. If they hadn’t, we would probably be able to see the smoke even from here!”

The two of you burst into laughter again, mutual glee and the burning rush of adrenaline coming to a head. Overcome with your own joy, you tackle him and both of you go rolling across the roof, clattering across shingles until you spiral off the roof and have to separate to catch yourselves and slow your fall. When your hand catches a statue, the jolt snaps you into another memory.

“If you’re not going to take care of it, don’t grow it out,” you’re saying, rolling your eyes as your friend winces as you pull a brush through his thick black hair.

“It’s boring short. And I can use it for more disguises if it’s long, like yours.”

“Yeah, but mine is thin. And I actually bother to brush it every day.”

“If you’re brushing it every day, why do you make me do it too?” he asks with a roll of his eyes.

“Because I like telling you what to do,” you lie as you yank a knot in his hair a bit more roughly than you need to.

“OW.”

“Shhhhh!”

You’re in the theatre now, trying to teach a boy who treats chaos like his favorite lover how to sit still and pretend to be a shem long enough to enjoy a musical. He keeps distracting you, whispering sarcastic commentary into your hidden ear, making you choke on laughter in the middle of a tragedy. Perhaps musical theatre isn’t quite his thing… But you can’t really bring yourself to regret bringing him.

The loud, gurgling grumble of a stomach snaps you out of your studying fugue. You look up from
your book in confusion, glance over to the young man sitting in the corner, nose buried in The Unholy Grace. He pulls the book higher up to cover the reddening of his cheeks.

“…What time is it?” you wonder, standing up on your bed to peek out the tiny window at the very top of the wall. It’s dark out, but you can still see feet passing by. “Shit.” You’d forgotten to eat. All day. A normal sort of thing for you, when you get distracted, but now you feel guilty about it. “Hey!” you snap at your new would-be roommate, who’s trying to pretend like his stomach didn’t just screech like a terror demon. “You have to tell me when you get hungry!”

“It’s nothing…” he mutters into the spine of the book, and you scoff.

“It’s not nothing. Three square meals a day, isn’t that what they say?”

“Who alive really gets to eat three meals every day?” he replies, rolling his eyes.

“Us! We’ll live like kings!” you declare as you scramble barefooted onto the table to reach the cupboards.

“…What’s that?” he asks curiously as you pull a rough sack out of the cupboard and hop off the table.

“Rice. I got a huge bag from a trader out of Rivain. You have no idea how much I’ve missed this.”

“Rice…?”

“You’ve never had it?” you ask, glancing over at him. “I thought you were Rivaini. You’ve got the look.”

“My mom was Orlesian. But she didn’t look a thing like me…”

“Maybe your dad was Rivaini, then. Well, either way, this rice is basically your birthright. C’mere, I’ll show you how to make it. It’s super easy; you just need a pot and water. Make it any time you get hungry. If you’re feeling generous, you can shove some in my mouth too, cause my dumb ass always forgets to eat.” You pull your large pot over to the wood stove. It had been collecting rainwater out of a leak all day. “Just because I’m too stupid to live doesn’t mean you shouldn’t eat.”

You come home to the smell of cooked rice later that week, and for the first time, you feel like maybe you made a good decision.

–

You wake up confused, shoving vaguely at the person shaking you. “Laissez-moi dormir, you shit, make your own breakfast…” you mutter, before waking the rest of the way up and realizing it’s just Cole. You shake your head to clear it. You’re not used to sleeping and dreaming anymore. It’s more disorienting than it should be. But your aura is already tucked inside… good to know that’s an instinct you do instantly upon waking.

It’s been a while since you dreamt of Banal’ras. Maybe because you’re back on the Imperial Highway? You stare up at the roof of your tent, your escape plans dancing idly through your background. How easy would it be to slip back to Val Royeaux? Some hair dye and a name change and you’d be in the wind.

You’re not really considering it. The loss is more than the gain… for right now. It’d be a pain in your ass if you had to trash Alix Gagnon after all these years. You’re just feeling sentimental because of your dreams.
You can practically hear him in your ear, informing you matter-of-factly that you have absolutely no right to miss someone you left behind.

He wouldn’t be wrong, but somehow that’s never really stopped you.

The actual sleep has you feeling groggy, the way a short nap sometimes actually makes things feel worse, but you roll over to try and get some work done on the tome overnight. You have to light a candle and it’s kind of slow going, but you’re arguably supposed to be finishing this thing. The problem is, you refuse to sacrifice quality just because the Inquisitor is a dick, so you wind up spending way more time lettering a single page than you would in ideal conditions. Or even not absolute shit conditions. There’s no way you’re going to finish this on the road… It probably would have been done faster if he’d let you finish it in Skyhold and then send it after him.

“Solas is awake,” Cole informs you, sometime before dawn. You fix him with a bleary look. How long has he even been there? You haven’t been paying attention.

“You can’t possibly expect me to sleep now,” you say, scowling.

“You could!” Cole insists. “I’d stay right here.”

“No way. It’s too dangerous, with people waking up and wandering around. What if I can’t wake up fast enough?”

“But you’re not getting enough sleep…”

“More than zero is an improvement, you know…” you grumble. “You’re the kind of person who always wants more, aren’t you?”

Cole pouts. It’s a difficult thing to argue with, but you force yourself. “No.”

“You could sleep while hidden…”

“It gives me a headache and you know it,” you say with a scowl. “And I’m not convinced it does anything.”

“It does! …I think.”

You let out a frustrated noise between a growl and a scoff. “Fine, but if I have to skip out later, you don’t get to nag me about it.”

Cole doesn’t look very convinced by that, but you don’t give him the option to haggle, climbing grumpily back into your bedroll and pretending it doesn’t feel completely amazing to lay down and close your eyes again. Sleep takes you almost instantly, a peaceful dreamless abyss.

You wake to Cole shaking you, at least you’re pretty sure you do. By the time you’ve blinked the sleep out of your eyes, he’s gone, and instead, you’re seeing Solas opening the flap to your tent. You squint at him through sleep-crusted eyes, blinking owlishly as you try to register what’s happening. Your aura is safely hidden, as you’d wisely insisted, but why is he here, then?

“Oh!” he says, looking surprised. “You were asleep… I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

You can’t help but laugh, even though it’s probably a weird time for you to be laughing. You can’t help it; he’d just assumed you’d be awake at, what, barely dawn? And it had been a really safe assumption! You’d only been asleep at all thanks to Cole’s meddling.
“No, I was just sort of… drifting in and out of sleep,” you say, rubbing your eyes.

“That’s to be expected, honestly, given how tenuous your connection to the… Fade…” he trails off, expression turning guilty, possibly at the sight of yours. You have to be glaring, and it might be something even more alarming given that you’re too groggy to properly police your facial expressions.

“Dare I ask why you’re crawling into my tent in these quiet pre-dawn hours?” you ask archly, taking some unnecessary satisfaction in the way Solas’ expression turns even more abashed at the way you phrased it.

“I assumed you would be awake, and this is when I normally begin my morning stretches,” he explains, a little stiffly. That snaps you the rest of the way awake, and you squirm the rest of the way out of your bedroll.

“Sounds like a good way to wake up,” you say, maybe more eagerly than strictly necessary. You can’t help it. It really does, and a lot more fun than getting the shit kicked out of you by the Iron Bull. Less painful, too.

Well. That turns out to be about half true. It turns out that you’re not nearly as flexible as you thought you were, no matter how much Solas informs you that you’re doing very well for a beginner. It is fun, though, trying to contort your body into positions that seem like they should be a lot easier to hold than they actually are. Also, Solas’ hands on your body here and there when you need to be guided into a position are definitely not the worst way to start your day.

“It shouldn’t…” you strain through grit teeth, “Be this hard for me to maintain a handstand. I’m not even on just my hands!”

“It’s harder than you might think,” Solas says, from where he holds a more complicated version seemingly effortlessly. “Normally, beginners wouldn’t—”

“Don’t you ‘beginners’ me, it’s a freaking handstand, it shouldn’t hurt! I’m out of shape…”

“How many times a day do you find yourself needing to do armstands, exactly?” Solas points out.

“Still,” you grumble, straining to keep your back straight and not fall over. “No wonder I’m sore after riding every day. I’m squishier than pâte de guimauve.”

“Squishy isn’t the word I’d use,” Solas says mildly. “Bony, perhaps. Scrawny?”

You let yourself fall sideways out of the armstand, feet colliding with Solas’ side. He lets out a satisfyingly pained wheeze as you knock him over as well. The two of you wind up in an undignified heap, your legs sprawled over his waist. “Oops,” you say flatly. “Looks like my scrawny arms gave up.”

“I suppose I deserved that,” Solas says, his voice muffled by the ground, and you burst out laughing.

That spells an end to your morning stretching, more or less, so the two of you grab breakfast. Or, well, Solas grabs breakfast and you grab an oatcake which you proceed to eat without your hands while beginning to prep the mounts. It’s something of a skill, one which you mastered a long time ago so you could eat while writing. However, books didn’t try to dive forward and snatch the food directly out of your mouth, something that horses, it seems, are more than willing to do. You’re dodging out of the way of Lady Knickers, who is very willing to reach underneath the larger horses to get at you while you’re bent over to secure their saddles, when Dorian arrives to be your knight in shining armor.
He pulls the smaller horse away from you by your lead and then gets to saddling Azrael.

“Thanks, Dorian,” you say after nearly choking to quickly swallow the rest of your breakfast. “It’s just a lot of horses.”

“I’m surprised he even knows how to saddle a horse,” Blackwall comments, completely unnecessarily, as he arrives to help as well. Which would be more welcome if it didn’t mean you’d have to listen to them sniping at each other like damned children.

“It shouldn’t surprise you that someone raised as a noble knows how to handle horses,” Dorian says dryly. “But then, I suppose that would require some modicum of knowledge.”

“Both of you shut up or I’ll have the harts headbutt you and just saddle all the damn horses myself,” you say crossly, which earns you two surprised stares from the men and a snort of what you choose to interpret as approval from Revas.

“Is it too late to hire her on as their babysitter?” the Inquisitor asks mildly from where he sits nearby, sharpening his sword as the camp is broken down in the background.

“She already works for you,” Dorian points out.

“Yes, but I’m starting to think she’s wasted in the library.”

“I promise you, your holiness, I’m much better with books than I am with horses,” you assure him as you struggle with Stormcloak’s saddle. He’s sucked in his breath to make himself bigger, you can just tell he has. If you just tighten it like this, the saddle might be loose later. Frustrated, you give up and knee him directly in the stomach. He lets out pained wheeze and you pull the strap as tight as you can. He whinnies in protest. “Shut up!” you snap. “If you weren’t such a little bitch about it every single morning, I wouldn’t have to get physical!”

“Are you sure? Because you’re pretty good with the horses.”

“I am very sure!” you snap before registering that you’re snapping at the Inquisitor and freeze, color draining from your face. He just looks amused, but any good humor you had from the morning with Solas is gone.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly by the time I'm ready to put these things up the last thing I feel like doing is an author blurb. Am I getting old? But I always get more comments if I say something cute and pithy. Also, hey, I know I'm the author, but does anyone else feel like smacking Blackwall some days? Just, right on the back of the head, pow. Literally nothing to do with his ~mysterious secrets~ and everything to do with him just frustrating the piss out of me sometimes, bless his heart.

Of course, I also want to do that to Emma near constantly so maybe that just says more about who I am as a person than anything else.

If you like my work, please consider checking out my Tumblr where you can find lots of other fantastic links to more work and more information.
Sorry that this chapter is a week later (I moved the stuff I was going to publish today up to last week to compensate, check out my works page if you haven't seen them already~), I got suuuuper sick two weeks ago and it just threw my whole operation out of whack.

You manage to get the horses saddled, thanks to Blackwall and Dorian’s help. The two of them keep their petty bickering to a minimum, to your relief. It’s not that you don’t believe Dorian has been a prat to Blackwall—you’re pretty sure he has, actually, because he’s been a prat to you, too. But so has Blackwall. So has pretty much everyone here. Can no one else see a foot in the mouth for what it is? Is it really just your experience with Tevinter that gives you the upper hand here? Surely there must be more to it than that.

You puzzle it over in your head as the group mounts up and heads out. The ahead party today is Blackwall, Dorian, and Cole, which is truly hilarious to you. Poor Blackwall. Poor Dorian. The Inquisitor jokes about sending you along with them, and you almost wish he would, if only because you’ve been left with him and Seeker Pentaghast, who might as well be in their own world, plus Sera and Solas, who might as well be worlds apart. What a nightmare group all around. You make the quick decision to fall in next to Solas before you’ve even started moving faster than a stately walk.

“How does the Inquisitor pick these ahead teams?” you murmur quietly to him. You can’t imagine that these two groups look cohesive to anyone at all. You’re mostly just hoping Blackwall and Dorian pause in fighting long enough to actually be on the lookout for danger.

Clearly, you weren’t quiet enough; either that or the Inquisitor has some elf-sharp ears, because he’s the one who answers you. “I have no doubt I can explain my own motivation better than Solas,” he says, mercifully sounding amused rather than annoyed. “The most important thing is that there always needs to be someone who can send off a signal… a mage, mostly, but Sera can serve the purpose as well. Then, because mages-and-Sera are inherently squishy and run the risk of being aggressively murdered in case of an ambush, I always want to have someone sturdy and skilled in melee combat. Myself, Cassandra, or Blackwall, in this case.”

“And then Cole,” Seeker Pentaghast adds, a little sarcastically. You can’t quite connect her with “Cassandra” in your mind.

“Not always Cole,” the Inquisitor protests. “I just send him a lot because he’s so weirdly good at detecting ambushes.”

Yeah, you can’t imagine why.

“The one thing that isn’t much of a worry when I pick ahead teams is personalities,” he continues, a little dryly, as if he knew exactly why you’d been wondering in the first place. “Since I trust that members of the Inquisition’s Inner Circle can just fucking suck it up and deal with it.”
You were not expecting the Inquisitor to say anything like that, let alone so crass, so you almost choke, your laughter coming out halfway as a cough. Possibly the cough is also in pure shock that you laughed at something the Inquisitor said. Even if it was just because you were surprised by it.

“If you laugh at him, you’ll only encourage him,” Seeker Pentaghast says, very dryly. “And his terrible, terrible sense of humor.”

“Cassandra, I’m hurt!” protests the Inquisitor, not looking even slightly hurt. He’s grinning broadly. “I thought you liked my jokes! You laugh more than anyone else.”

“Which is why I know what a bad decision it is,” she rebuts.

"I suppose that's true. One time I told a joke so bad that the tavern started throwing bread crumbs at me.”

“I can believe it.”

“That’s okay, though, because I took it with a grain assault—” he just manages to get out before Sera groans loudly.

“I’ll throw something worse at you!”

Seeker Pentaghast, however, has started giggling. It’s definitely giggling. There’s no other word for it and it’s making you deeply uncomfortable. She’s kind of… something. A handful of adjectives are coming to mind, but you don’t feel comfortable applying any of them to Seeker Pentaghast. It’s unnerving, seeing this side of both of them, although it can only be a good sign. If they’re relaxing around you, it means they don’t find you suspicious, or at least less suspicious than you could be.

That doesn’t mean you want to be their friend, however. The last thing you want is to get pulled into another “chess” type scenario, but this time with a Seeker or the Inquisitor. It’s bad enough with the Commander, and he’s almost tolerable to be around. When one squints and tries to forget about everything he got up to in Kirkwall.

You wonder, briefly, how he feels about what has to be one of the worst chapters of his life being written down and published to be judged by the masses. Or maybe he’s proud of his actions in Kirkwall. You can’t imagine anyone’s really given him cause to change his mind. If he regrets anything, it’s probably simply the consequences.

You wonder if the Inquisitor will ever live to regret his actions now. Die the hero or live long enough to see yourself become the villain, they say. Lucky for you, you skipped being a hero altogether. If you’re already a villain, perhaps you can live forever.

When the group meets up for lunch, Dorian and Blackwall look exactly as strained as you would have expected. You try to imagine being stuck with no one but someone you detest—Seeker Pentaghast for instance—for company. Well, that and Cole, whose incessant prattling attempts at ice-breakers would be even worse than silence. Nothing like having your weak spots prodded directly in front of your enemy.

Cole gives you a look that tells you in no uncertain circumstances that Cole heard you think that, and you respond with an apologetic smile. Maker knows you like the way Cole talks, but it does make you nervous. You imagine others probably feel even more strongly about it.

Despite that, however, you break away from the group with him, taking him to sit under a tree a little
ways away from camp. You grab some bread out of your pack on the way, just so that you can honestly say you ate something, should someone ask. You suspect Cole would probably forget that you even needed to eat, were no one to remind him, but Solas is the sort of person who would ask, and Cole is the kind of person who would tell him the truth.

“They’re not that different,” Cole says, sounding frustrated. You try not to smile, but instead nod and let him vent, in his odd, passive way, about Dorian and Blackwall. It’s clear that he wants to help, but just hasn’t figured out how to do it yet. “They should learn about each other, instead of assuming they already know.”

“If people did that, we’d have significantly less conflict,” you comment dryly.

“Yes!” Cole agrees vehemently, and you struggle not to laugh. He’s being genuine, and you shouldn’t laugh at him. It’s not like he’s wrong. Even you do that, though you’re a bit loathe to admit it. Your judgments are normally based in past experience, and you’re unwilling to let that go when jumping to those conclusions has saved you so much pain in the past. “Blackwall likes you now. Maybe you could make him see,” Cole suggests.

You snort. “Me? I couldn’t even convince him to like me for over a month. And I’m genuinely uncertain why he changed his mind.”

“Hard working, kind to animals, always in the middle of things. Traits not often found in someone sleeping their way to the top,” Cole intones. You choke on your bread.

“He thought I was what?! That’s why he didn’t like me?” you demand. Cole just nods, and you have to laugh. “Well, I guess it’s not like he’s the only one,” you admit, thinking about the rumors about you that flit around Skyhold. Although they seem to have settled on Solas after the trip to Val Royeaux, you’re still probably sleeping the the Iron Bull, Fenris, half the Chargers, Belassan, and Maker knows who else, according to popular rumor.

You have to laugh, or you’ll get angry about it, and you’ll probably stay angry about it.

Speaking of anger… when you glance over towards where the others are eating, you catch Seeker Pentaghast watching you. She glances away when she catches sight of your glare, but the irritation you’d been trying to chase off with laughter seeps in. That absolute–

“Not safe, they seem friendly to dig their claws into the unsuspecting,” Cole begins, but you cut him off.

“Don’t defend her to me,” you snap. “I know damn well exactly what she’s thinking without you telling me. That’s exactly what pisses me off.”

“Thinks she knows him better than me, thinks she knows me better than me. She sees the ocean only from a lifeguard’s point of view.”

“Meanwhile, I’m just trying to make friends with the fish,” you agree, giving Cole a fond squeeze of the shoulders. “I don’t need to be dragged out by someone who thinks that just knowing how to swim makes her an expert.”

“She doesn’t know you know how to swim,” Cole points out, and you grumble under your breath. Just because he has a point doesn’t mean you have to agree with Seeker Pentaghast’s bullshit. “Frolicking with sharks like they’re dolphins.”

“If she ever met a dolphin, she wouldn’t know what to do with it,” you snort. You doubt many here have ever even seen them. The Iron Bull, maybe, if he spent a lot of time on the warm seas around
Seheron or Par Vollen. “She thinks they’re all sharks because that’s all she’s seen.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Cole asks, and you frown again.

“I know better. Dolphins have always been more dangerous than sharks, and ‘just don’t swim’ has never been good advice. Nor has just stabbing wildly on the off-chance you hit a man-eater,” you add, squeezing Cole’s shoulder a little more protectively. Cole might appreciate her watching him, making sure he doesn’t make a mistake. But you don’t trust her to know what a mistake looks like. You don’t trust her judgment on the best of days, let alone with the life of your friend.

Your only comfort in sending Cole off with Dorian and Blackwall is that Seeker Pentaghast is staying with you. It’s a very cold comfort, and cold is also the way you shoulder past her while navigating to your mount. You know very well you should be treating her with the same friendliness you treat everyone else. You know being stand-offish is a risk; being all fangs to her when you’re a tame kitten with everyone else is suspicious. But you can’t quite crush your pride enough to be able to bend as low as you’d need to be to kiss her boots.

You want to sulk in peace, but riding ‘by yourself’ instead of directly next to Solas just results in Sera swooping in next to you basically immediately. It’s hard to stay in a bad mood around her. Well, except for when she’s making your mood worse, but she seems to have gotten over the sight of you on a hart. Thank goodness. You don’t have the energy to pretend not to be elfy around her, not with Revas and Solas here, not with so many other things on your mind.

Ironically, this leaves the Seeker to chat with Solas intermittently, which is a somewhat surreal thing for you to see. They don’t seem to get along in the fire-and-oil manner of you and Seeker Pentaghast, to your surprise. You wouldn’t mind asking him how he can stand to chat amiably with her, actually, but doing so would flatly betray exactly your own opinions on the woman, and you’d rather not. You might be keeping your distaste for her a somewhat poor secret, but you can certainly keep hiding the sheer depths of it. Let everyone think that you just tire of her needling you, or dislike her hostility towards Cole.

Despite your general and repeated irritation towards Seeker Pentaghast, Sera really does manage to distract you. Now that both of you know the other was in Val Royeaux, it opens up a whole new topic for complaint, one that you can absolutely both enjoy. You’re regaling her with horror stories about the nobles you served as a maid when you first came to Val Royeaux as a rough little whelp. You’d had a crash-course in Rivaini manners but it had done remarkably little to prepare you for the realities of Val Royeaux. Fortunately, you had been trained as a servant young, and one horrible noble was much like another.

“My general rule of thumb was to just look really clueless and docile whenever they started on about anything,” you’re telling Sera, during one of the little lulls where you’re walking instead of galloping. “I got a reputation for being an absolute imbecile, but it got me into a lot of weird events. People love a servant they think is too stupid to understand anything past delivering wine glasses.”

“I’ll say,” Sera says, rolling her eyes. “Prats. I proly got three quarters of all my information that way.”

“Probably some of it from me,” you say with a snort. “I did not have tight lips. Who would? Even the nice ones treated us like pets.” You shrug, irritated and not, at the memory. It had been annoying, but it had been incredibly useful. You’re sure Sera agrees. Or, well, pretty sure. It’s so hard to imagine someone as remarkably unsubtle as her actually being involved in the Game to the kind of extent she apparently was.
The two of you... reminisce, for lack of a better word, about Val Royeaux on and off for the rest of the afternoon. It’s a safer topic than Denerim, around the others. It isn’t exactly a secret, where the two of you are from, but you seem to be operating on some unspoken promise not to bring it up in public. The others seem to be mostly ignoring you, but you don’t trust that they actually would, so you watch what you say and paint a pretty picture of an elven maid in Val Royeaux, with no ulterior motives and no connections.

Sera mostly tells you of the shit she’s gotten up to, some of which you knew about, most of which you didn’t. Red Jenny had only been on the peripheral of your useful contacts in Val Royeaux, and she’d been an inconvenience as much as she’d been helpful. Which makes perfect sense now that you know who was behind it. You can’t imagine Sera being consistently anything, other than perhaps equal parts attractive and exhausting.

Her storytime keeps going, on and off, even after you’ve stopped moving for the day and are setting up camp. By then, however, they’ve become even more exciting and animated, and everyone’s listening in. You even wind up getting dragged in yourself, when she decides that she wants to tell a good one that was much more recent than Val Royeaux.

“So there he was, sound asleep... At least I really hoped he was sound asleep,” you’re telling a satisfyingly rapt audience made up of everyone but the Inquisitor and the Seeker, who are off doing combat drills or something. “And I’m balancing on this Maker-cursed ladder while trying to unscrew bolts with one hand as quietly and quickly as possible.”

“She was shaking like a leaf; woulda thought she was scared o’ heights if I didn’t know better,” Sera was giggling.

“So finally I manage to get the damn thing disconnected, and of course it immediately starts tipping.” You windmill your arms dramatically, stumbling backwards as if you’ve lost your balance to emphasize your point. Sera catches you as you stagger backwards into her.

“I was down there to catch it, drama queen,” she scoffs as you slump uselessly back against her, grinning. “She scrambles down like her ass in on fire, yeah, and we have to tilt it over to get it out the door.”

“How in the world were you not caught by a guard at this stage?” Solas asks, sounding intensely amused. He’s half sprawled out on the grass, one arm up to support his head. The others are all in similar stages of rest around the campfire; you and Sera have been amusing them with your Skyhold antics for a while now.

“We walked real casual,” Sera informs him proudly.

“Nothing to see here, just two elves with a ladder!” you add with a giggle. “I thought for sure she was gonna tell me to hurl it off the side of Skyhold. Just strand the poor Commander up there.”

“Least then he’d rest!” Sera jokes. “Naw, we just hid it out by the tavern.”

“I was so sure it was you, Sera, when I heard his ladder had gone missing. But Emma. I’m scandalized!” Dorian says, looking anything but. He’s been at the receiving end of your pranks more than once.

“What can I say,” you say dryly. “I have layers.”

“As if your antics with the lizards hadn’t proven that by now,” Blackwall laughs. “I thought Sera had pulled you into that, but...”
“No, she’s a little imp all on her own,” Dorian says with a scoff. “Should I tell them about the herring?”

“That was such a good one,” you say, grinning to yourself.

“It really wasn’t!”

“Is this about the time you got into a fish fight with the Chargers? I heard about that,” Sera comments.

“How in the Maker’s name did you hear about that? Who was watching us throw fish at each other?” you marvel.

“Wait, so that actually happened and isn’t a horrible euphemism?” Blackwall instantly wants to know.

“Krem, herrings, and I go way, way back,” you reply cryptically.

“How in the Maker’s name did you hear about that? Who was watching us throw fish at each other?” you marvel.

“Wait, so that actually happened and isn’t a horrible euphemism?” Blackwall instantly wants to know.

“Krem, herrings, and I go way, way back,” you reply cryptically.

“It’s a good thing for everyone that you two never ran into each other back in Val Royeaux,” Dorian says dryly. “No one in the whole city would have had a moment of peace.”

Little do any of them know, you absolutely had. You were just both wearing other people’s names at the time. Just as well. You had really bad luck with girls in Val Royeaux.

That thought sobered you somewhat, so you excuse yourself to make sure the horses are settled in okay for the night.

They’re fine, of course, but you find some comfort in brushing down the harts… and even the horses, which you’re starting to get a bit more accustomed to. Somewhat. They smell like the stables, which is comforting, and they’re large and warm with soft noses that remind you of Bella.

If only they would stop trying to step on your feet or eat your hair.

You’re half-brushing, half-laying-on Daine when Solas finds you. You watch him with sleepy eyes, wishing that he’d get less sleep so you could get more.

“It’s Sunday,” he says, which is not what you expected. You blink, momentarily confused. “I believe we have some free time before we must turn in for the night. Assuming you don’t wish just to start sleeping now,” he adds, sarcastically.

“…Really?” you ask, standing up more straight and trying to rub the exhaustion out of your eyes. You hadn’t even thought about what would become of your elven lessons once you were on the road. You’d just sort of assumed they’d stop out of necessity, you suppose, if you’d considered it at all.

“Certainly. I don’t particularly have our regular resources with us, but we can work on your oratory skills.” You mentally thank him for saying oratory instead of oral.

“They could use some work,” you joke for your own amusement anyway. “I’m out of practice.”

“More like you were never taught properly in the first place,” he replies with a roll of his eyes, and it’s all you can do not to burst out into childish giggling.

“Well, lucky for us both that you’re hear to teach me, then,” you declare with a smirk that only gets you a slightly puzzled look in exchange. “Where shall we do it? Hidden behind a tree? Off in the
“Might as well go to one of our tents. It will be easier to have a reasonable amount of light there, without disturbing the others by practicing by the fire.”

You burst out into an absolute fit of the very childish giggles you’d been trying to fight off earlier.

“…Are you feeling alright? Perhaps the long hours on the road are fatiguing you overmuch…” he wonders, frowning. You attempt to wheeze out a response.

“Totally fine! Totally fine, let’s get to my tent.”

You manage to steer Solas to your tent without any—okay, without many—additional giggles. Which you’re choosing to blame on the lack of sleep, ignoring the fact that you’ve been getting more sleep lately than you had in like a solid month.

Of course, then you and Solas are alone in your tent. It’s not a particularly large tent, space enough for probably three people to cram into and lay down in if they were all very comfortable with each other. Two grown adults trying to move around in it have to be at similar levels of comfort, really, and you’re very much not. This is exactly why you hadn’t wanted to share a tent with Sera.

You remind yourself a few times that it’s Cole’s tent too, and he could pop in any time. That helps, a bit, at least with the unnerving sense of privacy. An unrealistic sense, frankly, given that it’s just canvas and anyone standing particularly close could absolutely overhear anything that happened inside. It’s hardly Solas’ sound-proofed spellcasting room. You remind yourself of that a few more times, just in case it helps. It doesn’t.

“So! Elven!” you say, voice a little higher than it should be. “Elven, and my shitty, shitty pronunciation thereof.”

Solas snorts. “Well, I’ve certainly heard… worse. If not less consistent.”

“You could have just stopped talking after ‘worse,’” you say with a scowl.

“I could have,” he agrees. He reaches into his bag as you continue scowling, and pulls out what looks to be a rather old, leather-bound journal. “Let’s begin.”

He has you read from a book of poetry. A different book of poetry than you’d seen before, this one very handwritten. It’s obviously an original, since you can see places where lines were scratched out and rewritten, words scribbled in the margins. You marvel at it. Where does he get these things?

He focuses on your speech, rather than your vocabulary, which means you don’t actually know half of what you’re reading. But it’s satisfying nonetheless. You’d always figured Elven to be an inconsistent language in terms of pronunciation, much akin to modern Tevene. Turns out, no, there are just grammar rules that you’d never managed to figure out, reverse engineering the language from written word the way you were.

“Wait,” you say, pausing on a word. “Is this a derivative of harel?”

“If you stop every time you have a vocabulary question,” Solas begins, for about the twelfth time that night.

“Wait, no, I’ve actually had a question about this forever,” you say, pouting. “The rest of this poem sounds kind of light-hearted. Given the fact that most modern scholars define ‘harel’ as the verb ‘to betray,’ it seems a little odd.”
“Was that your question?” Solas asks dryly.

“I thought people were supposed to get more patient as they aged,” you reply sourly, then rush on before he can snap back. “I’ve kind of theorized for a while that harel had a different meaning back in the day. It might still amongst some Dalish, for all I know, but I’m working with what I’ve got. Do you know if that’s true? What does it mean?”

“To deceive, or to lie,” Solas says simply.

“Did it ever mean to like… prank?”

“To trick, more accurately, but yes, it could be used in a similar manner. And is here, before you ask. Now, will you consent to continue butchering the language?”

“Ass,” you say with a scowl. “This is why you get tricked by me and Sera,” you say in Elven, immediately applying your new knowledge.

“Oh, is that why?” he replies dryly, in Common. “And here I thought being a trickster was simply your nature.”

The dual meaning of the world ‘harellan’ makes you freeze, although you manage not to flinch. You’d heard something similar not that long ago, from Adahlen. He wasn’t the first and he wouldn’t be the last, but it’s easy to convince yourself that Solas just meant trickster and nothing else. Though he probably knows more about your ‘nature’ than anyone else here save for Cole.

“Your antics in Val Royeaux, for instance,” he says, as if following your train of thought. “You could easily have shared some of those by the fire this evening.”

You shake your head. You struggle to find the right words. It would be difficult even in Common, frankly, but you reply in Elven. “Vir var’tarenal.” You pause, uncertain if you said it right.

“Vir var’tarenal,” Solas repeats, and you think he must be correcting you, but you can’t detect the difference between how he said it and you did. You realize, after a moment’s puzzling, that he’s not correcting you.

He’s agreeing.

Chapter End Notes

If you like what I do, consider checking out my Tumblr where you can find more info about me and more places I am online!
Gender of the Day: Cole

Chapter Notes

I would like to personally apologize for the chapter title. Literally I had about seven possible titles and they were all memes. I don't know why I'm this way but I cannot stop.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“How are you adjusting to all this travel?” Solas wants to know. You’re taking a bit of a break from reading, for your voice’s sake if nothing else. You’ve flopped down a bit listlessly on your bedroll; Solas is sitting upright on the blanket you leave out for Cole on the off-chance he actually needs it. He’s towards the center of the tent, just so that he can sit up without his head hitting the top of the tent.

“…Adequately, I guess? I haven’t died yet,” you say, rolling onto your side to face him. “I just have to make it til we get there, and then hopefully the Inquisitor will drop me off somewhere relatively stable.”

“It is worrying but ultimately unsurprising that your baseline for ‘adjusting’ is ‘not dead,’” Solas says dryly, and you laugh. “It must be tiring you… I was surprised when I came in this morning and you were asleep. If I’d known, I would have let you keep resting. If you prefer, perhaps you can find me in the mornings if you wish to stretch? If you’re asleep, I don’t want to disturb you.”

You stare at him for a few seconds longer than is strictly necessary. You realize it’s not why he’s offering, but not having him poking around your tent at night or in the mornings would be quite the blessing. You’re stressed out enough about sleeping in, essentially, the middle of a pack of starving wolves. You know Cole can’t exactly spend every night with you in Skyhold, so this is–horribly–your best bet for getting some safe shut-eye, but still.

“…Sure,” you agree, instead of giving any sort of voice to what you’re thinking, which is mostly just wondering what you did, exactly, to deserve someone as considerate as him in your life. Objectively, you know it’s just dumb luck, and that there are plenty of other wretched things in your life… But right now, you’re feeling a bit fortunate. Things could be a lot worse. You’re in danger, but the people you’re with aren’t pure evil or anything. Not even Seeker Pentaghast, although it would frankly be much easier if she were.

You have Cole watching out for you, and even that little bit goes a very, very long way. Solas’ at-times-clueless assistance is just icing on a cake that already had icing on it.

Just thinking about Cole makes you yawn, which Solas immediately picks up on.

“Speaking of which, I should let you rest now,” he decides, beginning to gather his books.

“Ugh, no,” you say, making a grab for one of them. “I only get this once a week. Don’t be cheap with your time.”

Solas snorts. “Perhaps you should be a little more cheap with yours?” he suggests. “Then maybe you’d gather enough for a good night’s sleep.” He pulls the book harder, and you let out an audible
complaint somewhere between a whine and a grumble. You grip even more firmly, and his next tug pulls you physically off of your bedroll. You still don’t let go, and he winds up pulling your arms halfway into his lap. He looks down at you, expression between irritation and bemusement. “Have you absolutely no dignity?”

“None,” you say blithely. “Leave me the book.”

“Absolutely not; you’ll read it instead of trying to sleep.”

“No I won’t.”

“Liar.”

“I’ll fail to read it instead of trying to sleep.”

Solas rolls his eyes at your pedantry, but you’re still holding onto the book. “If you prefer,” you suggest. “You can just drag me and the book all the way back to your tent. I’m sure the sight of that won’t backfire for either of us, and we definitely wouldn’t spend the entire rest of the trip hearing about it from literally everyone.”


You feel a jolt in your hands, as if you’d just grabbed hold of an eel barehanded. Your hands release more or less on their own, perhaps out of shock, as your whole body jolts. “Ow!” The shock sent you sitting halfway up, and you stare momentarily at your hands, and then back at Solas, who’s already tucked the book into his bag. “You absolute ass, you just magicked me!”

“It was a very light shock,” he says mildly.

“What if I started crying, huh?” you ask irritably, the very fact you’re asking strong evidence that you don’t actually intend to.

“You’ve never shown any sign of being scared of destruction magic,” he points out, and you scowl.

“Everyone’s scared of destruction magic. It’s in the title, Solas.”

“And yet here you are, not crying.”

You almost start just to spite him, but instead you continue to glare. “I’m going to tell Sera on you.”

Solas looks slightly pained. “Don’t.”

“Leave me the book, then,” you repeat, leaning over him to get to his bag. You don’t even want the book that badly. At this point it’s the principle of the thing.

“It’s a book of poetry you can barely read,” he points out.

“Exactly,” you say, exasperated. That is clearly the entire point. It’s a book you can barely read, therefore it needs to become a book you can read, ideally as quickly as possible. You manage to get one hand on his bag despite his attempts to twist it away, although to do so you’ve basically climbed over his lap. He tries to kick backwards away from you, you respond by squirreling further on top of him and digging into his bag, dropping your weight onto him. You’ve been wrestling a Qunari, so honestly, you don’t know why he thought he stood a chance. “Oh, hey, you’ve got bread in here!”

“If I give you the bread, will you get off of me.”
“Found the book!” you exclaim, gripping it with one hand while fighting off his arms with the other.

“Good night, Emma,” Solas says with a sigh, and then you fall flat onto the ground.

You blink several times, trying to figure out what had happened. Solas had… vanished, leaving you to collapse, since you’d been essentially on top of him by that point.

“Oh, come on!” you exclaim, realizing what had happened, and you hear a chuckle from outside your tent. “Using magic is cheating!” you yell out at him. “And I’m still telling Sera on you!”

You don’t get a response, so you flop back down onto your bedroll.

…You should have just taken him up on the bread offer.

—

You want to cry. You want to scream. It’s lodged in the back of your throat, leaving you unable to speak a word. ‘You can’t go, you can’t just leave me here alone, what will I do, I can’t be alone.’ You don’t say any of that. There wouldn’t be a point, and it would just make her feel worse. You can already tell she’s barely hanging on. There’s a film over her eyes that you recognize, a lack of focus implying she’s only partway into the present as is.

Even then, she’s smiling. “I’m only going because they promised me a white griffon,” she lies, foggy eyes dancing with fake mirth. “Take care of my dad while I’m gone, okay?”

Her dad hates you. As soon as she is gone, you sincerely doubt he’ll tolerate your presence, especially given that she’d just fostered off some other unfortunate onto him. He’s well off for an alienage elf but there are limits.

“And I want you to have this.”

It’s too big for you, but she presses it firmly into your hands anyway. It’s not right; you shouldn’t be the one to have this. She should keep it. The fact that she’s giving it to you makes you think that maybe she doesn’t intend to survive.

Alienage elves aren’t allowed to have these things. You bury it behind the orphanage, with the intention of taking it with you when you leave. The six little gemstones glint up at you from the hilt before you cover it with dirt. Fen’harel’s Fang. You’re still young enough to believe it was pried from the very mouth of the Dread Wolf himself.

It’s a long time before you get it back, but you take it with you to Orlais, and some superstitious little part of your soul wonders if that’s why six red eyes found you in the alley that night. After all, the Dread Wolf never loses a scent.

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You wake up with a snarl and a disorganized mind. One of your hands is wrapped around the front of Cole’s shirt, the other has found Fen’harel’s Fang where it still rests under your clothes. It takes too long for you to remember where you are, to remember why Cole is here, though you fortunately recognize him quickly. He doesn’t look even slightly worried about the fact you’d been about thirty seconds away from stabbing him, or about the grip you still have on his shirt. You release him with a tired groan.

That’s right. Cole had come in shortly after Solas had left, told you Solas had gone for a walk rather than going to sleep. You probably haven’t been unconscious for very long.
“Ninety minutes,” Cole informs you, without waiting for you to ask. You have no idea how he knows the time so precisely, but you just accept it.

You want to go back to sleep.

Instead, you sit the rest of the way up, rubbing your sore head with one hand. You feel like death. Your head is killing you; you feel intensely dehydrated. You’re sore all over, actually. You know, objectively, you’re getting more sleep now than you have in ages, but it feels like shit.

“Who’s awake?” you ask, voice coming out hoarse.

“The Inquisitor and Dorian,” Cole replies, and you nod tiredly. The Inquisitor is a novice Templar at best. You don’t really have to worry much about him within that context; he’s more dangerous as “the Inquisitor” than “a Templar.” If Seeker Pentaghast is asleep, you can relax a little. Not enough to let your aura back out, of course, but you let yourself fall back down onto the ground. Your eyes are too tired, your mind too foggy. You can’t work like this, so you might as well rest.

You drift in and out of sleep, or something resembling sleep, until you hear movement outside. The camp is beginning to wake up, which means you can too.

You’re beginning to fall into a little bit of a routine, which is comforting. You help Blackwall with breakfast—no Sera today. She seems to be a bit of a late riser, which makes the fact she woke up early specifically to hang out with you and Blackwall even cuter in retrospect. The Inquisitor and Seeker Pentaghast are the next ones out of their tents, despite the fact that the Inquisitor had a late watch shift the night before. He looks about as groggy as you feel. His ever-growing facial hair is even more apparent since he normally doesn’t have a huge beard like Blackwall does, and only serves to make him look that much more haggard.

He and Seeker Pentaghast start in on some sort of morning practice. They’d done it before, but you hadn’t really paid much attention. Today, however, you wind up idly watching while you prepare breakfast with Blackwall. It reminds you a bit of early morning practice with the Iron Bull, even though the two of them are clearly practicing armed combat and not hand-to-hand. Although, given the way the Inquisitor appears to be looking at the Seeker— or more aptly, her body— when she’s not paying attention, perhaps it would be more apt to compare it to your morning stretches with Solas. Including the implication any questionable side-eyeing being entirely one-sided. She thinks his stupid jokes are funny, however, and the two would certainly be a match. They’re equally shitty. You wish them luck and a lot of troublesome babies that keep them too busy to kill any more mages.

Speaking of Solas, stretches, and one-sided lust, you do morning exercise with him again once he rises. It’s as soothing for your body as it isn’t for your frazzled mind and libido. You could see yourself doing this regularly, although when you’d fit in time for it back in Skyhold, you’re not sure. You could do it before morning practice with Bull, maybe. But it’s probably less important when you’re not self-tenderizing by riding at a canter for twelve hours.

When you set off after dawn, the Inquisitor takes Sera and Blackwall with him for the advance group. You wouldn’t have minded him taking the Seeker with him, but since she doesn’t really bicker with the others the way Blackwall and Sera do, it’s actually a somewhat peaceful set-up. You half-drowse on Vhas, soothed by the steady beat of hooves and the sound of idle, peaceful chatter between your companions.

A sudden drip of cold water jolts you out of your reverie, and you look up at the clouds. They’re thick and gray, but it’s too warm for snow now that you’re out of the mountains. You’re about to be rained on. You pull your cloak out of one of your saddlebags. It’s the one you arrived at Skyhold in, and it has… seen better days. But the one you got in Orlais is in your other bags, so it’ll have to do.
Most of the space in the bags you keep with you are taken up by the books you can’t risk leaving behind or someone else finding.

You pull it around yourself just as the skies open up and rain begins to fall steadily from the sky. It only picks up as you go, and your cloak only does so much when you’re cantering headlong into rain. You pull the cloak as close to your body as you can, but you’re still getting soaked. Soaked and tired. A chill is setting in, too, compounded by the rain and the wind. You slump a bit in your saddle to ward it off and just focus on warmth. The heat inside you, the heat from Vhas’ body beneath you, warm against the insides of your legs. If you focus on that, you can almost forget how cold the rest of you is. The pounding of hooves becomes the pounding in your skull, a painful rhythm you can adjust to if only because of how steady it is.

The next thing you’re aware of is smashing into the ground, of cold wet all around you. Disoriented, you don’t even sit up right away, instead trying to take bearing of your surroundings. You are on the ground. The cold wet you’re feeling is mud, which you are laying in. You’re still in all of your clothes. It’s still raining.

You sit up slightly, and see your companions ahead, all coming to a stop at varying degrees of urgency. Seeker Pentaghast is already off of her mount and running towards you, which is an extremely alarming sight even though she’s probably just concerned. You did, apparently, just fall off your goddamn hart like an idiot. You must have fallen asleep, even just for a minute, and careened right off.

“Are you alright?!” Seeker Pentaghast exclaims, coming to kneel beside you so fast that she skids a bit in the mud. Solas is coming up behind her; Dorian is still on horseback, holding onto Vhas’ reins.

“I’m fine,” you say, then wince as you shift to try and stand. You’d clearly landed on your left shoulder. You move it, testing. Not dislocated or broken, which is lucky considering that’s the shoulder that’s popped out before.

“Why did you fall? I thought for a moment you’d been shot,” she says, gripping your arms as if to check that they’re both still there. You try not to wince as your shoulder is jostled.

“Sorry, I must have fallen asleep.”

“Fallen asleep?” the Seeker asks, seeming horrified. “Are you not sleeping well on the road?”

“She has chronic insomnia,” Solas informs her, and you watch as she turns to look at him, an expression of stunned disbelief on her face.

“We are taking an untrained linguist who is chronically exhausted on our breakneck journey across Orlais into danger unknown?” she demands, as if it’s Solas’ fault. Solas merely shrugs. She turns to look at you with the same expression, and you shrug as well, although it hurts to do so. Seeker Pentaghast rubs her face, smearing a bit of mud on her cheek as she does. “I’m going to kill him…”

“Please don’t,” you quip with a grin. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to have to find out if the Inquisitor’s mark still works when not attached to his body.”

Solas snorts, and even the Seeker rolls her eyes, looking a bit less strained. “Are you sure you’re fine?” she asks again.

“I’m fine. I landed in this nice soft mud,” you inform her.

“Should we tie you into your saddle?” she suggests, and you shake your head.
“No, I’m sorry for the delay. It won’t happen again; I was just a bit distracted due to the rain.” Seeker Pentaghast looks skeptical, but you’re definitely not about to let anyone tie you to anything.

“Does anyone have a spare cloak?” Dorian shouts over the sound of the rain. “She’ll freeze solid if we don’t get her out of that mud-covered one. Not that you can tell the difference, just looking at it…”

You scowl at him. Was it really necessary to point out how ugly your cloak was? You know it’s seen better days.

“I have a spare,” the Seeker says immediately. “I believe we’re about the same size.”

“In height, maybe,” you mutter under your breath as she turns to fetch her cloak. The Seeker is significantly broader than you in literally every aspect, strong shoulders and muscles that would put even Fenris to shame. She looks like she bench presses horses in her spare time, for the Maker’s sake…

You manage to stand out of the mud pile after shooing away Solas, who reaches out to help you. You don’t want to get him covered in mud as well. You strip out of your cloak, letting the rain rinse off the parts of you that weren’t protected. Thank the Maker your hood was up, so your hair has escaped relatively unscathed. You don’t much care for the idea of trying to wash mud from your hair with freezing stream water.

The Seeker returns with her cloak, which does in fact fit you fairly well. The clasp on it is a Chantry amulet. You run your fingers over it again and again after you’ve mounted back up and Vhas and begun to move again. The familiar sharp ridges keep you very focused indeed, and you don’t drowse off again.

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You’re very awake by the time you stop for lunch. You’re also very muddy, wet, and extremely sore. Your mood is similarly dire, although you’d like to think that’s understandable given the circumstances. You see to the horses in a wet, irritated daze, barely even aware that Seeker Pentaghast—and possibly others—is helping you. Once you’re done, you flop listlessly next to the others to get something resembling a decent lunch into you. You run the back of your hand over your forehead when no one’s looking, but you can’t tell if you’re hot or if your hands are just frozen. You suppose it doesn’t actually matter either way.

“We’re lucky that today is the day we’ll be so close to Verchiel,” the Inquisitor is saying. You’re barely half-listening. “There’s an inn on the outskirts, near the road. We can stop there tonight.” Now that knocks you out of your stupor.

An inn room means proper, non-cloth shelter from the rain, and warm beds with actual blankets, and probably even a bath if you play your cards right. Speaking of cards, there’ll probably be a lot of ale and a lot of travelers willing to gamble. It could be a fun way to pass an evening, assuming you don’t want to just lay in bed for twelve hours.

You’re quite cheered by the news, and eat the rest of your lunch with more vigor as the others discuss the particulars.

“We can do two rooms, since there are eight of us,” Seeker Pentaghast says. You make a face into your bread at the concept of sharing a room with both her and Sera.

“And almost enough women to fill an even room this time,” comments Blackwall. “I’d been getting
used to sausage stew being the everyday.”

“Cole can room with us,” Seeker Pentaghast says, and you laugh at the same time Sera scoffs angrily. “He’s already been sharing a tent with Emma,” she points out to Sera. “And before that, myself.”

“He can be an honorary woman for the night,” you suggest, bemused and probably at least lightly delirious from lack of sleep, fever, or unrelated illness. You can’t be arsed to figure out which.

“It’s not like he’s actually a man, either,” the Inquisitor points out. “He’s like a… nebulous… spirit… thing…” He waves his hand vaguely at Cole, who seems unperturbed. “He doesn’t even need a bed. Does he even sleep?”

No one answers, not even Cole. Solas merely shrugs, as does Dorian. You follow suit when the gaze turns to you. Hopefully just because you’ve been sharing a tent with him.

“It doesn’t matter that he’s a spirit, I mean, he has a man’s body, right?” Blackwall argues. “With all the bits associated, I assume.”

“You assume,” you say with a snort.

“Well I haven’t seen it!”

“Then does it matter?” you ask dryly. “Would it matter anyway?” you add, thinking of Krem and your newfound knowledge of the ways bodies don’t really matter, even in humans, let alone spirits. “Instead of talking around his dick while he’s right here, I’ll show you a trick.” You turn to Cole, give him a chance to focus on you instead of staring blandly up at the rain, thinking his own thoughts, which he’d been doing while the conversation circled around him.

“Cole, do you feel like a boy?” you ask simply. He blinks in owlish confusion, then seems to consider it.

“Not the way they do,” he says finally, gesturing at the others. “More like the way you do.”

“See?” you say, turning back to Blackwall. “He’s… miscellaneous.”

“What does he mean, the way you do?” Blackwall asks, wearing a confused expression that clearly states he’s now wondering about the contents of your own trousers.

“All that matters is that I’m not a guy, and probably neither is he,” you say with a shrug.

“Is that because he’s a spirit?” Blackwall wonders.

“It’s not as though no spirits have genders,” Solas interjects, and focus turns to him as nearly everyone blinks at him in confusion.

“He’s right,” Dorian adds. “You’ll see ones that associate strongly with one gender or another.”

“Particularly if they’ve spent a great deal of time in contact with our world. They emulate things they see and like. Sometimes, a gender is one of those things. Sometimes it’s not.”

“Is that really a gender, though, if they’re just copying?” Blackwall wonders. “It’s not as though they really become human by copying, either.”

You gesture towards Cole, then squeeze his shoulder fondly, both a method of attempting to ground him since he’s obviously drifting off into thought again, and as a way to demonstrate how solid he is.
“He’s pretty close, though, right? Besides, who says only humans can have gender?”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Blackwall says quickly, and you laugh to let him know you knew he hadn’t. No point in giving him a hard time about wording at this point.

“What I mean is, isn’t that just what children do? Boys see men and emulate them. Girls do the same with women; we all do it with people we admire and see ourselves in. Professions, traits, morals… we take it all into ourselves by copying, right? That’s why people are so different depending on what society they’ve grown up in. Why would gender be any different?”

You’re clearly getting a bit over Blackwall’s head with this, but Dorian and Solas are more than willing to pick up the conversation.

“If you were to argue that spirits and humans were the same in this, though, you’d be implying that all human children are nebulous blobs,” Dorian points out.

“Have you met many babies?” Solas asks dryly. “Blobs seems an apt word.”

“What I mean is, surely some of it is inborn.”

“I thought all of it was inborn,” Blackwall says, a bit sulkily, but with good humor.

“Well, I mean, at that point we’re really getting into the question of nature versus nurture… Which… Has that been explored much, with regards to spirits?” You direct this question towards Solas, mostly, but Seeker Pentaghast chimes in.

“Some, although likely not in the way you mean, nor for the reasons you suggest.”

“Spirits are different than the people of this world,” Solas says. “They are not ‘born’ in the same sense. The spirits we think of as spirits, rather than mere wisps, form when there is enough distinct about them to give them will separate from the rest of the Fade.”

“It tends to be a strong emotion or something similar that gives them shape, rather than something so nebulous and human as a gender,” Dorian adds, sounding amused. “Before you ask if there are any spirits of maleness.”

“There are certainly spirits of virility that take a page from that book,” Solas quips, and you can’t help laughing at the way eyes go wide and cheeks flush around camp.

“Is this conversation gonna keep going?” Sera asks irritably. “Warn me now, eh?”

“Probably,” the Inquisitor informs her sympathetically. “There’s no stopping the intellectual type once they get going.”

“Is there a strong difference between spirits of virility and spirits of fertility?” you ask, largely ignoring Sera and the Inquisitor.

“Not so much as one might think.”

“But still some,” Dorian interjects. “You can often tell just by seeing them, even if the lines are blurry.”

“Could gender be a determining factor?” you suggest, and just like that you’ve started a debate about gender vis a vis spirits that carries you, Dorian, Solas, and at times Cole through lunch and onto the road. Blackwall, Sera, and the Inquisitor seemed very glad to be rid of you when they left. However,
Seeker Pentaghast seems mostly bemused as the three of you bicker and posit endlessly down the Imperial Highway.

Chapter End Notes

I really wanted for Emma to make a "schrodinger's dick" joke in there about Blackwall's speculation in regards to Cole. But alas, Schrodinger doesn't exist in Thedas.

Yet.

If you like my stuff, check out my Tumblr, where you can stalk me and my work more effectively! If you haven't already, I'd like to encourage you to subscribe to me in addition to/instead of just subscribing to this story, so you can know when I update other stories.
Kiss Kiss Fall In Love

Chapter Notes

:D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The inn is just your average side-of-the-Imperial-Highway affair, but it might as well be a seat at the Maker’s side for as happy as you are to see it. You have to stay behind the others a bit to see the mounts into the stables; it takes a bit for you to convince the stable master that you need an elven stablehand, specifically, to handle the harts. Derreck might have absolutely no standards, but you know for a fact Ashi’lana would misbehave and Revas would probably maim if a human tried to get fresh with them. You walk the starry-eyed elven stablehand through the basics of hart care before heading into the inn proper to join the others.

To your amusement, it’s Blackwall that’s purchasing your rooms when you walk in. You suppose the others might be recognized… Eugene Trevelyan and Cassandra Pentaghast are very known names at this point. And Dorian is very obviously Tevinter. So yes, of course, it would have to be Blackwall. Maker only knows what they make of the group. You could be mistaken for a handmaid or servant of some kind, but Sera’s bow makes her hard to mistake for a servant. And Dorian and Solas both have staffs. Maker. At least you don’t have any Qunari with you this time.

You all stop by your rooms, briefly, to change out of your armor and various protective layers. You hadn’t realized quite how thoroughly frozen you were until you stripped out of damp layers and hung them up to dry. Fortunately, thanks to Seeker Pentaghast’s more effective cloak, your innermost layer hadn’t gotten completely soaked. No need to strip completely next to her and Sera. You change into a fresh tunic and then head back down for a hot dinner prepared by someone else for a change. Someone with access to an actual kitchen. You’re already salivating.

The men have already grabbed a long table by the time the rest of you get downstairs, and food is already starting to come out. You suppose it’s just standard inn fair, nothing special, but to you it tastes absolutely fantastic. You eat a very unreasonable amount of stew for someone your size, and Solas keeps passing you bread. By the time you’ve finished eating, you suspect your stomach is probably visibly distended. You flop back in your chair contentedly. You suspect you’ll sleep tonight, without Cole’s aid, so long as you can relax enough in a room with a Seeker in it. So, actually, scratch that, you probably won’t get a wink…

You eye some of the other guests in the tavern. A game of Wicked Grace has started up in the corner… New plan. You’ll stay down here all night, and separate some travelers from their coin. You have a lot to gamble with, thanks to Leliana. You glance over the table; half of your traveling party is gone. The Inquisitor, Sera, Seeker Pentaghast, and Cole seem to have vanished at some point, probably went upstairs to get early baths in or something. Your eyes slide over Blackwall, Solas, and Dorian in turn, before settling on Blackwall.

“Blackwall, do you know how to play cards?” you ask curiously.

“A bit vague,” he replies with a good-natured laugh. “Any game in particular?”

You gesture over to the other table. “What are they playing?”
Blackwall looks over, squinting. “Looks like Wicked Grace. Surely you’ve played it before?”

You shake your head. “I’ve heard of it, but I’ve never gotten the chance to play. Is it difficult to learn?”

“Not really,” Blackwall says. “Easy to learn, hard to master, or so they say. Are you interested in learning?”

You bite your lip, as if considering, then nod. “Sure! When will I get the chance again? It’s not like I do that much traveling, and I’d be too nervous to jump in on a game like that on my own… Wicked Grace in a tavern, that’s something everyone should do once, right?” You grin nervously. “Get the full experience.”

Solas is giving you quite the look, but Blackwall doesn’t seem to notice. Dorian isn’t looking at you at all, burying his face in a mug in a poor attempt to hide a grin.

“Well, why don’t we see if they’ll deal us in?” Blackwall suggests.

“Is it okay for me to learn on the go like that?” you ask, frowning, but standing up to follow him.

“Oh, sure,” Blackwall says with a nod. “No one ever minds playing against a rookie.”

Your beginner’s luck lasts you about fifteen, twenty hands before people start complaining, helped along by the fact you lost quite a few in the beginning to rookie mistakes. The benefit of having a lot of coin to start with. A few people surrender, a few more join in. Blackwall is still in, but he’s gambling wisely, grumbling something under his breath about having seen this before. That’s just as well to you; you’re not trying to rob him blind. You fold early when he has good hands to let him come out with some coin and some dignity still intact.

But not enough dignity for anyone to suspect he’s helping you cheat or anything. You don’t want to get him in trouble. Especially when you have no real need to cheat—it’s easy enough to remember what cards have already been played. It’s not that you can’t cheat; you learned a lot of shit in Antiva. You just don’t need to.

You’re a few pints in, although so is everyone else. You tend to get a bit sloppy when drunk, so you’re watching your intake more than you would if you weren’t gambling at the same time. That’s probably why you’re just “pleasantly drunk” and not “completely plastered” by the time you decide to take a break while you’re ahead. Very, very far ahead, with a coin purse that’s half again as heavy as it was when you started, and a very nice ring you haven’t decided whether or not you’re going to return to the idiot who gambled it.

Dorian moves in to take your spot; he’d been sort of circling the table on and off for a while. You’d caught Solas looking, as well, though he’d never joined in, which is both a good thing and a shame. You would have had a really good time playing with him, you suspect, but it would have been hard to concentrate on fleecing people without getting caught.

You idly scan the bar for him, not for any real reason. You don’t even know what you’d do if you found him. Pester him, maybe. You have a pretty good track record for that. But he’s nowhere to be seen; probably already upstairs. Probably already asleep, because he’s boring and does nothing but sleep, which is actually really perfectly understandable now that you know he’s a Somniari. What does this world really have to offer, compared to the Fade? You wouldn’t know, since you can’t really explore it the way he probably can.
You throw on your nice cloak, the one from Val Royeaux, and head outside with a full bottle of wine you’d purchased from the inn just to be a prick about how much coin you’d made in a night. It’s still raining, but there are much worse things than wine in the rain. Music and the sounds of people spill out of the inn, muffled by the steady pounding of rain on the ground. You take a long swig from the wine bottle, letting your hood fall off as you lean back. Satisfied, you run fingers through your hair, pulling it down from its bun and letting it pool in your hood and spill down over your shoulders.

Feels nice. As does the cool rain on your wine-flushed skin. You meander over towards the stables, boots splashing through puddles, not really caring if you get soaked. There’s a bath upstairs with, as far as you’re concerned, your name on it. You can get as cold and wet as you damn well please.

You walk around behind the stables, enjoying the relative quiet, and considering walking further, wandering into the fields or towards Verchiel. It would be very easy to get lost right here, actually, just take your huge pile of coins and head off into the darkness. You could just go into the stables, get on Revas, and be gone. It’s not like your friends could spare much time looking for you when they have places to be.

The thought circles idly around your mind as you work your way through the bottle of wine. It would be nice to be free of the Inquisition, in some ways. You don’t appreciate the way you’re getting pulled back into both danger and a bardic sort of lifestyle. They’re currently taking you to the Western Approach, into a damned blighted desert, and you have no real indication that they intend on taking you back to Skyhold in any sort of reasonable time frame. It’s very much not what you had in mind when you headed for Skyhold in the first place. You’re right in the middle of Orlais. You have contacts in Verchiel and a lot of coin. You could vanish into the rain and they’d never fucking find you again.

But on the other hand, if there really are ancient ruins out there like Cole said, it’d be nice to have a first-hand look at them in a situation where you’d have half a dozen armed warriors watching your back. Chances like that are hard to come by without paying a lot of coin, and this time, you’d be the one being paid. If you bolted now, you’d have to abandon the Alix Gagnon name for at least a few years, long enough for the Inquisition’s potential pettiness to run its course. That would be a huge pain, you don’t have an infinite surplus of people to be in Orlais, and Alix is your favorite. And Seeker Pentaghast aside, you don’t really hate your company, either.

Solas is, of course, his own list of pros and cons, but the danger ultimately loses out to the promise of knowledge. It always seems to, with you, because you’re a fucking idiot and also your mother’s daughter no matter how much she tried to teach you better. So no, you won’t be running off into the night, burning all your bridges for no real reason. But the thought still circles, endlessly, offering suggestions you never asked for on how best to accomplish a goal you’ve already decided you don’t want. It becomes a background hum as you get further into the bottle of wine.

“You should thank me for stomping the smile off that arse! He was getting in your head!”

You freeze in place, then automatically take a few steps backwards. Sera’s voice…?

“Thank you?! You’re the one who fucked up!”

Aaaand the Inquisitor. Why do you always overhear the Inquisitor getting reamed by his inner circle?! The voices are coming closer, too. In a panic, you stumble backwards before seeing a window in the side of the stable. You scramble in and flop into a pile of hay, flattening out so they hopefully won’t see you when they go past.

“I'm sorry, what are you on about? Because that excuse for a person was a fully vetted arsehole,”
Sera snaps, sounding dumbfounded. “You’re sure as piss not putting me next to him.”

The voices have stopped getting closer, but they’re not getting further away, either, which is arguably the worst thing that could have happened. They might be right outside the window, for all you know. You glance around, wondering if you can risk crawling away and finding another exit.

“Forget him, I’m more concerned that your ‘friends’ didn’t know what they were getting into. You risked their lives for this scheme, and they didn’t even know what they were part of.”

Oh, that clears things up a bit. But did the Inquisitor seriously not know how Red Jenny worked? Even you knew that. Although you suppose that’s actually not really a fair comparison. You worked in similar circles, whereas the Inquisitor is a human noble. He’s not really supposed to know how these things work. Still, wouldn’t Sera have explained? ...Er, actually, that might explain it; she’s not really the clearest teacher in the Inquisition.

“Don’t turn this around!” Sera exclaims. “Yes, they got hurt for talking. But what were they supposed to do? They were already being hurt. And who made it necessary to speak up? That noble arsewhole, that’s who. And that was just the one we flushed out. There’s always more just like him.”

“You had me march my people through his territory. That provoked him. If we'd done it differently, it might've stayed peaceful,” the Inquisitor argues.

“What?” says Sera, straight back to dumbfounded. “I don't even know what to say to that! 'Let the bad man do what he wants, or he'll get worse'? What kind of lay-down-and-take-it shite is that? You'd rather do nothing than try to make this better?”

“It's not about that! I did something, and people died, that puts those deaths on my hands. On our hands. I have to think about the Inquisition and how all the bigger pieces fit together. I have to think about minimizing harm everywhere overall, not just right in front of me.”

“See this eye? You're making it twitch. Because that's stupid. Sometimes I cock things up, right? But at least I'm doing something. The ‘greater good’ can frig it.”

Well that’s… a stance. Not necessarily yours, but then again, you never really had the greater good in mind to begin with, just your greater good.

“Something? What have you done for anyone? How are you making things better?”

You bristle where you lay hidden in the hay, teeth clenching. Oh, that’s fucking rich from him. You resist the urge to pop up and join into the fight. It’s none of your business--even though that’s not stopping you from listening--and you finally got to the point where the Inquisitor doesn’t seem actively hostile towards you. This isn’t your fight. But you kind of wish it was.

“I make sure these arseholes pay!” Sera exclaims, which isn’t the most poignant point she could have made, but fair enough.

“While filling your pockets.”

There’s a light thud where your fist automatically hits the ground. That’s fucking rich! Oh, that’s so fucking rich! Like the Inquisition isn’t doing the same damn thing! They have a fortress and an entire army, there’s no way there isn’t a lot of coin flowing into their coffers. Fuck, you know there is, because Leliana threw gold around just to ensure you didn’t quit rather than march across Orlais.

“Well, maybe, but... but…” You can hear the hurt in Sera’s voice, and see her expression in your mind clear as day. You seethe quietly in the hay. “Know what? You go suck frigging eggs.” YES
GO SERA. “I take back. No, I don’t change the world, but that’s hard, right? Even for Heralds, or you’re lying!”

“That’s exactly what I mean by the big picture!”

“So the ‘big picture’ includes letting some arsehole get people killed just on the off chance he might kill more people later if you stop him?! Pissing me right off, Inquisitor. We keep up like this, it’s... Well it’s not good, right?”

You hear a long, frustrated sigh from the Inquisitor. “I need all the help I can get, but consider this a warning.” You feel your breath catch in your throat. Would he seriously kick Sera out of the Inquisition? What in the Void had happened out there?

You don’t have very much time to consider it, because the Inquisitor walks right by the window. You freeze in abject terror, mentally willing him to just keep walking and not look down and to his left. Mercifully, he seems preoccupied, storming off with an expression of intense frustration.

There’s a brief moment of silence, and then you hear a loud thud against the side of the barn. “Barking arse... ugh! So hard to get? Stupid... everyone.” You wince at the sound of another thud against the barn, mind slipping back to times you’ve taken your frustration and self-loathing out on the side of buildings, trees, rocks… whatever was handy. You imagine Sera with hands bloodied like yours, and bite your lip.

Maker… damnit, and damn your stupid emotions.

Cautiously, you crawl to your knees and poke your head out of the window. Sera seems on the verge of tears, repeatedly kicking the side of the barn. “Um,” you manage, but it’s enough to make her head shoot up.

“...Fuck!” she swears loudly. “How long’ve you been there?”

“Uh… the… the whole time, actually.” You hold up your bottle of half-drunk wine with a sheepish grin. “Not to be contrary, but the barn didn’t do anything. How ‘bout a walk and a drink and a good long complaint session where we shittalk the Inquisitor and laugh about how he needs to shave and always kinda looks like he’s hungover?”

“It’s raining,” she says huffily.

You shrug. “When has that ever stopped us before?”

The two of you wind up on the roof of the inn, which is inevitable really, especially since you involved an entire bottle of wine. Sera had quite a bit of the half that was left, but you’d been pretty well tanked before you started so you don’t particularly mind. Seems like she needs it more, anyway.

“And then he just stopped the battle after we’d basically won anyway and was just talking to this absolute prick who’d just killed someone in front of him!” Sera rants. “Asking him what he could add to the Inquisition and shit! And it just kept pissing me off more and more!”

“So what happened?” you ask, all sympathy.

“Well, I threw a knife at him!”

“You? Threw a knife? You’re almost as bad at that as I am shooting arrows,” you point out, which
probably wasn’t the most tactful thing to say, but hey, you’re drunk.

“This is my story, so if I say it worked, it worked!”

“Which side of hit him?”

“The blunt side, and you can shut right up.”

“It’s probably just as well, I mean, it would have been really messy if you’d just killed him.”

“Well, I still did!”

You pause, blinking in surprise. “Really?”

“Of course! He was a certified ass and if the Inquisitor hadn’t stopped to be a prick we would have killed him anyway!”

You nod, as if this is the most relatable thing in the world and not kind of alarming. You mean, you’ve done the same thing, but like… not really when people were looking. You always forget how comfortable your newfound companions are with casual murder. There’s a difference between warriors and everyone else, you suppose…

“And the Inquisitor gets all pissy at me! It’s not right, he was going to just ally with that absolute horse’s arse just because he has money, it’s like he doesn’t even care what’s right!”

You wrap what you hope is a comforting arm around her shoulders. The two of you are sitting under the overhang near one of the chimneys, half out of the rain, although your legs are getting soaked.

“He’s an ass,” you say. “We knew that.”

“He didn’t have to be that much of an ass! He seemed pretty good at first! I mean, you know, he was a noble, but he didn’t seem all… noble-y about it!”

“I’ll take your word for it,” you say, although thinking about it, he’d seemed okay the first time you’d met him, too. You hadn’t even realized he was the Inquisitor; you’d thought he’d been one of Leliana’s people. The second time, though, he seemed like a right prick. Arguably because he’d been talking to Solas.

“I dunno what I was thinking… They’re always all the same.”

You can’t argue, and wouldn’t want to. You’d met nobles that you’d thought were better, and nobles that you might still, on your good days, argue were good. But on most days, you know what an illusion that is. They’ll turn on you in a second. Sera had been in this life probably as long as you had; she knew as well as you did. Especially if she’d been in Val Royeaux this whole time…

“I guess I just… just thought maybe this time…”

“Maybe this one would be different?” you suggest. “He showed some of the signs, right, thought maybe he knew better than the rest of them?”

She lets out a sigh, then takes another long swig of wine. “I must seem like a fuckin’ idiot.”

You shake your head vigorously. “We all want to believe that.”

“Is it ever true?”
You shrug, uncomfortably. “Some are better than others…”

“But none of them are good.”

You smile sympathetically, and she pounds her fist against your thigh in frustration. You catch it with your hand when she goes to hit the roof instead, not wanting her to hurt herself. She yanks against your grip once, and then seems to think better of it, instead sighing and lacing her fingers with yours.

At some point, you realize, you’d gotten very close. Part of it is just the nature of huddling under such a narrow overhang. Your hip is flush against hers, and you’d thrown your arm around her to comfort her, but that’s just… that’s a hug, you’re hugging her. Now that you’re holding her hand in yours, it’s all very apparent.

She looks up at you, your scant inches of height suddenly very obvious when your faces are this close. Oh, wait, shit, this is bad, you’re drunk and she’s drunk and you really didn’t think this through–

You have just enough time, as she’s leaning up towards you, to jump away, to roll down the fucking roof and just let yourself hit the ground, limp and useless.

You had enough time. You did.

But instead of bolting like you have every other time this came up, you just sit there. Like an idiot. You let it happen.

And then her lips are on yours, any thought of stopping this shit before it could start flies out of your mind. You lean into her, pushing your lips against hers harder, and when they part slightly in a gasp, you barely hesitate to deepen the kiss.

Her spare hand goes to your waist, pulling you close, the empty bottle dropping from her grip and clattering down the roof. After a moment, you just shift over so you’re straddling her lap, pushing her back against the stone of the chimney and kissing her with a fierce hunger. She tastes like expensive wine, the taste of it still bursting on her tongue as it slides against yours. The voice in your head screaming that this is a mistake is momentarily hushed, and all you can feel is the heat of her against your chest and lips while your back soaks and freezes in the rain.

So good. She tastes so good; she feels so good. Why did you not want this? You can’t remember. Whatever reasons you had were probably really stupid and not worth it.

And then she pushes you off her for a second, so she can gasp in a breath of air that you hadn’t realized you needed too. She looks up at you, hazel-green eyes blown wide, lips and nose red from the cold and the kissing. Her breathless expression turns into a smirk; she bites her bottom lip as her eyes slip to your mouth and then back up to your eyes.

“We shoulda done that ages ago,” she says, and you can’t decide if you agree or need to revisit the “throwing yourself off the roof” plan.

Chapter End Notes
If you like my stuff, I invite you to check out my Tumblr, where I have lots of *new and shiny ways* you can see *additional content*, content that I might not be able to *legally mention on Ao3*. (Large, pleading eyes here.)
That was a mistake. That was definitely a mistake. And yet you did it, and when Sera drags you in to keep doing it, you do that too, shoes slipping against slick roof tiles as you struggle to keep your balance so your hands can do other things.

Her hand sliding up the back of your tunic is fire against the ice of your soaked skin. It sends electric tingles out from your spine as surely as if she was the mage. You have enough self-awareness not to start stripping her on the roof of an inn, and hopefully she does too, but that’s where self-awareness ends. You keep pressing closer until you’re essentially sitting in her lap, pushing against the chimney and pushing against her until she’s sliding downward, rough tiles of the roof pulling her shirt up slightly as she does. You play your hands across the bared skin, savor the way she sharply sucks in breath through the kiss.

You could do a lot more than kiss, so you’re sort of glad you’re on the roof, actually, grateful for the occasional distraction of your feet slipping against the tiles. You’re not wearing the shoes you normally would for climbing around on roofs in the rain–why would you be–so your traction isn’t what you’d like it to be. That little bit of awareness keeps you from sliding your hands down her pants, though it doesn’t stop you from kissing across her jaw and down her neck, testing curiously with little bites. The noises she makes are… encouraging.

You can feel her fingers, ice cold, playing around the waistline of your pants, perhaps contemplating the same things you were. You don’t know whether you hope she stops or not. You never got very far past this point in the past with Aimée–

The thought of her makes you lose your balance, mentally… and more importantly, physically. You foot slips dramatically out from under you as your weight shifts too much to the right, and you fall onto your side and begin sliding down the roof. Sera, still holding onto you and half caught by one of your legs, loses her balance as well and in a moment, both of you are tumbling down the roof. You push apart at the same time, having both apparently fallen off enough roofs to know that it’s very hard to grab onto something while tangled up with another person.

You don’t try to catch yourself on the tiles, not with your hands anyway, instead letting yourself tumble towards the edge where you can catch yourself with relative ease and without the risk of cutting your hands on sharp tile. You dangle half-carelessly off the edge, body still tingling all over. Sera is further up the roof, her boots having caught on the roof and helped her stop well before reaching the edge.

“Maker’s tits, are you alrigh’?” she exclaims. “Stop fuckin’ fallin’ off of shite!”

You laugh, and then pull yourself up a bit so your elbows and forearms can rest on the edge of the
“I’m fine, I’m fine!” you insist. “I caught myself.”

“Givin’ me fits…” she grumbles, and you laugh again. “Stop laughin’! It would be so like you to kiss me ‘n’ then jus’ fall off the roof ‘n’ DIE.” You laugh even harder, and she glares for a minute before beginning to laugh herself. You can’t help it. It’s just so ridiculous.

“Should I let go or climb back up?” you wonder after you catch your breath a bit. You’re just sort of hanging. It’s not necessarily super uncomfortable, but it’s not sustainable either, and it’d look super dumb if anyone came outside.

Sera slips further down the roof to look down over the edge. “Looks like there’s some hay down there, y’can proly just drop down. It’s only rainin’ harder.”

“Yeah…” you glance up at the dark sky. Not so much as a star. You can’t even see the moon through the thick cloud cover. “Where’d my wine wind up?”

Sera shrugs. “I think it rolled off the roof.”

“Maybe it clocked the Inquisitor on the head,” you suggest, and Sera laughs again. You lower yourself down as far as you can before releasing your grip on the edge of the roof. You fall to the ground, landing silently in the hay, and Sera follows just behind you. You don’t really talk about the fact you just kissed as you walk around into the inn, and then you’re in the room you’re sharing with her and Seeker Pentaghast, and Pentaghast is there so you definitely can’t talk about it.

There’s only one bath, and the Seeker already had hers, so Sera goes next as you hang up dripping overclothes up and strip out of soaked boots. The awkwardness in the room when it’s just you and the Seeker is palpable, but you’re most preoccupied with thoughts of Sera.

You absolutely should not have done that. Any of it. And you’re kind of glad, in retrospect, that Seeker Pentaghast is here, because you don’t want to have a Talk with Sera where you hash out why the shit you kissed her and what comes next, because you don’t know the answers to either of those, or not any that Sera would like, in any case. You’re really glad she’s here, so that Sera couldn’t ask you into the bath with her, and you’re really glad it was raining and you didn’t actually have sex on the roof of an inn, which sounds exactly like something you would have done in Orlais and exactly like something you should not do with the Inquisition.

You and Sera shift awkwardly past each other as she finishes with the bath and you head in. You try very hard not to think about her sitting naked in the tub. The water is past lukewarm and headed rapidly into cold, and you think of Solas’ fire runes in the inn in Val Royeaux. Then you’re thinking about Solas, and you flop back miserably against the edge of the tub.

Why do you have to be surrounded with fantastic people you want to have sex with? You’re trying to minimize complications, but feels like you’ve actually managed to maximize them. What are you going to tell Sera? What if Solas finds out? What if everyone finds out? Does Sera have any interest in keeping it secret, or does she think a kiss means you’re dating now?

At least Solas had the kindness to reject you when you acted a fool and kissed him. Thinking about it now, things really would have been even worse if he’d kissed you back like Sera had. You never thought you’d be grateful for him being a dickhead willing to let you believe that a dream had just been a dream when he’d been spying on you, but right now, you’re seeing the appeal of it.

It takes you a while to scrub all the mud off from your fall, and by the time you’re done and willing to come out, the water is stone cold and also pretty filthy, with bits of hay floating in it. You go ahead and take the initiative to bucket it out the window, body moving automatically in familiar
You’re so dead, that’s what you keep circling back around to. You have no idea to handle this. Fortunately, with Seeker Pentaghast there, you don’t have to handle it tonight. The three of you prepare for bed in relative peace. Sera is in a fantastic mood, which will probably absolutely bewilder the Inquisitor as soon as he sees her, something which amuses you despite how worried you are.

Seriously, what have you done? This isn’t fair to her. You’re lying to her every day, and you can’t be involved with someone right now, and you’d gone and kissed her. It’s your own fault if she gets the wrong idea! Anyone would! And how do you bring it up? Do you just say, oh, sorry we made out on the roof but actually I’m really emotionally unavailable right now for reasons I can’t tell you? Also I’ll be avoiding you for the foreseeable future because you’re hot as hell and I’m pretty sure I can’t trusted to be alone with you at this point.

Uuuuuuugh.

You stew in the darkness of the inn room, unable to sleep while listening to Sera and the Seeker explore the Fade in peace. Well, not that either of them would appreciate you phrasing it like that. Once you’re sure both of them, especially Sera, are asleep, you slip noiselessly out of bed. You grab your bag and a cloak on the way out and toss it on over your nethers so you’re not completely indecent. It must be really late, but there’s still people up in the tavern drinking. You’re severely tempted to join them—you’ve sobered up and you severely regret it. But instead you just walk out the door. No one bothers you, even though you’re barefoot and clearly not wearing actual pants.

That’s the beauty of crowds, of people. No one really cares. You can disappear.

Your bare feet pad through the mud, quickly becoming numb. They’re filthy and frozen by the time you get to the stables. You move inside silently, but when you do, there’s Cole, right by the entrance.

“You were really happy!” he tells you enthusiastically, and you don’t know whether to laugh or cry. “You can be happy, you know,” he adds, pouting a bit. “It would be different. Nothing has to be like before.”

“I’m not worried about that,” you lie. “I’m lying to her.”

“Not important things,” Cole claims, and you do laugh then.

“Really? You don’t think she’d lose her damned mind if she found out?”

“That’s why you haven’t told her. She’s not the one you should tell. But that doesn’t have to matter for this… does it?” he frowns, as if uncertain. “She makes you happy. You make her happy,” he adds, and your cheeks flush. You mean, well, obviously that would be true, since she made out with you, but it’s still something to hear out loud.

“It’s not right to be with someone like that and be lying to them…” you mutter, more to remind yourself than anything else.

“You’re not like her. No one else has to be like her, either. She was just one person.”

You shake your head. “I don’t think that.”

“You do, here,” Cole argues. He pokes at your chest to emphasize his point, amusingly nowhere near where your heart would actually be. He has to know where a heart is, he kills people. He has to know a heart doesn’t think anything at all.
“Well I don’t think it with anything that matters,” you say with a sigh. “She’s not Aimée, it’s a different situation, I get that, sure, whatever.”

“You’re a bad liar.”

“I’m a fantastic liar, and you know it,” you counter, and Cole considers, then nods, which makes you laugh again. The noise comes out hollow and a little broken towards the end.

“Maker… I really fucked up, Cole.”

“She doesn’t think so.”

“She doesn’t know any better.”

“I do.”

“Then you know I fucked up!” you snap. “I shouldn’t have done that! It’s not fair to her!”

“But you make each other happy,” Cole whines, and you shake your head. You grip his shoulder comfortingly.

“Sometimes that’s not enough.”

“It should be.”

You open your mouth to argue, but stop, and then just shrug. “Yeah. You’re probably right.”

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You sleep in the stables with Cole and Revas. It’s warm in there, especially resting against Revas’ body heat, and thanks to Cole you can sleep with your aura out and way more solidly than you normally would. You dream deeply of Sera, of the way her hands felt on your body, of the taste of wine and salt. You wake up slowly, naturally, something you don’t think you’ve done in months. You feel like you could stand to go back to sleep again, but the sun is up, stablehands are poking around, and your party is probably waking up as well.

You can’t believe you didn’t have nightmares. You deserved to have nightmares. You deserved every demon the fade had to offer tormenting you within an inch of your life. You deserved memories of Aimée. Of betray. Of lies. Of who you are and what you are and why it’s wrong to even keep Sera in your mind like this, let alone act on it.

Instead, soft pastel dreams of women who might love you one day, if only because you could keep them from knowing any better.

Disgusted with yourself, you sit up. At some point in the night, you’d just rolled over on top of Revas and kept sleeping like that, on your stomach. The elven stablehand you’d put in charge of the harts is watching you from a few stalls over where he’s brushing and saddling Ash’ilana. You sit up, rub your eyes, and reluctantly gather your aura back up. It takes you a while to spot Cole, who’s sitting up in the rafters, whittling something. Spirits whittle? Well, Cole does, you suppose. He’s hardly a typical case study of spirit behavior.

Revas glances up over his shoulder at you, mouth full of hay he’s slowly chewing.

“I can’t believe I got the chance to sleep in a real bed and I wound up sleeping on you,” you grumble out loud. “I’m a fucking idiot, that’s what I am.”
Revas snorts, and you give his neck a rub before sliding off. You grab your footwraps out of your bag and belatedly wrap your feet up with them, as well as pulling on some spare pants you had in there. You try to shake as much hay loose from your cloak as you can before heading back into the inn.

You’d been hoping to maybe get up to your room and be able to put yourself together more effectively. You’d pulled your hair up into the shittiest bun ever but you’re pretty sure there’s still hay in it, and you’re not actually wearing a proper shirt or anything under the cloak. Unfortunately about the second you walk in, you’re immediately accosted by Seeker Pentaghast, which on the scale of “alarming things that can happen” is pretty far past what you’re emotionally able to deal with at the moment.

“There you are!” she exclaims, rushing right up to you. She seems about to grab you by the shoulders, and you’re fairly glad she didn’t since you probably would have just kicked her in the stomach and run. “You weren’t in the room when we woke up. We were worried something had happened.”

“Cassandra was worried something had happened,” Dorian adds dryly from where he still sits further into the tavern, eating breakfast. Blackwall and Sera are there too, and Sera gives you a smile and a little wave, which isn’t helping your nervous mood. “I told her you’d probably gone to commune with the halla—oof!” Dorian winces as someone—presumably Sera, from her expression—kicks him under the table.

“Almost,” you reply flatly, rolling your eyes. “I was just checking on the mounts.”


“I woke up early and couldn’t get back to sleep. If you’ll excuse me, I’d like to straighten up and get prepared for the road.”

Seeker Pentaghast steps out of your way, and you head up the stairs to the room the three-to-four of you ostensibly shared. There’s not really much in it of yours. Your boots and the clothes that had been soaked yesterday and left out to dry. Everything else had been in your bag, which you’d dragged around with you all night out of instinctive paranoia. But you change out of your dirty and hay-covered clothes and into something fresh, then strap on some of your dumb leather armor since that was arguably your reason for coming up here. You cram the rest of your stuff into your bag and don’t even bother taking your foot wraps off, you just shove socks over them and yank your shoes on.

After you’ve done everything you possibly could to prepare yourself for the day, you just sort of sit on your bed for a minute and stare into space. You still have absolutely no idea how to handle the situation. You can’t possibly put it off forever… but boy you sure wish you could. You drag your feet every step of the way back to where pretty much everyone has gathered for breakfast. Cole isn’t there, which is to be expected. Solas isn’t either, which is weird, but you’re frankly kind of relieved. You have enough shit to deal with right now.

Warm dinner that you didn’t have to cook is pretty nice despite your frantic mood, and having it in a warm inn is even nicer. This is basically the lap of luxury compared to your life for the past week, and you didn’t even bother sleeping indoors! You’re probably not going to get another inn room for the rest of the trip, and then you’ll be in a fucking desert with demons and probably Darkspawn and Maker only knows what else. Dragons, maybe. The Draconologist you’re supposed to be meeting is only there because he claims there’s a high dragon in the area, although you had heard the Inquisitor say none of the Inquisition’s men had spotted it at all.
Thinking about the sort of dangers you’re flailing headlong into should serve to put things with Sera into perspective. It… does not. It just makes you feel more anxious in general, and Sera keeps giving you looks over the table. Not to mention she and the Inquisitor basically aren’t even acknowledging each other.

Yeah. You don’t really wanting him or anyone else knowing you were making out with her on the roof. Somehow you don’t think it would particularly elevate you in his eyes, and you’re trying to avoid pissing him off.

The mounts are ready for you when you head out, which is probably your favorite part of this whole inn experience, save maybe the ability to take a lukewarm bath. Even the harts are ready and seem to have been saddled up properly. Thank goodness, since it’s not exactly like horse tack and saddle, and you would have hated to have to redo anything.

Mercifully, Sera, Dorian, and Cassandra get sent into the ahead party. Mostly you’re just relieved about the Sera part. Hopefully she won’t be striking up conversation with Dorian about your late night activities. This, at least, gives you the morning ride to think over what you’re going to do. Mostly, however, you just sort of panic. You’re back there with Solas, Cole, Blackwall, and the Inquisitor, and you honestly just want to be left alone to freak out. You even avoid talking to Cole, which is frankly something of a feat even on the best of days.

You ride a bit off from everyone, in what you hope is a very clear indication of “don’t fucking talk to me.” It seems to work. Cole flits around a bit, but generally settles on bothering Blackwall instead, much to Blackwall’s intense displeasure.

You spend the entire morning stewing, but you’re not closer to an answer by the time you all stop for lunch. There’s an obvious conclusion: you have to tell Sera… something. You can’t just make out with her while lying to her about a lot of things that would definitely be deal breakers. You’re also not… You’re not ready, and you probably never will be. It’s not a good time. You’ve got shit going on. All of these excuses, none of which you can really fully explain. “Hey Sera, my last girlfriend situation ended about as badly as these things can and I don’t think I should be legally allowed to kiss another person at this stage.” “Hey Sera I’m actually a lying liar pants and you know literally nothing about me.” “Hey Sera you’re hot but I can’t even deal with my own shit let alone yours.”

All of these are really valid things that you can’t say. Ugh.

And of course, Sera beelines right for you the second everyone stops for lunch.

“C’mon! C’mon, I got somethin’ to show you!” she says cheerfully, grabbing your wrist and pulling you away from the group. Hopefully it’s not her tits, because you’re not exactly a paragon of self-control, as has been established. You glance back over your shoulder to see if anyone is taking any mind of the two of you leaving together. Most people are busy with their own tasks, fortunately. That’s just as well. You don’t want to have to explain away any more than you absolutely have to.

Sera pulls you to a private sort of area under a tree, and as she cheerfully prattles about having swiped enough rations for a bit of a picnic, it’s painfully obvious that she probably thinks that this… that the two of you… are a thing. Which you’d been afraid she would. It’s a perfectly reasonable assumption. You mean, she’s younger than you by a bit, if your memory of the orphanage serves you correctly. She probably doesn’t have any Aimée’s under her belt, or similarly bad women to teach her how the world works.

Looks like you’ll be her first.

Goody.
You sit down next to her, not even hearing what she’s saying, mind screaming the inevitable at you, frantically trying to formulate a way to do this without hurting her and knowing there isn’t one. If you didn’t want to hurt her, you shouldn’t have kissed her in the first place. It was wrong, and she’s the one who has to pay for your mistake now.

“…Emma? What’s wrong?”

You clear your throat, desperately stalling. Just four more seconds before you do this. Just another moment. Just one more. But the more you put this off, the worse it’ll get. You let out a long sigh, avoiding Sera’s gaze. She probably looks worried. She’s probably got an idea of what’s about to happen.

“Last night was… that is, I…” You struggle for words before finally blurring out. “I shouldn’t have done that, I’m sorry.”

“Uh?” Sera says, and you risk a glance up at her. She looks confused and a bit scared. “Pretty sure we both did it. Is this ‘cause of the alcohol? I wasn’t that drunk, s’not like you were takin’ advantage of me.”

“No, that’s not it. I mean, I might be, but that’s not…” You shake your head, trying to reorganize your scattered, terrified thoughts. “That was a mistake,” you clarify.

“What do you mean a mistake?!” Sera says, her voice raising. You pray they can’t hear it back in camp. “You don’t just oops fall into making out with someone for fifteen minutes!”

You flinch, in part because she’s not wrong. She has every right to be mad at you. “Wh-what I mean is… I can’t… I’m not really in the place to… be with anyone right now.”

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“Why not? If yer not with anyone, why not be with someone?” Sera demands. “Y’can’t just go aroun’ kissin’ girls then tellin’ them you’re unavailable.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry, it was a mistake,” you say, cringing, still looking desperately to the side to avoid seeing more of her expression.

“Why?” Sera demands, and you fumble to figure out how much you can tell her, what parts, before settling firmly on “pretty much nothing, actually.”

“I just… can’t.”

“That’s not an answer! Maker, at least look at me when you’re breaking up with me!” Sera snaps.

“We weren’t together to begin with!” you protest, which appears to just make her angrier.

“Oh, so you just make out with anyone on the roof?”

“Well, no, but…”

“Then obviously we are something,” she shouts.

“We can’t be!” you say again, this time forcing yourself to look straight at her, trying to drive the point home. You’re just dragging this out. “We can’t be anything. We’re not.”

“Then why did you kiss me?” she demands.

“Because I’m a fucking idiot!” you exclaim. “A complete fucking shitbag, alright? I’m an idiot and I kissed you and I’m sorry, what do you want to hear?!”
“Not that!” she yells right back. “You… stupid… dumb… ugh!” She throws her hands up in frustration. “You like me! You kissed me! Why’re you sayin’ this now when it’s obviously bullshit?!”

You wish another arrow would shoot out of nowhere, and this one would hit you instead of some innocent old man.

“I… I…” You don’t have good words to say, but she’s staring at you, demanding an answer. “I’m not… I don’t…”

“Is it cause I’m a girl? Have you not with a girl, before? Cause I don’t mind, we can go slow ‘n’ stuff,” she suggests, voice dropping in volume, taking on more of a whine.

“It’s not because you’re female,” you clarify, trying to get her out of this with as few complexes as possible. “I’m just not… with anyone, right now.”

“You were last night!”

“That was a mistake.”

“Stop sayin’ that!”

“Do you think this shitty conversation is something that should be happening right now?” you snap back. “Yeah! I shouldn’t have kissed you so I didn’t have to do this, but here we are!”

“Why do you think you hafta do anything?”

You grit your teeth. “I can still tell right from wrong.”

“Oh, so now I’m wrong?”

“That’s not what I meant! I just… Ugh…” You cradle your head, trying to figure out a way to make this stop. You take a deep breath, then look up. “I’m not going to date you or be your lover or whatever it is you were hoping. I’m sorry, and you can hate me for it if you want. But it’s not going to happen, and you yelling about it isn’t going to change that.” Your voice comes out flat. It’s not like when you yelled at Solas for poking around you while you slept, but it reminds you of that anyway. Sera’s hurt look will definitely be burned in your mind next to his and all the others.

“Forget it!” she yells. “Everyone is so fucking stupid.” She stands up and storms off, muttering furiously to herself. You sit under the tree for a while longer, looking at the food she’d gathered for what she no doubt hoped would be a romantic picnic.

Honestly “I’m a fucking idiot shitbag” is the closest thing to a genuine answer to why you can’t be dating anyone that you could possibly give.

Chapter End Notes

It wouldn't have saved you this time because I was away from a computer, but in general, following me on Tumblr or Twitter (Discord is the best place of all) will let you know about these sort of delays as they happen, so you don't have to wonder if I got crushed by a house or something.
See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Cole tries. He really does. The poor guy is doing his best. You’re just glaring at him every time he so much as opens his mouth in your direction. You feel bad about it, you do. It’s just that you feel bad about everything right now and you just don’t want to hear it. You also don’t want anyone to hear it. Sera is mercifully in the ahead party, but Solas and Cole are both still here, and you don’t want to talk to either or even acknowledge that either exists. You don’t want to deal with Cole and his Maker damned emotional clarity right now. You’re a mess. You know you’re a mess. He could at least let you be a mess in peace.

Fortunately, Solas—and everyone else—seems to have picked up on your radiating aura of “don’t even fucking look at me right now.” After the third time Cole makes a start towards you and then veers off after you give him a look that could probably best be described as “wounded tiger,” Solas intercepts and pulls the spirit into a confusing and meandering conversation that you’re definitely only eavesdropping on because you want a distraction.

"She's hurt. Why is no one asking? They should help her." Cole’s voice is quiet, but not quiet enough. You’re probably not the only one listening, though you think most of the others are too far ahead to hear clearly.

"Not everyone is as observant as you,” Solas advises him. “Sometimes these things are hard to see.”

"The neighbors heard, and they didn't do anything!”

"People at times fear that compassion may lead them astray."

"Does it do that?” Cole asks, sounding worried.

"…Only very rarely," Solas says, and you feel an extra pang of guilt through the cloud of it. Is he talking about you? You do have a way of backfiring on people.

"She was never made of stone. She was forced to be that way." Cole sounds distressed again, but Solas doesn't say anything. "They're wrong. She can't fly if she's made of stone. Why do they think she can?"

"People like to imagine that something wiser than them will right the mistakes they made in life."

…You have no idea what the fuck they're talking about, actually, but you know it sounds depressing. And you're already depressed, so you try to tune out their back and forth as best as you can. Even if they wind up talking about you, you know Cole won't tell him anything he really shouldn't know.

It doesn't take a spirit of compassion for your companions to be able to tell you and Sera are both in matching bad moods at dinner. She actually takes her dinner and climbs a tree on the outskirts of
camp to eat and sulk, which is honestly extremely relatable. You, in turn, don't even bother with dinner and do your own sulking with the horses on the other side of camp. You'd actually like to go for a walk, get some space, clear your head… It's stressful, being around this many people all day. But you're fairly certain that you'd get yelled at if you wandered off into the Dales (again). Maybe not even by Solas. Seeker Pentaghast appears to be having fits every time you're out of sight, perhaps suspecting you're so useless and naive that you'll drop dead of demons in an instant.

There are worse things than a Seeker thinking you're a complete fool, but it's still annoying.

Everyone is still sort of leaving you alone. Solas is… hovering, but at a distance. You look over only to see him looking at you several times, but he immediately switches to gazing at the stars or someone else every time. You're just as glad you've scared him away enough that he's not immediately coming to pester you. You're not sure what it says about what your face must look like today, however, that even your most ardent annoyers are steering clear.

Except.

There's always the one.

Dorian Pavus, who from day one has been completely clueless about what was and was not acceptable social behavior. Dorian Pavus, who you suspect didn't have a great number of friends in Tevinter and then had approximately zero outside of Tevinter. Dorian "Foot in Mouth" Pavus, your dear friend.

He comes right fucking over.

He doesn't seem to notice your glare, either, or is pointedly ignoring it. Probably the latter, since he had enough sense to bring with him a peace offering.

"This," Dorian announces, holding up a bottle by way of greeting. "Is very good alcohol."

"There are two wildly different possible interpretations of the word 'good' when applied to alcohol," you reply, eying the bluish liquid inside the bottle. It might be that the glass is colored. You rather hope that's the case, as blue is not an ideal color for most liquids.

"Have you ever heard of aqua magus?" Before Dorian has even finished the final syllable, your hand is out-stretched, making a "here" gesture.

"Hand it over."

"I have glasses, you absolute heathen."

You and Dorian 'keep watch' at the edge of camp, backs facing the fire and tents, gazing out over the endless waves of the Dales. As always, the stars are incredible out here, stretching from horizon to horizon without end.

It's unwise of you to be drinking alcohol quite literally laced with lyrium, but there's honestly trace amounts in most of these beverages. You think this might actually be a Tevinter version, though, because there's definitely more than you were expecting. It tingles against your lips and then buzzes the whole way down, filling you with a vibrating chaos that leaves you feeling both very drunk and very energetic.

Dorian doesn't try to ask you what's wrong, or even if something is wrong. He's good at this, at least, good at not prying, good at keeping you drowning just enough in your despair that you don't actually
go under. Frankly, just having someone to drink with is a relief right then. Someone who doesn't want anything from you and likely never will.

"Girls are the worst," you say, after a while. You're explicitly including yourself in that.

"I wouldn't know," Dorian says dryly, and you choke out a bark of laughter that would be very unseemly if you were actually on watch in anything more than name only. You can see the Seeker and the Inquisitor actually making rounds, now and then. Everyone else has gone to sleep.

"We're difficult 'n' finicky and capable of fuckin' up and stickin' our dicks in somethin' important. No advantages, don't listen to what the Chantry says."

"That's skill, unless I've been horribly mistaken about an important part of your anatomy."

You give Dorian a shove, snorting. "Maybe if I did, I wouldn't have all these idiots actin' like I'm somehow not the worst idea in all of fuckin' Thedas."

Dorian wraps an affectionate arm around your shoulders. It's a good indicator of how drunk you are that you let him. "You would probably have all the exact same idiots and then a few more," he advises you, and you shift your face to let out a groan of protest into his side.

"I don't understan' how people who only like one or th' other work anyway," you complain, still directly into the side of his chest.

"Pardon, you don't understand what?"

You poke him in the side. He lets out a noise of protest, but doesn't shove you away, so you just sort of shift to leaning against him more comfortably. "People who only like one. Like, you like dicks, right? Just dicks!"

"You know it's significantly more complicated then that, right?" Dorian asks, sounding deeply amused.

"I super don't!" you say, throwing one of your arms up in the air in frustration. You think that maybe if you threw both of them up you'd fall over completely. "I jus' said!"

"That is one of the funniest problems I've ever heard of."

"Don't help by explainin', or anythin'."

"I'm not sure how one explains," Dorian says with a laugh. "I run into the 'how can you like men' problem, not the 'how can you ONLY like men' problem."

"But what if like, someone you thought was a boy, and liked, turns out to be a girl?" you ask, frowning. "Does the like go away?"

"Romantic or sexual interest might, I suppose." Dorian still sounds very amused. You can tell this hasn't particularly been an issue for him, and you're glad, but it's definitely a problem you yourself have run into.

"And it's not the…?" You gesture in a circular motion vaguely around your crotch, and Dorian laughs again. You shove him this time, which only half works since you're still leaning against him.

"For some people, maybe," he allows. "But it's more… nebulous than that, what makes someone a man or a woman."
"Or a Cole," you add drowsily.

"Yes, or a Cole," he agrees, chuckling and nodding.

"How do you tell?"

"As with all great things in life, my increasingly drunk friend, if you're not sure, you can always ask."

"How do you tell if they're man enough to be attractive to you?" you insist, trying to close in on the core of what's confusing you, especially since Krem blew your presumed categories out of the water.

"For that," Dorian says grandly. "I mostly just ask myself."

You squint up at him. "You are absolutely no help at all."

"I get that a lot. Maker, have you finished the rest of the bottle?"

"Yes. It tastes like boysenberries and electricity."

"Oh dear."

You lean heavily on Dorian as he helps you back to your tent. Or like, a tent, anyway. How the hell could you tell the difference? It's got a bedroll in it, that's good enough for you. Dorian's damn near as drunk as you are, or at least you think he is, since neither of you are really doing the "walking" thing very well. Between your four legs, though, you manage not to fall over. You're not really sure what happens after that--probably, you clung onto Dorian like a leech. Or maybe he was just too drunk to be arsed to figure out which tent had Solas in it and was therefore his.

Either way, you wake up after a dreamless blackout with a splitting headache, spooning a full grown man. You're the big spoon, which makes the situation much more palatable but no less confusing.

Alright. You're fully clothed. You seem to remember having an entire conversation about how Dorian was only into dicks, or men, or whatever, so there's a close-to-zero percent chance that anything happened. You don't actually remember getting back to a tent, at all, wait, no, there's some blurry... somethings, that might be stumbling back to a tent. Stumbling somewhere, definitely. Your aura is a peaceful slumbering beast just beneath your stomach, fat and happy and quite possibly hibernating, if that were even possible.

Right, you drank a lot of lyrium-infused alcohol. Nothing like chugging a potion would be, but enough that you feel like you could probably perform magical feats of heroism, were you so inclined. Mm. Between that and your regular sleep schedule, that'll need something done about it within a week or so. Once you're in the desert, though, there will probably be far more opportunities for safely sneaking away from everyone else. For one, Seeker Pentaghast will have other things to do. So you'll just have to make it until then.

As for Dorian... you shift to try and unravel yourself from him, but seems like Solas wasn't kidding about him being a clinger. He has your arm but good. You'll probably have to wake him to get it out... which you will, shortly, but since you're sure nothing happened and nothing will once he's awake, you let yourself lay there for a moment and take further stock of your body.

Your head is pounding with the agony of someone who drank way too much hard liquor. You're not
looking forward to riding Vhas--you've been putting him first just so that when you're really sore in
the afternoon, you can just ride Revas, who's much easier on your... whole body, really. You briefly
wonder how Dorian manages to ride hungover. Just the thought of Vhas' rocking gallop is making
you feel like puking up anything you have left in your stomach.

Speaking of stomach, it rumbles loudly when the smell of breakfast hits your nose, letting you know
on no uncertain terms that no, you will not be staying here spooning with a sleeping Dorian any
longer, no matter how nice he smells. Hm. Actually, that cologne might smell nice, but it's bringing
up some less than pleasant memories, so yes, perhaps now is the time to get up. You file away
'approach the concept of spooning to Cole, but make sure it's not weird first' for a later day.

You're strong enough at this point to admit that you might be *slightly* touch-starved at this stage in
your life, and if you want to avoid any more unfortunate situations like Sera, you should probably do
something about it. Spooning with a gay Tevinter who will definitely never want to kiss you is not
something you can repeat regularly.

The thought of Sera spurs you to movement, and so with a quiet groan, you sit up enough to wiggle
your arm out of Dorian's surprisingly strong grip. This does, as you suspected, disturb his sleep. He
shifts a bit, then groans, reaching for his head. You can relate. He opens his eyes slowly, then blinks,
confused, up at you.

You grin down at him and wave, not really sure what the protocol for this is... and then two of you
both burst into laughter.

You're still laughing as you come out of the tent... which, you realize, is definitely his despite the fact
you'd somehow managed to drag your bag into it. Maybe Solas was up on guard when the two of
you stumbled in? It would explain a lot.

The two of you emerging together, giggling wildly, does draw eyes, particularly those of the
Inquisitor, who looks slightly shocked, and Solas, who looks extremely put-out, probably because
you'd been drunkenly spooning his tent-mate. You stumble over to the fire, but just grab some bread
and shove it into your mouth before half-tripping, half-walking over to the horses to get them ready
for the day. You don't want to deal with Sera, who is actively glaring at you and then turning to
pointedly look away every time you glance over. Or Solas, who probably has a very interesting story
about events that transpired last night that you in no way remember.

You're half-assing your way through horse care when Blackwall comes over to give you a hand,
which you appreciate on many levels.

"You and Dorian share a few drinks last night?" he asks, just casually enough that it's obvious he's
actually *really* curious.

"If by 'a few' you mean 'an entire bottle of aqua magus,' yes."

"How'd that work out for you?" he asks, sounding amused.

"I woke up with a piercing headache, spooning a Tevinter mage."

"Were you the--"

"I was the big spoon."

"He's half a foot taller than you!"
"I never claimed I was a good fit for the position."

"I'll say. I thought he was..." Blackwall waves his hand in a gesture that's not particularly evocative, but you know what he's getting at.

"We slept in the same tent, not together," you say with a scowl. "I thought you got over thinking I was fucking the whole castle."

Blackwall has the manners to at least turn bright red and look pointedly away at that. "I, uh..."

You wave your hand, as if brushing the thought away. "I'm not cross." That's a lie, but you're always cross. You're not any more cross than your default. "I just mean you should know better by now."

"Are you, ah... like him?" Blackwall asks after a bit of awkward silence, clearly not easily discouraged from making small talk.

"An alcoholic mage from the north? No, can't say I am."

"That's not what I meant."

"I can't imagine what else you could possibly have meant," you say, and that effectively kills the conversation.

The morning dawns grey and dreary and honestly slightly chill, autumn wind nipping towards winter. You had hoped you'd left the cold weather behind you, but honestly, it's not too unbearable. You just pull on Skinner's thick leather coat over your piecemeal armor, and the layers serve to keep pretty much everything but your face and hands warm. Your thin leather gloves don't do much for warmth, but you don't have any others and wouldn't want to sacrifice dexterity anyway.

Solas is in the ahead party, as is the Inquisitor and the Seeker. You mentally give him a little prayer... Maker knows he'll need it to get through the day. Of course, that leaves you with Blackwall, Cole, Dorian, and Sera... so, no one who fucking gets along at all. Just a minefield of potential bullshit, especially with you there.

Fortunately for you, Sera and Blackwall separate off pretty cleanly almost immediately, pulling forward quite a ways away from you and Dorian. That's... fair. She's probably complaining about you. She deserves to. You stay behind with Dorian and, intermittently, Cole. He seems significantly less hungover than you, which really makes you wonder exactly how much of that aqua magus you'd had. Or maybe he's just more used to dealing with it, it's not like you've ever regularly sipped on lyrium. To you, it's a sort of sinful luxury; the only time you'd been close to any real amount of it had been when you were with your old Master.

Or around Fenris, you suppose. The memory of the way the lyrium on his skin made your aura sing with the briefest contact makes you shiver.

"If I was going to fuck up anyway," you mutter sourly to yourself. "I should have fucked up with him." At least he would be gone, he didn't literally live at Skyhold full time--or, well, you suppose he might if he decides to stay on with the Inquisition after whatever happens with Hawke happens. You'd just sort of assumed the two of them would be moving on swiftly. Which you'd been right about, it was just that now you were going in the same direction as Hawke.

"Deception," Cole comments from nearby. "Disgrace. Evil--"

"Yes, right, I know Cole, but it's not like I made any better decisions in the long run."
"Singing sweetly, flower between fingers, she loves me, she loves me not, she loves me,"

"Alright, that's *quite* enough of that, Cole," you say irritably.

You'd been riding for at least an hour, through woods thick enough to break up the frigid wind. And you'd just assumed, with the ahead team that took care of things last time... You hadn't been paying attention. Cole, however, freezes mid-sentence.

"Incoming!" he shouts, and before you have a second to realize what he means, he's gone. You duck down in your saddle without thinking, plastering yourself against Vhas, a fear of more arrows like before. A second later, you feel a familiar yet unfamiliar tingle against your skin--a barrier... from Dorian. It feels different from Solas', a little alien. Solas' aura fits you like a shifting second skin, but Dorian's is more stiff and shield-like. But a barrier is a barrier, and you're grateful for it.

You're just wondering where the 'incoming' is when you hear a roar and the sound of iron striking flesh from ahead.

*Sera.*

You spin to stare ahead, you can see Sera backflipping off of Zephyr as Daine, who Blackwall is riding, joins the fight with flailing hooves. There are *demons*, they *have* to be demons, they couldn't possibly be anything else, and Sera is an *archer* and they're *all over*--

You kick Vhas into instant action, barely managing to stay onto him as he leaps straight into a bound, kicking off the ground before smashing down with all four hoofs, and kicking off again. This is *not* a sustainable gait for you, but it doesn't need to be. You see, in the distance, Sera fall to the ground, a many-armed monstrosity towering over her. It can't have taken you more than a handful of powerful bounds to catch up, but it feels like an eternity. The fact that you're charging *towards demons* doesn't seem to really register to you; the next thing you know you've steered Vhas straight into them. He gores straight into some horrifying, floating, icy cold thing, catching it on his antlers and sending it flying through the air.

You count on him to be able to take care of himself, praying he doesn't get hurt like Revas did, as you launch yourself clean off his back and right onto the *thing* that had been mauling the fallen Sera. You hit it clean in the chest, a little elven projectile, hadn't this worked on Bull? But unlike with him, all you can see is red, and there's a dagger in your hands.

You don't particularly know how to kill a demon with knives.

You wrap your legs around its narrow waist and just stab wildly into its chest, plunging your dagger in and then in again and again. You can feel wild tearing at your back, the demon clawing at your back in an attempt to get you off of its chest. But you just keep stabbing, bloody focus on nothing but its body and your knives, tearing at the same wounds again and again and again.

It stumbles backwards and you grab a second knife, your knees' grip around it now quite firm. You shred it open, tearing through its thick, spiny hide with sheer determination; a knife gets stuck in its armored flesh and you just grab another off your belt and continue your grim task. The creature falls backwards and you just keep going, tearing cuts into it long slashes, carving chunks of flesh out, ignoring the insane greenish liquid spewing out of it in sickly, thick globs, not blood and it burns a little when it gets on your bare skin, but you don't care. All that matters it that you take it apart, you peel it open until you can be sure that it's dead, all its insides on the outside because you don't have any way to take its limbs off--

It dissipates suddenly and abruptly. Only mist is underneath you now, a thin green fog, raw energy
of the Fade that slips away into the sky. You thud down onto the ground on your knees, having been straddling the creature on the ground as you focused on your grim work. You still have two throwing daggers gripped in your hand, half a dozen others clattering to the grass as the creature they were lodged in vanishes.

Panting, you look up. Vhas and Revas are aggressively trampling... something, and Blackwall is running his sword through that floating thing, shield up protecting him from a frosty blast of icy wind that solidifies on the metal. Just past him, you can see the Inquisitor and the Seeker galloping full-tilt into the frey, Solas a bit further back. You can see the shimmer of his barrier on both of them.

The battle, you realize, is all but over. Which is good, because your heart is racing and your limbs have begun to shake with the realization of what you'd done. You see Sera on the ground nearby, staring at you with wide eyes.

"...Blimey," she says, weakly, one hand pressing at a injury on her side, and for some reason, this makes you laugh. Which makes her laugh, and the two of you are giggling semi-hysterically on the ground, bleeding and staring at each other and alive.

Chapter End Notes

PHEW. Sorry about the extensive delay there. Followers of my Patreon, where I blog (amongst other things), already know what's up there, so I'm not going to go into any great detail. If you'd like to stay up to date on my bullshit, I recommend following me on Tumblr, although there's a notification-apocalypse going on there that's making me a bit hard to get ahold of. I'm slowly moving over to new social media but, you know, takes time.

Follow me on Tumblr anyway!

If you were platonically spooning Dorian, would you be the big spoon or the little spoon? [insert thinking emoji here]
Okay guys. Don't panic, but there's NSFW stuff in this. Actually. Forreal. I am earning the E rating, briefly, yet again. Because it's longer than the last one, and because I'm trying things out to make this as accessible to my (many) readers who are ace/sex repulsed/just plain don't wanna read about boinking, all sex scenes will be clearly marked with some *~*~* type jazz. The end will be thusly marked as well.

Now, there might be plot points and stuff in them, that is very true. However, I'll be doing my BEST to reference those plot points again later in a non-sex scene so that people who absolutely do not even wanna skim that jazz don't miss out.

Now that I've given away the plot of this chapter in the name of safety and preparedness, GO FORTH!

The last shreds of the demons are caught between Blackwall and the charging warriors. They're gone in an instant, no match for the twin onslaught. Which just leaves a lot of eyes on you, actually, kneeling on the ground surrounded by a little pile of throwing daggers, laughing hysterically with Sera.

It's Solas voice that snaps you out of it, tense with fear. "Emma! Sera!" He's still at a distance on his mount when your head snaps up, and then suddenly he's in front of you, wisps of fade, whorls of steam, glints of ice, all at once as the world shimmers to recover from his step through the Fade.

"Look at her first," both you and Sera say in unison, which makes you glance over, which makes you both start laughing again, this time a bit more shaky than hysterical.

Solas kneels down to have a look at you, before Sera. You suspect she must be more injured than you; although you're slowly becoming aware that your back hurts, like... a lot. Sera, though, is bleeding; you're pretty sure the uncomfortable damp sensation you have was caused by all that demon viscera. "Sera first," you repeat, a bit more firmly this time, looking over your shoulder to glare at Solas where he kneels behind you, examining whatever is making your back hurt this much. He ignores you, at first, instead grabbing your hair--it's come loose, no surprise there--and pulling it carefully out of the way and off of your back. His hand against the back of your neck as he does so is more gentle than is really warranted in the situation.

"Solas, I'm fine. Actually fine, I think, not me-fine," you add, with what is probably a startling amount of self-awareness. "Look at Sera first." He hesitates, and you glare a bit more firmly. He huffs, but shifts over to examine Sera more closely.

"Why is she injured?" you hear an unexpected voice demand angrily. The Inquisitor's. You glance over, confused, as Solas begins to tend to Sera's injuries, one hand on her shoulder supporting her and the other over hers on her wound. "Why was she in the fight at all? Three of you can't keep one non-combatant safe?"

"She just rushed in," Dorian explains. "Hart and everything." Most of the horses are safely quite a
distance away, half-hiding amongst the trees. Revas and Vhas, however, are standing nearby. Peacefully, for once, though that might be because Daine is standing pointedly between them.

The Inquisitor's gaze shifts to you, giving you the exact long, tired, annoyed look you're extremely used to seeing. "Rushed in," he says flatly.


"There were terror demons," Dorian offers up, by way of an explanation. "I sort of expected her to run away, but..."

"That's what you do when you panic?!" the Inquisitor asks, caught somewhere between irritation, alarm, and, fortunately, a small amount of exasperated amusement. He gestures down at the puddle of knives you're still kneeling in.

"...My fight/flight reflex may be strongly aimed towards fight," you admit, trying your best to look embarrassed.

"I'll say," you hear Solas mumble irritatedly from nearby.

"It's hard to say how someone will react to a demon if they've never seen one before," Dorian provides. "Frantic, screaming stabbing is not actually that unusual of a reaction, to be honest."

"It's fine, it's fine, stop hoverin'." Sera's swearing grows in volume as Solas heals her, providing a slight distraction.

"At least let me get you to the point where you can ride," says Solas, clearly exasperated by having two elves to heal, neither of whom are great about being healed, apparently.

"Yer makin' me look lame in front of the cute girl," Sera complains, and you're amazed at having been suddenly promoted from 'that bitch' straight back up to 'cute girl.' Not a strong memory span on this one...

"Are those throwing daggers?" This question is asked by Seeker Pentaghast, who's approached you close enough to see the damage.

"...I panicked," you repeat, rubbing under your nose sheepishly.

"Panicked and stabbed a demon to death with throwing daggers." She also sounds like she's caught between a desire to yell at you and a desire to laugh at the absurdity of a weedy little linguist launching off of a hart to stab a demon to death with something about as well suited to close-combat as a steak knife.

"Seeker, can you help me move her and Sera to the clearing up ahead?" Solas asks, interrupting her. "There might still be more demons in this area, but we should at least get them off the road."

"Of course, Solas," Seeker Pentaghast agrees immediately, and then next thing you know she's throwing her cloak over your back like a blanket. It stings a bit, and you wince. "My apologies, but there is a lot of blood," she says.

"There is?" you twist, trying to see instinctively despite the fact there's a cloak on you. And also you're wearing a jacket. And... wait, did it tear through the jacket and your armor?

"Yes," Solas says, sounding very irritated. "Although you can clearly move just fine, so I believe the damage to be primarily superficial. If it had hit your spine, we would both be very aware of it by
now. Sera, if you don't hold still, I will levitate you the entire way. You can't walk like this. You might tear something."

"It's fine!"

"**I can see your ribcage.**"

"You can see her what?!!" you yelp, as the Seeker locks an arm around the back of your knees. Before you can even protest, you're up in her arms, one arm under the backs of your knees, the other under your ass. You instinctively wrap an arm around her shoulders for balance.

"He's bein' a drama queen. You can see like part of one rib."

"Because it's broken!" Solas huffs. "You're not supposed to see any part of any ribs at any time, Sera."

"For the love of the Maker, Sera!" you exclaim. "Let him fix your fucking rib!"

"Fine, but then you're gettin' worked over too, an' I don't wanna hear you complain," Sera... complains.

"Great," Solas says irritatedly, hand still on Sera's side. "I'm overjoyed that the two of you have managed to settle that."

You, Sera, and Blackwall all do need some healing, though Blackwall least of all thanks to his armor, which held up significantly better than yours has appeared to. Solas gets Sera to a point he's comfortable with, and then beelines straight to you.

The Seeker has landed more firmly on "lecture" now that things have settled down a little, standing in front of you and chiding as Solas runs cool hands over your back. The Inquisitor seems more than happy to let her do the scolding, and is instead talking to Blackwall about the possibility of a nearby rift, and if they have time to go find it.

"--no combat training, and do not try to tell me that wrestling a Qunari counts, because it does not; that is more foreplay than it is combat practice," she's saying. "You cannot simply run into combat! You could have been killed!"

"Sorry," you repeat for the third time. You know what to do, having been lectured by angry mothers before... for this exact sort of tomfoolery, throughout your whole life, actually, now that you stop to think about it.

"She does have this sort of tendency," Solas says with a sigh. "And no training to back it up," he lies bluntly, and you can't decide if you want to smack him or kiss him. "The last time I witnessed her getting angry, she tried to punch a Qunari."

"He deserved it!"

"You said you'd sodomize his mother-figure."

"He deserves-- wait. How did you know what I said?"

"Don't change the subject!" the Seeker scolds. "You can only be proud of an instinct to protect others if you have the skills to back it up. This is hardly the place for bravado, and we are hardly the ones who need it. In fact,"
Her lecture continues. You let it wash over you, apologizing at random intervals, and begin to pay more attention to what Solas is doing. Out of necessity, as much as anything else, since your aura is getting full and happy off of lyrium and sleep lately. He winds up just cutting your jacket off of you; you can see why after he does. The entire back of it has been shredded away into basically nothing. Your armor, as well, has huge tearing gashes through the leather, as well as just looking like a pack of bears went to town on it, in general.

Your back, ultimately, could be a lot worse; it took the creature a long time to claw through your layers, and you're just gashed in a few places, you think. You hold the front of your armor and shirt in place as Solas heals your bare back. You think one of the stray claws may have actually slashed through your damned bra band. You'd liked this one... casualty of war, you suppose, along with the jacket and chest piece. You're going to owe Skinner--and the whole of the Chargers, in fact--a drink when you get back to Skyhold. If you get back to Skyhold, which is frankly very questionable at this point.

Still, despite the Seeker's lecturing and the risk to your cover, you can't bring yourself to regret your actions. Especially after hearing the severity of Sera's injuries. How much worse might they have been if you hadn't jumped in? What if you hadn't been on this trip at all? Would she have been horribly injured; would she have been healed? Would you have never learned of a near-death experience, back in the safety of Skyhold's walls?

"There," Solas announces. Finally. "You weren't as injured as you could have been, thanks to that armor."

You nod in agreement. Then shift, wincing. You feel sore with phantom pain and stiff and filthy, covered in blood and demon grime. Although there is no actual demon grime. It dissipated with the demon itself, to drift back into the Fade, but as with the pain, you can feel the ghost of it still on you. And it is disgusting.

"I'm finding a creek," you decide. Phrasing it like a question seemed far too open to protest that you had no intention of listening to. "I feel disgusting."

"That doesn't seem particularly wise," Solas comments, in a tone of voice that says, to you, he's already accepted that you're going to do it anyway. Smart man! Or maybe he's just known you long enough, now.

"I'll stay close. Within screaming range," you say dryly. You bite your lip as you stand, stifling a groan of pain. You're still stiff, your body screaming at you about injuries that are no longer there. This is one of the reasons they recommend bed rest after healing. But instead of that, you grab your bag, pleased you thought to keep spare clothes in it. "If I don't find anything," you inform Solas. "I'll come right back."

You'd known there was a creek nearby; you memorized every inch of this journey since you might have to run away at any moment. For once, however, that's not really on your mind. Despite today's... events... it seemed your cover was still completely intact. Surprisingly. Sometimes you wondered if there was anything you could do to make these people actually suspect you of deception. Perhaps you had been severely over-estimating the Inquisition. Perhaps Solas, Leliana, and the Iron Bull were the only ones you'd ever needed to look out for.

Shame you'd met them all on your first damned day, then.

The creek you remembered from your maps is near enough that you don't think anyone would fuss at you. Or should, anyway, since you're beginning to accept "would" as an inevitability. A side effect
of having to be thought relatively helpless... and therefore harmless. You're trying not to let it annoy you, to mixed success. You're pretty sure the Seeker thinks that you're just a damned moron where demons are concerned, at this point. You suppose she's not as wrong as you'd like her to be.

You're intending for a short bath. Contrary to popular opinion, the idea of being naked and alone in woods that might have a few stray demons in them isn't particularly appealing to you. You've stacked your clothes off on a rock a safe and dry distance away and are halfway through scrubbing--it's really hard to wash blood off your own back--when you hear a crunch of underbrush. Hand already going to the dagger you'd left within arm's reach specifically because you're not an idiot, you swing around to find...

Sera, throwing off her last article of clothing with significantly less care than you'd showed your own clothes. The breast band lands, haphazardly, in a bush.

This isn't the first time you'd seen Sera nude, but it had been embarrassing then, too, and you hadn't kissed her a few days prior that time. You avert your eyes quickly. Of course, she got covered in blood and demon goop too. She'd need to wash up just as much as you, if not more. You decide to just go back to awkwardly scrubbing dried blood off of your back and try to face the opposite direction, wishing for the thousandth time in your life that shyness with regards to your own body was more widely accepted when involving multiple women. Let any man walk in on you like this and he'd be horrified and you'd be given full freedom to yell at him and/or throw things. But make it a woman, and you're supposed to be 100% okay with it.

You're still mentally complaining about double standards that don't take into account hot elven women when you're suddenly and abruptly aware that Sera has gotten closer to you than even bathing standards would dictate acceptable.

"Want some help with that?" she asks, and you glance back over your shoulder at... yes, a very nude, wet Sera, who's probably offering to wash your back. One woman's sapphic dream is your sapphic nightmare. But you're glad she's apparently stopped hating you.

"Oh. Um." There has to be a polite way to say no. ",...Sure," you say instead, like an idiot. You hand her the soapy cloth you were using... and you have to admit, it's a lot easier to have someone else to wash your back for you. And it feels good, the rough cloth scratching places you didn't even realize you needed scratch. Better still when she puts her hand on your shoulder for anchorage. You're reminded suddenly and strongly of the massages you've gotten from Solas, and the idea of asking one flits through your mind before you remember that you're both naked, and naked massages are basically just foreplay.

"Gotta say," she says, snapping you out of your reverie. "Never thought you'd be th' one tacklin' demons."

You laugh weakly. "Yeah, that makes two of us."

"It was somethin' to see, though. You looked half out'cher mind. How come?"

You pause, considering. Then you chuckle again. "You get used to it, out on the field. It's not, like, a big heroic thing like it is when a normal guy jumps in to save another normal guy," you quote at her, glancing back over your shoulder.

She blinks in confusion, and then seems to remember. She laughs. After days of anger, it sounds amazing. "Yer a normal guy," she quotes back at you.

"Nah," she says, and then suddenly she's turning you around, and you don't know why. "Yer really
She kisses you, again, and you need to shove her away, because you're stone cold sober and this was a mistake then and it's a mistake now, and you just told her no, why tell her no if you're just going to kiss her back, shitfuck you're kissing her back.

Maker, why does she taste so good even when you've both just been fighting demons? Why does the pressure of her body against yours feel like everything you've ever wanted, the answer to all of your prayers? Her fingers against your hips are smooth with water and soap, and she's just so small and perfect and you've never leaned down to kiss someone like this before.

All your reasons for saying no are seeping out of your mind, until you can't remember why it was such a big deal to begin with. So you're lying to her. Why does it matter, if she never finds out? And you told her you couldn't have a relationship, and here she is still kissing you, so maybe she just wants sex, anyway, which is fine, sex is fine, to the void with it all. Weren't you just saying you were touch starved and needed to do something about it? Why pester Dorian or Cole with odd questions when there's someone right here who clearly really wants to touch you?

She smells like honey, probably the soap she'd been using a few seconds prior. Her hair is short but long enough to grip between your fingers, and when you pull it just right, just moans into your mouth, and that by itself is more intoxicating than the entire bottle of aqua magus had been.

*~*~*~*~*

One of her hands has found your breast, the other has a surprisingly firm grip on your ass. Rough callouses on her fingers made soft by water and suds. She pulls your lip into her mouth, and bites down, just barely. You let out a little huff of a growl, pushing back against her. One hand still in her hair, you let the other trail down her side.

It's been a long time. The last time you had bare skin under your hands--

You force the thought out with the same roughness Sera uses to shove you backwards. You nearly lose your footing on the slippery rocks at the bottom of the creek, and Sera takes advantage, pushing you into stumbling backwards until the back of your legs hit a much larger boulder along the side of the creek. Still she pushes, as if she intends to kiss you harder and harder until you simply fall.

She might, at that.

Her leg shifts between yours as she kisses you, a trick you're very used to, having employed it many times yourself. However, you'd never before experienced it while naked and wet, and you have to say the difference is startling. You gasp a little into her mouth, and she grins into the kiss, lifting her knee a little to push more firmly between your legs.

Your hands had, up until this point, remained remarkably chaste, unlike hers. As if you were scared to touch her, which you suppose is at least partially true. But instinct kicks in that feeling of pressure between your legs, and one of your hands slides down between hers. This should be fine. She started it, she's the aggressor, and if you just pleasure her, than there's no reason for her to be angry with you. It's not like you're taking something from her. It doesn't have to be a thing, the two of you don't have to be a thing.

She groans against your lips as your fingers slip nervously between folds, exploring blindly to find familiar spots, things you know how to use to your advantage. You rub her clit between two fingers,
first gently, then with more force as her moans grow in volume. Her lips leave yours as you slide two slick fingers into her, neck arching to send her cries upwards to the grey sky. You lean forward to kiss and nip at it, fingers still working inside of her, searching to find exactly the right spots. You're rewarded with an increase in volume when you do, and pick up speed enthusiastically.

Her leg between yours as she squirms is a constant low pleasure, and you indulge yourself by letting your hips thrust down against it ever so slightly, her knee pressuring against your clit. Enough to feel good, not enough to accomplish much, which is perfectly fine. You're too busy watching her expression as her own orgasm grows closer, lips noiselessly mouthing words before more senseless little cries slip out and echo down the river.

Her legs clamp down around your hand so powerfully when she comes that you can't move it at all, but you can still twist your fingers inside her, massaging against the spot you'd been so enthusiastically abusing. She almost collapses down on top of you, and you kiss her red, red lips again, marveling a little at the fact she'll let you. She probably wouldn't, if she knew you a little better.

But then again, if she finds any of that out, her feeling used will arguably be the least of your problems anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Please send your hate mail to: Please Don't Actually Send Me Hate Mail, It Has Happened And I'm Worried About It (dot com) backslash no-seriously-I-put-off-posting-this-for-as-long-as-possible-out-of-pure-fear

EDITED TO ADD, BECAUSE I JUST KEEP HAVING TO HARP ON THIS

Reasons you should not give me a hard time over the Sera/Emma development

1) yes actually it is in the tags, no it's not in the main relationship tags because that wouldn't be fair to people looking for Sera/OC centric fics, see above search results
2) back before I'd written any m/m or f/f I used to get regular messages asking me why I hadn't written any m/m, would I consider it, was I homophobic, but I got like maybe one message in 4 years asking me if I'd ever do f/f. I'm not saying you have questionable reasons for hassling me about this but you should also maybe make sure you don't have any questionable reasons, and then think about how many messages I get from people who DO have questionable reasons, and then not message me about it
3) this is 150k words and not even close to done and you can either embrace that or hate
it and I will not judge you either way as long as you don't make it my problem
5) sometimes people date people who aren't their one true love, and it can be good and it
can be bad but it does happen
6) this is a story and I am the god of it and therefore you can rest 100% assured that yes,
everything happens for a REASON
7) i am so fucking tired, please
"I thought you hated me," turns out to be the first intelligent thing you say, which in retrospect should probably have been a conversation you instigated before bringing Sera to an orgasm.

"You really wanna have this conversation now?" she asks, fortunately looking amused rather than annoyed. "Y' haven't even had yer turn yet."

Your 'turn' is a very appealing concept, but that's not a thing that's going to happen while you're awkwardly balanced on a river rock.

"It seems vaguely important," you say, instead.

Sera sighs, and rolls her eyes. "You obviously like me. Y' just stabbed a demon to like, super death. An' yer just a linguist, it's not like you go stabbin' demons every day! Every time someone so much as keeps you from fallin' off a cliff, you go all swoony-eyed. S'not in your nature to run into danger."

That is... at least half-true. You'd made a great career out of running away from danger. Strategically. That was why you were even at the Inquisition to begin with.

"Nothing's really... changed, though..." you say, thinking back to your numerous 'can't's. The self-loathing is already beginning to creep in around the edges, in fact.

Sera shrugs. "Y' got issues. I figure I can either leave you alone to stew in them forever or jus' make a strong first move and let you figure out the rest."

"... That seems... Uh..." Ill-advised?

Sera grins. "Worked, dinnit?"

She has a point, you suppose.

"It doesn't hafta be complicated," she says, her voice softening slightly. "Y' like me, I like you, that's enough, innit?"

You look away, biting your lip. It doesn't seem like it should be, but you also have literally no counter-arguments. None that you can really deliver without saying any of the many things you can't say. You can't tell her that you're hiding something from her, or lying to her, because even that admission is too telling. What secrets could a person like you have, that could reasonably be cause for someone like her to have second thoughts? You could surely make up some kind of lie to keep her away, but for once in your life, you're having trouble with the idea that lying more could fix your problem.

"I need... time to think," you say. It's not a no, because it would be really, really shitty to have sex
with her and then reject her outright immediately afterward. And also because she is still very naked and your mind is still circling around thoughts of turns, and what could be accomplished with a bit more time and a lot more privacy.

You're self-justifying. You know you are. You can feel it. You're pretty sure, given time to think, time away from Sera and her extremely beautiful, extremely naked body, you'll remember why you said you couldn't do this. Or maybe come up with a way to find out if she'd feel used without out-and-out telling her you're hiding multiple terrible secrets.

Like. You could... tell her a small one. Maybe. Little, tiny secret.

"Can we spend that time doin' more o' this?" Sera was asking.

"I... Uh..."

You should probably say no.

It is super late to be saying no. The damage is, quite literally, already done.

"Maybe?"

Getting out of the river turns out to be tricky. You're pretty clean at this point, and you'd helped Sera clean off. And nearly gotten distracted again. All while half-assedly explaining why you don't want her to go down on you in a river bed. You just don't want her to feel bad; getting you off is like solving one of those theoretical five-dimensional puzzles the Tevinter mages are always puttering away at. It's not going to happen in a river, and you'd rather not bother at all rather than have to get halfway through and then determine a good time to realistically fake it.

Even without any additional exchanges of fluids, there's a lot of giggling. And, inexplicably, a lot of shushing, even though Sera had been making a fair bit of noise earlier. You have to help her get her pants out of a tree, because she'd been focused more on being seductive than practical when she'd tossed them.

By the time you get back to camp, you're both more slightly damp than wet, and you've managed to put your hair back into a tail, if not a bun, since it needs to dry.

...Is it just you, or is everyone working very hard at not looking directly at the two of you...?

Solas is very focused on the horses. When have you ever seen Solas with the horses? Literally never. The two of you had just been injured, and he's not hovering even a little bit. Blackwall and the Inquisitor are having a very enthusiastic conversation about maces, which could almost be normal if not for how forced it is. Seeker Pentaghast is... sharpening her sword, which could also almost be normal if not for the fact she is visibly bright red.

You run a hand over your face.

Every single person in this camp just heard you have sex with Sera.

Great.

You peel off from Sera and the rest of the group almost immediately and beeline for the horses. Sera lets you, although whether it's because she wants to give you space or because Solas is with the mounts, you don't know. Not that it's significantly less awkward around him, but taking care of the mounts is objectively your job. Having a place where you're absolutely justified in being helps the
intense awkwardness of realizing that the majority of the Inquisitor's Inner Circle--as well as the Inquisitor himself--are all intimately aware of the fact you just fucked someone in a river.

Solas is sort of awkwardly hovering. He probably wants to ask how you're doing but also probably heard some Yells That Were Not In Alarm, and it's not like he's an idiot.

"I'm fine," you just spit out after a few minutes of tense and awkward silence. "I wasn't actually that badly hurt, I don't think."

"...You were badly injured for a civilian, but not for someone who had just fought a terror demon," he says, finally, with a resigned sigh. "I have healed much worse, but not necessarily on you."

"What about the time--"

"Please do not remind me of every horrible and inexplicable injury you have ever obtained," Solas interrupts, and you laugh.

"Alright. Fair."

"I would scold you for leaping in," Solas continues. "But I believe the Seeker beat me to that."

"She did. At length."

"And you did it to protect Sera, did you not?"

You hesitate, glancing over your shoulder. Sera is talking to Blackwall in a quiet tone that doesn't reach your ears, and grinning broadly.

"I would have done it for anyone," you lie. "I wasn't thinking."

Solas doesn't call you on the falsehood, but the doubt is obvious on his face. "We all do ill-advised things for those we care about. The extent of Sera's injuries leads me to believe that it was not unnecessary, as well. Had she been even more injured, we would surely have had to stop for some time to allow her to recover, or even left her behind at the next town."

You shudder. You hadn't really thought about any of that, to be honest. You'd just seen her gone down and then the world had gone kind of red and kind of sideways. It was hardly the first time you'd been inspired to grand acts of violence in that sort of situation. Which Solas knows more than anyone else here. He and he alone had seen you decapitate a man with his own damned blade. There is a reason why Seeker Pentaghast had been the one to panic and lecture, not him.

"Thanks for the cover, back there," you say, instead of any of that.

Solas shrugs. "I understand why it's important to you that no one knows." Another long glance back towards the others. "Perhaps even those you may be closely involved with."

You wince. You feel bad enough about the situation without him reminding you how much you're lying to her. "It's not really relevant to the situation," you lie. "If it was important, I'd tell her."

Solas gives you a look that you're having trouble interpreting. Not pity, bordering perhaps on judgment, but some odd combination of both and yet neither.

"It's about who you are. Of course it's important."

You all get back on the road by early afternoon. The ahead party has changed a bit, to the Inquisitor,
Cole, and Solas, a trio you can only admit is something of a powerhouse. And it leaves you with both the Seeker and Blackwall to keep Sera from getting clawed halfway to death if you run into anymore demons. You're right this moment a bit more appreciative of the Inquisitor's strategic team choices than you perhaps have been in the past. You also suspect the three of them are as much trying to hunt down any rifts as they are trying to keep the five of you from getting ambushed.

The working theory that the Inquisitor, the Seeker, and Solas had come up with was that the rift those demons had been pulled through had already been closed, but without destroying their corporeal forms first, leaving them stranded and wandering. But the Inquisitor, Solas, and Cole apparently all have their own ways to track down rifts, so the three of them working in tandem should be able to detect any in the area.

You repeat the sensibility of the Inquisitor's plan to yourself over and over to avoid any lingering resentment that he hadn't taken Sera with him. He shouldn't have. It would have been dumb as shit if he had. But that means she's there, with you, and you're having very painful whiplash between hating yourself and be very fucking pleased with the bad decision you'd just made.

She's objectively gorgeous, is the thing, and she's smiling now. Not even hovering like you'd been very worried she might, but chatting cheerfully about a mile a minute, mostly with Blackwall, but even a bit with Dorian. When had you ever seen Sera and Dorian getting along this well, joking and having a good time? Maker knows he deserves that, and Sera... Sera's practically glowing. It's such a stark difference between her misery and fury the last few days, and knowing you caused that feels just as good as knowing you'd caused her suffering had felt bad.

The idea that you could make someone happy is a particularly alien concept, and the taste of it on your tongue--as well as the vivid imagery of some other tastes you'd like to have on your tongue--is so sweet that you can't barely imagine being able to resist it. But lingering in the back of your mind, even now, is the fear, no, the knowledge that you could never make her happy long term. And as sweet as her joy is now, it would only make the pain later all the worse.

...Wouldn't it?

You are the kind of person who can compartmentalize. You can enjoy the bliss of the moment and not regret tasting that happiness even after it ends in flames. The destruction of your retired life in Orlais was horrible, but it's not like that means you regret the decision to retire, however short-lived it had been. That happiness, though brief, was still potent. Maybe you're not giving Sera enough credit. She seems to accept that you have baggage, at this point, even if she doesn't know what it is... right? She wouldn't have made moves on you after you'd rejected her if she didn't understand that. So maybe she doesn't care if it ends badly? Maybe she just wants to have some fun along the way.

And she's significantly less likely to up and kill you than Fenris. Plus: fewer issues. Or, well, fewer that you know about; you just know a bit too much about Fenris' sordid past to feel comfortable risking hurting him in such a way. He deserves better, the way Krem deserved better.

Not that Sera doesn't deserve much better than you... but if you're what she wants now, it's not like you're preventing her from getting someone better later.

You're justifying. You can feel yourself doing it, searching for a good reason to let this happen. And you're finding quite a few, which is a bit worrying. Is that because there actually are good reasons, or just because you're that good at justifying horrible things to yourself? Your lack of inherent moral compass is making this very, very difficult, you feel. Surely a good person would know automatically what the right thing to do was, but here you are stumbling around in blind circles.

Doing no harm is so difficult and alien to you that you spend the entire fucking afternoon circling the
drain of your own thoughts. The day passes, dreary and grey and worrisome, the only sun on display the blinding brilliance of a happy Sera. And try as you might, you just can't bring yourself to snuff it out.

You stop for dinner, and you've just finished caring for the horses in an absentminded daze when you're brought up short. Quite literally; you turn around towards the fire and are suddenly aware there is a Man There. Not even Blackwall, which would be alarming enough, but the Inquisitor. You look up in alarm, wondering if you're in for another scolding for your actions that morning.

You pride yourself at being very good at preparing for eventualities. Hard to surprise, quick to adapt when things don't go your way. Today, however, seems determined to make a halla-in-lamplights fool out of you, because instead of all the myriad things the Inquisitor of the Inquisition could want with you just now, he presses a sword, still in its scabbard, into your arms. You hold it, blankly, staring down at it and then back up at him, completely at a loss for why the fuck he just handed you a sword. Does he think you can use this? You fucking can't. Even if you weren't in the habit of hiding damn near one hundred percent of your martial skills, swords would definitely not be included in your list of talents.

"If you're going to be running headlong into battle," the Inquisitor announces. "You need to know how to use something better than throwing daggers for stabbing. You need to know how to defend yourself."

You stare at him just as blankly as before.

"Combat training," he explains, when it becomes clear you're just going to stand there, wide-eyed. "Like with Bull, I suppose, but infinitely more useful, since you'll have a sword and a teacher that isn't just trying to..." the Inquisitor waves his hand in the air, glancing away. "You know."

It really says something about his character that he's more than willing to imply you're sleeping with the entire Inquisition, to your face, but shies short of actually saying the word 'fuck'. Not anything good, mind you, but still something.

"Are you truly the only one here I can trust to teach me swordplay without trying to teach me swordplay?" you ask flatly, in straight-up denial and still trying to figure out a good way to refuse this absolute fucking madness. The Inquisitor has the good sense to flush and keep looking pointedly away.

"Surely not the only one," Solas interjects, approaching from where the two of you had been working with the mounts. "Although I will admit some trepidation to the concept itself, given that Emma has proven able to injure herself on stairs, let alone swords."

This thing Solas has started doing, where he helps you out while insulting you... You can't decide whether you appreciate it or want to set him on fire. Can it be both? It can probably be both; you're a multifaceted person.

"She'll be in more danger in the long run if she never learns how to handle a blade properly," the Inquisitor points out, making you deeply regret your earlier innuendo. "Especially as she seems perfectly keen on using them outside their intended purpose. Next time she decides she wants to run a terror demon through, I'd prefer she have a proper sword and some proper training."

You wouldn't be in danger in the first place if some idiot hadn't insisted you leave the castle and wander about the demon-infested countryside with warriors. You and Solas share a look that implies you're both thinking that, but neither of you are in a rush to say it right to the Inquisitor's face. Well, actually, wait, Solas looks like he might. Shit. You step subtly in front of him just as he's opening his
mouth, with that pre-lecture look on his face. You might bump into him a little bit. Pointedly. You don't step on his foot, but only because you're in boots and he's barefoot as always.

"I'd prefer I never be in a situation where I need to run a terror demon through, actually," you say quickly, instead of whatever significantly less diplomatic thing Solas was about to say.

The Inquisitor laughs, which isn't the ideal reaction there. "Wouldn't we all. But Thedas is rife with demons at the moment. And if I'm going to be dragging you into the desert, I should at least put some effort into ensuring you don't die before you have a chance to speak to our scholar."

You feel like there are a lot of ways for him to do that. Ones that don't involve you trying to swing around a sword. You're having a hard time finding polite ways to say any of them, however, and Solas is looking increasingly annoyed.

"A sword might be a bit much for her," Solas points out. "Perhaps I could train her in staff usage, instead? It would be very difficult for her to stab herself with that."

This is also a good point, but you do not need to be seen twirling a staff around. And you could never actually carry one with you, because too many people equate staffs with mages. It would be a skill just as useless as swordplay, perhaps moreso, since no one screeches abomination and tries to run a person through because they know how to parry. That being said, more lessons with Solas is preferable to anything with the Inquisitor.

"She's no mage," the Inquisitor points out, and you keep your face carefully neutral because bursting into laughter at this stage, while tempting, would be unwise. "Staff training would be less useful to her than simple, basic melee training. And the best way to start there is with a sword." He eyes you. "Maybe a shield, later, if she takes to it. I feel like that might be an appropriate thing for her to learn."

...Does one have to learn how to use a shield? It's a giant piece of wood or metal. You hold it between yourself and the person trying to murder you. It feels like that shouldn't be hard to master.

It would be easier if he'd simply not taken you into a situation where he deemed sword tricks a necessary life skill. But that ship, you know, has long since sailed. If he didn't listen to Seeker Pentaghast's displeasure, he certainly won't listen to yours. Or Solas'. And you'd like to prevent another hostile situation between the two. They've barely spoken the entire trip and it's been a blessing.

Keeping Solas from talking to the Inquisitor. Keeping Solas from talking to Sera. Keeping Dorian from saying anything stupid to Solas. No wonder the man is all but in isolation despite your attempts at enamoring him to the common man of the Inquisition. No one here can be trusted not to say something absolutely fucking idiotic, and he doesn't have an ounce of the patience you've learned over your long life of listening to dumbass shems say dumbass things.

"Alright," you say with a sigh, just to get it over with. "But need I remind you, I am supposed to be spending my spare time working on your tome."

"It will be easier for you to finish that once we get you to a place with tables," the Inquisitor says, revealing to you that he's an idiot, but apparently an idiot who knew you would not be able to work well on the road. If you had been back in Skyhold this entire time, you could have had it finished in another few days and just sent it along with Bull or something.

Actually, yeah, okay, let's hope this sword training gives you the chance to hit him very hard with something large and heavy.
Large and heavy turns out to be the perfect description of the Inquisitor's damned sword. You're on the road; it's not like he has spare practice swords lying around, so you're just starting with live steel. Live, very fucking heavy steel. You wouldn't know it looking at him--the Inquisitor is an aggressively average looking man--but he must be quite strong to heft these things one-handed. You keep wanting to grasp the hilt with two hands; it's big enough for it thanks to the comparative size of your hands, and it's certainly heavy enough for it.

Perhaps because it's a real sword and actually sharp, the Inquisitor just has you practicing basic sword motions. It would feel condescending if not for the fact you should have no idea what you're doing, and also for the fact that even just the repetitive motions are making your arms ache terribly. Oh good, you're so glad you can have exhausted arms to match your exhausted legs. By the time this trip is over, you will either be solid muscle or you will have died.

"I suppose linguists don't do a lot of heavy lifting," the Inquisitor says about fifteen minutes into you trying your best to swing a sword in the correct manner without dropping it. He sounds amused. "Bull should have had you doing push-ups instead of just having you bouncing around; your arm is like the last leaf in autumn."

"I think this sword is heavier than I am," you say breathlessly.

"Don't worry, you'll get the swing of it," he says with the broad grin of a man very pleased with his own awful pun.

Your natural instinct is to shoot back. It's what you would have done with anyone else... save the Seeker, the Commander, Leliana... A very important and very telling list that the Inquisitor is very much on. You may have completely failed to escape the notice of even one of them, but you can at least remain polite, useful, and most importantly, completely harmless.

The Inquisitor shows you a handful of what you can only presume are deeply basic sword drills. Just the absolute basics of swinging and blocking. Then he tells you to practice on nights when you aren't too dead tired from travel. You appreciate the addendum. What you don't appreciate is him saying that he'll show you more when the both of you have time. You don't want sword lessons with the fucking Inquisitor. You're having a hard time of thinking of anything you want less. But here you are.

You've been on the road for over a week now. Surely you're getting close to the fucking desert. Then the Inquisitor will be too busy with important Inquisitory things to bother you, and you can just focus on getting your work done. You're purposefully not thinking about how long you might be stuck in the desert. Hopefully wherever he sticks you will at least have some fucking walls.

You're fucking exhausted by the time you finally get to your tent. Today has been a completely insane day. From start to finish, just... completely mad. You can't wait to curl up with the help of Cole and get something resembling a good night's sleep. Well. Sleep, anyway, not even close to a full night of it, but at this stage in your life you'll absolutely take what you can--

That. That is a Sera. There is a Sera in your tent. There is a Sera in just her smallclothes, in your tent. Wh. Is. Did you walk into the wrong tent again. What is happening. Why do you keep winding up in the wrong tent.

"Hey, lover," she says with a wicked grin. "Wanna pick back up where we left off?"

You tried to say no.
You really did. You fumbled and stammered and hunted for a reason to not repeat all your bad mistakes. But she looked at you and she said "give me one good reason why we can't," and you hadn't been able to come up with any. Not any that you could say. That was the problem. You couldn't just blurt out "I'm lying to you," because then she'd want to know about what. And there were no good endings to that. Even if you came up with one small lie to give her, then she'd just think that was all you'd been hiding. And the truth, if she ever found it...

No point in coming clean about one thing if you weren't going to come clean about it all. Lying about one thing, lying about everything, in the end, isn't it the same amount of wrong? It feels like a zero-sum game. Even if you told her half a dozen little truths, there were too many she could never know, all of which would upset her if she knew. She'd want to know why you lied about so many small things, too, and those just painted a picture to a greater whole than she could know about.

So instead, you'd occupied your liar's mouth with other things.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit I literally just realized the next chapter is chapter 100, I hope I coincidentally outlined something dramatic happening there. The scope of my planning, alas, does not even BEGIN to guess where chapters begin and end unless I need to end at a very specific point for drama's sake. And even then I couldn't tell you which chapter it was gonna be.

If you like my stuff, I suggest checking out my tumblr for more places you can stalk me.
You don't sleep. Sera does, but obviously you can't with her there. Cole doesn't even show up, despite the fact you'd tried to use this being his tent as an excuse to chase her out earlier. Of course he wouldn't; he could obviously tell you had company, and knowing Cole was probably just as happy as you about the situation. Probably more, since he didn't tend to have your second thoughts and doubts.

You want to hate yourself more for the situation than you actually do, to be honest. But the thing is, she's very warm and very soft and curling up next to someone, even when you're not sleeping, feels very good. You wonder, idly, how much of this is that you like her specifically--you do, obviously, but how much?--and how much of it is just that you were a bit lonely and are prone to making bad decisions that hurt the people around you. Would you even care that you'd be hurting her if not for the fact you're stuck around these people for the foreseeable future? How much of your pleasure is genuine; how much of your guilt is genuine? Such thoughts occupy your mind through the night and into dawn.

You rise before her. You're kind of hoping that coming out of your tent early, without her, will somehow prevent people from realizing it's your tent she's coming out of when she eventually emerges. Of course, Seeker Pentaghast will probably have noted that Sera never came to their tent. And you'd put Cole out of a place too... well, he doesn't really seem to sleep, but still. It was the principle of the thing, when you'd put up such a fuss to get him sharing a tent with you in the first place.

Come to think of it, if you hadn't bothered, you'd be sharing a tent with Sera right now, and you could fuck every night like over-enthusiastic nugs and no one would be any the wiser--well not since you'd discovered the importance of finding something to muffle her with anyway. Ironically, it's your own constant attempts at keeping this from happening that made it happen in the most awkward time and place possible. As is traditional in your life, you have only yourself to blame. The things you try to fix, you always wind up breaking worse.

Of course, it's bad that you're even considering how you could have made this easier on yourself. You shouldn't be doing it at all. The fact that you keep failing in your attempts to do better is not an excuse to stop trying. Which you know. Which, fuck, even Solas seems to know, going by the mildly disapproving look he gives you as you wander groggily over for morning stretches. And of course he disapproves; he probably knows the most about you other than Cole. Which. Admittedly is... almost... nothing. Ugh. You're awful. And you're going to wind up hurting Sera. Or, just as likely, she's going to wind up hurting you, more viscerally. With arrows. Surely even your selfish mind could understand personal risk and stop this already.

Your distraction, or perhaps your soreness from "pick one: riding harts, riding Sera, or swinging the Inquisitor's over-sized sword around like a frantic and terrified octopus," has you clumsier than even you normally are. You fall over multiple times, including onto Solas once. On accident this time.
Your frustration is probably apparent because instead of springing up and apologizing wildly, you just sort of flop there and groan.

"Are you... alright?" Solas asks, in a tone of voice that implies he knows damn well you're not and is accustomed to ignoring it, however it's getting increasingly difficult to actually do so.

"I'm a disaster person," you reply, still laying face first on the ground, your waist and stomach flopped listlessly over his hips. "I'm the elven god of disaster."

Solas pats you awkwardly on the back. "I don't remember that one from my studies."

"That's because I'm such a disaster that all the records burned," you say flatly, still into the ground. "Like my house."

"The Dalish do not keep written records to begin with," Solas starts, and you lift your head enough to glare at him.

"Don't be semantic when I'm wallowing in self-pity."

"Ah, of course." He pats your bun, which has of course already begun to fray wildly. "There, there."

You snort, then shove yourself off of him and onto the ground, reaching up to fix your hair. One day, they'll design a hair tie that can actually keep it up reliably. Probably one laced with lyrium, since magic is the only thing that could possibly hope to control your damned hair. "You're the worst. I should be talking to Cole."

"You should," he agrees. "I am certainly ill-suited to give advice in matters of the heart."

You perk with curiosity, eager for a discussion that involves his shitty love life instead of yours. "No? Bad experience or no experience?"

He fixes you with a dour look that says he knows exactly what you're doing. "I merely think I would make a poor adviser in this. Dorian, perhaps."

"Yeah, let's ask the Tevinter altus only attracted to men for advice on the intricacies in a relationship between two orphaned, low class elven women."

"See? I am not even good at advising on who to ask for advice," Solas says, and you laugh.

"That's okay, Solas," you say, patting him condescendingly on the arm. "You've got other uses. Like helping me figure out how to hold that 'cobra' pose for longer than about thirty seconds."


You've just started breakfast when Sera finally arises. You're not sure if anyone notices which tent she's arising from--hopefully not--but you're sure distracted when she stops outside it and stretches, yawning broadly. Her shirt is lifting just enough that you can see a sliver of stomach. Given how much you've seen of her in the last day, it shouldn't have any impact on you at all, but somehow that all only makes it worse.

She plops down next to you with a bowl of whatever gloop Blackwall made. You're being unflattering. It tastes good; it's just completely indiscernible. It might as well be made of glitter and rainbows, however, as Sera wraps her arm cheerfully around your shoulders. "Morning, Em!"

She is the least subtle person ever, and it's killing you. "Morning, Sera," you mutter into your gloop,
trying very hard not to look like someone thinking about sex.

"Don't get up so early if yer gonna just be tired," she advises, clearly misunderstanding the source of your sudden-onset attempt to sink into the ground. "No one here's gonna mind if you sleep in a bit."

It's very tempting to fire back with the long list of things you have to do: taking care of the mounts, stretching with Solas to attempt to avoid being a pile of sore twisted muscles at the end of each day, now all this nonsense with swords, and oh yes, writing a fucking book. Also, you couldn't sleep because she was in your tent, which is not something you can say for a number of reasons.

"I'm a naturally early riser," you say, instead of literally any of that. You catch Solas rolling his eyes out of the corner of your vision, but no one else seems to have noticed.

Now that the sun is rising, it's looking to be a bright and clear day, thank the Maker. It's still a little bit crisp in the early morning, but overall you're not missing Skinner's jacket too much. You put on as much of your armor as survived your fight with the terror demon, and a cloak, but you're feeling sorely underdressed after a week and a half of riding wearing leather armor. You feel lighter and more flexible for the lack of it, however, and for once riding isn't too much of a chore... helped along by the fact you elected to ride Revas first instead of Tubby McBroadRibs. His canter is rougher, by a fair margin, but you're accustomed to it. It's easier to absorb with your legs, despite the extra bouncing, when you're not straddling an absolute tree log of a hart.

The ahead party is Solas, Blackwall, and Cole, which is a weird group until you remember that the Inquisitor thinks primarily about defensibility. Two defenders with the group with you—a civilian—and Sera—recently injured—makes sense. Two people sensitive to distortions in the Veil riding ahead also makes sense. That it leaves you with the Inquisitor and the Seeker is just an unfortunate side effect. Very, very unfortunate.

You stay back from them, and Sera and Dorian inevitably sort of fall into a group with you. A more sensitive man might have tried to give you and Sera some privacy and distance, but fortunately, Dorian isn't that socially aware. He chatters cheerfully nearby, some comments insightful and some probably insipid. You're not sure; you're not really paying attention. Because the beneficial side effect of the Inquisitor and the Seeker riding together is that neither of them appear to understand how elf ears work. A raised voice with that hushed quality of someone trying to be quiet and failing catches your attention immediately.

"She shouldn't be anywhere near a sword, frankly. She's a linguist, not a soldier." Solas, it appears, isn't the only one who takes issue with your new training routine of "take sword, panic, swing sword while panicking." But you hadn't expected Pentaghast to be your new stalwart defender. Maybe you should have, she seems rather convinced you're going to accidentally kill yourself sooner than later.

"She needs to be able to defend herself," the Inquisitor says, sounding like he's repeated it about fifty times and is getting tired of doing so.

"She needs to not be in danger in the first place. She's a civilian."

Someone should really have told them by now how sharp elven ears are compared to humans, but you're sure as fuck not going to be the first. Sera is ignoring them, instead engaging in Dorian's idle prattle... the exact prattle that implies that he, despite not being much further from the Inquisitor than you are, can't hear a thing they're saying. You, instead, strain your ears to hear clearly over the pounding of hooves.

"She stopped being a civilian when she signed up with a military organization," the Inquisitor says, and you can hear the sigh behind his words. "Corypheus doesn't care if some of our people aren't
combatants. No one does. That's why we send trained soldiers out with diplomatic and trade envoys. The more people we have who have some basic idea of how to protect themselves, the less casualties we'll be dealing with. And I think we can all agree she would make a very bad casualty."

"I'm amazed Leliana even agreed to let you take her out of Skyhold again," the Seeker grumbles.

"Leliana agreed with my reasoning. Which should tell you something. When is the last time she agreed immediately with my instincts on anything? You can keep scolding me for bringing her if you want, but she's here now. Lifting a sword isn't going to break her in half. She's got the stability of a wet noodle, but she's clearly hard to seriously damage."

"Our soldier seems to have managed it," the Seeker says stiffly.

"And then he dies in his sleep in our custody! All the better to get her out of Skyhold!" the Inquisitor hisses, lowering his voice a bit more. Not that it helps; now that you've got the thread of the conversation, the cadence of their voices, no amount of whispering will throw you off. "You know how much tension she was in the middle of!"

Oh, now, this is very interesting indeed. You'd had suspicions about the Inquisitor's motivations in bringing you out here. At least it doesn't seem like he suspected you'd been causing trouble on purpose... just that you were an unwilling and unknowing figurehead of the tensions you'd been fueling. You drum your fingers idly along Revas' saddle. So many lost opportunities... but unless he actually fixes the core problems, neither the mages nor the elves will settle themselves in your absence. And frankly, if he fixes the core problems, then your stunt will have absolutely worked.

"How much tension will we be in the middle of if we drag her out of the castle and she dies?" the Seeker counters, pulling you out of your considerations. "Not to mention that her life should not be a gamble we take to settle the elves!"

"Then you should be glad I'm teaching her the sword! Her fear instinct is freaking the fuck out and stabbing a demon to death with throwing knives, Cassandra! If anything, she's in desperate need of some training, or she'll just get herself killed. If the Chargers weren't smart enough to give our 'non-combatant' armor, she might already be dead or crippled."

You see the Seeker throw her hands up in frustration--or perhaps surrender. "Fine! You're right. I just..." she sighs. "We are supposed to exist so someone like her never has to pick up a sword," she says, and you're surprised to identify the emotion in her voice as sadness. "She doesn't have the temperament of a fighter. She is overly trusting. Haven't you seen her with Cole? She has no experience with spirits; she simply befriended the first one she came across. That kind of innocence has no place on a battlefield. You're right; she does need to be able to defend herself. But that speaks so ill of the world we've wrought."

This. This is the funniest thing you've ever listened to. You focus on Revas and the road ahead of you, trying very hard not to laugh. Yes! Yes, Seeker Pentaghast, that's you. Emma the linguist, trusting, friendly, innocent. Dear Maker.

"We haven't wrought much of anything, yet," the Inquisitor says firmly. "We didn't tear the world asunder; that was Corypheus. And before that, even. We didn't make the mages rebel, didn't make Orlais unstable. We're trying to restore order, but it's a process."

"If the Seekers had been doing their job properly, the mage rebellion would never have happened," the Seeker sighs, and you find yourself agreeing, although for starkly different reasons. The Seekers are a joke. They have never policed the Templars properly, so far as you can tell.
Where were the Seekers in the years leading up to the Kirkwall incident? You were there in Kirkwall, six or seven years ago. It was already a mess then. Apostates across Thedas knew to avoid the madness of the area, thanks to the over-zealousness of Knight-Commander Meredith Stannard. There was no way apostates knew more about the state of the Circles than the fucking Seekers did. Her madness had been a fucking known problem since the damned 20s. There was a reason that your mother, in all your wanderings, never once took you near Kirkwall.

The Seekers are a joke, and they--and Miss Pentaghast--have more blood on their hands than you could dream of aspiring to.

"We can't change the past, Cassandra," the Inquisitor is saying. "We can only change the future. And in the future I want, we don't lose Leliana's pet linguist to her own violent impulses."

The Seeker snorts. "Are we sure you're the one to be teaching her, in that case? You're still receiving lessons from me, after all."

You can't quite here what he mutters after that, but you can absolutely see his ears turning red from here as he grumbles under his breath. It's slightly cute, which is disgusting; he's not allowed to be even slightly cute in behavior. It threatens to make you physically ill.

Speaking of things that might make you ill, seems you're a hot topic today, as your name pricks your ears again... this time from Sera and Dorian.

"--think I didn't notice you coming out of her tent," Dorian is saying, and you cringe. You knew that flimsy cover wouldn't work; Dorian and Solas are the ones who put the damn tents up in the first place.

"Nothin' wrong with a lil sleepover between friends," Sera says cheerfully, and you pointedly try to ignore them as your own ears begin tingling red. The last thing you need right now is a reminder of your mistakes... or a reminder of how fun those mistakes were to make. Either one spells a frustrating day for you, so you try to ignore the two chattering birds and just focus on riding.

Despite yesterday being spent primarily dealing with the demons and the aftereffects of said demons, you're making good time. This becomes abundantly clear when you see the rooftops of Montsimmard in the distance not long into the afternoon. The good time is attributed--generously in your opinion--to not having to spend as long caring for the mounts. Apparently, having a Designated Mount Bitch is actually accidentally a good strategy for fast travel. You hope that if the Inquisitor makes a habit of it, he at the very least doesn't make a habit of you.

Montsimmard is a bit surreal for you, especially as you get closer. You don't think you've been in the city ever since your stay in the Circle. It's not that you've been consciously avoiding it... it's that you've absolutely been subconsciously avoiding it. The closer you get, the itchier you feel, a sensation like walls closing in around you until you start making even Cole twitchy.

"Eyes in the walls." That's your thought, spoken out loud, enough to pull your focus to Cole. "Six walls, not four, floor and ceiling close in too, every side shrinking," Cole mutters to himself as your group dismounts to head into the city. You'll be staying in an inn inside the gates tonight, which isn't helping the feeling like ants on your skin.

"It's alright, Cole, that's in the past," Solas says, a low voice you recognize abruptly from all the times he's used it on you. You look over sharply as Solas continues murmuring low, soft platitudes to a strained Cole. Those are your thoughts Cole's echoing, aren't they? But he's comforting Cole as if he thinks him to be the source. And you've seen Cole get a bit lost in other people's feelings before,
but he does look very upset.

You're distracted from your own fear, but Cole doesn't look any better. Maybe your thoughts set off something of his own, something you didn't know a spirit would have. Could have? Your mind is racing right along with ways to pry, before you abruptly stop and remind yourself... this is... just Cole. It's Cole. Schemes are blatantly unnecessary, no matter how automatic they are to you. You make a mental note to just ask him about it later.

Unfortunately, without schemes to distract you, you're just going to wind up thinking about the Circle again. It feels stupid to you, this shaky feeling in your limbs, glancing over your shoulder for a Templar that isn't there. You went into the Circle fully voluntarily, as a citizen. Ostensibly, to do work for them, on magic tomes that needed work but were too valuable or dangerous to actually be sent outside the Circle. It was your own, conscious choice. You could have left at any time, even if it would have meant leaving the job uncompleted.

You were never a prisoner there. You don't really have a right to be this jumpy about the experience. And yet...

At the inn, you're abruptly struck with the realization that once again you'll be in a room with Sera and the Seeker. This time, however, the Seeker doesn't look any happier about it than you. Does she think you and Sera are going to fuck while she's right there? ...Well, then again, given Sera's apparent lack of inhibitions vis-à-vis having sex where one could very easily be found out, perhaps it's a valid fear. You, however, have no real intentions to spend the night indoors. Your nice comfortable bed will once again go to waste, because you're not about to find out whether or not you have the willpower to say no to a quick tryst while the Seeker is in the bath, or something.

No, the second you're checked into the inn, you slip out the front door. You don't even bother making excuses first. It's a fucking town, and you've been on the road for ten days. You hadn't even expected to get this far in the journey, frankly; you'd figured something would have happened to cause you to bail out by now. You could honestly stand to do some shopping with all the gold burning holes in your pockets. Buy a nice meal that doesn't come from an inn, maybe.

Unfortunately, it seems that Sera saw you slip out the door, because you're no more than twenty paces away from the inn when she hits you, wrapping her arms around you from behind. You're so jumpy that you almost somersault her over your back, stopping abruptly halfway through grabbing her shoulders once you realize who it is.

"Pretty girls shouldn't explore the town alone," she teases, and you roll your eyes, letting your arms relax like you'd just reached back for a totally normal, non-violent reason.

"It's Montsimard. The crime rate probably tripled just from us walking into town."

"Oooh, are we doin' a crime?" Sera says, sounding enthused.

"It's Montsimard," you rationalize. "We'll probably get arrested either way. When d'you think the last time they even saw an elf was?"

There is no alienage in Montsimard. You're pretty sure they ship them all to Val Firmin or Verchiel.

Sera rolls her eyes. "That jus' means they'll know we're tourists! With big tourist purses."

"So you're saying we're going to get mugged? By who, some noble's nephew?" you ask with a snort.
"Hey, y' gotta be more careful around noble brats, not less," Sera points out, and you have to agree with a nod as she finally releases your shoulders to just walk by your side. "Which is exactly why y' need an escort."

"You're just bored," you accuse her, though you don't actually make any move to stop her from following along. "So bored that you're willing to accompany me as I shop for sand-proof socks."

"No such thing," she says with a sigh. "Trus' me. I've looked. Jus' go for really tall boots ' n' pray. Issat really what yer up to? Sock shoppin'?"

You shrug. "Yeah, more or less. I feel like this is the last time we're getting an afternoon off for the next... eternity. And I've been in like, one city since I even signed up with the Inquisition."

"If we keep makin' good time, we might have a night in Val Firmin, but yer not wrong. Not a lot of places to spend yer coin in the Approach. Didn't see any Darkspawn merchants last time I was there."

You shudder at the mention of Darkspawn. You left the Inquisition hoping you wouldn't see any demons and you wouldn't see any Darkspawn. So far you're one for one, and you don't feel like your luck is going to hold out. "Don't count on me to stab any of those to death for you," you say with a shiver. "I've heard what their blood does."

"It's fine if y' just don't get it in yer mouth. Or any cuts, I guess."

"Yeah, just don't get any blood in your mouth or on your injured person, in the middle of trying not to get stabbed to death," you say, rolling your eyes. "Easy. Yeah, right, I was covered in demon goop yesterday."

"Tha's because yer anti-demon strategy is death by a million shitty ill-aimed stabs."

"You don't get to complain about my strategy," you say loftily. "I saved your life. I'm your hero."

She shoves your shoulder, and you stumble exaggeratedly. "Yeah, yer a regular Templar," she says with a snort, and you grin. Your smart-ass retort, however, dies on your lips as someone else cuts in.

"No. She most certainly is not."

Both you and Sera spin to see the sudden speaker, and you're greeted by the sight of... just some... random... guard. Armor, but not Templar armor like you'd immediately feared. Just leather. Actually, on second glance, you kind of doubt she's even a guard. Sellsword? Do they have those in Montsimmard? You squint at the woman, as if staring a bit more intensely will solve the mystery of who the fuck this lady is and why she's bothering you. And why she's giving you the kind of hate-filled glare you generally have to earn.

"I know exactly what she is. Alix Gagnon, you have a lot of fucking nerve showing up here."

Chapter End Notes

Things are a little chaotic for me between now and the end of the year! I recommend more than ever following me on Tumblr to keep up with it.
Okay, so, of things you enjoy hearing, that's at the very bottom, right alongside "kill them all!" and "don't let her escape!". The wild thing is, however, that although the woman recognizes you, clearly, you actually have no clue who you're being accosted by. Which is saying something; normally you're pretty good with faces.

"Hey, lady, wrong redhead," Sera says with a scowl. "Her name's not Alix Fancybritches or whatever." This comes as something as a surprise to you, since you were fairly certain the entire Inner Circle has been appraised of your Orlesian identity. Leliana figured it out within, what, days? And you'd even used it in service to the Inquisition back in Val Royeaux. You'd never brought it up, but assumed that, like your history in Seheron, it had become something of an open secret.

"It's very much not," you agree with a much more careful frown. "Sorry, ma'am, but I have no idea who you are. Whoever you're looking for--it's not me."

"The Void it's not!" she curses, taking an aggressive step forward. You take one back to match, Sera noticeably does not. "You think I wouldn't recognize the face of the bitch who got me fired? I knew you were up to something with the mages, and then suddenly there are reports on my misbehavior?"

Ohhhhh. Now you recognize her. Well, sort of; her face had never been particularly interesting or particularly important. You're not even sure you ever saw her without her Templar helmet on. She was an experiment at best and an annoyance at worse. You hadn't thought you'd run into her again. Or that she'd know what you'd done, if she did happen to see you again.

"I should have figured it out faster!" she fumes. "You come around and start palling around with all the most troublesome mages, and no one seems to care! Then next thing I know, I'm on the chopping block."

Your eyes narrow slightly as you consider how best to handle this. She's clearly not taking 'who the fuck are you anyway, lady' for an answer. Her grudge must be considerable for her to recognize you years later. Sera is here, which severely limits your options. There don't appear to be any guards nearby, which is a blessing and a curse. No witnesses for whatever you do, but also no witnesses for whatever she does. You can't dismiss the possibility that she was following you until she found a place devoid of security. You were too distracted by Cute Elf to really pay attention to your surroundings. Not a mistake you make often, but you suppose the last year has made you very soft.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," you decide on.

"Oh, the Void you don't! You're lying now, just like you lied then! You told the First Enchanter I was abusing mages! But I looked into you, Alix Gagnon, and you're no fucking linguist. I know why you were in that Circle!"

"The only Templar I ever reported for abusing mages was, in fact, abusing mages," you say, cutting
her short. You doubt she has any actual evidence, but you don't need her running her mouth in front of Sera either way. "The evidence spoke for itself. All I did was provide an objective set of eyes to point it out."

Furious, she grabs the front of your shirt. "I never laid a hand on those mages, you knife-eared traitor!"

You glance slowly down at the fist gripping your shirt, then back up at her, eyebrow raised wordlessly. "Clearly. Violence is obviously your last resort."

"You bitch," she hisses, raising her hand back. Your eyes are locked with hers, dispassionate to contrast her burning fire. A thousand raised hands in unison, a hundred blows to the face. What's one more?

One too many, according to Sera, who proceeds to deck her right in the jaw.

You're briefly stunned. Then you remember Solas' fury in Val Royeaux, Commander Rutherford's rage at the sight of you battered and bleeding on the battlements, the frankly irritating levels of concern you dealt with afterward. You remember you have people here who get angry on your behalf even when you know better. You also see the rage in Sera's eye and remember her story of straight up murdering a noble in Verchiel. Temper, temper.

You grab her wrist and bolt, dragging her along with you. She stumbles briefly until she finds her footing to run with you. You take a sharp left into an alley, then another; two rabbits scurrying through the burrows of the city, more home to the two of you than the forests ever were.

Sera is still raging as you catch your breath up on the rooftop of a small building sandwiched between two taller ones. You let her swear her anger out; it's the exact same kind of thing you'd be furious about if it had targeted anyone else. You've done worse than Sera did to people who made the mistake of raising hands in front of you. And you're the only one who knows the truth in the ex-Templar's words. She hadn't laid a hand on the mages. She'd been neither good nor bad; the kind of neutral that wasn't that much better than evil in your book. Not that you have a lot of room to throw stones there.

"What the fuck was she even on about?" Sera demands, and you realize belatedly she expects an actual answer.

"Violent Templars don't fall far from the tree even when you knock them from grace, it seems," you say with a sigh, sitting up.

"Alix, who the shite even is that?" she asks, and you wonder again how much Leliana told the Inner Circle about you.

"My old working name," you say, running a hand through loose hair. Your hairband had either snapped or been lost, somewhere in the run. Fortunately, you carry spares. You begin pulling it back again to tie up with a spare strip of leather as you explain. "I did a job, briefly, at the Circle where our ex-Templar friend used to work. I witnessed her intimidating and even back-handing one of the mages there, and reported it to the First Enchanter." One Madame Vivienne de Fer, in fact. Not that she'd been there at the time, which is a damn blessing given her status with the Inquisition now. Given that she was already prepared to look into you, however, you suspect she's put two and two together by now, or at the very least will now that she's back amongst her resources in Skyhold. "Anonymously, so I can't say I was expecting this."
"Easy to see how she found out. She was obviously fuckin' stalkin' you after the fact, findin' out yer name, recognizing you now... and what was all that shite about not bein' a linguist?"

You shrug. "No idea. Maybe she didn't want to believe her bad deeds could catch up to her without some kind of conspiracy."

Sera snorts. "Yeah, s'not like yer a fair hand with daggers or an expert at magic or anythin' else suspicious like that."

You glance over at her sharply, hands stiffening in the middle of tying up your hair.

"I do pay attention, Em," she says, rolling her eyes. "'Sides, it's not like there are a lotta legit ways to get outta an Alienage orphanage. Y'pick up some skills. It's fine; y'can trust me. I been there."

Sera had not, in fact, been there; she'd been remarkably gone when the orphanage was raided, thank the Maker. But she's a Red Jenny now, so maybe she's right about one's fate being written early on in life. The two of you separated young and then wound up in the exact same walk of life anyway. Well. Not exactly the same.

You finish tying your hair back into its customary bun. "She was out of her mind. So is anyone who thinks knowledge of the things I translate for a living is suspicious."

"An' the daggers?"

"Everyone needs a hobby. I'm taking care of horses now, too; doesn't make me a stablehand."

"C'mon, Em, it's me," she says, pouting. "Y'don't need to hide all this shite. An' I know you are, all 'I can't I can't' without ever sayin' why not."

"You seem to think I don't trust you," you snap back. "But you're the one taking the word of some deranged Templar over mine."

"Wh--the fuck are you on about now? Tha's not what's happenin'! An' even if it was, she obviously knew more about you than me, Alix."

You snap to your feet to glare at Sera on a more even level. "Don't call me that," you hiss through gritted teeth. You can't handle hearing it from her lips. "That's not my name. It was a fucking nom de plume, don't make it into a big deal."

"Yer the only one makin' this into a big deal, cause you won't talk about it, or anythin'! Yer all average Jane til yer trousers come off, then y'act like you've got the world's biggest secret; what am I supposed to think?!

"You could think about listening to me when I said it was a bad fucking idea!" you yell right back. "Maker, it's almost like I knew kissing me would give you a bad time, imagine that!"

"Don't act like this is some always-gonna-happen bullshit! Only one causing this is you! It's not fuckin'... inherent! We could be makin' out on this fuckin' roof, but instead we're yellin'!"

"If all you wanted was to make out, we wouldn't be having this conversation," you hiss furiously, surprised a little by the vitriol in your voice given that you're just accusing her of caring about you as a person instead of a convenient masturbatory tool. "So if you just want to fuck me, say that instead of all this."

Sera throws her arms up in frustration, a signal that you recognize: she's angry enough to be running
out of words. "Yer a goddamn nightmare, Em!"

"Yeah!" you shout, loud enough that the people in the building can probably hear you. "Yeah, I fucking am! So why are you still here?"

She glares at you, tears burning in the corners of her eyes, and then wordlessly takes a running leap off the roof, grabbing onto a balcony railing on the opposite building before dropping to the ground. You try not to watch her leave, and fail.

Being alone is a blessing.

It's another reminder of all you've lost by having all these... hangers-on, be they friends or whatever Sera is trying to be. "Lovers," you suppose. Things were so much easier when you were by yourself all the time. The pressure of all these watching eyes... It's really getting to you.

You absolutely vanish into Montsimmard. You're tempted to do so utterly. It's not your favorite place, and it wouldn't be as easy as other places in Orlais, but you do have contacts here. You seek one out almost on auto-pilot. You doubt their information has changed much; you haven't been out of the game that long.

An elven visitor might raise a few of the neighbor's eyebrows, so you slip around the back to the servant's entrance when you reach your 'friend's' estate. Not that she has servants, mind you. She's not as rich as her family once was, and while she could probably still afford a thriving estate, she prefers to spend her money on her whims. In truth, dragon collecting doesn't take that much money these days—until very recently there were no actual dragons to collect, just memorabilia. Makes funneling money into the Elven Resistance easier.

She's a general sympathizer, which is probably why she still likes you so much. Or, well, at least you presume she does. It's been a while.

Lack of staff makes it easy to slip into her office. She really should work on that, although nobility protects her from the human side of things, and she's somehow managed to be friends even with elves outside of the Resistance she's helping fund. She's protected on all fronts but the literal. No need for a guard when the silent promise of punishment hangs so heavy.

"Claire," you say from the doorway, rather than startling the shit out of her more than necessary. She still jumps, hand going to a protective rune on her brooch. You smile. Good sign that she kept it.

"Alix?!!" she exclaims, which you're starting to get used to. "You're here? I only just heard you were even alive! You dropped off the map; I thought—"

"Everyone thought," you say with a sigh, walking further into the office now that it's clear she won't accidentally fry you. "I was... lying low, when Red Templars rolled up to my front door."

"You've been with the Inquisition, I heard news from Val Royeaux."

You nod. "From whom?"

She shrugs. "No one important. Just around. I keep an ear out for that sort of thing, still."

"Never know when it might be worth hearing," you agree with a quiet laugh.

"Alix, why are you here? You haven't been to Montsimmard in years. Is something going on?"
You sigh again, and she waves you to a plush chair that you immediately sink into, one leg going up over one of its oversized arms. It feels good to relax a bit.

"The Inquisition is here," you say, and she stiffens. "Not for long, don't worry. I'm with an advance party, just passing through on our way further west."

"*Further* west? Where in the Maker's name are you heading? Past the lake?"

You nod. "That's not necessarily gossip I want spread wide, however," you say warily.

"That's mean," she says, pouting. "Gossip is what I do."

"How about some *directional* gossip?" you suggest, and she smiles.

"My favorite kind. Who ought to overhear?"

"Get it to Jean-Luc Génin at the University. Should be easy."

"And he'll get it to whoever you actually want to tell, that you're not telling me," Claire says dryly, and you laugh.

"Quite so."

"Just that you're heading West?"

"Into the Approach, with the Inquisition... and the *Inquisitor*," you add ruefully.

Claire gasps. "He's *here*? In Montsimmard? Right *now*?" She looks as though she might bolt out of the house, or perhaps hide under the desk.

"Passing through, as I said. Calm down. I sincerely doubt the Inquisition even knows any of your business, much less cares."

"They've been courting favor with the Marquis. Who's still very much on the warpath, I might add."

You roll your eyes, not letting any concern you might have show. "The Inquisitor has little patience for Orlesian politics. No, you'd need to sweat more if one of the spymistresses' people were here... and I doubt either of us would know if they were."

Claire lets out a long sigh. "I really wish she hadn't done that," she complains upwards to no one in particular.

"I really wish she hadn't done a lot of things," you say darkly. "Slitting Lienne's throat is the least amongst them. But I didn't come here to talk about that." You shake your head. "I came to catch up! How have you been? Any real dragons yet?"

"No, and not for a lack of trying. Say, did you say you're going into the Western Approach?"

You eye her warily. "Are there seriously dragons out there?"

"Rumors! Rumors of a *high dragon*, which means *eggs*..."

"Claire. Claire, I'm a linguist."

"I know! But you might, you know, *know* someone out there, and you're with the Inquisition now! Surely they have someone who could pilfer an egg!"
"They'd probably want to keep it." You rub your face. "Isn't keeping a dragon extremely illegal?"

"That's the thing! They're not! The old laws allow for the keeping of small dragons; I think it was for training purposes. You just have to keep them locked up, there are security provisions..."

"How old are these laws?"

"...Old," she admits. "But you know I'd be careful!"

"Would you hire staff, for once, instead of slowly turning into the resident cat lady?"

"Dragon Lady! And yes, I would. I've been looking into experts. Dragon Hunters are starting to come back into vogue. I found a Pentaghast!"

"Everyone's a Pentaghast. Please don't get scammed, Claire."

"I'll be careful! Just look into it, Alix? Pleeaaaase?"

You sigh, rubbing your forehead. "I'll keep an ear to the ground, but I make absolutely no promises. This is very, very far out of my wheelhouse."

"Ooooh, thank you Alix!" she says, gliding over to the chair to smother you in a hug. It's considerably smothering, but you tolerate it. "Have you had dinner? Why don't you stay a little; we can catch up properly!"

You have tea, more than dinner, but Claire is satisfied and you are as well. You weren't sure Banal'ras had managed to hold onto that particular contact, but Alix's roots stayed in the ground even as you cut your own head off... metaphorically speaking.

You take one more advantage from being alone before you head back to the inn; you drain your magic into the river. It had been getting lively with all those nights of sleep, but knowing that you're guaranteed even more, you exhaust yourself completely until there's barely a drop of mana left in you. The fish in the river are somewhat deader for the expenditure, but that's their problem, not yours.

You take your time getting back to the inn, enjoying what few moments of peace you can steal before you go right back to constant observation. At least your current life has that on the Circle. It had been all but impossible to find stolen moments away there.

"There you are!" say two voices in unison as you make your way towards the bar in the inn's tavern. It's an odd sort of harmony, given that it's Solas and the Seeker. Not that you should be surprised that she's concerned for you, given that she's apparently pegged you for an innocent cherub, all caught up in a terrible war. You really ought to be nicer to her... but on the other hand, you really don't want to.

"I told you not to fuss after her," Dorian says, rolling his eyes, apparently here to be the voice of reason. "I'm sure even she could avoid mortal harm walking down well-lit streets."

"He's right," you posit. "Montsimmard isn't exactly known for being a dangerous city. One can't be mugged when one is the poorest person in a given area."

"Patently false," Solas says dryly, but you wave him off to lean against the bar and flag down someone, anyone, to give you alcohol.

"We have all already eaten," the Seeker informs you. "But I'm sure if you simply ask one of the
"I'm fine. Stout is pretty much just liquid bread anyway."

"You need to eat," begins Solas, who has no idea you already did, and who cannot be told that you already did. This makes his concern completely reasonable, and therefore he doesn't even begin to deserve the look you level him with. Were you not on the receiving end of the look he gives you back, you'd probably admire him for standing his ground so firmly in the face of your ire.

The Seeker, to her credit, looks between the two of you a few times before moving away to sit on the other side of the bar.

"Emma," Solas says.

"Solas," you reply, as a pint of very dark ale--or whatever it's damn well called--is delivered into your hand.

The two of you maintain long eye contact for a moment longer before he lets out a frustrated, huffy sigh. "You are impossible."

"I am," you agree with unwarranted bitterness. "So why are you still here?"

Your poison of choice this evening is a very strong, dark drink that you're told is imperial stout. It sounds very official and you hope to remember it the next time you're in Montsimmard... apparently it's something of a specialty of the region. Presumably, regrets are also a specialty of the region, as it is remarkably strong given that you're drinking it on a full stomach.

Despite your absolutely abysmal mood the entire time, Solas insists on keeping you company... or you suppose it's more accurate that he just ignores your repeated and increasingly unsubtle suggestions for him to leave. He's not nearly so good a drinking buddy as Dorian, who under normal circumstances would be right beside you feeding just as strong a hangover. For whatever reason, however, Dorian is leaving you to the dubious care of your... Solas. Whatever he is. Teacher-friend-hahren who's also annoying and annoyingly hot. Yeah, still attractive, somehow, despite the fact that upstairs there's an even hotter lady you could be fucking sideways on some rooftop if you weren't such a lying shithead, or were just slightly more of a lying shithead.

Both of those thoughts only really cause you to get more drunk, which only makes everyone more attractive. It's not really a solution, and you only get more depressed with each pint. Yet you just sort of... keep going, with the vague idea that you'll reach a certain level of drunk where your brain will shut off and everything will stop hurting.

"Alright, ma'am, I think you've had enough," says the man whose entire job is letting you spend money on alcohol. You glare at him blearily, but he said it with an apologetic tone and you know that "I'll tell you when I've had enough" is not an appropriate thing to say at any tavern across all of Thedas.

You do jab your thumb towards Solas, however. "He didn't tell ya to say tha', roight?"

"He's been telling me to say that for about two hours. I didn't listen to him, because I'm a very good bartender," the man replies, and you nod.

"Good man. I tipped, yeah?"

The man pauses, and Solas interjects. "Yes. Excessively. Probably to ensure he didn't cut you off
before you were literally sliding out of your chair."

You glance down. Hmm. You are... less than vertical at the moment. You shrug, which is kind of a full-body motion for you at the moment. "Eh, the fuck else am I gonna do with it. No point in dyin' a corpse full of gold."

"You're not going to die, Emma," Solas informs you.

"Sure am. Gonna get eaten by darkspawn, or possibly a dragon. Are there dragon darkspawns?"

"Yes. Archdemons. They're somewhat famous," Solas says tiredly.

"Gonna get eaten by an archdemon," you inform the bartender.

"That's very unfortunate," he replies.

"See!" you say to Solas, pouting. "He's nice. Be like... what was yer name again?"

"Jean, not that I think you'll remember in the morning."

"Ha! Joke's on you, Jean, I got like, the best memory."

"She really does," Solas says with a sigh.

You squint at him. "Maker, I know an imperial fuckton o' Jean's at this poin' though."

"An imperial fuckton. Well that's just far too many," he replies, not really looking up from the glass he's cleaning.

You nod. "It really is. I'm gonna call you... Vitrum."

"Emma," Solas says, sounding pained. "Do not name the bartender."

"It's really not the worst name I've ever gotten," says Vitrum.

"You should really be more like Vitrum, Solas."

"I'll keep that in mind," he says, exhausted. "Since you've no more ale, might I convince you to go to bed?"

You think of upstairs, of the room you share with the Seeker and Sera.

"...No?" you say, squinting into the air at nothing in particular.

"They're very nice rooms," Vitrum tells you encouragingly.

"They're filled with bitches," you say vehemently, and Solas looks around in a slight panic despite the fact neither Sera nor the Seeker are anywhere nearby. Both have probably gone to bed, in fact; you didn't even see Sera after you got back.

"Those didn't come with the rooms," Vitrum informs you, and you laugh.

"Nah, I brought my own!" you exclaim, then collapse in a fit of giggles. "Traveling bitch circus with me in it, that's for damn sure."

"I am going to carry you to bed if need be," Solas hisses, looking mortified.
"Yer not the first one to say that when I had this much drink in me, fenrel'hahren," you say with a grin at nothing in particular. "Sera beat you to it, though."

"I am well aware," he says, sounding strained. "But you are very drunk, and you need sleep."

"Don' put me in a room with Sera innit, then!"

"Would you prefer a room with the Inquisitor in it?"

"Maker, no."

"Then your decision should be clear."

You let out a long sigh. He's not really wrong, though. The decision is obvious. "Alrigh' alrigh' alrigh', fine, I'll head ta bed."

"Let me help you," he says, although he doesn't really wait for you to agree, reaching under your arms and practically lifting you out of the chair and onto your feet. You wobble a little bit, but manage to get something resembling sturdy footing. You're very good at walking, in general, which you think you comment to Solas on the way to the stairs.

He sees you to your room, and you walk right in, close the door, and continue past two occupied beds and two empty ones, all the way to the window. You open it, climb outside, and scramble outside onto the windowsill like a snake abruptly transferred into the body of a spider, completely unclear on what limbs are and how they're meant to be utilized.

You're pretty sure that it's only how much you'd hate having to explain to Solas that you managed to fall out the fucking window that keeps you from losing your grip. You do eventually manage to scramble up the wall, clawing from footrest to footrest. Why hadn't you taken your fucking shoes off, damnit. Finally, you feel your fingernails dig painfully into rough roof tiles.

You hang like that for a moment, wondering why you didn't think about how much of a pain in the ass pull-ups are before making this inspired decision. Fortunately, your rescue comes in the form of a floppy hat and the spirit attached to it, who grabs your hands and, with a pained grunt of effort, helps pull you up onto the roof.

"Ma mie," you say fondly, flopping against him somewhat listlessly.

"Your mind is mud," he says with a sigh. "Muck and mired, stuck wheel spinning in circles."

"Sounds abou' righ'," you agree, rolling off of him to lay spread-eagle on the roof. At least the stars are pretty, though the lights of the city dull it somewhat. "Cole. I'm such a fuck-up."

"You could have told her that much," he chides.

"I did tell her I'm a fuck up, I'm pretty sure."

"She would have understood," he continues, ignoring your frankly excellent drunken banter.

"I don't want her to understand," you mutter into the sky. "I don't exist to be understood."

"Everyone needs to be understood," Cole counters. You stare blankly upwards, thinking your thoughts. "No one is an island. Not even people on islands," he adds, musing.

"I'm not an island," you say tiredly. "I'm a volcano."
Life is going well for me! As always, I talk more about it on Tumblr and my various associated blogs and social medias. Expect some more from me during November and especially December, so long as nothing melts.
In retrospect, sleeping on the roof was both a great idea and a terrible one. It was great because you're remarkably safe from prying eyes, and with Cole there to watch over you, you sleep pretty solidly through the night. You're not sure if Solas just didn't sleep or if he just wandered off in the opposite direction in the Fade or something, but Cole never woke you up like he normally would. Or maybe he tried and you just stayed unconscious, but you prefer not to think about that.

The downside of course, is that you're hungover and there's sunlight and also... birds? Yes, there are pigeons that appear to have gathered around you over night, ostensibly for warmth. You're kind of loathe to move them, seeing as how they appear to have done you the extreme favor of not pooping on you. You also suspect you might have them to thank for the fact that you're not particularly cold despite sleeping on a roof in late autumn.

Cole is also there; you're a bit surprised that he appears to have stayed the entire night. He's sitting nearby, legs tucked up to his chest, watching the birds, or possibly you, with a neutral expression on his face. You consider, briefly, that to anyone else, this would be a deeply upsetting way to wake up in general: on a roof, covered in pigeons, with a young man watching you from about ten feet away with a blank expression. In your life, however, this apparently has just become par for the course.

"How'd I sleep?" you say, voice coming out hoarse and gravely. You clear your throat, and are suddenly aware of how intensely thirsty you are.

"Wrong," Cole replies.

"…I slept wrong?" you clarify, and he nods. "…Huh." You could ask for more details, and probably will later, but your limited focus has turned to the pigeon situation.

You're not exactly carpeted in them, but there's a rather peaceful line of nesting birds along the line of your arm, hip, and leg. They're also nestled up next to your front and, from what you can feel, along your back as well. It's a shame to have to disturb them, but you can't just stay on the roof, covered in pigeons. You shift slightly, and there's a few grumpy coos of displeasure from your arm.

"If I move," you rasp. "Don't take that as a sign to shit on me."

"They know you're not going to hurt them. A curious spirit, looking and touching but never destroying."

The shift in your posture is enough to send several birds fluttering off of your arm, and you shift to move the last few so you can sit up. Birds that were nestled around your chest flutter with distaste at the sudden lack of warmth.

"Not never," you say, scowling.
"Sometimes it can go too far."

"Maybe that was just me," you reason, rubbing your eyes and then shaking your head against the shadows of memories, or maybe dreams. "Maybe that's just who I've always been."

Cole says nothing, and that's almost as good as confirmation to you, but you don't want to dwell on it. Finally, Cole startles you out of your depressing, circling thoughts.

"The birds don't think so."

You roll your eyes. "Pigeons are fucking idiots, Cole," and the rest of them take off in a rain of falling feathers.

"There you are!" is starting to become the standard reaction for when you walk into a room, it seems.

"Yes, goodness, it's almost like she's always fine," Dorian mutters vaguely into his mug.

"You never came to the room last night," the Seeker says, frowning. "And you were gone in the morning, as well! Given your state of inebriation last night, we were concerned."

"You were concerned," corrects Dorian. "I told you she was probably out taking advantage of the final bastion of society before it's nothing but sand as far as the eyes can see."

"I awoke before dawn! Where in the Maker's name could she have been shopping at that hour?" the Seeker protests.

"Night market?" Dorian suggests.

"Yes, the famous Montisimnard Night Market," Solas adds sarcastically. He's sitting beside Dorian and drinking something from a mug, looking deeply disinterested in the fuss the Seeker is making. Everyone is having breakfast, and therefore hearing all of this, but Pentaghast seems the only one really paying you much mind.

"Where were you?" the Seeker asks, irritatingly concerned eyes landing on you again.

You scowl. Or actually, you think you've been scowling this entire time. It's a default expression when it's this early and you're this hungover.

"Last night, I was utterly charmed by a traveling merchant. I spent the evening in his room, engaging in the sort of wild, passionate lovemaking that one hopes only to read about in the pages of well-written erotica. He's gone now, but I'll always have the memories of the night we shared," you deadpan. In the silence that follows, you add, "Don't worry, I'll endeavor that my fatigue doesn't effect my work nor our traveling speed today."

There's another pause, and then Dorian snorts with laughter, which breaks the tension somewhat. It's immediately reinstated by Sera standing up furiously and hurling a dinner roll at your head, which bounces off fairly harmlessly as she turns and storms out of the inn.

"She... knows you were joking, yes?" Dorian wonders as you pick up the roll.

"What in the Maker's name is going on with you two, anyway?" Blackwall wonders out loud, and something inside of you finishes snapping in two.

"A lot of mistakes neither of us seem willing to stop making," you mutter, quietly enough that you're not sure who hears you. Especially given that you're already turning to storm out the door that Sera
You head to the stables, despite the fact that for once you do have actual professionals to take care of the damn horses. You would have liked a warm breakfast, but that's very clearly not in the cards for you today. You can feel yourself making more and more of a mess, tangled up in ropes and destroying your surroundings more every time you struggle. But you don't know how to get out without breaking everything.

When have you ever gotten out of anything without breaking everything? It's your one talent.

You find yourself in the stables, but you're not even checking on the horses or doing anything to excuse your presence here. You're actually just sort of standing at the end of a row of stalls, blankly facing the wall and staring at nothing. You feel panic fire lightning violence everything roiling under your skin despite the fact that there should be nothing inside you left to explode. You just want it to stop, you want everything to stop, stop spinning, stop boiling over, stop writhing out of your control. You want to go back in time to the day you met Sera and refuse every advance. You want to never have learned your shared history; you want her to be a stranger you owe nothing. You want to shred out of existence every kiss, every stroke of skin, every skyward scream and whispered prayer.

You want her to forget, but you want to remember. Is it selfishness or masochism, a reward you want--taste of her skin, touch of her hand buried in your hair--or a punishment you deserve?

You've buried into her skin like barbed wire, and you think that might just be your nature, so you wish you didn't exist, because that's the only way you can see out of this other than tearing yourself out of her and leaving only blood behind. The sensation of her barbed wire under your own skin goes largely disregarded, because you've seen your own blood and are much more accustomed to the sight. It's hers that scares you.

And you've tried the alternative, you can see the alternative on the ground in front of you in a pool of shared hearts' blood, fluids mingling in a perversion of the love you shared and you can't do that again you can't you--

"Would you... like to talk about it?"

The voice comes haltingly, awkwardly. You turn to face it, for a moment expecting long hair drained silver-white from too much bleach, judgmental eyes that know too much about you.

You do meet eyes that know, but not too much yet, because they're nervous and concerned and beautiful stormy blue-grey.

Your face twists into something like rage, a snarling beast, cornered and terrified with nothing to do but bite. Your mouth opens to hiss hate at him, a snake spitting venom: get back, get away. What comes out instead is a wail like a broken spirit escaping between your teeth.

You sink awkwardly onto the ground, legs splayed out to the side, bent at odd angles. You're a child throwing a tantrum, all raw edges and no control. A sob bubbles out of your chest and tears burst senselessly from your eyes. Hot tears, like each drop holds suspended inside a shard of the fire burning ceaselessly in your chest.

Solas kneels down on the ground next to you, wordlessly, and you fill the silence with a string of stupid, stupid curses and complaints.

"Such a jerk--" "It's not even my fault even though it is--" "Why can't she just leave it--" "How hard is it to just take no for an answer--" "All my fault--" "All her fault--" "Why am I like this--"
Solas never interrupts you, never offers an opinion or commentary on the mess you've created. You're glad for it, because that makes it easier, once you've mounted up and hit the road, to pretend like it never happened. Cole and Solas might know the truth, but at least to everyone else, it might look like you feel nothing at all.

You know the Inquisitor doesn't make his decisions based on interpersonal drama. You know that even if he did, your interpersonal drama wouldn't even make the considerations. Nonetheless, you find yourself wordlessly thankfully when he announces the ahead team for the day will contain Sera. Sera and himself, thank the Maker, thank the Maker, and even the Seeker.

You're left in blissful solitude, the presence of Blackwall, Dorian, Solas, and Cole barely feeling like a presence at all. You're still hungover, mind, and all the crying did nothing good for your headache. Only the knowledge that you'd fall off if you laid down keeps you upright in the saddle, your beautiful fat-ass of a hart ignoring you entirely to focus on the road... the first time you've been grateful for his presence as opposed to Revas', since that upsettingly empathic hart surely can already tell how shredded up you are inside.

Despite that, with every steady sip of the elfroot-infused water Solas had somehow procured and shoved into your hands, you feel numbness sinking into your limbs. Your aura is all but dead inside you, so anemic as to be barely there at all. The fatigue this would normally create is somewhat counteracted by the energy given to you by a good night's sleep, even one deeply helped along by copious amounts of alcohol. You think you might even be operating at an energy net positive compared to the foggy exhaustion that's become your baseline since your Solas-related paranoia set in in earnest.

Cole... hovers. Not literally, but probably only because he's aware of how alarming that would look. Solas hovers as well, to a lesser extent. He seems to be trying to give you distance, but you catch him quickly looking away when you glance his direction. Although that might mean relatively little, since you catch Blackwall doing the same thing a few times. Perhaps you're just a spectacle today.

Of course, the relatively blissful relative silence--even Blackwall and Dorian stop bickering when you snap at them to just lay them on the table and get it over with--can't last through lunch. The five of you meet back up with Sera, the Seeker, and the Inquisitor, and things are beyond awkward... You're excruciatingly aware that you're the epicenter of the awkward, which only makes things worse.

Inexplicably, Sera doesn't seem to be actively furious with you anymore. She hands you a cup of campfire tea, but kind of grudgingly and without actually looking at you. There was no actual need for her to hand you tea, though, so you're left at an absolute loss for how to read the situation. Even moreso when sits on a log next to you while you eat. Despite the close quarters, however, she still doesn't... actually look at you at any point. She sorts of glares off into space or down at her food, which you're not used to her doing.

Her conversation is awkward and stiff, and you're pretty sure yours is too. Her tone says she's angry, as does her body language, but her actions and words don't. She's trying to make small talk but she's stabbing her sausage with frankly alarming vehemence. It's extremely confusing. The whole situation isn't helped by the fact everyone else is clearly desperate to stay far away from whatever bullshit the two of you have going on. You can't blame them, but between them trying not to look directly at you and Sera refusing to glance your way, you're starting to feel like you've got some kind of weird plague spread by eye contact.

You thought you'd be relieved when lunch was over and Sera went off to the advance team, but instead you're just more bewildered than ever. Could she just decide whether or not she hates you?
You would never begrudge her the loathing, but you're seriously getting whiplash.

Life, for you, is a sore ass.

You can't help thinking that as you shift uncomfortably on Revas' back. He's bonier than Vhas'durgen, and the extra bouncing is serving you badly. Despite that, the afternoon isn't too terrible. You're confused and upset about Sera, and her part in your sore ass is weighing heavily on your mind. But the weather is very nice, and the trees are beautiful, and Cole keeps pointing out butterflies. At one point he tries to chirp back at a bird. It's impossible for even you to keep a bad mood going under such circumstances. You wind up hitting somewhere around "pensive" instead.

Conversations flicker around you like bird song as you drift in and out of your own thoughts. Solas and Cole are talking about something utterly incomprehensible again.

"Nothing but lies and crooked wings" catches your ear. Are they talking about you again or are you just being paranoid? The phrasing is a bit cruel for Cole, and Solas replies with something that sounds like it's about religion, one hierarchy full of lies and manipulation you actually haven't had much use for.

Oh, oh, wings and lies! Must be the Nightingale. It's kind of a relief to remember you're not the only one working from a throne of lies and secrets. You wonder if many people begrudge her her's. It's somewhat expected for a spymaster, less so for a linguist.

Your musing is interrupted by a bit of escalation in volume from Blackwall, which could mean only one thing. Yes... Dorian. Of course. Blackwall is saying something stiff about noble's perfumed assholes, which would be funnier due to its accuracy if Blackwall wasn't actually using it as an insult. You're just as certain that Dorian said something uniquely ignorant that set him off. Still, you wish Blackwall would go a little easier on him. Dorian's brand of headassery might be unique due to his Tevinter upbringing, but it's not like the Inquisitor isn't a noble! They just get along because they're both Marchers, as crude and loud as each other. Irritated that your admonition from that morning has already worn off, you steer Revas somewhat closer to Solas.

"I know the Inquisitor doesn't consider such things, but I can't help but note he took my only female companionship with him," you say, making sure your voice carries over the thud of hooves.

Solas glances your way, looking bemused and clearly wondering where you're going with this. "You have been preferring female company as of late," he agrees, and you level him with a sour glare. You don't need him inserting his pointed banter into yours.

"Can you blame me?" you say with an exaggerated sigh. "At least there's a few of you here who have yet to be completely overtaken by your raging hormones."

Solas' eyes flicker towards Dorian and Blackwall, who have paused bickering long enough to listen in. "Ah, I see. It can be quite exhausting to be on a trip with someone trapped in a pit of their own hormonal making," he agrees, once again completely unnecessarily referencing your own bullshit. You manage to mostly ignore his 'help.'

"I'm trying to be understanding, you know, it's getting warmer as we travel west, blood is beginning to flow again, including to certain parts of a man, but it's just quite tiring. I never thought I'd consider Orlesians straightforward, but they do seem quite in touch with their desires compared to some other people."

"Some people can never quite admit what they want," Solas suggests, and you nod sagely.
"Quite a sad thing, I suppose."

By this point, Dorian and Blackwall's horses have somehow moved themselves to completely opposite sides of the road, and you feel satisfied that you'll be getting some degree of peace for the rest of the afternoon.

You spend dinner with the horses. You can grab whatever food is left after the others are done, and even that you're doing mostly to convince everyone that you're not an inconvenience. You simply don't want an awkward repeat of lunch; you have no idea what's going on with Sera--does she feel bad for yelling at you? You yelled first... And you'd definitely been provoking her at breakfast.

You don't feel like dealing with the Seeker and the Inquisitor, either, particularly not after they start sparring. The last thing you need to do is get dragged into that. It's enough of a pain trying to squeeze in stance practice between everything else, and you're sore enough without swinging that damned sword around some more.

Ergo, horses.

It's been a good tenday since you left Skyhold--it doesn't feel like that long--and the horses seem to have finally adjusted to your presence. You've certainly gotten a good feel for their personalities, and even the largest of them don't spook you anymore. Of course, you still string them up every night. It's a lot of horses and you don't trust them not to wander off or get startled and run, and then you're the asshole who didn't tie up the horses.

The harts, however, you don't bother with. You know that even if they wander off, they'll come back, and they won't go far to begin with. You weren't sure about Derreck at first... with a name like that and a rider like the Seeker, you'd been a bit worried he was a fluke and not even a proper hart at all. But to your surprise, he'd immediately fallen into the same comfortable affection as Revas, Ash'lan, and now Vhas'durgen.

You've already tended to every single mount, and now you're just killing time, wandering amongst the horses, checking for ticks in places you might have missed, patting noses and just generally doing anything to avoid heading back into camp proper before most everyone has gone to bed. As a result, you wind up wandering even further away from the horses, idly and slowly, and eventually find yourself at the furthest point that could still be considered the edge of camp, the crest of a slight hill. Any further and you'd be out of sight of the campfire and officially into "wandering off into the night" territory.

You sit down in the grass after a while. It's cool, but the earth is still slightly warm with the remnants of daytime, and you're somewhat out of the wind down laying down. You stare up at the stars, mind drifting listlessly from thought to thought. It's probably as close as you ever get to empty, and you feel like you could let not only the whole night, but the whole winter pass you by just lying on that hill, growing into the ground like a tree taking root.

Horns drift into and out of your vision of the night sky; at one point someone's soft, furry nose nuzzles at your hand for an idle pat. Beyond that, you simply exist for a little, trying and for once managing not to think on any of the thousand dire, depressing things in your present or immediate past. You find yourself idly daydreaming instead, a half-dream where you, your mother, and Leah ride through the Dales on harts. Free of Templars and Wardens and Legionaries... simply existing. Together.

Three of the harts laid down at some point, an adorable habit that separates them from the horses, which sleep standing up with an efficiency you can only admire. Harts, however, tend to lie down
when they're comfortable and want a power nap. You shift enough to lean up against Revas' side, knowing that he, of all of them, certainly won't mind. He's very warm, and the night isn't that cold, and you're pretty sure you could and possibly will sleep out here unless someone drags you back to your damn tent. Maybe you sleep better under the stars? You'd never particularly noticed that about yourself, but then again, you've never been safe under the stars before.

You're not asleep when Solas approaches, which is probably for the best. You're just sort of staring out at the Imperial Highway, which winds from one forest, through the valley you're camped along the side of, and into yet another forest further down. It's very rare for you to be this far west, and the sensation of unfamiliar territory is probably only going to get stronger as you near the Approach.

Solas stands wordlessly nearby for a few moments, staring out that way as well. The two of you must cut an interesting silhouette against the rising moons. The way he stands, back straight and arms comfortably tucked behind him would look formal if you weren't used to the way his posture gets when he's thinking. You, on the other hand, are tucked comfortably in the grass, back warm against thick hart fur, arms wrapped around your knees as you rest your chin between them and watch time drift slowly by.

He looks down and quirks and eyebrow at you, gaze drifting to the myriad harts that have settled in around you, as well as Vhas'durgen, who stands as a lone sentinel against the steadily growing darkness as the very last rays of daylight fade away. "Finally found your people, I see," he observes.

"Yeah, only ones who don't ask me invasive questions, elect to kiss me, or think it's deeply unusual for a lone elven woman in a war zone to have picked up the instinct to stab things trying to kill her," you say sarcastically. "I'm finally at home."

"To be fair, I think it's more that Revas hasn't yet discovered how to kiss you," he says, and you laugh again. "On multiple occasions, I have seen him attempt to remove your trousers," Solas continues as your laughter crescendos.

"I keep treats in my pockets sometimes!" you protest between giggles.

"I've heard that exact excuse from many a man, and it has rang false every time."

Still laughing, you throw a clump of grass at him. It doesn't get very far before it falls apart, but it's the thought that counts. "Idiot. Did you come over here just to harass me and my boyfriend?"

"Boyfriends, at this rate. But no. It simply seemed more peaceful here." 

"So you decided to ruin it for me?" you joke.

"If I'm truly bothering you," he begins, but you wave him off before you can even determine whether or not he's being sarcastic.

"No, I understand. The Seeker and Inquisitor are playing with their swords, Dorian and Blackwall are steadfastly refusing to play with theirs, it's all very noisy."

Frankly, in retrospect, you're fairly certain the only reason Sera isn't the one out here bothering you is because either she's decided she hates you again or, more likely, it's because you're hanging out on top of a hill with four harts like some kind of Dalish racial stereotype.

"You must be coming to enjoy my company," you find yourself saying.

"Was that in significant doubt?" he asks dryly. "It was my reasoning for teaching you Elvhen, after all."
You flush a bit at the memory, but push onwards. "To be honest, I figured you were up to something."

"Not everyone is up to something at all times."

"Now that I'm living outside of Orlais, maybe that's actually true," you say with a laugh, to avoid calling him a liar or an idiot right to his face.

"If you're such a firm believer in the duplicity of man, what convinced you otherwise?"

"You've been covering for me," you say, pointing at him with a smirk. "The demon attack, and before that, even."

"You've made it quite clear that you wish your past to remain there."

"And you've made it a priority to keep it there."

"Are you not accustomed to people keeping your secrets?"

Your mind flits briefly back through the list of people who've had one of your secrets to keep. It's a long list of corpses with very few exceptions.

"You did sell me out to Iron Bull in a hot second the day we met," you point out. "You've come a long way from 'she's under the desk, angry Qunari who wants her for unknown purposes."

"I would say you've come a long way from hiding under my desk, but you have not," he replies, and you snort. "I feel you're essentially the exact same as the woman who burst into my study, got in a loud fight with a Qunari--"

"That wouldn't have happened if you'd just let me hide,"

"And then proceeded to declare her intent to seduce my knowledge out of me, all within the span of about ten minutes."

You flush at the memory. You hadn't guessed for a second then that you would have ever taken an interest in recreational seducing... of Solas or anyone at Skyhold, frankly. It made business-seduction, frankly, out of the question. Still, you can't help the bit of smugness that creeps into your smile. "I absolutely did, though," you point out.

"Oh yes," Solas says dryly. "I am thoroughly seduced."

"Clearly not," you say with a snort. "Because regardless of your personal stance on human transparency, there's still an awful lot of things you're not sharing with me."

"Perhaps you're simply not as good at it as you thought?" Solas suggests mildly. Your eyes snap over to fix him with a narrow-eyed glare.

"Not as good at seducing you?" you demand, mildly offended.

"You're the one who chose to use that phrasing originally, not I," he defends, but he can't hide the slight upwards curve of his lips from your eyes.

This is a trap. A trap in which you loudly defend your ability to seduce him. You are aware that it's a trap, which probably shows in the narrowing of your eyes. Knowing that it's a trap doesn't make it stop working, however, and it's very difficult to remind yourself that this exact kind of tomfoolery is actively and currently getting you in a lot of trouble.
It's hard to chase the thought from your mind that evening, however, even after you've returned to the camp and crawled into your tent with Cole. Sera has blown your doors wide open, and it's getting very, very hard to pull them shut.

"What do you want out of life, Emma? Not this, surely."

You're aware of being asleep. Your mind is hazy in the Fade, dizzy and tenuous, your surroundings spinning and fading in and out of reality. The sensation is just familiar enough to not alarm you.

"What about you? Do you even want?"

"I want what I've always been."

"That must be nice."

"Are you any different?"

You look down at your hand, hazy and half-transparent. "I must be."

"I don't know about that. I think we're the same. Don't we want the same thing?"

"Some days, I don't even know what I want."

"But not this, surely."

"Yeah... not this."

"Anything but this."

"Please, Maker, help me, anything but this--"

"No, stop, please, no, it wasn't me,"

"I didn't do it, you're wrong, it's not me, don't do this,"

"Maker, no, help, someone help me, please, anyone,"

"Don't do this, you don't have to do this,"

"No, please, someone help me, help me help me HELP ME HELP--"

Your eyes tear open, already flooded with water and burning with fire. A face is inches above yours, and you shove at it with a bloody snarl. "NO DON'T!" Your arms hit nothing and you wrench violently upwards with the force of your shove, sitting most of the way up, still tangled in your bedroll.

The figure you shoved at wasn't a wisp of your nightmare or a demon here to kill you, just Cole, who'd teleported out of the way of your violence, thank the Maker. He's crouched in the corner of your tent, an alarming sight with his gaunt face and oversized hat, but you're starting to get your head on now. Nightmare, you'd just been having a nightmare.

Just as you have this realization, the front door of your tent bursts open, treating you to the sight of the absolute last person you want to see:

Seeker Pentaghast, sword already drawn.
So Tumblr's exploding! That's fun! I spent years building up a user base and I was about to expand my business into more original work but that's fine! This is fine! I'm not freaking out! I have 2500 followers on Tumblr and 200 on Twitter IT'S FINE IT'S FINE IT'S FINE,

For right now, please (please) follow me here, and on Twitter, Mastodon, and especially especially my Discord (even if you mute everything but the news/annoucements T_T) so that I can continue to communicate with you about things I either can't mention on here or that require mentioning outside once a friggin month.

Given the announcement of a new Dragon Age game and the closure of Tumblr, I'm ultimately planning on putting off my original work longer (sob), delaying the Mystic Messenger story I was writing semi-indefinitely, and doubling down my focus on Keeping Secrets and other Dragon Age related materials in an attempt to not lose my ENTIRE audience overnight. At this time, when I'm going back to school and busier than ever, it's my biggest fear that I'll lose income to the point that I have to quit writing altogether to get a more traditional part time job. So please, tell your friends who want more Dragon Age material to tide them over between now and DA4 coming out 3-4 years from now that I'll be working hard!
You freeze like a halla at the sight of the Seeker with her sword drawn. Time crawls to a stop as your mind and heart race into a careening gallop. Your aura is tamped down in your gut, something you realize immediately upon trying to gather it. An instinct; you probably woke up that way. Anytime something frightening happens, instinct has you tucking it away to safety instead of pulling it out. One day, that will probably get you in trouble. Possibly this day, because if you had it ready, you would already be outside the tent and running.

Instincts still kick in despite that, sending you rushing against the back of the tent, kicking against the ground to put distance between you and the blade. To give you time to untangle your aura and you have almost no mana. **FUCK.** You realize it before you even try to prepare a spell. Are you about to try to knife fight a Seeker? Oh Maker this is how you die.

Before you have a chance, Cole throws himself in front of you, something that stuns you more than the sight of Cassandra Pentaghast bursting into your tent with her sword drawn. You can barely remember a time you've looked at a threat from over someone’s shoulder.

"Get away from her!" the Seeker snarls. "What did you do, demon?!"

Oh.

Oh, you screamed.

You screamed "no don't" in a tent you share with no one but a spirit, a spirit that Pentaghast is terrified will do something horrible to take advantage of your trust.

Fuck.

...Fuck!

You grab Cole by the shoulders and all but throw him to the side; he sprawls out awkwardly against the side of the tent. Now it's your turn to scramble forwards--going against every screaming instinct in your head--and put yourself between him and the Seeker.

"It's not what you think!" you exclaim, kneeling on the bedroll and throwing your arms wide in the universal signal of 'you'll have to go through me'. Which flies in the face of all your instincts, but you manage somehow. "I was having a nightmare!"

Fortunately, the Seeker isn't here for you, so she's not about to run you through to get to Cole. She hesitates, long enough for you to keep stammering out an explanation.

"Cole woke me up from a nightmare and I, I must have screamed, I'm sorry. He didn't do anything; he wasn't hurting me or anything, I just--!"
"Emma are you--Seeker?" Solas' voice is alarmed as he pulls the tent flap aside. He probably can't see the whole scene since the Seeker is still half in the entrance to the tent, but what he can see must be alarming. Cassandra Pentaghast in cotton shorts and a loose sleeveless top not that different from what you wear. Her blade out, pointed at you, who are also in your skivvies, and Cole sprawled awkwardly in the corner, not moving, hat askew.

"She screamed; I heard from my tent!" the Seeker exclaims.

"As did I. But she seems unharmed."

"I had a nightmare," you explain again. Your face would be beet red if you weren't so pale from the terror.

"Do you think Cole might have been involved?" the Seeker asks Solas.

"I doubt it. Emma is prone to night terrors. This happened on the way back from Val Royeaux, as well," Solas says, and you nod vigorously.

"He was just waking me up. I was probably visibly distressed... I'm very sorry," you apologize again. "I should have warned you all, but it didn't even occur to me."

The Seeker's eyes flicker between you and Cole, but the arm holding the sword drops, at least. Her eyes are narrow with suspicion, but you can't tell who it's aimed at.

"Are you certain you wouldn't be more comfortable bunking with someone else?" the Seeker asks, and for a hot second you're genuinely tempted to say yes, and spend the rest of this trip making out with Sera. But of course that's ridiculous. She probably hates you, having sex with her was a mistake that you're having trouble regretting, and moreover Seeker Pentaghast had literally just been about to stab your friend, you're not going to suggest he share a tent with her! You let your eyes hover on her sword pointedly, then glance back at Cole. She sighs, seeming to take the point.

"Very well. I'll inform the Inquisitor and the others not to worry."

"Oh, Maker, did they hear too?" you ask, running a hand over your face.

"Solas did from three tents away," she points out, and you put the other hand on your face as well. What a fucking trip this has been.

"Well, if nothing else," you say, letting your hands drop with a sigh. "Maybe next time the Inquisitor will reconsider bringing me along for the sake of his beauty sleep."

There's no chance of going back to sleep after a scare like that. You're contemplating not sleeping again for the entirety of the trip, frankly, even though you had not been the one at risk, in the end. You poke irritably at the morning's porridge as you cook breakfast with Blackwall, who's mercifully mum on the topic of whether or not he overheard your pre-dawn drama. It seems as though you can never catch a damn break. Or maybe just not as much of one as you'd like.

Readying the horses for the day has become habit after almost two weeks. They're more well-behaved now, and the ones who aren't... well, you've gotten used to the rhythm of their bullshit. You almost feel like you would like to try riding one, but now is not the time to experiment with such things. Your path through Orlais is a brutally fast one; no time for a new rider to learn to trot. You're pretty sure the only reason you haven't fallen off one of the harts is that you're on a road.

You were woken up so Maker-damned early that you finish prepping all the horses before the rest of
the group has even had breakfast or begun breaking camp. You should probably help with that, but you actually still haven’t the faintest clue how they do it so fast. You’d probably just be in the way.

Instead, you climb up on Daine to experiment with how a horse feels. She's significantly broader than you personally would prefer, but she's also the one you trust most not to throw you. The last thing you need is to break your arm when you're halfway across Orlais. You reach down across her ludicrously broad back and untie her harness, letting it drop to the grass. Curiously, you nudge her into a walk. You'd never risk this with another horse, but you've seen Daine refuse to get spooked by snakes before. She has a sturdier constitution and more bravery than you do.

The gait is immediately and noticeably different, which is upsetting since you're just at a walk. The hind legs aren't moving when your body thinks they ought to. Instead, it feels like you're rocking back and forth. It's not uncomfortable or threatening to throw you off balance, but you feel like the fact it's already different at a walk is a bad sign.

Your impromptu horse riding practice is doomed from the start, however, as basically as soon as the Inquisitor notices what you're doing, he shows up to drag you off to "how not to die: sword edition." The update of the morning is that you're still bad at and still have what the Inquisitor has affectionately dubbed "wet noodle arms." You don't think that's necessarily true, because you can absolutely pull yourself up by your arms if necessary... although you have to admit that's getting harder and harder. Your upper body strength isn't keeping up with the growth of your hips and stomach, given to you by the good diet and relatively sedentary lifestyle in Skyhold. You'd almost fallen climbing onto the roof the other night. Frankly, if waving around his stupid sword gives you buffer arms, it'll probably be worth it in the end. Plus, it’s giving you the opportunity to learn about the Inquisitor, which is a good idea even if it is a bit unpleasant at times.

"I know it's boring," the Inquisitor says as you practice changing stances for what feels like the thousandth time. "But if you don't learn the basics first, there'll be nothing to build on." He winces. "Ugh, I've turned into my brother. Although he wasn't nearly as gracious about it."

"Did your older brother teach you the sword arts?" you ask, out of breath but never so out of breath that you can't prod.

"Not really. He started me in it because I wanted to learn before I was old enough for father's actual tutor, Ser Gauteron. There's something to be said for having so many children that you simply keep a combat trainer on permanent staff, I suppose."

"You came from a large family, your holiness?"

"Did you not?" the Inquisitor asks, looking slightly surprised.

"I was an orphan, so I have absolutely no way of knowing, to be honest," you reply evenly. He has the grace to at least look abashed.

"Ah... Well, in any case, yes. I'm the middle child of seven."

"Maker!" you exclaim, stumbling briefly out of form. "Seven, really?"

"My parents were very enthusiastic," he says flatly, and you snort. And they say elves go at it like 'rabbits'. goodness. You’d love to make a joke about that, actually, but it would be in very poor taste and humans hate any implication there might be a pinch of elf in their background... even though any of them could have a full-blooded elven parent and there’d be no way to tell.

"Sounds like it. When did official sword training begin for your family?"
"Well, we didn't practice with any sort of real steel until we were twelve... arguably old enough not
to fall over onto our own swords. But a few of us, myself included, were eager enough to start that
Ser Gauteron started us out with wooden swords at ten."

"And you started with your brother even before then?"

"Oh yes. I was about seven the first time I managed to pester him into showing me a few things. He'd been learning from Ser Gauteron for over two years at that point, and as I recall I'd been
insufferable about it basically since I could walk."

"I recall you once mentioning an older sister. Did she learn swordplay as well?"

"Oh yes. My younger sisters were given a say in the matter, but as the oldest child, my sister had to learn everything, whether she liked it or not."

"Did she?"

"Well, when it came to swordplay, yes--arms up--" You correct your stance quickly. "If she'd had her choice, she probably would have been a squire instead of having a formal noble's education at
the University of Markham."

"Guess it runs in the family," you say wryly, and fortunately the Inquisitor laughs.

"Everyone but my younger brother," he agrees. "Although he would be quick to tell you his mind for study and politics more than makes up for it."

You're inclined to agree with the Inquisitor's brother, as someone who would much rather be scribing a book than swinging a sword right now. You keep that to yourself, however, and work your way through tiring swing after tiring stance.

The Inquisitor's "wet noodle" comparison feels very apt by the time you mount up for the day. Fortunately, staying on Revas is more legs than arms, and you're good enough at it now not to come flying off even if you feel like overcooked pasta.

The ahead party, unfortunately, is Solas, Blackwall, and Cole, which must suck for Blackwall but isn't much better for you. You had been really hoping the Seeker would be in the advance team again, after your rude awakening that morning... or hers, you suppose. Galloping prevents there from being much awkwardness, but every time you slow the horses to a walk to rest them, there's a palpable tension in the air. Not involving Sera, for once, but still involving you, unfortunately.

Sera is the one who finally gets tired of it, unsurprisingly. "Well, you've seen each other in your skivves now, so that makes you friends, yeah?" she suggests unhelpfully, gesturing between you and the Seeker. The Seeker's face flames red, which is almost funny enough to make up for how deeply awkward the whole situation is. "She's fit as anything, right?" she continues cheerfully, thumbing towards the Seeker again. "I keep tellin' her she could crush a melon with her thighs, but she won't try."

You notice the Inquisitor's ears are turning red as well, which tips the scales over from "mortifying" into "deeply amusing" for you.

"Sera," the Seeker says, sounding pained.

"Wot, it's not like she was naked! Was she?" Sera asks Pentaghast pseudo-innocently. "Not sure how she sleeps when nakedness isn't the whole point, not gonna lie--"
"Sera," you wheeze, it now being your turn to be in pain, apparently.

"She's slender as the day is long, roight?" she continues, chipper as ever, as if actively absorbing strength from everyone's suffering. "I been sayin' she should wear tighter clothes 'n' show off a lil, but noooo, s'all baggy 'n' long sleeves 'n' tunics. Ridiculous."

"There's one flaw in your plan, Sera," you manage through the embarrassment.

"Yeah?"

"Now that the Seeker's seen me in my 'skivvies', she knows for an absolute fact that I have literally nothing to show off."

Dorian, who'd clearly been trying to stay out of the conversation, barks with laughter, which attracts attention of the Inquisitor, who'd clearly been trying very hard to ignore all of you.

"Tha's not even close to true! Tell her, Cass!"

"I will absolutely not."

"See?" you point out. "She agrees with me."

"That is not what I said--"

"See?" Sera argues. "She agrees with me."

"I don't agree with anyone!"

"Face it, Cassandra," Dorian quips. "You're not going to be able to get out of this without giving a professional opinion on our friend's breasts."

"What in Andraste's name did I just walk into?" wonders the Inquisitor, looking deeply alarmed.

"Quizzy," Sera begins, but you snap a twig off a low-hanging tree and chuck it at her.

"One more word and I'm going to ride Revas right into that baby pony of yours," you warn her.

"You wouldn't!" she says with an affronted gasp. "Lady Knickers never hurt no one!"

"Accurate by grammatical technicality," you reply. "She headbutted me in the chest this morning."

"It's not her fault," Dorian suggests. "She's used to women with more padding in that area. How was she to know?"

"Dorian, I swear to the Maker."

"Someone please tell me what I have to do to make this conversation stop," the Seeker groans.

"Don't send the three most masculine people on ahead, leaving behind a small army of cattiness?" you suggest.

"Wait, are you ranking Cole and Solas as more masculine than me?" the Inquisitor protests.

"I have to protest as well," Dorian says. "After all, Cassandra is much more masculine than Cole."

"But not Solas?" the Inquisitor protests again, and the Seeker frowns.
"That's the problem you have with that statement?" she demands.

"I'm allowed to have multiple problems!" The Inquisitor holds his hands up in defensive protest.

"Solas is bald. They call it male pattern baldness for a reason," you point out. "And have you seen his jawline?"

"He doesn't even have a beard!"

"Elves don't grow beards! And do you know how tall he is for an elf? You're the same height! I think he might actually be taller if he wore shoes."

"I feel like this is some kind of insubordination," whines the Inquisitor.

"Oh, man up," says Dorian, and the whole group dissolves briefly into giggles, saving of course the Seeker, who still looks as if she'd like to hurl herself--or possibly all of you--off the nearest cliff.

Going over your map in your head, you realize that you really are coming up on a last bastion of civilization... Val Firmin. You don't know if you'll be staying the night, but you're certain there will at least be a prolonged stop for supplies. Soon after this, you'll be off the Imperial Highway altogether, and then heading into the depths of the Western Approach.

The location of the now Inquisition-controlled fort is at the far-flung western corner of Orlais, quite near the Abyssal Reach. To say you've never been that far west is a severe understatement. There's barely any further west to go. You admittedly have almost no idea what to expect in the Approach in terms of surroundings and environment. You know the basics: sand, hot. That's about it. Once you get more than a day's travel in, you're effectively trapped with the Inquisition until you arrive at your destination... and possibly even then, depending on how well--and swiftly--you adapt.

You briefly consider vanishing into Val Firmin, but write it off as quickly as it springs to mind. The Seeker might already suspect something after this morning. If you run now, she might start drawing conclusions. It wouldn't even matter if they were correct ones or not, any such conclusions drawn by a Seeker would spell no end of trouble. No, she seems at the moment even more embarrassed by the whole situation than you are, thanks in part to Sera's needling. Best to lie low until any suspicion she has passes, at the very least.

You're still in forests coming up to Val Firmin from the east. The trees no doubt break up the hot wind from the west, giving the general feeling of early autumn to your surroundings. You can appreciate the warmth now that Skinner's jacket is in unfortunate shreds, but you know that as you continue west, it will be as though summer never ends. You can't say you're looking forward to it any more than you were looking forward to a winter in the mountains.

You hit Val Firmin an hour or so after you would have normally taken a break for lunch--the Inquisitor elected to push on, understandably. True to your predictions, you'll be staying here for a bit to rest the mounts and resupply. You hadn't necessarily predicted spending almost a full day in Val Firmin, but you can't complain.

"This is the last you'll see of anything even resembling civilization for Maker only knows how long," Dorian informs you with a forlorn sigh. "Soak it in, what little there is to soak."

He's being a little harsh, but it's true that Val Firmin is more of an oversized market compared to some of the larger towns you've been through. It is, however, still a proper city in its own right, with walls and a Duke and everything. The walls, in your personal opinion, are what make something a city. Particularly this far west! You'd lived about as far east as you could get without literally being in
Ferelden, and even there, no matter how many people were in a village, it was just a village until it went and got itself walls.

Security and a cage. Such things go hand in hand, as you've well learned. You can't bring yourself to regret your time outside the cage of Val Royeaux, however, even if that lack of security ended so catastrophically for you.

 Compared to Val Royeaux, of course, Val Firmin is a bit more of a lump. You can see where Dorian is coming from. But it's still large enough to have districts! He's just spoiled, honestly.

You're reminded somewhat starkly of your entrance into Montsimmard, because before you're even inside the walls, Cole gets... twitchy. He's muttering to himself, and the second he starts, you hang back and separate him from the head of the pack... in particular, the Seeker. The last thing you need is for her to see him acting squirrelly after this morning’s surprise.

"Something is wrong on the outskirts, bleeding red like a sunset, dripping towards town like blood..." he rapid fire mutters under his breath, and you glance nervously up at the others to see if they've noticed. The Seeker and the Inquisitor are busy talking, probably about the supplies they need to make it the rest of the way to the fortress. Sera's glancing back, however, and Solas, who was already towards the back of the progression, is slowing his mount as well.

"Cole?" you whisper, bending low on your mount to try and get more on his level. "Not a good time, buddy; can you make it into the town?"

"She was here," he says, suddenly looking up desperately into your eyes. "She was here!"

You glance up nervously to see Sera still watching, her horse slowing as well. "Who was here, Cole? Is something wrong?"

"Solas, she was here!" he repeats again.

"So it seems," Solas replies evenly, and you frustratedly wonder again how he always seems to know what to say to Cole. "Shall we go and look for her?"

"Who's her?" you demand.

"A friend of his, I believe," Solas replies, and you frown.

"Another spirit?"

"No, not a spirit, but a soul. She already died once, what happens if she dies again?" he asks, clearly distressed.

"Solas, Emma, are you two coming?" the voice fortunately belongs to Dorian, but it's only a matter of seconds until the Inquisitor or the Seeker notices. You make a snap decision.

"Go with him," you say to Solas, biting back your curiosity. "I'll make excuses to the Seeker. But afterwards..." you point firmly at his chest. "You'll tell me what he's talking about."

You kick Revas forward without giving him a chance to reply, just in time for the Seeker to glance backwards over her shoulder. She stays by the gate into the town as the rest enter past her, looking for all the world like a teacher doing a head count of her students on a field trip.

"Where's Solas going?" she asks with a frown, watching as he wheels Ashi'lana off the road and into the grass. You can't see Cole from here, but that's probably just as well.
"He said there are some herbs that grow nearby. He wants to pick some before we head into the Approach," you lie.

"Not going with him for some quality alone time?" Dorian teases, because apparently not even shacking up with Sera practically in front of him will spare you.

"I would, but I have some shopping to do in town," you say, not nearly as close to a lie. "I'm taking Cole with me for some 'quality alone time' instead," you say dryly. "In case you want to change the target of your humor."

"To Cole? Maker forbid," he says with a laugh.

"Where is Cole?" the Seeker asks, frowning.

You shrug. "He was here a second ago. Probably poofed for a bit so he wouldn't alarm the guards; you know how he is."

The Seeker lets out a pained sigh. "Keep an eye on him, if you're going to be with him today. Someone ought to."

You give her a little sarcastic faux-salute. "Consider me Templar for the day, serah."

Your mounts get taken off to rest and recuperate for the journey ahead, and with them go most of your supplies. You keep your backpack, with the excuse that it contains your, you know, money, and you're ready to set off into the market and pick up some supplies for the desert. Like a hat. A big, floppy hat. And... uh... Maker, what do you even need to cross a desert, anyway?

You're distracted by that thought to the point that you don't notice Dorian and Sera approaching you until they're basically right on top of you.

"Mind if we tag along?" Dorian asks. "I've got some shopping to do, and I wouldn't want to get taken advantage of by these strange southerners."

You roll your eyes in unison with Sera.

"Where's yer lil buddy?" Sera asks, glancing around for Cole.

"Off with Solas," you say with a shrug.

Sera frowns at the same time Dorian laughs. "But you told Cass..."

"'Cass' tried to run him through with a sword this morning because he was trying to help me wake up from a nightmare," you say, not trying to keep the contempt from dripping from your voice. It's nice to have such a clean-cut excuse to dislike the Seeker, so you don't have to pretend not to. "So yes, I didn't tell her the spirit and the apostate were spending the day together."

"Look at you, lying to a Seeker," Dorian says, clearly deeply amused. "Pretty soon you'll be running off to join the Mage Rebellion."

You snort. "Those idiots? No, I think I'll stay right where I am, thanks."

You're surprised that Sera wants to tag along, although maybe you shouldn't be, given her bizarre behavior yesterday. She's acting much more normal today, although it's not any less confusing to you. You wish you could take a dive into her head and find out what in the Void she's thinking, but you have no way of doing it... well, short of asking her, you suppose, but you think you've proven
by now that you're a person allergic to proper communication.

Still, the two of them are acting normally, and not even bickering over-much, so you fall into a comfortable three-way conversation as you lead them into the market district--which is admittedly a huge portion of Val Firmin as a whole. You can't imagine that many people actually go into the Approach, but the fact of the matter is that they're essentially the largest city the furthest west. The Imperial Highway curves north and then east around Lake Celestine from here. For merchants taking the Highway, it's an important stop... but it's too out of the way to be important for much else.

You've never been into the Approach, obviously, but mercifully Sera and Dorian have. Therefore, as much as you're playing guide to your Tevinter friend--and it's taking all you have to not make any terrible jokes about the Altus being accompanied by two elven women--he's playing guide by letting you know what you're going to actually need.

Some of it is obvious--clothes made out of thin, lightweight cotton to replace the thick layers made for mountain use that you currently own. A sun hat with a comically large, floppy brim... Sera gets a smaller one, and Dorian refuses one altogether. Both tease you for your selection, which Sera suggests make you look like an old woman. That you were inspired partially by the large hats worn by older women in Rivain, you keep to yourself.

Other things, however, you would never have thought of. Dorian picks out a pair of lightweight gloves that are reinforced on the inside of the palm and fingers. It makes sense, your hands would die of heat and soak in sweat in your current gloves, but you still need protection. Sera helps you pick out an assortment of salted snacks, which is bewildering to you--surely salt will only make you more thirsty in a desert. Dorian explains something confusing about sweat that you don't fully understand, but you accept they know what they're talking about and load up a layer of your backpack with dried meat, fruit, and nuts.

Honestly, everything is going well and you're having a nice time. You're idly browsing a display that has a small handful of dwarven items--a rarity this far out, to be sure--and wishing there was a nearby Circle so you could actually see what usefulness magic had to offer the desert-dweller. Although you suppose since you're bringing two mages with you, you'll get to see something interesting sooner or later.

That, of course, is when you hear a commotion nearby, because you're not allowed to have nice things and peaceful days.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, remember that with social media in flux, it might be a good idea to follow me on places other than Tumblr, just in case!

Tumblr (elvensemi)
Twitter (elvensemi)
Mastodon (elvensemi)
Keeping Secrets Discord Channel (we've got a healthy community of Dragon Age nerds waiting to be best friends with you)
You're reminded sharply of the little thief you helped in Val Royeaux, mostly because you can feel your entire mind screaming that this is none of your damned business. Nonetheless, your eyes and ears are drawn to the sound of raised voices. When you realize it's coming from in front of the town's Chantry, you're even more curious. Headless of the fact you're in company at the moment, you move a bit close to see what's happening.

"Miss, these supplies are for refugees and the suffering," a Sister is saying, looking with strain at another woman, who's dressed nicely enough on such a random Tuesday that the lack of red ribbon around her neck isn't fooling you, nor, probably, the Sister. "You're obviously... dressed up," the Sister continues. "So I doubt you're the type these supplies were intended for."

You frown, eyebrows furrowing with your irritation. You can see the seal on the supply bundle from here; that's Inquisition aid she's being stingy with. It's not like she even went to the trouble of getting it together, to be so fussy about not giving it to a prostitute.

"These are for my sister and her family!" the woman protests, quite heated. She doesn't give off the air of someone not used to this sort of treatment... more like the air of someone too used to this sort of treatment. "They are refugees! And working the ridiculous hours that are the only things available to refugees in this town, so don't even ask why they're not here!"

"I'm sorry," the Sister says, clearly not sorry in the least. "But these supplies are for the Maker's children in need--"

You barely register the fury in Sera's eyes before she starts to move. The story of what she did to the noble who angered her, and all the trouble it caused, flashes through you mind. Quick as a whip, you reach out and grip Sera's arm before she can take so much as two steps. She turns back to glare at you over her shoulder, but you shake your head firmly.

"If you think for a second--" she begins to hiss, but you cut her off.

"Let's try doing this without punching first, hmm?"

You huff yourself up to your full height, back straight, and assume the confident gait of a woman
with places to be. Solas, were he here, would definitely recognize it.

"Pardon me," you say, strolling authoritatively over to the arguing duo. "But I believe I can be of assistance here. What seems to be the problem?"

You momentarily cherish the confusion on both their faces--the Sister's in particular. Her eyes linger on your ears, clearly bewildered as to why an elf is butting into the situation. "And... you are?" she asks, more confused than rude.

"Alix Gagnon, Inquisition representative," you say with an easy smile. "I just happened to be passing by and overheard your argument."

"Inquisition... What's an agent of the Inquisition doing all the way out here?" she asks, teetering between dumbfounded and disbelieving. "We didn't receive any word--"

"We're passing through, as she said." You're quite surprised to hear Dorian chime in, although it certainly doesn't show on your face. He does the noble bearing infinitely better than you for obvious reasons, and his lack of pointed ears will add some credence to your claim. "Don't hold her up for long--I have places to be," he adds, and you hope he knows that if he wasn't significantly helping you out by playing the shitty noble, you'd be cuffing him behind his stupid flat ears.

"Well..." the Sister says, floundering to find her footing. "As you know, the Inquisition sent us supplies to help with the many refugees of the war. But of course, one can no sooner begin to hand out free supplies before everyone is knocking on your door. We're simply trying to preserve our supply for those who need it."

"As I recall," you lie. "The supplies were given to be handed out to those in need." You gesture to the woman. "She says she has a family in need."

"With all due respect, serah," the Sister says, and you can't help wondering to yourself exactly what she thinks the respect you're due is. "She seems... well-dressed enough that I believe anyone would doubt her story. Everyone who comes by has--"

"I'll stop you right there. We are busy, after all, and I'm quite certain I've heard everything you're about to say many, many times before." The Sister's face has been growing increasingly red with each word, but before she has a chance to reply, someone else comes out of the Chantry. You recognize her garb immediately, and genuflect politely even while making a quick up-and-down sweep of appraisal.

"Goodness, what is all this fuss?" she asks mildly, and you briefly savor the look of panic on the Sister's face.

"Revered Mother! These are, ah, three?" Her eyes linger questioningly on Sera, who's done a lot of glaring but no talking as of yet. "Agents of the Inquisition, who had some... instructions on how their supplies should be distributed."
"I had no idea that the Inquisition was coming to Val Firmin!" Her eyes skip right over you and onto Dorian. "Surely the Inquisition wouldn't send you all the way out here to deliver such a short message."

"We're here for tasks unrelated, just passing through," Dorian says, waving a hand carelessly. The Revered Mother's eyebrows rise almost imperceptibly when he speaks. At his accent, you suspect.

"Ah, is that so... Then what brings you to our little Chantry's doors?"

"It was hard not to be drawn," you insert dryly. "Should not the ears of the pious be sharp to the voices of those in need?" You gesture to the woman, who's still there, arms crossed and one hip jutted out, still frowning. "She needs supplies. The Chantry has them, and yet instead of a simple transaction, I count six heads and twelve hands apparently required to hand over a box."

"Indeed," the Revered Mother agrees. "It does seem a bit excessive. Is there an issue, Sister?"

It's pretty damned funny to watch the Sister falter and panic, stammering out a few uncertain syllables before quickly agreeing there's no issue and handing over a box of supplies to the woman in question.

"Are the three of you going to be here for long?" the Revered Mother asks curiously as the Sister makes herself extremely scarce. Good thing Sisters aren't ones for revenge, because you and Dorian sure did embarrass her today. But even in Orlais, the land of intrigue and political violence, lower members of the Chantry tend to be the only ones you can trust not to scheme or hire a bard.

"Not at all, your Reverence," Dorian replies. You're greatly comforted at his usage of the correct title. You hadn't been confident a Vint would have any knowledge of the workings of the southern Chantry. "We're simply here for supplies."

"Fortunate that you happened by when you did," the Revered Mother says with the smile of the professionally holy. People would call it kind. Those people don't tend to overlap with your kind of people: ones who can mimic it perfectly and are also tend to be the as far from 'kind' and 'holy' as possible.

"The Maker acts through us, his mortal servants," you quote, and the Revered Mother's eyes fall on you again, this time curious.

"It's a rare pleasure to see an elf among the faithful," she says, and you give a short bow.

"Those who are born further from the Maker's light must work that much harder to obtain it," you reply with a pious smile. You ignore Sera shifting to kick at your heel without being noticed.

"Your knowledge of the Chant does you both great credit," says the Revered Mother, who's apparently more than happy to attribute your education to Dorian, the nearest human noble. "If you find yourself in Val Firmin again, please, do stop by the Chantry."

"Of course, your Reverence," Dorian replies with a polite smile.

As soon as you're out of earshot of the Chantry, Sera bursts into laughter. "I can't believe ya! Who taught ya how to talk all pious 'n' shit?"

"I do a lot of work with the Chantry," you say with a laugh. "Now you've seen why they're willing to hire an elven linguist to handle their holy texts."

"Never knew y'needed that level of bullshite to write books fer a livin'," Sera says, wiping away a
tear of mirth from the corner of her eye. "D'ja see the look on that Sister's face? Fuckin' priceless, that was."

"I'm inclined to agree," says someone leaning against a wall nearby. You turn to look, and are mildly surprised to see the prostitute whose supplies you had wrested from the Chantry's hands. "Thanks for your help back there. Are you actually with the Inquisition?"

You can't help but laugh. That question hadn't even occurred to you. You hadn't even shown the Sister identification, come to think of it. "It would be pretty funny if we weren't, wouldn't it?"

"Hilarious," she agrees. "It doesn't really matter, I suppose. I bet I won't have trouble picking supplies from there again."

"I don't think anyone will," says Dorian, amused. "I think I'm seeing why you had so much luck in Val Royeaux, Emma."

You wave him off as if bashful. "I've just lived in Orlais for a while."

"Are you really leaving immediately?" the woman asks curiously.

"Just here for the night," Dorian confirms, and she grins.

"One night is still an awful lot of time."

You'll maintain til your dying day that Sera and Dorian dragged you. It's true; their level of enthusiasm was significantly higher than yours. But perhaps that just speaks more for their level of enthusiasm than an intense lack of it on your part.

It's not that you have any issue going out for dinner and a show at a whorehouse. It's not exactly your natural habitat, but you're Orlesian. You know how to deal with prostitutes. You even know how to tell which ones are actually bards, because you've certainly been there. Not that you play a game of pointing them out, or anything, but it's worth knowing, especially when Anisha--the woman you'd helped out--announces you boldly on stage as heroic agents of the Inquisition.

And this right before she plays out your "daring rescue" on stage. There's significantly more dramatic motion and you're fairly certain at no point did any of you dance even the slightest, but you can forgive it. It is a performance, after all. You're not sure you can as easily forgive her dragging you up on stage with her, although by that point you've had a few drinks.

"And here she is! The champion of the poor and downtrodden!" she says dramatically. You shove half-heartedly at her.

"Champion of pissing off Chantry Sisters, maybe," you say with a laugh. "I'm good at that, at least."

"That's at least eighty percent of championing us!" suggests a voice from the audience, who you can only assume is another brothel worker.

"I'm sorry, whore," Anisha says, pulling herself up and looking down her nose in a characterization of the Sister you'd been dealing with. "This food isn't for the likes of you."

She slides behind you and shoves you forward, while yelling in a frankly hilarious approximation of your voice, "Stop right there, Sister! I am the Inquisition and I believe those are my foodstuffs."

"That is really not even close to what I said," you say, amused, as she continues on, ignoring you.
"What's all this fuss?" she announces from a third position on the stage. She really is quick on her feet. Her voice now is cracking in an amusing imitation of a very, very old woman. "I'm the Revered Mother! I'm old and I have a headache, get off my lawn!"

"That's not-- Well, actually, yes, okay, I suppose that is more or less what she said," you say, to assorted laughter.

"If she's such a hero, don't you owe her a kiss?" shouts some absolute bastard from the audience, who you're about to drop kick if you can identify them.

"You know, I believe you're right, serah!" Anisha says, to your chagrin. Great. Now you have to decide between kissing some woman on stage directly in front of Sera and hoping she doesn't throw anything this time, or attempting to diffuse the situation in such a way that still keeps the free drinks coming your way.

You consider, briefly, the extent of your bad decision making with Sera. She doesn't seem mad at you anymore, and you kind of want to keep that peace. On the other hand, you kind of want her to kick you in the face, call you a bitch, and hate you forever so you can stop ruining her life slowly.

You sigh, and then you dip that woman into as deep a kiss as your 'noodle arms' can manage. It seems a much more polite way to make it theatrical than adding tongue. The cheers inform you that you chose correctly. Frankly, you're just glad to get off the stage afterwards, face and ears burning. The worst part is, Sera is laughing, which means it didn't even work. Clearly she doesn't mind you kissing the occasional prostitute, which, while good to know, is not necessarily the outcome you were hoping for.

Although, plus side: there are a lot of people you can kiss here, in that case, and also just an obscene amount of alcohol. Wait, did you say plus side? No, you're pretty sure this is about to be a disaster.

After all that, you suppose it's no surprise that you wind up a bit... on the popular side, but you're not sure how to deal with it. About the third time you're being 'accidentally' leaned over, and the fifth time someone has 'casually' draped themselves over you in some fashion, you decide to start kiting some of them onto your companions. After all, you hardly acted alone, and you know for a fact your two friends have less sexual reservations than you.

Although if you were going to, this would be the place for it. No strings attached by definition, and you'll likely never see any of them again under any circumstances. When will you be to Val Firmin again? Probably never, and certainly never as Alix Gagnon, agent of the Inquisition. So you might allow yourself a few indulgences as the night drags on and the drink keeps coming. At least three indulgences, by your count, the most memorable of which is going to go to a very handsome, dark skinned elf who caught you as you were stumbling back from the washroom. He impressed you with his ability to pick you up and pin you against the wall. You impressed him with the only thing about you that's ever impressed anyone: your tongue.

All in all, a very good night.

You're not even sure Sera notices your increasing escapades, and if she does, she still doesn't seem to care. She's much too busy with her own in the form of two women, both over six feet in height, that you managed to attract to her side. You know her tastes well enough by now. You briefly lose track of Dorian entirely, and you definitely don't want to know what he got up to, where, and with whom, because he's somehow lost his shirt in the process. Literally. It's nowhere to be found. You can't even give him too much of a hard time about it, because you're wearing the shirt of your hallway paramour loosely over your undershirt and have absolutely no idea where your tunic wound up.
The three of you stagger out of the brothel—and you're only sort of sure it's the same brothel you started in—in pretty bad condition. You only have one of your original shirts between all of you, and you gained a rather large, feathered hat from... ssssssomeone. You're not sure, but you're definitely keeping it.

Getting back to the inn is an adventure, particularly because Sera is the most sloshed out of all of you, and she's the only one who has been in Val Firmin before today. Also you keep forgetting that you're actually heading to an inn and not just... wandering around the well-lit streets for the sake of doing it. There's a lot of giggling and a lot of stumbling and no one has a clear concept of what "straight" means, in several ways. You walk into three different inns before you find the correct one; they are varying levels of put out and extremely varying levels of helpful in directing you the right direction.

Things haven't particularly improved by the time you finally make it back to the inn. You're sort of supporting Sera, who is absolutely plastered, but you also had to be supported by Dorian—who's probably the most conscious out of all of you. That's not saying much. The end result is that the three of you are just sort of looped haphazardly together, arms around shoulders and just trying to keep vaguely upright. Your hat has migrated onto Sera's head.

"Maker's breath, what happened to the three of you?" someone asks. You squint in their direction.

"We're heroes," you explain patiently to the somewhat blurry lump that you think is probably the Seeker.

"...I feel like I'm perhaps happier not knowing the details," she says, and Sera giggles. "I can at least help you find your rooms. They're a bit small, so it's two to a room. Sera, our room is--"

"I'm bunkin' with Emma!" she declares loudly. You go to smack her, realize both of your arms are kind of tied up in your friends, and just bonk her head with yours instead.

"Uh... Well, that's fine, I can share a room with Cole, if he and Solas even come back tonight."

"Are they still gone?" you mutter, mostly to yourself. "Those must be some fucking plants."

"My thoughts exactly," she says dryly, leveling you with a steady, sour look. You, in all your drunk wisdom, stick your tongue out at her.

"Just use a similar excuse to your benefit when you want to run off and 'pick flowers' with the Inquisitor," Dorian suggests, which immediately brings her glare from you to him. "Just as well," he says, as if he doesn't even notice. Which he might not, frankly. "Tonight's a good night to have a room to myself."

"Got tired of sharing them earlier tonight?" you ask with a laugh. "Oh brave Seeker, won't you escort us poor sinners to our room safely?" You've been slipping in out of your pious persona—piousona, you think with a giggle—all night to everyone's amusement, and see no need to stop now.

"Only so that you don't pass out in the hall," the Seeker says. "Dorian, stop eyeing the bar. I'm cutting you off."

"You're no fun."

"No, I'm not."

Somehow, Pentaghast does in fact manage to herd all three of you into your rooms. You collapse onto the bed while Sera locks the door with some difficulty. The whole building spins around you
the second you're horizontal, but it's not a bad sensation. It's like being a child, when you would spin again and again and again and then collapse into the grass and watch the trees dance above you.

You open your eyes, but there's no trees. No roof, either. Just Sera, who must have crawled on top of you at some point.

"Yer supposed to be mad at me," you inform her plainly.

"You want me t'be?" she asks, and you're incapable of reading her expression.

"Yeah. Well, no. Well, kinda. You should be."

"Yeah," she agrees. "Cause yer shit at talkin' to me."

You nod in agreement.

"Yer pretty good at talkin' to Solas, though," she adds, and you frown, tilting your head against the pillow. "I heard ya in the stables," she admits, and you can feel your face heating up in mortification as you dizzily play it back, trying to remember everything you said. Well. Cried. Yelled loudly in between sobs. "I wasn't followin' you or anythin'," she preemptively defends, scowling. "I went in there t'sulk first."

"Fuck," is all you manage to say.

"I still don' really know what yer so scared of." She hesitates, then pushes onwards. "Em, you'd tell me if you'd been like... I mean... Y'know we don't have ta... It's not just... I mean, I like foolin' aroun' with ya, but it's not like... it's not the reason I'm here. We don't gotta do that, if somethin' happened t'you. You don't gotta."

You blink, slowly.

Oh, she thinks...

...Well, you suppose she's not really wrong, but...

You push her aside a bit so you can sit up, but don't move past that. You need to think about how to handle this, but your thoughts are syrupy and confused, thoughts sliding off of conclusions without sticking.

"... S'not that. Not exactly," you say finally, tilting your head back to stare at the roof.

"Shitty ex?" Sera asks, hazarding a guess, and you burst out laughing.

"Yeah," you say finally, and it comes out almost as a wheeze. "Yeah, I guess you could say that."

"Y'wanna... talk about it?"

"I super don't."

"...Was it a 'she'?"

You glance over at her, wonder at her blonde hair and strong frame, and wonder at your life choices.

"S'not really important."

"Seems like it might be?" she says uncertainly.
"She wasn't the only one, or anythin'," you say, staring right into Sera's eyes as you say it. You want to not be talking about this anymore. "I know what yer thinkin', but it's not that." You lean closer to her, shifting on the bed to face her. "There's jus' stuff about me you don't know."


You lean closer, closer still. Your knees lock in around hers, your face dangerously close to hers. "I'm a book with a lock," you say, watching for the shine in her eyes, the hitch of her breath. You bring your lips around to her ears. "I'm staying that way."

"I don't think tha's health--ah!" The way her voice cracks when you sink teeth softly into the lobe of her ear is satisfying. "Y'can talk to me," she persists.

"Is talking really what y'want me to do with my mouth?" you ask, directly into her ear.

"...See, I know what the right answer here is, but--"

You crash your lips against hers just to shut you both up. It lingers on, harder then softer; you take her up and down like waves, wondering if the room spins for her too. When you pull back, her eyes are full of stars and her lips are out of words.

"Let's make a mistake tonight," you say with a dangerous smile, voice low. "And regret it in the morning."

"I don't wanna regret you," she says, looking dazed.

You smile broader, only the smallest amount of sadness left behind the acceptance.

"Everyone does."

Chapter End Notes

Val Firmin was the last town before the Approach. God. I am so close to freedom. I am so close to... having to do more outlining,

fuck
Idyll Fantasies

Chapter Notes

Hey guys what's up it took me an hour to figure out the word I was looking for in this chapter was "idylls" (it's not, actually, but the word I was looking for does not exist in english so we make do) and not another word I'd been using all my life but actually just refers to one specific collection of historical stories! o/ Let's all say thank you to my editor who had no idea what the hell I was talking about and prompted an hour-long nose dive into the internet.

Elven Guide
Lathbora viran = Roughly translated as "the path to a place of lost love," a longing for a thing one can never really know.
Asha'elgara = woman of the sun
asha'vunin = woman of the day
Ir banal'ras = I am shadow

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You're gone when Sera wakes up, which is, you feel, deeply appropriate. You're churning with equal parts regret and nausea. Sera isn't responsible for the nausea. You're not sure how much she's responsible for the regret; you're actually pretty content to blame yourself for that, too.

The previous night is still a blur to you. You remember it, sort of, but it's all fusing together into a haze of sweat and alcohol and bad decisions. Your primary comfort is that even Dorian looks pretty damned under the weather too, and Sera isn't even out of bed yet. Actually, you think Dorian might be worse off than you, which is incredible given how much of a practiced alcoholic he is. You're not sure what it says about you.

Maybe it's just because you got plenty of fluids before you passed out. You make a mental note to thank Sera for that, which you of course definitely won't be doing, because you're already thinking your best course of action is to pretend literally nothing happened and that nothing is wrong.

For once, you're not so distracted by your guilt or nausea--possibly because after a certain point even you cap out, or possibly because you're still slightly drunk--to not be able to eat. You positively destroy breakfast, well aware that this is likely to be your last hot meal for a long time that's cooked in a kitchen and not over a fire.

"You have quite the appetite this morning, Emma," Solas says, his voice approving, as you inhale a bowl of porridge so fast that you barely taste it. You're not sure when he got in. You definitely remember the Seeker being pissy that he was still gone when you rolled in, and it's barely past sunrise now.

"She worked one up," says Blackwall, looking bemused. "Did you know that our room was right next to yours?"

You meet him with a flat, level look. "Sorry, I know I snore."

"Snore enough that the bed hits the wall?"
"That would be from the thrashing. Terrible night terrors, you know," you deadpan. "Why do you think I bunk alone or with Cole?"

Blackwall opens his mouth, as if to say more, but then throws his hands up in an I-surrender gesture. "I've thought better of this line of dialogue."

"I rather thought you might, given time." You return your focus to your food, which is frankly a much better place for it. You could eat a cow. Literally, if there was one in front of you right now.

This time, you take full advantage of having stable staff to take care of the mounts. You don't even go outside, but instead spend the morning eating, groaning about how terrible you feel--mostly to yourself--and then eating more. Dorian does more groaning and less eating, and Sera eventually half-stumbles down the stairs to wince and nurse a mug of water and small amounts of porridge. Somehow, it seems, you escaped the worst of the damage, although you still feel like someone threw you down the stairs in a bag filled with assorted pots and pans.

You bid a sorrowful farewell to Val Firmin. Maybe you'll see it on the way back out of the Approach. Perhaps it's that you're still a bit drunk and the regrets haven't set in yet, but you honestly wouldn't mind another visit to the brothel. Especially if you were going to be regaled as a hero again. It's not something you're used to, but it's something you maybe could get used to. You finally see what Banal'ras enjoys so damned much about the job.

That feeling of vague optimism lasts abooooout thirty minutes, which is how long it takes to split up the group and start your first bout of galloping.

It's like every ache you've developed over the entire trip and, in fact, over your entire life, is coming back in full force. Your back hurts. Your legs hurt. Your ass hurts. Your head hurts. Your abdomen even hurts. You're dying, this is the worst. Is it because you didn't stretch this morning? Is it because you stretched too much last night? You don't know, but you're completely miserable. You're fairly certain that the only reason you don't vomit is sheer force of will. You refuse to waste that food, and also refuse to puke off the side of a hart in front of a Seeker and a Warden, not to mention Sera and Solas.

You're fairly sure your soul has left your body and re-entered the Fade from whence it came by the time lunch arrives. You collapse off of Revas by a tree, and then just... stay there, slumped onto the ground, waving off repeated attempts to give you food. You do eventually lean up against the tree, but you otherwise refuse to move. You're not even looking over the horses like you normally do when you want to dodge eating and socializing. You've given up any and all pretense; you just want to fall asleep and maybe not wake up.

You don't even notice Solas approaching; you're completely zoned out and just focusing on not falling over or throwing up. Your first indication that something might be about to happen is when his shadow falls over you.

"Feeling a bit under the weather?" he asks, and you crack one eye open to glare blearily up at him.

"How were Cole's plants?" you reply blithely.

"Very interesting, but his to tell about." He squats down next to you. "Why did you tell the Seeker that?"

"Because the apostate was running off with a spirit who kept talking cryptic nonsense, and because she tried to murder Cole like a day ago and everyone seems to already have forgotten about it." You don't even try to keep the mild irritation out of your voice. You're not even irritated at him. You're
"Irritated at life.

"Cassandra is prone to giving me the benefit of the doubt, but I suppose the same still can't be said of her and Cole." You decide to take that as an agreement. "I feared you were going to fall off Revas. Would you like me to take a look at your health?"

"Guh, no, I'm not sick, honestly I'm just a hungover asshole," you say, closing your eyes again and rubbing your face. "We drank way too much last night, and I think Dorian and Sera are both worse off."

"Both of them--Dorian in particular--are perhaps a bit more accustomed to doing this the day after a night of heavy drinking, however," Solas points out.

You wave your hand vaguely in his direction. "Honestly, I'll be fine. If you feel like helping, grab me some water or some--" He's already pulling out a canteen. Damnit, that's kind of cute. You take it and drink an almost excessive amount before pouring even more of it on your head, gasping at the cold. You shake your head with a splutter, briefly letting your hair down to shake it out.

"Ugh, that was the worst."

"Then why did you do it," Solas asks. He sounds distressed, so you glance over and... yep, he looks way too alarmed. You snort out a laugh.

"Because it'll make me feel less like a century-old corpse possessed by a sloth spirit." You run your fingers through your hair. It's at first meant to be a quick straightening, but you hit a knot and frown. All this travel isn't good for your hair or for your limited vanity. You should have cut it ages ago, but you just can't bring yourself to do it. Still frowning, you pull your comb out of your backpack, careful not to open any compartments that might reveal to Solas that you're carrying every important item you own on your person at all times.

"Would you like me to?" he offers. You blink, and then laugh.

"I'm not convinced you'd even know how," you say, and when he looks confused, you tap the bone comb against his bald dome. "How can I trust you to my hair when you've already killed your own?"

Solas lets out a huff of breath, half amused, half put-out. "I do not need to possess a thing to know how to care for it."

"Uh-huh," you reply, already beginning to comb your own hair. It was bad enough when the girls got a hold of it during your trip to Val Royeaux. If Solas touched it, you'd probably instinctively deck him. "Did you just come over to make sure I wasn't dying? Because I'm fairly sure Sera could use the same treatment."

"Please imagine Sera's reaction if I were to offer her magical healing for a hangover."

"...Alright, point," you admit with a pout.

"Besides all that, I had to ensure you were healthy enough for this evening." You send him a questioning look and he gently reminds you, "It is Sunday."

You brighten like the first sunrise after a Blight. "It is?!!" You can't keep track of days at all when you're on the road. It all just blurs together. It simultaneously feels like you haven't been traveling a week, and like you've been traveling for six months. Odd to think that you're getting close, but this serves as a pleasant reminder that time is passing and you are making progress.
"It is," he says with a nod.

"So I'm getting another lesson tonight?" you ask excitedly.

"So long as you can remain conscious and then go to sleep afterwards, yes," he says with a single dry laugh. "Perhaps now you'll consider eating something?" He pulls out some of the odd bread you know is from his personal stock and offers it to you.

"Is this blackmail?" you ask wryly, taking it.

"Bribery," he corrects, and you laugh.

You spend the afternoon in relative peace. You're feeling slightly better after some food and water and rest during lunch, and while Vhas'durghen aka Fatty is a bit of a stretch for your sore muscles, he's at least not as bouncy as Revas is. You hurt more, but you feel less like puking.

Sera doesn't seem to be feeling much better, to your eye, which has you a little concerned. She's younger than you, and she might have considerably less experience with binge drinking. She seems in a foul mood, as opposed to her general cheerfulness yesterday, and you're not sure she's cognizant of what her horse is doing. It's not like Spirit Dancer to be aggressive at all, let alone towards Cinder, but she nonetheless keeps drifting into Cinder’s space, even nipping at her. Solas is mercifully handling it well, but it's an unnecessary distraction during a fast paced day of traveling. You resolve to double check her at dinner, to make sure she's not in pain somewhere. You were lazy during lunch; you'd hate to think that one of the horses has had a burr somewhere painful the whole time because of it.

By the time you stop for the evening, your good mood hasn't quite worn off, but you are a bit concerned, and immediately set to checking and double-checking all of the mounts while the others set up camp, prepare dinner, and begin to eat. Despite your fears, however, they all seem fine. Thank the Maker for that, too, since you imagine off-road riding is harder on the mounts... and on the riders, come to think of it. You frown at the thought.

It's going to be hot, too, and sandy before long. Now you're not sure if your concern is for the mounts or yourself. Maybe both. No, actually, the more you think about it, you're more worried about yourself. They're professionals. They've done this shit before. You're an indoor elf, not suited for cross-country journeys, let alone deserts.

You remind yourself for the thousandth time of all the logical reasons you have for putting up with this, sigh, and then go to find Solas.

You find a nice place on the outskirts of camp, close enough for no one to complain at you, far enough out for a bit of peace and quiet. It could also double as watch, since you're facing away from camp. Grabbing your supplies was easy, since they're all in the bag you always keep with you. You're excited to start your lessons. They're probably the only good part of this entire disastrous situation. Yeah, you're making a mess, yeah, you're probably going to wind up on the run, yeah, you're all the way across Orlais with a pack of idiots... Going into a desert reported to contain darkspawn and dragons, on top of all the other normal deadly things... But you've genuinely done more dangerous things to pry Elvhen knowledge out of places that didn't want to give it up. And you are very curious about those Tevinter ruins.

You're really getting into the meat of the language now, too. Solas has you working on that book of poetry again, translating passages you've never seen in any of your many books of ancient elven lore.
Unfortunately none of them are historic idylls or anything like that... it's a lot of poetry about magic and nature and love. Still, you can glean a great deal from what an elf eight thousand years ago thought worthy of writing poetry about.

"Thousand year tree," you muse to yourself as you scribble haphazard, half translated sentences, all messy and out of sensible order as you wrestle through the tides of metaphor. "Reminds me of the modern vhenadahl. You know of them, right?"

"Yes. The trees the city elves keep in the middle of their alienages," Solas says.

"The 'why' of that has been mostly lost," you say with a sigh. "There was one in Denerim, a great huge tree right in the middle of the square. They held everything there, weddings, funerals, you name it. We used to climb in it; I don't think we were supposed to but..." But you were a bit of a ringleader and you were a lot of a nightmare, so all of you used to get up to all kinds of shit. "I've been able to find out a little... it's a type of tree, too, the vhenadahl. When the one in Edgewall was burned down, some Dalish in the area were able to procure a sapling. Clearly, not just any tree will do, but in most alienages, the tree has been there for longer than living memory." You tap your quill idly against the page. "Thousand year tree... Did it sound as long to elves then as it does to us now, I wonder."

"The Dalish gifted a sapling? Rare, that they would deign to even acknowledge elves living in cities existed," Solas says, and you laugh at the bitterness in his voice. He sounds like you.

"Do I hear a grudge, Solas? Do you come from a city?" He says nothing, and you chuckle again. "Well, I guess you'd have to. Elves only come from three places."

"Oh?"

"Do you really want to hear me theorize on why I don't think you're ex-Dalish or an ex-slave?" you ask him, still smiling.

"I'll admit to some curiosity."

"Too bad," you say, stretching your stiff shoulders and wincing. "Because I'd only tell you if you'd tell me if I was right or not, and you won't." You press a finger right into a knot of muscle that hurts the most. Riding all day, sleeping on the ground, swinging around a sword... even with Solas' morning stretching to help you out now and then, you're basically one giant cramp.

"I would tell you if you got it right," Solas suggests, and you laugh again.

"Either you're lying, or it's something I could never guess, then."

"Do I seem so secretive to you?"

"Yes. And I'm something of an expert." You wince again as you roll your shoulders in their sockets. This time, however, Solas' hand falls to your shoulder. You're startled, briefly, but he pushes in just the right spot. You're caught off guard just enough to let out a half-choked groan.

"Fuck. How do you do that? I can't even find sore spots that well, and I'm the one who has them."

"There aren't that many differences between one body and another," Solas explains, shifting to place both his hands on your shoulders, and digging his thumbs into places that hurt in all the right ways. "If you learn where to touch on one," he shifts his grip close to your neck, squeezing tension out of your stiff muscles. "You've learned where to touch on them all."

"Ugh... This trip is going to be the death of me," you complain for what feels like the hundredth
"Let's hope it is not," he says with a quiet chuckle.

"If the dragons and darkspawn don't get me, Sera definitely will," you grumble, staring out at the sunset. Solas twists to work on your spine, and you wince, but shift a bit so he has easier access. Might as well. His massages are a known quantity, and you're only going to get more sore from here.

"I'll freely admit to having no idea what the two of you are doing. Do you love her or hate her?"

"Are those my only two options?" you ask glumly.

"No... I suppose nothing ever is quite that simple," he admits.

You thumb sourly through the book of poetry. "Lathbora viran," you read. You're not familiar with the phrase, but you think you can grasp the general meaning. "Asha'elgara, asha'yunin, ir banal'ras."

"You see her very differently than I," Solas says, and it startles a laugh out of you.

"We're all different things to different people. I know she seems a little rough around the edges, but she--"

"OY. What the 'ell are you doin'?!"

You look up sharply, surprised at being interrupted, and embarrassed at being interrupted by Sera of all people, when you'd just been in the middle of talking about her. "Uh... st...studying?" you manage to stammer out, holding up the book of poetry for her to see.

"What part o' studying some stupid old elf shite require that?" she demands, gesturing down at you.

You look down, confused, then back up.

"What?"

"...I'll leave you two to this conversation," Solas decides, extricating himself from behind you.

"To what conversation?" you ask, deeply confused. "Why are you...?" But he's already walking briskly away. "What the hell are you so mad about, Sera? You know I have lessons with him on Sundays."

"If you wanna waste your time with prancin' around on halla--"

"They're harts--"

"And readin' a bunch of old shite from dead people--"

"That's my career--"

"Then that's your problem, but who do ya think yer foolin'? Why are 'lessons' the reason yer practically sittin' in his lap watchin' the sunset while he gives you a massage!"

You blink in wide-eyed confusion. That's why she's mad? "Sera, you just watched me make out with a prostitute in front of a crowd."

"Tha's different! You know it is, don't play stupid!"
"You're right, in that the one you're not mad about is the one I would actually understand if you were mad about!" you exclaim, your voice rising slightly. You stand up, tired of being yelled down to. "Are you seriously interrupting my extremely narrow window to learn information I've been chasing my whole life for this petty bullshit?"

"Petty bullshit--!"

"Yeah, bullshit, am I supposed to believe you're actually pissed about a massage?! Do you think I'm an idiot? Are you going to get mad if the Inquisitor grabs my arms to adjust my stance next? Did you get mad when I held Cole's hand, or when I was spooning Dorian?! Don't be fucking ridiculous!"

"Yer bein' dumb on purpose now--"

"Just because you think studying Elvhenan is dumb doesn't mean it's not a priority for me!" you snap back. "I've never hidden my lessons from you! Why are you getting pissed now?"

"Because yer over here doin' it in front of everyone and also me! You can't possibly think that's okay--"

"I do, actually! I think it's perfectly fucking normal, so why don't you just butt out and go be pissy about your heritage somewhere that's not next to me!"

You grab your things off the ground and storm off as she yells semi-incoherently at you. You find Solas along the edge of camp, clearly trying to pretend like nothing's happening. You don't even bother to see how many people heard your fight with Sera; you just grab his arm and begin dragging him further away from camp.

"Are you sure--"

"Solas, literally the only thing I want to hear right now is conjugation lessons and my vocabulary for the week," you hiss, voice tense.

You find a place to settle that's frankly too far from camp, but you no longer care about that. You'll have some privacy, since Sera had soooo much issue with you being elfy where the humans could see. You're still seething, but make an effort to focus nonetheless. You're not letting her ruin this for you. You try so hard not to begrudge her for her issues, but she's just so hard to predict. You thought for sure she'd hate you kissing... what was her name? Anisha? but she had no problem with that. Then she claims to have an issue with Solas giving you a massage, Solas of all people! You've met neutered cats with more of a sex drive. You can't help but suspect it's because it's Solas, because it's this, because it's elves, and--

Ugh, you're distracted again. You need to focus.

When it gets too dark, rather than heading back, you encourage Solas to do his little "floating magic ball of light" trick. Just to make it even more of everything Sera hates... and more of what you love, can't forget that part. It's almost like it's your whole life and career and everything that's important to you rolled up into one little stolen moment of time under a tree, one good thing in your shitty shitty life that justifies everything you've sacrificed to get here.

Of course, you think to yourself, staring up at the stars through the tree branches, it's not like you ever gave her a chance to understand why.

Solas does, eventually, head for bed. You'd probably kept him up far past his regular bedtime, though you have no idea how late it actually is. You, unsurprisingly, stay up. It's for an odd reason,
however, in the recent scheme of your life... You're simply... not tired.

It seems preposterous, given all the activity in your life as of late, but you've actually been getting a decent amount of sleep lately. Two, four hours a night, sometimes even a full night's sleep tucked away somewhere safe with Cole. It's not as though your sleeping problems began and ended with your magic, although you'll confess it certainly did not help. Really, it was only a matter of time before you just... stopped getting sleepy. You don't feel exhausted or sick. You don't feel like you could run a marathon, either, but you're certainly not capable of going to bed.

You wander around the far, far edges of camp, close enough that you can just barely see the light from the campfire through the trees. Your shoes hang around your shoulders, tied together by their laces, as you enjoy the cold, slightly damp crunch of dead leaves beneath your bare feet. Solas’ magic light, still charged with his mana, bounces through the air as you play an idle game of catch with it. It seems as though you can move it with a bat of your hand, although it's also not solid. It floats through the air in slow arcs as you toss it up and ahead, walk, catch it, again and again.

A little breath of the familiar, although it's not as though you've any real familiarity with his particular version of the common spell. No memories of doing this as a child, although you could certainly imagine it. If only your life had been slightly different.

If only your life had been his.

When you're finally ready to head back to camp, you catch the ball in your fist and let your aura race hungrily down your arm, through your palm. In an instant, the light is gone. A few flecks of ash fall from your hand before getting picked up and blown into nothingness by the wind. You look at your empty hand for a time, and then make your way back towards the light of the campfire.

Chapter End Notes

As always, if you like my work, follow me on Tumblr, Twitter, or just check out my Ao3 works page for other stuff I've done. :)

Youtuber voice: don't forget to smash that kudos button (so that it can tell you that you're not allowed to), dropkick that subscribe button, and leave a comment down below!
Avoiding

Chapter Notes

This extra long chapter was made possible by readers like you! :o Give yourself a pat on the back.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"No, focus. You seek to control your power, but it is a part of you, like an arm. See it as such, and control becomes not domination, but casual mastery. You do not seek to control your arm, it merely does as you wish."

You are terrified that if you lose your grip, this beautiful wagon will burst into flame. Control of light without heat is difficult for you. How are you meant to let go and relax?

"See? An aura is a fluid thing. It flows through and around you, rising and falling like the ocean. Wait for a wave, ride it, reach through the Veil, and--"

The blade bursts into flame in your hand, but it stays narrow, focused. The metal does not melt. You are delighted.

"Spirits are as natural a part of the world as rain. Open yourself up to the Fade. Keep your mind clear and free of judgment, and you will be able to see the truth."

You giggle as wisps dance around you, ever curious. Perhaps what they glean from you today will send them down the path to becoming spirits of one kind or another. You give one a little kiss, smiling and laughing as you imagine it growing into a spirit of curiosity, eternally probing the world around it for more knowledge. As you walk through the world, sometimes you can feel them following you in the Fade, peering down to watch. Always there to help if you just reach up and through.

It becomes a background sensation that you no longer even consider, but when you wake up in a high-up tree branch, for a moment, you feel them flickering around you in the Fade, and smile. You reach through the veil, ever so briefly, brushing against them with the soul of you. They recognize you as friend, swarm to your side. Then your aura is back inside of you, and you're making your way down the tree to see about making breakfast.

Solas and Cole were on last watch, which is what enabled your nap in the first place, although you never would have had the courage if you hadn't been nestled out in the woods where he would be unlikely to even look, let alone locate you up a tree. He wanders over as you begin to set up the pot for breakfast. You've no doubt he noticed you wandering in from the woods, but fortunately doesn't ask about it.

"I saw some deathroot around the roots of some trees in the forest," you say finally, to break the silence.

"Arcanist?"

"I think so. I didn't get too close."
"Were any of them flowering?"

"A few. If you have a safe place we can store them, I could show you where I saw them once Blackwall is awake to take over the porridge." You stifle a bit of a yawn, not wanting to give him the impression you hadn't slept when you actually had. "There'll probably be more of them the further west we go. They like arid environments."

"Madman's deathroot is particularly common in the Approach," Solas says with a nod. "Of course, there are alchemists in the fortress there whose job it is to venture into the desert to gather such reagents for the Inquisition."

"If I'd realized that was an option," you say sarcastically. "I wouldn't have been so quick to settle into Skyhold."

"Regretting introducing yourself as a linguist instead of an alchemist?"

"I picked the option I thought more likely to get me a safe job inside of some walls," you say with a laugh. "I picked wrong."

"Not necessarily. I believe our requisition officers wind up sent to the far corners of the globe, often alongside soldiers or even the Inquisitor's personal strike team."

"So basically exactly what I'm doing now?"

"More or less, yes."

You let out a long sigh. "I guess that's just Inquisition life for you." It's probably unseemly for you to complain so much about risking your life when that's what most members of the Inquisition do, but it's really the opposite of what you had in mind when you first fled to Skyhold. Still... you're better off than most refugees. They might have been able to settle in the valleys under Skyhold during the summer, but with winter fast approaching, especially in the mountains... Well, you'd taken part in the relocation works several times, yourself. At least you have a home and a job. Even if it is a shitty, dangerous job, apparently.

"Those who most want peace for the world are least likely to see it themselves," quips Solas, and you shoot him an odd look.

"Do I seem like a 'world peace' type?" you ask, genuinely curious.

"Perhaps I am mistaken," Solas says with a shrug. "But when needs must, I believe your actions speak for themselves."

After Blackwall is up for you to foist your breakfast efforts onto, you and Solas head to a corner of camp to stretch for the day ahead. As always, you struggle your way through poses that seem as though they shouldn't be as hard as they are. Your upper arm strength leaves much to be desired... but while it might be in your head, you feel as though you might in fact be gaining some power there. While you curse and sweat and wobble your way through an armstand, you can see the muscles in your arms straining... muscles that you're not particularly used to seeing.

Any good mood that might have put you in is quickly removed when you notice Sera glaring--and clearly trying hard not to glare--at the two of you. This time, however, instead of feeling guilt, you feel a surge of irritation. It’s true you'd wanted to alienate her, but the fact that this is what did it... What is her problem? You've put her through so much worse than this! It's inexplicable, especially when compared to how quickly she's been willing to forgive you for things that you think would be
much bigger red flags than "is elfy."

Maybe there's more to it that you're just not seeing. The thought of asking her about it fills you with a bitter taste, however. Why should you, when she's the one being a jerk?

Unfortunately for you, Solas is in the advance team with Cassandra and the Inquisitor today, leaving you without much company for purposes of dodging Sera. You wind up sticking close to Dorian, hoping that Sera just sticks similarly close to Blackwall and you can have something resembling peace for the morning ride.

Within a few hours of travel, you're well and truly off the Imperial Highway. The going is a bit slower and considerably rougher. There's a path through the woods, right now, but it would be barely big enough to get a single wagon through, and the dirt is loose and torn up. You travel in two lines, one horse--or hart--following each rut of the path. At least this makes it easy for you to pair up with Dorian and Sera to pair up with Blackwall for, hopefully, the entire day.

The thickness of the trees and the relative narrowness of the path, however, has you jumpy. Especially after the comparative broadness of the Imperial Highway and the Dales. You were already ambushed once... how much easier would one be here? There could be demons or bandits or rogue soldiers behind any tree. After the third time you flinch at a snapping branch or a jumping squirrel, Dorian decides it's time to comfort you. In the most Dorian way possible, of course.

"You really needn't be so jumpy, Emma. Why, you have some of the best fighters and mages in all of Thedas to protect you!"

You can't help but laugh a bit at his good-natured braggadocio. "Lucky for me, and unlucky for you that you have me along."

"Ah, but what's a squad of heroes without a damsel in distress to protect?" Dorian announces grandly, and you laugh again. You do so love being the damsel in distress.

And to be fair, he's not wrong, either. Well, he's wrong about the damsel part, but he's not wrong about the strength of the team you're with. Oh, sure, he's exaggerating, but this is quite the squad. And while Sera would probably let you get stabbed to death right about now if your earlier roles vis-a-vis demon attacks were replaced, you're fairly confident everyone else would have your back. Blackwall is a Warden, and you've more than seen that he can hold his own versus things other than Darkspawn. You might have less battle experience with Dorian, but he's an Altus, and you're confident that his magic and techniques will be deeply familiar to you. Cole, wherever he is, can be trusted not to lose sight of you on a battlefield where everyone else might in the chaos.

The advance team is safest of all; with the combined awareness of the Inquisitor, in Templar training and paired with his supernatural mark, a Seeker, and Solas. It's unfortunate that this sort of team could kill you in an instant if they saw the need, but at the same time it makes you particularly safe for as long as they see you as an ally and an asset.

This isn't the sort of trip you could ever make alone, but if there does turn out to be anything of value in those ruins, then it will have been the opportunity of a lifetime. Darkspawn infested areas in particular, you have always avoided. One can't hire Wardens, and the number of mercenaries you need to even stand a chance otherwise has always been far beyond your coin purse. Your mind almost itches as the thought of all that otherwise out-of-reach knowledge. Hopefully you'll actually be able to get it, and this isn't some elaborate ruse to have you sit in a tent for a month.

Frankly you might abandon them out of sheer frustration if that's the case.
Your lunch break comes when the ahead team finds a small clearing in the forest, large enough for what you still think is an unreasonable number of horses. The fact you think that is probably due to how much time it takes you to care for all over them. Compared to when you were on the Highway, you have a nightmare of a time cleaning all their hooves and brushing burrs out of their manes and tails. The others might not think it necessary, but if you do it now, it's less work for you in the evening. Plus you really don't want to risk the horses being in discomfort on such a long journey.

The harts aren't nearly so difficult. Their split hooves are much more suited for forest travel. Of course that advantage is going to go out the window once you reach sand, but you can't exactly trade-off for camels halfway through. Alas, the Inquisition's hand hold into the desert happens to be on the other fucking side of it.

You finish caring for all the mounts about three minutes before it's time to pick up and leave again, but you manage to cram some bread and jerky into your mouth and chew it on the way, like a ruminating cow. It'll get you through the day, at least.

This close to a desert, you feel, it should not be raining.

But it is. In the early afternoon, the clouds rolled in and the sky split open with slow, rumbling growls of thunder. This does not noticeably help your mood or you general jumpiness, because the air is thick and muggy despite the time of year. Water clings oppressively to your skin, and every breath feels like inhaling fog.

Only the fact that there isn't any actual fog, just the limited sight of a heavy rain, keeps you from complete panic. The way you're shaking on Vhas'durghen's back is hopefully hidden by the rain at large. You keep your mouth shut and your teeth clenched, despite how it jars your jaw every time Vhas'durghen's hooves hit the ground. You can't help but remember your stupid little breakdown at the war table in Skyhold. You refuse to show any more genuine weakness in front of these people. That they know so much about you already--your 'night terrors' for instance--is humiliating enough.

People thinking of you as weak is convenient, but people knowing actual weaknesses is inexcusable. Few people can take advantage of nightmares, and many people suffer from them, but eventually, someone is going to have enough of your fears to piece something of your past together. Let alone enough to put you in a disadvantageous situation should their need arise.

Your state of mind is probably why it takes you so long to notice that Dorian, who's riding next to you, does not look nearly so water-logged as you. You squint for a moment, and notice something you've seen before. Water streaming off an invisible surface above him, pouring off the sides. Almost impossible to notice at this speed; if you hadn't known what to look for, you doubt you would have noticed at all.

Good to know that everyone except for you apparently learned the "umbrella" spell when they were children. Not that you could cast it here, in any case, but you can think of a number of situations where it would have come in extremely handy. You sulk to yourself about it, wondering if you'll ever have the chance to fool around with your magic enough to figure it out. At this rate, you suspect you're going to die with your aura clenched in your gut.

It's still raining when you stop for the night, because of course it is. Of course you'd get completely drenched a few days before hitting a literal desert. The rain hits you in huge drops when you're under a tree, water collecting on leaves until it falls down in rushes. It's not particularly pleasant, and you're out a jacket, so you're utterly soaked. You probably look like a drowned rat; you certainly feel like one.
You leave the others to figure out how to erect tents in the pouring rain and focus in on the mounts again. They'll certainly need some extra care with all this muck around, and while the tack and saddlebags are all waterproofed, you don't want to leave them in the mud overnight. After a few minutes of hemming and hawing over it, you eventually just wind up climbing trees on the edge of the clearing, hoisting up saddles and saddlebags on your back. You hang them up in the trees on branches sturdy enough to hold their weight, using their own straps to ensure they don't fall.

You've gotten about a third of the way through when the Inquisitor wanders over, probably to figure out why a saddle is climbing its way up a tree. It must look strange, but strapping them around your back is the best way to get them up.

"That's quite clever for someone who's never done this before," he calls up to you, and you have no idea whether he's praising you or being suspicious. Probably the latter, given your luck.

"It just seemed logical," you shout down over the sound of rain pattering against leaves and ground. "I don't want to waste more time washing mud off of these in the morning, or risk flooding our supplies."

"Here, let me help," the Inquisitor suggests. "I think I can lift some of these up over my head far enough that you won't have to keep scrambling up and down."

You consider. The Inquisitor is fairly tall, and your arm and core strength is getting to the point where you can probably reach down pretty far while hooked around a branch.

"Alright," you agree. "Let's see if we can get these horses unloaded; Maker knows I still have to brush them down and clean their hooves."

The Inquisitor's plan works remarkably well. He can easily lift saddles over his head, offering them up at the zenith of his reach, arms straight up. For your part, not only can you reach down and grab them, you even manage some amusing tricks. Around the time you're dangling down from a branch with your knees locked around it, grabbing a saddle with both hands, and pulling it and yourself back up, you realize that you're definitely getting stronger. It's not just in your mind. It's a good feeling, and the two of you manage to breeze through getting the saddles and supplies up into some trees for the night. Getting them down should be a lot easier.

You drop down out of the trees, and the Inquisitor surprises you yet again by sticking around to help out with the horses. When you comment on this, he shrugs.

"No one else needs me right now." He gestures over to where Blackwall and Sera are working at a campfire protected by a hastily put together cover of leather and fallen branches. Meanwhile, the Seeker, Dorian, and Solas are setting up the tents in a remarkably complicated manner that you don't particularly understand.

Well, far be it from you to turn away a helping hand, even if one of them has an otherworldly mark that can close tears in the veil. Which you've still yet to see, but you're kind of fine with that, frankly. The circumstances in which he needs to use it are not circumstances you ever want to be a part of. One close run in with demons was more than enough.

He starts with caring for Jarek and Snowblind, which is frankly completely fine with you, since Snowblind is one of the biggest pains in your ass. You still have to wrangle Zephyr, but she's small, so you'll take her over Snowblind any day. You're not surprised, but you are slightly annoyed, to see how much better both of them behave with the Inquisitor, who talks to Jarek in the kind of voice one might expect to come out of a Ferelden talking to their dog.
"I heard that Jarek was your horse from home?" you ask, wondering if you can needle more information out from the Inquisitor. He's not quite a closed book, but even during sword practice, he tends to focus more on the moment. You still barely have a grasp for what kind of man he is, stuck with a dozen incongruous pieces that don't even seem like they're from the same puzzle.

"Yes, he is. Elaine brought him from home when she came."

"Elaine?" you ask, frowning. Surely not the same Elaine you know?

"You know her? Oh, that's right, she was on that Val Royeaux job. Yes, she used to be one of my family's knights... Still is, I suppose, but she was sent out here with a handful of others after the Inquisition allied with the Templars and got a bit more of a name for itself."

"Is that why her technique is similar to yours? Or at least, I presume it is..." She used a sword and shield, but past that you wouldn't have noticed if she used a completely different technique.

"Mmm, yes, I suppose it would be. We still spar together when time allows," he says, nodding as he brushes through Jarek's mane. "She won her way in through the Grand Tourney when she was..." He sucks in a breath, tilting his head this way and that as he tries to remember a year. "I guess thirteen or so?"

"That young?" you ask, genuinely surprised.

"That young! She was the youngest to be made a knight in my family's history, if I recall correctly. Frankly, there should have been more competition for her amongst the noble houses but... well..." He sighs. "I guess I've learned nothing if not that people will do stupid things because of their own personal biases."

Right, which was so completely unlike him. You don't point that out, though, because you're not an idiot. "Because of her age?" you ask instead.

The Inquisitor pauses, then nods. "I suppose so, yes. My parents didn't see any further than her skill, though. She's two years younger than me, did you know, but she still acts like my older sister." He laughs. "At thirteen she already had more talent than me at the blade and a better hand with the horses."

"Impressive," you say, thinking back to how you were at that age. Your talents didn't lie in the blade, but if they had, you could easily see yourself doing something similar. Hadn't you used your ill-gotten skills to weasel your way into places you had no right being? In Antiva and Rivain both. Perhaps you and the knight you'd known so briefly have more in common than you thought. Not that it matters.

The conversation peters off and starts again and meanders aimlessly while the two of you work your way through the mounts. You, obviously, take care of all four of the harts yourself, remembering that you'd heard they didn't care for the Inquisitor. As it should be, given that he's a shem, although you mutter under your breath about that as you work with Derreck. Some harts, you inform him, can't be trusted with their own tastes, and it's a bit silly of him to let the Seeker prance about on his back and then get all huffy around the Inquisitor.

"There!" the Inquisitor announces finally. "I do believe we're done." You nod in tired agreement. The tents have been fully set up, and while you're sure they're damp in their own right, they're clustered in a fairly tight circle around the fire. It will make sleeping... interesting, but at least you'll be warm.
You head over to them, intent on figuring out a way to get your soaking clothes off sooner than later, but get no further than dropping you mercifully-extremely-waterproofed bag into the corner of your tent.

"Come on, then, no rest for the wicked!" the Inquisitor says cheerfully, throwing a heavy arm around your shoulders and startling the living daylights out of you. "This is perfect weather for practicing footwork."

"...What?" you manage as he begins to drag you off.

"If you can't perform in poor conditions, you can't perform at all! Surely Bull taught you that?"

...He had, actually, and yet you still hadn't considered for a moment that the Inquisitor would want to swing swords around with you in this weather. Nonetheless, that's exactly where you wind up, slipping around in grass and mud while trying to run through training exercises with the Inquisitor. Water fairly pours off of a brimmed hat the Seeker had tossed you to keep the rain out of your eyes, and keeping your balance is a challenge. But thanks to the Iron Bull and, frankly, a number of other people you could name, it's not as unfamiliar as it could be, and you adjust quickly.

You've finally gotten to the point where you can swing the Inquisitor's bastard sword around without your entire arm wanting to fall off, although it's still a struggle to swing it as fast as you know you've seen others do. The warriors you've seen whip these blades around like they're an extension of their arm; you're not even that good with daggers. If nothing else, you're getting some new-found respect for fighters.

The two of you move out of predetermined training routines and into something a bit more free-form, which is a hassle for you because it requires you to actually think creatively instead of just focusing on performing correctly. You mostly stick to moves you've already started developing muscle memory for, but as your arm begins to ache terribly, you decide to experiment a bit. These swords are called "hand-and-a-half" for a reason, and the Inquisitor's is so large for you that you can grip it with two hands quite easily. You do so as you're moving into a sideways swing, and the added strength means you move fast enough that the Inquisitor elects to move backwards instead of blocking. It's the first time he hasn't caught your blade effortlessly, and you feel pretty good about it even as you spin around a full time due to the force of the swing. You slip a bit in the mud, but manage to stay upright.

You'd been half expecting a lecture about proper stance, but the Inquisitor actually bursts out laughing, to your surprise. You blink while he tries to collect himself. It takes a while; he's caught in a serious giggle fit for reasons you can't at all comprehend.

"Sorry!" he wheezes finally, still laughing. "That just looked so Maker-damned funny! Cassandra, did you see that?!"

You glance over, and find that both the Seeker and Blackwall are watching. Blackwall is laughing as well, and the Seeker is clearly trying very, very hard not to. You tilt your head in confusion.

"You're just so tiny, and that sword is so huge and you swung it so hard, you were like a tiny... elven... ball... of--"

"Rotational energy?" the Seeker suggests, sounding deeply amused, and the Inquisitor bursts into laughter anew.

By the time you finish swinging a giant sword around, pretending to be Fenris, you're inventing new levels of "utterly soaked." This isn't a surface level wet. Every layer of clothing is soaked. Your skin
is soaked. You think your bones might actually be wet. You stand glumly outside your tent, which they somehow got up without getting it even slightly wet inside. You aren't going to just strip to your skivvies by the campfire, but if you go in like this, the inside will be a puddle.

While you're still trying to come up with the logistics of minimal damp-making, rain abruptly stops falling on your head. You glance over, expecting to see Solas, but to your surprise it's actually Dorian.

"How long can you maintain that spell for?" you demand. He looks remarkably dry.

"I barely even notice it's up," he admits. "It's something of a reflexive habit."

"Do they not have umbrellas in Tevinter?"

"They do, but this makes one look much more impressive," he replies, and you roll your eyes but smile. He's not wrong. If it weren't for how pissy the Chantry got about mages using their magic for mundane things, probably everyone would do it.

"Well, you're about twelve hours too late," you tell him, gesturing at your soaked... everything.

"Oh please, Emma. Do you really think I wouldn't be able to fix clothing?" With a roll of his eyes and a wave of his hand, you feel a gentle surge of heat wash over you, like a wave at the very edge of the ocean. You're too startled to take complete notice of what's being done mechanically, but when it passes, you realize that you and your clothes are both comfortably dry.

"Holy fuck magic is amazing," you exclaim, instead of what you want to yell, which is 'teach me how to do that right this fucking instant holy shit.'

"Isn't it just?" asks Dorian, looking appropriately smug. "However, some things are even better than magic to beat a chill." At this, Dorian pulls out... some kind of... ceramic jug? You look at it, then up at him, bewilderment clear on your face.

"Aren't you Ferelden? I'd think you'd recognize mulled wine when you saw it."

"First off, I'm Ferelden by a technicality at best," you say. "And secondly, I don't have your ability to sense alcohol from a few meters away, so..."

"Sass won't get you warm and drunk, Emma."

"A good point," you say, lifting your tent flap to the side. "Come in, good ser, to casa di Emma."

You follow him in, kicking your backpack further over to one side, and throwing down the customary blanket you always leave out for Cole. You don't think he's ever used it, but you never know. He might decide he wants to try napping. This time, however, it's more for Dorian to sit on than anything. You leave the flap open, letting the heat and light from the nearby fire spill in. The thick, treated leather over the top of the tent goes over the entrance enough that there's no risk of rainwater falling in, so it's actually quite a pleasant effect.

Dorian pours out two mugs of the mulled wine, which is a Ferelden classic and not exactly a favorite of yours. The Dalish have warm alcohol which is loads better, in your opinion, and more than anything you're craving a bit of Rivaini sake, served hot. Still, beggars can't be choosers, and it warms you up from the inside out. Even if the alcohol content isn't enough for much of anything.

"What have you been hauling around in that bag, anyway?" Dorian asks, pointing at your ever-present backpack. "I thought it was clothes, but it sounds like it's about sixty pounds."
You manage not to frown. You can't believe Dorian is the first one to wonder what's in your bag. "Books, mostly," you say with a shrug. "And a few other important belongings."

"Books? Why are you carrying books when we have horses?" Dorian demands incredulously.

"That bag's waterproof. Very waterproof. It's been with me through everything short of a flood; I could probably submerge it and the books would be fine." On days like today, you're reminded of why you spent a solid fortune on it.

"The Inquisition saddlebags are waterproofed as well," Dorian points out. "They have to be, or the rations would get absolutely ruined the first time we had a downpour."

You shrug. "I know that objectively, I suppose, but I feel more comfortable knowing from personal experience just how safe they'll be."

"What sort of books are you dragging across the countryside, in any case?" Dorian asks curiously.

"The ones I need to finish the tome I'm ostensibly supposed to be finishing, for one," you say with a sigh. "Some that I think the draconologist will be interested in. And a few others for reading and research, since I have no idea how long the Inquisitor intends to leave me stranded in the Western Approach. Cole mentioned there were some Tevinter ruins, though, so I brought whatever I could dig up that I thought might be useful."

"Oh, are you planning on visiting? I might see if I can tag along; I wasn't there the first time and the Inquisitor wound up completely destroying one of the ruins."

"Of course he did," you say with a scowl. "Honestly..."

"What sorts of things have you got?" Dorian asks, and with a sigh, you pull your bag over. At least you don't have to worry he'll get implausibly interested in some of your "extremely boring" titles that are actually tomes of forbidden magic. You have enough of actual interest in here to keep him busy for half a month.

Sure enough, he finds great interest in some of the books you pulled together about Tevinter architecture in the southwest.

"I haven't seen some of these before. Where do you find these things?" he's saying, looking very impressed as he flips through pages of dry text and sketches of ruins.

"I spend an inordinate amount of time in book stores," you reply. "Or I used to, I suppose. I was able to dig through all of my old haunts in Val Royeaux, and I unearthed some gems."

"But how did you even know you'd need this?" he marvels.

You shrug. "I mean, I didn't exactly plan on heading into the Approach myself, if that's what you mean, but it still looked interesting. And besides, there were half a dozen requests for basically everything I could find on Ancient Tevinter, pre-Blight specifically. Because of that Corypheus fellow, I suppose."

Dorian nods with a chuckle. "A good number of them were probably mine. That library was sorely lacking before you swept through."

"I thought the Inquisitor was out of his mind for sending me," you confess. "But compared to this, it seems downright inspired."
"You certainly did an amazing job then, and you're doing quite well this time, as well."

You roll your eyes. "You just say that because I haven't gotten anyone killed yet. Just wait."

"I suspect we'll all be just fine," Dorian says with a chuckle. "After seeing you go to town on that terror demon, I think you're scarier than most things we might run into."

Dorian heads out at a reasonable hour after spending the evening thumbing through some of your books. It was an enjoyable time, actually. Nerding out with Dorian always seems to be. You honestly have no idea why he's had trouble making friends amongst the Inner Circle. Well, actually, if you consider what kind of people the Inner Circle generally has in it, you can make perfect sense of it. Most of them would find your conversation with him absolutely intolerably boring and pretentious.

What a shame. As with Solas, you can't quite shake the feeling he's being wasted on the people around him. But you also can't deny that to someone with priorities slightly different than yours, they'd be largely insufferable.

You're comfortably drunk by the time he's left. Or maybe tipsy? Drunk enough that you'd prefer to keep drinking, but unlike Dorian, you don't just keep a *stash* of alcohol on you at all times. Well, there's too many people, with the tents too close together, for you to risk actually letting your aura out to sleep, but where there's a Cole, there's a way. You can at least catch a nap, even if it won't be very effective.

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to check out my [Tumblr](https://your_tumblr_url)! Please. There are only so many ways I can communicate with y'all. You can also find links to my Discord channel on there.

I can't decide how I feel about this chapter, but it sure is published now! \o/ Comment down below which part made you go "hmmmm" the hardest.
Your first thought was to tell your master.

Years later, you would understand that to the world at large, that would seem absolutely, completely insane. But you’d been his for years at that point; you hated him, but so did everyone he owned. That’s probably the natural state for any chattel under the sun. You believe with all your heart that if chickens and cows can hate, they do so fiercely and without reservation. But they obey, because when you’re owned, that’s just what you do.

Even now, ‘safely’ back in his possession, that thought rings in the back of your mind. You're so scared of your new magic. Terrified beyond belief. It's nothing like the magic you've seen in Tevinter. It's sick, twisted fire that rages inside of you. But louder than the voice that's been trained into your mind, louder than the voice of terror, is a voice like your mother’s. Don't tell anyone. Keep the truth close to your chest. A secret, a secret. Between the two of you, there were none, but between the two of you and the world, everything was. And now that she's gone...

A good instinct to have so deeply instilled. If you'd told anyone, you might have found yourself bound and broken as surely as the Saarebas. You already were, in some ways, but those beasts were mindless. You don’t want to be like that. Your mind is all you have; all you are. Being clever makes you valuable, but dangerous; so say your masters. Magic would make you more of both.

So you teach yourself. You try to remember things you've seen before, things you've overheard. You learn to control the raging fire, to make it glimmer and dance. In secret, hidden corners, you practice, twisting its shape, making it bow to your will. And when you sleep, spirits come to you. You aren't afraid of them, just cautious as you are with any stranger. As your mother taught you.

They have questions, about the world you live in, about the things you've seen and experienced. You wield your words, then tell them you can show them better if they teach you how to use your magic, how to shape the Fade. You can't do it the way they can, not while you're asleep, but you learn much. And when you wake, you find you can feel the Fade, still there. Locked behind a shimmering, ephemeral curtain. The Veil, that must be the Veil you've heard mages speak of. Not a place, nor a thing, but a constant hum of energy. When you reach for it, you can feel it. Touch it. Grab it, twist it.

Accidentally hurtle yourself through it.

The first time you do it, your body ricocheting through space from one room directly into another, you realize there's a very good reason you'd kept this a secret. Dangerous and valuable... yes. You are. You can use this. If you are very clever and very patient. Like your mother taught you.

You train and practice slowly, for a long time. You do your job and play with your master and keep your head down. You spend all of your time thinking. Your master loved that far-off, serious expression that you wear so often. “The eyes of a grown woman on the face of a child,” he calls it. He sees much of it as time passes; your mind is always racing.

Three months after your magic exploded out of you, you use it to slip out of the encampment for the first time. You borrow a friend’s clothes, hide your fiery red hair and pretend to be a boy. Light-skinned, for a native, but one ragged boy amongst dozens doesn't stand out, even a pale one. You explore. You listen. You collect more secrets. You learn how to go for days without sleep, to ration
your time. You learn how to travel further, chaining one jump after another after another.

And one night, when you jump too far, you’ve already learned how not to be scared of strangers. Their skin is as pale as yours, paler still, painted white to blend in with the fog. One of them recognizes you when he snatches off your hat, sending your fire-red hair cascading down. Wide-eyed little slave, spared by them only to be snatched up by someone else.

You’re valuable and dangerous, you tell them. And if they want to be friends, you can be valuable to them and dangerous to someone else.

When you wake up, the humidity of Seheron still clings to your skin. For a good minute, you’re still there, wondering how you came to fall asleep in a Fog Warrior encampment. But then your mind and body come back to you, and you remember where and who you are.

It's still raining outside, and for once, you refuse to rise. You stay curled up in your bedroll, letting someone else deal with breakfast, letting Solas stretch alone. No one can condemn you for one lazy morning, surely. And unlike the mages, you can’t summon a magic fucking umbrella to keep you dry. If you're going to get soaked sooner or later, you’d much prefer it be later.

Still, you rise in time to fetch the saddles and bags down from the trees--much easier than getting them up there in the first place--and prep the mounts for the day to come. You keep the Seeker’s cloak since she doesn’t seem in a hurry to ask for it back, and with the hood pulled up, it helps keep you drier than you managed yesterday.

The sour note you and Sera ended on yesterday looms overhead, thanks in part to the fact that neither she nor Solas are in the ahead party today. Of course, Solas not being in the ahead party shouldn't matter, but you have absolutely no doubt that it does. You can only hazard a guess as to what actually pissed her off yesterday, but you wouldn’t be surprised if the fact it was Solas in particular had something to do with it.

This actually creates an extra layer of irritation for you, because it seems like just by existing, you’re always damaging that man’s reputation and relations. Sure, they weren’t exactly great when you got here, but you’d been hoping to fix that. Solas is a good person who’s fun to be around and has a lot to offer a friend. You want more people to see that. You're wise enough to see that hoping for friendship between him and Sera is a lost cause, but you wish you could at least get them to stop actively aggravating each other. Instead, by the force of her glares, you’ve only made things worse. Again.

For once, your surroundings provide a bit of a much-needed distraction. It stops raining after a few hours on the road, and the forest ends rather abruptly, giving away to a scrubby sort of plain you’ve never really seen before. The grass is short and clumpy and almost spiky in nature, the dirt underneath it turning more loose and dusty as you travel. It's completely unlike the plains you're used to, the Dales with their long tall grass and unbroken skyline. But it's also not at all what you were expecting in terms of a transition into desert. Up north, towards the Anderfels, it gets rocky before getting deserty, not all... weird like this. The grass is full of burs and some of the blades are actually somewhat sharp.

It's also getting noticeably less humid as you travel, but after all that rain, it's a very welcome change. You shed the Seeker's cloak fairly quickly, but since she's in the ahead group, it simply rests across Revas's back until you have a chance to return it to her.

By the time lunch rolls around and it's time to stop, the ground is dusty and sandy but still held together with an excess of strange, scrubby grass and bushes. You’d like to have a bit more time to
explore this environment instead of rushing through, but you suppose that's life. You're not sure how long it will be like this before you hit desert properly, but that will be just as alien to you. You're planning on treating it like an extended beach, probably.

Unfortunately, you can't even take your lunch break to explore your surroundings. The horses are taken care of in relatively short order, although you're fairly certain you could keep brushing them for hours and they'd still have sand in their pelts. The harts manes are basically like a trap for the stuff. But even after you care for the mounts, there's something else, something much more important and much more unpleasant, that you have to deal with.

Sera.

She's sulking. Sometimes it feels like she's been sulking for most of this trip. You've certainly given her a mood whiplash over the last few weeks... but this time is unique inasmuch as you have no fucking idea what went wrong. You kind of thought that she'd maybe figured out the whole "actually I can't" thing, and the conclusion she'd come to is that she still wanted to fuck you anyway. Which could have worked! But then she went and got pissy anyway, for unclear reasons!

You try not to go into it with that attitude, though, because you're pretty sure it's unproductive.

"Do you want to talk?" you ask, instead of all the myriad more pressing questions you have. She looks more surprised that you're talking to her than annoyed, which might be a good sign. For something.

"...I guess," she says. Grumpy, but it almost sounds forced. Another good sign, maybe. If she's realized she was kind of a bitch, it'll make your job a lot easier. You lead her away from camp a bit, although there's not much to do to get out of sight. There's a few trees, but they're few and scattered and not particularly healthy looking. In a way, though, that lets you get further away without breaking line of sight and worrying your fussy companions.

"I'd apologize, but I'm genuinely not sure what part you're mad about," you start, because otherwise you're just going to beat around the bush until you're exhausted. And not even the fun way you and Sera have been getting up to lately.

"Do you seriously not know?" she asks, slightly incredulous but at least not yelling.

"I seriously don't. I could hazard a guess, but I feel like that would probably just piss you off more." You wiggle your hand in the air uncertainly. "So..."

"Look, I dunno how it is with you, and maybe I shoulda asked sooner, given your whole..." She gestures vaguely at... all of you. "Thing. But like, I'm a one-woman girl, ya know? I get tha' relationships are complicated for you or wha'ever, but I gotta at least be the only one."

You blink slowly. "...The prostitutes...?"

"We were jus' foolin' aroun'! It's not like we were runnin' off to fuck 'em."

Okay, so, asking her definition of fuck isn't a good idea right now. "So what are you mad about?"

"Solas, obviously!"

"...Sera, you do know there's nothing going on between me and Solas, right?" you ask, your expression probably one of perfect bewilderment. "He's like... Cole, I'm pretty sure."

"You jus' think that 'cause yer real bad at knowing when people wanna fuck ya," Sera points out, but
you shake your head.

"No, seriously. There's nothing like that going on. Why does everyone always think I'm fucking someone?" you pull a frustrated hand over your hair. "Seriously, it's been like this since I got to Skyhold! It feels like I can't even look at a man without you and half the damn castle thinking we're having sex! We're not having sex! I never intended to have sex with anyone, I never had sex with anyone, until you came along, and that was--"

"Wot, really?"

"Don't tell me you believed any of those rumors!" you snap. "Why would anyone? You know me! Think about how difficult this whole thing has been for you, and then think about everyone else we know! Who'd fucking bother?!"

"You were getting massaged while sittin' between someone's legs! Watchin' the sunset! Of course there are rumors, that shit looks a certain way! If Dorian weren't gay as the day is long, even I'd be wonderin' about that. An' you mention Cole, but if he wasn't a spirit-thing, I'd really be wonderin', 'cause you wander around holdin' his hand but you held mine like once for a minute, and yer real weird about me goin' down on you an' y'always say shit's complicated but never explain an--"

"Alright, I get it!" you exclaim, throwing up a hand to stop her breathless rant. Your thoughts on whether or not you should be required to relegate all forms of physical companionship to someone with whom you're having sex aside... You have to admit you suppose she has a point. If only that people are going to make really stupid assumptions based on completely arbitrary-seeming rules that you're not sure you have any hope of ever fully grasping.

"...Yer sure it's not a sex thing?"

"For the love of the Maker, no," you say, exasperated. "Me initiating some form of physical contact with other people is not a sex thing, I just--"

"Not that!" Sera interrupts before you can go on another misunderstanding-based tear. "The 'complications.'"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, y'know, y'got some scars, yer always deflectin' when I wanna go down on you, I'm pretty sure y'faked finishing at least once--"

You flush red. She'd noticed? Maker, you're more out of practice than you thought. Or maybe it's just because you'd never had to fool a woman before, someone who actually knows what a climax looks like.

"I'm not sayin' that's bad!" she continues on. "I just... y'can tell me." She rubs the back of her neck. "Think about what I do. S'not like I don't know what happens to elf girls workin' in Orlais."

"It's not--I mean, that's not the issue."

"Not the issue, but--"

"Don't make it a big deal," you say with a sigh. "That was ages ago. It's not that."

"What is it, then?"

"I can't do... this." You gesture between the two of you. "What I think you want it to be."
"What I want it to be?" she asks with a snort. "I don' even know what it is!"

You chuckle a bit sadly. "Yeah, me neither."

The two of you just look helplessly at each other, and at the mess you've created. All good intentions and all following your heart and all that other garbage that works out in the stories, and here you two idiots are sitting in a tangled disaster.

"Well... Can we still make out behin' that tree?"

You almost choke, despite having nothing in your mouth. You clear your throat, cough a bit, and then stare at her. "Are you insane?"

"Well, it's not a sex complication, right, an' I'm apparently the only one y'like enough to bone. It'd be kinda dumb for us to just throw it off a cliff at the first sign o' trouble." What an inspired argument.

You rub a hand over your face. "Sera, this is like the eight hundredth sign of trouble. We have been literally nothing but signs of trouble this entire time. Forget signs entirely, in fact. We're just concentrated trouble."

"...Okay, yeah, but consider: we could be makin' out behind that tree, right now, and leavin' complications off til later."

You level her with an even glare.

She's not wrong.

"Why do you keep doing this?"

"Cause I don't think it's as complicated as yer makin' it. Especially if I'm th' only one y'like."

"It is, though."

"But not in a way that keeps us from makin' out behind a tree?"

"...Not technically."

"Well, there y'go then, can't be that important."

It's about who you are.

But you want her to be right. You want it to not be that important.

And honestly, when you've got her up against the bark of that tree, working splinters into her clothes, you can almost chase away the ghost of Solas' voice telling you just how important it is.

The fact that you're hiding behind a tree that only offers so much coverage, and that it's lunch time, keeps things from getting too heated. You're still unfortunately sandy by the time you pull yourself off of Sera. It's going to be even worse, you suspect, once you're in an actual desert. You're expecting beach levels of "you and your belongings are never not sandy." You're not at all looking forward to it. Perhaps you should double bag all your books tonight, in an attempt to keep them free of the never-ending scourge of sand.

"We still got some time t'kill," Sera says, sounding surprised. "Y'must've gotten through the horses real fast."
"That's because I didn't seem to be making any progress getting sand out. There was always more," you say with a sigh. "I'm completely uncertain of how much I'm supposed to be brushing them at this stage."

"Sand won't kill 'em," Sera points out. "Just brush 'em off a bit, make sure nothin's gettin' caked, you know."

"I don't know. If I did know, this trip would have been a lot less stressful." You glance sideways at her. "Slightly less stressful."

That she only shoves lightly at your shoulder is a good example of how much happier she is, generally, after she's been kissed stupid a bit. You're not sure this is a sustainable method of Sera wrangling, but the temptation to just keep kissing the idiot out of her and kiss a different kind of idiot right into its place... is very strong.

"Yer the one who insisted we had t'bring deer with tons o' fuckin' fur into the desert. If it takes ya six years to brush 'em out, it's yer own fault."

"Don't remind me," you say sourly. Not that Revas would have let you out of Skyhold without him, probably. "I'm terrified of what this is doing to their manes."

"Y'should just learn how t'ride a horse! Honestly, it can't be any different--"

"They have completely different gaits," you point out sourly.

"Try it on Daine!" she insists. "You'll see, it's easy."

"I already tried once." Briefly. "It felt weird."

"Y'really hate havin' unfamiliar stuff between yer legs, huh."

This time it's your turn to shove her. She laughs good-naturedly.

"C'mon, I'll help. I been ridin' horses since I was tummy high. An' Daine's th' easiest horse in the whole fuckin' world. She's who ya'd learn on anyway."

"Fine, fine," you say with a sigh. You do kind of want to learn to ride a horse. It just keeps coming up, and it does seem like a good skill to have. It only took you a month or so to learn how to ride a hart, although you're still questionable at that in some ways. You should at least start. Besides, Sera has a history of getting a bit jealous that everyone else gets to teach you something. You might as well let her have this; maybe she'll be less pissy about Solas.

Although you're beginning to suspect that it's not within your power to make her less pissy about Solas, as a general concept.

Daine is already saddled up for riding, since Blackwall was riding Major this morning, so it's easy for you to just climb on... well, in theory. In practice, it's a chore. Half the time, the harts are laying down for a nap when it's time for you to mount up, anyway. It's pretty easy to get on a mount when it just stands up underneath you. Daine is tall and broad and utterly unwilling to squat.

Fortunately, she's also patient, so she doesn't appear to mind your undignified scramble up into the saddle. Sera adjusts the stirrups for you, thank the Maker. You hadn't even bothered the other day, but it does feel a bit more secure this way. You feel a bit less like you might tip off the side when she's just walking, but it's still unsettling how she seems to almost... sway from side to side. It's pronounced, and you're certain that if you watched her walk next to Revas, you'd be able to pick out
some kind of important, key difference.

You're fine while walking, really. It's uncomfortable, but you're hardly going to come flying off.

Then she starts trotting, and you more or less come flying off.

Whereas the harts' trot feels bouncy, but kind of like someone skipping through a field of flowers... Daine's trot feels like being violently shaken up and down. You think even Bull would be a smoother ride than that, not that you're going to comment so out loud. You all but throw yourself off of her when you realize you're bouncing clean off her back, not wanting to get trampled, and as soon as you hit the ground you hear an angry honk. You don't even need to get up to know who that is.

Sure enough, in a matter of seconds, your vision is overshadowed by fur, legs, and horns. Revas stands possessively over you, snorting angrily.

"I'm fine, Revas," you say blandly, sitting up, but he still angrily digs his hoof into the sand, kicking up loose, spiky grass.

Looking up at him, pointlessly and senselessly possessive and jealous over such a stupid thing as you riding a horse, threatening absolutely out-of-proportion violence for the transgression, your struck with the dull realization that Sera is kind of just like him. Possessive when you gave them no permission to be, jealous over things you don't understand and feel random and dumb to you. Angry and a bit violent when they get that way, too, and, as he butts his head against your chest when you stand, you have to add 'absolutely willing to take it out on you.'

You glance between the two of them as Sera puts her hands on her hips and pouts at the hart. She's saying something, something funny or something insipid, but you don't really register it. Looking between the two of them is making you realize something about Sera's character... and something more about her maturity level. Of course, she's quite younger than you, enough that she doesn't even remember who you are. You'd lied about your identity on a whim, never predicting the two of you would be anything other than casual acquaintances, so she may not realize just how much older you are.

You remember yourself at her age, which feels so very long ago. You weren't like her in many ways, but you remember your general maturity, your ability--or, more poignantly, lack thereof--to handle things with grace.

You're fucked, in both the good and the bad ways it's possible to be fucked. And honestly, you still only have yourself to blame.

There's not really a natural place, to your eye, to set camp for the night. After a day riding through seemingly identical rough, dusty terrain, you have frankly very little idea of how it is the Inquisitor knows where in the Maker's name you're going. You have a general concept of where you are; you could pick out the region on a map. But past "go west," you have no idea how he's figuring out the direction you need to be heading. It's too bare out here. What is he using to guide by? The sun? Rocks?

The place that he selects to set up camp is equally nonsensical to you, but there are at least some rocks you can tie the horses to. Now you finally understand why they’d laden the horses down with so much food in the last town. From here on out, they won't necessarily be able to graze.

You've no more than decided you have to give up on brushing them--sand is infinite and you already hate it--before the Inquisitor has once again swept you off to practice swordplay. The sand, even held
together with rough clumps of grass, provides its own difficulties. Especially given some of the grass is sharp. It's far more difficult, in fact, than the mud had been. You know mud. Sand is unfamiliar. You can remember the last few times you were on a beach, but they were long ago and you certainly hadn't been swordfighting. It's loose, but you don't sink into it like mud. It's not slippery, it's just... like trying to fight when someone's scattered tiny beads. You have your fair share of stumbles, which is nerve-wracking when you're holding a sword. You somehow manage to keep from impaling yourself, which feels like its own victory.

The Inquisitor's absolute surefootedness is more than a little infuriating, though. You'd feel better if he fell over at least once. But you suppose that would be bad, since he's one of the people you're depending on to be better at this than you.

You're just about tired and frustrated enough to consider trying to stab him for real when your salvation appears in the form of a Tevinter altus. The fact that it keeps happening doesn't make it any less bizarre, all things considered.

"If you two are about finished with your fencing--" he begins.

The Inquisitor rolls his eyes. "It's not fencing, Dorian. You know that. I know you know that."

"Whatever you want to call it," Dorian says with a careless wave of his hand, as if brushing the topic away. "I know you Fereldans prefer exhausting your partners completely, but Orlesians are quite delicate."

The Inquisitor snorts. "Are we talking about the same woman?"

"I am extremely delicate," you object. "No one here is more delicate than I."

"Have you met Dorian?" the Inquisitor counters.

"I'll have you know I have excellent upper body strength," Dorian protests.

"And lower body strength," you quip, quietly and mostly to yourself, although Dorian catches both it and your meaning and gives you a pointed look.

"Are you volunteering to take her place?" the Inquisitor asks, grinning.

"Under normal circumstances, Inquisitor, I would love to fence with you--"

"It's not fencing!"

"Sword wrestle," Dorian suggests.

"Definitely not called that. Nothing is called that."

"I can think of a few things that could be called that," you interject. You've let your sword drop towards the ground. You're very ready to be done swinging the damn thing around. You roll your shoulders and wince as they catch.

"See?" Dorian points out, gesturing at you. "You've injured her."

"I have not!" the Inquisitor protests, but Dorian is already approaching. Without so much as asking first, he grips your shoulders and digs his thumbs in just so. Your surprised noise is interrupted by a satisfied groan. Why is everyone you know so good at massages? Your eyes half close as Dorian works his fingers into tight muscles, too startled by how good it feels to even protest. Even Sera can't
"Look how tense she is," Dorian says, sounding like he's pouting. "You're never going to win a woman to your side if you're so rough with them, Inquisitor."

"I have several women on my side," he says, definitely pouting.

"I'm siding with the man currently giving me a neck massage," you offer up as a tie-breaker.

The Inquisitor throws up his hands in mock-defeat. "I can tell when I've been bested."

"Good man. If you're finished thrusting for the evening, I believe Sera is roasting a few potatoes in the coals."

The three of you migrate over to the fire, oddly necessary despite the fact you're so close to the desert. You blame the clear, cloudless sky for letting the heat of the day escape so easily. As you settle in, however, you sit directly in front of Dorian, half pointedly and half hopefully. He snorts with amusement, but puts his hands back on your shoulders, digging thumbs in near your spine. There's no magic, like there is with Solas, but frankly that's almost a relief in and of itself.

"You are not my normal target for these things," Dorian says, sounding amused.

"I'll work on growing a dick if you'll just refrain from stopping," you reply, leaning back into the relief and pain in your tight muscles.

"Honestly, if you keep making those noises, someone's going to ask you two to get a tent again," the Inquisitor quips.

"Would these noises be any less alarming when coming from a closed tent?" Dorian asks, and you can practically see the suggestively raised eyebrow despite the fact you're facing the other direction.

"Good point," the Inquisitor agrees.

"Stop making fun of my noises, both of you," you insist. "I'd like to see any of you fair any better, and you're all used to this sort of thing."

"Used to having massages?" the Inquisitor asks, seeming alarmed.

"Used to heavy labor. Not that I'm calling into question what you all choose to do in your spare time. None would be more understanding than I if you all formed a massage chain around the fire, now that I know the pace at which you travel and the weight of the swords you swing around." You wince as Dorian straightens out your back, pulling your shoulders backward and pressing what feels very much like a knee into your spine. You suspect your back would snap if he pulled you backwards more sharply, but the satisfaction would almost be worth it.

"And you're not even wearing armor," the Inquisitor points out, and you nod.

"Exactly. If I was, I'd probably die."

"Are you agreeing with her, Inquisitor?" Dorian asks, sounding deeply amused. "Might you need a massage as well?"

"Very funny, Dorian."

"Who's joking? I would hate to have you injured in battle if it could have been avoided with a little preventative care."
Your desire to continue being stretched is vastly and immediately overcome by your desire to put the Inquisitor in a compromised position.

"He's right, you know," you supply. "I work my hands every day, and I always make sure to stretch them regularly to avoid cramps. My friends and I used to get hand massages with some regularity back in Val Royeaux, and my job is one in which no one's life is on the line."

"Huh," says the Inquisitor. "I hadn't thought of it that way. Well, I suppose there's no harm in trying..."

"Excellent!" Dorian says, and you hope he's not grinning as much as it sounds like he is. "Let's begin at once. Do take off your armor padding, Inquisitor."

"So is this like a pre-training stretch or hhhnnnhgh," he says, and you choke back laughter at the look on his face as Dorian most likely goes right in for the gold. "What in the--"

"Please, try to relax, Inquisitor," Dorian says cheerfully. "It will make this much more comfortable for you."

"He's right," you say, rolling over onto your stomach and snatching a potato that had been cooling on a nearby rock. "I have plenty of experience and trust me. It hurts way less if you relax."

---

You dream of red eyes in the darkness.

It's at once familiar, a nightmare you've had a thousand times. If it could even be called a nightmare; in a proper nightmare, you would run from it, force yourself awake the second you realized what was happening. Rain of blood, fog in the heat, an ever-present stench of cooking flesh. Those things? You run from. There's no running from this particular nighttime visitor, and there is no point in trying.

After all, you chose this.

Those words, both your own and yet not your own, echo in your head like a mantra. And the effect it has on you, awake or asleep, is reflective of the familiarity. One sense of rebellion rages in a straight line like a controlled fire; the other dies completely, suffocated out with no air.

You hear his voice the same way you feel his presence. Inside your mind and outside, all around. And then behind you, familiar and known even if you don't turn to see.

You chose this, Gingersnap, so don't you dare fuss. Not a word.

A large hand ruffles your hair, disturbing your braid. You don't have to turn to see, you don't need to look up, but you do. The sight of Banal'ras is a familiar one, as if you'd seen him the night before. Your memory is a steel trap. Even things you might wish faded with time are crystallized. Ancient bugs trapped in the amber of your mind for all of time.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Ashkaari Bisette. I'm a dancer from Rivain. I speak Orlesian, Rivaini, and a small bit of Qunlat. I am eighteen years old. My mother lived in a Qunari outpost in Rivain, but I disliked the Qun and fled when I was twelve. I was trained as an entertainer by my mistress, Lady Chandra Deshpande, a wealthy woman who took pity on me. I used to travel with Carnevale di Mistero, but left due to personal disagreements on the nature of my job. This is a fancy term for not wanting to be prostituted, and all I have to say on the matter to anyone who asks. When pressed, I will display
signs of mild trauma and say nothing more. I now dance for entertainment across Orlais--primarily in Val Royeaux and Halamshiral--with the help of my manager, Ser Ferrault."

It fits like a second skin. You think you have been training to become this your whole life. Dirth'len grew up but never changed.

"Not a sound. If you can't control your face, at least control your voice. You have to be able to handle at least this. No, control your breath. Focus on it, not the pain." A heavy sigh, a temporary relief. "Gingersnap. You need to be able to tolerate at least this much. Your fear of pain is your biggest weakness, and someone will take advantage of it." A thumb wipes tears off your face--an uncontrollable reaction that you cannot wait to be able to control. "This is part of what you have to learn."

He's right. You chose this. You chased him. You don't have any right at all to complain about anything that comes from it; you were told at the outset. You chose it anyway. And you're happy with it, no matter what your occasional temper tantrums might suggest. If it hurts, if it's unpleasant, it's only because you're cauterizing the hole from when your heart was ripped from your chest.

This might be a painful procedure, but it's for your own good. You wanted this. Banal'ras gave you a purpose, one you've been wanting your whole life.

More than just running, more than just a wildfire burning out of control, turning everything to ash and ruin. You can't stop burning; you ignited in Seheron and you have been on fire ever since.

If you throw the first blow, cripple them with it. No one will catch you when you fall. Speak only lies, until you can tell them in your sleep, until they pass from your lips like sworn truth. Work eight times as hard for a quarter of what they have. Never, ever let them see you hurting.

That's what Banal'ras represents, what he gives you. A purpose for your agony. Your soul cracks and twists from flame, blackens to coal, but it refuses to kill you. And if you can't die, you can burn to ash the world that dared to light you ablaze.

Chapter End Notes

If this chapter felt long to you, that's because it super was. And you got two exposition-laden dream segments! Comment down below which parts you guessed ahead of time and which parts you got totally wrong!
Chapter Notes

*tosses fanservice hesitantly into the writhing masses*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

You wake up to the taste of ash in your mouth between gritted teeth. Cole must have woken you, though you don't see him anywhere. Maybe he's decided to make himself scarce as you wake so he doesn't have to deal with your bad mood. And you're in a frightful one right now. You absolutely ache for someone to take this feeling out on. It crawls under your skin like ants, a sensation that demands action. You used to take this feeling out on chevaliers. Never ones actually making their rounds in or near the alienage; you'd learned better than that. But you're sorely lacking chevaliers right now, and there are too many eyes on you for any of the bad behavior your instincts are screaming for.

So instead you light a candle and get some work done on your stupid fucking book.

No stress relief means no actual improvement of your mood. You sulk all through breakfast, snap at Blackwall when he tries to make light conversation, and then spend the rest of the morning preparing the mounts and snapping at them instead, since they take much less offense. Well, for the most part—you have a few unkind words for Revas and he responds by nearly peeing on your foot.

To make things worse, the morning dawns hot. It's hard to believe you were getting soaked two days ago, because the more you travel, the hotter it gets. The sun beats down on you with nary a cloud to get in the way. You don't mourn the loss of your armored jacket or chest piece anymore, and what little armor you have left—protection for your shoulders, arms, and legs—feels hot, heavy, and unnatural. You can't imagine any of the ones wearing chainmail are feeling great about it either, but you can't really tell by looking at them that they even notice the sunlight or heat.

The scrubby grass and bushes you'd been paying so much attention to become scarcer and scarcer as you gallop across western Orlais, and sand is indeed taking over. It's as odd as you expected, to see so much sand but not smell the salt of the ocean. You can still see trees and rocks dotting the landscape behind you, but towards the west, towards your destination, there is very little to break the monotony of the horizon.

So this is what Blight does to the land. Perhaps only now, you feel like you better appreciate how easy Fereldan got off during the last Blight. Your mind drifts briefly to Leah. This does nothing for your foul mood.

It's hot. It's sandy. You feel uncomfortable and violent and angry. The horses kick up sand, and it's getting everywhere. You already hate it, and you know it's only going to get worse from here. Sandier. Hotter. More bullshit to deal with further away from where you wanted to be and further away from what you wanted to do. The only benefit to this is that your foul mood keeps everyone, even Cole, at a distance, leaving you to focus on the inconvenience of heat and sand.

You fetch your giant floppy hat—the one you bought, not the one from the prostitutes which you think Sera has anyway—and it helps a little. But it turns out that your tunics, most of which you bought with a winter in the mountains in mind, are not particularly conducive to riding through a
You had purchased lighter clothing to an extent, but you're not used to this kind of sun and dry heat. So, captive audience be damned, you wind up eventually stripping to your undershirt and just tying the tunic around your waist.

It's not as though your undershirt is indecent; frankly what Dorian's wearing covers less in a technical sense. It's just not something you're used to wearing in public. And the presence of your traveling companions definitely makes this qualify as public despite the fact that the only judgmental passersby would probably be lizards, who are generally very open-minded.

You can't lie, it feels whole worlds better. You doubt the few tunics you brought will be getting much use for the rest of this trip. During lunch, you can dig out some of the more lightweight clothes you had the foresight to purchase. Until then, undershirt it is. You just won't think about the places sand is probably getting.

You suppose you're in the desert now. That's all you can really think when you stop for lunch. You thought the shift to scrubbiness had seemed abrupt, but it was nothing compared to the transition to blighted wasteland. You slide off of Revas, at first relieved and then wincing as the movement of your limbs stretches your skin. You... are not normally aware of the stretching of your own skin. You place a hand on your own shoulder--hot to the touch, but that could mean anything in this weather--and then look at your arms. That redness isn't just irritation from the sand and wind, or flushing from the heat, you're willing to bet. You're sunburnt.

You curse under your breath at the realization. Of course, you'd taken your tunic off and left your bare arms to bake in the unbroken sunlight. Idiot. You hadn't even thought about it; despite your red hair and the stereotypes attached to it by humans, you'd never been one to burn easily. But even you couldn't avoid a vicious burn after baking yourself in desert sun for half a day.

"You can't possibly be surprised," comes a voice from behind you. You don't even turn to glare at Solas, instead going to rummage in the saddlebags that carry your excess gear.

"I've never been in a blighted desert before," you grumble at him. "Normally the only time I have to consider the sun is on the ocean, and that's a rare enough occurrence. Plus a hat is normally enough to..." You finally pull out a lightweight but longer-sleeved shirt and turn to face Solas. Your eyes narrow. "How are you not burnt? You're bald and not even wearing a hat."

"Surely you can guess the answer to that," Solas says, sounding amused. His outfit has changed somewhat as well, you note with some relief. At least he isn't completely immune to suffering from the heat as you are. He's stripped off not only all excess layers, but his tunic as well. You weren't really necessarily ready, emotionally, for the sight of his mostly-bare arms, but you're coping admirably, you feel.

You roll your eyes. "You have a magic spell to prevent sunburn."

"You say that as if it's so extraordinarily unnecessary," Solas quips, poking your burnt shoulder. You give out a little hiss of pain and slap his hand away, and he smiles, barely. His smile is always such a tiny little thing that you suspect most people would miss it entirely. "However, I had the foresight of assuming you would not be comfortable with me casting that spell on you every few hours, and also that you would not bring a natural sunblock."

"I bought some in town!" you say, exasperated. "I just forgot to put the damn stuff on!"

"The end result is the same as predicted," Solas says, and you roll your eyes again. "Although if your pride is such that you don't want my aid--"
"You're not wasting your magic on curing a sunburn," you say, exasperated. It's ridiculous at the very concept.

"I'm not," he agrees, holding up a little jar with something clay-colored inside. "Amrita vein and aloe vera grow all over the Approach, so I sincerely doubt we'll be in any danger of running out of this little cure. In fact, if you have any interest, I'm certain we can find the time to teach you how to make it yourself."

You perk right up at that. "I'm always game to learn a new alchemical recipe," you say, smiling for the first time since you woke up well before dawn. "Is it really a cure?"

"An aid," Solas concedes, gesturing you towards the rocks and rubble that are serving for your resting area. "And preventative. I'm sure you won't be the only one using it."

"Some o' us had the foresight not to wait!" you hear Sera yell from--you presume--the other side of the rocks.

"Indeed," Dorian says, eying your burn with some obvious mirth. "As they say, an ounce of prevention..."

"Sorry that I've never been dragged bodily through a desert, Dorian," you say sarcastically. "As this is my first and hopefully last time, I'm sure it will be a learning experience."

"This, at least, is a mistake you're unlikely to make again." Solas sits down on a rock and gestures for you to sit down on the rubble in front of him. "This will stain your clothing, if you care," he warns you.

"Even after it dries?" you ask, frowning, and glancing down at the longer-sleeved shirt you'd been intending to throw on.

"Wait perhaps thirty minutes after application, and you should be fine. Your undershirt, however..."

"Do I look like I give a shit about the condition of my undershirts?" you ask with a roll of your eyes. Solas, no doubt remembering the condition of ones he's seen you in before, nods in concession.

"Very well. Have a seat."

You can't help but glance at the positioning he wants you in--on the ground in front of him, practically between his legs. You raise an eyebrow and make pointed eye contact with Dorian, who just shrugs, although he's grinning while he does so. Honestly. You wish you could get Sera to understand how clueless Solas can be about these things, exactly like the Inquisitor the night before--though both would be quite offended by the comparison. Of course, on a sliding scale of clueless, Sera is closer to them than she is to you or Dorian. She never gets your dick jokes. It's kind of delightful, but it's also why you'd never expected her to be the type to suspect sexual intent from any sort of physical contact.

You give your head a little shake to clear it and go ahead and sit down on the ground in front of Solas. The sand is hot, but not uncomfortably so. With a sigh, you just go ahead and take your boots off. They're not much use for walking in sand, something you genuinely hadn't considered at all. You'll just have to unpack your foot wraps and elf it the rest of the way. Hopefully it won't annoy Sera too badly.

You're musing over your girl troubles with such focus that you aren't paying attention to Solas. When he lays a hand on you, you yelp out loud, more than a little undignified. Normally you'd consider yourself somewhat armored against his touch--or anyone's--but in this particular case, his
hand is covered with cold goop and it is **alarming.** No less so because despite the goop, or perhaps thanks in part to it, your burnt skin is horribly sensitive.

"That feels terrible," you complain.

"If you'd had the foresight to put something like this on in the first place--"

"Don't lecture me, *mamae.*"

"Of course not," Solas says, and you can practically hear his eyes rolling. "Nothing up to this point would suggest that you'd listen to it."

"Hngrk," you respond instead of what you'd been about to say, because he's just spread the balm up onto your neck, his hands rubbing in small circles. Your breath catches in your chest as one of his hands slides around the front of your neck; your hands spasm into the sand, grabbing great fistfuls with such force that had it been grass, you would surely have torn it from the ground.

You clench your jaw, eyes finding the middle distance and staring determinedly until he's done with your neck. When he moves back onto your shoulders again, you let out a breath you hadn't even been aware you were holding. You don't think you can open your mouth to complain when he reaches slightly under your shirt to rub more in.

Well, you don't complain, but Sera picks that exact moment to walk back from the other side of the rocks. Solas just keeps on rubbing the ointment in, lost in his blissful Solas-y unawareness of how things look. You, however, are very aware of it, and make apologetic eye contact with Sera. She looks unamused; you can see the twitch in her jaw as she clenches it. But it's for sunburn. You will her to remember that it's just for sunburn. She appears to, since she says nothing and just keeps walking. You let out another little sigh of relief. That's progress, right? This is a type of progress.

Completely unaware of the danger he just narrowly avoided, Solas continues on. "You don't burn as much as I'd expect of one of your complexion," he comments as he works the salve down one of your arms. You let in a hiss of breath as he does; your skin is more sensitive than you thought, especially on your arms.

"Really? Because I *feel* exceedingly burnt," you say, wincing. "I feel like a piece of toast left in the oven for far too long."

"In my experience, most redheads begin to burn if they so much as look at the sun," suggests the Inquisitor. "One of my sisters is a redhead and she doesn't get even a shade darker in the summer; she just burns."

You shrug, which turns out to be a poor idea with a sunburn. Your skin feels weird and sticky against your shirt. "I've always just assumed it's different for elves."

"Oh?" Solas asks, which seems bizarre to you.

"Oh? Are you *asking me* something about *elves,* Solas?" you ask, exaggeratedly astounded. "I thought for sure you were about to explain the history of red hair in the elven population."

"I simply thought you might have some observations there yourself, given that you have red hair in the elven population," he replies dryly.

You snort. "Just that there are more redheaded elves than redheaded humans, and that the traits you see in redheaded humans don't necessarily translate. But I always figured it was just like these." You tap the corner of your eye. "Almost all elves have green eyes. But elf-blooded humans seem no more
likely to have green eyes than the average human."

"Really?" asks the Inquisitor curiously, leaning closer. He's sitting on a rock nearby, probably absolutely roasting in his chainmail. He looks flushed, but not burnt, so you can only presume he, like Sera, had the foresight to prepare himself ahead of time. "I had a friend in school with green eyes; he used to get bullied about being elf-blooded by the other students."

You wave your hand, shaking your head. "If anything, they tend towards brown eyes, but that's useless as an identifying feature given the prevalence of brown eyes in the general population. Humans always like to presume there's some way to tell what humans might have elf blood in them. There's not. No slightly pointed ears, no rounder than average eyes. The child of an elf and a human is a human, and so far as I can tell, any trait that makes us different fails to pass along."

"I wonder why that is..." the Inquisitor muses. "You'd think--"

"Inquisitor!" you hear Seeker Pentaghast call from a distance. "I require your assistance here."

She hasn't even finished the sentence before he's off the rock he was sitting on and rushing over to her. You smirk in no small amount of amusement. "A bit early for the Inquisitor to be so whipped, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know," Solas replies, and then interlaces his fingers with yours. Shocked, you look down, only to realize he's merely ensuring full coverage. Of course; your hands are your most valuable asset. Embarrassed by your reaction and with no Inquisitor to distract you, you look back up at the middle distance and wonder if being burnt means no one can tell when you're blushing.

"You seem to have paid a lot of attention to the human children of elves," he says, and you latch eagerly onto the distraction.

"I saw a lot of them when I was living in alienages. They stick out like sore thumbs, obviously, but you learn to tell them apart. Humans want to be able to see the elf-blood in their companions, but what they should be looking for is a human who lowers his head when walking through a door frame. A human who treats the elven servants with respect, who hires more elves than other humans, who tenses at the word knife-ear. If they were even the slightest bit more self-aware of their own behavior, they'd be able to tell that the tell-tale trait we pass on to our human children is empathy." You pause, considering. "And a keen awareness of how tall one is compared to door frames."

"I've found myself with that problem in alienages, as well," Solas comments, and you laugh.

"How many door frames have you headbutted?"

"I do take some pride in my sense of self-awareness--"

"How many?"

"Several," he admits, and you laugh again. "Your arms and shoulders are covered, but I will need to apply this to your face and head," Solas warns you.

"Should I close my eyes?" you wonder.

"Only if that is your preference. I won't be getting too close to your eyes. Sit up here." He's standing, and pats the rock he just vacated. You scoot up and backwards onto it, and he squats down in front of you. You realize immediately that the real problem presented by this is that to keep your eyes open would be to be staring directly at him, and close them at once.
That's not really much better, as he starts around your neck again. Your eyes snap open, and there must be something in your eyes, because he stops immediately, hands retracting a few centimeters away from your neck as he waits for your reaction. When you say nothing, he keeps going, and you aim your eyes up and to the right, glaring vaguely at the sky. You think about anything other than how nice his hands feel while he rubs ointment into your cheeks. One of his hands stills on your cheekbone, and your eyes fall back to him, annoyed that he should decide to take his time with this.

Your complaint dies on your lips when you see his expression. He looks like he's in pain. But when he speaks, all he says is,

"You're healing up nicely, considering how much damage you sustained back in Skyhold."

That, still? Underhill has barely even crossed your mind since you left Skyhold. You shrug. "I had access to a great deal of healing magic. There was no risk of me not 'healing up well.'"

"You were blind in one eye for days."

"Because it had swollen shut, not due to any real damage to the eye itself," you remind him. You know that for a fact; you'd paid a lot of attention to what the healers said about your eye. "And now the worst problem I have is a sunburn."

"Is that the worst problem you have right now?" he asks, concern breaking to show a bit of amusement. "Is it really?"

"Unless you want me to begin listing grievances against the sand and all of womankind including myself, I suggest you just finish up applying the damn cream."

And he continues, and you're fine—until one part you hadn't considered. After he's finished with your whole face and you're certain that you're about to be set free, finally, he runs ointment-covered fingers along your ear. Your whole body spasms at the unexpected punch of pleasure right to your core, and you almost kick him in the damn chest.

"I can do that part," you almost hiss, snatching the jar out of his hands.

Solas frowns. "Are you sure? It's very easy to miss a spot if you're applying it yourself, and your ears are very—"

"They are the normal amount of sensitive!" you snap.

"...I was going to say long."

"They're the normal amount of that too!" you say, feeling like you're burning up under the desert sun despite the cooling salve on your skin. That's a blatant lie, your ears are long, but Solas doesn't call you out on it. You apply the cream to your own damn ears, and when you miss a spot and he reaches out to wipe a bit more onto the back of your ear, you manage not to deck him or to make any inappropriate noises.

"There!" you say finally, shoving the jar back into his hands. "It's done. Now I can... Oh!" You look down at your extended arm, blinking. "You weren't kidding about the staining." Your skin is a shade of brown you're not sure you've ever seen on yourself. It would probably look patently absurd if you took your shirt off. Turning your arm this way and that, you can't see a single spot Solas missed, at least.

"Indeed," Solas says. "I hope you're prepared to look as though you have the world's most unfortunate tan for the next few days."
"I'll say. Maker have mercy."

"It is particularly dramatic on you." He sounds amused, but you can hardly blame him. You probably look ridiculous. "It will even out given time. You'll just look a bit like... an inverse raccoon."

"Oh joy."

"It will fade, however, in a few days, unless we reapply. And it will keep you from burning."

"Eventually, my skin will get nearly this dark on its own," you say with a sigh. "I suppose until then I'll just be sporting the inverse raccoon look. I'll certainly look peculiar when we get back to Skyhold. Nothing says winter in the mountains like the tan of baking a pale elf in the desert sun."

"If you prefer, we can let you burn," Solas suggests. "Perhaps we can get you a bright enough shade of red to stand in for the sun during those long evenings and slow mornings."

"Har har," you say flatly. "No, this is fine." Honestly, dye your hair black again and you'd be a completely different person. Perhaps you should get your hands on Solas' recipe, or at least figure out what it is that stains your skin so. It could come in handy for more than just healing sunburn.

The afternoon isn't any cooler than the morning was. If anything, it's worse. But now that you're dressed more appropriately and your skin isn't actively sizzling, it isn't too bad. The air is dry, and when you're galloping there's a decent breeze. You have to slow more regularly to keep the mounts from overheating in the sun, though, so that's only periodically helpful.

You still have no idea how the Inquisitor is figuring out which direction you go, but he at least has a map that he's examining regularly now. You suppose that's how he finds the oasis you stop at a few hours after lunch, to rest the mounts and let them drink. While everyone else is rinsing off and refilling the group's supply of water, you pull your foot wraps out of a saddlebag, intending to replace your leather boots--hot and heavy and not much use in sand. However, you pause to rinse yourself off as well. The mounts kick up an obscene amount of sand when they run, and you're basically coated. You want to at least rinse your face off. It fucking stings when that sand hits your face and sticks.

Which is when you get any idea. You're figuring out the desert thing fairly quickly, to your credit. Something about the heat--or possibly being stained clay-brown and wearing an undershirt and no shoes--has really stripped away your self-consciousness. So, not even considering the possibility of being heavily mocked, you curiously dip the foot wraps into the cool oasis water. Experimentally, you wrap the soaked cloth around your arm.

Holy shit that feels amazing.

Thinking of diagrams you've seen in books, you try wrapping it around your neck. The head and neck, those are the most temperature sensitive parts of the body, right? When they used to treat heat stroke in Seheron, they would wrap cloths soaked in cold water around the neck and head of the afflicted person. Clumsily at first, and then figuring it out, you wrap one of the foot wraps around your neck and bottom half of your face.

Yep, that feels fucking incredible. And it should keep the sun and sand off of your poor, suffering nose and mouth. You leave your nostrils uncovered, obviously, so you can breathe, but past that, you're protected. You don't care how dumb it probably looks. If it keeps you from suffering from painfully split lips this entire trip, you'll look as stupid as you need to.
Which is a helpful attitude, considering you're barefoot in leggings, an undershirt, and a loose linen tunic, your hat tied around your neck and resting on your back because it keeps falling off of your head, and, one can't forget, elven footwraps abruptly turned into a mask to keep sand off your face. No one says anything to you about it, though. Probably because half of them are wearing chainmail, and aren't in a state to be judging anyone. They might even envy you for getting your armor mauled to scraps. You definitely understand why they brought that instead of the plate you've seen them wear in the past.

That map of the Inquisitor's appears to be a map of every single oasis in the entire desert, as you're zigzagging in a frankly bewildering pattern, but coming across an oasis every few hours. Every single time, you pause to rest the mounts and let them drink, as well as refill your own water supplies. It's slower going, but you're not going to complain, and you doubt the horses will either.

You're not necessarily getting used to the heat, but you're figuring it out. Maybe you can do this after all. Mind, you're pretty sure it's been getting hotter all day, and sandier, were that even possible. You're not sure when you're going to cap out in terms of heat; if it just keeps getting hotter at a steady pace as you travel, you're absolutely going to keel over dead before you reach your destination.

Which you're... still somewhat unclear on, you realize as your group--finally--stops for the night at one of the Inquisitor's many oases. You have a general gist, but that's about it. Maps of the Western Approach, that you saw, aren't exactly rife with detail, and you don't know where this fort the Inquisition dug out of the sand even is.

You try to delicately probe for details while you and Blackwall care for the mounts together, but you don't really get much that you didn't already know. You're going near the Abyssal Reach but that's huge. So you're unclear on where you're going past "west" and you're not the one with the map of the oases.

This is, you decide grimly, your last day to jump ship if you want to.

The idea has its merits, so you consider it at length instead of dismissing it out of fear like you've gotten into the habit of doing. You would have to abandon Alix, but weren't you already flirting with that before this all started? You could go anywhere. If nothing else, you know you can always adapt. Frankly, nothing the world has to offer could be as strenuous as the circumstances around keeping your secrets here. You're practically losing your damned mind to Solas alone, and you had just recovered from getting pummeled into the ground... although to be fair, that had been your idea.

But on the other hand, even putting aside your more emotional attachments for the moment, there's still the matter of rifts and red Templars. The actual Templars themselves have been almost entirely brought under heel by the Inquisition, so they're at least not out there tearing up the countryside. The mage rebellion is technically ongoing but with the majority of them escaped into Tevinter--poor idiots--the fighting isn't really what it used to be. The rifts, however... you've just learned how dangerous those are first hand. And Red Templars, well, you already knew.

You don't feel any real sense of loyalty to the Inquisition. You suspect you haven't seen enough of the effect they're having on the world, locked inside their walls as you have been. You've never seen the Inquisitor close a rift. You weren't at Haven; you don't comprehend what this Corypheus fellow is or how severe of a problem you should consider him. Moreover, you've never been one to try and save the world.

…Well. Not from monsters, anyway.

This is not an easy decision to make, which is probably why you'd been putting off making it for as
long as possible. It's also hard to be objective when your heart is so tangled up in Sera... both in the sense that you'd like to stick around for more sex, and that your every better instinct is *screeching* at you to run for the hills. Betray her, you think sourly to yourself, before she gets the chance to betray you.

Now that the sun is setting, there's a definite chill in the air. After the heat of the day, it's frankly kind of nice... even though you're not generally one for cold air under any circumstances. But it's not so cold that you've forgotten the heat of the day, and you're sticky from sweat and sand and Maker knows what else. After everyone has filled up your water supplies one last time, you decide to rinse off in the oasis, clothes and all. It's much easier to carelessly soak yourself now that you're aware that Dorian is in possession of a *magic drying spell*.

You enjoy a bit of good-natured splashing around, even though the oasis is only up to your waist at the deepest point. It's a relief to work all the sand off of your skin, and you even sit down in the water, let your hair down, and brush through it until you've worked out tangles and sand both.

You're also, if you're being perfectly honest, taking this as more time to consider whether or not to slip away. It's not really privacy, but no one bothers you while you're bathing. Not even Sera, who would have to be reaching alarming levels of bold to accost you when you're in the middle of camp.

Your hair needs to dry; you don't want to see what wet hair feels like in desert heat. But fortunately, you doubt it will take long. You leave it down, and then dodge people and mounts until you find yourself on what is arguably the outskirts of camp. You settle in up on what you're going to suppose is called a sand dune or something--you're not one hundred percent clear on the terminology for hills when they're sand instead of dirt. A ridge that means you're still within easy sight of camp, but which is far enough from the trees of the oasis to give you a bit of privacy and quiet.

It's so flat out here that you can see a sliver of Satina on the horizon. ...Satina? Is it Harvestmere already? You've more than lost track of the days while traveling... frankly you tend to lose track of days even while sitting next to a calendar day in and day out, just like how you lose track of hours sitting next to a time-keeping candle. But it must be Harvestmere, because that little sliver of light could be nothing but Satina. You'll certainly have a splendid view of it out here in the desert. Surely you won't still be here for Satinalia? You'll probably be traveling back during the holiday... Or if you're very lucky, you'll have just arrived in Skyhold in time for whatever celebrations a military stronghold can throw together.

If you stay, you remind yourself. If you don't slip off into the night with Revas tonight. You would have to head east as fast as possible, to minimize your time stuck in a desert without any idea of where to find water. You could steal a second hart, probably Ash'ilana, to carry some water and supplies, but traveling with two harts would make you stick out... and increase the chances that the Inquisition would waste resources hunting you down.

From there, you'd need to head... northeast, above the lake. Val Royeaux would be too obvious, but you have resources in Val Foret. From there, it would be easy to lay low somewhere *safe*, as safe as you'd *thought* the Inquisition would be for a scribe. You'd been certain that a scribe would be too valuable to ever risk sending into the field. Idiot... But you probably wouldn't have been any safer as a menial worker. An army is always in need of dragging some of *them* along. No, the Inquisition had been a mistake from the beginning. You'd underestimated them entirely, or perhaps overestimated them. You thought they'd be just like the Chantry they broke off from.

But you're here now, and it hasn't been all negatives. Your cover is miraculously intact, which is frankly doing wonders for your confidence. If you can fool a Seeker and a Somniari, who can't you fool? How miraculous is the power under your skin? Is there something special about you, or are you
just the smartest of all the mages you’ve met? Smarter than Solas, who clearly doesn't know that what you can do even can be done at all? The thought makes you smile.

Aside from all you're learning about yourself, you also have excellent connections and resources through the Inquisition, ones that you're growing every day. Who knows when the Chargers will come in handy? You're willing to bet the Iron Bull would offer you a steep discount on something as easy as accompanying you into some particularly dangerous ruins. You even have some in mind. Plus, if you stick around, you could use Celia and the farm elves to dig fingers deep into the Inquisition, fingers you could keep even after you leave later. Then there's mages like Solas and Dorian and all the resources they offer.

Frankly, Solas is his own category. The thought of leaving him without saying a word, without a whisper of explanation... hurts. More than it should. But it's an old, dull hurt, one you know you could live with. But should you? He's dangerous, but you're learning so much. And Dorian might be exiled--if he's not now you've no doubt he will be once word of what he's getting up to spreads--but he's still a Tevinter altus with all the learning and skill that implies. Your mind practically writhes with the things the two of you could get up to, undercover in Tevinter.

And there's Cole. You'd be loathe to leave him behind, when the state of him being in this world makes him so uniquely safe to befriend. When are you ever going to have a chance to be friends with a spirit like him? He's as one-of-a-kind as you or Solas. Utterly priceless. He'll stay with the Inquisition until this task is done, but once it's over, perhaps you could convince him that coming with you is the best way to help hurts. Maker above, the things you could do in Orlais with him by your side.

Somewhere through your list of pros, your cons had been utterly trounced. You're staying. You're seeing this idiotic mission through. You'll do your job well and impress your friends and at the end of the day, you're going to be the one who climbs out of this hibernaculum intact and ready to take on spring.

Chapter End Notes

If you enjoyed any of this shameless pandering (we all knew the sunburn was coming, we all knew!), make sure to smash that kudos button, smash that subscribe button, and leave a comment down below! X'D
The Past Catches Up With You

Chapter Notes

I feel like the only French in this chapter is pretty obvious, but just in case, it means "let me pass" or "let me through," essentially.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

You wake up, slow and groggy, to the sensation of something warm and wet and furry shoving against your face. You grunt and bat vaguely in front of you, coming in contact with what appears to be a large, furry wall. Cracking one eye open, you see nothing more than a giant nose directly in front of you. It exhales hot breath onto your face.

You push Bella's nose away with a groan. You wish she'd never learned how to unlatch windows. You'd move your bed, but you're too worried she'd try climbing through into the house.

"I was having a dream about... about..." you squint, not quite remembering. "An elf? And a war?" You shake your head, then roll haphazardly out of bed, stumbling around as your body wakes the rest of the way up. You manage to locate an oatcake for Bella, which is all it takes to get her to remove her entire head from the window.

Your home is small, more of a cottage than anything, but it's yours. You'd had enough saved up for a little hovel in the middle of nowhere, most of a mile away from the nearest village. You'd made it your own, and the summer breeze coming in through the window, bringing with it the myriad scents of your garden, is proof enough that you'd made the right decision. You can be yourself here. Just yourself, and no one else.

You fight off a shiver despite the summer heat, and move to your wood stove to make some tea. Maker knows you'll need it to get through the day after being woken up at the crack of... uh... noon... by Bella. Maybe you'll take her into town today, to wear her out a little if nothing else. Or you could go the opposite way and head into the Dales, collect some alchemy reagents. If you can get a hold of some more mugwort, you're pretty sure your cooling potion would sell like... well, you'd say like hotcakes, but given how warm it is, probably more like ice cream.

Still strewn about on your desk is your current project, rubbings from an elven ruin you'd found in Fereldan. You feel sick every time you look at it, but you can't bring yourself to throw it out. Your quest for knowledge trumps all else... but even that thought has you rolling with panicked nausea. You decide to skip the tea for now and all but burst out of your door.

The air is fresh and hot, real and familiar. You suck in desperate breaths of air as Bella trots around the cottage to butt her head against your chest. Honestly... you have no idea why you even bother with the illusion of putting her inside a fence. Absentmindedly, you run hands through her mane.

"Let's go into the Dales today, Bella," you murmur through the fog in your mind. "Let's forget about knowledge for the day. We'll pick flowers and braid them into our hair." You let your face rest against her head. The smell of her is solid, earthy, and comforting. "Let's let this summer pass us by. Let's just waste our time and prove..." You take a deep breath full of mule. "Prove we can."

She snorts her assent, and you go back inside just long enough to grab your bags, not even stopping.
to put shoes on. Today can be a day for you and Bella. You can ignore your hunger for a few more
days. You place a kiss against Bella's nose, close your eyes, and--

You wake up with another disoriented grunt, this time, regretfully, not to a face full of mule. You're
in a tent, and for a confused second, you think you're in Fereldan, but no, that's stupid. You're in the
desert, and Cole's waking you up three hours before sunrise because sleep is a luxury you can
scarcely afford. No wasting time picking flowers for you, not anymore. You feel an unsettling churn
of nausea. The only thing left from your dream is the disgusting knowledge of just how far your
burning need to know will go.

You push that thought out of your mind and rise, enjoying the cold and dark of the desert, not a
cloud in sight. The stars are beautiful. Perhaps you'll just pick a dune and stargaze until the sun
comes up. Maybe you'll just--

"Not asleep? Is something amiss?"

You grit your teeth against the sound you least want to hear at the moment. It seems that the current
watch is the Seeker. What luck.

"Everything's fine. I sleep poorly under the best of circumstances, and I simply got tired of tossing
and turning. I thought fresh air might clear my mind," you tell her, turning to eye the Seeker. You
feel like her prey more than ever at the moment; it's hard to see her or the Inquisitor as anything other
than enemies to be avoided until they can be taken care of for good. When you look at her, you see a
problem, not a person, and it's an unsettling reminder that she should be viewing you the same way.

"I'm on watch at the moment. If you'd like to walk together--"

"With all due respect, Seeker Pentaghast," you say, your mouth moving before you can stop it.
"There is little I would like less. If you'll excuse me." You turn and stalk away from her, for the
moment uncaring of her thoughts as to why you dislike her so. She barged into your tent with her
sword drawn. You are allowed to hate her.

You make your way to the edge of camp, or whatever you think counts as it, hoping to be far
enough away that the Seeker won't bother you. You've no doubt she'd have the boldness to, despite
what you just said to her. She thinks you misguided. She thinks you naive. The sharp words you
throw at her probably only strike her as hard as a child throwing a tantrum.

Somehow, that thought doesn't do anything for your temper.

But that just leaves you to stew alone, hating who she is and what you are and the overwhelming
realization that you're marching into the desert with her because you are what you are, you are what
you tried to avoid in forgotten corners of Orlais. No matter how long you tried to avoid it with Bella,
the truth of the matter will always catch up with you. She's dead, and your hunger will drive you
over the edge of the Abyssal Rift and into the darkness.

No sooner than the sun is up, it's sweltering. This gives you a very clear picture of your life for the
foreseeable future, and you can't say you much care for it. You've always disliked the cold, but at the
moment you can't help but think that's because you'd never experienced real heat. Still, it's not as bad
as the sticky summer of Seheron in your memory... though that's little comfort.

Solas had the last watch last night, so while you'd gotten a few hours of sleep in under Cole's
watchful eyes, you're still up bright and early, which means you're learning how to do implausible
stretches in the sand. Some are harder, but some are admittedly easier, as sinking an inch or so into
the sand adds a degree of stability to some poses. All in all, you absolutely hate it. You're just voicing this to Solas when something immeasurably worse happens.

"Come on, then," says the Inquisitor, who you hadn't even noticed approaching. You'd been too busy studiously looking anywhere but Solas' bared forearms. "Now that you've warmed up, let's get some practice in."

"Now?" You don't mean it to come out as a whine, but in retrospect it absolutely does.

"Yes, now. I have some time, and by the look of it, so do you. Besides, there have been darkspawn reports in the area we'll be going through today. I'd prefer you learn how to move in sand before we run into a fight, in case you get scared and run headlong in to massacre a hurlock."

That sores you completely, and sets a chill in you that even the morning heat can't bake away. Darkspawn. The one good thing to come of your kidnapping and subsequent slavery is that you'd never had to deal with the invasion of Denerim. You want to believe with all your heart that you would never have been left there to deal with it alone, but you can't be sure.

That lack of darkspawn had been perhaps the singular highlight of your life, besides your talent at avoiding experiencing slavery version two at the hands of the mage Circles. And now, it would seem, the Inquisition is going to take that from you wholesale.

You doubt the Inquisitor can see any of this on your face, but Solas is watching you closely. It doesn't matter. Anyone would be terrified at the prospect of facing darkspawn. In this, you are hardly unique.

"Fair enough," you say with a sigh. "But given what I've heard about darkspawn blood, I don't think that'll be a problem." There's not enough gold in the Inquisitio'n's coffers to get you to willingly fight one of those things. If you do anything, it will be with throwing knives and at a great distance. But you go with the Inquisitor nonetheless. It's not as if there's any discouraging him.

Fifteen minutes later, you can tell he's taking it easy on you, likely not to wear you out before a long day. Something you idly wish Bull would have kept in mind more often, although you suspect he thinks he was the most important part of your day in any case. That being said, footwork in sand is exactly as impossible as he'd made it sound. You slip, you stumble, you almost stab your own foot once, saved only by the Inquisitor quickly knocking your own blade away. It's a bit telling that he's better at controlling the direction of your sword than you are, but whatever. You're not supposed to be good at this.

As a child, Leah taught you how to protect yourself with a knife. Any other sort of weapon would get an alienage elf killed. In Antiva, your lessons had continued in much the same way. In Rivain, you'd learned a little bit of staffwork, but not much. Even in Orlais, full-sized swords had never factored into your training. And come the Inquisition, Bull had focused solely on hand-to-hand. For once, you don't have to fake being bad at something. You just are. The fact that this allows you to genuinely put your all--or most of your all--into the sword training is something of a mildly pleasant side benefit.

Though when you started thinking of this as mildly satisfying and stopped thinking about it as the worst thing in your shitty journey, you're not sure. Probably about the time when it stopped hurting just to lift the Inquisitor's damn sword.

After some shoddy practice and a lot of slipping and being very aware that the Inquisitor could make you fall on your ass if he had a more Bull-like approach to these things, the two of you grab breakfast as camp is being broken down and packed back onto the mounts. This routine, having just
now begun to feel slightly familiar, is almost over. Soon, you'll be at your destination. And, having decided not to run, you'll be with the Inquisition for the foreseeable future.

You throw on a loose-fitting linen top over your undershirt, wrap your face in a damp wrap, check to ensure your knives are all in their proper locations--even slipping the dagger you often keep hidden in the small of your back into place--tie a hat around your neck, and effortlessly pull yourself up onto Revas' back.

Perhaps it's the new, dark tint of your skin, but you can't help but marvel at how much--and yet how little--you've changed.

The desert does not make for a fun ride. You and the mounts both appreciate the frequent water breaks as the Inquisitor--leading once again in the ahead group--zig-zags you across the approach. However, each relief is short-lived and it feels as though it takes no time at all for all the moisture to be sapped from your skin and out of your body entirely. Solas informs you to drink liberally, and you do, absolutely guzzling water down at every opportunity. You're so full with the stuff that you barely eat lunch, managing to munch down some bread only because Solas insists.

The afternoon is unspeakably hot. You feel like bacon sizzling in the sun despite--or perhaps in part because of--the new shade of your skin. At least you're mostly free of the painful sting of burning flesh. Solas' creation certainly worked, and you'll certainly be having him show you how to make it at a later date, when time and resources allow. The acquisition of any knowledge, great or small, helps tamp down on the sizzling panic in your heart, the feeling that you're making a horrible mistake, taking a terrible risk.

Of course, no sooner than you're batting down that growing feeling of dread, an odd shift in the air has you looking up. It almost feels like a storm is coming, but in the desert, you have no idea what a storm would even be like. The sun in the sky seems as bright as ever... Perhaps the wind has picked up, or shifted direction?

The fact that you're looking around, anxious and looking for answers, is why you see them, the sudden crest of darkness over a hill. You have no way of knowing what you're looking at, but something about the sight captures you. When you see it rushing down at the Seeker, the Inquisitor, and Cole like a swarm of ants, you briefly freeze, your whole body seizing with terror. Your voice catches in your throat as you go to speak up, but it doesn't matter.

"Darkspawn!" yells Blackwall, and you finally have a reality to fit to the word in your head.

You can taste the wrongness of them in the back of your throat, even from this distance, something sick and twisted that makes the world itself scream out. You desperately don't want to get any closer than you are right now.

But the others are rushing forward. Of course they are. Those are your companions up there, threatened to be buried in this sensation in the air like sickness and death itself. Sera once said that they save each other, back and forth, without a single thought. It means nothing to them. You wonder what that's like, because as you charge forward to keep pace with the others, all you can think about is that they're definitely all going to owe you for this if you have to get involved.

You leap from Revas' back sooner than the others dismount, thudding down into the sand and pausing just long enough to place a firm hand on his snout. Stay back, you try to communicate through a glare. You refuse to lose him to Blight, and this fight is far too dangerous for a creature that doesn't know to avoid the Darkspawn's diseased blood.
The others are crashing into battle, but Solas hangs back a bit, even further than Sera, who's loosing arrow after arrow in a literal blur. Rather than wonder at how the fuck that works, you scamper to Solas' side. The air tastes like ozone near him, an indescribable tang like the taste of air at the peak of a mountain. That's the only comparison you've ever found apt for trying to describe that taste, that sensation, when the power of the Fade is used to warp reality. It's uncomfortable to be around, but not painful.

You pull out two throwing knives, but you're still too far away. You don't have the kind of range that Sera does with her arrows, or Solas with his spells. You could get them there, but you might risk missing or even hitting one of your companions. Worse than useless. But you don't want to charge forward, either. You're a noncombatant, you remind yourself. No matter how much the Inquisitor has been teaching you in your off time, you're barely a beginner with the blade, and no one here expects you to charge in to fight Darkspawn with a knife.

Which is good. Because you don't want to. You really don't want to. Even as close as you are, you can smell them, a stench like rotting flesh. They're viscerally wrong, every sense you have screeching at you to stay away from them. Even the burning desert sun itself seems dimmer in their presence, the air colder.

That's not your imagination, you realize. There are clouds growing, clouds in the desert... or is that dust? You have no frame of reference for what a dust storm even looks like, but you pray that's not the case. The last thing you need on top of Darkspawn is a fucking sandstorm. Either way, the clouds are growing thick enough to dull the desert's midday sun, and with the absence of light, the Darkspawn's wrongness seems only to grow. You grip your blades tighter, knuckles whitening.

Solas and Dorian are controlling the field masterfully. Sera is away from the horde and relatively safe. It's Blackwall, the Seeker, and the Inquisitor in the thick of things... and presumably Cole, somewhere, but you don't even think spirits can be Blighted. He's probably the safest of anyone here.

But there's just so many. Where did they come from? And yet even this number must be nothing compared to the overwhelming hordes of a Blight proper. Once upon a time, Leah had stared down the face of this times a thousand, times a hundred thousand, and saved it from overwhelming the whole of Fereldan. It feels like only right now do you understand the implications of that. You don't think she'd been any older than you are now. Where did she find the courage? Where does anyone?

There's too many of them. Someone's going to get hurt. Someone's going to get sick. There are Darkspawn overwhelming the fighters now, breaking free to charge towards the back ranks, towards Dorian, Sera, Solas... and you. You swallow thickly, and take as deep a breath as you can through the wraps covering your face. You taste plague in the air, so it doesn't particularly help.

Before the Darkspawn can reach you, however, something huge and fast barrels into them, through them. You'd been so hyperfocused on the approaching Darkspawn, the whole world becoming a narrow tunnel between them and you, that you didn't even hear it approaching. The huge animal—a camel, you realize, which doesn't make the situation any less surreal—sends Darkspawn sprawling, a few even flying through the air in a way that would be absolutely comical in a less dire situation.

You have just enough time to register that there's someone on the camel's back before the figure comes tumbling off, falling onto the sand only recently cleared of Darkspawn. The camel keeps going, and you realize with muted horror that whoever it is, they're surrounded on all sides by rapidly recovering Darkspawn.

There's about to be a massacre.

It seems as though you're the first one to recover, first one blade and then the other hurtling from
your hands, each striking a different darkspawn in a black, oozing eye. You charge forward, one hand going to the Fang at your back so you can defend yourself, and the other grabbing for another throwing blade. But there's a grip on your arm, and you get yanked back, almost losing your footing in the sand.

"Laissez-moi passer, idiot!" you snap, pulling at the grip--which is painfully firm. Your eyes are on the collapsed figure, dark brown against the sand, and the cackling darkspawn, too far back to have been struck by the camel, drawing its bowstring taunt--

The arrow looses, and you desperately hurl your blade, not considering what your companions might make of your talent--you've given this much away to Leliana. But from this angle, from this distance... You slice it in two, too late to matter. The arrow strikes true, the front half of the arrowhead and shaft burrowing into the sand--wait, the sand?

The figure rolled over right before the arrow hit. You let out a ragged breath of relief, but his situation is still dire. He staggers, stumbling, and you fear he was disoriented or concussed from the fall.

"Don't just stand here, you idiot!" you yell, half turning to Solas. "Do something!"

The first of the Darkspawn to recover are charging him, and one or two sprout arrows from Sera's bow, but it's certainly not going to be enough. The man stumbles backwards, then sideways, and then there's a Darkspawn upon him. You kick Solas sharply in the shin, hear a hiss of pain as he finally releases your arm, and begin to run forward, although you're sure you'll be too late. The Darkspawn swings its terrible blade down, but the man trips sideways, narrowly avoiding the blade. Then backwards, avoiding a sideways swipe by collapsing onto the sand, knees bent. Wait--

The man sweeps his legs, knocking the Darkspawn off balance and into another Darkspawn that had been ready to swing, and in that moment, you realize what's happening. You half-stumble yourself as you stop running, staring in disbelief.

The man seems drunk, alright, but thinking that would be a deadly mistake. No, he's tripping and tumbling with purpose, avoiding strikes and bewildering even the near-mindless Darkspawn with unpredictable movements. Forget Solas, the idiot here is you.

He's not just avoiding the Darkspawn, either. No, quick as a whip they begin to fall as he returns blows with blades that glint in the dim light and seem to appear and then vanish just as quick. Of course they do. Only one idiot would stumble like a drunkard and use knives of ice in a desert.

If those Darkspawn don't break his neck, you're going to do it your damn self, because Banal'ras has followed you into the fucking desert.

Chapter End Notes

Me, with faked surprise: oh my god! Look who it is!

Everyone in my Discord knew this was coming but I guess to those of you who didn't, it's a hell of a surprise. Do you remember this asshole? What do you think of our new guest? :o Tell me~
Chapter Notes

There's a bit of Elven in this chapter that I left purposefully untranslated! You can definitely hazard a guess from the context (and if you know elven lmao) though.

To those who have been waiting a long time for this: enjoy! To everyone else: please also enjoy it's like 8000 words long I'M VERY tired!

You know, objectively, that it hasn't been that long since you last saw him, but it isn't often that the two of you had an all out melee to participate in. Had he always been so bloodily efficient? Is that how you look on the battlefield to others, a scythe of efficient magic and daggers through eyes and spines with pinpoint accuracy?

You already know that's not the case; Banal'ras uses his magic in wildly different ways from you. You're all or nothing; he uses it in little subtle ways to accent his natural stumbling fighting style. Any practitioner of a drunken fighting style might "trip," but Banal'ras will do it while summoning a sheet of ice under his feet and slide clean around in an arc to stab his opponent in the back. It melts and evaporates into sand so quickly in the desert heat that it would look like he was gliding if you weren't familiar with the way he fights.

You wonder what he looks like to the others as he stumbles backwards on one leg. You wonder if even the Darkspawn understand what's happening as they slip on briefly summoned ice under their feet in what should be a desert. You wonder if anyone else can see the place at his back where you're not, can understand that his masterful distractions are lacking without you there to take advantage.

No matter how gracefully he slides across the desert, little slicks of ice carrying him away from danger or appearing under his enemy’s foot just in time to make them stumble, no matter how many daggers appear long enough to lodge in an eye socket before melting away, you're keenly aware that he is alone, and you were once the reason he wasn't.

But you're absolutely unnecessary, despite what all the adrenaline rushing through you is saying. With the addition of Banal'ras to the battlefield, the Darkspawn don't stand a chance. You don't need to be there to vanish across the battlefield. They have Cole for that. Who needs your savagery with magic when Dorian is so much more practiced? Your bloody nature would only get in the way in a fight where blood is poison. You're superfluous.

He's had a long time without you, and was trained to fight on his own well before. He's also out there with a squadron of experts, people whose battle prowess puts yours to absolute shame.

People who are more of a threat to him than the Darkspawn, you realize, hands tightening on your dagger. More likely than it finding its home in a Darkspawn, this blade is incredibly likely to taste Templar blood before the hour is out.

You need to get closer to him, but Solas is keeping part of his focus on you even as he controls the battlefield, separating out Darkspawn with walls of ice and blows of force, keeping them from swarming or surrounding. You grit your teeth and wait.
As the last of the Darkspawn fall, the party turns to the newcomer—their savior, you hope they realize, and you move subtly closer, a throwing dagger in each hand. Ready. More ready still when it's the Inquisitor and the Seeker who approach him. You shift away from Solas, knowing he's the only one with any chance of seeing what's about to happen coming. Your eyes slip briefly to him, but he's watching the newcomer as well, not you.

"Timely intervention," the Inquisitor calls out, voice tenser than you think is fair given how Banal'ras just assisted them, risking his own idiot life in the process. The Seeker still has her sword out, and you can practically hear what she's thinking. Apostate. You can't believe that after everything you've been through, this absolute idiot would just--

"Not quite luck," Banal'ras replies, voice cheerful and even and as affable as ever. It sounds like the thud of a knife thrust into your chest, all the way to the hilt. "I was following that group of Darkspawn when your group traipsed through. I thought it would be a bit unkind to just watch."

"Why were you following a group of Darkspawn?" the Seeker demands, voice accusatory. You'd worry that your hawklike focus might give you away, your eyes on your companions and their hands, but your face is still covered and no one is even looking at you.

"Seeking where they were crawling up from the abyss, of course. The only way to stop Darkspawn is to plug up their leaks." He's unarmed, and leaving his hands plainly visible, but they have to know he can be armed in the time it would take them to inhale.

A Templar can nullify magic in the blink of an eye if you get too close—one of the reasons for Banal'ras' long-standing fondness for throwing daggers. But a Seeker is more dangerous still; she could probably nullify the magic of this entire area. But they can't nullify a dagger through the back of the skull, and wouldn't be expecting an attack from you, of all people, to begin with.

"You're not a Grey Warden," the Inquisitor points out. You wonder briefly how he knows, and then remember the whole reason you're traipsing across the desert. There appear to only be two Wardens who haven't lost their minds: Blackwall and this Warden Stroud you're on the way to meet.

"And neither are you. Funny, how the area has so many Darkspawn and so few Wardens," Banal'ras says dryly. "Clearly someone had to step in and do something about it."

"From around here, then?" the Seeker asks, eyes narrow. "Nomad tribe, perhaps?"

"Something like that," Banal'ras says.

Of course they would think that, dressed as he is in desert appropriate garb. He'd thrown off his cloak in the early stages of the fight; it still lays in the sand, blending in almost perfectly. But his face is still mostly covered by a litham that must work a lot better than your own improvised covering. His armor looks only slightly less thrown-together than yours had, a mix of cloth wraps around his arms and legs, a leather cinch around his waist, gloves that probably have a layer of metal along the back to catch blades—a trick you're fond of—and thick guards for his shins and knees. The rest of him is covered with a pair of skin-tight leggings and a loose, billowing shirt only held in check by the arm wraps and leather waist guard. Not to mention his skin—closer to Dorian's tone than that of anyone else here.

You're the only one who could guess he's as Orlesian as a fucking soufflé.

"I'm judging by the armor that you're Inquisition," he says, nodding his head towards the Inquisitor's emblazoned armor. "I don't suppose you're here to take care of our little Darkspawn problem?"
"We're just passing through," the Seeker begins, but the Inquisitor interjects.

"The Darkspawn issue in the Approach was on our list, though. Did you find where they're coming from?"

"I did, in fact," Banal'ras says, and you can almost guarantee he's smiling under that mask at how well the Inquisitor went for his obvious bait. Now you're starting to wonder if you shouldn't have been more worried for your new friends than your old one. "There's a cave not ten minute's ride from here from whence they emerge, but there were too many there for me to get through to see if it can be sealed easily."

The Inquisitor is clearly considering. Good for him, you suppose, that he wants to fix the Darkspawn problem badly enough that he's willing to stop when you're in a rush. If you ever see one again, however, it will be far too soon. You also have no way to know if Banal'ras is telling the truth or up to something, and you're the one who actually knows the man.

"This could be a trick, Inquisitor," the Seeker says quietly, pointing out the obvious.

"Inquisitor?" Banal'ras says, and you have to roll your eyes at how obvious it is that the Seeker really doesn't understand how keen elf ears are. She'd not meant for him to hear that, you're sure. "Such an honor I have this day."

"Given that you're clearly an apostate and I recently began rebuilding the Templars--"

"Templars or no, the Circles are currently disbanded. Unless you and your friends intend to cart me off to your own prisons for the crime of not belonging to a club that no longer exists..." Banal'ras shrugs. "In any case, I would have thought you'd start with your friends." He gestures towards Dorian. "And yet, he looks like he hasn't seen a cage a day in his life."

"Maybe recreationally," you mutter under your breath, much more confident than the Seeker that no one can hear you.

"My point," the Inquisitor says. "Is that you've no reason to see this as an honor. In fact, Cassandra has a point; you have a clear motivation for wishing the Inquisition ill."

"Surely you could say the same of all your apostate friends," Banal'ras points out, casting eyes over your group and lingering on you for too long before sliding over the slightest bit to gaze at Solas instead. Asshole.

"We know them. We have no idea who you are."

"Ah, of course. How rude of me." Banal'ras reaches up, pulling the part of his litham covering his face down, and you wince. Just let them all see your face, sure, okay, great idea. You swear to the Maker, you're going to kick his ass all the way back to the Lake. "My name is Alas'len. I suppose you must be Inquisitor Trevelyan, and Seeker Cassandra Pentaghast, but the rest of you have me at a loss, I'm afraid."

You barely manage to keep a straight face. You haven't heard that name in a while. Just the sound of it releases a churn of uncontrolled emotion in your chest. It hurts, more than you realized it would.

You want to run, and you're not sure if you want to run towards him or away.

That whole thought is a moot point, however, because either would probably be deadly for the both of you, and you're still trying to keep this scenario from ending in a slaughter.
Cautious introductions circle around your traveling companions. Only Dorian and Solas sound particularly chipper about the situation--Cole is nowhere to be seen. You remain silent; that's what you'd do if this was a real stranger you'd just run into. You're just a linguist, after all. Of everyone here, you matter the least. Banal'ras--pardon, Alas'len's eyes linger on you, but he doesn't protest your silence.

"Well then... Alas'len," the Inquisitor says, tongue awkward on the Elvhen syllables. "You say the Darkspawn are holed up nearby?"

Alas'len nods. "There's a cave system with an entrance not far from here. I had enough time to scout a potential pinch point to cut off their access to the surface, but the cave is crawling with their filth. I had no chance of plugging the hole and protecting my own hide."

The Inquisitor hums, clearly considering. You know objectively that it does speak well of him, but if he thinks you're accompanying him into some dark horrible cave filled with monsters, he's got another thing coming. You've discovered exactly how far you can be pushed and it's to this point right here, this point before you go into a Darkpawn infested cave. You don't even want Alas'len to go. You wish you could catch his eye, figure out what his angle is. You wish you could have him alone.

"It could be a trap," the Seeker points out again. "An ambush in the cave, or an easy way to rob us of our horses and supplies."

"We can leave someone here with the horses," the Inquisitor points out. "Emma, for instance, who has no business being in those caves."

"Appreciated," you say dryly.

"Leave one non-combatant here with all our mounts and supplies?" the Seeker protests. "She would be easy pickings to anyone, and there may still be Darkspawn in the area."

If these fools weren't with you, you'd have significantly less to fear from Darkspawn. Provided it wasn't a horde, you suspect you could keep them from even coming close. But you can't say that, and you wouldn't be able to explain the piles of burnt corpses.

"I doubt that all of you would be required to slay the Darkspawn. I'm not even sure you could all fit comfortably in the caves," Alas'len pipes in. "If it would settle your nerves, why not split the party? Some can come assist me with our Darkspawn problem, and the rest can remain here with your delicate companion."

There's a bit of discussion after this, but you already know where it's going to fall. Some will go with Alas'len, some will remain here--and you'll be one of the ones remaining here, meaning you'll be unable to pull his ass out of the fire if things turn dire. You have no desire for him to go into a cave with a Seeker and a would-be Templar. They could do anything to him down there and claim it was the Darkspawn. Your jaw is clenched so tightly that it aches, but you can think of nothing to say to salvage the situation.

"Blackwall should stay behind," the Inquisitor muses, and Blackwall lets out a noise of protest.

"You're going to fight Darkspawn!"

"But if any attack while we're gone, you're the most suited to deal with them," the Inquisitor insists. "With you here, we don't have to leave behind half our forces. Sera, you stay too."

"Fine by me," she says, wrinkling her nose. "Those things smell bad enough out here, let alone in a
"Having learned my lesson about telling Cassandra to stay behind--" the Inquisitor says, earning him a glare. "Dorian, you stay here. The rest of us will go into the cave with Alas'len."

You manage to make brief eye contact with Alas'len while this planning is going on, and give him a thin-lipped, terrified glare. The broad smirk he shoots you in return is no comfort at all. You can do nothing but mouth "come back alive" in Elven and pray to no god at all for the best.

You quietly fume and fret the whole time he's gone, pacing back and forth around the horses. You half expect someone to ask you why you're so worried, but it seems that in this situation, your nerves seem justified. No one would guess that your fears are more for Alas'len than Solas or any of your other new companions... or even for yourself, waiting in Darkspawn-infested lands with a ton of horses and only three trained fighters.

It's the better part of an hour, possibly longer, before you see a group on the horizon. It doesn't take long for you to count the mounts and flood with relief. Alas'len's camel is clear and obvious, but it seems as though everyone else made it out as well. You can't see Cole, but that's hardly cause for concern. He'll turn up. And you'll have to have a long talk with him about Alas'len's secrets.

It's everything you can do not to march right up to your friend, drag him off his stupid camel, and fill his ears with the kind of lecture that would make even Solas tremble. You settle--grudgingly--for a lot of glaring, increased in potency enough to burn through iron when no one's looking.

"We managed to seal off the caves," the Inquisitor announces, mostly to Blackwall, as soon as he's close enough.

"It was fair crawling with Darkspawn," Alas'len says, shaking his head. His litham is back up around his face, but no one seems as put off by it now. "I would never have been able to seal it up alone without being detected."

"One less thing we have to worry about later," the Inquisitor says. "We can continue on into the Approach now. And..."

"Our new friend has decided to accompany us," the Seeker interjects, making no attempt to hide her suspicion on the matter.

"He's what." You're surprised to realize that was your voice.

"The Inquisitor generously offered me aid for helping in dealing with the Darkspawn in this area," Alas'len says cheerfully, eyes on you but expression unreadable behind his mask. "And I'll admit I'm quite curious to learn more about a group that includes two Templars, three mages, and what appears to be a ghost."

"Oh, that's Cole," Dorian pipes in. "You get used to him, somehow."

You open your mouth to object, and then close it. At least this will give you a chance to get him alone. To yell at him. And then warn him. And maybe shake him, both because he deserves it and also because part of you can't believe he's really here.

It had taken long enough to deal with the Darkspawn, and your group is tired enough, that you travel only perhaps another hour before the Inquisitor has you stop near what was no doubt the closest oasis available. You set up camp some small distance away from the actual water, which Blackwall explains to you is because of the blood still staining their armor. There's not a great deal of flowing
water in the desert, and no one wants to risk tainting an oasis with the Blight.

Of course, you can't help but notice that you, Alas'len, and Dorian appear to be the only ones who made it through the battle without getting some degree of tainted blood on your clothing.

"Perhaps the three of us could be the fill the water barrels and haul them to camp?" you suggest.

"Emma," Dorian protests, sounding as if you'd just stabbed him in the back.

"A good idea," Blackwall agrees, grinning. "We wouldn't want to risk any contamination."

"I must protest," Dorian begins, but the Inquisitor cuts him off.

"Oh, just use magic, the lot of you," he says, rolling his eyes. "Make the barrels float or something."

"Inquisitor, if I could make barrels float, I would never carry anything again," you say dryly.

"If you've got two big, strapping lads to do it, I don't see why you'd have to do any heavy lifting at all," the Inquisitor says. "It's not as if upper body strength is your forte." You can see the Seeker rub her face, clearly tired, behind him.

"My feminine noodle arms and I will make do," you say, letting your voice get just a little icy, to see if either of them will notice. Both do. The Inquisitor looks confused; the Seeker meets your eyes with the long-suffering gaze shared between women since time immemorial. The Inquisitor follows your gaze and glances back at the Seeker, and then towards you.

"...What did I say now?" he wonders aloud.

"I must protest to either of us being called 'big' or 'strapping,'" Alas'len chimes in. "I realize it's difficult to see me under these robes, but our friend here appears to be quite trim." He gives Dorian an appraising up and down look that's clear even with his litham on.

"Also, if it weren't for Sera, our new friend would be the shortest one here," you point out, which catches you the sharp look from Alas'len you'd expected.

"I believe I might have perhaps a scant inch on you," he says, voice teasing despite the look he's giving you. He does; you know he does. You remember the summer he shot up like elfroot, and the subject of your comparative heights never ceased to be a popular topic since. "If you'd care to stand very close, we could have someone measure."

"No need for that," you say, picking up an empty water barrel. "I'm fairly sure Dorian here has a spell for that."

"A spell for measuring heights?" Dorian asks, dryly. "What must you think of the laziness of my countrymen, to assume such a thing."

"Tell me I'm wrong and I'll tell you all the practical uses of a measuring spell," you point out, handing him the barrel. He takes it, although he doesn't look particularly happy about it.

You turn to grab another one, but Alas'len has already picked one up and hands it to you, getting a little too close to press it into your arms. He has a troublesome glint in his eyes that you recognize even without being able to see the rest of his face. You shoot him back a glare so potent that you suspect anyone nearby can see the sparks fly. You swear, the second you get him alone...

"Are you quite certain you want me along for this?" Dorian asks, sounding amused.
"In some places, it is necessary for a lady to have a chaperone when she must share the company of an unfamiliar man," Alas'len chirps in.

"I'm not from any of those places, and wouldn't qualify as a lady regardless," you say sourly. "But if you think you're getting out of helping me carry these damn barrels that easily, Dorian, you have another thing coming."

With a long sigh, Dorian starts across the sand towards the oasis, and you and Alas'len follow at just enough of a distance that you can hiss under your breath at him, inaudible to Dorian's human ears.

"What the fuck are you doing, lethallin?" you demand quietly. "You're going to get us both killed!"

"I'm sure I have no idea what you mean," he murmurs back.

"Don't you start that shit with me! What are you thinking?! They know you're a mage now! They've seen your face!"

"Do breathe, lethallin. They've seen a desert apostate and nothing else. So long as you don't blow my cover by being overly familiar."

"Blow your cover?! I've been here for months, you absolute prat! You have no idea who I am to them! If they get even a hint--"

"I will be overjoyed to get to know you, Emma," he says, and for the first time, his voice betrays bitterness. "Just as well as I intend to get to know your friends," he adds, with a glance towards Dorian.

"Do not," you hiss. "I mean it. Don't you dare."

"Don't dare? Dare not what, exactly? Join the Inquisition with an old name no one knows anymore, then immediately learn the ins and outs of a man old enough to be my father?"

"...Dorian's not old enough to be your father," you settle on finally, after too long silent. You glance up at him, trying to do math in your head. "...Probably." There are too many unknown variables and your confusion with regards to Solas' age is still too fresh on your mind for you to trust your guesses.

Dorian's at the oasis now, and you're catching up too fast. "Find a way to be alone with me later." Even you don't know if it's a demand or a plea. "We need to..." Talk? Catch up? Plot?

"Ah, you know me too well already," Alas'len says with a smile. "I love nothing more than getting people alone."

That chance to be alone doesn't come until well after dinner, which you spend glued to Solas' side and sullenly silent. For once, Solas seems more than willing to pick up any conversation that you don't want to have, and is serving the same general function that you have for him in the past. You're left alone to stew as much as is possible in these circumstances.

Alas'len is doing a good job spreading his affections around. You've seen him work before, but this is the first time you've felt the need to suilk about it. Of course, Pentaghast and Sera are more than ready to loathe him, both for his personality and the fact he's a mage, which you can't help think speaks somewhat poorly of them. You understand how people could hate him, you suppose, but as he breaks off a piece of his bread to offer to you, commenting with a pout how you're barely eating, you can't help but think that anyone who does is probably somewhat soulless.
Of course, him offering you bread with that pouty, wide-eyed, cute-little-brother expression—and you actually taking it and eating it—is probably the source of a fair chunk of extra dislike from Sera, given her general attitude towards you. You know for a damned fact that Alas'len actually is flirting, too, so if she's pissy about Solas... This is actually justified by comparison.

In the course of a single meal, you watch as Alas'len figures out the correct attitude to have with each of your companions, about as fast as you had, although with a great deal more direct interaction. Despite—or probably because of—your protest, he spends more than his fair share of flirtation on Dorian. Part of that, however, is probably just because the only other one here open to it is you. Dorian is just plain better at being seduced than you.

It's almost worth the danger of the situation to watch the Inquisitor utterly fail to realize when he's being flirted with, though. Especially because the Seeker definitely notices.

"Goodness," Alas'len almost purrs, feigning shock well. "All of the men here are quite rugged. Do you feel left out?" he directs this last comment at Solas, as he rubs a hand woefully over his own bare face. "I believe I do."

You can see the Inquisitor turning slightly pink, self-consciously running a hand over his own growing stubble, which is by now a short beard in its own right. He hasn't particularly had time to shave on the road. You're pretty sure Dorian does so by magic.

"Ah... It's just, you know..."

You lean onto one hand, watching with detached bemusement as a man who was actively hostile two hours ago fumbles over himself trying to deal with a compliment. Absolutely wretched. Why can't you do that? Who compliments a man on his facial hair, anyway? Save Dorian, they just look unkempt to you. Ugh. You suppose that's why you can't do that. "Charming" only works for you in short bursts. Alas'len, by contrast, just fucking oozes it. Jackass.

You made such a good team, once. How did you ever luck into finding someone who filled in your shortcomings? Alas'len kept your temper in check—barely—and you... well, you made sure he actually brushed his hair, and didn't run dick-long into every bad decision possible. You'd wondered how he was faring in your absence, but his presence here answers the question somewhat succinctly. Bad decisions were back on the menu, and he always did have quite the appetite.

It's well into the night by the time you manage to sneak off, despite how distracted everyone is by Alas'len's presence. You skulk out of sight behind a large, scrubby, thick tree some distance from camp. You'd had to skirt by Pentaghast, who was on guard duty at the time. Fortunately, the other guard was Cole, so she was probably distracted paying more attention to him than, you know, actual threats.

Since you sleep alone—well, with Cole, but that's essentially the same thing—you're able to lurk out there for a while, which is good because Alas'len takes his damn time finding you. He'd set up his own tent—far more suited to the desert than any of the Inquisition's, furthering his disguise as a nomad—but you're sure people are watching him much more closely than they are you. You're not bitter that it took him a long time, so long as he was careful.

He slips down next to you, back against the bark of the tree, but you round on him before he has enough time to so much as inhale. You twist over in front of him, locking your knees around his and letting your weight sit on his legs, eyes a furious blaze as you glare right in his face.

"Well, someone implied she would appreciate an illicit midnight meeting, and--"

"Don't you dare play cute with me right now! You're going to get me killed! You're going to get yourself killed! You are going to get us both absolutely murdered! What were you thinking?!"

"I was thinking that the last time you came to Orlais, you walked into my back yard and then refused to meet with me outside of asking for a favor. I was thinking that you would take this moment, crossing Orlais, to leave the Inquisition rather than be dragged into a Darkspawn infested desert. And then I was thinking that if I wanted anything resembling an answer for why you hadn't, I was clearly going to have to go to you."

That brings you up short. Unfortunately. You should have been more prepared for him to have reasons, let alone good ones, but your mind hadn't gotten much further than "what the fuck you idiot aaaaaaaaaah" in actuality.

"...I can't just leave," you say finally, rubbing your forehead. "I'm in very, very deep here. I'd have to toss Alix if I just up and left."

"I've seen you toss names for a lot less than being dragged into a Blighted desert full of demons, Darkspawn, and who knows what else," Alas'len points out. "You'd already all but trashed her when you left Val Royeaux the first time."

When you say nothing, sulking, he sighs and presses a finger against your nose. You snort and bat his hand away. "You have gotten far too used to lying to people who know nothing about you, lethallin."

"Me, chief amongst them," you grumble under your breath. "I have a lot of resources here, lethallin, and I'm growing them every day. I'm this close to having a whole damn team of mercenaries." You reach your hand out, as if trying to grasp something just out of reach. "A fortress full of elves who trust me, two remarkably powerful mages who dote on me, even that idiot Seeker is intent on babying me. I hate this. But I'd be an idiot to toss that to avoid a traipse through the desert."

"You had more in Val Royeaux," he says, and you once again hear the barely-concealed bitterness in his voice.

"If anything, that was the problem," you say with a sigh, then endeavor to change the subject. You'll get nowhere being angry with him when he has just as much reason to be angry with you. "Surely things haven't fallen apart without me? I left them in such capable hands, after all."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Alas'len scolds, and you snort. "Liar."

Alas'len lets out the sigh of the eternally tested, who coincidentally also have nothing to say in their own defense, because you're right. "Things are in pure chaos right now. Not with ours--we're fine. But we're perhaps the only ones left in Val Royeaux doing so well."

"I trust you're taking appropriate advantage?"

"Am I ever," Alas'len says, rubbing the side of his face. "We've more than tripled in size, although I suspect we have significant overlap with Briala's people at this point."

"It's to be expected," you say with a nod. "We're drawing from the same well, after all."

"I've had to create tiers," he complains. "Since we can't possibly risk information falling into the
wrong hands. It's all very complicated. I hate it."

"You love it," you counter.

"I love the reality of it being done. I hate having to actually do it," he grumbles.

"Awww," you tease. "The desk work of running an underground elven legion getting you down?"

"Yes." He thumps down into the sand with a very put-out sigh. "You neglected to tell me how much of it was involved. I was led on."

"That's not how I remember it happening," you muse, as if thinking it over. "In fact, I remember no small amount of begging..."

"I have never begged a day in my life."

"How do you say such tremendous lies with such a straight face?"

"It comes with the territory," he says dryly. "I could ask you the same. You stayed retired for, what, five minutes?"

"That wasn't my fault," you grumble, crossing your arms. "Trouble found me."

"And then you ran directly at more of it, instead of coming home."

"I thought the Inquisition would be a safe place to wait out the war," you say, running a hand through your hair. Your bun is coming loose; you just go ahead and yank it out and let your hair fall down. You try to brush some sand and knots out of it with your fingers. "I didn't think they'd drag me across Orlais twice in as many months."

"And this Solas idiot is worth that trouble?"

You freeze, hand still in your hair, then glare at him out of the corner of your eyes. "He's not the reason."

"You went on a job with him."

"I used him as a cover for a job," you counter. "He's too perceptive for me to have snuck out on my own, and what if he caught me at it? How would I explain taking down magical wards? He'd already found out I was a bard; it just worked out."

"He just found that out did he? What else does he know about you?"

"Not much. ...I think," you admit, squinting into the middle distance. "Hard to know for sure. Nothing important about you, despite your best attempts to ruin that. I'm pretty sure he thinks Banal'ras is my ex-boyfriend."

Alas'len snorts. "Not entirely inaccurate. I definitely remember getting dumped."

"If I dumped you, it's even more inappropriate for you to chase me into a desert," you say dryly.

"Wouldn't it be a grand romantic gesture?"

"Stalking."

"Damn. I've never been clear on that score."
"Lethallin," you say finally, still running fingers through your hair in a failed attempt to comb it. "Why in the Maker's name did you do magic in front of the Inquisition?"

"Because there were a load of Darkspawn, ma moitié, and I didn't want to die."

"Bullshit."

Alas'len sighs. "Because I'm not good at this." He gestures vaguely at you. "And there is a Seeker here. If she finds me half-hidden, what happens to you? How many times have you lectured me on that very thing?"

You're silent. That's a very good argument, and precisely why you hadn't wanted to show him your trick in the first part, and had refused to teach him when he couldn't do it instantly.

"They would have figured it out sooner or later," he says with a shrug. "Less suspicion if I show them straight-out. Show them what they think should be a secret, and they stop looking. Who taught me that?"

"...Me," you grumble under your breath. "...I'm not used to you making decisions that have any degree of thought behind them."

Alas'len reaches up to shove half-heartedly at your shoulder. "You weren't paying attention, then."

"I can promise you, I absolutely was."

"Well, it couldn't possibly be that something happened recently that required me to suddenly and abruptly take on a huge amount of responsibility," Alas'len says dryly. "That would be ridiculous."

"Alright, alright," you say, putting your hands up in surrender. You're definitely not going to win anything with him now; he has too much on you. "Speaking of a sudden onset of responsibility..."

"Oh, this is going to be good."

"The girl I sent your way, Dirth'len. Where did you wind up sending her? If you're having trouble, I sent a bunch of refugees out to--"

"She's in your old apartment."

"Oh, she--what?"

"The old apartment," he repeats blandly.

"It was... empty?" you ask, feeling hurt, unreasonably. 

Alas'len glances up at you, wordlessly, considering. "That upsets you?"

You say nothing, kicking at the sand with your bare foot.

"Did you expect me to stay? See your ghost around every corner?" he continues. "Wake up every evening to an empty bed?"

"...I guess that would be stupid," you mutter, tucking your knees up against your chest and wrapping your arms around them. "Why would you let her keep living alone, though? She's a child. She needs a family, or an orphanage."

"She's not that young," he says with a shrug. "And besides, it's what she wanted."
You twist your head to look at him sharply. "...Is it now? She wanted to stay in an empty apartment in a shitty corner of the Alienage? Why would she want that, I wonder."

Now it's Alas'len's turn to sulk quietly.

"Why, pray tell, would a little girl want to stay in the same hell hole she grew up in, when she ought to have the whole world to choose from?"

"...She wanted to stay with me," he said finally, airily as if he's not confessing to anything at all.

You turn and begin kicking furiously at his legs.

"Ow! Ow! Stop it, you--"

"You fuck! I told you to move her along! She's a baby!" you hiss at him, only not yelling because you don't want to draw attention.

"What do you think I'm doing to her?!" he hisses right back, scooting away from your furiously kicking legs. "I'm not a monster, you absolute--"

"Don't let some lonely little street rat get attached! Are you an idiot?!"

"Are you?!"

"YES! How do you think I know?"

This time, he kicks, and it catches you right in the side. You let out a little pained wheeze and fall over.

"It's too late for your fucking regrets," he snarls, and you hold up your hands again.

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Oh didn't you."

"You were supposed to move her along! I gave instructions," you whine.

"She wanted to stay."

"You shouldn't have given her that as an option! You're as shitty of an influence as I am! Possibly worse. Neither of us have any business being around children. We'll groom them without even meaning to."

"You sent her to me, already a third of the way there," he says rolling his eyes. "And she didn't want to leave."

"She didn't want to leave because you're hot and she's hitting puberty!" you snap. "What girl in her situation would want to? Hand a starving orphan a hot, mysterious older man, what would you expect?"

"Ooh, describe me more."

"Can you please take this seriously?"

"No. Also, you're the one who handed her to the sexy rogue," he points out. "If you want to bitch about turning her life into the plot of a youth's romance novel, bitch at yourself first."
"I presumed you would see a whiny little girl and hurl her out of the city limits so fast she'd snap through the Veil twice. Also, who else was I supposed to ask?"

"Jean?"

"Jean doesn't have the resources to move an elf orphan anywhere. You do! That's the whole point of Banal'ras!"

"Not the whole point."

"We move elves!" you exclaim, exasperated. "For fuck's sake, 'Len!"

"I'm not making her miserable to soothe your shitty conscious," he snaps finally. "Look, I'm not telling her anything, but she's three fifths of the way there on her own." He reaches into his robes, pulls something out. "This is a letter she wrote you, in about thirty minutes, right after hearing where I was going."

He thrusts the paper at you, and you open it wordlessly.

It's a letter alright. It's a letter in code. It's a very basic cipher; looks like a simple 1-1 alphabetic cipher based on... some mathematical formula, maybe. You glance up.

"Did you...?"

"No. You're looking at baby's first secret message," he says dryly. "Someone will swoop her up in a heartbeat if she's not dead by fifteen."

You glare back down at the message, which almost certainly doesn't include anything that would require coding to begin with. "...This is still your fault. I'm still mad at you."

"When are you not?"

"--set the whole thing on fire, but try doing that when your resident firestarter has fucked off to raise llamas--"

"It's not even hard, you one-trick pony; what kind of mage can't cast a fireball?"

"My fire acts like fire. Your fire acts like it's--hold on." Alas'len pauses, and you do too, stiffening. You're fairly far away from camp, but if someone overhears... Or even sees, the way the two of you have wound up halfway on top of each other--ostensibly for warmth, actually because you both have a lot of hair that's better suited to having someone else comb it.

Alas'len twists, straddling your hips so he can crane his neck around the tree. "...False alarm," he says after a moment, sitting back on his legs. "I thought I heard someone."

"Thank the Maker," you grumble. "I have no idea how I'd explain being alone with someone I just met behind a tree at midnight. They already think I'm enough of a slut as it is."

"They do?" Alas'len asks, looking equal parts shocked and delighted. "You? How? Why?"

"I don't know! It just happened!" You let out an exasperated sigh. "I think Bull used it as a cover with the Inquisitor once, and one of the first assets I met there was a real rumormonger... It just ballooned, and now I'm the fort mount, somehow."

"Well, that's easy then," he says with a shrug. "I'm a charming rogue, you're a loose woman. Lean
into it, and we have every excuse in the world to sneak off together without suspicion."

"It's not nearly that easy," you say, thinking of Sera.

"Oh? Someone here whose opinion of your reputation matters?" Alas'len asks archly.

"Kind of, yes. I just convinced the Warden I wasn't sleeping my way through the ranks!"

"You're concerned about what a Warden thinks of you? With what they're up to? Lethallin, are we projecting again?"

"Shut up," you hiss, because you absolutely are projecting again. "Wait, what do you know about what the Wardens are up to? And also, how?"

"No one can move that many men around without accumulating rumors. People talk. Details are few and far between, but whatever they're up to, it's dire enough that they've neglected their duties utterly. Every Warden in Thedas gathering in the Approach, and they're somehow lacking the manpower to take care of the Darkspawn on their doorstep." He shakes his head. "And the Inquisitor is heading out with a full advance party—and you. Something insane is starting. I can smell it."

"That's probably me. It's hard to bathe on the road."

Alas'len rolls his eyes. "Well, if you're not going to let me bed you, we'll need to think of something else. There's more we have to share than can be accomplished in a few midnight romps through the desert, and someone will see us eventually if we keep trying to sneak off."

"It's too suspicious for us to know each other from anything," you muse out loud. "I can't risk it after all the conclusions the Nightingale is already drawing about me." But of course, no matter what you do, Sera is bound to be furious with you. She'll assume the worst again, just like she does with Solas. But maybe that's for the best. For her and Solas, if the see you seduced by some tramp, maybe they'll finally drag you off of that pedestal. You're not getting out of this without hurting Sera, and you've tried breaking things off with her so many times. The two of you just keep bouncing back together like idiots. But if she calls it off...

No, that's cruel. And also, she'd hate you. But you've broken up with her what, seven times? It doesn't stick!

But maybe, if you break up with her and rebound, she'll get the hint?

"...Let's revisit that seduction idea."

"Oh, you always know just what to say."

"Quiet. Be your normal charming, idiot self. Only this time, I'll let it work. We'll start spending a bit more time together. It'll buy time, and if we ever are seen sneaking out together, well..."

"Charming, I can do. Although if you have that Tevinter third-wheeling every single time, I can't promise you'll keep my undivided focus."

You reach up to push him, shoving him--gently--off of you. "I told you, no. Don't get any ideas with him."

"You can't possibly expect me not to have ideas. He's a noble human--it absolutely wafts off of him--and a Tevinter to boot. Also, you have seen him, yes?"
"He's not a score for you to settle! He's kinder than you think, Alas'len, and he doesn't deserve what you do to men."

"You make it sound like it's not enjoyed thoroughly by all parties," he says, pouting.

"It's not. They might enjoy you sinking your claws in, but no one enjoys when you rip them out."

"You want me to be gentle?"

"Lethanalin," you spit out, and Alas'len stills.

"Tel'halel? Mi'tam shem?"

"Tel'halel! Shem na mir falon."

Alas'len pouts again, crossing his arms. "I can't believe you. Over some Vint! You can't do that on all of them, you know! I thought you'd save it for your bald mage."

You snort. "Lethallin, if you can seduce Solas, you deserve to. At this point, I might consider if a favor. Now, we have our plan. Let's get back to camp--separately--before someone realizes both our tents are empty."

"Fine," he says with a sigh. "But I want you to understand that you're an absolute bore and no fun at all."

"Good. Between the two of us, maybe we'll average out to one normal person."

Chapter End Notes

Please check out this fanart of Banal'ras just... just because I want you to. Everyone needs a face to put to the obnoxious personality, right?

This was a really long chapter, so you know the routine. Please leave a comment, even if it's just to say you liked it (this is the only way I know whether or not something was enjoyed), hit the kudos button and get infinitely frustrated by the sight of "you've already left kudos on this work :)", and make sure you're subscribed or following me on Tumblr or Twitter for update notifications. <3 Thanks for reading!!!
“You have a friend!”

From the way Cole’s unbridled enthusiasm explodes out of him the second you crawl into your tent, he must have been waiting to get you alone with even more enthusiasm than you’d had about getting Alas’len alone. He’s practically vibrating.

“I have several friends, Cole. Like you, for instance.”

“In, out, flowing freely from one into another. A body doesn’t choose to breathe but takes in air—”

“I get it,” you interrupt with a sigh. He doesn’t seem to take any offense to your interjection. “We have to talk about him anyway, I suppose. Remember when I first arrived, Cole, and we had to chat about secrets?”

“A similar role, two faces or more, offering protection. A new kind of armor. I had to get used to it. But the armor is best described by the one who wears it…”

“You want to go talk to him?” you ask, amused. “Well, I suppose that’s for the best. You shouldn’t tell me his secrets either… or him mine.”

“But—”

“We’re friends because we tell each other things when we want to. When we need to. I don’t know what secrets he’s got, and it should stay that way.” You run a hand through your still-loose hair. No point in putting it back up before bed. “So yeah. Go talk to him about it; that’s a good idea, honestly. I still can’t believe you’re this excited, though. He might actually vibrate through one of the walls of your tent. That’s a thing he could probably do; you’re pretty sure corporeality is just a goal he aspires towards.

“He’s your friend,” Cole repeats with maximum insistent enthusiasm, as if this alone should be all the explanation needed. You just laugh. “He shines like you and Solas!”

“Does he?” you muse, curious. You know what you’d thought Cole had meant the first time he’d said that about you and Solas. Now you’re not so sure.

Before you can get an answer out of him—and it’s probably your own fault, since you’d just been talking about keeping Alas’len’s secrets—Cole has vanished. You shake your head, bemused despite yourself. Alas’len is in for an interesting night, it seems. As for you, you doubt you’ll be able to sleep. Even regardless of your usual problems, your head is just too full of thought and ghosts of the past to have any real hope at rest.

Instead, you light up a lantern—you cannot wait until you and Alas’len are ‘close’ again so you can demand he cast you all number of petty spells you can no longer cast for yourself—and attempt to focus on your tome. Ostensibly the reason you’ve been dragged out this far, you can’t help but blame it for the tangled predicaments you’ve found yourself in. Sera and Solas and the Seeker and now even Alas’len on top of it all. Without even talking about the fucking Darkspawn! You can’t forget that particular nightmarish horror just because you’re distracted by interpersonal drama. You can’t blame Alas’len for being bewildered by your decision to stay and crawl through the desert. Thinking
back to the petty excuses for staying with the Inquisition that you offered up to Alas’len, you can’t help but sigh again. If only you were so sure of your own motivations.

The night fairly crawls by, but the sun does rise eventually. You immediately wish it hadn’t. The sun has no more than begun peeking over the horizon than the desert begins to heat up. The only good thing you can say for it is that at least it’s not the sticky heat of Seheron. But when you’re merely frying instead of steaming, it hardly feels that distinct.

Almost as exhausting as the promise of another miserably hot day is Alas’len the very second he wakes up. You know damn well that he’s not a morning person, and also that Cole probably kept him up nearly as late as you stayed awake. And yet here he is, chipper as a fucking songbird at dawn. You make a small cup of tea over the campfire and try to stay out of the way.

“Oh yes, I’ve lived in the desert all my life,” Alas’len lies easily as the Seeker questions him with what she probably thinks is diplomacy. He’s left his litham off this morning, and his shaggy black hair lays messily to one side, giving him an earnest sort of appearance. It has the unfortunate side effect of making your hands itch for a comb. “But to answer your unspoken question, no, not with any particular tribe. You’ll find little luck smacking at the sand to see what magic turns up, my brave Seeker.”

“You turned up, didn’t ya…” grumbles Sera, who, next to the Seeker, is probably the most unhappy about having a third mage in the party. You’d say ‘if only she knew,’ but you’re extensively glad she does not.

“True,” Alas’len agrees smoothly. “A bit of luck, that. Normally it’s much more difficult to find out what needs to be smacked to get me to appear.”

“I’ve got a few ideas for things I’d like to smack,” you quip, glaring his way over an unfinished cup of tea. “Are you always so energetic in the mornings?”

“I am full of energy at all times, my lady!” he replies cheerfully.

“I’m no more a Lady than our Warden,” you say, rolling your eyes. “You did catch my name, did you not?”

"I wouldn't want to be presumptuous, Miss Emma," he says, placing a hand to his chest. "But if you wish—"

"All I wish for is a nap in some shade."

"Ah, shall I stand in the sun's way?"

You give him the long, withering stare of a woman well aware she's being hit on, who is still considering whether or not a heavy stick will be necessary. "You know what, yes. If you're so eager to be of use, let's see if you have similar functions to a well-placed tree."

"Oh, I have many functions indeed, Miss Emma," he says, eyes twinkling as he strolls gamely over to stand in between you and the burning sun. "And unlike a tree, I can be taken with you."

"If I'd known he was willing to be an umbrella, I would have snatched him up first," says Dorian with a sigh.

"Oh, just use your magic," you reply, rolling your eyes, so that you can be seen attempting to ignore getting flustered by how close Alas’len is standing.
"Even if I did have magic for such a thing—"

"You absolutely do."

"—I wouldn't use it. No sun could be as potent as the force of Sera's glare."

"Displeased with the presence of magic, my lady?" Alas'len asks, directing the question towards Sera.

"Oh, don't you start with that ‘my lady’ shite. I'm exactly as much of a lady as she is," Sera says, pointing at you.

"Which puts her on par with Blackwall," you add as an unnecessary reminder.

"Of course, Miss Sera."

"None o' that either!" she snaps. "An' of course I'm not 'appy about it! I'm a normal person, yeah?"

"Not sure I'd go that far..." the Inquisitor mutters from where he's hoisting full water barrels back up onto horseback.

"Is no one else excited about the possibility of the term 'Miss Blackwall'?" Dorian muses, ostensibly to himself.

"Being a normal person must include things I hadn’t previously assumed," Alas’len muses.

"I’ve been saying that since I came down here," adds Dorian.

"Sera didn't have the dubious benefit of living in Tevinter for any period of time like either of us," you tell Dorian. "Magic is comparably less common in Fereldan."

"Are you just telling people that about you now?" Dorian asks incredulously. "I seem to recall you nearly biting my head off for guessing that."

"I have absolutely given up on keeping any secrets around you people," you reply evenly. "It's impossible."

"You're from Tevinter?" Alas'len asks, blinking in surprise. "I thought elves there—"

"You thought right. I was Dorian's loyal servant, you see, and when he fled his homeland—"

"Please don't use me to prank the newcomer, Emma."

"You're not fun," you say, pouting, then sigh. "If you're very curious, Young Master Alas'len, you can simply ask Varric after we arrive in the Approach. He's likely writing a book on the subject."

"Young Master..." Alas'len begins, looking equal parts amused and baffled.

You shrug, standing up to go help Eugene prep the horses. "If you're going to be calling me Miss, it only seems appropriate."

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The Inquisitor’s distrust of Alas’len is obvious if for only one reason: he’s here with the main group, with your elven newcomer, while Seeker Pentaghast leads the ahead party. This is the first time you’ve seen him not go to the ahead group with her. Normally, he sticks to her like glue, and now
here he is, obviously trying not to be obvious while keeping an eye on the new mage.

They’re so unsubtle sometimes; you have no idea how the Inquisition gets anything accomplished. Leliana’s influence, probably.

For all his obvious spying, it’s you that Alas’len winds up next to during the morning ride—although that’s probably aided by the fact that Dorian’s in the ahead group. Revas clearly doesn't know what to make of Alas'len's camel. Which is fair, honestly, because you don't either. You've paused briefly at an oasis to rest the mounts, and you're taking the moment to explore the realities of a camel, assisted by Alas'len. When he got experience with camels, you genuinely have no idea, but you play along anyway. You don't even have to force the giggle that sneaks out of you when the camel lips curiously at your palm.

"He's adorable," you announce—and hear Revas snort in displeasure from a few feet away where you tied him to a tree, having foreseen his jealousy. "Look how much his lips can stretch!"

Delighted, you feed him another piece of oat cake.

"His feet are much more suited to this sand," Alas'len is explaining, "and he needs far fewer water breaks than your horses."

"On one hand, it's kind of a shame the Inquisition didn't have access to such mounts... I know that after so long on the road, the horses are getting exhausted no matter how much resting we do," you say with a sigh. "On the other hand, I'm damn delighted that I don't have to learn to ride one of these."

"Don't you want to? You seem to favor her."

"I can favor something without wanting to ride it... Despite what everyone seems to think," you add under your breath, mostly for yourself. Technically, you're capitalizing on your reputation as an absolute slut right now, so it's a bit petty to still be complaining about it. Still, if you'd known it was going to be like this, you wouldn't have put so much damn effort into being undateable.

You and Alas'len continue chatting as you begin to travel again, and when Alas'len begins extolling you with hopefully fictional stories of him daring ancient ruins in the Approach, even Solas joins in the conversation.

"There are actually apparently several ruins nearby to where we're headed," you inform him. "I'm hoping to have an opportunity to examine them after we've settled."

"By yourself?" Alas'len asks, concern fake and implications obvious.

"It's a military outpost," you say with a shrug. "I'm fairly sure I can find a few brave young adventurers to keep me relatively safe."

"We could make a trio of it," Solas suggests. "Given that we all have some degree of ruin-delving experience."

You squint briefly at Solas, trying to remember if you'd told him about any of your ill-advised lone ventures into ancient tombs. Probably. You probably have. It seems like something you'd do.

"Two mages and a linguist walk into an ancient Tevinter ruin..." Alas'len jokes.

"They get eaten by giant spiders because they're idiots who didn't bring any soldiers or mercenaries with them," you interject dryly. "Seriously, it's a military outpost filled with mercenaries. Why in the Maker's name would we go alone?"
"For the sake of privacy?" Alas'len suggests.

"I feel the need to emphasize these are actual ruins that I actually want to study, on the off chance that 'explore the ruins' is desert-nomad slang for something."

"It absolutely is, but I don't see any reason why we can't do both."

"I do," Solas protests.

"Why should you have a say?" Alas'len asks.

"Because I was invited."

"I'm uninviting both of you and taking Dorian instead."

"I don't think he'd be much use exploring your ruins," Alas'len points out.

"I've changed my mind; I'm going alone."

"Wot, am I not even an option then?" comes Sera's irritated voice. You glance over at her in surprise.

"...Do you want to spend a few days in ancient Tevinter ruins with me while I gas on and on about elven history?" you ask, blinking.

"...Well, I might," she grumbles, after a long pause. "Y'could at least ask."

"Well... if you want to tag along, I'd be glad to have you," you muse, rubbing the back of your head uncertainly. "But I'm pretty sure you'd hate it. Seriously, twenty minutes of listening to me gas on about Elvhenan this and Arlathan that and I'm pretty sure you'd be ready to feed me to a spider yourself."

"Why would y'be goin' on about them anyway? S'a Tevinter ruin, right?"

"Ancient Tevinter was built on the bones of Arlathan," Solas interjects. "Such is the basis of Emma's research into Elvhenan: she researches the Tevene and the Elvhen side by side to discover similarities. I confess some surprise that you did not already know this, Sera."

"Why in the Maker's name would I know any o' that?"

"Your disinterest in the elven is well known, but I thought perhaps your interest in Emma would have outweighed it."

"Alas'len," you say, voice cracking a bit in your desperation to change the subject as fast as possible before Sera takes Solas's entire head off his shoulders, metaphorically or literally, "I don't suppose you've been to any of the ruins near where we're heading?"

You look back over to Alas'len and catch, belatedly, the narrowed glint in his eyes: the way they slip back from Sera to you, and then over to Solas.

He is putting something together, you're quite sure of it. And you don't like it one bit.

"Unfortunately, no. They were always far too dangerous, and the increase in Darkspawn in the area hasn't particularly changed that for the better. But if it's Tevinter ruins you're after, you've certainly come to the right place. We're lousy with ruins, and no one seems in a hurry to excavate them. The deeper you go into the desert, the more untouched they are... well, by people, anyway."
"Implying they've been touched by all manner of inhuman things. And you wanted to go with just me and Solas," you say, rolling your eyes. "I'm amazed you've survived this long, young master."

"Am I going to be able to get you to stop calling me that?"

"No."

You didn't know that it was possible, but Sera is in an even worse mood for all your talking about ruins and research with Alas'slen and Solas, both of whom were extremely interested in the topic. Which is miserable, because if it weren't for that, it would have been one of the best damned conversations you'd had involving more than one other person since you joined the Inquisition.

Although considering that one of those people already knows all this shit and is just faking interest for a variety of reasons, maybe that's not really any kind of triumph at all. When thinking about it from that angle, actually, it's somewhat depressing.

And even more aggravating, you'd predicted that all of it—Alas'slen's appearance, the topic being elves and history, even Solas' not-so-thinly veiled barbs—would have her furious and ready to ignore you or even tell you to fuck off altogether. Instead, she's sitting close to you all through lunch. She seems almost desperate to change the subject to the things you have in common, and you can't really blame her. Even if she didn't hate the topic, she'd have nothing to add to a conversation about archaeological digs.

"S'a shame we didn't run into each other in Val Royeaux," she says with a sigh.

You had, but she didn't know that. And never needed to know, especially given that she'd also run into the smirky little bastard currently hitting on Dorian and pretending not to be paying attention to you.

"It's not really a surprise. It's a big city, and I gather we were running in extremely different circles," you say, sounding amused. "It's not like we were going to trip into each other at the local bookstore."

"Y'coulda gone to a pub now'n'then," she says, elbowing you good-naturedly. "Yer deep enough in them these days."

"That's a more recent affectation," you lie with a snort. You've been drinking since Antiva. "Besides, any pub in Val Royeaux that would let me in would probably have been too rough for me."

"Oh bullshite!" she exclaims. "Yer the roughest thing in most pubs once you've 'ad enough ale!"

"Iron Bull's influence, I'm sure," you say firmly, sipping your tea and pretending you hadn't gotten absolutely smashed at the Inquisition pub within your first week and beaned a Templar with a mug.

"Perhaps she's just trying to put on a good face now that there's new company?" Alas'slen suggests, earning him a potent glare from Sera, as well as earning you more literal, physical clinging for most of the rest of lunch.

Uncharitable of you, perhaps, but you can't help thinking that she gives off the same vibes as a dog with a bone. Under other circumstances, it would be a little cute. Alright, it's still a little cute. You're not normally the kind to like possessiveness in any measure, but somehow, when Sera—or Revas—does it, it's kind of adorable. Like a child that doesn't want to share their favorite doll.

Of course, being that you're the doll in this situation...
In addition, you know exactly where this level of possessiveness goes, particularly with Sera. How do the two of you keep rehashing the same problems? You'd thought you had gotten this worked out the last time you talked. But come to think of it, her issue had been exclusivity, hadn't it? You certainly never agreed to that, or to anything, but you had rather explicitly stated that there was no one else you'd fucked or were even particularly interested in fucking. It had calmed her down, but then Alas'len shows up and starts flirting...

Maker. Why can't this be simple? Why can't she just throw a fit and finally realize she deserves better?

To make things worse—which shouldn't even be possible—you're keenly aware that Alas'len is watching and probably taking mental notes. Sera's not exactly giving him a good showing. Possessiveness, jealousy, hostility towards magic... She must just look amazing to a stranger right now, not to mention her rather spectacular distaste for elven history. You don't even understand it, and you're the one willing to give her some benefit of the doubt for these things... you know that Alas'len would never in one thousand years extend that same benefit.

Once you've reached half again as much social strain as you can bear, you announce to the camp at large that you're going to take care of the horses. You never thought you'd be grateful towards the Inquisitor for any damn thing on this trip, but in the end, being able to escape any situation by running off to brush a horse has proven to be incredibly useful.

You're honestly somewhat surprised that Sera doesn't follow you over to the horses. Maybe even she can take a hint? If so, it's a credit to her; you don't think anyone else in the entire fortress has ever respected your wishes when you wanted to be alone. And speaking of people not respecting your wishes, here comes Alas'len.

"Let me give you a hand, Miss Emma," he says cheerfully.

"They're hardly camels, young master," you reply dryly.

"Ah, worry not for your steeds. I am a deft hand at many things."

"Ugh," you reply, unable and unwilling to stop the disgusted noise. "Okay, no one's even close enough to hear us; lay off the bit before I throw up onto Stormcloak."

"I believe he's also handily blocking us from view," Alas'len comments, running a brush—where did he even pick that up—over the horse's shoulder. "I do love these giant mounts. You could have a whole tryst behind one and no one would even notice."

"The horse might."

Alas'len snorts, then finally gets down to business. "So. The blonde, eh?"

You let out a long sigh. "She thinks it's more than it is."

"And what is it, precisely? A romance?" He's watching your reaction, which you keep stony. "A kiss? Oh dear. Sex? Oh my. And she doesn't know...?"

"She doesn't know anything."

"And here I was watching the bald apostate this whole time," Alas'len sighs. "I forgot about your tastes. Of course it isn't the mage; I suppose romancing one of those would make far too much sense for you to consider it, as always."
You bristle, but try not to rise to the obvious bait.

"In a way, it fits a twisted sort of logic," he muses. "Going with someone guaranteed to betray you this time, I see. Skipping the middleman, taking all the uncertainty out of the equation."

"Shut up, 'Len," you hiss. "Someone will hear you."

"They won't," he informs you. "But if you insist..." He moves closer, reaching around your shoulder to brush at Stormcloak's haunch, boxing you in, "I can always speak in lower tones."

"Lethallin."

"I'm just trying to understand the situation," he says innocently. "Didn't you leave Orlais to get away from traitorous blondes? This whole time, I've been laboring under the assumption that you ran off because of what she did, but maybe I was wrong. Because here you are, fucking her damned clone."

"Sera isn't Aimée," you say, wishing there was any confidence in your words. You'd whispered them to yourself enough times that there really ought to be. "She's not... manipulative. You've met her. She doesn't have the wherewithal to be."

"No, of course not. She's just a blonde woman involved in the underbelly of Orlesian politics. She's just possessive; she's just bigoted; she's just you making the exact same bad decisions all over again. And to think, you accuse me of not thinking these things through! Tell me you're not catching feelings."

"It just happened!" you snap, turning to face him, hoping that Stormcloak is blocking the view as well as he thinks it is. "It wasn't planned!"

"That's worse!"

"Why do you even care? Why are you doing this?"

"Because Aimée destroyed you," he hisses. You hate that he leans down to be closer to your face; you hate that you have to look up at him. When did that happen? "She destroyed you as surely as if she had succeeded in her plans, and I will kill that woman myself before I watch it happen to you again."

"Don't you touch her!" your grip closes around his arms, threatening if thoughtless.

"Perhaps you should have said that to yourself, first," Alas'len says coldly, leaning back away from you and the horse, shaking himself free of your grip.

You glare as he stalks away, taking in how his gait loosens from furious stalking to a casual swagger as he slides back into his cover. You should do the same, but you can't force yourself to relax. It's not unlike him—or yourself—to make casual threats. You're not sure how many of his exes you've threatened to kill, yourself, or how many times you've threatened dangling him off a roof for his own behavior.

However, you also can count how many of his exes you've actually needed to stab. It's not zero, so there's precedent here.

You wouldn't necessarily put it past him. You'd say he inherited your temper, but honestly, you think his might put you to shame. He's younger, brasher, and you suspect this might be something of a sore spot. You know what he's capable of when he's truly infuriated, and while he's not there yet...
You glance over at Sera around Stormcloak, biting your lip in worry. She also has a temper, and she also has killed people over it, as you well know. You're not used to working with all these soldier and adventurer types. They're all killers, and only they know the limits of when and where. You'd thought "the battlefield" was the line drawn, but Sera did kill that noble in cold blood, and that was a story told from her perspective.

And to think, you’d been complaining about the elves in your life hating each other before. At least Sera and Solas were never at risk of killing each other… Although come to think of it, Fenris and Solas… Ugh! You’re exhausted.

The worst part of it is, he has a perfectly valid point tucked in amongst all those barbed words. You've been telling yourself that same thing for a long time now, since before Sera kissed you on the roof. Since she almost did in her bedroom. Since she took you running through Skyhold. Since you sat in the underbelly of the castle and you lied about who you were in the orphanage; since you let her think you were dead without even really understanding why you'd done it.

You are a liar who makes bad choices, and she is the most recent of a long chain of them. The last thing you needed in your life was another beautiful woman to make mistakes around, and it's gotten out of hand. You need to figure out a way to get it—all of it—back in hand before someone or something else does it for you.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a day early because this weekend--this entire weekend--I'll be hosting a "talk to the character" chat in the Keeping Secrets Discord [link here] where you can chat and ask pointed questions with Banal'ras. This was meant to primarily be for my Discord fans but given that I'll be doing it All Damn Weekend, I figure there's no such thing as too many people showing up.

Please keep in mind Banal'ras's personality and measure that up against your own comfort zones before deciding to join in.

Works inspired by this one: Keeping Secrets (the Audio Works) by ElvenSemi, lacewing, Banal Nadas by Calwyn

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!