The Griffon and the Raven

by rhetoricalrogue

Summary

Fifty slice of life snippets of story between the Inquisitor and her Warden

Notes

Hello! I'm breaking out of my comfort zone and dipping my toes into a new site. This is a story that I've been posting (and will continue to cross-post) on ff.net under the penname ice princess deluxe, just in case anyone was reading over there.

I've had a huge case of writer's block lately and going back to a list of prompts I've saved over the years has helped tremendously to pick through. I'm trying to write in some sort of chronological order, but if there's something that comes up that is out of place, I'll make a note as to where it is supposed to go. Chapter titles are the prompts that I used.
If Blackwall had to describe his current traveling companion in one word, he would have to use *professional*. Ravena – the *Herald*, Maker’s breath, those rumors he had heard traveling through the Crossroads were actually *true* – was nothing if not polished. She was more relaxed with her other two companions, the dwarf Varric and the elven mage Solas. It wasn’t that she was cold and detached, she had been nothing but friendly in the short time he’d known her, but it seemed as if she was still slightly wary as if she didn’t quite know what to make of him yet.

It earned her a degree of respect from him. He was a man they had found wandering the woods. She had very little reason to trust him aside from his word that he wanted to join the Inquisition. If he allowed himself a moment to think of her in a purely masculine fashion, he would have to describe her as *pretty*. No, pretty didn’t do her enough justice, and beautiful seemed too generic. Blackwall guessed that a better word to describe her was…*interesting*. She was somewhat tall, the top of her head reaching almost to his chin. Her dark hair was kept in a tidy bun at the back of her head, sunlight glinting off the inky black strands in such a way that it nearly gleamed blue in places. Her high cheekbones, aristocratic nose and milk-pale skin tipped her off as nobility even if he had never heard her pleasantly cultured voice. Trevelyan was definitely a known noble name, and she did have impeccable posture that had probably been ingrained in her at a young age, but she definitely didn’t act as if she were better than the people she kept company with. While she held herself with professionalism, her eyes often gave her away. Thick lashes fringed large, copper colored eyes that reminded him of fire-warmed whiskey. Those eyes were quick to flash in humor at some quip Varric would say or widen in fascination at some piece of crumbling architecture Solas pointed out to her. Her full lips would often part as she murmured something quietly to herself as she studied something, long, elegant fingers tracing over broken edges of stone.

He had to admit, if he hadn’t known about the Mark on her hand or witnessed her slaying demons or bandits firsthand, he would have had a difficult time picturing her closing rifts or wielding twin daggers. While she had an athletic build, she was…*softer* than some female soldiers he had encountered. The Herald was all generous breasts, gently curving hips and mile-long legs, which definitely appealed to him.

“Ugh,” she groaned, sitting down next to him on a fallen log and rotating her foot when they finally stopped for a break. “I am definitely out of practice for long hikes.”

“Did you often have occasion for those?” he asked, genuinely interested in her answer. “What did you do before you joined the Inquisition?”

She looked up from her boot. “I worked for the Chantry.”

“Somehow I don’t see you as a lay sister.”

She laughed. “No, neither can I. I did field research for the Chantry. It was my job to go out and excavate forgotten temples and recover religious relics.”

Now Blackwall understood her fascination with the ruins they encountered. “And you were at the Concalve to…” he prompted.

She looked at her hands, the thumb of her right hand tracing over the edges of the Mark on her left. “I was assigned to record the proceedings for posterity. Actually, it was pure chance that I was even there; another cleric had been assigned, but he had a recent injury that made travel impossible, so I
was asked to take his place.”

“Chance, or fate?”

She gave him a sly glance. “You know, I can never decide. The Maker has a plan for each of us, however unwilling we are to follow His plan.”

“Don’t want to be the Herald of Andraste?”

“Would you?” Her voice had a trace of humor in it. “I certainly didn’t ask for this power or the weight of responsibility that comes with it, but I’m determined to do the best I can and help as many people as possible.”

“It’s a worthy cause.”

She nodded. “And one I can’t do without the help of others.”

“You have my sword and shield at your service.”

“And I’ve already employed your shield. Good reflexes, by the way.”

He looked at the shield he had leaned against the log. From the angle, he could clearly see the dent the arrow meant for her had left in it. “Well, it wouldn’t do if something marred a face as lovely as yours.”

Those expressive eyes of hers sparkled in mirth. “It seems as if I have your compliments at my disposal as well, Ser Warden.”

Blackwall could definitely tell that the ice had been broken. He chuckled along with her. “If you could call them that, my lady. And please, call me Blackwall.”

“Yes, I would definitely call them compliments. And I shall definitely take any you decide to throw my way.” She leaned towards him. “Yet if I am to call you Blackwall, you must call me Ravena.”

He shook his head. “You aren’t what I figured you as,” he told her. It was true: the Herald was a woman who chatted amiably with her friends and was quick to laugh or offer a helping hand without complaint as they traversed the Hinterlands, which was a change from what he had expected from a noblewoman.

“Oh? And what did you expect?” She arched her eyebrow. “Let me guess, some haughty lady who complained and moaned about the heat and trudging through mud? Perhaps a delicate woman who fainted at the sight of blood?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it. “Field researchers don’t last very long out in the world with delicate sensibilities. The only times I associate with nobles nowadays is when they reach out to hire me for research. I much rather prefer the company of others that don’t tend to have their heads up their arses half the time.”

Blackwall let out a shocked laugh at her swearing. “And here I thought you worked for the Chantry.”

Ravena shrugged. “I do. I’m also open to outside employment, if the site, manuscript or price is good enough.”

“So you’re an intellectual mercenary?”
“I’ve always called myself a freelance researcher, but I like that description as well. It sounds exciting, like I should travel armed to the teeth and be littered with scars.” Her fingers went to her forehead where a faint mark traveled across the edge of her forehead and hairline. “Unfortunately, I only have the one scar and I don’t think I can pull off being menacing.

“No, you’re more captivating than menacing.” He was vaguely surprised at how easily words tripped over his tongue. He’d never been one to quickly compliment a lady, and he was desperately out of practice.

The corner of her mouth quirked up in a quick smile. “There go those compliments again.” Standing up, she reached for her pack of supplies and stretched. “We have some ways to go before we reach Haven. I wonder what other flatteries you can think up during our travels.”

Break over, their other companions fell into step with her. Blackwall paused, his attention caught by the sway of her hips. Smiling, he picked up his pace and joined the rest of the group.

Yes, interesting was definitely the word he would use to describe Ravena Trevelyan.
Ravena usually didn’t mind the cold – she and her cousin Henri had spent nearly two years in Haven helping Brother Genitivi unearth the temple of Sacred Ashes once the Blight was over. She remembered those first days where wonder at something so completely untouched warred with the pain that came from numb fingers and toes. Henri had refused to wear gloves while cataloging artifacts and it was a minor miracle that she’d been able to stave off frostbite before he lost a finger.

That first exploratory year had been one of the best years of her life, even if it had also been one of the coldest. Sleeping in the Temple was definitely out of the question due to the many layers of ice and snow that had crept in over the years. She could clearly remember huddling against her cousin and several other researchers for warmth at night, a small side chamber of the nearby church the only room remotely suitable to sleep in.

It felt odd to walk around that very same church now. It was much larger than the original building, warmer too, and Ravena was comforted by the fact that most of the original work in the basement area had been left intact even if the rest of the structure had been given a major upgrade. Ghosts seemed to cling to nooks and crannies: there was Brother Genitivi exclaiming over a translation, her cousin’s dark head bent close by as he tried to decipher the rest of the puzzle. Here was her own shadow, ecstatic that the text from so many books they had hauled from the Temple were still in good condition and sorrowful when she discovered several priceless manuscripts beyond her skills of restoration.

It was hard to believe that ten years had already passed since that first breathless view of the temple. All of that hard work and long hours painstakingly making sure that every detail was historically accurate was now gone, reduced to rubble in the aftermath of the Conclave. She couldn’t help but mourn the loss.

Ravena pushed open the doors of the church and had to close her eyes at the sudden blast of wintry air. She had spent her recent years working with her cousin in warmer climates, basking in the warm Antivan sun and enjoying the pleasantly temperate winters of Nevarra. To say that she wasn’t used to the sudden gusts of freezing air that stung her cheeks and chapped her lips was an understatement.

Her boots crunched in the snow as she made her way towards the smithy. At least it was warm beside the forge, and her business was conducted in relative comfort. She was distracted partway between deciding what sort of leather to use to craft a new set of armor by someone she caught out of the corner of her eye. Blackwall was leaning against a stone half-wall, his arms crossed over his broad chest and his face tilted up as he regarded the Breach with narrowed eyes. Ravena had to admit, he cut a remarkable profile; he had an air about him of a man who knew who he was in the world, of someone who could be menacing to his foes and yet equally protective of his allies.

The fact that Ravena thought he was incredibly attractive didn’t hurt either. He wasn’t handsome by conventional standards, what with his crooked nose and slightly unkempt beard, but something drew her to him. His eyes were wary of her when they first met, narrowed in suspicion, but once she explained herself and her reasons for seeking him out, he had relaxed. The earnestness in his face had tugged at something in her and she often wondered just what he would look like if he stared at her in desire. Would his eyes go glassy with want or would they darken, his pupils expanding until there was only a thin ring of grey showing? The idea of being pinned by such a striking gaze made her tremble; the cold not having anything to do with the gooseflesh that suddenly broke out over her skin.

He seemed to feel her stare. Slowly, he turned his head in her direction and gave her a lazy smile,
tipping his head in greeting. She returned his smile and absentely nodded to Harritt, hoping that she
didn’t accidentally give Varric the wrong improvement in the process. After the smith assured her
that the finished piece would be delivered as soon as it was complete, Ravena thanked him and made
her way towards the Warden.

“Afternoon,” Blackwall drawled as she drew near.

“Hello.”

“Nice set of armor. For Varric?”

“Yes, I thought he could use an upgrade.”

“He’s a good man, keeps your flank covered well.” He leaned further against the wall and regarded
her. He was tall, yet he didn’t look down at her like some other men might. Ravena was not a short
woman, and she found that she liked the fact that there were only a few inches of height apart, the
top of her head neatly reaching his chin. “Speaking of, you might want to invest in some new gear
for yourself.”

“Oh? I thought the armor Harritt had supplied was well constructed.” Honestly, she

could

use

another set, especially when dealing with despair demons. She shivered just thinking about how
badly her arms and legs had frosted over dealing with the last rift they had seen in the Hinterlands.
She just chose to tough it out because she felt that her companions deserved the upgrades more than
she.

“It is, if you’re dealing with low-level enemies. The demons and bandits that we’ve been facing are
just a tad bit tougher than what you’re wearing.”

She grinned up at him. “Oh, so you’re comfortable with we now, aren’t you?”

He returned her grin. “And here I thought we were building a rapport.” His tone was light, mirroring
her earlier teasing. Ravena had to swallow hard at the way that his eyes glittered with quiet mirth, at
how the corner of his mouth twitched ever so slightly.

Maker’s breath, I’ve always had a weak spot

for beards.

“Oh, we most definitely are,” she told him, unable to stop her voice from dropping a tone lower than
usual. It had the unintended yet completely welcome effect of Blackwall’s eyebrow quirking up in
interest. Clearing her throat, she tried to dispel the butterflies that had suddenly taken up residence in
her stomach. “And I wanted to thank you, for the cover earlier.”

“It was nothing.”

“You ran across an entire battlefield to guard my side.” She had been surrounded by demons and on
the verge of being completely overwhelmed when she heard a loud battle cry to her left. All of a
sudden, Blackwall was at her side, carving a path for her to regroup and continue with her usual
flanking attacks.

“As I said, it was nothing.” A harsh gust of wind blew and he noticed how several strands of hair
flew free from her bun and waved in front of her face. “Cold?”

She shivered again, part from the way he looked at her, but mostly from the temperature. “Just a bit.”
Her fingers felt like icicles and she clasped them together to try to get some feeling back in them.

Impulsively, he reached out and took her hands in his. “Maker’s breath, you’re freezing. Why aren’t
you wearing gloves, woman?” She didn’t think he was even aware of his movements, but she stifled
a surprised gasp when he brought their joined hands close to his mouth and blew, his breath warm on her frozen fingers.

“Gloves felt odd on the Mark at first,” she explained. “And I felt plain silly wandering around wearing only one.” Unlike her, Blackwall wore gloves, but Ravena could still feel heat from his hands radiating out onto hers.

He turned her hands over and regarded her left palm. “Does it hurt?” he asked, fingers tracing along the edges of the Mark. When there were no rifts around, it looked as if she merely had an odd-shaped scar, a rough circle of jagged and raised edges skirting along her palm.

“Not really, not anymore. Not like it first did,” she admitted, distracted by the way his finger pressed against the pad of flesh between her index finger and thumb. “It itches from time to time, but I can ignore it for the most part.” She stared at their hands, marveling at how hers were dwarfed by his. For the first time in a very long time, she felt delicate, feminine.

“Perhaps you could start considering gloves now?” he asked, his thumb absently running along her palm. He gave her another lazy smile. “Not that I mind acting as her ladyship’s personal hand-warmer.”

She laughed. “You know, you’re strangely charming for a man I found wandering the woods,” she teased.

“I’ve always found myself more odd than charming,” he admitted, stepping closer. “But I’ll take a compliment from a lady. They’re hard to come by these days.”

Ravena took a little half-step closer to him. “Compliments,” she started, tilting her head slightly to the side. “Or ladies?”

He grinned. “Both.” Letting go of one of her hands, he tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “So, is there something large and heavy you need moved?”

She wanted to lean into his touch. “That would be a waste of your particular talents.”

“Oh, really?”

Ravena couldn’t help but shiver at the way he had pitched his voice. “You’re much better suited to standing in front of dragons while they try to eat you.” It was so easy to flirt with this man. She found it a comfort to have been able to find someone in the middle of all this chaos who seemed to have an actual interest in her as a person instead of the Herald of Andraste.

Blackwall chuckled, and the deep rumbling sound traveled down her spine almost like a caress. “I have to say, my lady, you’re unlike any woman I’ve ever met. I’m flattered that you’d spend any time with me.” He leaned in and Ravena decided that she could definitely get used to seeing him look at her with such frank admiration. “I enjoy your company.”

“And I enjoy being in yours.” She could have continued on talking with him forever, but Harritt seemed to decide that it would be a great time to interrupt, shouting from his forge about forgetting to mention an upgrade to her current armor he had in stock.

“You’d better give it a look,” Blackwall said, bringing her hand up to his lips. Ravena held her breath as he kissed her knuckles, his eyes never once leaving hers. “I’d hate to see you injured out on the field.”

Ravena reluctantly stepped away and went back to the forge. The added protection for her arms was
definitely a bonus, especially since it was supposed to protect against elemental damage. They hadn’t yet found the headquarters for the rogue mages hiding in the Hinterlands, but she knew that having extra protection would help their efforts of securing the roads for the refugees.

She happened to look up from her purchase in time to see Blackwall still staring at her. The look in his eye, even from such a distance, made her completely forget about the cold.

Several days later, a pair of warmly lined gloves mysteriously appeared in her quarters. Ravena ran her fingers over the buttery soft leather and instantly knew who they had come from. Heart light and a spring in her step, she made her way down to the smithy, thoughts on how she should properly thank her benefactor floating about in her head.
“So, where did you learn how to fight?”

Blackwall poked at the fire with a stick. “Why do you ask, milady?”

Ravena shrugged. “Idle curiosity. I assume that you learned with the Wardens.”

He shook his head. “No. I was a military man, once. Learned how to attack there. Before that, I learned how to defend myself by entering tournies when I was younger.” He grinned, his teeth white in the semi-darkness. “But I learned how to fight as a boy. Had my share of taking punches until I grew too big for others to pick on.”

She curled her legs up to her chin and wrapped her arms around her knees. “You said you were military. Why did you leave?”

He stared at the flames for a while before answering. “The people I served under cared too much about themselves and too little for their men,” he said roughly. “To them I was just a tool that knew how to take orders well. Once I realized that, I found I didn’t like the lifestyle. Luckily I was recruited soon after.”

She took note of the terse way he had replied. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t know it was a sore subject.”

“It’s a part of my past I don’t like to dwell upon.”

“Then I’ll try not to bring it up.”

“And since you asked,” Blackwall started, breaking the silence. “Where did you train? I didn’t think that the Chantry equipped their scholars with weapons other than pen and ink.”

She quietly laughed. “They don’t. Well, not normally. I tend to study artifacts in places most law-abiding citizens don’t know about. Between the traps originally meant to deter thieves, the bandits that usually claimed such spaces for their hideouts and monsters that wanted to kill me, I needed to learn.”

“You have an unorthodox style.”

“I had unorthodox teachers. My cousin was the one to give me my first set of daggers. He taught me what he had learned over the years, which admittedly wasn’t much besides bare boned basics. Being the bookish sort, I took it upon myself to research as much information on different fighting techniques as I could when I got back to civilization between digs. I took several styles and blended
them all into something that suited me. Some of the Templars caught me practicing and helped to iron out some issues I had.”

“Generous of them.”

“Well, I did just retrieve a manuscript that they had thought was long lost the week before. And I had almost gotten killed by some demons who thought it would be great fun to play ‘chase the researcher’ while doing it, so I guess they figured they owed me.”

He stirred at the fire again. “I’m surprised none of them talked you into fighting with a sword and shield.”

She shook her head. “One of the knights I came across on my travels in Nevarra tried to teach me, but I don’t have the upper body strength for that type of combat. I’m quick on my feet and daggers are easier to handle for me.”

“Whatever were you doing in Nevarra in the first place?”

“I received word that a noble wanted to look into this legend about a royal crown supposedly charmed to grant the wearer everlasting life. My fellow colleagues thought it was a heretical load of rubbish, but you know what they say about curiosity and cats.”

He grinned toothily. They hadn’t known the other long, but Blackwall had picked up on Ravena’s curious nature right away, especially when she made time to stop and inspect every ruined building they came across in their travels, muttering dates and theories under her breath and taking time in the evenings to write in a battered looking journal. “And was the crown charmed?”

“Yes and no. See, the crown itself was secured in a tomb dedicated to royalty. The tomb was a marvel to go through: it predated modern Mortalitasi traditions and even looked slightly Avvaran in build. It was also armed to the teeth with hidden traps to deter thieves. I would have loved to study it further, but my employer was adamant that I retrieve the crown in a timely fashion. The knight I mentioned came with me as backup, not only to act as protection, but to make sure I did everything the noble was paying me for. If I remember correctly, Anya is distantly related to Cassandra in some fashion. Probably some cousin or another twice-removed: the Pentaghast’s family tree has as many or even more branches to it than my own line.” She unfolded her legs and stretched. “Long story short, I was grateful to have an extra sword around. The crown was indeed charmed: some necromancer ages ago decided that it would be hilarious to use it to bring back the dead if the site was disturbed. As soon as I tried to remove the crown from the corpse’s head, the thing sprang up and tried to kill me. The crown also reanimated several of the other corpses interred in the room. My first guess would be that they had been originally killed as a ritual sacrifice to attend the royal body in the afterlife, especially since there were many artifacts correlating with…” She paused. “I’m sorry. I tend to ramble on about the academics on things like this. I’m probably boring you.”

Blackwall shook his head. “No, no. In fact, I’m finding it quite the opposite. You live an interesting life, Herald.”

“Ravena.”

“Pardon?”

“We agreed to call the other by our given name, remember? Hearing so many people calling me the Herald is hard enough to get used to. Having you…” she turned her face so she could hide the bothersome blush from him. “Having a teammate call me that feels odd.”
With her head turned, she didn’t catch the slight smile he gave her, or the way his eyes softened with affection. “Very well. As I was saying, you’ve lived an interesting life for someone who started out copying texts in a Chantry library.”

She had to laugh. “I never copied texts. My handwriting was never consistently neat enough for the head archivist’s high standards. I spent much of my early years re-shelving and cataloguing before falling into a dedicated specialization. But you’re right; I’ve lived a bigger life than I would have had I been a traditional noblewoman or if I had stayed within the Chantry’s walls.” She looked at her palm. It might no longer hurt, but it did throb with strange energy from time to time, especially when they were in places where the Veil was weak. Seeing as they were in the middle of trying to close multiple rifts in the Hinterlands, her Mark made for some sleepless nights. “You should get some sleep. There’s no sense in both of us staying watch, especially if we’re going to deal with those rogue Templars tomorrow.”

He tried to hide a yawn behind his hand. “You should rest too. Never know if we’ll find more rifts along the way.” He reached out and tugged on her arm. “Come on; wake Sera to take the rest of the watch. You’ll get a tent to yourself for once.”

She smirked. “So you’ve noticed, then?”

“If you recall, I spent the night sharing a tent with her last. She slept as soundly as a baby, even though she wound up kicking me in the kidneys all through the night.”

“You have my sympathies.”

“And you have mine. It probably wouldn’t be so bad if her knees weren’t so damned bony.” His eyes sparkled with quiet mirth. “It’s past time to change watches anyway. Might as well get two or three hours’ worth of rest.” Standing, he offered his hand. She smiled up at him as she took it, letting him help her to her feet.

“Goodnight, Blackwall,” she said, stopping by her tent.

He held the flap of his open. It was empty: Solas had decided to sleep a little ways away from them all that night. “Goodnight, Ravena,” he replied before slipping inside.

Not even Sera’s cranky attitude at having a particularly nice dream interrupted could dislodge the warm feeling that had settled in Ravena’s chest at the sound of her name on Blackwall’s lips. She squashed the need to tell herself that grown women her age had no reason to feel butterflies flutter at the rumbling timbre of a man’s voice, choosing to enjoy the moment instead.

Still smiling, she settled onto her bedroll and drifted off to sleep.
“Give me a boost, will you?”

Blackwall turned away from where he had been scanning the area for any leftover bandits to find Ravena standing underneath an apple tree. She had her hands on her hips and was eyeing the branches in the same way Blackwall was used to seeing her eye an opponent to figure out the most advantageous angle of attack. “Hmm?”

She pointed to the apples higher up in the tree. “Sera got to talking about how hungry she was, which got the Iron Bull complaining about how hungry he was. There’s a bunch of apples that look just about ready to pick up there. I’m hoping that it’ll be enough to silence both of them before all their talk of food makes my stomach start to grumble.”

He had to laugh. “So the power of suggestion is enough to bring the mighty Inquisitor to her knees?”

“You’ve never seen me when I’m hungry. I get cranky. It isn’t pretty.” She pushed against the trunk of the tree, hoping to shake some of the fruit down. “I can’t reach the lowest branch on my own, and while you’re a smidge taller than me, I really don’t see you climbing trees in full armor.”

“It would make for quite the sight,” he agreed.

“And seeing as both Bull and Sera are scouting ahead, that leaves me to do the foraging.” She looked at him expectantly. “So, will you give me a leg-up?”

Still grinning, he bent his knee and laced his fingers together to give Ravena a proper foothold. “Have you done this before, my lady?”

“I’ll have you know that I used to be a champion at climbing trees when I was a girl. There was a large orchard in the bannorn my father oversees. My brothers and I used to cut through it on our way back home, and since I was the lightest, they would often send me up to get apples or pears or cherries, depending on the season. The only trees that I refused to climb were the orange trees the farmer had been experimenting with. They were transplants from Antiva with these wickedly sharp spines on each branch, but gave the sweetest oranges I’ve ever tasted. If I remember correctly, the farmer tried for several seasons to hybridize them with a gentler variety from Orlais to breed out the spines, but nothing worked. He finally gave up and kept the Antivan oranges like they were.”

Blackwall hoisted her up, watching as she grabbed onto the branch and hauled herself up. “So if you didn’t get the oranges, who did?”

“My second oldest brother, Robert. He’d come down full of scratches and leaves in his hair, but he always said it was worth it.” She carefully walked along the thickest branch until she could pull herself up another foot or so. “I’m going to drop the ones I can reach and I can’t see you, so be careful.”

He looked up at her from between the branches. From where she had gotten to, all he could see of her were the bottoms of her boots. “You be careful as well. It wouldn’t do if you fell and broke your neck.”

“No, that would not do. Bull wouldn’t let me hear the end of it if we forced him to patch me back together.”

Apples began to fall to Blackwall’s left. “And Sera would curse a blue streak the entire time.”
“She does have a way with words. I don’t think I’ve ever heard arse and shite used quite as creatively before.” The gentle thud of apples hitting the ground began to cease. “Well, that should hold us over until we reach a camp.”

Blackwall watched as Ravena made her way back down. “I think that should more than hold us. Did you lose count while you were picking?”

Ravena’s laugh floated down to him. “I don’t know just how hungry Bull was, but have you seen how much Sera can put away? Honestly, I don’t know where she keeps it.” She eased herself down to a sitting position on the lowest branch and looked down.

“Problems?”

“Maybe. I don’t know if I can make this last jump without risking a turned ankle.” She looked down again and estimated that she had at least a six-foot drop. While she had made higher jumps easily in the past, the uneven terrain underneath the tree had her biting her lip in indecision.

Blackwall helped her out by holding out his arms. “Here, I’ll catch you.”

She arched her eyebrow. “Are you certain?”

“Wouldn’t have offered otherwise. Come on, jump.”

“All right, here goes.” Without further preamble, she hopped down from her ledge. Blackwall easily caught her underneath her arms, breath coming out in a huff when she collided with his chest.

“See, nothing to it,” he murmured, still holding onto her.

Ravena slowly slid down his body until her feet touched the ground, her hands still anchored on his shoulders. “Nothing at all.” He was so close that she finally decided that his eyes were definitely more grey than blue, like the sea on a cold winter’s day. She could feel her heart begin to hammer in her chest as he tilted his head down, his intent clear. His hands flexed on her waist and she bit her lip, noticing how his eyes had zeroed onto her mouth, his pupils expanding until that lovely grey-blue had narrowed down to a thin ring of color. Happily tilting her chin up, her eyelids slid closed in anticipation and then he…

“Oi! Ain’t we all cozy-like!” Sera’s shout seemed to dissolve whatever moment they had built. Both of them quickly stepped away from the other as if burned.

“We can give you five more minutes, if you want,” Bull quipped. He eyed Ravena, who had decided that picking up fallen apples was suddenly an important task.

“What you two can give me,” Ravena said, tossing an apple in Bull’s direction, which he caught. “I hope the both of you appreciate the fact that I climbed up and got them just for you.”

Sera swallowed a huge bite of apple and wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve. “And I hope you appreciate the honey I just wrangled,” she shot back, bouncing on one leg to make the sack she had hooked to her belt sway. “Saw a big old hive and thought about you and all those fancy teas you like so much. Well, thought about bees actually, because we can always use more bees, but you were in there too.”

The Iron Bull shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything like it. She just crept up to the hive, coaxed bees into some jars, and then reached in to grab a couple of handfuls of honeycomb.” He paused in his gathering. “How do you do it anyway?”
“Nope, trade secret. If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

Ravena started placing fruit into her knapsack, the banter from her two companions quickly fading to background noise. She looked up when Blackwall offered her an apple. She took it from him, her fingers deliberately brushing against his in the process. She felt a distinct thrill when he winked at her before turning to help Sera out.

“Nope, trade secret. If I told you, I’d have to kill you.”

Ravena started placing fruit into her knapsack, the banter from her two companions quickly fading to background noise. She looked up when Blackwall offered her an apple. She took it from him, her fingers deliberately brushing against his in the process. She felt a distinct thrill when he winked at her before turning to help Sera out.

“Somebody’s got it bad for someone,” Bull teased, his voice low enough for only her to hear. Ravena jumped, not realizing that he had managed to sneak up behind her.

“I do not,” she hissed under her breath, hating how quickly she felt her face heat up.

Bull laughed. “I was talking about him,” he countered, his smirk widening. “But yeah, you do too. Didn’t even need to use my Ben-Hassrath training to figure that one out either.” He dropped a handful of apples into her bag before walking off.

Ravena watched the three of them start to walk towards the direction of the closest Inquisition campsite. “I do not get crushes,” she muttered, slipping her arms through her bag’s straps.

Just then, Blackwall happened to look over his shoulder. Once he caught her eye, he gave her one of his lazy half-smiles that never failed to make butterflies flutter about in her stomach. She couldn’t help but smile back in return.

Okay, she thought, picking up her pace to catch up with the rest of her group. So maybe I do get crushes.

Not that she’d ever admit that to Bull, or to anyone else.
“And that was the last time I played Wicked Grace with that man.” Blackwall drank deeply from his glass and grinned as he finished his story. Over the weeks since she had recruited him, the two of them had found themselves getting together more often in the evenings for an hour or so. It had started as Ravena lingering beside the smithy and sharpening her blades or inspecting her armor for needed repairs. Blackwall had joined her and eventually their conversations while they worked turned into invitations for drinks at the tavern. Drinks quickly evolved into evening walks, at first where they walked with a respectful distance between them to now where Blackwall offered his arm in an almost courtly gesture and kept her tucked close to his side. Ravena appreciated it; spending time with Blackwall talking about everything except the Breach and matters pertaining to the Inquisition was a welcome distraction.

Tonight they were in the small cabin Ravena had claimed for her own: a platter of mostly picked over food and a nearly empty bottle of wine between them.

Ravena nodded, refilling both their cups. “I can imagine. Owing that many sovereigns to one person would make me reconsider a rematch.” She sipped from her own glass. “I’m horrible at Wicked Grace.”

“You’re too open an opponent,” Blackwall agreed. “You twitch the corner of your lip in this little half-smile when you have good cards and you do this subtle little frown when you have a bad hand.”

“I do…” She gaped at him before laughing again. “All right, so I do tend to do that.” Secretly, she felt a little curl of pleasure at the fact that Blackwall had been staring at her mouth on the few occasions she and several other people had gotten together in Haven’s tavern to play a round of cards. The initial bolt of attraction she had felt for him upon their first meeting had only grown with time, and she was pleased that it seemed as if he returned her feelings.

“If I ever need the extra money, I’ll be certain to ask you for a game.”

She arched her eyebrow as she mock-glared at him over the rim of her glass. “Fine. And I’ll be sure to ask you for a game when I’m low on coin. I might be rubbish at Wicked Grace, but I can beat the pants off nearly everyone here at Diamondback.”

He grinned. “You said nearly everyone.”

“Well, Solas has the grace not to beat me too terribly and Varric gives me a run for my money most matches, but I can hold my own against anyone else.”

“And what, my lady, makes you so certain that you can take me?”

She swallowed her wine. There. He tended to pitch his voice lower than usual when he was in a flirtatious mood, and the low rumble was enough to make her shiver. “Believe me,” she replied, matching his tone. She watched as his eyes darkened, his gaze never leaving hers. “I can take everything you give me.”

His fingers tightened on his mug and Ravena held her breath, watching as he leaned forward. “Well,” he said, clearing his throat. “I guess it’s a good thing that I don’t have a deck of cards handy. It’s cold out there; I’d hate to lose my pants.”
“Such a shame,” she told him, not bothering to keep the disappointment out of her voice.

He reached for the gloves he had placed on the table at the start of the evening. “It’s getting late, I ought to be going.” Standing, he grunted and made a face, his hand going to the small of his back.

“Is everything all right?” she asked, genuinely concerned.

He waved her off. “It’s nothing, merely the weather and age playing hell on my body. Don’t ever grow old. It’s a trap.”

“It doesn’t look like nothing,” she said, standing up and going over to him. Without thinking, she put her hand on his back. “Tell me you’re wearing something studded underneath that,” she told him.

“Oh, no?” He grunted again when her fingers began to probe at the middle of his back.

“Blackwall, you have knots in your back the likes I have never seen before,” she declared. “No wonder you’re uncomfortable.”

“I haven’t had the opportunity to visit an Orlesian spa to get those worked out,” he sarcastically replied, rolling his shoulders when she hit a particularly bad spot.

She stopped prodding long enough to tap at her chin with a finger. “Well, it isn’t as glamorous, but I could help you out, if you’d like.” Moving over to the bed, she picked up several books that had been sitting on the mattress and placed them on a nearby table to join the journal she had started. At first, her journal was like all the other ones she had done for various digs in the past, describing the day’s goings on in a reserved, clinical manner with one or two sketches included per day for the sake of posterity. Recently though, she’d taken to using it as a silent sounding board, a place to better organize her thoughts. She felt it was better to write about her worries and fears instead of burdening someone else. Ravena’s fingers lingered on the journal’s leather cover and thought about how many half-finished sketches of a certain man’s profile she had added to the pages as of late.

“I don’t want to put you out.”

“I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t truly want to help. Besides, I owe you for some of those knots. Remember the Storm Coast just a few days ago? The gigantic spiders?”

He made a face. “Ugh, don’t remind me. Those things are ugly as sin.”

“And they make the most Maker-awful shrieking noise when you stab them.” She did some digging in a small basket that was on the bedside table until she came across a vial of some sort of clear liquid. “Boots off, please. I’d rather not get the sheets dirty.”

“And just how far would milady like for me to disrobe?” he asked. Ravena had her back to him, but she could all but hear his cheeky smirk. Two muted thumps told her that he had at least taken off his footwear.

“However far milord wishes would be fine,” she replied, setting a candle close by for extra lighting. She didn’t know if it was the wine talking or just the fact that it was so easy to fall into flirtatious banter with him. Turning, she tapped on the buckle of his belt. “But I can work on the muscles in your back better if you strip to the waist.”

He arched his eyebrow and threw a leer her way. “Why does this sound like you just want to see me without my clothes?”

Rolling her eyes, she held out her hand for his gambeson and carefully draped it over the back of the
chair he had vacated. “If that were the case, I would have gone with a much less complicated ruse, like saying take off your clothes; I have a dire need to see you naked. I’ve no skill in the art of seduction.”

Blackwall gave a husky laugh as he grabbed a fistful of the back of his shirt and pulled it over his head. “I think you sell yourself short, my lady.”

“And you flatter me.” Taking his shirt, she motioned to the bed. “Face down, if you will.” While he situated himself, she uncorked the vial and held it out. “This is a liniment Adan gave me for sore muscles. I don’t know what he put in it, but it works wonders.”

“Smells a bit like elfroot.”

She poured a bit into her palm. “More than likely the base. It might be cold at first.” Even with the warning, Blackwall tensed as she applied it to a spot underneath his right shoulder blade. He let out a quiet groan when her fingers found a knot that had troubled him for days.

“Where did you learn this?” he mumbled, the side of his face sinking into the pillows. He inhaled, breathing in a floral scent that he’d often caught faint whiffs of out in the field when he sat or stood close to Ravena. It made sense that the smell would be more concentrated here where she slept and it made him feel pleasantly lightheaded.

“Antiva,” she replied. “My cousin and I were working a dig that was more physically demanding than usual. Spending hours hunched over notes is something I’m used to, but spending hours hunched over notes, wriggling through half-collapsed chambers and helping haul out statues weighing several hundred pounds each took a toll on us both. The head foreman of the project suggested a place where he promised we’d get our money’s worth. He didn’t disappoint.”

Ravena continued to work at his shoulder, working the stiffness and pain out of places he hadn’t even been aware had been sore. She moved down his arm, making a quiet tisking noise at how badly his forearm was knotted. “I spent nearly a year at that site. It might have been hard work, but it was rewarding, both on an academic level and a personal one. And, most importantly, I spent most of my extra pay at the massage clinics. It was a relaxing experience, even when I wasn’t sore. After a while, I began to memorize their techniques.” She looped her foot around a low stool to drag it closer to the bed, sitting down so she’d be more comfortable as she worked on releasing tension in Blackwall’s hand. She gently placed his arm back on the bed and rounded the mattress, shaking her head in the process. “Maker’s breath, your shield arm is a mess.”

Blackwall hissed when she hit a spot close to his ribs that had been giving him hell for the longest time. His hiss turned into a loud groan that her pillows did little to muffle. “Too much pressure?” she asked, her hands stilling over his skin.

“No, just that I forgot how much that spot hurt until you made that spot stop hurting.” He turned his head so he could look at her. “I’m not made out of glass, do your worst.”

She rolled her eyes. “Good. You have a couple of tight spots here that can use some extra attention.” She took her cues from his body language, but began to use her elbow to break down a particularly large area of tension on his left side. They lapsed into silence as she worked, and eventually she was satisfied that Blackwall’s back and shoulders were as relaxed as she could make them in a single session.

“You are a miracle worker,” he slurred, humming in contentment as she kneaded at the back of his neck.
“Glad to be of service.” Ravena slid her fingers through his hair to work at his scalp. She had expected his hair to be coarse to the touch, but found it to be incredibly soft as it sifted through her fingers. “Consider this payback with interest at all the times you protect me when we’re out there.”

“If that’s the case, I’m going to have to throw myself between you and danger more often.” Ravena’s hands slid back down to the small of his back and then purposely moved upwards with some slight pressure, gently making his spine pop as things settled back to where they belonged.

“You don’t have to go to such extremes, Blackwall. When things begin to pain you, just let me know. I’d hate to have your back revert to how it was.” She moved back to his neck, her thumbs digging into the strong cords of muscle she found there. He didn’t reply, and after a while she checked on him to find that he had fallen asleep.

Ravena flexed her hands and looked down at him. She hadn’t allowed herself to admire his body while she worked to ease his pain, but she took the time now. Firelight showcased the strength in his outstretched arms and the breadth of his shoulders. His muscled back tapered down to a trim waist that Blackwall’s padded gambeson and bulky armor often hid. Her eyes traced the collection of scars she could see from her vantage point. Most of them were small in size and pale, but she had felt a larger, more raised section of skin running vertically along the front part of his shoulder. There was a pale white slash that started close to the small of his back that more than likely snaked around his hip, but she could only guess at the extent after it disappeared beneath the waistline of his trousers. As if on its own volition, her finger reached out and traced a long gash along his right bicep and she wondered just how he had gotten the mark.

She suddenly wondered exactly how his back would feel under her hands, his muscles bunching and moving, skin sweat-slicked in the heat of passion. Her imagination was so vivid that she had to bite her lip to smother a moan. She had half a mind to wake Blackwall, but the look on his face when she went to shake his shoulder made her change her mind. He looked peaceful, lying there with his head turned to the side and hair spread against her pillow. The serious expression that was almost always on his face was gone, or at least smoothed over in sleep. She had the strangest desire to kiss his brow.

“Too much to drink,” she muttered, moving away from the bed to stopper the wine bottle and tidy up. She shook out his tunic and folded it properly, taking time to bring it to her nose to smell. His shirt smelled of the smithy: like wood smoke and metal all rolled up into one manly package. “Definitely too much to drink,” she told herself, eyeing the half-full cup still on the table. She hid a yawn behind her hand. She, Solas, Varric and Blackwall were scheduled to head back out to the Fallow Mire in the morning to deal with the report of lost troops. She knew that she had to be well rested if they were to be successful in getting their men back.

She glanced at the bed. Blackwall took up much of the small mattress, leaving her only a sliver if she slept on her side. A sliver isn’t so bad, she thought. Remember that one time you and two other researchers slept in that half-sunken ship you were investigating? You had less room than that and you did just fine. Then again, her fellow researchers had been tall and reed thin. Fine, so this is like the time you had to take shelter in that small outcropping that barely counted as a cave during a rainstorm five years ago. You remember the Coastlands, right? Ravena quietly groaned and put a hand to her cheek. Of course she remembered the Coastlands. She had been traveling in Ferelden with a mercenary who had agreed to come with her as protection. Over the course of her trip, the two of them had become friends and...

“Oh, grow up,” she hissed, toeing her shoes off. She and Marcus had amicably parted ways several months after that, but she still thought of him and the memory of that night and the many other nights that followed fondly. Taking the pins out of her bun with more force than necessary, she quickly
braided her hair and blew out the candles. The cabin was still dimly lit by the low fire in the hearth, and she silently climbed into bed beside Blackwall, stretching out on her side and pulling one of the spare pillows away from him. All Blackwall did was murmur in his sleep, which made her breathe a sigh of relief. Blackwall wasn’t the soundest of sleepers while they were out on the road, but it seemed that he had slipped into a deeper slumber now that he was better relaxed. She briefly thought about how she was going to use her feet to pull the blanket at the foot of the bed to cover her, but then she realized that his body radiated so much heat that the coverlet wouldn’t be necessary. Settling down, she stared at the back of his head until her eyelids drooped and she fell asleep.

Waking up in a strange bed with a woman in his arms was something Blackwall hadn’t experienced in quite some time. It took him a little while to focus; going by the weak light from the dying torches lit outside Ravena’s window trying to peek through her closed shutters, he estimated that it was an hour or so before daybreak. Glancing down, he saw that Ravena had curled up close to him sometime during the night. Blackwall was caught between being embarrassed that he had fallen asleep on her in the first place and incredibly pleased at the way her right leg was wrapped around his and how her arm was draped across his middle, her hand splayed against his back.

He chose to be pleased. He felt good, in fact, he felt better than he had in a very long while, thanks to Ravena’s care. Now that his eyes were adjusted to the gloom, he saw that Ravena had taken her hair out of her usual bun and had braided it into a thick plait that coiled around her shoulder. He couldn’t see too many details in the low light, but he caught the way the thick fringe of eyelashes had fanned out over her cheeks. For the longest time he merely lay there, enjoying the quiet and marveling at how well the palm of his hand fit against the feminine curve of her hip. It was truly difficult to rouse himself out of her bed, especially when Ravena made a quiet sound of protest when he finally did roll away from her. It took a little bit of fumbling around in the dark, but he managed to dress himself.

Blackwall was in the process of sneaking out of her cabin when he turned to give her one last look. Ravena had moved, rolling into the place he had just vacated. Even from the door he could see how she had loosely curled herself into a ball, her arms around the pillow he had been using. He set his gloves back down on the scarred table and crouched by the hearth, stirring up embers until he had created a fire large enough to heat the immediate area. He then went over to the foot of the bed and unfolded the blanket he had found, gently pulling it up over her shoulders. He was beyond surprised that all she did was sigh in her sleep and snuggle deeper against the pillows; Ravena was normally a much lighter sleeper on the road.

With the fire in the hearth providing extra light, Blackwall stared down at her as she slept. She was lovely; unable to help himself, he reached out and traced the edge of her cheek with the backs of his fingers, thinking back to one of those princesses in a book he had read as a young boy. Before he could think better of it, he bent and briefly touched his lips to hers. It was wrong and he knew it. Even so, he took that moment and hoarded it away, knowing that he’d take it out and treasure it for many a cold and lonely night to come.

Ravena woke to the sound of pounding on her door. Bolting upright, she looked around, slightly disoriented for a second. “Blackwall?” One glance to the chairs they had sat at the night before saw that his boots and coat were missing. She was partly disappointed that he had left and partly surprised that she hadn’t woken as he moved about. Pushing her hair out of her eyes, she slipped out of bed
and padded barefoot to the door.

“Rise and shine, Herald,” Varric said, his voice overly cheerful.

She rubbed at her eyes. “What time is it?” she asked, letting him in. The sun was just starting to peek over the horizon, the sky painted a lovely mix of roses and purples.

“Too damn early, if you ask me. I was enjoying a well-deserved sleep when Seeker woke me up.” He held out a still-steaming mug. “Don’t ask what’s in it, just trust me.”

She took a cautious sip and sighed gratefully. “Varric, you wonderful, beautiful man. Just how did you get your hands on Nevarran coffee beans?” There was something sweet in the background and he had watered the usually strong beverage down with cream for her, but it still tasted like she remembered it.

“One, I have my ways of pulling strings. Two, I’m impressed you’re familiar with the drink. I usually have it strong and black; puts hair on your chest.”

She laughed. “Ah, so that’s the key to your luxurious mane of chest hair. Don’t worry; I’ll keep your secret safe.” She took her coffee with her as she began pulling her gear out of the storage chest close to the bed. “Though just between you and me, the hair thing is a lie. I drank pots of the stuff while writing up thesis papers and never saw a difference.”

“Maybe I’m just lucky that way.” He sat at her table and whistled through his teeth. “Well, this explains where Hero went the other night. He stood me up for a game of cards.”

“What are you…” she turned just in time to see Varric wave a pair of gloves at her. “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. So just when were you going to fill me in on the blossoming relationship you and the bearded Warden have?”

She rolled her eyes. “There is no blossoming going on. We spent the evening talking and he must have left those behind.”

“Must have been some evening. That explains why I saw him tiptoeing out your cabin at such a Maker-forsaken hour this morning. I wouldn’t have known this little tidbit of information, had I not also been up so early.” His smirk deepened. “I think I have title ideas for my new book. How does Conscripted by Desire sound to you?”

“Varric…”

“No? The Warden’s Marcher? Nah, that sounds too dull, never would get past my editors. Ah, I know it!” He snapped his fingers. “The Griffon and the Raven! See what I did there with a play on your name?”

“Maker give me strength. I swear if even a paragraph of this harebrained scheme gets written, I’m leaving you to the mercy of Cassandra from now until the end of time.”

“Not even one page of steamy bits? I’d even let you read it for approval before I send it off.”

“Not a word written. Especially the steamy bits.”

“You know, you’re just as bad as Hawke was, hampering my creative voice. I’ll have you know, the Rogue and the Reformed Rake was one of my finer non-serial novels. This one could be an even bigger hit than that one.”
“Stick to *Hard in Hightown*. Now out, I have to change if we’re going to get on the road on schedule.”

He chortled. “Judging by the looks someone’s been giving you lately, I can guess what else is har-”

Drawing herself up to her full height and using every spare ounce of noble authority she possessed, she pointed to the door. “Out.”

“Everyone’s a critic!” Varric laughed as he closed the door to her cabin, shaking his head at the muffled *I love you, too* that she shouted at him. Well, this was definitely an interesting twist in the story. He wondered if anyone else knew. Well, anyone else besides Nightingale. Varric swore that woman knew everything about everyone just by looking at them.

He made his way towards the main gate where Solas and Blackwall were already waiting.

“You look…chipper this morning, Hero,” Varric drawled, sidling up to Blackwall.

“It’s amazing what a good night’s rest will do for a person,” he replied, sorting through the backpacks of supplies they were going to be taking, making sure that everything was in its place.

“Oh, I’ll bet.” He shrugged at Blackwall’s quizzical look. “You didn’t have Cassandra poking you awake with her boot.”

“No, that I didn’t.” Blackwall’s gaze seemed to turn inwards and a small smile quirked the side of his mouth.

“Speaking of sleep, here comes Her Worshipful Sleepyhead herself.”

“Sorry I kept everyone,” Ravena said, coming up to them while still trying to put pins in her hair. “I must have overslept.”

“Do not trouble yourself,” Solas reassured her. “We only arrived a few moments ago.”

She nodded. “Well, now that everyone’s here, shall we get started? The sooner we can conclude business in the Mire, the faster we can head back into the Hinterlands and talk Dennett into giving the Inquisition horses.”

“I’m with you on that, Dusty. All this walking nonsense is for the birds.”

“And here I thought you traipsed all over Kirkwall with Hawke.” She gave him a look. “Dusty? That’s the best nickname you could come up with?”

He held out his hands. “Hey, I’m a city dwarf. Hawke was decent enough to take me out only when she felt I was going to start growing roots from staying at the Hanged Man too long. And secondly, I thought with all of your tomb raiding, old artifact searching…” he made a face. “Okay, so it’s a work in progress. Give a storyteller a break.”

“Be grateful you’re one of my favorite people. Just don’t settle on anything too generic for me.”

Varric rolled his eyes. “Andraste’s ass, it’s like talking with Aveline all over again.” Still shaking his head, he followed Solas out the gate, ears pricking when he happened to overhear Ravena and Blackwall’s quiet conversation.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“As I said last night, you’re a miracle worker.”
“I’m glad. There’s usually some soreness the next day, especially in areas that held a lot of tension. I wanted to make sure it didn’t interfere with any fighting we might have to do.”

“You’ve no need to worry on that end.” There was a pause. “I do want to apologize though.”

“Oh, for sneaking out this morning without waking me? I ought to blame you for my hair looking a mess since I didn’t have time to properly fix it as I rushed out the door.”

“Blame me if you’d like, my lady, but I can find no fault in your hair. You’re as lovely as ever.”

“And you are as charming as ever.” Her tone was definitely in the flirtatious territory. “By the way, I think that these belong to you.”

“Ah, I was wondering where I had misplaced those. Thank you.”

“You should be thanking Varric. He discovered them when he woke me this morning. Just a warning: he may try to tease you about it, if he hasn’t already.”

“What of you? Have you been the victim of his jokes?” Varric gulped. It was unnerving just how quickly that man could go from light, flirting banter to steely, protective warrior in a single sentence.

“But of course. Then again, I forgave him since he did come bearing coffee. Just for reference, I’ll forgive pretty much anything if you give me a decent cup of the stuff.”

“I’ll have to keep that in mind.”

Varric quickened his pace and got out of earshot once he realized that the two of them weren’t going to be giving him any more juicy tidbits of conversation. He thought back to his book idea. Well, it was more of a brainstorm session than an actual idea. He hadn’t really had much time to work on his Hightown novels, and frankly, he was going through a bit of a block when it came to them. Varric figured that if he started something else instead, it might be enough to get the creative juices flowing again.

“Just swap out the names and a few physical features…” he mused, stroking his chin. Perhaps making the lead a world-weary soldier instead of a Warden would be enough. And Ravena’s rogue skills were commonplace and wouldn’t necessarily bring attention to her. He’d already used a redhead as a heroine in a recent novel, but perhaps if he lightened her hair color to brown and gave her blue eyes...

As they walked, a vague outline began to form in his head. Then as the hours progressed, dialogue suddenly started springing up from nowhere. Out of habit, he grabbed his notebook and pencil out of an interior coat pocket and started scribbling madly, shorthand quickly filling up pages.

“That had better not be for what I think it is,” Ravena warned, appearing at his shoulder out of nowhere once they had stopped for a break.

He jumped, looking up from his work. “Why Herald, I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he said innocently. “I happen to be in the middle of drafting a business proposal between myself and a former associate.” It wasn’t quite a lie: that last mile had him realizing that he’d more than likely need Isabela’s help if he really wanted to do the more physical scenes justice. Aside from intentionally writing bad erotica like Swords and Shields – a serial he had absolutely no plan of actually finishing, seeing that the whole thing had been done on a dare Hawke had challenged him to when the both of them hadn’t been exactly sober – he was rubbish at the romance genre.

“I’m serious,” Ravena said, arching her eyebrow. “I won’t rescue you the next time Cassandra starts...
to fight with you.

“And here you see me quaking in my boots,” he deadpanned, looking over his notes. Yes, this was definitely going to get written and Rivaini was definitely going to co-author. Work would be slow going, seeing that Isabela had taken again to the seafaring life, but the wait would be worth it. If Varric played his cards right, and he usually always did, even if Ravena did follow through with her threat it wouldn’t be of much consequence.

No, he was determined to write this one so well that if the Seeker ever got wind of the tale, she would be practically begging him to finish.

Chapter End Notes

I hadn't meant to do it originally, but Varric decided for me that the Hawke in this story is going to be the same Elsa Hawke from my previous story The Blade and the Bow (https://www.fanfiction.net/s/7333176/1/The-Blade-and-the-Bow)
Boots squelching in the mud, Ravena turned her lip up in disgust. “Have I mentioned how much I hate it here?” she asked, pushing wet hair out of her face.

“Once or twice,” Solas answered. “And for the record, I share your dislike of the place.”

“That makes three of us,” Varric said, examining his crossbow for signs of damage.

“Make that four.” Blackwall scanned the area ahead of them, frowning when he saw more reanimated corpses far off on the horizon. They hadn’t spotted them yet, and Blackwall was hoping that his group could avoid another fight. The Fallow Mire was living up to its name: nothing aside from a few weeds and the rare medicinal herb grew in the boggy ground. He could have sworn that they had spent most of the day traveling, but the sun refused to show its face. If anything, the sky had grown darker as the day progressed and Blackwall was dreading what sort of enemies might turn up once night arrived.

“I don’t know about anyone else, but I think that this is a good spot to camp,” Ravena decided. “Even if it isn’t, I don’t know how much further I can go on today. I’m spent.” She cradled her left hand against her chest. There was a rift somewhere close by, but in her current state, she didn’t know how much help she would be in fighting demons and the inevitable undead that would surely flock to them.

Blackwall dropped his pack. “Then it’s decided. We set up camp and get some rest.” Normally they would have retraced their steps and gone back to the last camp they had established to fetch recruits, but Solas had suggested sending up a magical flare instead of trudging back through the bog. It worked more efficiently and freed them up to begin clearing the area for the future campsite while they waited for extra forces to arrive.

“What I wouldn’t give for a decent fire right about now,” Blackwall commented, helping Ravena set up tent poles.

“I know what you mean. It would be nice to have something to warm ourselves by.” She wiggled her toes in her boots. “As well as something to dry out by. Remind me to have our quartermaster requisition extra socks to the troops who take this post.”

He stretched out the oiled canvas and secured knots until the tent was as rain-proof as the two of them could make it.

“No use starting a fire in this mess,” Varric said. “Until reinforcements arrive, who’s got first watch?” Watch rotations were quickly sorted out, with Solas volunteering to act as the first lookout. The mage was drier than the rest of them: apparently he had been casting a temporary barrier around himself most of the day.

“Sleep well,” Blackwall said, picking up his pack to head over to the tent Varric had set up. He paused when he felt Ravena’s hand on his arm. “My lady?”

She bit her lip and looked down. “I really don’t want to sleep by myself,” she confessed. Blackwall couldn’t quite tell in the gloom, but it looked as if a blush had seeped across her cheeks. “Between the corpses coming out of the bog, the rain, and…” she trailed off before taking a breath. “Would you mind sharing a tent?”

His eyebrows rose. “Not that I mind, but wouldn’t you rather share with Varric?”
She shrugged. “Varric is good at putting my mind at ease with distraction, and normally I wouldn’t mind hearing one of his stories.”

“I’m sensing a but coming along here.”

She looked him in the eye. “However,” she corrected, a faint smile forming on her lips. “I’m not in the mood for storytelling and if you can excuse me for being so bold, you make me feel safe out here.”

“I do?”

“You sound surprised.” She took in his widened eyes and unbelieving expression. “You look surprised.”

He regained his composure. “Forgive me, but I am.” His gaze fell to the ground. “I’ve been on my own for so long that I’ve nearly forgotten…” He took a breath and gave her a faint smile. “I’ve forgotten what it was like to have others to lean on.” Reaching out, he opened the flap of the tent and gestured for her to enter. It took little time for them both to unpack bedrolls and organize themselves.

Ravena had to smile at the way that Blackwall muttered under his breath about rust as he inspected his armor mostly by touch, the light from the lone torch Solas had set up inside his barrier not doing much to penetrate the tent’s layers of canvas and oilcloth. She was too busy unpinning her hair and running a comb through the snarled mass to notice when his quiet inventory of his items had died down to nothing.

“I never realized how long your hair was,” Blackwall murmured. He was man enough to admit that he had been staring at her silhouette for the past minute or two, transfixed by the way her hair had uncoiled from its bun and had fallen down her shoulders.

“I don’t usually keep it down,” she replied, wincing as her comb tore through a hidden tangle. “It’s inconvenient to have in my face and people usually try to make a grab for it in a fight if I have it in a braid. Practicality says I should cut it, I can’t bear the thought. A woman has to have at least one vain point, right?”

“Nothing wrong with a little bit of vanity,” he answered, unbuckling his sword and setting it beside him in case he needed to quickly grab it in the middle of the night. “Makes you human.” Settling down, he used his pack as a makeshift pillow. He didn’t trust himself not to stare, but he listened with closed eyes as Ravena quietly pinned her hair back up and situated herself for the night, the hiss of metal escaping leather sheathes telling him that she trusted the Mire just as much as he did. The shift of cloth and the faintest hint of something floral reminded Blackwall that their tent was incredibly narrow. Slight pressure as her back brushed against his arm confirmed it.

He suddenly wished that he had thought to take off his metal vambraces when he had removed his pauldrons before turning in, if only to better feel her. His mind went back to the last morning in Haven when he had woken up beside her, Ravena pliant in his arms and her breath warm against his bare skin. It was days ago, but he could still bring up the sense memory. Unfortunately, it was also something that would probably never happen again, much to his disappointment.

“And to think that I normally like the sound of rain,” Ravena said, breaking the silence. Her voice was already thick with sleep.

“Wouldn’t be so bad if you took the swamps, the leftover plague ruins, and the undead out of the equation.”
“Not to mention the Avvar who want to kill us.” She shifted onto her back. “I hope our people are all right.”

He turned his head to look at her in the dark. He couldn’t see much except the faintest outline of her profile. “We’ll get them back,” he promised.

“I know we will.” She sighed. “I just hope that we’ll get them back alive.”

He reached out, his hand blindly searching for hers. Once he found her fingers, he squeezed them reassuringly. “We will. Come on, get some rest. You’ll need all your strength in the morning.”

Ravena yawned. “You’re right. Goodnight, Blackwall.”

“Goodnight.”

It was still raining when Blackwall woke up, but the downpour had slowed to a soft patter of raindrops against the tent. He tensed when he heard movement outside, but quickly relaxed when he realized that fellow Inquisition forces had found them and were quietly milling about camp. It was still as dark as it had been, but the addition of extra men had chased away the feeling of isolation.

He didn’t need light to know that Ravena was still sleeping. Sometime during the night, one or both of them must have shifted closer for warmth. Blackwall found himself on his side; Ravena’s back firmly nestled against his chest. He had stretched out his left arm, which she was currently using as a pillow, and his right arm held her snugly to him. He had a moment of shame when he realized that his palm was cupped intimately around her breast, but it was slightly diminished by the fact that her own fingers were twined with his in keeping his hand where it was. He tried to move out of her grasp and roll a respectable distance away without waking her, but it seemed as if the heavy slumber that she had been under in Haven was an anomaly. As it was, Blackwall had only a few seconds to slide his hand from her chest to the relatively safer territory of her hip before she was fully awake.

“Blackwall?” she murmured, voice still groggy with sleep.

“T’m here.” He had expected an awkward awakening, with her moving quickly away from him, but he got something different. She covered her yawn with the back of her hand before slowly stretching, her body brushing electrically against his.

“We’re still in the swamp, aren’t we?” she asked, rolling over onto her back and flinging an arm over her eyes. “It wasn’t just some horrid nightmare, was it?”

“Afraid not, my lady.” He took the opportunity to sit up and begin buckling on the armor he had taken off the night before.

Ravena groaned and did the same. The Mark on her hand flared to life, casting an eerie green glow about the tent. “That rift must be closer than I thought,” she said, sheathing her daggers.

“Does it pain you?” She flexed her fingers. “Not so much as it originally did. This feels more like someone’s knocking impatiently on the other side of a door. It’s distracting, but bearable.” Since they had been traveling with gear meant to establish camping sites, they left most of the items where they were and only took the essentials with them in their now lighter packs. Solas and Varric greeted them as they exited their tent, both of her companions looking better rested.
“You ready to get out of here?” Varric asked, shouldering Bianca.

“Truer words have never been spoken,” Ravena replied. She lagged behind the others and placed a hand on Blackwall’s arm. “I should apologize,” she murmured, her eyes downcast.

He tilted his head. “For?”

“I may have, ah, taken advantage of you last night. And perhaps that last evening in Haven.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and quirked his eyebrow. “A serious accusation.” He leaned in. “And an unfortunate one, seeing as I was asleep and unable to enjoy both occasions.”

It might be dark, but he was still able to catch the flush that rose to her face in the sputtering torchlight. “I’m trying to be serious,” she said, letting out a very Cassandra-like huff as they walked. “I’m not a person usually prone to… snuggling. If I were, Varric would tease me about trying to get close to his chest hair every time we shared a tent. This morning…”

“Was a pleasant way to wake up,” Blackwall finished. “Did I make you uncomfortable?”

She made sure to catch his eye. “No.”

“Then let me assure you that you didn’t make me feel uncomfortable either. In fact, I’m flattered, especially since you claim not to be a cuddler.”

She rolled her eyes at his teasing tone. “Can we keep that little fact between us? Maker only knows what Varric will write about when he gets around to doing my biography.”

“Oh? Are you looking to be another bestseller, like The Tale of the Champion?”

“Even if I weren’t, he’s dead set on publishing something. I figured I’d cut him off at the pass and be as accommodating as possible just to throw his thought process off.” She glanced sideways at him. “So we’re good? No lingering awkwardness?”

“There wasn’t any there to begin with.” He stopped her by putting a hand on her shoulder. “We’re good, Ravena.”

“I’m glad. I didn’t want there to be any.” She paused, as if trying to organize her thoughts. “Would you mind if we continued sharing tents? No offence to Solas, but it’s eerie when he slips off to dream in the Fade.”

“So he does that whole thing where it looks like he isn’t breathing with you, too? He’s so still, it looks as if he’s dead.”

She nodded. “Which is probably a great benefit that draws as little attention to himself when he’s alone, but it makes for an unsettling sleeping partner.”

“Agreed. And what of Varric?” He stepped over a fallen log and held out his hand to help Ravena do the same.

“I love the man dearly, but he talks in his sleep.” She leaned in closer and lowered her voice. “Unless Bianca is also a woman that no one knows about, he has a rather explicit and complicated relationship with his crossbow.”

He gave an amused snort. “Well, rest assured that I have no romantic inclinations towards my weapons and unless you have any objections to the occasional snore, you are welcome to join me in
my tent at any time.”

Ravena moved even closer to him. “I’ll be certain to take you up on your offer, Ser,” she murmured. Blackwall would have replied, but he found that his heart had flown up into his throat and his tongue seemed glued to the roof of his mouth.

Fortunately, or perhaps, unfortunately, Varric answered for him. “If the two of you are finished canoodling,” he said, cupping his hands over his mouth to be better heard over the thunder. “There’s a rift that needs closing.”

Ravena rolled her eyes. “We’d better get going,” she said, moving away and picking up her pace. She whacked Varric on the shoulder as she passed him; Blackwall grinning when he heard her. There was no canoodling going on.

Then she turned and smiled at him. The look in her eyes was enough to make the swamp, the reanimated corpses, and the rain seem like a stroll in a park.
“I fucking hate that man.”

“First off,” Varric said, sympathetically pulling out bandages from their pack. “Language. I didn’t know highborn ladies had such a vocabulary. And two, that man you hate so much is dead. Hero took his head clean off with that last sword swing.”

“Good.” Blackwall spat, wincing as he helped Ravena out of her leather jacket. “I only wish he were alive so I could kill the bastard again.”

Ravena hissed in pain as she pulled her arm out of the sleeve. “Get in line,” she said. She made a motion to put her hand over the long slash against her ribs, but stopped when she realized that her gloves were filthy and soaked in the former leader of the Blades of Hessarian’s blood. Even with her ruined cotton undershirt as a barrier, she was worried about inadvertently contaminating the wound. “Tell me straight, how bad is it?”

Blackwall’s stony expression and silence didn’t do anything to reassure her.

The Iron Bull whistled through his teeth. “That right there is going to leave an amazing scar,” he told her, pride evident in his voice. “But we should probably stitch it up before you bleed out.”

Varric nudged Blackwall out of the way. “Eh, I’ve seen worse. Have I ever told you about the time Hawke took on a dragon and managed to get stabbed in the leg with one of its teeth? Heh, Choir Boy had to carry her on his back all the way back to Kirkwall for that one.”

“You know,” Ravena said, wincing as Varric poured water from his canteen over the gash to clean it. “Every time you mention him, I find myself liking him even more.”

Varric rolled his eyes and took out a dagger from his boot to begin cutting Ravena’s shirt in order to get to her injuries better. “At first, there wasn’t much to like. He was an upright do-gooder who pined over Hawke for years. He got tolerable once Hawke wiggled herself into that shiny white armor of his and talked him into retaking his family’s title. This is ruined, by the way.”

“Yes, I figured. The shirt, not Sebastian. Never met him, but I met some of his family when I did research in Starkhaven in my younger years. Attractive bunch of men, those Vaels were. All piercing blue eyes and deep, rolling brogue…” She drifted off with a satisfied hum, her eyelids closing as she wove on her feet.

“And when she starts swooning over princes is when we know Dusty’s lost too much blood. Hero, hold her down. Tiny, do your worst.”

Bull uncorked a bottle of brandy from his pack and shook his head. “Gonna sting like nothing else,” he cautioned before unceremoniously dumping a generous portion onto her side. The three of them were prepared for Ravena to thrash around in pain, but the curses that flew from her mouth caught them off guard. Their reactions were different: Bull’s eyebrows rose in respect for her impressive vocabulary, Varric laughed, and Blackwall held onto her arms so she wouldn’t flail about, surprised that something so filthy could still sound somewhat ladylike in her voice.

“Language,” Varric said again, his mouth turned upwards in amusement. “And I have really got to
introduce you to Rivaini.”

“I’d rather be introduced to Hawke,” she gritted out, leaning heavily against Blackwall’s chest. “Sebastian is a package deal with her and I’d finally be able to ogle.” She drew in a pained breath when Varric began to spread a thick red paste across her ribs.

Blackwall’s brows furrowed. “Does this really need an audience?” he growled, noticing that Bull wasn’t really doing much to help except offer an attempt to distract Ravena by sharing a few other choice curses to add to her list. That, and staring at her chest, which made Blackwall bristle.

“Nope,” Bull drawled, smirking at him. “Gonna go see what information our new agents have on tap. I was just waiting to see how long it took you to snap at me.” With that, he walked off in the direction a group of Blades were congregated at, his battle axe casually propped over one shoulder.

Varric held out the glass jar. “Don’t need to tell me a thing,” he said breezily. “I know when the dashing Leading Man turns into the Third Wheel.”

Blackwall tightened his hold on Ravena’s elbow when she started swaying. “We need to find someplace for you to sit,” he said.

Ravena tilted her chin towards the hut they were closest to. “Apparently that used to belong to their leader. I’m certain he’s not going to mind it if we move in for a while.” What little healing paste Varric had managed to put onto her injury had worked enough to stop the bleeding and dulled the pain to a somewhat bearable level, but she was still woozy.

“I can carry you if you wish, my lady,” Blackwall offered, already bending at the waist in order to scoop her up in his arms.

“And let new allies think I’m weak? Thank you for the offer, but no thanks.” She did offer her elbow to him. “Your leg is bleeding. Why don’t we lean on the other and both of us find somewhere to sit?”

Blackwall took her arm and the both of them slowly made their way to the largest of the buildings. Indeed, there was a rickety looking stool and a narrow bed. “My leg isn’t injured, you know,” he told her, helping to ease her down onto the mattress.

“I know; the blood was from our favorite headless person over there. There were curious eyes and ears paying attention.” She frowned and unscrewed the glass jar Varric had handed her. “I absolutely despise this.” Leaning back, she tugged at the frayed portion of her shirt until it ripped up the seam and then drew it off her good side.

Blackwall unsuccessfully tried not to notice that she was sitting there bare from the waist up save for but her breast band. His gaze automatically went to the eye-catching swell of her cleavage, but instead of lingering, his ardor was cooled by the sight of the delicate white lace spattered with blood.

“Getting hurt or hiding how much you’re hurt from others?” he asked, busying himself by sitting next to her and digging into his pack for a roll of bandages.

“Both. Getting hurt is one thing, but having to hide it because I’m not a hundred percent sure of new allies’ loyalty and I don’t want to give them a weakness to exploit? That’s something completely different.” She tugged off a glove and let it fall to the floor. “Do you have any idea how much this hurts?” She scooped a large glob of the healing paste and slathered it across her skin, sighing in relief as it began to work.

“I have an inkling,” Blackwall replied, taking off his own gloves. He carefully brushed her fingers
aside and gently took over to get to the uppermost portion of her injury that she couldn’t reach, his fingers moving over her side as if she were made of glass and he was afraid of breaking her. Even though he should have been concentrating on tending to her, Blackwall couldn’t help but relish the feel of soft skin against his roughened fingertips. Ravena had the smallest cluster of birthmarks dotting her torso, the trio of marks running along her ribcage like a constellation. “The Iron Bull was right; this is going to scar.” Task done, he took the bandages and began to wrap her up.

She hummed her agreement. “Perhaps now I can be the intellectual mercenary you called me when we first met.” Now that the pain had nearly completely vanished, her eyes sparkled in humor.

“Did I say that?” he teased. “I don’t think you have a mercenary bone in your body.”

She rolled her eyes. “Obviously you’ve never seen me haggle over the price of an artifact before.” Suddenly aware of the fact that she was partially undressed, she made a grab for her coat. “Thank you for your help, Blackwall. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” He watched as she laced and buckled herself back up, all that milk-pale skin concealed once more by hardened leather. “Do you think you’re well enough to continue?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I’m well enough to head back up to our base camp, if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t think we have anything much to worry about concerning our troops and the Blades of Hessarian butting heads any longer, and we haven’t finished everything in the area that Leliana wanted us to look into. I’d rather rest up for the evening there before continuing explorations here on the coast. I’m certain that once we get back to Haven that there’ll be a long list of other things that we’ll need to see to, but I’d like to see if we couldn’t find any other rifts that are in need of closing before we leave.”

Blackwall took in her hunched shoulders and for the first time saw the dark circles blooming underneath her eyes and the way that her cheeks were beginning to hollow. She was as striking as ever, but he didn’t know if it was her recent injury or if it had always been there and he – and everyone else – had failed to notice just how tired she was. “You need a break,” he said.

She gave him a weak smile. “And the sky needs to stop raining demons,” she replied. She made a move to get up, but Blackwall reached out and carefully cupped her shoulders in his palms.

“Demons will continue to do what they will without tiring, but you can’t continue this way. We’re stopping here for the night, and then continuing along the coast in the morning.” His voice was still gentle, but it held a thread of steel in it that brokered no arguments.

Ravena looked up at him. “Well, it would cut travel time down from going all the way back to base camp,” she agreed.

“Then it’s settled.” Blackwall pulled out a vial of potion from a pouch on his belt. “Drink your potion, go to sleep, and let someone else worry about everything for one day.”

A giggle bubbled forth before Ravena could smother it with her palm. “You sound like René,” she said, tipping back the potion and gingerly scooting backwards on the bed until she was lying down. “My oldest brother, that is. He would often scold me when we were children for doing too much at one time and tiring myself out.”

Blackwall shifted, reaching out to smooth some hair out of her eyes. “Looks like you haven’t outgrown the habit,” he told her. He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips so he could kiss the back of her knuckles. Unable to help himself, he carefully turned her hand, his mouth moving over the quickly beating pulse at her wrist. His lips quirked up into a smirk when he heard her sharp
intake of breath, the sound having nothing to do with the pain at her side. Rising from the bed, he moved to the door. “I’ll let everyone know what the plan is. Get some rest.”

Ravena stared at the door long after he had left. “Easy for you to say,” she muttered, her hand pressed to her suddenly heated cheek. She closed her eyes, still feeling the ghostly impression of his lips against her skin. It wasn’t long before the events of the day caught up with her and she fell asleep.

A few hours later, Blackwall carefully tiptoed back into the hut. The lone lamp at the bedside was still lit, illuminating Ravena’s sleeping face. She was still on her back, one arm curled protectively around her middle and the other stretched out, almost as if beckoning him to go to her. She looked a little better than she had when he had left her; he guessed that the combination of medicine and sleep was going a long way to ease her weariness. Carefully setting his gear down, he eased himself into a sitting position on the floor near the bed, his back leaning against the side of the mattress. While Bull and Varric had both agreed with him that they didn’t have anything to fear from their newly gained allies, it didn’t stop Blackwall from keeping his sword close at hand. Leaning his head back, he gave Ravena one last glance before closing his eyes.

He woke to a dark room, the lamp’s candle long since gone out. His ears pricked to see if he could hear just what had woken him, but all he could catch were snatches of conversation outside and the quiet, even breathing coming from the bed behind him. He winced as he stretched a crick out of his neck and shifted. Even with the slight padding of his bedroll, sitting in one spot for so long in full armor played hell on his bones. Getting up, he soundlessly made his way outside.

“What’s the matter, Warden?” The Iron Bull asked. Blackwall flinched, not having noticed the larger man from his vantage point in the shadows. “She kick you out?”

“Ravena’s sleeping,” he answered. “Thought I’d stretch my legs a bit, maybe relieve someone from watch duty.”

“What’s the deal with you two anyway?” the Qunari asked. “Either you’re moving around her all protective-like or she’s staring at you when you aren’t watching. The two of you are adults, why not just act on all the tension?”

Blackwall opened his mouth to answer, but then closed it. “It isn’t that simple,” he finally settled on. “She’s the Herald. I’m just…”

“A person she trusts above pretty much everyone else here? Come on, I might only have one eye, but I can see just fine.” Bull pulled out a flask from his pockets and took a swig. “But I gotta ask, if you’re not going to move in on her, mind if I do? She might not be a redhead, but damn, she’s got a rack that’ll make a grown man weep.”

Blackwall’s eyes narrowed. “Watch your mouth.”

Bull grinned. “I’m just shitting you. Plain to see that even if I did go in with the big guns, she’d still let me down easy. She’s got eyes just for you, Big Guy.” He took another drink. “Question is, what are you going to do about it?” He didn’t wait for an answer, he just pushed himself away from the hut’s wall and ambled towards the empty stable where it looked like he and Varric had set up their own little campsite.

Blackwall stared at him. “Nothing,” he sighed, running his hand through his hair. “Absolutely nothing.”
I have a headcanon that potions aren't enough in the first aid department. I'm guessing that poultices can be difficult to transport without drying out and carrying loads of raw ingredients ready to mix out in the field was too cumbersome. Some apothecary discovered that mixing poultice ingredients with a stabilizing agent created an ointment and bottling the finished product up in easy to carry jars was the next best thing. Thus, healing paste is born. Just think of it as Thedas' version of Neosporin.
It was Blackwall’s habit to head into the Singing Maiden for a pint after spending the afternoon and early evening helping train the new recruits. He had managed the beginnings of a professional friendship with Commander Cullen, grateful that the man allowed him to help out. He admired Cullen’s training methods and was gladdened to hear the Commander say the same about his. Unfortunately, he’d never managed to talk Cullen into joining him for post-training drinks, but he’d managed to form some bonds with several other Templars who had joined their cause. It did something to him to know that he was helping contribute to the Inquisition in ways other than going out on the front lines with the Herald.

Speaking of the Herald, Blackwall spied her sitting by herself at a table wedged into the corner at the back of the tavern, her head down as she poured over several notes in front of her. Thanking Flissa for his drink, he maneuvered around the crowd until he approached her.

“Mind if I join you?” he asked.

Ravena looked up from a stack of papers and smiled. “Please. You’re a welcome distraction.” Shuffling the pages aside, she tipped her head in invitation to the empty chair next to her.

“Field reports?” he asked her, settling down.

She shook her head. “Worse. Josephine suggested that I write my family for aid. The good news is that the Trevelyans are one hundred percent behind the Inquisition.”

“And the bad news?”

“I just received a mass influx of letters from my immediate family. I’ve read through all of them, but I’m dreading penning replies.”

Blackwall noticed that Ravena had traded out her customary glass of wine for a squat, square glass and a bottle of something stronger. “Come on, how bad can it be?”

She pulled out a thick portion of the stack, which he estimated to be well over several pages long. “This alone is from my mother. Ten pages of *I was in labor with you for thirty-six hours and nearly died and this is how we find out you’re alive after what happened at the Conclave*. Ten pages full of tiny, delicate, single-spaced handwriting, Blackwall. If you should know anything about my mother, Adriana Trevelyan is a master of the fine art of guilt trips.” She pulled out a single sheet of paper. “In contrast, my father wrote the first two paragraphs to confirm that his bannorn would support our cause and that longer, more businesslike letters would be coming Josephine’s way as he continued to petition his arl to join our cause. The remainder of his letter was to apologize for Mother’s tirade, with a long postscript on how he sends his love and is thankful that I’m still alive, even if it meant that I was the reason Mother had random attacks of teary hysteria for an entire week straight.” She fondly ran her fingers over the strong, bold handwriting and could all but see her father rolling his eyes as he wrote the last bit in his brightly lit study. Unbidden, a rush of homesickness hit her. She took a sip of her drink, the burn of the alcohol helping to wash away the sudden tightness in her throat.

“Your parents sound like night and day,” Blackwall commented, quietly sipping on his ale.
Ravena laughed. “They most definitely are. Yet they love each other dearly: Mother despite Father’s more serious nature and Father despite Mother’s bouts of silliness.” She rifled through the rest of the pages. “The remainder of the letters are from my brothers. My eldest brother, in his usual way, spent two sentences echoing Father’s initial two paragraphs and then wrote three pages worth of Big Brother things. My second eldest brother wrote in a similar vein, only adding the by the way, whatever the Inquisition needs from us, let me know as an afterthought.” She neglected to add that her sisters-in-law had added their own notes in the margins of their husband’s letters, inquiring about her welfare and briefly filling her in on the latest gossip. Maria, the more romantic of the two, made certain to ask if between trying to restore order and finding a way to seal the Breach Ravena had seen anyone who had caught her eye.

She was torn between keeping silent and writing everything she could about a certain man currently sitting beside her. Sighing, she picked up her glass and swirled the contents before downing it in one go. “My only consolation is that my cousin Henri also wrote to me.” She handed Blackwall a piece of paper that looked to have been torn out of a bound journal. “If there’s one thing I can count on with him, it’s that he is direct, to the point, and so absent-minded about the passage of time that he can’t guilt me on not writing sooner.”

“This makes no sense,” he told her, staring at the neat and precise handwriting. He’d seen samples of Ravena’s own writing, and had he not known that the note had come from her cousin, he’d have assumed she’d written it. “All he wrote is a string of words, see? Dearest, Blasted Tantervale, Rivain, Thankful, Salvage, and Henri.”

Ravena filled up her glass and emptied it just as quickly. “You have to understand Henri for that to make sense. His letter goes something on the lines of Dearest Ravena, thanks to my blasted, broken foot, I’m stuck in Tantervale for the foreseeable future, or until it heals up enough to get around on my own. Because of this, I had to turn down a lucrative non-Chantry sanctioned job in Rivain, which you know I hated to do. I’m highly thankful that you’re alive after the Conclave, even though dealing with the Inquisition means that you yourself will also be missing out on the Rivaini job, which makes me turning it down somewhat more bearable. By the way, have you managed to go back to the Temple of Sacred Ashes? Is there anything remotely salvageable? As always, I remain your ever loving cousin Henri.”

Blackwall laughed. “You got all of that out of seven words?” Seeing that her glass was empty, he chivalrously poured her another.

She nodded. “I’ve known Henri for a very long while. His mind runs at a much higher speed than his hands, so you have to learn how to read between the lines. It’s always fun to translate his blurbs in person, especially when he’s in the middle of a discovery and too excited to take enough time to speak in full sentences.”

“So what does this postscript mean? It’s only a date.”

Ravena leaned closer to Blackwall to read. “9:15 Dragon.” Her eyes widened. “That little cretin! When he mentioned being stuck in Tantervale, I figured that he meant he was holed up in the house I own. I never thought he’d stoop so low as to raid my wine cellar! I was saving that bottle for something important!”

Blackwall watched as Ravena gave a little annoyed huff before picking up her glass and taking a drink. “I didn’t know you owned your own home,” he settled on.

“You don’t know a lot of things about me,” she replied. She leaned further against his arm and smiled flirtatiously at him. “But I’m willing to let you in on several details. All you have to do is ask.”
He smiled back. “I’ll keep that in mind, my lady.”

She shivered. “Oooh, you should talk like that more often,” she said. “I like when your voice gets all low and growly.”

Blackwall couldn’t stifle the laugh that spilled from his lips. “And you, I think, are quite drunk.”

She eyed her stack of letters. “I can handle the rest of these sober, but I’m going to have to drink considerably more if I aim to reply back to my mother. Perhaps I should let Josephine look after that one, seeing that placating Lady Trevelyan should count as a diplomatic matter.” She grew quiet before drawing away from the table.

“Leaving so soon?”

“Soon is relative,” she replied, collecting her letters and tucking them away in a pocket. “You may be correct: I actually might very well be on the other side of pleasantly tipsy and leaning more towards stupid drunk. I’m making a retreat before I say something I might regret.”

He stood and offered her his arm, which she took. Not being able to resist, he dipped his head down until his mouth was level with her ear. “Such as confessing you like the sound of my voice?”

She closed her eyes and hummed appreciatively. “That, my dear ser, is cheating.” She allowed him to walk her out of the tavern, where the crisp mountain breeze helped to start sobering her up. Ravena decided to steer him along the longer pathway to both ease her drunken state and prolong the pleasure of his company.

“I do believe that this is your stop,” he finally said once they reached her cabin’s door. “Do you need any help getting inside?”

“No, I can manage on my own. I do want to say that I’m sorry in advance; I’m going to be a grump traveling to Redcliffe. Hopefully by the time we arrive, my hangover will be gone.”

“No need to apologize. If I had a shrew for a mother, I’d drink too.”

Ravena leaned against the closed door. “She isn’t a shrew,” she told him, feeling the sudden need to defend her mother. “At least not all the time. She just has her overdramatic moments.”

“Then I apologize.”

“Apology accepted.” She gave him a sad looking smile. “My poor mother raised a houseful of boys. I never quite turned out to be the delicate lady she had hoped for.”

“For what it’s worth, I happen to like you as you are,” he said. He leaned in and wound a strand of hair that had gotten loose from her bun around his fingers.

She tilted her head towards him. “You’re cheating again,” she murmured.

“Oh? And what secrets might I ferret out of you, my lady?” Blackwall braced his free hand on the doorframe and crowded her, pleased when she rested her palms against his chest.

He wanted very much to kiss her, but held himself back. She didn’t have full control of her senses and doing so would not only be ungentlemanly of him, but would go against the firm do not get involved past friendship tether he had recently leashed himself to. Regretfully, he pulled back to a respectable distance.
Ravena noticed his withdrawal, but didn’t comment on it. “None this evening,” she replied. “Goodnight, Blackwall.”

He bid her a good evening and waited until she had gone inside before turning and making the lonely walk back to the blacksmith shop. He had been staying with Harritt and his apprentices, taking up only the smallest corner of the smith’s home. Harritt never minded, seeing as Blackwall kept things neat and tidy, and sometimes when Blackwall would come back from the field, exhausted from travel and whatever fighting they might have to do, he would wake to find that someone had mysteriously cleaned and repaired his gear while he slept. To show his appreciation, Blackwall always tried to go out of his way to find iron ore or other crafting agents that Harritt could use.

“You’re calling it an early night,” Harritt commented, looking up from a piece of leather he was working on near the hearth. The cut of the fabric told Blackwall that it was something for Cassandra.

“There wasn’t anything interesting going on. Besides, we’re heading out tomorrow.” He had a strange feeling about the meeting with Grand Enchanter Fiona, but he couldn’t quite place just what it was.

“Varric going along with you?”

“When doesn’t he?” Lately, it seemed as if Ravena had decided on a more permanent team of himself and Varric, with either Cassandra, Bull or Sera rotating with Solas if the mage was unable to join them due to helping out in Haven.

Harritt grunted. “Tell that stubborn dwarf that if he wants me to upgrade his crossbow, he’s going to have to leave it with me for a few days. The Herald said that he’s capable of using daggers; he can still defend himself.”

Blackwall snorted as he settled down on his cot. “I’ll mention it to him, but you’ll not likely get to work on it for some time. He treats Bianca as if she were his firstborn.” He folded his arms behind his head. “Besides, he’d probably get underfoot, staying at your elbow and telling you that you’re doing your job wrong.” He remembered the conversation Varric and Sera had gotten into a few days ago. It had ended with Sera making a rude noise, throwing her hands up in the air, and telling Varric he could stick his crossbows-are-more-advanced-than-regular-bows argument where the sun didn’t shine. Blackwall had never been so entertained, especially when Varric had sassed back at her, wanting to have the last word.

Although Blackwall didn’t figure that Varric thought having the last word was worth it after waking up the next morning with honey smeared across his chest. As he remembered it, it had taken forever to get out and left the storyteller in a foul mood for the rest of the day.

“You said that we were going out,” Harritt said. “I’m assuming that means you’re joining them?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I have the Herald’s new armor ready. You can deliver it for me.”

“I’ll be sure to do that first thing. You have my thanks.” He had seen how Ravena had put everyone else’s protection ahead of her own when ordering new armor or gear. He had confronted her about it once and she said that the money was better spent that way.

“I should be the one thanking you. Getting twice the business with half the product doesn’t happen every day.” Secretly, Blackwall had been squirreling away coins on his own and asking Harritt to
give Ravena a lower price estimate on things made specifically for her. After finding out what she had ordered, Blackwall had paid the difference and then some, ensuring that Harritt used better quality material and added in extra armoring.

It wasn’t the most sweeping of gestures, but it helped keep Ravena safe, and that was all that mattered to him.

Not one to talk much, Harritt turned back to his work. In turn, Blackwall closed his eyes, and with his mind still running through the items he’d need to pack for their departure, fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's prompt was a toss-up between drink and letter, so I figured I would work them both in instead of choosing between the two. I have no idea where Mamma Trevelyan's channeling of Mrs. Bennet came from, but if it means that Papa Trevelyan and Ravena have a Mr. Bennet + Elizabeth Bennet sort of father-daughter relationship, then so be it.
The slam of the door at the end of the cathedral brought Blackwall out of his musings. “Keep your gear on, we’re heading back out.” Ravena marched out of the meeting room, her head barely turning to address Blackwall as he pushed off the pillar he had been leaning on. He wasn’t the most devout of Andrastians, but he had taken up the habit of walking Ravena to the Chantry and lingering as she debriefed her advisors, if only to have the opportunity to walk back outside with her once she was finished. At first, he merely stood there and waited, but gradually he began to listen to the prayers of the sisters around him and offer up his own hesitant thoughts to the Maker in a sort of one-sided conversation. Those thoughts rarely turned into actual prayers, save for the occasions he visited the Chantry when Ravena was out in the field without him. Only then did he pray that she returned safe and whole.

“Where to?”

Ravena slowed down once they were outside the Chantry. “Back to Redcliffe. Alexius wants to personally meet with me.”

He frowned. “It’s a trap.”

“I know it is,” she said, sighing and pinching the bridge of her nose to stem a headache. “Believe me; I just spent the last thirty minutes arguing with Cullen about the same thing. I’m well aware of all the dangers.”

“And I certainly hope that Cullen talked you into meeting Alexius with at least some protection?”

She looked at him sharply. “Do you think I’m stupid?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it. No, Blackwall. I intend to waltz up to Redcliffe Castle unarmed and unaccompanied, because I am a foolish woman who refuses to listen to a man’s warnings.” She crossed her arms over her chest and glared. “Of course, I’m far too stubborn to listen to reason and…”

Blackwall held out his hands. “Hold on. Don’t spew venom on me for something Cullen may or may not have said correctly. I know how capable you are. I only worry about your safety because we have no idea what Alexius is capable of doing. I’d worry if you went alone and I’d still worry if you were accompanied by a hundred Inquisition forces.”

She took a breath, her shoulders sagging. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to take this out on you; it’s just been a very tiring day.”

He reached out and put an arm around her shoulders. “And it’s already almost evening. Are you certain you want to head back out tonight?”

“I’m certain.”

He caught the way she wobbled on her feet, how she leaned against him. “Alexius has been in Redcliffe for quite some time now. Surely a few hours more won’t hurt.”

She slid out of his embrace. “It might not hurt us, but what of the mages in Redcliffe? Blackwall, you saw them yourself. Something was definitely not right.”
Now it was his turn to cross his arms over his chest. “I know. And that’s why I think going to him so soon is a bad idea. Surely it wouldn’t hurt to seek out the Templars’ help? Once we gain their alliance, we can be better prepared for whatever any mage throws at us.”

She shook her head. “We don’t have the time,” she countered. “It’s either one or the other, especially now that mages had been sold into slavery. And don’t argue semantics with me that it’s indentured servitude either; it’s the same thing here, no matter what sort of pretty dressing you place upon it.”

“I’m not arguing it. It’s just…” His frown deepened. “I’d rather have a backup plan if things go poorly. I don’t know these mages; I don’t trust them.”

She turned to face him. “Mages are the same as ordinary people. There are good ones and then there are bad ones. The majority of the mages in Redcliffe are scared, but I feel as if they’re good people. I’ve never personally been to Tevinter, nor have I seen what magisters are supposedly capable of doing, but something tells me that Alexius is capable of doing extremely bad things, given enough prodding. Going to appeal to the Templars, who may or may not give us their support, especially after the scene in Val Royeaux, might be a waste of time that we simply do not have.”

“So you would risk the lives of so many by acting rashly?”

“And you would risk the lives of so many by waiting?” Both of them had raised their voices: Ravena out of frustration, Blackwall out of…well, he didn’t rightly know. He guessed it was a culmination of things: how he hated the thought of Ravena willingly putting herself in danger, fear of the unknown, or perhaps it was that nagging feeling in his gut that told him this was a bad idea. He wanted to reach out and shake her, to make her stop and think about things.

She beat him to it. “If you’re so against my plans, then you can stay here.” With that, she stormed off and headed over to the home Adan had taken over as his apothecary workshop. Blackwall watched as she briefly stopped in front of Dorian before heading down the hill to gather Varric.

“She’s leaving.” Blackwall turned his head as Cullen came up to him.

“Did you have to piss her off?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

Cullen spread out his hands in a defensive posture. “I didn’t say anything! All I asked her was to consider going to the Templars for help. Then she started saying how I thought she was…”

“Stupid, foolish?” He eyed the other man and sighed. “Did you happen to mention anything about her being stubborn?”

Cullen winced. “I never said the first two, nor did I imply them. I may have said something about stubbornness in passing, which Leliana, Cassandra and Josephine have already taken me to task for, even if my argument had been well-intentioned. You don’t think that she’ll do anything rash, do you?”

Blackwall shrugged before stomping down the hill after her. “I have no idea.”

Ravena was in the middle of making sure her mount’s saddle was properly secured when he came down to the stables. “I thought I said that you were staying here,” she told him.

“Damned if I am,” he spat back, grabbing tack and readying a horse. “Look, I don’t care how angry you are at me, or Cullen, or the situation in general, but if you’re so dead-set on traveling straight to Redcliff, then I’m with you.”

“Fine.”
"Fine."

She hauled herself into the saddle and started off for the main gate. "Fine."

Blackwall was at a loss to figure her out. He jumped when Varric’s horse rose up close to his. "Don’t worry," he said. "She’ll get over it before we’re a mile away from Haven."

“How do you know?” He gave his mount a pat on the neck before swinging up into the saddle.

Varric winked. “Because Dusty acts a whole lot like Hawke. The similarities are eerily uncanny, which is strange since I thought the Maker broke the mold when he made either one of them. Both of them are too damn nice for their own good, take on every sad story like it’s their own, and have a slow-simmering temper. It takes a lot to make Hawke upset, and the few times that her temper snapped, it was spectacular to watch.” He shook his head at some memory, smile still in place. “I remember this one time; she got so mad at Broody for still having dead bodies in his house that…”

“I hope you’re getting to a point, Varric.”

“Yeah, the thing is, no matter how bad the argument was or how big the blast radius got, Hawke always got over it pretty quickly. Something tells me that our Herald’s the same way.”

“I hope so.”

“So, what about you? Are you over that little tiff?”

Blackwall frowned. “I don’t think I was really mad to begin with. I was more…” he drifted off, at a loss for words.

“Frustrated? Scared? Worried about her?”

“Yes.”

Varric rolled his eyes. “Maker’s breath. I really am stuck with another Choir Boy. I can’t count the amount of times Sebastian stomped off to brood when Hawke went out without him. At least you don’t have that whole Chantry righteousness thing going on for you. Makes you more likeable.”

“Thanks. I think.” He kicked his horse onward into a faster canter until he rode up next to Ravena and Dorian, both of them deep in a conversation.

“Speaking of,” Dorian drawled, eyebrow cocked and chin pointing towards Blackwall. “I do believe I need to become better acquainted with our resident bard.”

“Storyteller,” she corrected absently, her hand going up to push a lock of hair behind her ear. “Calling him anything other offends him.”

She stared straight ahead as Dorian slowed his horse in order for Varric to catch up. Ravena all but winced when she heard the mage ask Varric what he was writing.

“Don’t look now, but I think we’re giving Varric plot ideas,” Blackwall said, breaking the silence. “I need to apologize,” she said in a rush. “I was angry and I took it out on you. That was unworthy of me.”

He reached out and placed a hand on her arm. “And I need to apologize as well. I was frightened and lashed out.”
She blinked. “Frightened? You?”

“You say that as if it’s an impossible thing,” he told her, his lips quirking into a rueful smile.

“Well, it sort of is. You have this air about you, Blackwall, as if nothing ever fazes you.”

“I’m probably the furthest away from that description, my lady.” His hand slid up her arm until he could cradle her cheek in his palm. “Especially when it comes to you.”

She stared into his eyes, the sincerity reflected within them making her heart flutter. Unfortunately, she was too tired and the timing was off to discuss any deepening feelings between them, so she decided to deflect his seriousness with humor. “Oh? Am I a distraction?”

He caught her change in tone and dropped his hand. “A pleasant one, I assure you.” His smile widened. “And before I begin digging myself into a hole I may never find my way out of, I want to add that I know you certainly don’t need me or anyone else worrying about your safety. You are more than capable of rescuing yourself from danger.”

She blushed. “I shouldn’t have gotten on my soapbox about that,” she confessed. “My chosen profession is a male-dominated one; I’m used to dealing with men questioning if I’m able to do the things I need to do, then have them second-guess me the entire process.”

Blackwall opened his mouth to speak, but she interrupted him. “No one is doing that here, but I was tired and cranky and took things more personally than I should. I owe Cullen an apology once we return.”

“Something tells me that all will be forgiven.”

“I hope so.” She looked up at him, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. “And what about you? Am I forgiven?”

He couldn’t have stopped his thumb from ghosting over her lip even if he had wanted to. “Always.”

She laughed before slightly pulling away. “I would suggest the classic kiss and make up move, but I fear that Varrië’s journal doesn’t have enough paper to record the occasion.”

Blackwall grinned. “Knowing him, he’d simply start narrating instead.”

“And then our newest companion would absolutely get the wrong impression about us.”

“Which wouldn’t do at all.”

Ravena broke away first, urging her horse further on down the trail. Blackwall made a point to stay a slight distance away from her, yet still close enough to stay within talking range. He caught her eye and shared a secret smile when they both heard the commotion behind them.

“You swindler, I want my money back!” Dorian cried. “You said there’d be fireworks! That was a fizzle, at best!”

“Hey, all bets are final,” Varric countered. There was the distinct clink of money being tossed in the air. “Try winning it back when we get back to Haven. I’m in the middle of organizing a Diamondback tournament; I’ll put you on the lists.”

“Barbarous trickster.”

“On the contrary; I prefer cultured warrior, if we’re going to be throwing tropes around all willy-
nilly. Stay on my good side and I just might be able to wrangle up a few things to make Haven feel like an exotic resort.”

Dorian *harrumphed*. “I seriously doubt that.”

“Obviously you have no idea of my extensive network of connections. Five sovereigns says that I can rustle up a bottle of Tevinter red without breaking a sweat.”

“Please. The South is full of nothing but swill. *Ten* sovereigns says that…” There was a pause. “You know what, Varric? I just might begin to like you. You’ve managed to perfect the art of bullshitting down to the point where I can’t tell if you seriously do have a fine vintage stored away somewhere or not.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

Ravena twisted around in her saddle so she could look at them. “If the two of you would *hurry up*, we can get this meeting out of the way and be back quicker.”

“You really think he has wine stored somewhere?” Blackwall asked.

“Oh, I know he does. I won a bottle of Valpolicella from Antiva off him during our latest card game.” She moved around until she was facing forward again and turned to him. “I’d be willing to share a glass or two, once we get back.”

Blackwall stared at her. “Then there’s our motivation for getting this done quickly,” he replied.

He still had an ill feeling in his gut about the whole endeavor, and Ravena’s smirk did nothing to dispel the feeling of wrongness, especially when he saw the same worries peeking through her bravado. Taking a breath, he returned her smile.

If she could get through this, so could he.
“The last time I was hip-deep in water, I was exploring a partially sunken cavern with my cousin,” Ravena said, pulling a face at the feel of water and who knew what else sloshing around in her boots. “I was prepared for that excursion, unlike now.”

“Forgive me for not controlling just where we were sent,” Dorian dryly replied, wringing out his sleeve. “Truly, if I had thought of it, we’d have landed in a much nicer place.”

“Right. So, any thoughts on where we might be?” Ravena looked around. “This looks like part of Redcliffe Castle.”

“I’m almost wondering if the where isn’t in question, but the when.”

She turned to face him. “What exactly do you mean?” She listened as Dorian explained the possibilities of time travel to her before taking a deep breath and nodding. “Right. So, how do you propose we get back where we belong, then?”

“What? No hysterics over time travel? Not even a teary eye over the fact that we might have been flung into the far future or the distant past?”

Ravena held up her palm. “Try having a hole in your hand that has the power to seal or open up rifts in the Fade, then we’ll talk hysterics.” She kept one of her daggers out as they both cautiously exited the waterlogged room, doubting that the initial skirmish with the guards that had found them was going to be their last confrontation. “Do you think that we were the only ones caught in Alexius’ blast, or were Blackwall and Varric affected as well?” Everything in the throne room had happened so quickly; all Ravena really remembered was a flash of light and hearing Blackwall bellow out her name in warning, then nothing.

“I don’t think so, but it would be good to see a friendly face, no?” They made their way up a flight of stairs until they reached a chamber that looked as if it connected four rooms together. Guards jumped to attention and began to attack.

“Those are not friendly faces,” Ravena commented, slashing out with her daggers. She dodged Dorian’s lightning bolts, dimly noting that he fought differently than Solas, who relied mostly on fire or ice to deal damage.

“Not too shabby, Herald,” Dorian commented after the fight.

“Likewise.” She hissed as she tied a ripped portion of a guard’s shirt to her forearm as a makeshift bandage. “Care to put money on that we’ve been tossed into the future?”

“Five coppers?”

She rolled her eyes. “Dorian, if you’re going to be part of our little rag-tag group, you must start betting with the Big Boys. As Bull says, silver, or go home.” She paused at one of the doors she had picked at random, trying to listen if there were any more hostiles on the other side. “I don’t remember Redcliffe being this hostile after the Blight, and I definitely don’t remember blood of the Elder One being used as a curse when any of Andraste’s or the Maker’s body parts usually do just fine.”

“You’re using your powers of deduction to skew our bet. That, Lady Trevelyan, is cheating.”

She flashed him a smile. “Nope, that’s Varric Tethras 101. I’m stupidly in love with that guy, but
he’s going to clean your wallet out within the first fortnight. I’m just doing my part to give you a fighting chance.”

They crept down several flights of stairs, both of their eyes adjusting to the gloom, until a dim red light began to illuminate their path. “Red lyrium,” Ravena whispered. “I’ve seen this before at the Temple of Sacred Ashes, but not in this quantity. Don’t touch it.”

“Needn’t warn me twice, this thing just reeks evil.”

They discovered Fiona not long after that. To their horror, they learned of the events that had happened while they were gone.

“This is fixable,” Ravena said, teeth bared in outrage. “I will fix this.”

“Hold on to your anger, Herald,” Fiona told her. “Find the others and undo this.”

Ravena stood straighter. “Others? Blackwall, Varric?”

The Enchanter nodded. “They were quickly taken after you were…” She shuddered as a jolt of pain wracked through her body. “I don’t know where they are exactly, but they are on this same floor.”

“Thank you.” Ravena’s hand went to the dagger at her hip. “Is there anything that I can…” She couldn’t believe the words even as she said them. Killing people that attacked her was one thing. In all her years, she never thought she’d be in the position to actually offer to do the same as a mercy.

Fiona shook her head. “It won’t be long for me,” she whispered. “Besides, what’s a few hours more when this will never happen?”

“I swear, I will never let this happen. To you, or anyone else.”

“Then that is comfort enough. Go. End this nightmare.”

Ravena stumbled up the staircase leading from Fiona’s cell. “We should split up,” she said.

“Are you completely daft?” Dorian countered. “Splitting up in a place we aren’t familiar with is the surefire way to end poorly.”

“We can cover more ground this way.” She pointed towards a doorway. “I’m not suggesting going far. Castle dungeons are normally very similar in design. Keep the prisoners on the lower levels, preferably with cells butting against common walls. It’s an economical design that allows better use of space. Good architects would also use this layout to plan sluices to dump waste into the sewage canals leading to…” she tried to finish her explanation, but her legs gave out on her and she slid against the wall to sit on one of the stairs with a heavy thud.

“You’re in shock,” Dorian said gently, crouching in front of her. He grabbed her trembling hands and rubbed them to try to get some warmth circulating back into her skin. “Understandable, and really, I’m surprised that it hadn’t happened sooner.”

“How did this happen, Dorian?” she whispered, a sheen of tears filming her eyes. She blinked them away before they could fall. “How did everything collapse in such a short amount of time?” She thought of the brief explanation that Fiona had given them. The Empress assassinated, a demon army rising up out of nowhere, if things had gotten this bad, then it was nearly a sure thing that everyone she had known in Haven was dead.

“The Elder One is to blame for this,” he told her.
“Damned right, he is.” A sudden flash of anger had her standing back up. “So let’s find our way back and put a stop to this asshole.”

“There’s the gumption Varric told me about,” Dorian said, dusting his knees off. “This Elder One has given us an advantage, you know.”

She nodded. “Yes. Hopefully we can learn more of his plans here and when we get back, we can put a stop to them before they even begin.”

“All right, now let’s get back to searching. I’m going to throw all better sense to the wind and agree with your idea of splitting up, but practically going to suggest each of us going only so far to clear nearby rooms. Is that agreeable?”

“Very.” They made their way back to the main chamber. Ravena picked through her pockets until she found a stub of chalk that she made certain to always carry with her. Bending down, she made the subtlest of marks on the floor next to the door they had just exited. She walked to the door they had originally came out of and did the same there. Breaking the chalk in half, she handed it to Dorian. “Mark the rooms you’ve searched so we don’t waste time. That way if we get lost, all we have to do is follow the places we’ve already been.”

His eyebrows rose. “Smart idea.”

“Saved my life in the North. I came across the bodies of several adventurers in an underground labyrinth during an expedition one time. They had gotten so turned around that they wound up starving to death. The sad thing is that I found their bodies only an hour’s walk away from the surface. After that, I make sure to have something to mark my path on hand at all times.”

“Right. Well, good luck. Do try not to get yourself killed.”

Ravena took a deep breath and took one of the doors closest to her. Keeping her daggers in her hand, she silently crept down the staircase and down a long hallway. The red lyrium wasn’t as abundant here as it was in the cellblock Fiona had been in, which made her wonder if the only people capable of turning into the material were mages. *No, remember that story Varric told you about the Knight Commander in Kirkwall?* Thoughts about Varric and his stories made her suddenly afraid of what she might find once they discovered her companions. She briefly closed her eyes, panic and worry making her throat tight at the thought of Blackwall dead, or worse.

*Enough. Now focus. You can panic later when everyone is safe.*

She finally made her way down to the lower level. The lack of guards made her wary, and the silence was absolutely deafening. She winced when the door she had been trying to quietly open gave out a loud, moaning creak.

“Who’s there?” Ravena’s knees nearly went weak in relief at the sound of Blackwall’s voice. “Come into the light, you blighted coward.”

“Blackwall?” Ravena stepped towards the cell, trying to see him in the gloom. He stepped up to the bars of his prison at the sound of her voice, a surprised inhalation of air catching in his throat.

“You should not be here,” he rasped. “The dead should rest in peace.”

“I’m not dead. Alexius’ magic sent Dorian and me into the future.”

His hands tightened on the bars and he snarled at her. “Don’t lie to me, demon. I saw Ravena vanish in front of my eyes.”
She nimbly picked the lock to his cell. “It’s complicated. All that matters is that we found you and together, we’re going to figure out how to get back.” Swinging open the door, she held out her hand. “Please, trust me.”

Hesitantly, Blackwall reached out and took her offered hand. “Is it really you?” he asked, his voice hushed even as his fingers tightened on hers.

She nodded. “It is. It’s me, I promise.” Whatever she was going to say next was interrupted by Blackwall crushing her to him in a tight embrace.

“You’re alive,” he whispered, backing her up against the cell wall and framing her face with his hands. Ravena barely had any time to take a breath before he was kissing her, his mouth moving over hers hungrily. All she could do was throw her arms over his shoulders and hold on, gasping against his lips when he hitched her up and roughly shoved a thigh between hers. Her gasp turned into a quiet moan when his teeth scraped along the line of her neck. His hands were restlessly moving over her body, almost as if he wanted to touch her so badly that he didn’t know where to start.

“This must be a dream,” he said, his voice rough with emotion, “but my dreams haven’t been good in so long.”

She put a hand to his cheek and tilted his head up to the weak light. She took a ragged breath at the sight of his cloudy red eyes and gaunt face. “What have they done to you?” she asked, lips trembling.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said quietly. His thumb brushed away a tear she hadn’t registered shedding. “All that matters is that you’re here and you can put a stop to this.” He drew away from her and went to the corner of his cell. “Cocky idiots didn’t even bother to take away our weapons,” he explained, buckling on his sword and picking up his shield. “It’ll feel damned good to run some of these bastards through.”

“Then let’s get out of here and find Dorian and Varric.”

He nodded. “I’m with you.”

It didn’t take them long to look through the remaining rooms and locate Dorian. The mage had also picked up Varric in the process. “Well shit,” Varric whistled. “I guess I owe you some coin after all, Sparkler. Good to see you, Dusty.”

Ravena gave him a shaky smile. “Same here. Now that we’re all here, how the hell do we fix this mess?”

“An hour? That’s impossible! You must go now!” Seconds after Leliana’s exclamation, the floor began to shake and bits of stone started to tumble from the walls.

“The Elder One.”

Ravena turned to Dorian. “Do you think that you can pull off something a little more quickly?” she asked.

“Please,” he started, already beginning to cast. “You’ve seen me work; how can you doubt my amazing prowess?”
Blackwall shared a look with Varric. The dwarf nodded solemnly, taking Bianca in his hands and double checking his supply of bolts. “We’ll go on ahead, take out as many as we can,” Blackwall said, addressing Leliana. “You’re the last line of defense. Give them what you’ve got.”

Ravena shook her head. “No, I am not allowing you to do this. It’s suicide.”

Blackwall stepped close to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. “Look at us, Ravena. We’re already dead,” he told her. “Buying you time is the only way to make sure that this never happens.”

“There has to be another way!”

He pressed his forehead against hers. “We both know that there isn’t.”

“Please! I beg you, don’t do this.”

Varric peeked out from the doorway. “Hero, move it! We don’t have much time left!”

Ravena clutched at his armor. “I love you,” she breathed. “I have horrible timing, I know, but I…”

His hand fist in her hair and he kissed her desperately. “Nothing wrong with your timing,” he murmured. “A man deserves to know that his feelings are returned before he dies.”

“Blackwall, damn it! Move your ass!”

Blackwall’s fingers softly caressed Ravena’s cheek. “It was at the lake,” he said. “The sunlight made your eyes look like copper. You hadn’t said a word to me yet, but I was already bewitched. Remember that, my lady.”

Ravena watched as he walked away, the great door closing behind him. She moved closer to Dorian in preparation of jumping into the slowly growing vortex he was summoning.

She flinched when the heavy stone doors flew off their hinges. Even though she thought she was prepared for it, she still screamed in anguish when Varric and Blackwall’s lifeless bodies were carelessly thrown aside and stepped over by demons. She drew her blades and prepared to charge in grief when Dorian grabbed at her arm, his fingers digging into her skin hard enough to bruise.

“You move, and we all die!”

Ravena had no other choice but to stand by and watch as Leliana was quickly outnumbered. Dorian’s grip on her arm tightened as the spell was finally complete. Closing her eyes, Ravena jumped into the void with him, praying that she would be able to set things to rights.

She was absolutely terrified of the alternative if she failed.
The walk from Redcliffe Castle to the town of Redcliffe was pretty much a blur. Ravena could recall speaking to King Alistair and Queen Anora, could remember pledging protection to the mages and promising to treat them as equal partners, but she could not remember anything past that.

“Easy, my dear,” Dorian said, gripping her elbow as she stumbled down the path. “Everything all right?”

She blinked up at him. “Did we stop it?” she asked, her eyes darting towards Varric and Blackwall as the two men walked a little ways ahead of them. “Did we stop it from happening?”

Dorian tilted his head. “I don’t know. The future is always a shaky subject to broach; certainly we stopped Alexius from his current plans, but who is to say that the actions we took stopped everything else…”

She cut him off. “That will not happen,” she said fiercely. “I refuse to let that happen.”

“The future events that concern everyone in southern Thedas, or just the personal ones involving a select few?”

“Both.” She closed her eyes and shuddered as she remembered the way Blackwall’s body had just… fallen, his lifeless limbs flopping about like a rag doll.

“When will you tell him?”

Ravena stared at the ground in front of her, following Dorian as he led her further down the path and out of hearing range. “I don’t know. I don’t even know if I should.”

“Just for clarification, you do mean that you’re conflicted on telling your strapping, burly Warden that he gave his life in the future so you could return to the present, not that you’re conflicted on professing how you feel about him, yes?”

“Both,” she repeated.

Dorian stared at her. “I know that I’ve only known you for a short amount of time, but I do feel as if our little shared adventure was a bonding experience of sorts. That being said, are you out of your ever loving mind?”

Her head jerked up at his tone. “And what do you suggest I say? Should I tell him that I feel more for him than a simple attraction, that I’ve felt this way for weeks?”

“You should tell him that you love him, you ninny. I honestly don’t know what’s stopping you, it’s written clear as day on his face that he feels the same about you.”

“You really think so?” She winced, realizing that she sounded like some lovesick teen instead of a grown woman.

Dorian rolled his eyes, coming to the same conclusion. “There’s only one way to know for sure.”

The rest of the walk was spent in silence.

Organizing a large group of mages proved to be more complicated than telling everyone to grab their gear and make their way towards Haven. It took several hours to notify everyone, and by that time,
the sun was sinking low over the horizon. King Alistair hadn’t given them a concrete deadline to leave, so Ravena made an executive decision to stay the night and begin traveling at first light. Leaving her three companions in the tavern below, Ravena made her way upstairs to the rooms they had secured from the innkeeper. Sleep was going to be elusive, she already knew that, so after stripping out of her battle-worn leathers and indulging in an extremely long bath to rid herself of the smells of that horrific future, she made up her mind to write down all of her findings while things were still fresh in her memory.

She got as far as explaining the Empress’ assassination and the demon army when the page of her journal blurred. “Shit,” she whispered, her voice breaking as she hid her face in her hands. “Oh, fuck.” She couldn’t get the image of Blackwall’s hazy red eyes and Varric’s haunted face out of her mind and she wept for them both. Shoving her journal aside, she leaned heavily against the room’s rickety writing desk and sobbed.

This must be a dream, but my dreams haven’t been good in so long. Wiping her face, she tried to rationalize that whatever torture Blackwall had undergone in that dark future had never happened, that she had prevented them. Still, the thought of his lifeless body hitting stone was enough to make her tremble, a new bout of tears spilling down her cheeks.

“My lady?” Ravena’s head jerked up at the sound of Blackwall at her doorway, knuckles poised on the newly opened door as if to knock for permission to enter. His brows knitted together at the sight of her sitting there looking utterly devastated. His long legs ate up the distance between them and he knelt at her feet, his large hands engulfing hers. “Maker’s breath, you’re shaking.”

She stared dumbly at him as he pressed her hands to his lips, his breath warming her skin. “Talk to me, Ravena. Tell me what’s troubling you.” He let go of her hands to frame her cheeks, his thumbs brushing her tears away.

“You died,” she blurted, leaning into his touch. “You sacrificed yourself so I could get back.”

He looked away. “At least my death had some merit.” He meant it to come across as a quip, a desperate attempt to rid the haunted, frightened look in her eyes.

“Stop.” She jabbed him in the chest with her index finger. “Don’t you dare undervalue your worth. No one should die because of me.”

He caught her hand and pressed it against his chest. “And you shouldn’t think so little of yours. One word from you and an entire army would risk their lives for you. You have the world at your feet, myself included.” He shifted on his knees. “Literally.”

“I don’t want anyone at my feet,” she croaked. “Especially you.”

“Then what do you want? What would you have of me?”

She stared into his eyes, her heart in her throat. “This,” she whispered, closing the distance between them and pressing her lips against his. He knelt frozen there for a fraction of a second before uttering a guttural groan and pulling her tightly against him, his mouth slanting over hers. Ravena gladly slid to the floor, her mouth opening on a gasp as her knees hit the wooden floorboards. Blackwall took advantage by sweeping his tongue into her mouth, moaning at finally, finally being able to do what he had fantasized of doing for weeks now. Her hands clawed at the front of his gambeson, blindly attacking the laces so she could get at the shirt he wore underneath. It was her turn to cry out when he hauled her onto his lap, her legs straddling his thighs on instinct.

“Oh, my lady,” he murmured, mouth moving down the column of her throat, his nose brushing aside
the wide collar of her shirt. He bit at the juncture of her shoulder before soothing the ache with the flat of his tongue.

“I love when you call me that,” she gasped, her hands tunneling in his hair as she dragged him up for a kiss, swallowing the growl he made when she pressed her aching center against his growing erection. His hands flew to her waist to keep her steady as he thrust up to meet her rolling hips, her sharp cry of pleasure ringing out in the room. “I love… ahh!”

The bite of her fingernails at the back of his neck was grounding. Breathing harshly, Blackwall let his head fall forward against the softness of her breasts. “Tell me you want this,” he pleaded, dragging his eyes up to hers and feeling a masculine thrill of satisfaction at the glazed look of lust that stared back at him.

She shifted, her eyebrow arching. “If you have to ask, then obviously I’m not doing a proper enough job of showing you,” she replied.

He bit back a moan, his hands moving up her sides to cup her breasts before sliding around to her ribs. He gave a gentle push to set some distance between them and stood, his knee protesting. “I mean, will you want this tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that?” He bent and helped her to her feet.

“You’re leaving.” She frowned, wondering what she had done wrong.

As if reading her mind, he settled his palms against her shoulders and kissed her forehead. “You just had a draining day. You mean too much to me for our first time together to be…”

“A mistake?”

His fingers tightened on her shoulders. “No, never. I don’t want fear or sorrow to mar something I intend to never forget. I’d hope that you’d want the same.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “You’re right,” she finally said, sounding just as frustrated as he felt. “But once we get back to Haven –”

“Once we get back,” he finished. He brought his hand to her chin and gently tilted her face up for a kiss. “I intend to tell your advisors to sod off while we lock ourselves up in your cabin for a week.”

She snorted a laugh, the darkness that had surrounded her finally lifting. “I’m certain everyone will take that news well.” She draped her arms across his shoulders and rose on her toes to give him a parting kiss that was meant to be light, yet quickly deepened into something that had Blackwall sliding her nightshirt up in an attempt to get to bare skin.

She broke away first. “Goodnight.”

“Remind me why I decided to be chivalrous,” he bit out, running his nose against her cheek and greedily inhaling the floral scent that rose from her skin.

“Because you’re a good man,” she told him, smoothing her hands down his chest. “Get some sleep. We move at daybreak; we’ll both need the rest.”

“Don’t know how much sleep I’m going to be getting tonight,” he told her, picking up her hands and pressing kisses against her knuckles.

“If it makes you feel any better, at least now I can blame my sleeplessness on something more pleasant than what was originally going to keep me awake.”
He sobered. “Whatever you saw in that future, it won’t come true,” he told her. “You told Dorian that you wouldn’t allow it to happen, but you aren’t alone. Together, we’ll make sure that none of the things you saw come to pass.”

She stared at him, and in that instant, she believed him. “Thank you,” she said.

He turned her hand and kissed the pulse at her wrist before stepping away and heading to the door. “Goodnight,” and now that he knew the effect his words had on her, he added with a wink and a grin, “my lady.”

She heard the latch to the door securely catch. Letting out a breath that had gotten caught in her throat, she fell across the bed, a smile on her face. She tilted her head so she could look at the journal sitting on the writing desk. Invigorated, she began to plan a course of action that she intended to take once they arrived at Haven. Firstly, the Breach needed to be sealed as soon as possible. Secondly, this Elder One needed to be taken down before he grew so powerful that their fledgling Inquisition would be easily overtaken.

Thirdly, and most importantly, Ravena needed to feel Blackwall’s mouth on hers again. No matter what came their way, knowing that he wanted her just as badly as she wanted him strengthened her resolve to see everything through to the end.
“There you are.” The festive music and triumphant shouts of joy could still be heard, even as far up as the Chantry’s hidden side garden.

Ravena turned at the sound of Blackwall’s voice. “You just missed Cassandra,” she said, scooting over on the bench to give him room to sit. She held up the bottle of wine she had, which he gladly took. “I forced her to go out and let her hair down.”

“Do you think she will?”

“Well, she might head down to see all the festivities, but I highly doubt she’ll drop her guard low enough to truly go wild and crazy. Remember, Varric’s down there. He’d likely tease her and then she’ll clam up for months.”

“And what about you?” he asked. “How come you’re out here all alone instead of celebrating with the rest?” He took a pull from the bottle and handed it back to her.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been one to mingle with a lot of people. I’d rather quietly celebrate with a select few.” She tucked some loose hair behind her ear. “I was hoping that you’d find me.”

He leaned closer to her. “I was hoping that you’d want to be found.” He reached out and played with the strand of hair she had just pushed aside. “What are you thinking about?”

She took a drink before leaning against him. “I was thinking about how relieved I am. The Breach is closed and now that horrible future I saw will never come to pass.” She turned her palm over and contemplated the raised scars. “The Mark always throbbed against my skin, almost like a second heartbeat. It’s silent now.”

“You saved a lot of lives today. You did well, Ravena.”

“It wasn’t just me. We all did well.” She stared at the wine bottle in her hand before setting it down at her feet. “What will we do now, Blackwall?”

He looked at her quizzically. “What do you mean?”

“Well, aside from any stray rifts that might still be open, the threat is over. I didn’t want to talk with Cassandra about plans tonight, but I wonder what the future holds. The Inquisition was formed to seal the hole in the sky and restore order. What will become of us now that we will no longer be needed?”

Blackwall leaned against the back of the bench. “You’re right to think about planning for the road ahead,” he started. “But I think that you’re wrong in saying that the Inquisition won’t be needed. Look at the Hinterlands alone: the land has been devastated by what’s happened. And what of the Circles? Where do the mages go, now that the only home many of them have known has collapsed? Every peace treaty needs a good third party opinion. The Inquisition can be that voice.”

She looked down and laced her fingers between her knees. “I suppose I should have clarified.” Taking a deep breath, she looked up at him, a worried expression on her face. “What will you do, now that the sky is healed?”

“I haven’t really had much of a chance to think about it,” he confessed. “I would like to stay here as long as I’m able, to help train. I grew up in Markham as a poor farmer’s son; I could be of some use
in the rebuilding and reclaiming stages of recovery.”

“You’d want to stay?”

He didn’t answer her directly. Instead, he turned the question back on her. “And what of you, my lady? If the Inquisition were to disband, what would you do?”

“After helping people out with recovery?” She frowned thoughtfully. “Unless the Chantry reverses their opinion of us being heretics now that things have been resolved, I highly doubt that they would allow me to go back to work for them as a researcher. It would free my time up considerably to do more freelance work though; I’ve been playing around with the idea of writing an anthropological study on ancient cultures for years now that’s never gotten past the concept stage. And if I was very lucky, I could still get in on that Rivaini job Henri mentioned in his letter.”

“I’ve never been to Rivain.” Blackwall slung his arm atop the bench’s back and nudged closer to Ravena.

She froze for a second before sinking into his embrace. “I would need a bodyguard,” she cautiously agreed. “Piracy runs rampant in some areas, and most of the temples or treasure to be found there are sunken.”

“Then that’s settled. Should the Inquisition disband, I would need to learn how to swim.”

Ravena had to quietly laugh. “You can’t swim?”

“Well, I can manage. I know enough to keep me from drowning, if that’s what you’re worried about. Just don’t expect me to go deep sea diving for treasure on my first try.” He gathered her close and rested his chin on the top of her head. “And I expect that when we’re not out adventuring, you’re going to need someone to drag you up for air every once in a while when you’re writing about your findings and make sure you eat regular meals?”

She grinned. “I’m not as bad as my cousin, but I’ve been known to skip a few dinners and fall asleep on my work.” Her grin faltered and she played with the laces on his gambeson. “But what of the Wardens? Wouldn’t they need you back?”

“I’ve been on my own for years. I figure I could spend my free time recruiting wherever we go.” It was a nice dream to have, a life post-Breach with Ravena, but one that he really had no business indulging. Yet he couldn’t keep his mind away from what had happened in Redcliffe. With trying to transport so many people to Haven and then Ravena setting to work soon after, there hadn’t really been any time to discuss things.

She sat up and leaned away from him. “Blackwall, I know that we’re talking in hypotheticals, but…”

“Yes, my lady?”

“What would you say if I truly did ask you to come to Rivain, or Tantervale, or any other number of places with me?” She turned so she could face him. “What if I asked you to run away with me, right here, right now?”

“It depends. Are you asking?”

She looked at him and took a steadying breath. “In that dark future,” she started. “You asked me to remember one thing. It was the last thing you said to me.”

“What was it?”
“You talked to me about that day on the lake, when we first met.”

He smiled. “I remember that day well. You complimented me on my reflexes.”

“Well, they did save my face from getting skewered by an arrow. That sort of deed deserves praise.”

She cleared her throat. “But what you told me happened a little before that. You said that I had bewitched you, without having said a word. You said that the sunlight had made my eyes…”

“The light made your eyes look like burnished copper,” he finished. “I didn’t know who you were or what you wanted of me, but I knew then that I’d never seen anyone more lovely.”

“I’ve been wracking my brain trying to figure out if what you had said in the future was just because you wanted to say something nice to me before going out to die or if you truly meant it. Then I thought that you really did mean it, seeing that you made certain to tell me to remember what you said, knowing full well that I was heading back to the present. But then I could have read the whole thing wrong and…”

Blackwall cut off her rambling by seizing her hands and bringing her knuckles to his lips. “I meant what I said,” he told her, his voice low and rumbling as his mouth skimmed over her skin. “You have captivated me in ways that I have never thought possible.”

Ravena leaned towards him. “Run away with me, Blackwall,” she murmured, her mouth bare inches from his.

He couldn’t think; he just reacted. “Wherever you wish, my lady.” He let go of one of her hands in order to thread his fingers through her hair. He was tilting his head to go in for a kiss when they heard the first horrified scream.

“Flames,” Ravena cursed, jolting out of his arms. “What the blazes is going on?”

“Nothing good, judging by the sound,” Blackwall replied. Standing up, he followed Ravena down the garden path towards the Chantry’s main doors and down to the main gate.

It wasn’t soon after that all hell broke loose and Haven was buried in snow.
There were things that needed to be done. Wood had to be collected for fires, the wounded and
dying needed tending to. Blackwall was more comfortable dealing with the former, so he grabbed an
axe someone had brought along and went out into the surrounding woods. The cold seeped into his
bones as he worked and the snow made seeing further than a few feet ahead of him nearly
impossible. Every other swing of his axe had him looking up and around, fear that their enemy had
tracked them down warring with hope that the Herald had somehow done the same.

The Herald. Ravena. Blackwall refused to let his mind wander to her as he shoulderled logs to split
later back at the makeshift campsite they had created. Yet try as he might, images of her kept
creeping in: the way her eyes shone in the heat of battle, how the corner of her mouth would curl up
in amusement, the warm and pliant way her body had molded to his when she had kissed him in
Redcliffe…

“When,” he admonished himself, setting the logs down. “There is work to be done; no time to
think…” To think about all the what ifs: what if Ravena was injured out there, what if she was lost,
what if she hadn’t ever made it out of Haven…

Blackwall’s axe swung down harder than necessary, the wood easily splitting. He spent the next few
hours desperately trying and failing to think of anything other than Ravena.

He was in the middle of setting up another temporary shelter when a lookout shouted that they had
spied someone coming closer. A brief second later, the same lookout confirmed that the Herald had
found them. Heart in his throat, he all but sprinted through the snow to reach her.

He caught her just as she fell to her knees, exhaustion finally taking over. “Maker be praised,” he
murmured hoarsely, his arms going around her. It worried him that she was so still and he could see
that her normally fair skin held a slight bluish tinge about her lips. Snow caked her hair and clung to
her eyelashes, making her appear to be something out of a children’s story he used to read to his
sister.

“Blackwall?”

“I have you, my lady.” He gathered her in his arms and stood, amazed that a woman whose
shoulders so many people placed their hopes upon could weigh so little.

Ravena burrowed closer to him, her face pressed against his collar. “So cold.”

“I know.” He held her tighter, trying to transfer as much body heat as he could to her. “We’ll get you
warm.” He carried her towards one of the makeshift tents they had set up, her advisors trailing after
them, full of worries and concerns. Ravena weakly attempted to shift around to address them, but
Blackwall could see just how tired she was.

“She’s fine,” he told them gruffly, fighting to keep any unintentional bark out of his voice. “She just
needs to rest and thaw out.” One of the Chantry sisters had gone ahead of him and set out a blanket
atop some storage crates they hadn’t broken down to use as kindling yet in the shelter he had just
finished making. He gave the sister a nod of thanks as he knelt to gently set Ravena down and began
to strip her out of her wet coat and gloves, but stopped when she wrapped her hand around his wrist,
her grip surprisingly strong.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered, her voice sounding raspy and sore.
“I won’t,” he swore, free hand unbuttoning the first clasp of his gambeson. She seemed to understand that he was taking his coat off to offer to her, because she stopped him.

“No sense in both of us being cold,” she said. “I’ll be fine.”

Still kneeling, he reached out and brushed her cheek with the backs of his knuckles. Thus distracted, she didn’t put up a fight when he took off his gambeson and wrapped it around her as a makeshift quilt. “Are you injured?”

“Nothing major, just some scrapes. My ribs might be bruised, but I don’t think they’re broken. I’ll be sore later, but I’ll live.” She looked away, oddly compliant as he moved to take off her boots and soaked socks, not commenting as he thankfully muttered under his breath that none of her toes had any signs of frostbite. “That’s more than can be said for some.”

“Stop. You did the best you could. Everyone here owes their life to you.” He could still see her in his mind’s eye dragging Adan and Minaeve to safety, anxiety clawing at his gut when the three of them dove to the side as the nearby pots caught fire and exploded.

“It wasn’t just me,” she said. “I seem to remember seeing someone jump through a hole in the roof of a burning building.”

“Nearly singed my beard on that move.” He moved back to her side and held her hands in his, if only to stop them from trembling. “We lost good people today, but it could have been far worse.” Impulsively, he pressed his lips against the backs of her icy hands, grateful beyond words that Ravena wasn’t among the day’s casualties.

She took a deep breath and slowly relaxed against the makeshift bed. “You’re right. Now we need to focus on moving on from here. Can anything at Haven be salvaged?”

“I doubt it. We might be able to save some things, but it looks as if it was completely destroyed.”

Ravena closed her eyes in defeat, thinking about not only the people that had recently called that place home, but of all the priceless architecture that was now buried under who knew how many tons of ice and snow. “I don’t know what to do,” she confessed. It seemed that now that she had found the rest of the survivors, she allowed herself to rest, her body trembling almost violently.

Blackwall tucked his gambeson tighter around her body. “You sleep, that’s what you do. When you feel better, we’ll tackle what comes next.”

She smiled weakly at him. “There’s that we again.”

He returned her smile. “What can I say? You’ve grown on me.” He gave her unmarked palm one last kiss before standing. Brushing snow off his knees, he searched around the area for something he could use as a blanket for her.

“I thought you said you weren’t leaving.” Her voice was slightly slurred and it looked to Blackwall like she was fighting sleep.

“Only for a moment. I need to find something more to keep you warm.”

She rolled to her side and gave the wood a pat. “There’s plenty of room.”

He eyed the crates and seemed to contemplate how they would take their combined weight. It didn’t take him much time before he slipped in next to her, sighing when she huddled close to him, her hands tucked under her chin and fingers gripping the fabric of his shirt. She was asleep within
moments, leaving Blackwall to his thoughts. He buried his face against her wind-tangled hair, ignoring the stench of blood and smoke, grateful that she was alive and in his arms and that the chattering of her teeth had nearly stopped. His hands were restless, palms sliding over her back to try and work some heat back into her body. While her skin had lost the tinge of blue, she was still ghostly pale and too cold for his liking.

Outside the tent, people were starting to slowly make sense out of chaos. He could hear Cullen and Leliana begin to make up plans with Josephine adding in her input here and there. Someone had taken over chopping wood, Cassandra, more like, judging by the frequency and volume of the strikes. There was a low murmur of voices in the tent next to theirs: one of the Chargers – Stitches? – was busily tending to the injured.

He didn’t know how long he stayed there with Ravena in his arms, but he was pleased to see that her coloring had finally returned to normal. Fatigue taking its toll, Blackwall found it would be incredibly easy to slip into slumber right alongside Ravena. Practicality won out though; reluctantly, he slipped his arm out from underneath her neck and slowly rose to his feet. There was still work to be done and he had no right to laze about when there were other people worse off than he working.

“She is a strong woman,” Mother Gisele commented from just inside the tent’s opening. She held up a rough woolen blanket she had found somewhere.

Ravena didn’t stir as he carefully covered her with the blanket. “That she is.” Her hair had long since fallen out of the bun she normally wore it in and Blackwall had to keep himself from running his fingers through the dark strands now that he had an audience.

“The Herald is a rock to many people. She will need an equally strong partner to lean against when things become too much.”

He took his eyes away from Ravena to eye the other woman critically. “What are you saying?”

“I am saying that I have seen the way that you look at her, how the two of you interact. She will need you in the coming days, more than even she knows.”

He gave Ravena one last look before turning to leave. “She has better people to help her. Me? I’m no one.” I’m not worthy of her affections, he silently added, walking away to help wherever he could.

Mother Gisele shook her head and busied herself by mixing potions from whatever meager store of ingredients she had managed to grab on the way out of the Chantry. “He is a stubborn man,” she said, watching the Herald for any sign of her waking. All Ravena did was shift in her sleep, one of her hands going to the spot Blackwall had recently vacated. “But I sense that there is good in him, more good than he realizes.” Getting up, she gently smoothed hair out of Ravena’s face and tucked the blanket closer.

“I pray that he recognizes that he needs you just as much as you need him.”
If Varric really were to write Ravena’s biography, the days after Haven would all be a blur of plodding through snow during the day and shivering in the night. They had been relatively lucky: the path that Chancellor Roderick had led them on had been supplied by a few wagons that had been initially meant to cart older or sick pilgrims up to the Temple to pray. Now, they served as a way to transport the children and the injured. They’d gotten even luckier when they discovered the supply of blankets and dried provisions stored in each cart, which helped boost morale. Their surviving horses were being used to carry those who couldn’t fit into the carts but were well enough to ride, so Bull often took turns with several other men in pulling the carts through the thick drifts of snow.

Ravena had declined a ride in them, despite many protests from her advisors and flat-out orders from Blackwall that she get in, saying that the space she would have taken up was better used by someone far worse off than she. Despite her aching ribs, she walked on.

On the third day of their march, a woman that had been walking a few feet ahead of Ravena collapsed out of sheer exhaustion. Ravena knelt at her side and felt her weak pulse before looking up at the small girl frantically patting at her mother’s face to try to get her to wake.

“There’s room on the cart for the mother,” one of the Inquisition soldiers told her, two other men already placing the unconscious woman on board and pulling a blanket over her to keep her warm. “But the child…” He motioned to the cart where two other people were lying flat, their wounds making sitting impossible.

“It’s all right,” Ravena replied. “I have her.” She turned to the little girl, who couldn’t have been more than three or four years old. “Will you come with me?”

The girl stared up at her with wide eyes before nodding and taking Ravena’s offered hand. “My name’s Ravena,” she said, holding her hand securely as they traveled through an icy patch. “What’s yours?”

“Libby.” Libby craned her neck to try to look at the wagon. “Mama…”

“Your mother is very tired,” Ravena explained, unwinding her scarf from around her neck and wrapping the material around Libby’s head to cover her ears as the wind made snow whip around them. “She’s going to rest in the cart for a while, then she’ll be able to get out and walk with us once she feels better. I get lonely sometimes, so I’m very glad that I have you as a friend to keep me company.”

They continued to walk for at least another hour before Libby began to stumble. Without thinking, Ravena picked her up, gritting her teeth when her ribs protested. Libby clung to her like a limpet, her arms going around Ravena’s neck and her legs clamping about her hips. Ignoring the pain, Ravena wrapped her arms around the girl’s bottom to support her and plodded on.

Blackwall had been taking a turn pulling one of the wagons when he had lost sight of Ravena. Judging by the sun’s angle in the sky, he’d been helping to pull the cart with Krem for close to several hours before their group decided to stop for a break. He took advantage of their time off to search for Ravena, finally spotting her near one of the other carts sharing slivers of apple with a little girl perched on her lap who looked to be more dirt than child. The girl had trouble keeping her eyes
open long enough to chew, making her look just as exhausted as Ravena.

“There you are,” Ravena said, holding out a hand. “Sweetheart, this is Blackwall. He’s one of my friends. Blackwall, this is my new friend.”

He took her hand and sat down next to her, noticing the way Ravena’s shoulders tiredly slumped. “Hello.”

The little girl blinked up at him owlishly before becoming shy and burying her face against Ravena’s shoulder. “She doesn’t talk much,” she explained. “Her name is Libby.”

His eyes widened. “Did you say Liddy?”

“No, Libby.” She looked up at him. “What’s wrong? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I had a younger sister named Liddy,” he told her. “Lydia. She died when I was very young.”

“I’m sorry.” Ravena leaned against him. “I can’t imagine what it’s like to lose a sibling.”

“I was angry for a long while. I was her big brother, I was supposed to look after her, protect her.” He stared out at the sea of white in front of them. “I thought that some flowers would cheer her up when she grew too ill to get out of bed. By the time I came back with a handful, she was gone.”

“You were a boy; there was nothing that you could have done to stop it.”

“I know that now, but try telling that to a lad who just lost his sister.” He looked at Libby, who had fallen asleep on Ravena’s shoulder. “Where are her parents?”

“Her mother is with the cart over there. I haven’t had the heart to ask about her father.” Libby’s dress was stiff and stained a dark reddish-brown in places. Seeing as the child had no injuries of her own and her mother was unharmed, Ravena could only guess whose blood it was. “Here. Have you eaten yet?”

Blackwall shook his head and refused the offered pieces of apple. “Keep them for yourself, or for the little ‘un. I’ll be fine. How are your ribs?”

She shrugged. “They’re there.”

“They still pain you.” It wasn’t a question.

She leaned against him, sighing contentedly when he wrapped an arm around her and drew her closer to his chest. “I’ll be fine,” she echoed. She closed her eyes and caught herself drifting off when people around them began to move.

“Looks like the break’s over,” Blackwall commented, standing up. He turned to help Ravena to her feet when he stopped. “What are you doing?”

“She’s done in,” she explained, pulling Libby from her lap and into her arms. She tried, but failed to hide the sudden gasp and pained expression the move made. “I can’t make her walk like this.”

“Give her here,” he said. “I’ll carry her. You look about ready to drop on your feet too.”

She handed Libby over, noticing how gently Blackwall held the sleeping child against his shoulder. Libby, unaware of the transfer, merely snuggled close to him. “It’s getting late. We should be stopping soon for the night, once scouts find a good enough place out of the wind.”
“That’s wonderful news. I’m sure there are plenty of people ready to stop for a proper rest.”

He glanced at her. “Including you?” He hefted Libby onto his left arm and held out his right, silently offering it to Ravena to lean against. “You’re pushing yourself too hard.”

She wrapped her arm around his, grateful for the support. “We need to find this place Solas mentioned, and soon. We’re losing people every day.” Each night, she’d taken to helping the healers comfort the injured. Vivienne had taken charge of any mage who knew how to cast restorative spells, directing them like a general on the battlefield. Even Dorian, who professed to know very little healing magic, was helping the best he could. Ravena knew some first aid that went beyond the basics; she had spent much of the first few day helping with triage: setting bones and sewing sutures alongside frightened young Chantry initiates and seasoned sisters alike. After her range of skills had been exhausted, Ravena spent her nights quietly reciting the Chant and holding hands, offering comfort wherever she could. Those were the worst nights, and Ravena often found herself stumbling back to her part of the makeshift camp for an hour or two of sleep, collapsing wherever there was an open space available. It never failed that she’d wake up later on with Blackwall’s arms around her, warding off the majority of the cold.

“And I still say that you’re pushing yourself too hard. I’ll not argue with you over this, Ravena, but I want my opinion known.”

She sighed and ran her hand through her wind-tangled hair to push it out of her face. “Thank you for your concern, I appreciate it. I’ll try to pace myself, but I can’t promise anything.”

He held her closer. “I know. It’s good enough that you’ll try.”

It was several more hours before Cullen called everyone to a halt for the night. Ravena and Blackwall took Libby, who had woken up and finally trusted them enough to start talking in little yes and no sentences, to the cart where he mother had been resting.

“Maker’s blessings on you, my lady,” the woman said, clutching her child to her and pressing kisses against Libby’s cheek. “When I woke and she wasn’t with me, I feared the worst. She’s all I have left of my Ben.”

Ravena’s shoulders sagged when she heard a soldier report to Blackwall that the two wounded men sharing the cart had perished as the sun went down, their bodies left behind by necessity’s sake. Blackwall grimly nodded and began to help the men load other passengers while Ravena distracted Libby and her mother. “She was a big help along the way today,” she said instead, tucking a threadbare blanket around the two of them. “I should be thanking you instead, for letting her keep me company.”

She secured the scarf around Libby’s ears, knowing that the girl needed it more than she would. She was about to say goodbye when Libby spoke first. “She gets lonely,” she said, her eyes staring straight at Blackwall. “Stay with her, please.”

“Of course.” Blackwall stared at Ravena as he answered. “For as long as she’ll have me.”

The two of them walked away and towards the area where Dorian was cursing in fluent Tevene at a damp piece of wood that smoked instead of lit, flame dancing from his hands. She looked around, knowing that there were a million things that she could do to help, but also knowing that she simply lacked the energy to be of any use for any of them. Wearily lowering herself to a spot someone had already cleared off, she held a hand up as an invitation for Blackwall to join her.

“So,” she started, barely covering her yawn with the back of her hand. “As long as I’ll have you?”
He looked at her, staring past the grime and the bruises and the flecks of blood that still stained her skin. “Yes, my lady,” he answered. He couldn’t help the contented sigh when she curled up close to him, her head on his chest.

“That’s a very long time,” she said sleepily. The last thing she felt before sleep took her was Blackwall’s lips against her forehead.

“And still not long enough,” he murmured. He grunted when he felt someone roll up against his back.

“Aren’t we all lovey-dovey,” Sera cooed, burrowing her face between his shoulder blades.

“You have damned bony knees,” Blackwall complained, carefully rolling to his back and offering his unoccupied arm to Sera.

“Yeah, well you’ve got a…” she yawned. “A butt. But you’re warm, and you’re a friend, so I won’t complain.” Stretching her arm across Blackwall’s chest, Sera gently brushed hair out of Ravena’s face. “She’s a candle all worn down to the nub, that one is. Heh. Nub.”

“Crude,” Dorian whispered, settling down on Ravena’s unoccupied side. “But an apt description. Hopefully we’ll reach this place Solas knows about before she wears herself out completely.” His brow furrowed in concentration as he held his hands over Ravena’s ribs, a weak glow of healing magic emanating from his fingertips.

“Hey, why didn’tcha just do that to begin with?” Sera asked.

Dorian rolled his eyes. “Because I’m a necromancer, not a healer. It takes an incredible amount of focus for me to do this, whereas summoning up spirits is a snap.”

“Pfft. Magic is magic.”

“That’s like me asking you to pick up a sword and poke someone’s eye out at a hundred paces. Arrows and blades have sharp edges, my dear, but they work in completely different ways.”

“And I still say pfft.”

Blackwall shook his head. “You’re both going to wake her,” he admonished. “And thank you. No matter how much or how little, every bit of healing helps.”

Dorian preened. “Well, I happen to like her a lot. I just wish I could do more to help.” He laid his palm over Ravena’s eyes. “She wakes at the smallest noise; a little sleep spell should do her good.” Without telling the others, he expanded the spell to include Blackwall and Sera.

“Someone needs to look out for you,” he muttered, settling down beside Ravena so that their backs were touching. “Else I’ll be stuck here in this Maker-forsaken south with no one but the dwarf for decent company.”

Chapter End Notes

I’m playing fast and loose with travel times for this one. I figure that it would take more than a day or so to travel to Skyhold, especially when you have heavily injured people and limited means to quickly transport them. In my playthrough with Ravena, I pretty
much ignored any options to get different horses/mounts, so they'd technically be stuck with whatever Freldan horses they would have been able to recover from Haven.
“Has anyone seen Ravena?” Blackwall asked. He’d been busy helping Dennet rebuild the stables and settle the horses for the better part of the morning before lending a Cullen a hand at organizing recruits and refugees alike for the rest of the day. Now that night had fallen over Skyhold, he found that he wanted to see their newly named Inquisitor.

Maker’s mercy, but wanted was too tame of a word. He needed to see Ravena like he needed air to breathe. It was strange; certainly no other woman had made him feel this way before, his emotions all twisted up in knots that only she knew how to untie. It was dangerous, and ultimately unwise, for him to feel this way, especially when he knew for a fact that she deserved far better than he could ever give.

“She’s alone,” someone said to his right. Turning his head, he found Cole, the odd boy they had picked up right before Haven had been attacked. “She’s alone, and yet she’s with hundreds of old friends, all of them waiting to meet her for the first time.”

Blackwall frowned. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

He shrugged. “Not to you, but it does to her. Her happiness is so loud; I can hear her shouting from underneath our feet.”

“So,” Blackwall started, crossing his arms over his chest. “She’s somewhere underground? Below the keep?”

“Yes. It’s cool, but not damp. Can’t make out the age yet: there’s bones built on top of bones. I shouldn’t be touching these, not without gloves. Journal was lost in Haven; need to find paper and ink to record this finding.” Cole blinked, his eyes coming back into focus. “You worry that she’s in danger, but she’s safe. The only thing we should probably worry about is if she’ll come up to eat and sleep any time soon.”

“How do I get to her?”

Cole stretched out his arm and pointed towards the kitchens. “She went through there first, then started exploring. Follow the marks on the walls.” With that, Cole slipped away faster than a blink of an eye.

“I will never get used to him doing that,” Blackwall muttered. He took a step towards the door Cole had pointed out, but then paused as he thought the boy’s words over. A quick detour where merchants had begun setting up temporary stalls saw his coin purse a bit lighter. Thus outfitted, he made his way inside the kitchens. The cooks looked at him in bemusement as he wandered about, eyes scanning the walls, but they didn’t say anything.

He didn’t find anything in the main room, but a trip into the storage area proved fruitful. There, on the very bottom closest to the floor, was the tiniest of arrows pointing towards where Ravena must have gone off to. A similar arrow was found down a flight of stairs, and another was close to a door inside the cellars. A few feet later, Blackwall saw a flickering light coming from another hallway. After that, he didn’t need the arrows to point him in the right direction.

“This has to have been from the Storm Age, but it’s right next to something from…” Ravena’s back was to him, and she jumped when he cleared his throat to announce his presence, her hand flying to the dagger at her hip.
“Oh, it’s you,” she said, her voice sounding relieved while she sheathed her blade.

“Jumpy,” he commented, tilting his head. “Think I was some sort of big ugly out to get you?”

She smiled. “Big, yes. Ugly, no. If anything, I thought you might have been one of those spiders that have made their home here. Watch out, they’re hairy and as large as your fist.” She turned around in a circle, looking up at the floor to ceiling bookshelves. “Can you believe this? I was exploring some of the smaller rooms to see if we could use them as more cold storage for foodstuffs when I came across it.”

He walked over to her and picked a thick rope of cobweb out of her hair. “It’s a lot of books.”

“It’s so much more! Look!” She tugged at his hand and brought him over to a desk. Amid the layers of dust, cobwebs, and wax from a nearby candle long burnt down to a stub were several large books. “I haven’t had the nerve to clean these off yet, not without the proper archival tools…Maker, I need to write Henri and have him send my gear in from Tantervale, have him add in my restoration equipment as well…no. I need to have him come himself once he’s able and things are more settled. He’d never let me hear the end of it if I didn’t share this find with him.” She gazed at the rows of shelving, her eyes bright. “I can make out a little of the titles underneath all the dust. These books are ancient. Several of these look to be the original copies. Original copies, Blackwall. Do you have any idea what sort of treasure trove is here, how much knowledge is stored in one small space?”

Still holding her hand, he gave her a lopsided smile. “No, but apparently you do. Look at you, you’re positively glowing.” Even covered in dust with spider webs in her hair, she looked absolutely radiant. Cole’s words came back to him. Her happiness is so loud. “Anyone can see how happy you are.”

“Happy doesn’t even begin to describe how I feel.” She squeezed his fingers. “After all the death and destruction at Haven, the horrible future I saw, the Conclave and receiving the Mark…my life has been a whirlwind where nothing is normal. This, exploring places and coming across finds like these, is as if someone threw something familiar for me to cling to amid everything.”

“I’m glad. If anyone needs a bit of normalcy, it would be you.” He let go of her hand to take something out of his pocket. “Here.”

She stared at the small, pocket-sized journal he held out to her. There was a freshly sharpened pencil tied to the front with a string. “For me?” she asked, her throat tight. Outside of her family, no one had really given her gifts. Even the people who brought tributes to Haven for the Herald of Andraste only brought items they thought were somehow worthy for the title, not what she herself might find useful. Those items normally wound up being broken up and distributed among the camp or added to the Inquisition’s treasury, better suited for the common good instead of staying in the cabin she had claimed for her own. To have this man who she was quickly falling – or if she was completely honest with herself, for whom she had already fallen quite hard – for, give her something specifically tailored to her…she had no words.

He swallowed hard. The way she looked at the little leather-bound journal in his hand was as if he had offered her a platter overflowing with sovereigns and jewels instead. “It isn’t much,” he started, rubbing at the back of his neck with his free hand. “But I saw it and thought of you. I know that—” Whatever he was going to say next was cut off by the way Ravena threw her arms around his neck and pressed her mouth to his. He froze in surprise before wrapping his arms about her waist and hauling her close to him, returning her kiss in a manner he had been thinking of doing ever since Redcliffe. Where that kiss had been completely unexpected and frenzied with need, he took his time here, discovering what made Ravena sigh and what made her gasp in pleasure.
“Thank you,” she whispered, palms flat against his chest and her forehead pressed to his once he broke the kiss to come up for air. All he could think about is how the stale scent of parchment and dust from the hidden library and that elusive floral perfume Ravena favored had etched themselves into his memory. He *should* have been pushing her away, should have been listing all the reasons why they couldn’t be together, why *he* couldn’t be with her. But Void take him, he was a selfish bastard.

“You’re welcome,” he said instead, turning his face against the softness of her cheek. One of these days he would be strong enough to step away, but until then, he hoarded stolen moments such as these to keep him company.
Chapter Notes

I didn't want to re-write the battlement cutscene where Blackwall first pushes his love interest away, so this takes place roughly a little while afterwards, maybe a week or two after the Inquisition reaches Skyhold.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’ve been quiet.”

She looked up from the fire. “Have I? I’m sorry, just deep in thought.”

Blackwall sat close to her. “I noticed. Want to talk about it?”

Ravena opened her hand, revealing a metal cylinder Blackwall had often seen strapped to the legs of Leliana’s birds. “Cullen sent me a message. A count of those we lost at Haven is ready for my review once we get back to Skyhold. He also added a note that the names of those who died at the Conclave have been released.”

“Are you all right?”

“No.” They were silent for a long while, which was something that Ravena was grateful for. She was also grateful that Varric was with them; he was keeping Cole occupied by teaching him the finer points of Diamondback.

The silence didn’t last long.

“There’s a bird throwing itself against the bars of its cage,” Cole softly said, his eyebrows furrowing in concern. “It’ll break its wing if it keeps hitting itself so hard.”

“Not the time, Kid,” Varric muttered. Unfortunately, it didn’t stop the spirit.

“A hand opens the door. Gentle fingers give the raven a taste of freedom, they walk together at noon. Sweet kisses amid the rosemary, even sweeter, more forbidden ones at midnight.” Cole blinked and looked up from the cards in his hand. “What was his name?”

“Don’t look at me, that wasn’t one of my memories.”

“Nor was it mine.”

Ravena closed her eyes and sighed as she rolled the metal message cylinder in her palms. “His name was Simon,” she said softly. “I met him three months after I had been sent to the Chantry.” No one spoke, so she continued.

“We Trevelyans are extremely devout Andrastians. We have a long history of having many of our family members in the Chantry in one form or another; traditionally if no one else volunteers, the youngest unwed child is selected to serve the Maker. As the youngest at eighteen, the only sibling without a spouse and seeing as I was neither the heir nor spare of the family to keep me from the Chantry, the honor fell to me.
“Before then, I had been raised to believe that the world was my oyster, that I could do anything I wanted, become whoever I wanted to become in my life. My mother often talked of how much she couldn’t wait to hear every detail about my suitors, to fawn over embroidery for my wedding gown or how she dearly wished to hold grandchildren. That all changed the moment my brother Raoul announced he was getting married. After that, it was if someone had yanked the wide, open space that my life could have been away from me and set me on a narrow path not of my making.” She shook her head. “The Chantry in Ostwick didn’t have any places open for newcomers, but the one in Tantervale did, so I was sent there. Instead of finding peace and tranquility within the Chantry as so many of my relatives have done, I only found loneliness at being isolated from everyone I knew and bitter resentment for being shoved into a vocation I never wanted.”

“It was unfair of your parents to force that life upon you,” Blackwall quietly commented.

She shrugged. “It could have been worse; I could have been made a sister, like Mother wanted me to become. Father at the very least saw how ill that mantle would suit me, so he made certain that I was assigned to the archivists and scribes. He knew how much I loved books.”

Varric gave up on pretending to shuffle his cards. “Eighteen and angry,” he mused. “That’s a pretty potent combination.”

“It was. I thought about leaving several times, but where would I go? Being raised as a noblewoman, I had no real skills that would help me survive in the real world and running away would only bring shame to my family. That was when Simon showed up.” Her voice lightened and the ghost of a smile quirked the corner of her mouth. “He was twenty-five to my eighteen and the handsomest Templar recruit I had ever seen. He was brave and bold and so much worldlier than I could ever hope to be. To add to his lists of virtues, Simon was also quite perceptive. He saw through my mask, which no one had been able to do. He confronted me in the gardens one day and I’m a bit embarrassed to admit it, but I burst into tears and confessed everything.”

“Did anyone know about the two of you?”

She let out an unladylike snort. “More than likely the entire Chantry. We never bothered hiding our affections and preferred to spend the noon hour when we were both free of our duties walking together in the gardens. There weren’t any vows forbidding the two of us from being together. The Revered Mother didn’t forbid our relationship out of worry from what my parents might think because while Simon might have been the third son and ineligible to gain anything from his father’s lands, he was from a good, reputable family. Simon often spoke of what our life would be like once he became a Templar; how I would follow him wherever he might be stationed once we were married. It was the happiest I’d ever been since arriving.” She played with a bit of grass near her feet. “We were the model example of a devoted, chaste couple.”

“At least during the daytime?” Varric asked, his eyebrow rising as he remembered Cole’s words.

She smirked. “At least during the daytime,” she agreed. “My father would have killed him, had anyone in the Chantry caught on and alerted him about our secret midnight meetings. That is, if my brothers hadn’t already done the deed themselves. I never wrote to them about Simon, figuring that I would surprise them all when my Templar beloved and I came to visit instead. Not even my mother knew about my romance.”

“The cage might be open, but the weather is stormy,” Cole said, sounding oddly sage-like in his observation.

“It wasn’t long after Simon became a full-fledged Templar that he was reassigned to Kirkwall. We swore we’d write letters every chance we could and that he would soon speak to my parents to ask
for my hand.” She shook her head. “At first, we conversed so often that I felt sorry for the poor postman having to run such a volume of letters. Then our correspondence slowed to a trickle when his duties took him away from the Circle for weeks on end. Eventually as the months wore on, the letters I wrote to him were never answered and messages from him stopped altogether. You can probably guess what happened.”

“The bastard.” This was spat out with more venom than Blackwall had meant to. Listening to her talk about her past, he couldn’t help but feel jealous of this Templar and angry at what a gift he had thrown away.

“It was chance that I was able to see him again. Some high ranking nobleman had requested a copy of an obscure manuscript. Our archives so happened to have it and I begged to be in the party that would deliver the copy. Once I was there, it took some effort, but I managed to track down my Templar. I found him involved with one of the girls from Lowtown and it was very clear by the noises they made and how her skirts were stacked almost over her head at what they were doing.”

Varric leaned forward. “So what did you do? Did you make a scene, beat him senseless? Were there at least some choice curse words shouted at him?”

She laughed. “To what end? Neither of them had noticed me and doing anything would only serve to embarrass myself further than I already was. I simply turned around and walked the other way. When a fellow researcher had asked if I had seen Simon, I lied and told him that I had not, that he must have been out on patrol. It was the last time I saw him, until the Conclave.”

“Did he know who you were?” Cole questioned.

“No. Our eyes met across the room that first day, and I wanted to go over and speak to him, but there was no recognition on his end, no memory of what we once had. He was my first suitor. My first kiss, my first…everything.” She stood up and stared out into the darkness beyond their camp. “And now he is dead.”

“You never got the chance to say goodbye.”

“No, Cole. I didn’t.” With that, she began to walk towards the path that would lead her to the lake. She wasn’t expecting anyone to follow her, and she tensed when she heard the familiar sound of Blackwall’s footsteps.

With her back still to him, she let out a faint huff of humorless laughter. “I’ve never really talked about him before,” she said quietly, her eyes trained on the reflection of stars across the water’s surface.

“He was a cad who abused your affections,” Blackwall replied, coming up to stand beside her.

“Did he? I know that I liked him. I suppose I might have loved him in a girlish way: he was a strong, brave Templar who would rescue me from a life I didn’t want, just like the heroes in all the storybooks I used to read as a child. I know that I was fond of him and that it genuinely hurt to know he betrayed me, yet looking back; I have my doubts as if I ever truly loved him as a woman who was prepared to live the rest of her life with her husband should have.”

“You were young and unhappy.”

“That I was, but that’s no excuse. Perhaps I’m not meant to become some man’s wife, if he ever meant to keep that promise to me. After returning to Tantervale, I threw myself into my work. I found solace from heartache in my books, in the knowledge they contained. Refocused, or should I say,
focused for the first time since I had never really had my heart in it to begin with, it took a few months to persuade the senior clerics to allow me to move from merely re-shelving and retrieving works to a more scholarly approach with an emphasis on restoration and recovery. In time, I honestly began to like my life, all because I chose what to specialize in instead of it being something foisted upon me by some outdated tradition.” She turned to him. “It was my knowledge of history that brought me to Henri’s attention a year later. As you could probably guess from my earlier descriptions of him, he’s a field researcher dedicated to ruins and artifacts and an older cousin on my father’s side. It took some persuasion, but my parents finally agreed to allow me to accompany him as his assistant on one of his local digs.”

“And the rest is history, so to speak.”

She smiled. “Yes. It took that initial viewing of the work he was uncovering to fall in love with the lifestyle. Once I gained a foothold in the profession, my gear and items began to outgrow the small dormitory I shared with other clerics, so I was given permission to live outside the Chantry walls. Several of my privately funded expeditions allowed me to purchase and furnish the home I now own. Henri is too much of a nomad to own anything permanent, so he lives with me when he needs a longer term living arrangement to write up his findings and polish up papers for publication.” She rocked back on her heels. “He was the one supposed to go to the Conclave to record the proceedings, but he broke his foot in a freak accident and insisted to our superiors that I go in his stead. I guess the Maker works in mysterious ways: had he not been injured, he would have died along with everyone else and I would not have been there to receive the Mark.”

Blackwall picked up a stone and let it skip across the water, the ripples it caused obscuring the night sky. “And the Inquisition would have never been formed, and we wouldn’t have ever met.”

“I think you underestimate Cassandra’s tenacity. The Inquisition surely would have been formed, just that someone else would be the Herald.” She shrugged. “I might even be underestimating Henri. Had things played out differently, he just might be leading things about now, which would have more than likely driven everyone insane, seeing how absentminded my cousin can be.”

“Cassandra does have a stubborn streak,” he agreed. “For what it’s worth, I am glad that I was able to meet you.”

“And I, you.” She reached out and placed her hand against his cheek. “Blackwall, I…”

He closed his eyes and leaned against her hand before turning his head. “Ravena, don’t. I told you before, this, us, it can never be.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And as I told you before, why should we have to deny ourselves? With the world the way it is, shouldn’t we take what comfort we can?”

“And with the way the world is, we shouldn’t let our emotions distract us from our purpose.”

Ravena took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. “I can see that continuing this is like beating my head against a stone. Have it your way; I’ll not discuss this with you again.” Defeated, she turned away from him and made a move to return to their camp.

“Ravena, wait.” He could tell that she wasn’t happy and he didn’t want their conversation to end poorly.

“No. We’re both adults and I refuse to pine over you like some lovesick girl. I know my heart; once you get your own feelings for me sorted out, you know where to find me.”
Blackwall watched her walk back to camp, regret forming a bitter knot in his stomach. He briefly wondered which one of them was more stubborn: he for knowing that he didn’t deserve someone like her or Ravena for refusing to give up on him.

He threw another stone into the lake. The quiet that followed refused to reveal any answers to him.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to explore a note I saw on the Human origin that said Trevely an entered the Chantry either willingly or unwillingly (paraphrasing, since it's been a while since I've started up a new game.) I have a headcanon for another Trevely an I haven't written about (yet) where she enjoyed belonging to the Chantry and the different traditions bring her great comfort, but I wanted to play around with how a Trevely an who didn't want to go to the Chantry would act. Ravena hits me as being an Andrastian who might go through the motions out of habit, but personally doesn't sing the Chant as often or as wholeheartedly as she should. She believes in the Maker and has faith, but she's also seen much in her travels to make her realize that faith alone isn’t enough to help her out in different situations.

She had plans, or at least the dream of having plans, before her parents decided to send her off to the Chantry. I think what put her off was that her choices had been taken away from her and she suddenly found herself alone in a strange place where she had been so used to being surrounded by family and friends, not that she disliked the Chantry in and of itself. What brought her back into things was the fact that after another choice had been taken away from her when Simon left her by the wayside, she took back her ability to choose her specializations for herself. That in turn eventually opened more doors to her than she would have had available had she not gone to the Chantry and lived life as a typical noblewoman. She became more independent and sure of herself because of her life experiences, which are two traits that Blackwall finds incredibly attractive in her.

I have no idea where I'm going with this, but yeah. A little insight on her character.
It felt good to be back in Skyhold after a prolonged absence. Flames, it felt good to be dry, especially since she had spent the better part of her time away on the Storm Coast searching for the whereabouts of Wardens rumored to have been in the area and it had constantly drizzled over her and Blackwall. The rain had followed them all throughout their return trip; outside of her rooms, thunder rumbled ominously as if to herald yet another storm in the near future.

She leaned back in her chair and looked around her chamber. The odd-shaped alcoves framing her bed had been quickly converted in the cleaning and clearing up process to make the room habitable: the one closest to the stairwell now housed her field gear and weapons along with the equipment Henri had shipped to her. He’d included a brief note explaining why he hadn’t accompanied the many crates he’d filled with her journals and restoration tools. Josephine had been puzzled at the note that only consisted of big paper, headache. Have fun with books, but Ravena had explained that it meant the Chantry had tasked Henri with writing up a manuscript that one of the other clerics had approached him with several months ago. Henri didn’t really want to do it, but it was another way to get his work published and noticed, so he tolerated the headache working on a deadline always gave him. It was also his way of telling Ravena that now that she was better equipped, she could head down to the hidden library she had written him about and begin unearthing titles without feeling guilty about her cousin missing out on the fun.

Henri had also been thoughtful enough to include several trunks with her personal possessions. She felt so much better at the sight of familiar clothes and toiletries that she had nearly hugged the items to her chest, much to Cullen’s amusement. The fact that Henri had included an enormously large box of her favorite chocolates he knew she always ate while mulling over theories and logistical issues pertaining to digs made her love her cousin all the more. It had taken some deliberating, but Ravena had finally decided to leave her old gear in the trunks instead of wearing them out into the field, seeing that she was already accustomed to the weapons and armor Harritt had supplied her with. She did trade out the outfit she had taken to wearing around Skyhold with her old clothes, mostly because what she had in the trunks was far more familiar to her and the faint scent of lemon balm and lavender left over from the laundries in Tantervale gave her a grounding sense of comfort in a relatively new place.

The second alcove had been turned into a sort of dressing room, complete with a vanity and mirror. Ravena sat there now, running a brush through her hair. Now dressed for bed in only a short green silk shift with its matching robe, she leaned forward and thought about her most recent outing. Blackwall had been courteous yet somewhat distant throughout their trip, the both of them sleeping in separate tents. Any conversation she had struck up with him had been met with the same familiar warmth as usual, but any time she tried to touch him, he had flinched as if burned. After they had
found his Warden-Constable badge, he had seemed even more distracted, his gaze often turned inward and their conversations fading into a somewhat uncomfortable silence. It was a sudden turn from how attentive he had been since Redcliffe, and she had to wonder if she might have done something to turn him away.

Ravena frowned and looked at her reflection. According to the standards set in Orlais, she had never been a striking beauty: her jaw was too square, her cheekbones too high and lips too full. A noblewoman had even once brazenly declared the color of her eyes to be too unnaturally bright a shade of brown to ever be attractive. Still, she was confident enough in herself to know that she wasn’t horrid; her past lovers and brief romantic entanglements had proven that she was pleasing to the eye. She stood and regarded her figure. Blackwall had certainly been appreciative until late. She set her brush down and let her hands glide over her waist to settle at her hips. She wasn’t as willow thin as she had been as a young girl, and she knew from experience that without regular activity that she could easily put on weight, especially around her hips and thighs. Ravena made a face as she poked at her stomach critically. While still slender, she was slightly soft in the belly, even though the weeks of travel and fighting were starting to remedy that. Her hands moved up higher, her palms cupping her unbound breasts. Her skin hadn’t quite given up the fight with gravity, though she guessed that it was only a matter of a few years before things began to eventually sag. With a sigh, she slid her hands up past her collarbones and throat until she held her face in her hands. She’d taken after her father’s side of the family, and the Trevelyan women had always retained a youthful appearance, even in more advanced ages. She recalled a dowager aunt who had delighted in fooling everyone into thinking she was fifteen years younger than her actual age. By all accounts, Ravena figured that she would keep her dark hair for another good twenty to twenty-five years before the first silver strands would appear. Thinking back to that same aunt, she hoped she would emulate her thick head of silken hair, the color gleaming like newly-fallen snow.

“Come off it, girl,” she said to herself, turning this way and that to glimpse at her backside and trim legs in the mirror. “If there’s something wrong, it’s his loss, not yours.” How she wanted to believe that. The truth of the matter was that it hurt to be pushed away. Had this been any other man, she would have been able to easily shrug off his disinterest and move on with her life without any sense of guilt or regret. Instead, she found herself moping and second guessing her decision. The last time they had spoken of their almost-relationship, or whatever they could call this, she had firmly placed the ball in his court to do with it as he saw fit. She had hoped that this trip the two of them had taken together would have clarified his feelings for her one way or the other, but it had only left things even more muddled, if that was even possible.

“You’re getting touchy in your old age,” she muttered, blowing out the candle on the vanity and padding barefoot out of her dressing alcove. She was about to untie the sash that held her robe closed when she heard the faintest of noises outside her balcony doors. Adrenaline coursed through her veins when she clearly remembered that the now open doors had been firmly shut before she had withdrawn to change for bed. She inched towards her bedside where she kept one of her daggers.

“If you’re planning on assassinating me,” she called out, unsheathing her blade. “You’re going to have to be stealthier than that.” Her heart beat a rapid tattoo against her throat when she saw movement, but then her breath went out on a relived sigh when she realized it was only Blackwall.

“It’s you.” He’d changed out of his gambeson and gloves. She let her eyes rove appreciatively over him. It was so rare to see him out of his armor that it was easy to forget that most of his bulk was padding. What was left over was solid muscle born from years of wielding sword and shield.

“Maker’s mercy,” he rasped, taking in her outfit. He took a hesitant step towards her.

“How long have you been out there?” she asked, setting her dagger aside.
“I had thought you would still be speaking to your advisors,” he started, his eyes following the long trail of her hair where it spilled over her shoulders and ended nearly at her waist. “I wanted to be here when you got back. Obviously, I misjudged the time.”

“I’m glad you came. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

He took another step inside. “I wanted to thank you for accompanying me to that ruin. I wanted to…” He swallowed thickly and moved closer to her until he was inches away. “I just had to see you.” His confession sounded as if it had been wrenched from somewhere deep within himself, as if it had hurt him to voice his feelings. He leaned in and kissed her, his hands gentle as they cradled her face, his thumbs running against her jaw. Ravena sighed and pressed herself against him, relishing the heat that seemed to radiate from his body.

All too soon, he broke away. “No, this is wrong. I shouldn’t even be here.”

She frowned. “I want you here.” She made a move to reach out to him, but he stepped away from her touch.

“I hope you can forgive me for pushing you away,” he finally said.

Her heart hammered in her chest. It sounded very much like he was telling her goodbye. “You had your reasons,” she said cautiously, even as she wanted to rail at him.

“But I can’t just ask you to trust my reasons blindly!” He paced in front of her and raked his hands through his hair.

“No, you can’t. Yet I’m doing it anyway because I care about you.”

“I owe you an explanation for what I did.” He stopped pacing and stood in front of her fireplace. “I know that my actions have been confusing and hurtful, and for that I am truly sorry.”

“Then explain.” She crossed her arms over her chest and tilted her head. “I’m here.”

“What we saw on the Storm Coast: that was my life before you. Crumbling ruins, endless battles, death. How could I drag someone like you into that? I want to give in; Maker knows how much I wish I could.” He turned to her, his face a study of anguish. “I’ve killed before, Ravena. I’ve done things in my past that I am not proud of, things that still haunt me to this day. You’d have no life with me, not the sort of life that you deserve.”

“If you haven’t noticed, crumbling ruins are sort of my specialty. Endless battles, death? Blackwall, look at what we face on an almost daily basis. It’s as if we were made for the other.”

“Ravena, be serious.”

She tilted her head up defiantly. “I am being serious. You say that you regret choices in your past, but tell me, who doesn’t? I’ve done things I’m not proud of either, but those choices, those mistakes, they’re what shape us into the people we are today.”

“I’m not what you want. I could never be what you deserve. I need you to end this, because I can’t.”

Ravena’s eyes flashed in anger. “No.” She poked at his chest with a finger, not caring if he flinched at her touch. “You don’t get to decide what I want or who I deserve. You don’t get to make those choices for me without my say so. As I told you before, I know my heart. The fact that you’re standing in front of me tells me that you’ve come to some decision on your own. So tell me Blackwall: yes or no, do you care for me? Do you want this as much as I do?”
He closed his eyes. “Yes,” he all but growled. “Maker, yes, I want this.”

“Then fight for it.”

Blackwall groaned and lunged towards her. Fisting his hand into her hair, he attacked her mouth with his. She mewled against his lips when his free hand slid down her back, over her backside, and across the back of her leg to hitch her that much closer to him. He tugged at her hair in a way that made her gasp in pleasure, exposing her throat to his teeth and tongue.

“Blackwall…” she gasped, her fingers tugging at his hair to bring him up for another kiss.

He stilled in her arms. “That isn’t my name,” he said. He carefully withdrew from her and went back to the fireplace. “My name is…my name is Thom. Blackwall, it’s…” he ran a hand through his hair and his shoulders bunched up in a tense line.

“It’s a Warden tradition, isn’t it?” she asked, wondering if his life with the Order was one of his arguments against a relationship with her.

He was quiet before nodding. “I took the name of Blackwall when I joined the Order,” he agreed. “It was a way to distance myself from the life I had before. You are right; the mistakes in our past shape us into what we are today. Thom is a reminder of the man I left behind, but it’s a part of who I was, who I am. I need you to know that.”

She closed the distance between them. “Thank you for trusting me with it. What would you like me to call you?”

“Blackwall will do fine when we’re out in the field or in public.” He raised his hand and traced her cheek with his fingers. “Yet when it’s just the two of us, like this, I’d like very much if you called me by my given name.”

She leaned into his touch. “It’s a good name,” she told him. “A good name for a good man.”

He pressed his forehead against hers. “There’s nothing I can offer you,” he breathed, almost as if he were giving her one last chance to back away.

“You’re offering me this.”

“We’ll regret this, milady.”

Her hands went to the sash at her waist. Without a word, she let the robe pool at her feet. “Do you regret this?” she asked, her lips brushing against his. He groaned and she felt his resolve crumble as he clutched her to him, his powerful arms easily picking her up and carrying her to her bed. She savored the heavy weight of him as he covered her, his hands slipping over her shift, calluses catching on the silk.

“I don’t think I could ever regret this, my lady,” he finally answered, head nestled against her chest as their breathing struggled to return to normal. He gave her one last kiss on another cluster of birthmarks he found on the underside of her breast before rolling and taking her with him.

“Me either,” she murmured. Her hands roved over his shoulder and down his arm, fingers tracing the scars she had noticed all those weeks ago when she had rubbed his back. “Why did we wait so long to come to this?”
He held her closer. “I thought that what we had was something easy; a flash of attraction that could be quickly dealt with and then gotten over after a tumble or two, the two of us amicably parting ways afterwards. Then I got to know you and that attraction grew into something more, something I’ve never felt before. I couldn’t treat you as I have treated other women in the past.” He pulled back so he could look her in the eye. “You’re a hard woman to walk away from, Ravena Trevelyan.”

“Good. I don’t want you walking away from me, Thom.” His name still felt foreign on her tongue, but she figured that it would sound more familiar the more she used it.

“I wanted to,” he confessed. “You are an amazing woman. You deserve far better than me, than what I can give you.”

She hushed him with a kiss. “And as I told you, I decide what’s best for me. I make my own choices and I chose you.” She settled down against him, her head pillow on his chest. “Will you stay with me?”

He pulled the sheets over them to ward off the evening chill. Across the room, he could hear the patter of rain hitting the windowpanes. “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

I chickened out! I could have put in a more descriptive sex scene than a fade-to-black, but in the end it felt jarring. The rest of this story is around the PG-13 range, having only one chapter that would raise the story's rating to M or E didn't feel right to me.

I was hesitant at having him reveal his name to her right here. All these half-truths are going to come back and bite Blackwall in the butt later on, I'm sure. I think at the start of this, he thought that Ravena was the type of woman who he could flirt with and possibly sleep with one or two times with no strings attached. Then he began to care for her more and he got spooked, especially since he came equipped with a crap-ton of baggage, which was why he decided to push her away. And I think that he really did want to tell her everything in the Storm Coast cutscene, but like he says later on, he lost his nerve. All the Inquisitor's in-game conversation options also seem to give him an out as well, and I think Ravena's a smart enough woman to know that something's up, but she's patient enough to give him time and let him decide when he wants to share with her, if he will share at all.
“You’re humming.”

Ravena looked up from where she had been hunched over for the past hour. “Hmm?”

Dorian flicked dust off his robes and sat as regally as he could on the rickety stool she had brought down to the hidden library for him. “You. Are. Humming. Now I know that all this work gets you in this sort of cat basking in the sun after a good belly rub happy mood, but this goes beyond that.” He gave her a critical look. Then his eyes widened. “You’ve slept with someone.”

Ravena’s mouth gaped open like a fish. “Dorian!” she said, a blush coloring her cheeks and spreading down her throat.

He smirked. “And that was pretty damning evidence right there.”

Gathering up her dignity, she sat up straighter, her back protesting the move. “And what if I have?” she asked, her eyebrow arched. “I don’t see how it would affect you in the slightest.”

“On the contrary, my dear. Your moods affect me in great detail. If you’re happy, I’m happy. If you’re cross, I usually bear the brunt of your ire.” He rested his elbows on his knees and his chin on his fists. “Well, who was the lucky chap?”

She rolled her eyes and went back to her work. “I thought you were supposed to be translating those titles for me,” she said, pointing with her dusting brush at the bookshelf she had deposited Dorian in front of.

“Well, it’s drafty and my back hurts. There are also furry little abominations scurrying about behind the bookshelves over here that you won’t let me set on fire because you’re worried about your precious books going up with them.” He sniffed. “Shows how much you care for your friends, putting them to such slave labor.”

“I hardly think translating a handful of titles counts as slavery. If it displeases you so, you’re more than free to head back up to your safe, spider-free corner in the library.”

Dorian glared at the books before settling back down on the stool. “I’ve read them all. Really, Ravena, you need to expand your collection of Tevinter manuscripts post haste. There’s nothing but a grand collection of Chantry nonsense up there.” There was a pause. “It was Blackwall, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“And was he good?”

She grinned. “Maker, yes.”

Dorian rubbed his hands together gleefully. “Now we’re getting somewhere! Details, if you would.”

Ravena primly folded her hands in her lap. “A lady never kisses and tells.”

“Since when are you a lady?” He stood up and went to her. “Please? I’m living vicariously through you, you know.” After Dorian mentioned that their families were related, no matter how distant, they
had gotten close. Since their recent trip back to the inn in Redcliffe and the conversation Dorian had with his father, the two of them had gotten even closer.

“I’d love to, but I don’t know what Blackwall would want me to say. You know how private a man he is.”

“I know, I know. I was merely hoping to be able to celebrate a bit of happiness with you.” He leaned against the newly cleaned desk and stared down at her expectantly.

She sighed. If she didn’t tell him something, she knew he’d continue to pester until he got his way. “Four times,” she settled on.

His grin grew wider. “Four orgasms in one evening, color me impressed.”

“No, I lost count of those,” she said, smirking smugly. “We had sex three times last night and once this morning. He made me feel glorious and let’s leave it at that.” She cleared her throat. “Now that your curiosity has been slaked for the time being, could we please return to work?”

Dorian whistled appreciatively through his teeth. “Huzzah for Warden stamina,” he said. Then he pulled out a piece of paper and held it in front of her face. “Your list, your Worship.”

“You had it all this time?” she asked, taking it from his fingers.

“But of course. I’ve only been waiting for the opportune moment to ask you about that charming love bite your collar keeps on exposing.” He had to laugh at the way she quickly pulled the loose collar of her work shirt upwards. Bending down, he pressed a kiss to the crown of her head, sputtering when he realized her hair was covered in a fine film of dust. “And now I’m going to head back upstairs and change. I fear I’m as filthy as you look.”

“It’s just dust, Dorian. It’ll wash out.”

“These are silks we’re talking about.”

“Which is why I distinctly remember telling you to dress in something else.” She waved him off as she skimmed through his list, her spine straightening as she recognized one of the titles from a previous paper she had worked on several years ago. “We have this in our possession?” she asked, her voice going up in pitch. Rushing to the bookshelf, she carefully pulled the book from its spot, her gloved fingers trembling as she carefully opened the cover and began to read.

“It’s in Tevene.”

“I know.” She groaned and closed the book, sliding it back in its place. “That settles it. You’re just going to have to teach me how to read. If I’m correct in my theory, this book might hold the key to settling a debate I’ve had with a rather pompous cleric. I would dearly love to see his face if I could prove him wrong.” Going back to her section, she resumed clearing out the dust and cobwebs. Dorian watched for a while, grinning as it became clear Ravena had forgotten his presence as she began to mutter dates and places to herself while writing in a notebook she had brought down with her.

She didn’t even notice him leave.

It was much later when Ravena looked up at the noise of someone clearing their throat behind her. “Dorian, I told you, if you’re bored just leave. I’ll pester you with translations once everything is cleaned and properly catalogued from the comfort of your easy chair.”
“A pity I’m not Dorian, then.” Ravena spun around at the sound of Blackwall’s voice, her lips splitting into a radiant smile.

“Hello, you,” she said, standing up. Her hands went to the small of her back and she stretched, groaning as muscles protested. “Where did Dorian go?”

“He left hours ago.”

Her brow furrowed in confusion. “That can’t be right. I’ve only been here…” her eyes went to the candle she had placed on the desk, the wax melted down considerably more than she remembered it being the last time she looked. “Okay, so there’s a distinct possibility that I got sucked into my work and I lost track of the time.” Her stomach growled loudly and she wrapped her arms around her middle.

“And you lost track of when to eat,” he agreed, laughing. “You weren’t kidding about missing meals. Come on, I’ve saved you a plate.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and tugged her up for a kiss, his teeth nibbling at her bottom lip. His hands slid down her arms until he could twine his fingers with hers.

“What have you been up to?” she asked, squeezing his hands before withdrawing to begin blowing out candles. She was satisfied with her initial progress: the spider webs and dripping piles of candle wax had been cleared and she had catalogued all the titles along one of the long bookshelves.

“Repairs,” he replied, blowing out the rest of the candles at the opposite side of the room. “The lower bailey is working well for a temporary shelter for many of the people, but there are some other buildings that would do better. The stonemasons say that the walls are solid, but the carpenters have their work cut out for them.”

Ravena frowned. “I should be out there helping instead of…”

He cut her off by placing a finger on her lips. “You’re right where you’re needed,” he reassured her. “Things are going to become even more burdensome sooner than we’d like; you need to have something to take your mind off of matters for an afternoon or two here and there. Let the rest of us do the heavy lifting for you.” Blackwall led her out and back up to the kitchens. They both greeted the staff before Blackwall snagged a small satchel for her.

“It isn’t much,” he started swinging the canvas bag for emphasis, “but word has gone out and we’re starting to receive shipments of fresh produce, thanks to the contact you made in Val Royeaux. We’re starting to organize troops to scout out the local area; there are a few lads who are handy with snares and bows that are going out to hunt for game.” The two of them made their way towards the newly refurbished stables, Blackwall taking her hand and leading her up to the hayloft.

She looked around, noticing that he had laid out a pallet and bedding underneath the window. “Is this yours?” she asked.

He nodded. “It’s secluded, yet close enough to the barracks for early morning training. Cullen and I have been talking and he’d like for me to continue helping him since he knows I have military experience. I’m more than happy to lend a hand.” He sat at the edge of his bed and pat the straw next to him. “I’ll admit that it isn’t as comfortable as your mattress, nor is it as fancy, but it has a certain appeal.”

Ravena hummed her agreement. “Well, it has you in it,” she agreed. “That’s welcoming enough in itself.”
Blackwall laughed. “Charmer.”

“I try.” She sat next to him and leaned into his embrace. This was her favorite part of a new relationship: the flirting, the getting accustomed to how the other liked to be held. She yawned and tucked her face against the crook of his neck. “We’ll be receiving guests shortly. Varric managed to pin down this mystery contact of his and he said he received a return message from them saying that they were less than a week’s hard ride away.”

“Do you know who this person is?”

“No, but Varric said that they had some experience with Corypheus. I’m open to any help we can get when it comes to him.” She shivered, still remembering the way his hand had felt around her throat, how helpless she had felt dangling above the ground. As if he sensed her distress, Blackwall pulled her closer to him.

“I’m sure they’ll be able to help us.”

“I hope so. You don’t think…no, that would be silly.”

“What?”

She pulled away slightly so she could look him in the eye. “You don’t think that Varric’s contact might be the Champion of Kirkwall, do you?”

Blackwall shrugged. “Will there be a problem if it is?”

“Only that Cassandra will kill him. She’s been searching for Hawke for how long now? To have her stroll up to the front gate and offer her help would surely rankle.”

“You don’t think that Varric is withholding information from us?”

“No. Do you?”

“No. Varric is a loyal man; if anything, he hasn’t mentioned Hawke because she’s one of his dearest friends. I’m sure that it hasn’t even crossed his mind that she could be of some help to us, especially since we already have you. Besides, as I said, she’s a friend. With everything that the two of them went through in Kirkwall, Varric more than likely thinks that she’s been through enough.”

Ravena looked down at her left hand. “Try telling that to Cassandra. Her temper is on a short fuse on a good day. Dropping a bombshell like this in her lap is bound to cause trouble.” She respected the Seeker, both on a professional and a personal basis. Ravena had gotten Cassandra to open up a little before the attack on Haven, but she was still worried about the fallout if Hawke ever did show up in Skyhold based on the barely disguised tension that seemed to string itself between her and Varric whenever the topic of the Champion came up.

“Lady Cassandra’s temper may be short, but she is quick to calm down,” Blackwall assured her. “She’s a reasonable woman, and besides, we don’t know if this contact is even Hawke.” He tipped her chin up and kissed her. “Let’s not worry about tomorrow tonight.”

She sighed. “All right.” She looked at her dust covered trousers. “Maker’s breath, I’m filthy.”

“We’ll just have to do something about that, now won’t we?” His grin widened when his hands drew her tunic out of the waistband of her pants and up over her head. “Ah ha! I seem to have found the solution to your problem!” His mouth traced the slope of her neck down to the curve of her shoulder.
Ravena laughed, her hands tugging at his shirt. “I’m afraid that I might have gotten you dirty as well, Ser,” she murmured. “We’ll have to fix that too.” Dinner forgotten, she let him lower her against the bedding, her legs tangling with his.

“Perish the thought.”

Chapter End Notes

Why isn't Hawke already on the ramparts? Well, as amazingly awesome as Varric is, I thought it might take just a little bit longer to pinpoint where Hawke was and then some travel time for her to get to Skyhold.
“I still don’t see why you would waste good cheese throwing it down a hill.” Sera argued.

“It isn’t wasting it,” Ravena told her, comfortably settling further into her seat at one of the tavern’s more private booths. “We do wind up eating it after the race.”

Sera made a face. “What, after the hill, with all the grass and nasty bits on it? You know what lives on hills? Cows and sheep. You know what cows and sheep do? They piss and leave big old globs of smelly shit everywhere, that’s what. No thanks.”

Blackwall laughed. “I’m sure they wash it down first.” He eyed Ravena. “You do wash it down, right?”

She arched her eyebrow. “No. The turf and anything the wheel happens to roll over adds a distinct flavor to the finished product. Brings out the subtle nuances in certain cheeses.”

“She’s shitting us.” Sera elbowed Ravena. “You’re shitting us, right?”

Ravena couldn’t keep a straight face. “Of course I am. Our family used cheese wheels with a protective wax seal. The Farenholts, however…” She shrugged. “That family is famous for making and rolling down this stinky type of blue-veined cheese that was one of their shop’s bestselling items. It’s delicious in salads or paired with pears and white wine, but structurally unsound for the contest. They never win because most of it crumbles before it even makes it to the halfway point, but the rumor circulating around Ostwick is that after the race they go back and pick up what they can to use as a starter for the next year’s batch, which was why the snobby cheese people you always find at parties swear they taste clover blossoms and delicate grassy notes of flavor when they eat it.”

“You’re kidding me. Hah, fancy nobles don’t know what they’re stuffin’ in their mouths, do they?” Her eyes caught a serving girl carting a tray of food. “Speaking of…” With that, Sera went off, leaving Ravena and Blackwall alone.

“Didn’t you say you grew up in Markham, Blackwall? Ostwick isn’t that far away, I’m sure you made it to the festival at least once or twice.”

“That I did. My family and I went nearly every year when I was a boy.”

“Then you must have seen my family race. My two older brothers were always in the top ten finishers and even won first place several years in a row. My twin brother and I…” she briefly touched the scar on her forehead. “Let’s just say that we were very good at tumbling down the hill and chasing after our runaway wheel. After Raoul broke his arm when we were eleven, Mother forbade us from participating unless we were paired with either René or Robert for supervision.”

“I wish I could say that I did see you, but I stopped attending when I was sixteen. You probably weren’t even a twinkle in your parents’ eyes yet.”

Ravena looked at him and laughed incredulously. “Just how young do you think I am?”

He took a drink from his tankard. “That right there, my lady, is a trap. Any sane man knows that it’s dangerous to ask a woman her age.”
“Humor me.”

“Oh, I don’t know, somewhere between twenty-seven and thirty, if that much?” He winced when she laughed again.

“Remind me to pay you later, and thank you for the massive compliment.” She smirked over the rim of her wineglass. “Twenty-seven. I haven’t seen that age in quite some time. Feels good to know I can still pass for it.”

Now he scoffed. “Oh please. You can’t be that much older.”

She leveled him a glance. “Why not?”

“You just don’t look it. Now I’m sure you’re going to shock me and say that I’m not, in fact, chasing around a woman half my age like everyone seems to gossip about.”

“Well, brace yourself. If demons or darkspawn or whatever else Corypheus decides to throw at us doesn’t kill me first, I’ll be forty this year.” She took a sip of her drink. “And everyone else needs to mind their own damned business or find someone else to gossip about.”

“You’re thirty-nine?”

“Yes. And you’re what, forty, forty-one?”

“I’m forty-three.”

She tilted her head. “You need to tell Varric. He swore you were in your upper fifties, but I’m guessing it’s the beard. Shave it off and it’ll probably lift ten to fifteen years off your face.”

He frowned. “I’m not touching the beard.”

“And I wouldn’t want you to. I’ve grown rather attached to it.” She reached over and took his hand. “Does it bother you that I’m not as young as you thought I was?”

He squeezed her fingers. “Not at all. Though now it makes more sense why you always seem to be more grounded and sure of yourself than most people. I always figured it was because you were so well-traveled.”

“That had something to do with it. You can’t be too flighty when you’re not sure if a ruin is booby-trapped or not. I’ve been told that I’ve always acted more mature than my age, though.”

He brought her hand to his lips. “At least now I can stop feeling guilty about kissing a girl old enough to be my daughter.”

Ravena rolled her eyes. “You thought I was in my late twenties. That would have made me a younger cousin or niece. You aren’t quite that ancient, Granddad.” Standing up, she rounded the table and perched herself atop Blackwall’s knee. “Age is just a number.”

“I agree.” He pulled her closer so she sat more securely in his lap. Leaning over, he kissed the scar on her forehead. “So, this is an old Cheese Roll injury?”

She nodded. “I tripped over my skirts and hit my head on a rock. By the time Raoul and I had made it down to the bottom – and we had caught our runaway cheese wheel and finished in third place, I might add – it looked as if someone had thrown a bucket of blood on me. My face and the front of my dress were a mess. I don’t know what Mother was more upset about, the fact that I ruined an
“Outfit or that I picked up a scar in such a visible place.”

“Head wounds do bleed pretty badly,” he agreed. “Though you might want to tell Varric. He swore
you got that scar fighting off monsters in some long-buried tomb.”

“We can’t let him keep thinking I got it doing something daring?”

“What? You received that injury honoring a well-known tradition. That scar, dear lady, was made
with culture.” He rested his chin on her shoulder and grinned.

“Oh, that was awful,” she laughed. Standing up, she held her hands out to him. Unable to resist, she
added, “You might say that it was downright cheesy.”

“Now that was awful.” Blackwall slung his arm around her shoulder and held her close as they
walked out of the tavern.

“What can I say? Just because we might be older doesn’t mean we always have to act our age.”

Chapter End Notes

While I’m a sucker for a good May-December romance, I really wanted this Inquisitor to
be closer to Blackwall’s age range (this has nothing to do with the fact that I’m in my
thirties and have started identifying with older heroines, nope, not at all. *whistles
innocently*) I sort of wish that the developers would have kept the badger stripe in his
beard from his concept art because holy silver fox, Batman. I may have fudged
Blackwall’s age some, seeing that I found him described as being in his 40’s without a
concrete number. I’ve probably missed a codex entry that said his exact age, but for the
sake of this story, he's 43 here.
“I have to ask,” Blackwall started, his eyes intent on the piece of tack he was repairing. He shook his head and gave a dismissive tug to the leather. “No, never mind. It isn’t any of my business.”

Ravena shifted from her perch on the nearby table and looked up from the book she was annotating. “What is it?”

“Like I said, it isn’t any of my business. Besides, it was daft.”

“It isn’t daft if you thought it was important enough to ask. What’s on your mind?”

He set the bridle down and took his time organizing the tools he had set beside him. “Cullen. The two of you seem close.”

She nodded. “He’s one of my advisors and I trust him. I’d like to consider him a friend – something tells me that friends have been in short supply for him lately.”

“So, friendship is all that you’re after with him?”

“Of course. Why would you…” she stopped and braced her hands on her knees. “You’re jealous, aren’t you?”

“No.” He sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck. “Perhaps a little.”

“If you wanted to play chess with me so badly, all you had to do was ask.” There was a teasing lilt to her voice, but the smirk on her lips faltered when she caught the look in his eye.

“Ravena, trust me. Playing chess is the last thing on my mind when it comes to spending time with you.” He moved to stand in front of her, his hands planted on the table on either side of her body. “I know I haven’t given you much cause to believe this, but I do care for you.”

“Good, because the feeling is entirely mutual.” She leaned in and gave him a brief kiss. “Besides, I’ve grown incredibly fond of bearded men recently. While he has the stubble down, I don’t think Cullen could grow one quite as magnificent as yours.”

“Ah, so that would be the deal-breaker then?” He rubbed the side of his nose affectionately against hers.

“Absolutely.” She leaned back enough to look him in the eye. “I’ve no talent for juggling men’s affections like apples. I’m not looking for anything else from another man besides their friendship.”

“Good to know. Although now I have a problem.”

“Oh?”

The gleam in his eye was absolutely devilish. “Yes. Now I have no excuse to press you up against a wall and kiss you senseless, just to remind you of what you have here with me.”

Ravena walked her fingers across his chest and smoothed her palm over his heart. “You know, you don’t really need to have an excuse to do that. You can…” Whatever she was going to say next was muffled when he dove in with a kiss that curled her toes in her boots. She moaned against his mouth and twined her legs around his waist when he tipped her backwards onto the table, his hand cushioning the back of her head.
“Also good to know,” he murmured huskily, his mouth moving down the column of her throat. Her laughter buzzed against his lips and he couldn’t remember a time when he had been this happy.

“Thom,” she murmured, her hands tangled in his hair.

“Hm?”

“As much as I like my current position, perhaps we could take this elsewhere?” She dropped her legs and attempted to sit up. “The last thing we need is to hear Dennet give one of the stable boys The Talk after they accidentally walk in on us.”

He smirked and helped her off the table. “So, when a Warden and an Inquisitor love each other very much…” He froze, thinking how easily the word love had tripped off his tongue. She stared up at him with wide eyes before giving him the biggest beaming smile that warmed him all the way down to his bones.

“When they love each other very much?” she prompted, slipping her hand into his as they walked out of the stable.

He couldn’t find words to express what he felt for her. Instead, he carefully held her face in his hand and kissed her. “Yes,” he breathed, feeling her pulse pound at his fingers.

“Yes,” she whispered back, rocking up on the tips of her toes to kiss him again. The world seemed to dissolve around them and it wasn’t until Blackwall let them up for air that they acknowledged the rounds of applause coming from several of the nearby merchant booths. Ravena hid her face against the side of Blackwall’s neck, her shoulders shaking with laughter even as she felt her cheeks flare red.

“What, can’t a man kiss a beautiful woman without comments from the peanut gallery?” Blackwall shouted, grinning down at her. “Can’t a man hold the woman he loves in peace?” The last was asked quietly, for her ears alone.

Her arms tightened around his waist. “He can indeed,” she told him, not caring one bit if they had an audience. “He can indeed.”
There was nothing better than waking up after coming back from a long mission to cool sheets, songbirds in the window, and a warm woman in his arms.

Blackwall grinned at the last one. Without opening his eyes, he knew that Ravena was tucked against his side with her head on his shoulder and her hair sliding across his chest. He tightened his arm around her, enjoying the quiet of the day and the blissful feeling of being back with the woman he loved.

The Iron Bull had asked Blackwall if he’d like to accompany some of his Chargers on a scouting mission to pick through the ruins of Haven. The Chargers hadn’t found much worth salvaging, aside from some trinkets that would put a little extra coin into the Inquisition’s treasury. It had been pretty uneventful actually, or it had been until Rocky had set off some mild explosions to clear the massive blocks of packed-in snow so they could get inside the Chantry. The cabin that Ravena had stayed in had somehow avoided the fires from the attack, and the landslide hadn’t completely destroyed it either. It had taken some time to uncover and sift through several feet of snow, but Blackwall had managed to find a few things worth salvaging, a familiar battered-looking journal among those items. Blackwall had thought that the snow and ice had ruined the pages, but he tucked it into his satchel nonetheless, hoping that maybe Ravena would be able to fix the damage somehow.

He still hadn’t given it to her, namely because she’d all but ambushed him as soon as he returned. She had sent a messenger to meet him at the stables, a note in hand that informed him of the Inquisitor’s whereabouts and the desire to speak to him as soon as possible. The tone of the note had been urgent, so after depositing his gear in the hayloft, he strode straight to her chambers.

Instead of the serious debriefing and update that he had been expecting, he had been greeted by a platter of food, warmed wine, a steaming bath, and a very naked Ravena, who had crooked her finger at him in invitation from the previously mentioned steaming bath.

*If this is how I’m to be welcomed back,* he had told her, reclining in her arms as they soaked in the tub. *Then I should leave with the Chargers more often.*

He stared down at her now, the backs of his fingers softly running over her arm. She stirred, her eyes fluttering open.

“Good morning,” he murmured, tipping her head up for a kiss.

Ravena hummed against his lips. “It is indeed,” she answered. Stretching, she draped her leg over his hip, smiling as he used his hand to hitch her knee up higher. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too, my lady.” His lips skimmed across her throat before he nibbled at her collarbone. “You have no idea how much.”

“I didn’t even think to ask last night, but did the trip go well? Was there anything worth recovering?”

Blackwall shook his head. “A few things that happened to be in the Chantry. Another trip to the basement area might be worthwhile, but we didn’t want to risk it with so few people, especially when the entrance to the lower stairwell seemed dicey.”

“That was a smart idea. Did you happen to find…”

“No. The snow and ice were too deep to look for any of the bodies left unaccounted for. We
recovered many of the bodies we had to leave behind while coming to Skyhold, but I fear that the mountain has buried the rest for good.” He smoothed over the sad frown on her lips with a finger. “I know you were hoping to find everyone. I’m sorry.”

“No, thank you. You and the Chargers went out and brought back who you could. I appreciate your work.”

Blackwall leaned in and briefly kissed her. “I did manage to find something of yours.” He smiled when she visibly brightened. “That journal you always wrote in when we were out in the field.”

She propped herself up on her elbow. “You actually found it? I thought it would be lost forever!”

“It’s pretty damaged, but if there’s anything worth recovering, I’m positive you’ll be able to restore it.” He made a move to roll out of bed, intent on dressing so he could head back to the stables and retrieve her book, but she threw her arms around his shoulders.

“Just where do you think you’re going?” she asked, rolling with him so she was partially perched atop of him.

“Well, I was going to collect your journal, but I guess that could wait.” He ran his hands down her back and grinned. “It’s not every day I have a woman pinning me to the bed.” His smile widened when Ravena’s hands began to wander, fingers tracing over his ribs and then lower towards the line of muscle at his hip. Somewhat self-conscious, he attempted to suck in the beginnings of a belly that no amount of exercise could dispel, but his breath stuttered out on a groan when she pressed her lips to his shoulder and gave him a playful nip.

“Do you have anything planned for the day?” she asked, her hands moving upwards and into his hair, her fingers massaging his scalp.

“Training. Cullen wanted to run some more advanced drills with the newer recruits now that he’s confident in some of their abilities.” He grabbed hold of her hips and sharply turned to the side, spilling her across the mattress. “I suspect he’s wanting to get in a second pair of hands before we leave for Crestwood. How’s Cassandra, by the way?”

“Livid. She still refuses to speak to Varric without mentioning how deceitful he is at least twice in a single conversation. Varric’s taking it all in stride, but I think that’s only because he’s looking forward to working with Hawke again.” While The Tale of the Champion had described his and Hawke’s friendship, it was something different to see the two of them in the same room together. Varric’s normal personality seemed to become amplified; his smiles a little bigger, his jokes coming out a little easier. Hawke seemed to be the same: where the woman had been polite yet deathly serious on the ramparts, it seemed as if a rather heavy load had been taken off her back just by being in Varric’s company, her cares she had burdened herself slowly easing off her shoulders, even if only for a little while.

“Is Varric truly being that tolerable?”

“Well, he started in with his own sniping a day after Hawke left to get a head start to meet her Warden contact. I suspect that we’ll have a fun-filled trip ahead of us trying to keep the both of them from drawing blood. I’ll handle Varric if you’ll watch Cassandra.”

He snorted. “Deal.”

Her finger swiped idly across his chest. “What about you? Have you had any dealings with Warden Stroud before? From the way Hawke described him, it sounded as if he’s been in the Order for quite
some time.” She smiled and snuggled closer to him. “Will I be regaled with tales of brotherhood once we meet him, any embarrassing stories I can bring up later?”

Blackwall stilled under her hands. “Probably not. The name sounds familiar, but I never met him personally. I work alone, remember?”

“That’s too bad. It seems as if you’ve heard most of my best stories from the road, and yet I haven’t had a chance to hear many of yours.” She leaned up on her elbow again and smoothed away the frown lines that had appeared on his brow. “But I understand. You’re a private man; you’ll tell me whenever you’re ready and not a moment sooner.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“It’s one of the many things you love about me.”

He laughed. “As well as your humility. And what of yourself, my lady? What has you occupied today?”

“Crestwood. I know that you’ve only returned last night, but I fear that we’re going to have to head out first thing tomorrow. Our scouts are sending back disturbing tales of the undead rising from the local lake, and while I hate to push anything so serious to the side, meeting with Stroud is of utmost importance. Once I have more facts, then we can work on a better list of priorities.” Ravena had read and re-read the reports, just to make certain that she wasn’t missing anything. By all accounts, the undead sightings were few and far between, and the town of Crestwood wasn’t in any imminent danger. If it had been anything else, she would have dropped everything and headed over days ago. The idea still stood, should she see for herself that the town was unsafe.

“We’ll look into everything once we can see the situation for ourselves,” Blackwall said, echoing her thoughts. “When do you meet with your council?”

“After lunch. Before then, I need to talk with the quartermaster to go over supply requests, answer letters with Josephine, and see to this Dagna person we’ve hired. She sounds interesting; I wanted to give her some time to settle in, but I really do need to speak with Harritt about upgrading my blades. If he has anything better, I’d like to take something out on the field with us for testing.”

“It sounds as if you have a busy day ahead of you.” He tipped her backwards so she was flat against the pillows and loomed over her. “Yet I can’t help but wonder if you’re too busy to add one more thing to your list.”

“Oh? And what would that be?”

“To spend a morning fooling around with your favorite person in your inner circle.”

Ravena laughed. “Love, you know I adore Dorian, but I don’t think he’s attracted to me in that manner. Besides, did you know that we’re distantly related? It’d be like kissing a cousin, or worse, a brother.”

Blackwall rolled his eyes. “You know what I meant,” he said, kissing her cheek, her chin, any bit of skin he could reach.

“Yes, but I do enjoy that long-suffering look you give me. Yes, that one, right there. It’s adorable.” Her laughter stilled and turned into a breathy moan when Blackwall pinned her to the bed by his hips.

“Shut it and kiss me,” he murmured, his mouth brushing hers as he framed her face with his hands
and tangled his fingers into her hair.

So she did.
Ravena had been subdued ever since their meeting with Hawke and Stroud. Blackwall hadn’t pressed, thinking to give her space, and she hadn’t expressed any desire to tell him her thoughts. Nights were difficult: when she wasn’t staring moodily at the fire on her self-imposed prolonged watches, she was fitfully sleeping, caught between some nightmare or another only to wake with a silent gasping breath, her eyes wild and pulse hammering at her throat.

He hated seeing her that way. She always reached for him when she woke, her entire body trembling and he held her as tightly as he could, wishing with all his might that he could take whatever fear that plagued her away.

It was only when they reached Skyhold again to replenish their supplies before heading out to the desert that she finally opened up.

“How long have you been a Warden, Blackwall?” she asked, emptying her pockets at her desk in her chambers.

He looked at her quizzically. “For several years,” he finally answered, settling down at the sofa and pulling off his boots. “Is there something troubling you, my lady?”

“How long have you been able to hear Corypheus’ false Calling?” She turned to face him, her hands tightly wringing her gloves.

“Not long,” he said. “As I told you earlier, after seeing Corypheus with my own eyes, I recognized it for what it was: a lie. I pay it little heed.”

She sat down next to him. “Yet it doesn’t bother you? Every other Warden has sought their death because they feel it is their time and yet you still remain. How is this?”

He thought over his reply for a while. “In war, victory. In peace, vigilance. In death, sacrifice. For so long, I used to believe in these as if they were part of the Chant itself. Becoming a Warden has made me a better man, far better than I was before, and had I not met you, I more than likely would have found my way down to the Deep Roads.” He reached out and cupped her cheek in his palm. “Being part of the Inquisition, being with you, has changed my mindset and made me an even better man. I have something worth fighting for, and I’ll be damned if I let that bastard decide how and when I die.”

She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. When she opened her eyes again, Blackwall saw they shone with unshed tears. “Yet you’ll still die. The Calling – the real one – will still happen. How long do we have before you’re taken from me?”

Blackwall gathered her in his arms and rested the shelf of his chin on the top of her head. “This is what’s been bothering you this whole time, isn’t it?” He didn’t wait for her answer. “I’m not worth losing sleep over.”

She sat up and glared at him. “Don’t say that. I love you. You mean everything to me. To think that one day you’ll be gone,” she looked down, her lips trembling and voice thick. “I don’t want to lose you.”

He cupped her cheek with his hand. “None of us know how long we have left, Ravena. With everything that we face on a near-daily basis, any day could be our last, Calling or no.”
She leaned into his touch. “You’re going to tell me not to borrow trouble, to live life day to day, aren’t you?”

“Well, perhaps not in those words, but yes.” He bent down to kiss her forehead. “I worry too, you know. What if I’m not fast enough, not strong enough? What if someone cuts you down and I was right there and still unable to prevent it? I don’t want to lose you either.”

Ravena shook her head. “You can’t. No matter what, you’ll always have me.” She took a deep breath and settled against him, her arms wrapping around his middle. “I guess we’re both just a pair of old worrywarts.”

He let out a light snort of laughter and held onto her tightly, grateful that their conversation had taken a lighter turn. “Old being the appropriate term. Compared to the others in our circle, I’m positively ancient.”

She poked at his ribs with a finger. “Hey, watch it. I’m only a few years younger than you. What does that make me?”

Blackwall shifted. He tipped her backwards until she fell against the sofa’s cushion and covered her body with his own. “Devastatingly witty. Beautiful beyond measure, my lady.” He punctuated each description with a kiss. “A woman with an insatiable desire for…” Leaning on his elbow, he leered at her and waggled his eyebrows comically. “Knowledge.”

Ravena rewarded him with a laugh, feeling better than she had ever since her first conversation with Stroud. “Knowledge, is it?” She slid her palms down his chest and tugged on his shirt to untuck the material from the waistband of his pants. “And would you like to share what you’re offering with the rest of the class?”

He grinned, grateful that the shadow that had been over her since leaving Crestwood had lifted. His free hand began to wiggle out the pins that held her hair in place, each of them making a plinking noise as they fell haphazardly to the ground. “I’m always willing to collaborate, especially when I have such an agreeable partner.” His lips painted a path from her jaw down to her neck, stopping only when the material of her blouse got in the way. He muffled a groan against her skin as her hands found their way underneath his shirt, her palms warm against his back and nails raising gooseflesh in their wake.

“As much as I like your method of study,” she gasped out, arching her back as he abandoned his task of unlacing her tunic in favor of cupping her breasts in both hands and lavishing attention on what skin he had managed to bare. She gave a meaningful glance towards the waiting bed. “Perhaps we should move somewhere else less likely to collapse under us. This thing is so old; it could give at any moment.” As if in agreement, one of the sofa’s legs not so quietly creaked.

His teeth were a flash of white against the dark field of his beard. “What, you don’t think we’re capable of managing where we are?” He sat up and in a flurry of movement had her perched astride his lap, his mouth laving at her collarbone. “I seem to recall a cot far ricketier than this at one of our campsites that survived our attentions.”

Her laugh turned into a breathless moan. Whatever argument she had fled her mind as Blackwall’s hands undid the ties to her pants, his fingers slipping inside the waistband, palm warm against her stomach.

Later, they sprawled out, half on the sofa and half on the floor. “Should I say I told you so now, or later?” she asked, running her fingers through his hair as he attempted to catch his breath against her shoulder.
“I never liked that thing,” Blackwall replied, kissing her heated skin. He turned his head and glared at the leg of the sofa that had cracked underneath them. “It was too Orlesian.”

Humming her agreement, she let out a quiet grunt as they slid the rest of the way to the floor. “I’m just wondering how we’re going to explain the fact that I need to go out furniture shopping to Josephine.”

He shrugged. “You could tell her that you draped one of your sets of armor on it and that was what made it give way,” he offered, gallantly rolling so he’d take the brunt of the cold stone.

“Somehow I don’t think she’d believe anything I came up with.” Stretching up, she pressed a smacking kiss to his lips before untangling her legs with his and standing up. She offered her hands to help Blackwall to his feet, then tugged him purposely towards her bed. “And I think you’re going to be going with me to look for a replacement as punishment for breaking this one. Just for fun, there will be multiple visits to several stores before I ultimately make up my mind to pick the first couch that caught my eye in the very first shop.”

Blackwall laughed as he fell backwards onto the mattress and watched with hooded eyes as Ravena crawled over him. “My lady is a harsh mistress indeed.”

“Mmhm. And I haven’t even mentioned the mandatory stop at an eatery for tea and frilly cakes yet.”

Hours later, Blackwall held Ravena in his arms and stared up into the darkness at the canopied ceiling. Ravena was asleep and had been for quite some time, her body comfortably warm against his, her arm a welcome weight as it draped across his chest and her breath puffing out against his shoulder in a deep, steady rhythm. Her sleep wasn’t plagued by nightmares for once, and for that, Blackwall was grateful.

Sleep had proven elusive for him, though. Gathering Ravena closer in his arms, he pressed a kiss against the crown of her head, sighing as she shifted in her sleep, her leg moving to twine around his hip. He had to smile at the motion: Ravena had once proclaimed she wasn’t a person prone to snuggling, but it never failed that he always woke tangled in her arms when they shared a sleeping space. He covered her hand with his own, thinking that he’d never have it any other way.

Even as comfortably sated as he was, his mind constantly wandered back to their earlier conversation, guilt knotting at his stomach at the worry that he had put Ravena through. Lacing his fingers with hers, he vowed to never cause her the same level of grief.
For all the noise during the day, Griffon Wing Keep was surprisingly quiet at night. Ravena sat near the campfire they had made near the main tents, her knees up to her chin. She couldn’t hear him, but she had spied Blackwall’s familiar silhouette along the battlements where he and Warden Stroud had gone to patrol. Who she could hear was Varric, mumbling in his sleep about advanced trigger release techniques, much to her and Hawke’s amusement.

“It’s good to know that he hasn’t changed,” Hawke said, sitting in a similar fashion next to Ravena. She stretched her legs out and stared up at the sky. “I have missed him.”

Cassandra leaned back on her hands. “He does grow on you,” she agreed with a sneer. “Like a fungus.”

“Come on, Cassandra,” Ravena teased. “Admit that you like Varric just as much as we do.”

The Seeker’s eyes narrowed. “He is a liar. A cheat. An all-around scoundrel.”

“Which is exactly why we adore him.”

Hawke snickered. “You know, Inquisitor, I do believe that we could be friends.”

“Then please, call me Ravena.”

“And you must call me Elsa.” She sighed. “Actually, I’ve missed this. It’s been lonely on the road by myself. Stroud makes for good company most of the time, but it isn’t the same as having fellow ladies to talk with.”

“You didn’t need to be alone,” Cassandra started. She seemed to realize that her tone was a little confrontational, because she gave them an apologetic look. “What about your other companions?”

“Aveline stayed in Kirkwall to help restore order. Isabela and Fenris ran off together and I haven’t heard a word from both. My guess is that they’re sailing around on the Captain’s new boat and killing Tevinter magisters wherever they find them.”

Ravena nodded. “You’re close. Varric told me some details. They’re doing just as you said, but as far as he knows, separately.”

“Ah. Well, I’m sure that they’d find the other, should they want to. Merrill traveled with me until we met up with another Dalish clan. She looked happy to be back with her people, and I wish her well.”

Hawke stared into the fire. “Anders is dead. He was a dear friend, you know. All the stories out of Kirkwall always forget that.”

“What was he like?” Cassandra asked, moving closer to them.

“He was…troubled. He never slept enough, never ate enough. He was far too serious for his own good, except for little moments when his sense of humor peeked out. I can only guess that was how he was like before he merged himself with Justice. Yet he was kind to people in need; even if he hadn’t been a friend, I would have been compelled to help him with his clinic.” Her brow furrowed. “He told me that he didn’t blame me for it, at the very end. I sat there with his blood staining my
hands and stared at his face, realizing at that moment that I had known this man for nearly a decade and yet I had never seen him look as peaceful as he did when he was dead.”

Ravena looked at the younger woman, who had been a cheerful and calming presence all day, suddenly close in on herself. “And what of Sebastian?” she asked, hoping to steer the subject onto lighter territory. “Varric said the two of you were close.”

“We were married, once.” Hawke’s fingers went to the necklace she wore, her nails tapping on the simple silverite ring that was threaded there. Her lips curled up into a fond smile and she let out a little huff of amusement. “It was rather unplanned; Isabela had just gotten a ship and we were all on deck celebrating. Sebastian and I had far too much to drink, and though neither of us can remember the details, apparently we asked our newly coined Captain to marry us on the spot. Seeing that Isabela has a romantic streak underneath all the perviness and always wanted to marry someone, she happily performed a handfasting.”

“Handfastings only last…”

Hawke quietly interrupted Cassandra. “A year and a day, yes. It’s one of the main reasons Isabela did that ceremony; she figured that if we were unhappy in the cold light of sobriety, then the easiest way to cancel the marriage would be to wait out the statute of limitations. No harm, no foul.” She tucked her necklace back against her armor. “The time limit ended three weeks ago. Long before our time had run out, Sebastian asked me to marry him for good this time and I said yes, but with the way things are…” she spread her hands out in front of her and sighed.

Still trying to lighten the mood, Ravena leaned forward. “Is he as handsome as everyone says? I’ve never met him, and the only two correspondences I’ve had with him have been about business, but I did get a chance to meet his father and an older brother, once. They were striking men.”

Elsa smiled. “You should mention that to him if you write him again. He loves it when someone tells him about his family. And no, he isn’t as handsome as people say.” Hawke’s eyes twinkled in mirth. “He’s better.”

“It’s the Starkhaven accent, isn’t it? There was a time when I made it a point to work out of their Chantries, either in Starkhaven proper or in the outlying territory, just to hear that deep brogue.” She sighed appreciatively.

“Ach, and what of it, lass?” All three women jumped up when Knight-Captain Rylen walked past them, his lips turning up into a smirk as he caught the last of their conversation. “Us lads know our voices can make the ladies swoon, ’tis why we thicken our accents and speak in such an exaggggeraaaated manner at all times.” He winked at them knowingly before tipping his hand to his helmet in a good-natured salute and casually walking away.

Elsa stared red-cheeked and wide-eyed at Ravena, who stared back, her hands clasped over her mouth. Both of them slowly turned towards Cassandra, who broke the silence first by giggling.

After that, it was pretty much a free-for-all of muffled laughs and snorts around the fire.

“Well, we’ve spoken at great length about my significant other now,” Hawke said, passing the wineskin she’d managed to wriggle out of Varric’s rucksack.

“And it has been enlightening, to say the least,” Cassandra commented. “I always thought Varric had made up half of the things in The Rogue and the Reformed Rake.”
“Oh, no. He came to me for some first-person perspective on a scene or two. Let’s just say that Sebastian got a thorough teasing during card games at the Hanged Man after Varric wrote Chapter Nineteen, which I paid dearly for in private.”

Ravena passed the wineskin to Cassandra. “Something in your tone tells me that you weren’t all too upset about your punishment.”

Hawke grinned wickedly. “No. No, I was not. In fact, what happened back home pretty much inspired Chapters Six through Ten of his second installment of Swords and Shields. Aveline was starting to get suspicious, so I had to take one for the team.”

Cassandra sat up straighter. “You mean to say that the Guard-Captain is based on…”

“If we were still in Kirkwall, I’m sure Aveline would have killed him several times over by now.” Looking towards the battlements, Hawke kicked at Ravena’s foot. “Yet speaking of significant others, how is it with you and your Warden?”

Cassandra snorted. “They are joined at the hip.”

“Can you blame me? Look at the man, he’s gorgeous.”

That earned a trademark huff. “If you like the wild, overgrown look. I prefer my men more clean-shaven, or with just the smallest hint of stubble. Yet Blackwall is a good man, loyal and honorable. I do find those qualities attractive.”

“I’ve been trying to talk him into letting me trim his beard, but he’s ridiculously attached to it. It’s a good thing that I find the look attractive on men who can pull them off, which he can definitely do.” Then she paused. “Wait. Clean shaven? A hint of stubble? Why dear Seeker, are you telling us that you have a thing for our Commander?”

“You know, I’ve had the opportunity to talk to him, and now that we’re both not neck deep in blood magic and Mage-Templar feuds, he’s rather pleasant. The way he’s taken to styling his hair makes him incredibly handsome, I think.”

Cassandra went ivory pale, then turned as red as a beet. “No!” Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms defensively. “I am friends with him, yes, but that is all. I have great admiration for the man, for what he is going through with the lyrium.”

Ravena and Elsa shared a look. Just like Varric said, it was downright eerie to see the same thoughts going through her head reflected back at her. “And I admire him for that as well,” she said, her tone gentle. “I apologize for the teasing.”

“Yes, as do I.”

Cassandra nodded. “I am not blind; he is an attractive man. It’s just that…” she sighed. “He wouldn’t even think to look in my direction anyway.” The last was quickly said in a barely audible grumble that confirmed Ravena’s suspicions. Cassandra suddenly turned to stare at Varric, who was still blissfully unaware of their conversation. “Don’t tell Varric.”

Hawke held out her hands. “Don’t worry, your secret is safe with us.”

Ravena mimed zipping her lip and locking away a key. “If he hears anything, it won’t be from us, you have our promise. Yet you should prepare yourself for a few working titles thrown your way. Perhaps something like the Lion and the Seeker or somesuch.”
Hawke shook her head. “No, too revealing. It would never get past his editors. Yet there would definitely be Lion-something in the title, that’s for sure.”

Cassandra sputtered. “You don’t think that he’d…but…” Her eyes narrowed. “I would kill him.”

Hawke eyed the woman’s clenched fists. “Just don’t beat him up too badly. I’d like for my trusty dwarf to stay the way he is.”

“And besides, he has his hands full right now,” Ravena assured her. “Why do you think I keep taking him out on field missions with me? That way he’s too busy or tired to even think about polishing up all the things he writes in that little notebook of his.”

“Oh, he still has that? I nicked it out of his pocket one night when we were camped out at the Wounded Coast, but I couldn’t read his shorthand. It’s all squiggles and dashes and some other symbols I’ve never seen before.”

“That’s because I write in code and only my publishers, Rivaini, and I know the cipher.” All three women jumped at Varric’s low, sleep-graveled voice. “Good night, Hawke, Dusty. And don’t worry, Seeker. I’ve got Swords and Shields to finish and then I’ve got to get started fleshing out Dusty and Hero’s story before I even dream about figuring out a plot worthy of Curly. That’s something worth taking my time on.” With that, Varric turned around with a chuckle, presenting his back to the women as he fell back asleep.

“I told you, not a single paragraph!”

“I will murder you and make it look like an accident.”

Hawke couldn’t stop the laugh from spilling out at Ravena and Cassandra’s faces. “Oh, it feels good to be on the opposite side of this for once! Not to worry ladies, you’re both familiar with his writing; he’ll make sure all the romantic scenes are tastefully done.”

Their little party broke up soon after. Cassandra retreating to the tent she’d set up, Ravena to one of the ramparts. It didn’t take long before the rogue’s silhouette was joined by a taller, bearded one. Elsa stared at them, glad that the Inquisitor had found someone to help share the burden of her title. Friends were good, and while she hadn’t met everyone in the Inquisitor’s inner circle, the ones she had met told her Ravena was in good company. Yet there was something to be said about having a partner, someone to trust and speak your fears plainly to in the middle of the night, whose support went far beyond what friends alone could give. Maker knew that having Sebastian with her had made the title of Champion easier to bear. She sighed wistfully as Ravena tipped her head to offer up a kiss for Blackwall. While she was happy for her, Hawke couldn’t help but feel a bit envious. She reached into her armor and fished out her necklace, her lips lingering on the silverite ring.

“Soon, my love,” she whispered, closing her eyes. If she imagined hard enough, she could almost bring up the sense memory of her favorite archer’s arms circling around her.

Chapter End Notes

I miss Hawke and Sebastian. *makes a note to revisit their story sometime later*

And we all knew Varric was faking being asleep. Two of his favorite ladies and the Seeker talking about the men in their lives? That’s prime plot bunny fodder right there.
“He isn’t going to like this.”

Ravena sighed. “I know.”

“I don’t like this much either.” Cullen watched as Ravena pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger, very much like he did whenever he had a blistering headache. “Yet your reasoning is sound and I support your decision.”

She let out a breath. “Thank you.”

The two of them stood over a map of Adamant fortress and tried to see if there was anything that they had missed. Cullen fiddled with one of the blocks representing the trebuchets Josephine’s contacts had procured for them. “You haven’t told him yet, have you?”

“No.”

“Inquisitor…”

“How many times have I asked you to call me by my given name, Cullen?”

He sighed. “Fine. Ravena, we start the initial assault in less than five minutes. Shouldn’t you tell Blackwall…”

“Tell me what?” Blackwall stepped inside the main operations tent and looked at both of them warily. “Ravena? Is there something the matter?”

She swallowed hard and bit at her lip. “I was solidifying my ground team for the main assault with Cullen.”

“Ah. And who will be going with us?”

She looked away. “Solas, Varric, Cassandra and myself.”

He nodded. “Those are good choices. With a possible demon army being led by Corypheus’ lackeys, it makes sense to bring Solas. And Varric would have gone even if you hadn’t picked him since Hawke is joining us. Lady Cassandra…” He paused, seeming to put two and two together, his brow furrowing. “You’re not taking me.”

“No, Blackwall, I’m not.”

He shook his head. “Commander,” he said, addressing Cullen. “Could you give us a moment of privacy? There’s a matter I wish to discuss with the Inquisitor.”

Cullen gave her a sympathetic look before nodding. “Of course. Remember, we begin the assault in less than five minutes.”

“This will just take two.” Blackwall waited until Cullen had closed the tent flap. “What do you think you’re doing, Ravena?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Stroud believes that there are other Wardens who are doubtful that this plan to raise an army will work. If we divide our own Wardens up – meaning you and Stroud – we can talk sense into the ones willing to listen and get them to fight on our side.”
“Then send him aside, keep me with you.”

She shook her head. “I can’t do that. There’s too much at stake and out of you both, Stroud is the senior Warden. If he’s seen with the Inquisitor, then we stand a bigger chance of getting them to stand down. Once we breach the main gates, our party will split from yours and move further into the fortress.”

His nostrils flared in anger. “So that’s to be it? You’d go out there without even telling me of your plans?”

Ravena crossed her arms in front of her chest defensively. “Because I knew you’d act this way.”

“Ah, so now you profess to know me? Then you should know that I’ll be damned if I let you go in there without me!”

“Blackwall…”

He shook his head and pointed a finger at her. “Don’t. Not here.”

She didn’t know what to make of his outburst. “Thom,” she said instead, her voice calm. Reaching out, she put her palms against his chestplate, the metal cool to the touch. “Please. Those are your brothers and sisters out there; this plan is the only way we can spare as many of them as we can and concentrate on slaying the demons.”

“I know who they are,” he replied, his hands going to her waist, her leather armor creaking underneath his gauntlets. “But right now, you are more important to me. How am I supposed to keep you safe if I’m not with you?” He pressed his forehead against hers and took a shaky breath.

“Out of all the people here, I trust you the most,” she said, tilting her head to brush her lips against his. “That’s why I need you to follow up behind me, to make certain that I won’t have anyone following that could take me unaware. You’re keeping me safe that way.”

He held her close. “I don’t like this.”

“I know, and I’m sorry.” She jumped at the sound of a war horn. “But we’re out of time to argue. Dorian and Sera will be with you and Cullen.”

His face hardened. “As you say, Inquisitor.”

“Thom, please. Don’t be this way. I don’t want to say goodbye with this between us.”

He clenched his teeth and stepped away from her. “Then don’t say goodbye.” Turning on his heel, he strode out of the tent.

Ravena swallowed the lump that had gathered in her throat and followed. She found Sera anxiously fidgeting, bow in hand. “Watch after him,” she said, staring at Blackwall as he stood beside Cullen.

“Pfft. Watch your own arse, I’ve got his,” Sera said, nudging Ravena with her shoulder. “Better not go and do something stupid like die, yeah?”

“I’ll try my best to stay alive. You do the same.” She turned to Dorian, who had taken his customary spot beside Sera.

“I know, I know,” he said, waving his hands. “Insert overly emotional moment here and all that. Now go and stop this blighted army so we can get ourselves out of this Maker-forsaken desert and
back into civilization, such as the South is.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s what I love best about you, Dorian. You always know the right thing to say.”

“Yes, well I try. Do try not to die; I’d notice if you were gone.”

The gate fell quickly, as did the courtyard directly behind the front gate. Ravena scanned the area, trying to see the best route to get further inside.

“We should go this way,” Stroud suggested, gesturing with his blade to the upper ramparts. “We need to clear the area for the siege ladders to be more effective.”

She nodded. “Then that’s where we go.”

Cullen came up to her. “We’ll secure the outer bailey and the opposite ramparts. Just make sure to clear out as many of those demons as you can to give our forces a fighting chance. After, we’ll find you.”

“Good luck.” Ravena turned to follow Stroud, but stopped short when a hand clamped over her shoulder. Blackwall spun her around, his hands framing her face as he swooped in for a quick, fierce kiss.

“Come back to me,” he pleaded.

“I will, I promise.”

Blackwall caught Stroud’s eye. “Keep her safe,” he said, stepping away.

“I will,” Stroud echoed. “I promise.”

Blood ran in Blackwall’s eye and he shook his head to clear his vision. “These bastards never quit coming,” he growled, bashing a rage demon with his shield. Ice encased the demon, its skin sizzling where the frost turned into steam.

“Just how many Wardens does it take to raise a demon army anyway?” Dorian asked, switching from ice to lightning, the tip of his staff crackling with magical energy.

“Too damned many! I’m gonna run out of arrows if this keeps up!”

Cullen slashed at a despair demon. All of a sudden, a terrible roar shook the ground. “Great, what now?”

Several Inquisition soldiers blanched. “Dragon!”

Blackwall looked up, his blood running cold as he spied the archdemon that had attacked Haven. “It’s going after the tower,” he said. “Ravena’s up there!”

Cullen shouted for the other forces. “Rally to the tower!” he shouted. “To the Inquisitor!” The four of them made a break for it, dodging past demon claws and trails of fire. They had gotten halfway up
the tower when they heard another roar.

“No,” Blackwall breathed, catching sight of Ravena’s party on a bridge several flights above them. The archdemon had them cornered. All of a sudden, there was a flash of light and it seemed as if time had decided to go into slow motion, the bridge crumbling as the dragon plummeted to the ground below. “Ravena!” He watched, helpless to do anything, as Ravena and the others tried to scramble to solid ground, but none was to be found.

There was a bright flash of green that left lights dancing in Blackwall’s vision. He flung himself against the balustrade, trying to catch sight of Ravena, but there was nothing. His legs gave out on him and he fell to his knees, hands clutching the stone.

“Where are they?” Sera shrieked, eyes wild. “There ain’t no blood, no bodies. Where are they?”

“That rift,” Dorian said, hand sliding over his mouth. “She didn’t close it, she opened it to stop their fall. Fasta vass, they’re in the Fade.” The mage took a step back, horrified at the thought of their friends in the one place that was supposed to be impossible to enter.

“Shut your face! Just…just shut it! What do we do?”

Cullen was the first to shake himself out of shock. “We continue fighting.” He looked up to where he saw the Wardens fighting against the demons. “The Wardens are on our side now; we help them take the fortress. It’s what she would have wanted.”

“She isn’t dead,” Blackwall snarled, standing.

Cullen gave him a sad look. “I know you don’t want to think this. Maker knows I don’t either, but until she comes back, we have to assume the worst and act accordingly.”

Blackwall numbly followed, sword and shield automatically raising to defend an attack by a Fade demon. He plunged his sword into its chest, barely flinching as it shrieked in his face. She’ll come back. The thought became his mantra as he fought. She’ll come back.

She promised.
Ravena looked through the crowd of people gathered in front of her. Wardens and Inquisition soldiers were standing there in awe, but the faces she truly wanted to see weren’t there.

“Come on,” she said, draping Hawke’s arm over her shoulder and wrapping her own arm securely around the other woman’s waist. “Let’s get you to a healer.”

Hawke shook her head, even as she leaned heavily against Ravena’s side. “Varric first.”

Varric held his arm close to his chest and coughed, causing an alarming bit of blood to spatter his lips. “Nah, this is nothing. Come on Hawke, we’ll share a healer and talk their ear off about how much worse we’ve had it before.”

After getting the two of them settled in one tent and leaving Cassandra in another healer’s care to see to her bloodied arm, Ravena checked with Solas to see if he had any injuries. He waved her off, telling her that he could tend to the minor cuts and bruises on his own. She stumbled past the injured and the fallen, anxiety taking hold when she couldn’t find Blackwall amid the other Wardens. She was about to go into a full-blown panic when she felt hands slapping at her back.

“Shitey arse-biscuit!” Ravena turned around to find Sera glaring at her, face red and eyes watery. “I told you not to do something stupid, but did you listen?” Sera slapped at her arm again.

“Where’s Blackwall?” she asked, dodging her friend’s hands and looking over her shoulder. “Is he hurt? Are you hurt?”

“You went and fell ass over teakettle into the Fade and you’re asking about us?” Dorian demanded, moving Sera aside and grabbing hold of Ravena’s shoulders. His hand shot up and tipped her face towards him, his eyebrows furrowed as he looked her over for injuries. “I’m fine, by the way. Thank you for asking.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “You didn’t give me a chance.” She put her hands on his shoulders. “I’m okay, I’m not hurt.”

He looked at her critically. “You’re covered in blood and demon guts and who knows what else. You’re filthy and disgusting.” Dorian’s mouth quirked into a grin as he embraced her. “But you’re alive, which is all that matters. Give me a moment to work myself up into a fit worthy of your recent brush with death.”

Ravena moved so she could include Sera in on the hug. “Everything’s okay,” she said. “No need to cry over me.”

Sera sniffed. “I’m not cryin’,” she argued, her arms hugging Ravena almost painfully tight. “Just got some dirt in my eye.”

Ravena was going to reply, but then she heard a commotion several feet in front of them. She stepped away from Dorian and Sera as Blackwall made his way through the crowd, his eyes fixed on her. Her heart flew into her throat at the sight of blood streaking down an ugly gash on his forehead and matting the side of his beard. He was limping, armor stained nearly black with gore, and hair slicked to his head with sweat, but Ravena thought he was the most beautiful person she’d ever seen in her life.

“You’re hurt,” she said, eyes welling up as she reached out to him. He didn’t reply, he merely
grabbed her and pressed his mouth to hers in a messy, relieved kiss.

“You’re safe,” he breathed, feathering kisses along her cheeks and eyelids. His arms trembled as he crushed her to him. “You came back.”

She sobbed against his neck, body aching and something in her chest unraveling with relief at being in his arms again. “I promised you I would, didn’t I?” She pulled back only far enough to trace his face with her fingers. “One pathetic archdemon isn’t enough to keep me away from you.”

He barked out a short laugh, his forehead resting against hers. “Solas told me where you were,” he said, taking her hands and leading her into an unoccupied tent. “But the others? How are they?”

She stepped inside, her fingers quickly undoing buckles and setting aside plate armor. “Cassandra, Hawke and Varric are with the healers. Hawke lost a lot of blood and I think Varric has some internal injuries, but they’ll both pull through.” She unlaced his gambeson and peeled him out of it and the thin layer of padding he wore underneath. “Stroud…” she bit her lip and looked away.

He cupped her cheek in his ungloved hand. “I understand.”

“We were up against a demon that fed off our fears. I could never hear what it said to anyone else, but it whispered things into our ears, made us see things that would break our spirits.” Three of her companions had been unreadable, but Hawke had railed out into the darkness, anger burning brightly through whatever fear had gripped her. “We were almost to the rift when the demon confronted us all. It was huge; there was no way that we all could have taken it on and lived.”

Blackwall wordlessly undid the familiar clasps and buckles to her armor, setting each piece next to his own. “What happened?”

“Stroud saw it before any of us did. Someone had to stay and distract the demon so the rest of us could escape. Hawke tried to stay behind, but he wouldn’t have it. He…he…” Ravena swallowed hard, her brow furrowing.

Blackwall held her, his arms a comforting weight that anchored her. “He was a good man,” he said. “I might not have known him long, but he was honorable and someone I looked up to.”

“I’m so sorry, Thom,” she said, breaking away and looking about the tent until she found a canteen of water and some rags. Wetting one of them, she gently began to clean the blood on the side of his face. “You’ve lost so much today.”

“And we would have lost more, had you not stopped the demon.” He held onto her wrist and looked her in the eye. “I would have lost everything if you hadn’t come back.” He softly hissed when she applied a thick layer of healing paste to his cut, her fingers seeking out any other injuries hidden from her view. He did the same to her; hands tracing the now familiar landscape of her body, eyes seeking any sign of discomfort. They eventually made it down to the bedroll someone had set out, both of them shaking as exhaustion took its toll.

“Forgive me,” Ravena whispered against his mouth, turning her head away to let out a yawn. “I want…”

He hushed her with a kiss. “Just holding you is enough.” He buried his face in her hair, his hand lazily making a path from her ribcage down to her hip and back, overjoyed at the rise and fall of her chest against his. “What did you see, in the Fade?” he asked after a long while.

Ravena was silent and Blackwall thought she had fallen asleep, but she spoke up. “Failure,” she finally said, her hand splaying against his back. “The demon showed me a world where the
Inquisition was taken away from me and there was nothing I could do to stop things from happening.”

He held her closer. “That won’t happen,” he vowed. “You have us at your side, no matter what.”

“It was Redcliffe all over again,” she confessed. “You were just…gone.”

Blackwall pulled back and tipped her chin up so she could look at him. “I’ll never leave your side again. Whenever you go out, I’ll be with you. Promise me, Ravena.”

“I promise.” She gave him a wry smile. “Though I think you might regret that. You’ll eventually tire of me.” Her tone was teasing, but her eyes were uncertain.

“Never.”

Her lips trembled and she tucked her face against his throat so he wouldn’t see her expression. “I love you,” she breathed.

“And I you.” The two of them held on to the other. Outside their tent, order was slowly emerging from chaos, but for that moment in time, none of it mattered. All that mattered was the reassuring sound of the other’s heart and the steady rhythm of their breath as they eventually fell asleep.
Ravena found Varric sitting by himself in a corner of the tavern’s second floor. He usually held court there when he couldn’t be found in the Great Hall, the scarred table littered with missives from the Merchants’ Guild, letters from his editors, and various drafts of his works in progresses. The chairs surrounding the table would usually be full, or at least have a handful of people sitting in them, all waiting to be regaled with one of his legendary stories. Tonight, the table was empty, as were the chairs. He had his customary glass of brandy in his hand, but it looked as if he were more concerned with staring into the contents of his cup than actually drinking.

“I ever tell you about the time Hawke was challenged by the Arishok?” he asked, not looking up when Ravena sat down next to him.

“Not apart from what you wrote in her book,” she replied.

He huffed a humorless laugh. “I had a time trying to write that chapter. Words can’t really capture the smell of Kirkwall burning, the feeling of the nobles’ sheer terror that buzzed around the Viscount’s chamber like a swarm of angry bees. I couldn’t find the right words to give just how much that damned place reeked of blood any sort of justice.” He stared at the tabletop. “There had been so much: the Viscount’s, the Arishok’s, but most of it had been Hawke’s. He yelled doesn’t really define the way Sebastian screamed her name when the Arishok ran her through either. We all had to hold him back or else he would have gone in there to fight at her side, which would have killed her for certain.”

“Varric…”

“That thing, that fear demon. It told me that I was going to be the reason Hawke died, just like I was the reason her sister…” He took a gulp of his drink. “We had to leave Sunshine in the Deep Roads. Fenris and I built a cairn over her to keep darkspawn and whatever other scavengers away. Poor Bethany, it was agony for her at the end. I volunteered to…to end her suffering, but Hawke insisted that she be the one.”

“She didn’t want anyone else burdened with the guilt of taking her sister’s life, no matter how humane the reason.”

“Heh. Too late for that one. It was my damned brother’s idea to go into the Deep Roads to get treasure. It was my damned fault that Hawke and her family got involved in the first place. It took months for me to finally work up the courage to step foot inside Hawke’s home and offer my condolences to Leandra. I don’t know about you, but most of the Fade that we went through looked too much like the Deep Roads. I could go the rest of my life without going underground again.” He was quiet for a beat. “I killed him, you know. Bartrand. The idol drove him insane. I could have spared him, could have found him help, but…” He swirled his drink, not caring about how it sloshed out of his glass. “His death, that’s on me, too.”
“The fear demon knew how to push our buttons,” she admitted. “Get us good and scared and it would just get stronger and stronger. But we beat it.”

“Yeah. Too bad it cost us Stroud.”

Her face fell. “I know. He was a good man.” Her fingers twitched on the wooden tabletop and she suddenly wished that she had thought to bring a drink up for herself. “Abandonment.”

Varric finally looked up at her. “What?”

She took a breath, held it, and slowly let it out. “It told me that the only reason you all were still with me was because of the Mark. Had I not had it, you would be long gone by now.”

“Well, that’s just bullshit.”

“I know that now, but right then, in the moment…” she frowned. “It told me that I’d never be good enough, smart enough, strong enough to keep anyone with me, not without holding some sort of enticement over your heads to make you stay. That I’d be powerless to do anything but watch as you all walked away.” Then, there in the Fade, old fears and insecurities she had thought long-conquered proved more powerful than the threat of imminent death. She had lied to Blackwall when he had asked her what had happened, failure slipping past her lips easier than an explanation on how the demon’s insidious voice had slithered through her ears. You think that love will be enough to keep your Warden, but he’ll turn his back on you like the Templar before him. He’ll cast you aside like your parents did and ignore you just like your brother is doing. It’s only a matter of time before he moves on to someone better and forgets you.

Warm hands on her own brought her back to the present. “Hey,” Varric said, his fingers squeezing over hers. “I’m not going anywhere. The bar might not be seedy enough for my usual tastes, but the company is fantastic.”

“And after?”

He gave her a sympathetic look. “You know I love you, Dusty, but I love Hawke too. We both know where she’s headed once everything is all over. I’ve heard good things about Starkhaven in the springtime.” He bumped her shoulder with his. “But, as crazy as it sounds, I still want to see Skyhold in the winter. Besides, you can’t get rid of me that easily. I need to go on one of your digs to see if all the stories you tell are true or if you’re just pulling them out of your ass to impress me.”

Ravena let out a watery sounding laugh. “I love you too, Varric.” She gratefully leaned against him. “So, my stories really do impress you?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“And that’s what I’m here for. Well, that and to play the part of the loveable dwarf with a gorgeous crossbow.”

“And a heart of gold?”
“Absolutely.” His fingers nervously tapped on the tabletop. “I know we’ve only come back from Adamant, but I gotta ask you a favor.”

She sat up straighter. “Done. What do you need?”

He wagged a finger at her. “You know, you really need to start asking people what they want you to get into before blindly agreeing to things.”

“Please. Did we not just go through the touchy-feely friendship moment a few seconds ago? What can I do?” She listened as Varric told her of an old friend needing his help. She couldn’t help but be curious about this Bianca person, especially when Varric’s eyes softened and his mouth curved up into a nostalgic looking smile. She’d seen the same expression on Hawke’s face when she spoke of Sebastian, and Ravena was pretty sure that she herself had that same look whenever she talked about Blackwall. She didn’t ask Varric any personal questions about his friend, thinking that she would have plenty of time later on to observe them together and form her own opinion, but between the two of them, they planned out an excursion in record time. She was going to leave their list of goods needed for the trip with the quartermaster when Varric called out to her.

“Hey, Ravena?”

It was the first time that she had ever heard Varric use her given name. “Yes, Varric?”

“I don’t think any of us has said it, but thanks for getting us out of there.” He gave her a smile. “But from me personally, thanks for getting Hawke out. The letter I’m writing Choir Boy would have been a hell of a lot harder to do otherwise.”

She nodded. “You’re welcome.”

It was late by the time she climbed the stairs leading to the hayloft. She had to smile when she found Blackwall lounging on his bed, a pile of wood shavings at his side, a block of wood in his hands slowly turning into a Mabari pup destined for one of the children who called Skyhold home. When he first told her about making toys for the children in his spare time so they could have something to call their own in a new place, she had thought it was endearing that he would think of their smallest refugees when they could have easily been overlooked. When she got to see him deliver simple carved animals or the roughly-made dolls he had crafted out of twine and spare burlap and how much the children loved them, it made Ravena love him all the more.

“Here,” she said, sitting cross-legged beside him in bed and plopping a rag full of cookies on top of his chest.

“What’s this?” he asked, setting the dog aside.

“She’s not too keen on keeping raisins in the recipe.” As soon as she had left Varric, she had dropped in on Sera, who had sensed that Ravena had wanted to talk about anything other than the events in Adamant. Instead, Sera had dragged Ravena out one of her windows and onto the rooftop, where the two of them talked about cookies and family. She hadn’t been happy with how her newly-coined Inquisition Cookies had turned out, but brightened when Ravena offered to help her tweak the recipe until Sera was satisfied with their taste.

He picked up one and regarded it with a wary eye, which was always a good thing to do with anything that came from Sera. “Are these raisins?”

“She’s not too keen on keeping raisins in the recipe.” Settling down beside him, she moved the cookies to an empty crate Blackwall was using as a bedside table. “What kind do you like? I’ll make
sure to bake up a batch for you the next time the cooks let us in the kitchen.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t know you baked.”

She scoffed. “Please. If I wasn’t running around outside with my brothers or in my father’s study with my nose stuck in a book, I could be found in my family’s kitchens. Our cook taught me everything I know.” Ravena smiled and snuggled close to Blackwall. She hadn’t thought about Audrey in such a long time, but she had loved spending time with the older woman. Like Sera, Ravena had missed the cookie lesson from her own mother, but she had been lucky enough to learn it from Mistress Audrey instead. She had been patient and kind as she taught Ravena how to make basic things much like she would have taught her own daughter.

All of a sudden it hit her how very lonely her mother must have been. While Ravena had learned to embroider and paint china cups and a multitude of other ladylike pastimes from her mother, she had never really latched on to any accomplishment for them to have a shared hobby to bond over, preferring to spend her time in her father’s study over her mother’s day room. When her oldest brother had married, her mother had gushed about René’s new bride, joyful that she finally had someone to spend time with. At the time, it hadn’t bothered her, but now…

Sensing her silent withdrawal, Blackwall wrapped his arm around her and tugged her closer to his side. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing. I was just thinking that I owe my mother a long-overdue letter.”

They were both quiet for a while, content to listen to the world revolve outside the hayloft.

“Chocolate,” Blackwall said, breaking the silence.

Ravena rested her chin on his chest. “Hmm?”

“I like chocolate,” he explained. “When I was little, it was too expensive to get but once a year, after the harvest and Da had been paid. He spent most of his money on seed for the next season’s planting, the rest on cheap booze. My mother would save what leftover coin she could for everyday expenses, and she would use whatever was left to splurge by getting an ounce of dark chocolate at a market stall. Alone, it would have been too little to split between the four of us, so she would dice it up into the smallest of chips and add them to the morning biscuits with a bit of sugar she had bartered with a neighbor for. It wasn’t quite a cookie, but Liddy and I loved them. Ma would serve them with this heavy-handed Orlesian accent and mispronounce pain au chocolat on purpose to make Liddy laugh.” He closed his eyes, all but tasting the simple treat. He remembered that after he had won the Grand Tourney, he had sent his mother a basket overflowing with the finest Orlesian chocolates he could buy. Thinking back, he would have been better off sending her all the money he had pissed away on wine and whores instead, not knowing that back home his father’s field had gone unplanted for several seasons and that his father himself spent most of his days marinating in homemade hooch while his mother scrimped and did all sorts of jobs around the village to scrape up enough coin to keep a roof over their heads. They may have been poor growing up, but both of his parents had died paupers while he had the means to help, but had been too thoughtless and selfish to do so.

“Then I’ll be sure to let Sera know to add chocolate chips into her recipe, just for you.”

He smiled, shaking off the sad memories. “You spoil me.”

Leaning up, she pressed a brief kiss to his lips. “You spoil me.” Picking up the half-finished Mabari, she turned it in her hands. “Who’s this for?”

“Trevor, Scout Jim’s little boy. Jim keeps on going on about how his son wants to get a dog, but
with the war and everything, it’s impossible. I thought this might be enough to tide him over until later.”

“That’s thoughtful of you.” She kissed him again. “And incredibly sweet.”

“Don’t tell anyone. It’ll ruin my image of being this tough bear of a man.”

Ravena crossed her fingers over her heart. “Your secret’s safe with me.” She arched her eyebrow. “Though I may need some bribery to keep my lips sealed after a while.”

“Ah, there’s that mercenary streak I was warned about.” He leered and rolled them over so that he loomed over her, his forearms braced on either side of her head. “I may not be able to keep your lips sealed, my lady, but I bet I could keep them busy.”

Below, Dennett shook his head as a peal of laughter drifted down from the hayloft. “Young love,” he said, patting one of the horses’ necks. Dousing the lanterns, he made sure that the barn door was closed and secured for the night. “It’s either irritatingly sweet or just plain irritating.” Still shaking his head, he left the stables and made his way to his quarters, where a letter to his wife was waiting to be written.

Chapter End Notes

Blackwall is Skyhold’s Santa Claus. Pass it along. I also wanted to give Jim a family, so in any Cullenmance he has someone to talk to. "How was my day? I was minding my own business, doing my job when my boss jumped down my throat for delivering a message. I thought he was going to bite my head off! I’m certain to get demoted to latrine duty tomorrow..."
The colorful oath and painful exclamation were Blackwall’s only warnings before a hairbrush sailed over the railing. It flew in an impressive arc before hitting the uppermost stair and then clattering down a few treads.

“Problems?” he asked, bending down to retrieve the offensive item before continuing up the stairs leading to Ravena’s chambers. He hoped that the sound of his voice would deter any other flying projectiles.

“No, I just felt like seeing how far I could throw the blasted thing.” Ravena sighed and sat on the sofa. She looked up at him as he rounded the landing’s newel post and knew that he wasn’t buying it. “I can’t lift my right arm over my head.”

He sat down beside her. “I knew something was bothering you on the road. When did it happen?” He thought back to every encounter they had while underground in Valammar, trying to pinpoint just when he hadn’t been able to shield her from a blow.

She pointed a finger at him. “I know what you’re doing and no, this wasn’t your fault. Remember when we were fighting darkspawn and I jumped out of the way of the ogre? I wound up banging my shoulder into a stone column and I must have pulled something.” She shuddered. “There had been so many of them. It was no wonder you couldn’t sense them all.”

Blackwall cleared his throat. “Right. It’s a good thing that Dorian came with us to seal up the places the darkspawn were coming up from.” He reached over and rubbed his thumb over her shoulder. “But now you can’t lift your arm over your head.”

“Right.” It hasn’t seemed like much of an issue to begin with: adrenaline had dulled any pain she had felt, then later on the nagging soreness had been easy to ignore and deem too minor to waste a potion on. It wasn’t until they had gotten back to Skyhold and the weather had changed that she had really had a problem with mobility, the cold stiffening up already sore muscles to the point where any attempt to move past a certain range of motion caused her pain.

_Get him killed, and I’ll feed you your own eyeballs._ It was probably a good thing that her arm had been practically useless by then. If not otherwise, she would have dragged Bianca Davri up to her eye level by her hair and let the rogue have it. She had wanted to rip into her, not for giving away the source of red lyrium and inadvertently helping Corypheus, but for the way Ravena felt the woman had toyed with Varric’s affections. _Love him or let him go, but don’t keep going on as you are, for both your sakes._ Ravena had wanted to say that to Bianca so badly, but instead she had silently turned on her heel and followed after Varric. Her heart hurt for her friend, but she knew that he was an adult who could make his own decisions with his life. All that she could do was to be there for him if and when he needed her.

Blackwall’s gentle fingers brought her out of her thoughts. “And your brush bore the brunt of that frustration?”

“Well, it takes two hands to get the pins out of my hair. Since we got back so late, I really didn’t want to bother anyone. Everything else I could wiggle out of or take off without a problem, but my hair…”
He spared a glance to the floor around her bed, noticing that her boots, pants, and every other article of clothing she normally wore out in the field was strewn about haphazardly. “Ah. That explains the carnage.” He also eyed what she was currently wearing. “And that also explains where my shirt went off to. What else are you wearing underneath that?” The last was said with a leer as Blackwall leaned towards her, his eyes tracing over a tantalizing expanse of bare thigh peeking out from the hem of one of his older, more worn shirts.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she asked coyly, leaning in to bridge the gap between them for a drawn out kiss.

He stroked her jaw with his thumb. “I would indeed. But back to the matter at hand: I can help with that.” Reaching out, he started to pull out a long hairpin. Setting it on the side table nearest to him, he slid another one out, watching as her hair began to slowly unroll from the bun she normally wore it in. “You could use these as weapons,” he mused, looking at the pointed end of one.

“I have,” she agreed. “Bandits had taken up residence in a mine I was investigating and one of them was stupid enough to think I was unarmed. I came out missing one pin, but the bandit was minus an eye, so it evened out.”

He chuckled. “Remind me to never get on your bad side.” Taking a handful of her hair, he let it slip between his fingers before picking up her brush and carefully working out tangles.

She leaned closer to him. “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

“I know; I want to.” They fell into a comfortable silence, the crackling of the fireplace the only sound in the room as he began to slowly brush out her hair. Ravena was almost asleep when she felt Blackwall’s fingers begin to press against her shoulder.

“Ow.”

“Looks like I found where you sprained yourself,” he muttered, his fingers spreading outward, his hands moving lower along her back. He tisked when she jumped. “Ravena, you have knots the likes I’ve never seen.” He stood up and went over to the closet next to her bed where he knew she kept a supply of liniment. Pulling the oversized neckline of the shirt over her shoulder, he winced in sympathy at the angry looking bruise that went from the curve of her right shoulder and all the way around to her shoulder blade. Taking care not to hurt her, he began to rub a generous amount of ointment across her skin.

She rolled her eyes at him throwing her words from several months ago back at her. “Where have I heard that before?” Hissing when he hit a sore spot, she shifted on the sofa to give him better access to her back.

“Probably from a very wise person. I’ve been neglectful – you make certain that everyone else in our party is well and yet I’ve never paid you the same courtesy.” With a few careful tugs, Blackwall pulled her shirt over her head, leaving her in only a pair of smallclothes. He ran his palms appreciatively over the small strip of lavender lace at her hip before sliding his hands back up, his thumbs working at her lower back where he’d often see her stretch uncomfortably after spending too many hours in a chair writing reports.

“That’s because I’m the resident Mother Hen and my job is to worry over everyone. Your job is to hit things with your shield, which you do quite well, I might add.” She hummed in contentment as his hands continued to rove, his fingers finding and releasing knots along the back of her neck. She quietly rotated her left shoulder as a hint to pay attention to that side of her body. He was a quick study, his touch soothing muscles that had ached for far too long. She sighed as the heat of his hands
melted away all the lingering tension she held.

“It’s good to know that my talents aren’t wasted. Still, what sort of man doesn’t take care of his lady?”

She peered at him from over her shoulder. “One that’s appreciated for the many other things he does.” She winked at him. “If it makes you feel better, I give you full permission to use my body as you see fit.”

He groaned and pressed a kiss against the side of her throat. “Careful, Love. I have an active imagination.”

“As do I. Care to see what we can come up with?” She laughed when he tugged her onto his lap before standing up with her in his arms. He navigated the few strides towards her bed before gently placing her down.

“Oh my lady,” he murmured, his eyes warm as he twined his fingers in her hair, his weight a welcome bulk against her. “I can hardly wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Ravena often steals her boyfriend's shirts to wear to bed on nights when he doesn't join her. They're thin and worn out in places, but they smell like him and it's like being held in one big hug for the entire night. Plus, it gives her an excuse to buy more form-fitting shirts for him to wear when they're in Skyhold.

I need to go back and replay Varric's personal quest. I don't remember much, but I do remember not trusting Bianca from the get-go. I also know that feel when you've hurt your back/shoulder and how frustrating it is to not be able to do anything that involves moving your arm past a certain range.
“A red Templar isn’t going to stop and see if you’re ready. Demons aren’t going to go easy on you just because they know you’re new, remember that.”

Ravena walked up towards the new training ring that had been constructed in the outer bailey. Blackwall was in the center of it, along with a handful of Leliana’s scouts. “You don’t have heavy armor or shields. Sister Leliana specifically chose you for your swiftness, so show me!” He clanged his practice sword against his shield and rushed one of the scouts. “I just ran you through. Again, starting position! Dodge or deflect my attack!”

“Mind if I watch?” Ravena asked, leaning against the ring’s railing.

Blackwall’s entire demeanor changed. Gone were the tense lines and his eyes softened. “Inquisitor,” he said, tipping his chin in greeting. “Commander Cullen asked me to run some of the scouts through their paces.”

“And you’re having some difficulties?” The question was directed more towards the four scouts than at him and he knew it. The lanky redheaded boy who couldn’t have been more than sixteen nodded.

Climbing over the railing, Ravena effortlessly landed inside the ring. “I can remember when I first started fighting. I was a little older than you, but just as inexperienced. What’s your weapon of choice, Scout?”

“Bows, Your Worship.”

Ravena nodded. “You have the shoulders for it. Archery might enable you to attack from a distance, but you need to know how to defend yourself once an enemy puts themselves within striking range. If you’d like, I could help you work on your knifework.”

“I’d take her up on it, lad,” Blackwall said. He turned towards her. “I’m wondering something. Do you happen to have any free time right now?” He flexed his shield arm.

She arched her eyebrow. “I might have some time to spare. What were you suggesting?”

“Well, I’m teaching these scouts how to defend themselves against armored attacks. It might do some good if they can see what I’d like for them to accomplish. You’re an experienced fighter; I’m certain they can learn from your example.”

Ravena grinned. “Why Ser Blackwall,” she drawled. “Are you challenging me to a fight?”

He returned her grin. “Consider the gauntlet dropped, my lady.” He gestured to the weapons rack where a set of practice daggers lay. “Those might suit you.”

Ravena tested the balance of each weapon and found them to her liking. “Any rules?”

“Do demons give you rules?” He thought for a moment. “First to land a deadly strike three times wins, loser buys the drinks?”

She laughed. “Sounds fair.” She began to circle him, a predatory light flashing in her eyes. “For the
record, I’d like for my drinks to be cold ciders today.”

He moved with her, looking for an opening to start an attack. “Trash talking already? For the record, I’d like a pint of ale when I win. Several of them, in fact.” Lunging, he rushed at her, not surprised for one moment when she easily dodged him. He deflected her attack and clipped her hip with the edge of his shield.

“That doesn’t count as deadly,” she warned, moving into a fast riposte followed by a spinning whirlwind attack.

“And you’re not attacking me at full power,” he countered. “Come on, Ravena, give these scouts a show!” It was the last that they spoke, the two of them concentrating on fighting. Blackwall soon found that fighting against Ravena was extremely different than fighting on the same team. He might have been familiar with her style, but he’d never quite had something like it thrown at him. It was difficult to adjust to at first, but he soon used his knowledge of her weaknesses to his advantage, attacking her in places he usually made sure to protect out in the field.

“One,” he crowed, bringing his sword up through her armpit and tapping her ribs with the flat of the blade. He chuckled as she grumbled in frustration.

“One,” she shouted triumphantly, dodging past his shield and tagging him in the gut, his gambeson dulling the impact of her blunted dagger. She had taken his teasing to heart; she was putting her full strength into each blow now. While the blunted edges of her knives wouldn’t tear through his clothing like her usual blades would have, Blackwall had a feeling that he’d be sporting several new bruises before the day was done.

He earned his second deathblow when Ravena was too slow to avoid a shield bash, but she paid him back by slipping into stealth mode and hitting him in the back with her twin fang strike. He grunted at the impact and swung around with his arms in front of him, his sword and shield falling uselessly from suddenly nerveless hands.

“Let that be a lesson,” Ravena was saying to the scouts who were crowded around the outside of the ring. Their fight had also attracted the attention of many of the other soldiers. “Use your blades to hit a nerve that runs the length of your opponent’s arm. If you can get them to drop their shield or weapons, then that’s one less piece of protection they have.”

“Yet let this be another lesson,” Blackwall chimed in. “Even though your opponent is unarmed doesn’t mean that they’re harmless.” With a roar, he lowered his shoulder and rushed Ravena, knocking her flat on her back. One of her daggers went flying and she grunted as Blackwall’s hands went around her neck, his grip open and loose yet still showing how an enemy could have strangled her. “Three.”

“Three,” she said at the exact same time, the one dagger she had managed to keep hold of pressing almost uncomfortably tight against his chest. Had her blade been sharpened, she would have gone through the padded gambeson, up under his sternum, and more than likely pierced a lung.

They were both breathing hard. “Call it a draw?” he asked, one hand moving from her throat to pillow the base of her skull from the packed dirt and the other slipping up, his thumb brushing against her jaw.

“I can live with that.” She dropped her dagger. “What say you buy my drink and I’ll buy yours?”

“I’d say that sounds like a fair bargain.” He seemed to notice how intimately they had landed just then, her bent knee brushing against his ribs as he crouched between her legs, his body pressed
snugly against hers. Bull and Sera’s wolf whistles made Blackwall laugh, his breath stirring the hair at Ravena’s temple.

“I didn’t hurt you?” she asked, holding her arms up for him to help haul her to her feet once he had rolled away and stood up.

“No. I was going to ask you the same.”

“Psh. That little knock to the ground? I’ve had worse.” She rotated her right shoulder to ease some soreness that still lingered from Valammar. Leaning close so only he could hear her, she murmured, “Besides, you’re rougher in bed. I’ve got bruises in very interesting places to attest to that.”

“And I’ve the scratches on my back to prove you can dish out your own share of roughness.” He winked at the blush that crept over the tops of her cheeks. Dismissing his recruits, they walked towards the tavern. They stopped near the door and giving her a lazy half-smile, Blackwall leaned his hand against the stone and purposely crowded Ravena. “So, can I buy you that drink?”

She tilted her head and fluttered her eyelashes coquettishly. “I don’t know. My mother always warned me about accepting beverages from tall, dark and handsome men. She said it would lead them to believe that they’d be able to get something more than a drinking companion for the night.”

He rested his weight on his forearm, looming even closer to her. “And do you always do what your mother says?”

“Concerning tall, dark and handsome men?” Her smirk widened. “Never.”

His free hand went to her waist. A slight tug had her body flush against his. “Lucky me.”

Chapter End Notes

I think my favorite part of his kiss scene is the lean he does right before he goes in for the kill. *sigh*
The block of wood just felt right in his palm. Blackwall still wasn’t sure what he wanted to make out of it, but he was content to sit by the fire and turn it in his hands, imagining the possibilities. Ravena’s name day was coming up: Josephine and Varric had been talking, more like plotting, the other day about it and Dorian had caught wind of their plans. Between the three of them, they had concocted up a surprise party for the Inquisitor. Blackwall had been informed to attend, bring a gift, and for the Maker’s sake – this from Dorian – wear something other than that shabby coat of yours.

Party or no, he had already planned on spending the day with Ravena. He also had a recently purchased tunic folded up in a dresser in his lady’s chambers, far away from the smells of the stables. What he didn’t have was a present. Flames, he didn’t even know what she would like.

“Books? She likes reading,” he mused, but then quickly shoved that thought aside. While he was certain she would appreciate a new book, the idea was too generic, especially since he didn’t have a clue as to what genre she favored reading when she wasn’t studying old texts. Purchasing a new journal for her was also out; he’d recently given one to her a few weeks ago once he found out that she had taken to cramping up her writing amid the margins of the little pocket book he had given her when they first came to Skyhold. “A new blade? A whetstone? An upgrade for her armor?”
Frowning, he nearly threw the block against the wall in frustration. None of his ideas sounded even remotely romantic. Then again, who was he kidding, he didn’t have a romantic bone in his body. Giving up, he stood and placed the piece of wood on the table next to his unfinished griffon and ran his fingers through his hair as he tried to think.

“She likes flowers.”

Blackwall jumped. “Andraste’s tits, Cole!” he growled, spinning around to face Cole. “What have I said about sneaking up on me?”

“Sorry.” The spirit didn’t look very contrite. “Her father laughs when she makes flower crowns for him to wear on picnics when she is very little. He insists she wear them instead: daisies, cornflowers, those little yellow ones whose petals always get stuck in her hair, but not lilies. Never those; lilies and funerals go together and she hates both. Her heart broke when he drew away from everyone after the service. The too-sweet smell stayed in the hall even after it gleamed with fresh soap.”

“That would be useful, if we had more than a few paltry wildflowers growing here.” He did file that bit of information away for when they traveled through other areas.

Cole tilted his head. “Solas already gave her an adventure. He took her dreaming through her favorite ruin and she saw what it had been like back when people lived there. Her tears stain the pillowcase, but she’s happy, so happy.” He picked at his nails. “Why does she cry when she’s happy? I thought tears were for sorrow.”

“Not all the time. Ravena is special.”

“And you’re special to her.” He stared at some point over Blackwall’s shoulder. “Hands tangled in her hair, dark as a raven’s wing. Waves tumbling down her shoulders, always a surprise at how long it really is. So impossibly soft; it smells like home. She is home.”

“I wish you wouldn’t go wandering around in my head like that.” It unnerved him and often made him wary of what else Cole might pick up on.
“I couldn’t help it, you were too loud. Try to think about her hair more quietly next time.” Moving away from the fire, Cole glanced at him from over his shoulder. “It doesn’t really matter what you give her, she’ll treasure whatever it is because it came from you.”

Blackwall thought Cole’s words over. He picked up the piece of wood from the table and turned it sideways. Taking out one of his smaller knives, he began to chip away at a rough shape.

Cloth rustled as Ravena opened a gift. “This is lovely, thank you, Cullen.” She opened up the decorative metal tin, discovering that it was filled to the brim with fragrant tea leaves. A quick sniff told her it was a rose and bergamot blend from Starkhaven that she once offhandedly mentioned that she preferred. “Thank all of you for everything. This has been one of the best name days I’ve ever had.”

Varric swirled his glass of brandy. “We’re just glad to share it with you. It isn’t every day a girl turns twenty.” His grin deepened and he elbowed her. “Again.”

Ravena laughed. “And that, dear man, is why you’re my favorite.” She leaned over and pressed a quick kiss on his cheek.

“And what are the rest of us, chopped liver?” Dorian asked, theatrically turning his nose up in disdain. “Keep that up and I’ll take back my gift.”

She grinned. “The beginner’s primer to Tevene is golden. Thank you, Dorian. I appreciate learning new languages.” She looped her arm around Dorian’s neck and dragged him closer so she could messily kiss his cheek.

“You’ll appreciate it even more when you use it to translate that big anthology of naughty bedtime stories I also gave you,” he replied, turning his face to plant a similarly messy kiss to the side of Ravena’s head.

“Aaaaand that’s why you’ll be glad I gave you the booze, Boss,” Iron Bull stated, taking a hearty swig from his tankard on the opposite side of the table. “You’ll need it to slog through all that Tevinter horseshit.”

Ravena stood up and began to gather her gifts. “Unfortunately, I’m going to have to call it a night. Name day or not, we do have a trip planned bright and early tomorrow.”

Blackwall stood as well. “Here, I’ll help.”

Sera cackled from somewhere underneath them. “Someone hasn’t given her Gracious Ladybits her present yet,” she sing-songed. She grunted as she hoisted herself up, elbows planted on the table’s surface. “Ten silvers says there’s parts tied up in bows involved.” She waggled her eyebrows for emphasis.

Blackwall thought he was too old to blush, but he felt heat rise up the back of his neck and burn his ears. “No,” he said, giving her a mock-glare as he quickly recovered his composure. “But good idea. Should have gone to you first instead of going with my original plan. Would have saved myself a lot of time.” Gathering up the rest of Ravena’s gifts, he waited until she had given everyone assembled parting hugs and thanked them again before the two of them headed towards her chambers.

“Nice save,” she commented, nudging him with her elbow as she winged the door to her rooms open.
“I thought so too.”

She set her gifts atop her desk, her fingers running over the expensive looking jar of Orlesian face cream Vivienne had given her. “You mean there isn’t a…package waiting for me?” she teased, her fingers hooking into the waistband of his trousers. She gave an experimental tug as she pressed up to her tiptoes to kiss him.

“What, that?” Blackwall drawled, teeth nipping at her lip. He slid his hands down her hips until he could firmly grip her bottom, causing her to gasp against his mouth when he hauled her even tighter to him and purposely ground against her hips. “That’s always there when it comes to you, my lady.”

“Glad to see I have an effect on you.”

“A profound one, I assure you. Now if you’re quite done distracting me, I’d like to give you your present.” Giving her one last kiss, he stepped away and retreated into the small storage area to the right of her bed.

“I see that Sera was right on one thing,” Ravena said, eyeing the white ribbon tied around a square of blue silk.

He grinned and held out the gift. “Happy name day, Ravena.” He watched as she carefully undid the ribbon and placed it on the desk. “What do you think?”

She stared. “It’s beautiful,” she murmured, her finger running over the decorative hair comb sitting in her hand. The entire thing was made out of dark lacquered wood with two birds perched on top of the comb facing the other in such a way that their necks and bellies created a sort of upside down heart shape between them. “Did you make this yourself?” She already knew the answer; the birds were of a familiar style she had often seen him carve at various campfires during his turn at watch. These were more refined and elegantly crafted though, as if he had taken an incredibly long time to make sure he got them just the way he wanted them.

“It took me a while to figure out what you might like,” he confessed.

She threw an arm around his neck and hugged him. “I love it.” With the comb still in one hand, she gave it a critical look. Blackwall had carved delicate looking flowers around the birds. “These look so familiar. I remember as a child that…”

“You would wear them as a crown and they would get stuck in your hair,” he finished.

“How did you know?”

Blackwall rubbed at the back of his neck. “Cole might have helped on that.” The image of Ravena as a girl with petals in her dark hair had stuck with him enough that when it came time to carve them, he’d tracked Cole down to help describe the flowers in better detail.

“Then I need to thank him.” Stepping away, she hurriedly tore out the pins holding her hair up until it fell about her in a mess of waves. A few twists had her hair formed into a quick knot at the base of her neck. Reaching back, she blindly secured the comb. “How does it look?”

“Beautiful,” he breathed. He ignored her protest when he reached out to take the comb out of her hair and set it on the desk, her hair falling almost to her waist. He took a handful and held it to his nose. Now that Cole had pointed it out, he realized that the faint floral scent really did smell like the blossoms that had grown outside his house as a boy. “You are so incredibly beautiful.”

“Gifts and compliments? It really must be my name day.” She stepped forward, making Blackwall
take a step backward until the backs of his knees hit the foot of her bed. “However shall I thank such a generous man?” He knew exactly what she was doing when she shoved at his shoulders, which was why when he fell back against the mattress he made certain to grab hold of her waist and take her with him.

“I’m certain you can think of something.”
“Okay, so how about that guy?”

Varric made a contemplative humming noise as he took in the stranger sitting at the end of the bar. “I'd say he's a down on his luck assassin looking for a new target. He hasn’t found any work in over three months and if he doesn’t get anything soon, he’s thinking about opening up a tea shop.”


“Then, O Seeker, who is he?”

“Obviously he’s a bard, out searching for his true love. A fortuneteller told him that he’d meet her in a tavern, but they never told him which one, so he spends his days traveling from town to town hoping to meet her.”

Cole tilted his head. “Why can’t he be an assassin who’s looking for a lady? They could open the tea shop together.”

Ravena smiled. “I like that one the best, Cole. I knew an assassin once. Well, ex-assassin.” She looked around the tavern, at ease in her surroundings. For someone of a scholarly nature, taverns and inns had always called to her as a source of comfort almost more so than any library. She figured it was the hominess of them all: no matter where she ventured out to, she could count on stepping inside a tavern and being greeted by the scent of cooking meat, hoppy ale, and tobacco smoke that seemed to permeate every surface. When she traveled, no one knew who she was or where she had come from, and she found that air of anonymity highly appealing, even long before she had become the Herald of Andraste.

Out of all the places in Skyhold, the Herald’s Rest had to be one of her favorites. The first floor was usually full of patrons at any given hour with the second floor just slightly less crowded. The third floor was a favorite spot to curl up and read, the familiar sounds of the tavern below creating a pleasant background noise that calmed her nerves. Cole was usually present in the little space he had claimed for his own and made good company. On especially stressful days, she’d find his corner empty, but a cup of hot tea and a sweet roll would be sitting there waiting for her.

Bull raised an eyebrow. “How do you get to be an ex-assassin? They retire or something?”

She took a drink. “I don’t know if he was blowing smoke or not, but he said that he had fought with the Hero of Ferelden during the Blight. Nice guy, that Zev. I hired him to act as a bodyguard for one of the jobs I was helping my cousin with about five years ago. He used to break out into fluent Antivan in front of Chantry sisters, which irritated them because they didn’t speak the language. It was so difficult to keep a straight face: here he was, telling the dirtiest jokes I’ve ever heard and I couldn’t laugh until later.”

Varric stroked his chin thoughtfully. “You know, that sounds awfully familiar. Rivani knew a guy like that once.”

“I heard he got around. Maker knows he was always trying to get into either mine or Henri’s pants any chance he could.”
Bull laughed. “And did he?”

“Nope. As usual, when Henri gets involved in his work, he pays little attention to anything else and he was oblivious to Zev’s advances. While the flirting was appreciated, I had too much on my plate at the time to add a brief fling to everything.”

Cassandra took a contemplative drink and rested her elbows on the scarred wooden table. “Just how do you go about hiring people for your jobs? Doesn’t the Chantry provide protection?”

Ravena nodded. “Oh, they offer guards, but…” she made a face. “Let’s just say that the ones assigned to us normally don’t stray too far from the straight and narrow. It puts a hamper on what we can and cannot do in their presence, which usually meant that we were forced to sneak around behind their backs while they were sleeping to do what we needed to do.”

“Do you mean to tell us that you did something unlawful while in the Chantry’s employ?”

Ravena quickly took a drink. “I wouldn’t call it unlawful, per se,” she said, trying to evade Cassandra’s question.

“Then what would you call it, Dusty?”

“Protecting historical interests. We weren’t the only game in town and what we were after at the time was worth an extremely obscene amount of money. I would have gone with a private collector, but Henri insisted that what we were discovering belonged in a Chantry museum. I went along with it because he’s family.”

Bull slapped his knee in amusement. “I knew I liked that about you, Boss.” After a beat, he nudged her. “But back to Cassandra’s question: how do you hire people? I mean, us mercenaries don’t usually go around with a sign hanging around our necks saying we’re available for hire or anything.”

“Well, I usually begin my search in a place very much like this. Taverns are havens for the sort of muscle I look for.” She slung an arm behind the back of her chair and scanned the crowd. “Sutherland’s company upstairs might be a good choice, as would any number of those rowdy Chargers over in the corner,” This earned an approving snort from Bull. “But…” Ravena’s eyes fell to the man who had just walked into the tavern. He hadn’t seen them at their table, instead intent on heading straight to the bar to order up an ale. He leaned against the bar while Cabot pulled him a pint.

“Target sighted?”

“And acquired. Excuse me.” Standing up, she smoothed a hand over her hair and made her way to the bar.

“Good evening,” she said, sidling up next to the man.

Blackwall turned at the sound of her voice. “Evening,” he replied, noting the catcalls from the table in the middle of the room. “Is there something going on that I should be aware of, Ravena?”

She smiled sweetly at him. “Not really. Cassandra just asked me how I went about picking up big, strong men to watch my back during digs.”

His eyebrow rose in interest. “Oh?”

She hummed in agreement. “My name is Ravena Trevelyan. I’m an agent of the Inquisition and I am in the process of organizing an expedition into the Exalted Plains. You look to be a man of great
fortitude: would you happen to be available for hire for this trip?"

Blackwall grinned and leaned further against the counter. Taking the mug Cabot had left him, he drank deeply. “For hire, you say? How much are you paying?”

“It depends. How much coin are you worth?”

“Oh, I’m expensive, but worth every copper.” His eyes raked down her body and she couldn’t help but shiver under his stare. “I’m a man that’s good with his hands.”

She bit her lip, thrilled when she saw his eyes darken. “Are we still discussing accompanying me on this trip, or have we moved onto negotiating something else?”

His hand came up and brushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “See something you like, then?”

Both of them ignored the disgusted grunt Cabot gave them before moving into the back storage area for more bottles of mead. “I do indeed.” She stepped closer to him and put her hand on his arm. “The question is: are you interested?”

Blackwall’s hand was warm on her waist. “Very.”

“In the Exalted Plains job?”

“Hang the job, you know I’m in.” Ale forgotten, Blackwall took her hand and tilted his chin towards the exit. “What say you and I discuss this something else somewhere more private?”

Behind them, the four companions Ravena had left behind looked at one another. “I don’t think that’s how she usually hires mercenaries,” Cole said, taking a sip of his drink. He had been curious about what the rest of his friends had been drinking one night, so Varric let him try his brandy. Cole disliked the way that it had burned down his throat and stuck to his customary single glass of milk from then on.

“No, Kid, I don’t think it is.”

“Well damn, if it had been, I wish I had known her before Blackwall met her.”

Cassandra rolled her eyes at Bull’s comment. “Since we have lost our Inquisitor for the night…”

“You’re leaving? Aw, and here I was gonna break out the cards for a quick game of Wicked Grace, Seeker.”

“As I was saying, since we have lost our Inquisitor for the evening,” she pointed over in the corner where a lone man was sitting, hood obscuring his features and pipe smoke curling about him like a halo. “Who is he?”

“Ah, that’s easy. That right there is a scout with a mysterious past. It’s a mystery because he woke up one day without any recollection of who he is and he’s been searching for clues ever since.”

“Ugh. You think of the most horrible things, Varric. It’s a wonder anyone buys your books.”

“Hey, you happen to like my work, or was that some other Seeker who demanded that I finish Swords and Shields? You didn’t even have the decency to ask me for the latest chapter yourself, you sent Dusty in to do your dirty work.”

“Varric?”
“Yes?”

“Shut up and deal the cards already.”

Chapter End Notes

I bet Varric would be the best person to people watch with. Vague, throwaway museum reference from one of my favorite movies here gives you an idea of what Henri looks like. It was playing when I was trying to figure out Ravena's backstory and I ran with it. Special guest appearance by a character from another movie that happened to be on because why not? He had to do something before heading to the Prancing Pony.
“I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m ready for a bath.”

“And real food,” Dorian commented. “Something other than stale biscuits left at the bottom of my satchel. They’re starting to taste like old, sweaty socks.”

Varric nodded in agreement. “Don’t forget getting a good drink. I could use one or two of those.”

“I’m up for all three, in no particular order,” Blackwall finished, rotating his arm. Druffalos were normally docile creatures, but the animals became rather violent when accidentally caught in the crossfire of chain lightning strikes. Blackwall was certain that he had wrenched something in his shoulder while deflecting a charging druffalo with his shield. “As well as a good, long nap.”

“I think that can be arranged for us, especially since we just spent the past few weeks sealing up rifts non-stop.” Ravena gave him a sideways glance and Blackwall translated the shy half-smile as her way of inviting him up to her quarters to partake in all four options with her, and then some. His assumption was confirmed when she helped him take the saddle off his horse.

“The bath is large enough for two,” she said, her breath stirring his hair as she leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“Is it now?” He reached out and settled his palm on the curve of her hip and pulled her closer.

She nodded. “Mmm hmm,” she hummed, walking her fingers up his chest. “And the bed is definitely comfortable enough for napping.”

There was no mistaking the look in her eye. Maker, how he had missed spending time alone with her. The campsites along Crestwood were in secluded areas, and while they did share a tent the entire time they were out in the field, making love to Ravena had been out of the question. The camps were crowded with Inquisition forces making sweeps for the threat of lingering undead and the tents were made of ridiculously thin canvas that did nothing to muffle sound, even with the addition of oilcloth to ward out the rain. The one time that they did manage to carve out a sliver of private time had been the night they had spent in the reclaimed fortress. While the faint exhibitionist feel and the novelty of venue had enhanced their storage room encounter, it had been rushed. The next morning they had both laughed over the odd shaped bruises from banging into shelving units, but Blackwall would have liked to have had time for something more besides a quick tryst against a wall.

“As I said,” Blackwall told her, dipping his head down to nip at her lip. “I could really use a nap.”

“Oh, for the love…” Dorian rolled his eyes as he came around to the tack room, woolen blankets in his arms. “You two are the epitome of the annoyingly cute couple. Even worse, you’re the annoyingly cute older couple. Go get a room, you’re making me nauseous.”

“Jealous heart.” Ravena stuck her tongue out at the mage, earning her a laugh. “And technically we are in a room.”

He ignored the last part with an eloquent roll of his eyes. “Me, jealous of you having a big, brawny man to call your own? Actually, yes, I am quite envious.” Brushing off his sleeves, he gave them a
quick farewell wave. “And on that note, I’m going to get cleaned up. Pity me for only having my
books and some questionable alcohol as a sole form of comfort.”

“I’ve probably got a stack of letters waiting for me,” Varric sighed, watching as the mage walked
away. “How the Merchants’ Guild found me here is beyond me.”

“Maybe you need to stop writing them letters asking them to take you off their newsletter list.”

“Probably, or else my publisher snitched on me.” Varric shaded his eyes with his hand and looked at
someone walking purposefully towards them. “Say, is that someone new?”

Ravena squinted and looked in the direction that he was pointing. “Must be. That’s…” She stopped
herself with a happy cry. Exhaustion forgotten, she ran full-speed towards the man. The man gave a
similar shout and held his arms open. Ravena flung herself at him, the force spinning them around.
She laughed as the strength of the man’s embrace lifted her off her feet.

“Take it she knows the guy.”

Blackwall shrugged and continued to put their gear away. “Guess so.” He tried hard not to let
jealousy get the better of him when he noticed that Ravena had just pressed several kisses to the
mystery man’s cheek, her arms still wrapped around him.

“He broodily replied,” Varric chimed in. “His eyes flashed in barely concealed…”

“You’re doing the narrating thing again.”

“He grumped.”

Blackwall rolled his eyes and began to walk towards Ravena. “Stop with the narrating thing.”

“Heh, good luck with that. You up for a game of Wicked Grace later on tonight?”

“I’ll take a rain check. Thanks for the invite, though.” As they drew closer, Blackwall could hear
Ravena talking a mile a minute, which was completely out of character for his usually quiet, mild-
mannered lady.

“René and Robert are fine?” she was asking, finally moving away from the man. “And Mother,
Father? The children?”

The man laughed. “Yes, they’re all fine and they send their love. Honestly, Ravena, you ought to
read your letters more thoroughly.”

She frowned in confusion. “What letters?”

“The ones I sent before leaving. They should have arrived weeks ago.”

“I’ve been gone for weeks. They’re probably buried underneath piles of reports that I’ll have to slog
through.” She reached for his hands and squeezed them. “But I am happy to see a familiar face.” She
turned when she heard her remaining two companions come up behind them.

“Blackwall, Varric, I’d like you to meet someone very special to me.”

Blackwall’s heart plummeted somewhere in the vicinity of his stomach. “Always good to meet a
friend of the Inquisitor,” he said carefully, eyeing the other man.

Oblivious, Ravena went on. “This is Warden Blackwall and Varric Tethras, two of my dearest
friends. This is my brother, Raoul Trevelyan.”

“Pleasure to meet you.” Raoul said, untangling a hand from Ravenna’s in order to shake.

*Brother. Well, that felt awkward.* Now that she mentioned it, the two of them looked amazingly similar in appearance; their height, dark hair, and whiskey colored eyes were exactly the same, as were a majority of their facial features. The only things different were where Ravenna’s features were more softly curved and feminine; Raoul’s were all sharp angles and blunted edges. They even had the same manner of standing with most of their weight on one leg and a hip canted out, which was slightly unnerving. “Wait, you’re the twin brother she mentioned.”

Raoul nodded. “One and the same.”

“I was wondering,” Varric noted. “The similarities are creepily uncanny.”

Ravenna laughed. “You haven’t seen anything until you’ve seen the rest of my family together in one room. We strongly take after the Trevelyan side.”

“Our poor mother was so hoping that at least one of her broodlings would have inherited her blonde hair and blue eyes, but it looks as if Father’s traits won out, even with the grandchildren.”

There was a brief pause and Varric filled it by yawning. “Well, it was nice meeting you, but I’m going to go find myself a bathtub and then sleep for the next year or so. Stop by the main hall or the tavern when you can. I’d love to find out some embarrassing backstory about our illustrious leader straight from a close source.”

“If you do, I will seriously hurt the both of you,” she mock-threatened. “But go, Varric. You earned a rest. I’ll see you later.”

Blackwall shifted his weight slowly from foot to foot. “I’ll take my leave as well.” He tipped his head towards Raoul. “Welcome to Skyhold.”

“Nice fellow,” Raoul commented once they were alone. “I can see how you’re head over heels for him.”

“I wish he would have stayed. I…” She turned to stare at her brother. “How did you know?”

“Please. I’m your *twin*. You can’t hide things like this from me. Besides, you had this syrupy, besotted look on your face. It was adorable.” He nudged her with his shoulder. “If it makes you feel any better, I do think your Warden thought I was some sort of competition.”

She sputtered. “*What?* Blackwall doesn’t have anything to be jealous about.”

“You obviously didn’t see the way he sized me up to see if he could take me in a fight before he knew who I was. Bit older than your usual tastes, no?”

The teasing hit a sore spot Ravenna hadn’t been aware she had. “Since when do you know what my tastes in men are?”

Raoul held up his hands in surrender. “You’re right, I don’t.” It came out more clipped than he meant it to and he winced in apology.

Ravenna toed the dirt in front of her boot. “What are you doing here, Raoul?” That too came out more tired and strained than intended and she suddenly wished that whatever space that had formed between them could be closed.
“Your letter home was somewhat vague. Mother and Father were worried.” He eyed the small pile of dirt Ravena was pushing with her boot and nudged the opposite side with his toe. “You’d think that they’d worry less after your second letter. The *I’m not dead; we’ve regrouped in a place called Skyhold, longer letter to arrive shortly* sounded quite reassuring to me, even if that longer letter never did arrive. Father has had more correspondence with your ambassador than with his own daughter.”

She frowned and folded her arms in front of her chest. “I didn’t know what to write. I never know what to write them, especially Mother.” She was much better at face to face conversations than correspondence when it came to the closest members of her family anyway. “You know how much she hates it when her children put themselves in the least bit of danger. Telling her the details on how I escaped Haven would have caused her fits greater than what she had when she found out about the Conclave.” She didn’t even want to contemplate how her mother would react if Ravena ever told her about what went on at Adamant. She was certain that rumors and tales about those events in the desert had already circulated in Ostwick, but Ravena doubted any of them were even remotely close to what had actually happened.

“Yes, well, luckily for you, my letters are a bit more fluent than yours. To save you from having your home overrun by well-meaning parents, elder siblings and various nieces and nephews, I decided to volunteer my services to your cause.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

He laughed, trying to recapture some of the familiarity that had shown in the first moments of seeing the other. “What? I’m good with a blade and can take orders, although you do recall that my skill with a pen is even deadlier. I was hoping that you could use me as a diplomat.”

“As much as I love seeing you again, I need to mention to you that we already have an ambassador.”

“Ah, yes. The lovely Josephine Montilyet. We’ve met. She’s quite capable, and incredibly brilliant. Her reputation reaches even as far as Ostwick, you know.”

“We’re all very grateful to have her.”

“And yet I can tell that while she most definitely can handle the burden of such an important title and that she enjoys her work, she is a bit stressed. I was hoping to help ease the burden, if only to make certain that something didn’t unintentionally fall through the cracks.”

Ravena arched her eyebrow. “Raoul, have you actually mentioned that to her?” She and Josephine had hit it off almost instantly, and Ravena regarded her as the younger sister that she never had. It would never do if Josephine thought she was being replaced.

“Well, not in those exact words, but yes, I did. She seemed amiable to the idea. She even gave me a few minor projects to work on to see if I could put my money where my mouth is.”

“And?”

“She told me to mention my plans to you, which I took as having her support.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Just how long have you been here?”

“Close to a week. Your friend Cassandra is charming, by the way. And your spymaster is quite the conversationalist.”

“Am I really at home, or did I fall asleep on the road? I know Leliana is friendly and talkative, but Cassandra? Charming? Wait, have you met Vivienne yet?”
"Tall, elegant Orlesian lady who at first glance has a slight disdain for everyone?"

"The very one." She and the enchanter had never gotten past a polite, professional working relationship, mainly because Ravena took offense to the way she talked down to Sera and Blackwall. Yet Vivienne was a great help in Skyhold, offering to make sure that all their mages were battle-ready and to help train the younger ones from the abandoned circles. In return, Ravena preferred to take either Dorian or Solas out with her when she ventured into the field, and the arrangement suited them both well.

"Delightful woman. We spoke at length on politics once she thawed a bit. We’ve met for tea every afternoon at four."

Ravena looked at him with a critical eye. "All right, who are you and what have you done with my brother? I grew up with you; I don’t recall you being this likeable by nature."

Raoul laughed. "I was born with natural charm and the ability to easily make friends. You never got to see it because I was honor bound to treat you as my insufferable baby sister."

"I’m five minutes younger than you, that shouldn’t count."

"Five minutes is still five minutes. Trust me, it most definitely counts.” He noticed the way she was weaving on her feet. "When was the last time you slept?"

She shrugged. "I can’t remember.” She had managed a few brief cat naps here and there, but she never slept well out in the field, even when they camped amongst Inquisition forces. While the heat that Blackwall’s body put out – she swore the man was like a furnace – and the comforting weight of his arms around her could quickly put her under, any little noise seemed to wake her. It was a habit carried over from her days of exploring; when she had gone on her solitary expeditions, she had never fully trusted sleeping in ruins or caves and Henri usually slept like a rock on the digs they went on together, no matter how dangerous the area might have been, so someone had to keep watch. It didn’t help matters any that when she did manage to catch some sleep, she often had nightmares of the people from Old Crestwood or any number of demons that they had just fought, so whatever break she got had never been restful.

All in all, she was most definitely looking forward to sleeping in her own bed for a change. She glanced in the direction Blackwall had walked off in. Hopefully she wouldn’t be sleeping alone.

"Then it’s about time you did something about that.” He nudged her with his shoulder. "And take a bath. You smell like a horse."

"All in due time. I still need to report to my advisors while everything is still fresh in my mind. After that, I’m planning on sleeping for a solid eight hours, so I won’t be seeing you until later.” She nudged him back. “Welcome to Skyhold, Brother. Try not to cause trouble while I’m unconscious.”

He gave her a grin. "Trouble? Me?"

Ravena laughed and walked away. "Don’t give me that innocent look. I know how you are."

She might have been joking, but in reality, she didn’t know him, or at least not any more. Spending so many years away from family members tended to make one lose familiarity with them. She hoped that having him as an agent for the Inquisition would help regain some of the closeness they once had.
She did have enough decency to use the barracks’ bathing room to rinse the worst of the stink and
dust off her general person before making reports to her advisors. By the filthy towels in the bin and
used cakes of soap, she could tell that her other three companions had done the same. She piled her
still wet hair up in a bun and pulled on a spare uniform someone had left for her – bless whoever
had, Ravena had been dreading climbing back into her dirty clothes – and made her way to the War
Room.

Luckily, her advisors were quick and to the point. She had been sending birds on a regular basis
while she was out, so all she had to do was give them a short summary of events.

“Have you seen our newest guest?” Leliana prompted. Cullen had already left the room, but the two
women lingered, hoping to get some information from Ravena.

“Raoul? Yes, I met him close to the stables.” She eyed Josephine. “He mentioned that he wishes to
help the Inquisition.”

Josephine gave a small smile and looked down at her paperwork. “Yes, he has a broad knowledge of
law from varying countries.”

“As far as I know, he’s been a lawyer for over twenty-two years. I recall him mentioning having to
help nobles deal with international incidents from time to time.”

“As far as you know?” Leliana asked, tilting her head.

Ravena bit her lip. “The two of us…” her brow furrowed. “We’ve drifted apart over the years. What
information I have of him is secondhand from the rest of my family.”

Josephine, sensing Ravena’s discomfort, cleared her throat. “Then your family is as modest about
your brother’s accomplishments as he is. I’ve heard his name spoken in Orlais with high praise. He is
brilliant at what he does.”

“He said the same thing about you.”

It must have been some trick of the light, but Ravena swore that the normally unflappable Josephine
had blushed. “Does that mean that you’ll let him stay?” she asked, her tone hopeful.

“It depends. Are you all right working with him?”

“More than all right. With two diplomats working for you, we can accomplish much more than I
could alone.”

Leliana leaned against the table. “And besides, Raoul is easy to look at, isn’t he, Josie?”

Josephine’s blush grew darker, causing her friend to laugh. “I…well, that is to say…”

Ravena smirked. “It’s okay if you think that my brother’s pretty,” she reassured her. “He is, you
know. When we were younger, most of the ladies in Ostwick fell over themselves for him. Thank
the Maker Raoul never realized his appeal, or else he would have been as impossible to live with as
my two other brothers were in their bachelor days.”

“What? How is that possible?” Josephine coughed. “I mean, he is rather attractive.”

Ravena waved her off. “He never had much patience for women, especially the empty-headed,
giggly sort when there were more important matters to deal with, like memorizing legal terms and
cases. The two of us are alike in our attention to scholarly pursuits. And when Father arranged an
internship for him and he spied the lawyer’s daughter, who was the exact opposite of giggly and empty-headed, he lost interest in all other women.”

“So he’s married.” This from Leliana, who wasn’t even hiding the fact that she was fishing for information.

“Widower. His wife Eliza died in childbirth fifteen years ago.”

Josephine put her hand to her throat. “That’s horrible.”

Ravena nodded. “It was. I’ve never seen two people more in love than them. After, Raoul poured himself into his work. It might still be a sore subject; I wouldn’t bring it up to him.” Maker knew that she hadn’t; Ravena had quickly realized that any attempts at bringing up either his wife or their child to help her brother heal from the loss of both had been met with resistance, her brother distancing himself even more from her. As painful as it was to see her brother suffer alone, she had stopped before the gulf between them grew so wide that it could never be bridged.

“Of course.”

“You have our word.” Leliana leaned in. “Though it will be nice to have another man to stand around and look pretty during our meetings.”

Ravena laughed. “I’m certain Cullen will appreciate sharing the load of teasing. Just be careful, Raoul always had a tendency to tease right back when you least expected it.” She covered her mouth to hide a yawn. “Now, if there’s nothing else, I think my bed is calling my name.”

Josephine shook her head. “No, I have nothing further. I did take the liberty of ordering you a bath and having some food sent to your quarters.”

Ravena sighed, just thinking how wonderful soaking in hot water would feel. “Josephine, you are a treasure.” With that, Ravena saw herself out and made her way to her quarters.

She was on one of the landings when she felt a presence beside her. “Hello, Cole,” she said, smiling in his direction.

He picked at a loose thread on his sleeve. “Hello.” For once, Cole was without his trademark hat. “He’s prickly, like a weed that knows it doesn’t belong in a garden but doesn’t want to be plucked out.”

She frowned in confusion. “Who is?”

He mirrored her expression. “There’s ragged edges, like a piece of cloth torn long ago. It’s all a jumble of confused thoughts that are too loud for me to make out. I want to help, but I can’t tell who it is.” Cole leaned against the wall and wrapped his thin arms around his middle. He looked so troubled that Ravena impulsively reached out to give him a hug.

“It’s all right, Cole. If you’d like, I could help you try to figure things out.”

“I think most of the noise is coming from you,” he said, his words muffled by her shoulder. He pulled back so he could look her in the eye. “There’s a wall between the two of you. The more you push on the wall, the further the wall moves away. You didn’t want to, but you eventually stopped pushing. It hurts.”

She looked down at the ground. “Yes, I did.” She looked back at him. “And yes, it does.”
“You’re like a doll whose arm was torn off at the seams; the pain isn’t fresh, more like a dull ache that you’ve gotten used to having. Losing a part of yourself made you seek other pieces to replace it, but you still miss him.”

“You’re right,” she finally said. “I do.”

Cole gently traced her cheek with a cool hand, his eyes understanding and sympathetic. “Your brother is here because he wants to be here, there’s no other reason. Titles don’t matter to him, ‘Vena.’

She took an involuntary step backwards at the shortened use of her name. The look on her face must have troubled Cole because he grimaced. “Little children laughing, heads close together as they play. No one besides Papa has called me that in so long.” He furrowed his brow. “I said that wrong and I hurt you. I didn’t mean to: I can fix it, say it again.”

“No, Cole. You didn’t do anything wrong.” Leaning in, she gave him a brief kiss on the forehead. “In fact, you said it just right.”

“The noise is quieter now,” he reassured her. “But the weed still bothers me. It’s conflicted: does it stay or does it leave? Never had to deal with this before, will someone make her realize I’m no good for her?” Cole’s eyes pointedly looked towards the closed door leading to Ravena’s chambers.

Ravena’s eyes followed his. “Ah. I think I might have an idea who those thoughts belong to.”

“So you’ll help them?”

“I’ll try to, as best as I’m able.”

Cole smiled. “Good. I like that you like helping people. It makes me happy.” He leaned in and gave her a kiss on the forehead, much like she had given him earlier. Almost immediately, the headache that had bloomed between her eyes since talking about her brother eased. “You’re very tired, you need to rest.”

She nodded. “I will. I’ll just…” she stopped, because suddenly the spirit wasn’t standing in front of her any longer. “…never get used to you popping in and out like that,” she finished out loud.

Shaking her head, she went up the last flight of stairs and opened her door, already anticipating the bath and food Josephine had promised to be waiting.

What she found was even better. Yes, there were slices of bread, cold meats and a selection of cheeses on a platter at her desk and thick plumes of steam were still rising off the tub situated by the fireplace, but what really made her heart beat contentedly was the dark shock of hair peeking over the back of the sofa she saw from her vantage point on the staircase. Smiling, she quietly made her way up to Blackwall and stared down at him as he slept. He had changed out of his travel-worn clothes and into a pale blue tunic and light brown trousers. Both items fit him well, the shirt stretching over his broad chest and wide shoulders in a way that made Ravena want to curl up on the sofa with him. He’d taken off his boots, his long legs stretched out in front of him and his bare feet resting on a nearby ottoman. Giving into the temptation, she toed off her own boots and folded her legs underneath her as she sat by his side.

He stirred at her movements. Still half asleep, he blindly reached out and draped his arm around her. “Hello.”

She snuggled up closer and pressed a kiss to his jaw. “I didn’t mean to wake you. You looked peaceful.”
He smiled. “I’m better, now that you’re here. They didn’t keep you very long.”

“No, I think a quick overview sufficed.” She curled an arm around her middle when her stomach grumbled.

Blackwall rested his chin against the crown of her head. “Hungry?”

“Famished. I see that the meal Josephine promised was delivered.” She rose and went over to the food. She sandwiched a large amount of meat and cheese between two slices of bread and was in the process of creating one for herself when she heard Blackwall get up from the sofa.

“I’ll leave you to it,” he said, his words sounding oddly formal.

Turning around, she tilted her head. “Just where do you think you’re going?”

He stood straight and rigid with his hands balled into fists at his sides, almost as if he were expecting a blow from somewhere. “I thought that you’d like to be alone, especially with your brother at Skyhold.”

She walked up to him and put her palm against his chest. As if to match his outward appearance, his heart was beating rapidly against his ribs. “Have I given you any reason to doubt my feelings for you?”

He covered her hand with one of his own. “Never.”

“And you’ve never given me a reason to doubt your feelings for me. Nothing changes just because my brother is here.” She leaned in and kissed him. “I’d like for you to stay, but the choice is ultimately up to you.”

He held her close. “I don’t deserve you,” he said, tension leaking out from his stance.

“Nonsense. You’re a good man, one that I’m grateful to have in my life every day.” Stretching up, she kissed him, hoping that if he wouldn’t believe the words she spoke that he’d believe the way she held him. Taking his hand, she led him to the tub. “The bath is getting cold.” She busied herself by dragging a side table to the edge of the tub. Whoever had delivered the food had also thought to bring up a bottle of wine and two goblets. She smiled as she filled both cups: she and Blackwall hadn’t been nearly as secretive as they thought they were. *It’s a wonder they haven’t started to bring his repaired gear or laundered clothes up here as well.*

He watched as she stripped out of her borrowed uniform, unabashed in her nudity. “I thought you said you were hungry,” he said, pulling his shirt over his head.

“The food will keep.” She slid into the tub with a blissful moan, her eyes on Blackwall as he divested himself of his pants. “That’s it,” she said, sipping her wine. “You’re not allowed to wear your field gear here at home ever again. I’m filling up dressers full of outfits just like that one for you.”

He smiled, his heart tripping over how easily she had called this place *home* for them. “If that’s what my lady wishes.” He groaned as he stepped into the tub and settled behind her, the heat from the water already soaking into his bones.

She leaned back against his chest. “Your lady wishes that you’d refrain from wearing clothes at all times, but I fear you’d suffer from exposure in the winter months.”

“Not to mention cause a spectacle.” He slid the pins out of her hair and set them on the table next to
their wineglasses. Shifting her hair over one shoulder, he bent his head and lavished kisses on the other. “No one needs to see my arse.”

“I happen to be rather fond of your arse,” she countered, reaching down and massaging his calf. The muffled groan against her skin told her that she had found a sore spot. “I thought you were favoring that leg.”

“It’s nothing.”

She arched her eyebrow and craned her neck so she could kiss him. “Nothing? Just like your bruised shoulder?”

“You weren’t supposed to notice that.” He disliked the feeling of having a weakness, especially when he tried to keep up the image of being solid and sure, a wall that Ravena could count on and lean against.

“It wouldn’t be hurt if I hadn’t slipped in the mud and been in that druffalo’s line of vision.” The enraged animal had her in its sights, but Blackwall had taken the blow meant for her while she had scrambled to her feet and out of harm’s way.

“It wouldn’t have mattered, had Dorian not hit the beast with lightning in the first place.”

She hummed her agreement. “Then Dorian owes you a drink, even if the druffalo zapping had been accidental.”

He laughed. “Dorian owes us all a drink, by that count. I seem to recall a certain crossbow wielding dwarf being tossed to the side after a charge.”

“Don’t remind Varric. He’d like to keep the entire tossing incident quiet so he doesn’t lose his credibility as a dark and mysterious storyteller. Besides, Cassandra would never let him hear the end of it if word got out.”

“And what of our renowned Inquisitor? Is your credibility in danger if rumors of nearly being bested by an overgrown cow crop up?” He reached for the washcloth and after lathering a generous amount of soap on the fabric, gently swiped it across her back, the faint scent of mint filling the air.

She laughed at his teasing tone. “If you have the urge to talk about our trip, make certain you mention that the druffalo was actually a dragon and it flew away before we could kill it. It’ll soothe everyone’s ego.” She relaxed against his chest again and trailed her fingers across the surface of the water. “I’m not close with my family. Not like I should be.”

The sudden change in topic surprised him. “What makes you think that?”

“Well, I should probably rephrase that. I’m close with my father and my two oldest brothers. Robert, my second oldest brother, would come to Tantervale often. Out of them all, he had the freest schedule: he was still apprenticing under my father’s seneschal in order to one day take over those duties, but he would make time to visit at least once a month and stay for a week each time. He’d bring his wife with him most visits. They grew so fond of the city that they even bought a small house they still use for vacations.” She smiled at the memory. “I remember Robert would make a big deal out of covertly smuggling in these little chocolates I used to love when I was younger. Many of the other Mothers disapproved of such indulgences from other initiate’s families, so I had to hide them in a hollowed out book I kept in my room.”

Blackwall abandoned the washcloth in favor of slowly running his hands over her back, his thumbs soothing away knots of tension. “You rarely speak of your family. What are they like?”
“You know I have three brothers and that I’m the youngest of the bunch. Richard, my father, is a good man with a kind heart, but he can be almost too serious for his own good at times and he tends to have a sarcastic streak when someone begins to irritate him about something. He’s an avid outdoorsman: you’ll know if he likes you if he starts to ask your opinion about hunting. You’ll know that he approves of you if he invites you to hunt on his grounds with him.” She smiled and her back relaxed under his hands. “I love him dearly. He says that he loves his children equally, yet it never failed that I could sway him towards my side of any argument as a child, much to my brothers’ annoyance.”

Ravena paused, her fingers tapping on the side of the tub. “My eldest brother, René, is a carbon copy of my father, both in looks and in temperament. He’ll take over the bannorn after Father passes, so he never had much of a chance to visit the Chantry when I was there. He made up for it by writing as often as he could. He and his wife have a son, though I can tell by the way that he dotes on his nieces that René wishes he had a daughter of his own to spoil. There’s a five year age gap between the two of us, but he’s never treated me as anything other than his equal. Out of the three, he’s the one that I’ve always confided in the most. He’s also the best at giving advice, and he’s the most protective of my brothers.” René had a tiny scar on his chin due to a fight he got into where another nobleman’s son was teasing Ravena. The taunting had gone from playful to downright cruel because at the time, she had a slight lisp. The brat might have gotten in a lucky hit and his ring had cut her brother, but René wound up breaking his nose. The memory of René, bloody chin and all, kneeling in front of her as he dried her tears had been permanently seared into her brain. He’d told her that it didn’t matter how she talked, because she was his favorite person to talk with and anyone who dared to mock her would face his wrath. Years of speech lessons had banished the lisp for good, but the bratty boy’s face never recovered. To this day, many of his contemporaries called him Pug Face behind his back.

She picked up the long-handled brush nearby and took her time scrubbing her legs and feet. For good measure, she copied the same motions with his, using the act of bathing as a way to busy her hands while she spoke. “My second brother Robert can be just as serious as René when the occasion calls for it, especially when there’s anything pertaining to his duties, but he’s the most lighthearted in the family. If you need someone to find a bit of fun with and drink until the early hours of the morning, he’s your man. Where René might sit and listen and offer a shoulder to cry on, Robert has this way about him that makes it nearly impossible for anyone to feel low when he’s around. You can’t help but laugh at some of his horrible jokes, which he’ll purposely make just to make you feel better because he can’t stand the sight of tears. He’s a born flirt too: he had most of the ladies in Ostwick giggling and blushing after him in his bachelor days. That is until he met Maria. She was the only woman unaffected by his charms, so naturally he fell in love with her. They have three children – two girls and a boy – and I’m happy to report that I’m their favorite aunt.”

Blackwall grinned. “You seem proud of that fact.”

“While I love my brother’s wives like they’re my sisters, yes, I’m thrilled to be the favorite. I’m also the ‘fun’ relative who has tons of interesting stories to tell my nephews and nieces about my travels.”

“What of your mother?”

Ravena sighed, plucking the washcloth from the side of the tub to run down her arms. “Sometimes I feel as if I’m a disappointment to her. I can tell that she doesn’t approve of my decision to follow after my cousin’s footsteps as a field researcher, especially when she hears about random tussles with bandits and beasts. I try to water the reports down as best as I can to keep my family from worrying, but Henri doesn’t have that sort of filter when he goes to visit. He doesn’t mean to say anything that might worry them, it just all sorts of spills out over the course of his stay. As I’ve said before, she would have preferred me to stay in some cloister and become a sister before hopefully working up
the Chantry ranks. Having a Revered Mother Trevelyan in the family would have brought a lot of political clout, you know. Had I not been placed into the Chantry, Mother often talked about marrying me off to some rich noble and giving her tons of grandchildren.” She turned around and began to soap up his chest, her eyes focused somewhere around Blackwall’s chin. “She always dressed me up in satin and lace as a child; I think my choices of pants over dresses and adventuring over more ladylike pastimes confuses her.”

“Young brother seems nice,” he offered, noting that she hadn’t spoken of him yet. “Will he be staying with us?”

She nodded, her fingers easing the soreness at his shoulder. “Raoul’s an excellent addition to the Inquisition. He’s already impressed Josephine to the point where she’d more than likely be upset with me if I asked him to go.”

“But do you want him here?”

Ravena tilted her chin down. “I don’t know. Part of me wants him to be here because I’ve missed him. The other part of me wants him to leave because…” she splayed her hands out against his chest in a gesture that said she wasn’t sure how to express herself. “Because I’ve missed him. As twins, we were nearly inseparable as children and seemed to always know what the other was thinking or feeling at any given time, but our relationship became strained after I went to the Chantry and distance separated us. It became even worse when his wife Eliza died. I write to him often, but he rarely answers and when he does, it feels as if he only writes back because he has to, not because he wants to. His work schedule and mine always seem to be on opposing timetables; the only chances I’ve really had to visit with him have been on First Day celebrations, but even then we don’t get much chance to talk alone because he’s always put to work on some preparation for festivities or another.” Being together as a family on festival days was so important to her entire family; there had never really been a good time to take Raoul aside to confront him about the distance that had grown between them, seeing that Ravena hadn’t wanted to spoil the festive mood for everyone with an outburst. Cole had been right: the hurt of being ignored by her brother had become a constant ache she had adapted to until it just felt normal to feel that way.

Blackwall put his arms around her. “And you’re wondering why he’s shown up now.”

“For the most part, I was thrilled when I saw Raoul here, but there’s this nagging little voice that keeps creeping up that wonders if he’s just here because I’m the Herald of Andraste and he’s honor-bound as a Trevelyan to show up instead of coming to support his sister because he wanted to see me for me. Cole pinpointed it right away: I don’t want to be the Herald to my family, or,” she framed his face with her hands. “Or to those that I love.”

Blackwall stood up from the bath and reached for one of the towels that had been left for them. Slinging it around his hips, he held out his hand. “I don’t see you as the Herald,” he told her. “Well, I do see you as the Herald when we’re out closing rifts or when you’re doing Inquisition-related things, but that’s just one side of you. I see you as more than your title.”

She took his hand and grabbed a second towel. “What do you see me as, then?” she asked, wrapping the towel around herself. She took a breath and grinned at him, trying to dispel the heaviness that had fallen over them. “Just so you know, I am blatantly fishing for compliments.”

He smiled and helped her step out of the tub. “I see a clever, intelligent woman who is insatiably curious about the world around her. She is equally at home in a hushed library or a rowdy tavern, though personally I enjoy the tavern, especially when she gets into her cups and starts singing bawdy tunes.”
Ravena laughed. “That was once, and I wasn’t that drunk.”

“Says you.” He picked up one of her previously made sandwiches and handed it to her. “I see someone skilled with blades that I would trust my life to in a fight. I see a woman who finds something to smile about even when the world seems to shit upon everything good, who takes on the hard decisions so no one else has to be burdened with them.” He took a bite of his sandwich. “I see a most stunningly beautiful woman who for some incomprehensible reason, has chosen to allow a rough, shaggy-looking man she found wandering the woods into her life.”

She brushed crumbs off her hands. “I saw a ruggedly handsome outdoorsman in the woods, teaching a handful of men how to protect themselves and their families,” Ravena corrected. “Actually, I heard you long before I saw you. I was incredibly pleased to discover that your appearance matched the attractive sound of your voice.”

Meal finished, he reached out and smoothed his hands over her waist, his palms catching on the nubby texture of the towel. “So you like my voice, do you?”

Nodding, she slid her hands across his shoulders and upwards until her fingers tangled in his still-damp hair. “Very much.”

He bent his head until he could rest his forehead against hers. “Maker, I don’t know how I became so fortunate to find you,” he breathed.

“I ask myself that about you,” she replied. “Your being here with me has made all of this bearable.”

“My lady.” It was too easy to angle his head for a kiss. The loose knot Ravena had made with her towel came undone with a light tug, as did the tie at his hip. Both pieces of material fell in a puddle around their feet.

“Take me to bed,” she murmured against his mouth, arms going around his shoulders as he easily slung her up in his arms and carried her towards the waiting mattress.

They lay in a sleepy tangle of sheets and limbs. Blackwall ran his fingers down her arm, marveling at how soft her skin was. “Do you think they would approve of me?” he suddenly wondered, his voice quiet and low.

Ravena’s fingers stopped making random patterns across his chest and stomach. “Hm? Who?”

“Your family.” He held her closer, his hand splayed across her back. “Your parents, especially.”

Her fingers resumed their lazy path along his body. “Does it matter?”

He caught her hand in his. “I never really paid it any thought because they were so far over there in Ostwick, but now that you have someone here, yes, it does matter.” He brought her hand up and kissed her fingers. “You matter, Ravena, more so than any other woman I’ve ever known.”

She lifted her head away from his shoulder so she could look him in the eye. “You matter to me too,” she said solemnly. “I’ve never felt this way about anyone else.”

“I want,” he started, reaching out to run a long wave of her hair through his fingers, “I want very much to be the kind of man they would want for their daughter. The kind of man your brothers would gladly want for their sister.”
“You’re a good man with a kind heart. I think that my family would be quite impressed with you.” Snuggling closer, she wound her leg around his. “And you make me happy, which is all that my parents have ever truly wanted for their children.”

“I’ve never really cared about anyone else’s opinion before,” he confessed. “I’m just afraid that…”

She silenced him with a kiss. “I’m not easily driven away just because people don’t approve of my choices,” she told him. “If I were, then I’d probably be sitting in some Chantry right now instead of traipsing around Thedas.”

He sighed. “Let me guess: Cole?”

She nodded. “He means well, and he has a way of bluntly getting to the heart of a matter that most people don’t.” Resting her head against his shoulder again, she continued. “I love you, and I hope that you’d want to be with me no matter what others think.”

He ran his thumb against the back of her hand. “There’s no place else I’d rather be,” he told her.

She beamed up at him. “I’m glad.” She tilted her face away to hide a yawn against his collarbone. “We should get some rest. Something tells me that even if we’ve only returned, there’s still more work to be done.”

Blackwall dropped a kiss to the crown of her head. He quietly lay there and listened as her breathing slowed down and her body grew heavier against his arm, her tell-tale sign that she had fallen asleep. He worried about her, she often woke multiple times during the night when they were on the road and never seemed to look fully rested during the day. Thankfully, she made up for it by sleeping like the dead once they were back at Skyhold, not even stirring at the slightest sound and barely moving from the position she had fallen asleep in. He knew from experience that in the morning he’d be able to slip out of her bed, dress and leave without so much as disturbing her.

Not that he wanted to leave her, but he had two major plans for the next day. The first revolved around meeting with Ravenna’s advisors to see if they could give Ravenna at least another day of rest before inundating her with various requests. She tried to hide it from everyone, but he could tell she was exhausted.

The second involved properly introducing himself to Raoul. While Ravenna might have said that opinions didn’t matter much to her, he still wanted to make a good impression. Settling more comfortably against the pillows, Blackwall drew Ravenna closer and shut his eyes. It wasn’t long before he joined her in slumber.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter happened while I was trying to figure out the Trevelyan siblings' backstory. Ravenna's mother liked all the baby names that started with the letter R. Ravenna's father didn't object because on a practical level, they would save so much on monograms for stationary and seals. Growing up, the siblings used to irritate their tutors by never writing their full names on any assignment, just their RT initials, so no one really knew whose paper was grossly inaccurate and who actually understood the lesson for the day. It got better when Rene and Robert grew too old for certain subjects, but the twins were still a handful. Out of all her brothers, Rene is Ravenna's favorite.
life

Ravena had read about people going into a berserker rage before. She’d even seen it in action, thanking her lucky stars that she was not on the receiving end of the warrior’s wrath.

What she never thought she’d do is experience the phenomena herself. They were in the middle of the Emerald Graves on the trail of red lyrium smugglers when they crossed paths with a giant. Before, they’d luckily managed to sneak past any that they’d spotted without incident, but this one had spied them before they could avoid combat.

Things had been going well, the fight ever so slowly turning in their favor when several things happened at once: Bull had been flung out of range by the giant’s hand, landing thankfully unharmed in a large pile of brush, and Cole had paused in his fighting to down a healing potion and was unguarded. Ravena had seen what was happening and grabbed him by the arm to get him out of striking range, which unfortunately put her in the spirit’s place. She had braced herself for the impact of the giant’s fist, but what she got instead was a hard shove in the center of her back and a mouthful of grass.

“Ravena, no!” Ravena flipped over in time to see Blackwall stand protectively over her, his sword cutting into the giant’s hand. That same hand opened and scooped Blackwall up faster than any of them could react. He let out a strangled yell as the beast’s hand crushed him, his armor groaning with the strain. The giant then threw him just as easily as someone would discard a wadded up piece of paper, Blackwall’s limp body hitting a massive tree with a sick thud.

Ravena honestly couldn’t recall the events that happened soon after. All she could remember was the heavy sound of Blackwall hitting the ground and a piercing shriek splitting the air, her throat burning as she realized the sound was coming from her. The world became one blur of red as she lunged at the giant with her daggers, rage driving her on. The ground shook, but she continued to attack, long after her arms had gone heavy with exertion.

The Iron Bull stopped her mid-slice, his hand clamping over her wrist. “He’s dead,” he said quietly. He took in her wild expression and clarified. “The giant. We got him.”

His words snapped her out of whatever haze she had been and she blinked, finally noticing the giant lying prone on the ground, its eyes already starting to glaze over in death. “Blackwall,” she breathed, sharply turning to the place she had seen him fall. Sheathing her daggers, she ran to him. Her knees ached when she fell at his side, but she didn’t care. She was more concerned with how pale he was underneath all the spattered blood.

“He’s alive,” Cole said, propping Blackwall’s head in his lap as the spirit carefully fed him sips of healing potion. “Chest, head, ribs. Everything a bright burst of pain. Maker, let her be all right.”

“Can you tell what he hurt exactly?” she asked, gingerly working to strip Blackwall of his armor. His pauldrons were a complete loss, as was his chest plate and several of the segmented portions of his tassets: metal was crimped and twisted in on itself and Ravena worried that any pieces might have punctured his body. She left his helmet on, hoping that whatever protection it offered would keep him safe while they transported him to a campsite.

“No. Everything hurts so much, but the worst of the pain is in his chest.” He eased out from underneath Blackwall and looked at Ravena as they traded places. “He’s not going to die,” he said sternly.
“I know he isn’t,” she said, uncorking a potion from her supply and pressing the glass bottle to Blackwall’s unresponsive lips. Her heart beat frantically when she saw the precious contents dribble out the corners of his mouth.

“Little bird, frightened and alone. I won’t let him leave you; I’m going to help.” As absorbed in trying to get Blackwall to drink, Ravena didn’t even notice him leave.

“We need to move him,” Bull said. “I don’t think the two of us can take on a group of nasties that might show up, at least not right now.” They had run into a lot of wolves lately, and a corpse as large as a giant for them to scavenge would surely bring them in large numbers.

She nodded, her fingers catching the potion on his lips and coaxing him to swallow as much as he could. “I can carry his armor and weapons. Can you…”

Bull put his hand on her shoulder. “I’ve got him, Boss.”

Luckily, the closest campsite wasn’t too terribly far and they didn’t run into any enemies along the way. Ravena noted several bandit corpses peeking out from the underbrush and silently thanked Cole for clearing their path. Another stroke of luck was that there was a field medic in the camp who took charge as soon as he saw the extent of Blackwall’s injuries.

Ravena stood close by, wincing as Blackwall’s helmet was taken off and she could see the blood in his hair and the ugly bruise that was beginning to bloom across his face. The surgeon worked in a flurry of movement, especially when he pressed his ear to Blackwall’s chest and declared one of his lungs to be collapsed. Ravena tried to watch, but she turned and buried her face against Bull when the surgeon made an incision and placed a metal tube in his chest. Ravena blessed Cole again when she heard the attending medics mutter under their breath that they didn’t remember packing such instruments in their gear before leaving Skyhold.

“Come on,” Bull said, pulling at her shoulder. “Let’s give them room to work.”

Ravena was thankful for the Iron Bull: he didn’t try to stop her from pacing back and forth in front of the large statue, one arm wrapped comfortingly around herself while she chewed the nail of her thumb down to the quick. He listened as she rambled on about her limited knowledge of elven religion and folklore, offering a few brief suggestions as to why they had found so many statues of Fen’Harel when Dalish herself often used the god’s name as a curse. Once Ravena had run out of theories, he distracted her by telling her of his Chargers’ past exploits, even though he’d already told her several of them more than once.

Ravena jumped when the surgeon approached them an hour later. He looked tired, but he smiled as he wiped his bloody hands on a cloth. “He’s stable for now,” he told them. “We were able to re-inflate his lung and potion application made it possible to remove the chest tube. He’s breathing on his own, and my team and I managed to set the ribs that had been broken. It will take a while for them to heal, and he’s going to be bruised and sore until they do. He has some heavy bruising around his kidneys and lower back as well. I couldn’t detect any internal hemorrhaging, but I’d like to keep an eye on them just to be safe.”

“But he’s okay?” Bull asked, more for Ravena’s benefit than his.

“He still hasn’t woken up, and I’m worried about him suffering a concussion, especially with the trauma to his head, but…”
The Iron Bull tilted his head and looked the surgeon in the eye. “But he’s okay, right?” His eye flicked over to Ravena for emphasis.

The surgeon got the hint. “Ah. Yes. Aside from any damage we can’t see until he wakes, I imagine he’ll make a full recovery.”

“May I see him?” Ravena asked.

“Yes. He’s in the tent over there.”

“Thank you.” Ravena turned to Bull.

“You go on. I’m gonna catch a nap.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed. “Thanks, Bull.”

He nodded, knowing what she was thanking him for. “No problem, Boss. Take it that we’re gonna cut this trip short?”

“Yes. We’ll head back to Skyhold as soon as Blackwall’s cleared to travel.”

“Good. In the meanwhile, I’ll send a bird to Red to let her and the Commander know what’s going on. I’ll add a note to make sure Stitches and Dalish ride out to meet us halfway.” He knew just as well as all the other Chargers that Dalish wasn’t a mage. She just happened to have a knack for healing that came in handy when Stitches’ poultices and potions weren’t enough.

“I’m grateful. I’m sure Blackwall will be too.”

“Eh, just tell him when he wakes up that he’d better get his ass back in fighting shape as soon as he can. I’d hate for him to miss out on all the fun.” He gently pushed Ravena in the direction of the large tent the surgeon pointed out.

As quietly as she could, Ravena pushed the tent flap open. Inside, there were tables full of crafting supplies and unoccupied cots neatly lined up in rows. Blackwall lay in one of them, looking strangely small out of his armor and lying so still. Ravena dragged a chair over to his bedside, tears threatening to fall as she looked at him. She’d seen him in various stages of undress many times already, but seeing him wrapped in so many bandages was new and a sight she would prefer not to see him in again. Sinking down onto the chair, she reached for his hand.

“Hey,” she said, her thumbs running over the back of his palm. “We’re okay, we’re at a camp. You got yourself beaten up pretty badly, but you’re going to get better.” She brought his hand to her lips and pressed a kiss to his skin.

“I know you can hear me, Thom,” she murmured, reaching out and tentatively brushing the backs of her fingers across his unbruised cheek. “So I need you to wake up so I can yell at you.” She really wasn’t expecting him to dramatically wake up at her words; things like that only happened in Varric’s books after all, but she still held her breath and watched anxiously for some sort of response, her eyes glued to his body as she watched the rise and fall of his chest, mentally counting each breath.

Ravena woke up to the sensation of fingers twitching against her own. Blinking, she realized that she must have fallen asleep sometime during the night. Rubbing her eyes with the heel of her left hand,
she also realized that someone must have moved her because she was sitting on the ground with her head against Blackwall’s arm and his hand firmly held in her right.

That’s when it registered that there were twitching fingers against her palm. Sitting up straight, she stared at him. “Thom?”

Blackwall opened his eyes, a pained breath causing him to grimace. Ravena scrambled to her feet and reached for the canteen of water she had at her belt. After carefully tilting his head and giving him small sips, she blindly sat back down in her abandoned chair.

“Are you all right, Love?” he managed to ask, his voice raspy.

She laughed tearfully. “You have broken ribs, a punctured lung, bruised kidneys, and a possible concussion and you’re asking if I’m okay?”

He tried to raise his hand, but winced in pain. “Blood.”

Her fingers touched her cheek, noticing for the first time that her skin was tacky. “It isn’t mine. I’m pretty sure that most of it is the giant’s, but I think some of it is yours too.”

“Good.” He licked his lips and tried to focus on her. “Kept you safe.”

“You almost died because of me. Don’t ever put yourself in danger like that because of me again. I couldn’t bear it if you’d…if…” She leaned over him and gently pressed her forehead to his.

“Can’t promise that.” He tilted his head up enough to brush his lips across hers. “I’d do it all over again if it meant you were safe.”

She took a shaky breath and leaned away. “I should tell the medics that you’ve woken up. They were worried about some things they’d only be able to diagnose when you were conscious.”

“Good. While it’s a nice view, I don’t think I should be seeing two or three of you.” He closed his eyes as a wave of nausea made his stomach unpleasantly twist. “Get the tent to stop spinning, would you?”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Brushing her fingers across his cheek one last time, she turned and went in the direction she had last seen the medics.

“The pain isn’t as bad as it once was. I’m happy he’s better.”

“Cole.” Ravena wrapped her arms around his thin body and held on tightly. “Thank you,” she breathed.

“Knees weak, heart beating wildly. He’s awake; Maker I can breathe again.” He leaned back so he could look her in the eye. “I told you I wouldn’t let him die. I’m glad I could help.”

“You did so much more than help. Where did you find the medical supplies?”

Cole held up a belt full of health potions. “There’s a camp several miles away. They hurt people for fun; Blackwall needed their supplies more than they will. I already talked to the Iron Bull and showed him where the camp is on the map.”

“That’s good. We can’t do anything about them directly now, but we can expand patrols to keep the area safe for Fairbanks and his people.”

Cole pushed a thick lock of hair out of Ravena’s eyes. “You would survive,” he said quietly.
“Pardon?”

“You told Blackwall that you didn’t know what you’d do if he died. You would survive. It would hurt more than anything you’ve ever gone through and you wouldn’t be the same afterwards, but you’re strong. You’d endure.” He frowned and back to the infirmary tent. “He wouldn’t. He had to save you or else he might as well die alongside you. That’s why he risked getting hurt; he’d suffer through more if it meant you were safe.”

“I would do the same for him.”

“Because you love him?”

“Because I love him.”

He looked down at his feet. “But why did you put yourself in danger for me? You don’t love me, not like you love him. You would be sad if I died, but it wouldn’t destroy you.”

She reached out and tipped his chin up with her fingers. “I pulled you out of the way because you’re my friend, Cole. Friends keep other friends safe.”

He gave her the tiniest of smiles. “Friends. I have to keep reminding myself that I’m not alone.” His smile grew larger. “It feels so warm.”

“And if you forget, there are a ton of people in Skyhold willing to remind you how much they like you.”

“Yes. I’ll remember that.” He cocked his head to the side, as if listening to something. “You might want to get the medics. Blackwall’s head aches. He’ll need these.” He handed her the cache of potions. Ravena blinked, thinking to thank him one more time, but he was already gone.

Her steps lighter than they had been since earlier that afternoon, she made her way over to the medics and reported her good news.
And I'm all caught up! After this, it'll be new material posted here and cross-posted to my writing journal.

Come say hi over at my tumblr!

“For the last time, no.”

“Will you not listen to reason?”

Ravena crossed her arms over her chest and arched an eyebrow. “You want to talk about reason? Blackwall, look at yourself.”

He huffed as he tried to get up from the bed. He got so far as to raise himself onto his elbows before he grunted in pain. “I’m fine, woman.”

She sat on the edge of the mattress and gently pushed on his shoulders until he lay back down. “You were grabbed by a giant and thrown against a tree. You have several broken ribs that are trying to mend and you’re still recovering from bruised kidneys and a concussion. Had we not have had any potions on us, you would have died.”

“Yet I didn’t.”

“You came close.” Seeing him lying pale and unresponsive in a crumpled heap, his armor twisted about him like shredded paper had been the most terrifying experience in her life. Leaning over him, she placed a palm against his heavily bandaged chest and pressed a kiss to his brow. “You need time to heal so that when I do go on a difficult mission, you’ll be ready to come with me. This is easy; we’re just setting up the last few campsites in the Hinterlands we never got around to doing and completing a few odd jobs here and there.”

He scowled. “I don’t like the thought of you going out there without me.”

“I’m taking Cassandra, Solas and Varric with me. You trust them, don’t you?” Tracing her fingers across his frown, she tilted her head. “Believe it or not, I actually got a lot accomplished with those three before we recruited you.”

“It isn’t that I don’t trust them,” he started, reaching up to brush his fingertips across her cheek. “It’s that I’m not there. I can’t protect you from here.”

She bent her head for a kiss. “Dear man,” she murmured, rubbing her nose affectionately against his. “I appreciate that you want to be my protector, but let me be yours right now. Rest and heal, if not for yourself, then for me.”

He sighed, tilting his head up to catch her mouth with his again. “For you, then,” he promised.

“Good. In return, I promise I’ll take you out to Crestwood so we can take on that dragon that’s been terrorizing the area.”
He let out a small huff of laughter. “Perhaps nothing that strenuous,” he told her. Reaching out, he brushed a few stray hairs away from her face. “Be careful out there, Ravena.”

“I will. I’ll see you as soon as I get back.” She gave him one last lingering kiss before leaving the infirmary. On the way out, she spied her brother leaning against the exterior wall.

“He’s a stubborn man,” Raoul commented.

“Yes, he is.”

“Ah well, you’re a stubborn woman, so I’m certain the two of you are well-matched.” He laughed as she shoved at him.

“Keep an eye on him for me,” she asked.

“Both eyes, as often as I’m able. My boss has me busy making ties with half of Antiva at the moment.”

She shrugged. “I wouldn’t have given you the assignment if I hadn’t known you were capable of it. I’m serious though; don’t let him do anything he shouldn’t be doing. Sit on him if you have to.”

“Maker’s breath, the two of you really are well suited for the other. I’m going to be stuck here with a man worrying about your safety while you’re out there fretting about his.” He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. “Just be careful, will you?” The last was said with genuine concern, all teasing gone from his voice.

Impulsively, she turned to embrace him. “I will.” She couldn’t help but feel grateful at the way Raoul’s arms tightened around her.

It took Blackwall two weeks to recover enough that the healers weren’t hovering over him any time he tried to get out of bed to take a piss. A week after that they finally deemed him fit enough that he could move out of the infirmary. At hearing the news, he didn’t know who was more relieved, himself or the healers. The need to move about when he hadn’t been able to leave the bed on his own had made him want to crawl the walls.

Maybe it was a good thing Ravena was gone while I was recovering from the worst of it, he thought, knowing that his temper had been shorter than usual while he had been bedridden. He was still grumpy, mostly because he wasn’t back to full strength, even after three weeks’ worth of potions and poultices. The dark purple bruises that had adorned most of his upper body down to the waist were now a sickly looking green and yellow, but he still felt uncomfortable twinges against his ribs when he twisted certain ways.

Perhaps the only good thing about being bedridden for so long had been the fact that he had gotten to know Ravena’s brother better. Raoul had made a point to stop by in the evenings and the two of them would talk or play a game of cards. Sera was often around at that time, so conversations were often loud and sarcastic. At the end of the first visit together, Sera had pat Blackwall’s foot and deemed that Raoul was an okay sort of noble who didn’t have his head stuffed up his arse most of the time, which coming from her was high praise indeed. Blackwall had discovered that he and Raoul had some shared interests, and he had managed to wheedle out a few childhood stories that further confirmed his image of Ravena as a rough and tumble tomboy.

Now that he had been released from the healer’s care, he was back in the stables. The first day, just
for fun, he attempted to suit up in his full armor. The end result had been him slumping in a chair out of sheer exhaustion, half of his gear still on the table and a fine sheen of sweat on his brow. Sera had found him that way; she had been taking to stealing treats from the kitchens and smuggling them into the infirmary as a way to cheer him up and it looked as if she was going to continue until he was back to full health. She hadn’t said anything about his tired state; she just helped him unbuckle what he had gotten into and neatly placed it back on the rack he normally kept his armor on. Then she had produced a rather large block of cheese, a heel of still-warm bread, a chunk of cold roast, and two bottles of mead from the sack she had slung at her hip. He had a suspicion that all the items had been swiped either from the kitchens or from the tavern’s supply room.

Get to eatin’, Beardy, she had told him, helping herself to a large portion of the food. We’re playing cards at the tavern tonight now that you’re up and walkin’ around and I need you to keep an eye on that shifty dwarf, whatsisname, Pebbles or summat. He’s being all sneaky-like with giving me shit hands and taking all my money. I think him and Grime are in on it. Odd sort of fellow, that Grime. Doesn’t say nothin’ but still gets his point across. He’d been too amused by the way her nose had scrunched up that he hadn’t thought to correct both of the Chargers’ names.

He was grateful for the distractions; Ravena had said she anticipated being gone for a month and the last week waiting for her to return had been utter torture. Fully healed and more than rested, Blackwall had filled his time with woodworking projects just to keep his hands busy. A morning exploring the Keep had unearthed entire rooms filled with furniture in need of repair. By Wednesday, he had completely upgraded an entire bedroom set. The finished items had turned out so handsomely that he had claimed them for his own, setting them up in a forgotten room off of the gardens he had stumbled upon earlier. It had taken a little bartering with the merchants to procure a decent mattress and linens. In all, sleeping in his newly acquired nook was worlds better than the straw mattress he had been sleeping on in the hayloft, and he decided after his first night that he’d make the spot his permanent quarters. It might be further away from the barracks for training purposes, but if anything, perhaps the secluded nature of his new room would provide him and Ravena with more privacy than the stable had. Even now, Blackwall could feel his face and the back of his neck heat as he recalled Sera teasing about him getting hay in various nooks and crannies.

Friday had seen Blackwall pacing the ramparts like a caged animal, impatiently going from one end of Skyhold to the next. Cullen had given him reports to deliver, thinking to capitalize on Blackwall’s restlessness, but had quickly retracted the offer when Blackwall had distractedly delivered them to the wrong recruit. Night had fallen without any sign of the party and by late evening Blackwall had retreated to his new garden room, convinced that Ravena would return later than she had first thought. Concern about her welfare had him staring up at the ceiling, but eventually sleep had taken over.

When he woke next, something was tickling his nose. Eyes still closed, he batted at the offending object, only to have his fingers brush against soft hair. Sliding his palm down, he caught the edge of an ear and the feminine curve of a cheek. His eyes snapped open when a hand smoothed over his chest and a contented sigh broke the silence.

“I was wondering when you’d wake up,” Ravena said sleepily, shifting so she could twine a leg around his. She pressed a lazy kiss against his chest before scooting up enough to reach his mouth. “Hello.”

“Hello.” He slung his arm around her and drew her closer. “When did you get back?”

“About two hours ago. I would have gone to look for you first, but…”

He turned on his side so he could face her. “Duty calls. I take it that the three of them requested
“Updates on your trip first?”

She nodded, propping her head on her hand. “The four of them, actually. Raoul said that you were finally given a clean bill of health this week.”

“Thank the Maker. I don’t think I could have handled any more poking and prodding from Sister Gertrude.”

Ravena grinned. “I also have some information from Sister Gertrude that you were a veritable grump while you were out of commission.”

He scoffed. “I wasn’t that bad.”

“She started counting all the times you blasphemed. I think the total count before they said you could leave the infirmary was in the fifties.”

“I couldn’t have been that bad.”

“I believe she said your favorite, or at least most often used, swear was Andraste’s giant flaming...”

“All right, so I was that bad.” He reached out and gingerly traced a fading bruise that curved from her eyebrow to her cheekbone. “What happened?”

She shrugged. “Minor scuffle with a bear.” She winced when he raised his eyebrow. “I got in the way of Solas’ staff as he was casting and he accidentally backhanded me with it. He was very apologetic about it all. In his defense, he was being attacked by a bear at the time.”

“And what of the bear?”

“Varric and Cassandra are going to play stone, parchment, scissors to see who gets to keep the skin. Cassandra said something about using it to make a warmer coat for trips into Emprise du Lion we need to start thinking of making. Varric said he needs it as a rug to lounge on when he gets writer’s block.” She grinned. “I might have told everyone that I supported Cassandra’s practical use of it, but in all honesty, I’m rooting for Varric. He said he gets his best intentionally-bad erotica ideas when surrounded by the same cheesy accessories he writes about. Right now he’s co-authoring a long-distance novella with his pirate friend Isabela that he won’t let me read until it’s finished. All he says is that the prose has gotten even more purple than usual and he’s running out of metaphors for the term member. He said there’s flowering and weeping involved as well.”

Blackwall blinked, trying to get the mental image out of his head. “Do I even want to know?”

“He told me that if his friend out-writes him, he’s going to see if Bull and Sera want to collaborate on a chapter or two. Apparently it’s even better than Swords and Shields, which he’s also been dropping hints to in an effort to get Cassandra to just give him the damn bear skin.”

He laughed. “He really wants a bearskin rug that badly?”

“Nope. The best part is that when I asked him what he really wanted it for, he replied that he wanted to use it to make Cassandra a warmer coat for the trips to Emprise du Lion. He just wanted to irritate her, especially since he had to run around to avoid the bear cubs that had been trailing after the bear we took on. They were definitely not happy to see their mama under attack.”

“Now that sounds more like him.” Blackwall ran the backs of his fingers against her cheek, smiling at her when she leaned into his touch. “It’s good to have you back.”
“It’s good to be back.” She settled against him, her head pillowed on his shoulder. “It felt odd not having you out there with me.”

“I’m certain that the tent was quieter at night without my snoring.”

She snorted. “Cassandra tends to mumble. Apparently Varric still manages to vex her in her sleep because she kept on muttering damn dwarf every so often.” She lifted her head and looked around his newly claimed room. “This is a nice place.”

“You like it?”

“It’s very secluded. Took me forever to hunt you down. I’m surprised that the sisters haven’t claimed this wing for themselves.”

“I think they’re trying. It’s a little ways away from where they established the Chantry, but I saw one or two workmen clearing out some nearby rooms.” He turned to lie on his back, his arm still wrapped around Ravena’s shoulder. “At least it doesn’t smell like the stables.”

“Oh? Are you thinking of making a permanent change of residence?” She burrowed closer, sighing contentedly. This is what she had missed for the past month: the closeness, the ability to relax and talk to someone about nothing in particular. While she and many of her friends kidded around and freely showed affection, no one held her in the familiar way that Blackwall did and it wasn’t until she had him back in her reach that she had realized just how starved for touch she had been.

“As a matter of fact, I was thinking of it. I like the space; it’s far away from prying eyes and ears that hear things they shouldn’t.”

Ravena groaned and buried her face against his chest. “Please tell me that Cabot isn’t telling everyone what he heard. Maker’s breath, we get too noisy in the hayloft one time and we never hear the end of it.”

“Actually, my lady, I can recall a handful of other times we…” Blackwall tensed and nearly sat up. “Wait, Cabot? I was talking about Sera.”

She groaned again. “Sera too? Well, at least that explains the whole finding hay in my bedroll after the last time.” Ravena peeked up at him and smirked. “According to Cabot, there have been reports of things going bump in the night and strange noises coming from the barn. We’ve been spooking the horses.”

He ran his free hand over his face. “Maker’s balls.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Walking her fingers over his chest, her smirk widened. “I don’t know if I should be embarrassed or smug.”

“Smug. I’m definitely going with smug.” Grinning, he rolled them over until Ravena’s back hit the mattress. “I am one lucky bastard,” he told her, his lips skating over the line of her throat.

She hummed her agreement. “I am quite the catch,” she teased, twining her fingers in his hair.

“You’ll not hear any arguments from me.” His fingers began to deftly undo the toggles on her tunic. “Care to see just how secluded our new spot is?”

The next morning, Ravena was touring the Chantry gardens to check in with the Inquisition’s herbalists. One of the sisters stopped her to quietly ask if something could be done to move repairs to that portion of the Keep forward on the schedule. The young sister complained that she had been
kept up most of the night, the sound of the wind moaning and groaning as it whipped through the various holes in the surrounding structures sounding almost human in tone. Ravena had felt a blush creep across her cheeks and down her throat when the sister described a particularly loud shriek that had woken the poor girl up after she had finally drifted off.

Face still hot, she left the Chantry and went in search of a mason. There had to be some way to sound-proof a room.
Tankards and dishes clanked against the large wooden table. The sound of cards being shuffled was all but drowned out by laughter, music, and the many conversations floating around.

“Pass the ham, will you, Dorian?”

“Does this one taste like despair, or should we complain to the cooks?”

“I think we should complain if it did taste like despair.”

“And then there we were, running around in circles trying to get away from this bear, when Seeker over here starts screaming and lets out with a mean right hook. Knocked old furry butt out cold.”

“I did not scream!”

“And yet you don’t deny the bear punching.”

“Do you know how many times I’ve found *Hard in Hightown* lying around this place? Do we seriously need over thirty copies of that book? They’re taking up valuable shelf space that could be better used to bring in *quality* novels from Tevinter.”

“We probably need *more*. The copies that I’ve found have made their way around the barracks and are in pretty sad shape.”

“Don’t let Ravena know; she’ll beat your recruits’ heads in if she finds out they’re abusing books. I just might join her.”

Cole sat perched on a stool nestled between Josephine and the Iron Bull. His eyes moved over the group as he tried and failed to keep up with multiple conversations. “You’re happy,” he said with a smile, tilting his head towards Ravena. “All of you are.”

“Well, it isn’t every night we can all get together for a friendly game of cards,” Varric replied, dealing another round. Money hit the table as everyone glanced at their cards.

“We deserve a night off,” Ravena agreed, discarding one of her cards for another one off the top of the deck. “This reminds me of this one time in Starkhaven.”

Bull laughed. “Any story that begins with *this one time*… ought to be good.”

“Well, what is it?” Raoul asked, discarding three cards and frowning at the ones he picked up. He held his cards close to his chest and leaned his elbows on the table to listen.

“I was staying at the Chantry in Starkhaven while doing some basic text repairs. One night a bunch of us scholars decided to head into the local tavern for drinks.”

“Shame, shame. Whatever happened to Chantry folk being pious?”

“What can I say; there were a few scholars there who wanted to go to the tavern for…*academic purposes*. Most of us were repentant the next day when we suffered through services with hangovers. Anyway, there was this big mountain of a man challenging anyone he met to a game of Wicked Grace. Most of my colleagues were too intimidated to take him on: he had to have been over six feet tall and three hundred pounds of pure muscle. He had this bushy red moustache and was missing a tooth, which he explained he had lost in a fight when he had been younger.”
“So, what happened?” This from Josephine, who was shrewdly looking over everyone assembled at the table to discern their tells.

“I accepted his challenge. We played cards until the tavern kicked us out.”

“And did you win?” Cullen asked.

Ravena laughed. “Maker, no. I got my ass handed to me that night and lost all my weekly wages the first three games in.” Still laughing, she leaned against Blackwall’s arm. “Liam liked me so much that we had gone from strictly playing cards to playing while seeing just how many shots of fine Starkhaven whisky we could down. I very nearly drank him under the table, but apparently we were getting too disorderly for the barkeep’s taste and he cut us off. Liam, being the gentleman that he was, saw my friends and me back to the Chantry before wandering off down the road to his house. It so happens that I met up with him a few days after that when he answered my paper I had tacked to the Chanter’s Board looking for hired muscle for an expedition I had been planning on taking. He hadn’t known it was me when he saw the advertisement and I hired him on the spot, no questions asked. We spent several months adventuring together and getting into all sorts of non-Chantry sanctioned trouble. We still get together at least once a year for a game of cards and a bottle of good scotch.”

Cassandra sighed. “Were the two of you…”

Ravena shook her head. “Me and Liam? If there’s one thing I can tell you about him, it’s that if you get him talking about his wife, he’ll never stop talking about her. I’ve never met a man more vocal about his devotion before.” She threw her cards down when she realized she had a crummy hand. She thought back to Liam and Hannah. The two of them were good people who clearly loved the other. Liam often looked at Hannah as if the sun rose and set in her smile and she looked at him with equal adoration. She had longed to find someone to have that sort of relationship with. Giving Blackwall a sideways glance, she believed she might have just found that someone.

More cards were dealt and Varric and the Iron Bull tried to out bullshit the other. Blackwall shook his head as he got up to retrieve another round of drinks from the bar, his arm sliding from its resting spot on the back of Ravena’s chair. When he came back, everyone was laughing at something Raoul was saying.

“And that was when Madame Hastings got to see more of the Trevelyan family than she bargained for,” Raoul concluded, much to everyone’s amusement. “Robert couldn’t pass by the poor woman’s house for a month without getting embarrassed.”

“Serves him right for being a poor gambler,” Ravena said. “And if I remember that story correctly, Robert wasn’t the only one streaking back home that night.” She looked pointedly at her brother.

Josephine hid her smile behind her hand. “It sounds as if there’s more to that story than you’re letting on.”

“Let’s just say that there was a sixteen year old moon in the sky that evening.”

Raoul cleared his throat and tapped at the table. “Perhaps we should start up another round,” he suggested, trying to change the subject.

“I think he’s onto something,” Cullen agreed. “Deal again. I’ve figured out your tells, lady ambassador.”

She grinned. “Commander, everyone knows a lady has no tells.”
“Then let’s see if your good fortune lasts one more hand.”

Raoul raised an eyebrow. “This sounds like a worthy challenge. I’m in.”

Ravena shook her head. “I know when I’ve given away too much of my coin. I’m out, but I can’t wait to see Josephine fleece the pair of you.”

“Hah, as if that would ever happen, sister dear.”

Several rounds of cards later, Ravena looked at her brother. “Famous last words, brother dear?” she asked, not even bothering to hide the smug grin on her face.

Cullen glared at Varric. “Don’t say a word, dwarf,” he growled.

“I tried to warn you, Curly.” He looked over at Raoul. “You too, Slick.”

“Never bet against an Antivan, Commander,” Josephine crowed, holding up Raoul’s shirt. “And you, I would have thought you’d know better, Raoul.”

“Can I at least have my pants back?” Raoul asked, scooting as close to the table as his chair would allow.

Josephine looked at him with a critical eye, her gaze lingering at the table’s surface as if by staring hard enough she could see what it hid. “Let me think about it.” She tapped her index finger against her lips and raised an eyebrow. “No.”

Cassandra stood up. “I’m leaving. I don’t wish to see our Commander and Ambassador’s walk of shame.” The low light in the tavern did nothing to hide the dusting of pink across her cheeks as she tried to look anywhere but at Cullen.

“Well I do!” Dorian said, leaning across the table.

Ravena stood up as well. “I have no desire to see something that can’t be unseen,” she said, turning her back to her brother. “No offense, Cullen.” Everyone soon followed suit. The sounds of bare feet slapping against the floor and the tavern’s door slamming shut rang out as the two men made a mad dash towards Cullen’s tower office. Bull laughed uproariously when a scandalized shriek ran out somewhere outside, telling everyone that their escape hadn’t been spectator-free.

The party broke up soon after that, everyone going their individual ways. Cassandra shook her head as she gathered up Cullen’s clothing, explaining that she was going to leave it at the Commander’s door. Josephine did the same for Raoul’s, the two women leaving together.

Blackwall finished stacking cards together and shuffled the completed deck in his hands. “You know, Cole was right about tonight,” he started. “I don’t think we’ve ever had an evening where so many of us have let our collective hair down before.”

“It was a good night,” she agreed, stacking empty tankards on top of trays. They could have left the mess for the cleaning crew to pick up, but Ravena felt bad about even thinking of leaving a mess of platters and dishes lying about. Between the two of them, they carted everything back over to the bar where the tavern staff could get to it easier. “And yes, Cole was right. Everyone was happy.”

“Well, almost everyone,” Blackwall said. “I wager Cullen and your brother aren’t feeling too terribly jovial at the moment.”

She grinned. “Shame on you for bringing their state of undress up,” she teased. “Where’s the sense
of solidarity? I seem to recall a certain Warden explaining how he had to run back to his quarters with only a bucket to cover his bits after Solas cleaned him out during a game of Diamondback.”

“That was said with complete solidarity and sympathy. At least my run of shame wasn’t witnessed by some poor woman.”

Ravena ran her finger down his chest. “A pity. I would have dearly liked to have seen it.”

He stepped closer to her. “Would you, now?” He held up the cards. “It so happens that I have a deck of cards in my possession. Although with your streak of luck, I might be the one catching an eyeful instead.”

“Now there’s where you’re wrong,” she countered, taking his free hand and leading him towards the tavern’s exit. “I might be rubbish at playing when there’s money at stake, but when there’s a chance to get an attractive man naked…”

“Yes?”

She leaned close to him, her breath warm against his ear and creating goosebumps in its wake. “When it comes to you, I play to win.”

Blackwall pulled her close. “Oh my lady,” he murmured, tilting his head down for a kiss. “This is a game I think I can bear losing.”
Ravena sat primly in her seat and gave a dismissive glance to her brother, who, for lack of a better word, was currently braying like a jackass. “Oh, for Andraste’s sake, Raoul,” she deadpanned. “Your laughter is certainly not helping my cause.”

Raoul leaned forward, face slightly red as he tried to catch his breath. “I’m sorry, Ravena,” he said, wiping at his eyes. “It just strikes me as funny that they think you would need etiquette training.”

Ravena looked apologetically at her would-be tutors, namely Leliana, Josephine, and Scout Harding. “I do apologize for my brother,” she said. “He seems to believe that he was raised in a barn.”

“No, Inquisitor, you must allow us to apologize,” Josephine told her. “I should have broached the topic to you more delicately instead of merely assuming…”

“That she was an unwashed hayseed?” Raoul grinned, clearly enjoying himself. “Oh, our dear mother would be in fits if she knew!”

Giving up on being dignified, Ravena punched Raoul in the arm hard enough to make him wince. “And your behavior would have surely placed her in a catatonic state of shock. Honestly.” She smiled reassuringly at the others. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. I understand your trepidation, especially with the ball in Orlais coming up shortly. It’s important for the Inquisition to come off looking as polished as possible, and that starts with the Inquisitor.” Really, it could have been worse; they could have invited Vivienne to their little afternoon salon of tea and dainty cakes. Then again, Ravena would do well to spend some time with her resident Enchanter; while she could hold her own amongst various lords and ladies of her station, her skills with high-court protocol were woefully underused. If there was anyone in Skyhold more capable of knocking rust off her manners than Madame de Fer before facing the Empress, she would eat her boots.

“I’m glad you see it that way,” Leliana said, sipping her tea. “But tell us, what is your level of comportment?”

“My mother hired one of the best etiquette tutors out of Orlais to instruct my siblings and me as soon as we were able to talk. There were the basic lessons on tableware, posture, and how to behave in public, all of them tailored to be age-appropriate and advance in complexity as my brothers and I grew older.”

“Which was more of the classic do not speak unless spoken to and children should be seen and not heard until we were deemed old enough or mature enough to begin holding brief conversations with others.”

“Yes, and if memory serves correctly, you failed those lessons spectacularly.” Ravena chose a delicate china cup and gracefully poured herself a serving of tea. “As I grew older, the lessons became more sophisticated. The Game is not played as intricately in the Free Marches as it is in Orlais, but the basic rules are still the same. My final lessons before joining the Chantry were how to properly blend embarrassment with humor at something a man might say to an eighteen year old girl, and how to tactfully turn a marriage proposal down without burning any bridges or severing potential ties.” She might not have gotten to use any of those skills when she first learned them, but they had been handy to have recently, what with the handful of letters she occasionally received from various
dignitaries offering up their sons or brothers to her in marriage she’d already tactfully turned down. Depending on what happened at the Winter Palace, Ravena feared that those offers might expand in volume.

“What about dancing?” Scout Harding asked, nibbling on one of the petit-fours laid out before them.

“My father paid for a dance instructor to teach me from the age of seven to the age of eighteen.” She sipped. “I haven’t had the opportunity to dance in quite some time, I’m afraid. I might need a refresher course.”

“Well, we can’t have that, can we?” Without another word, Raoul stood and bowed deeply to Ravena. “Inquisitor Trevelyan.”

Ravena looked at the other women, all of whom were smiling like loons. Shaking her head, she sat with perfect posture and daintily placed her cup back on the nearby table. “Ambassador Trevelyan,” she said, dipping her head to the side in welcome.

“I can’t help but notice that while this salon is highly entertaining, there is a sad lack of dancing. Would you do me the honor of joining me in the waltz our orchestra is playing?”

She took his offered hand and stood. “Somehow, ser, I believe this display is more for your benefit than mine.”

“But of course, Your Worship. Now that your lovely and capable advisors know you can talk your way out of any situation that might befall you at Halamshiral and are aware of the fact that you know the difference between the salad fork and the dinner fork, they shall set to work on the rest of your party, starting with myself.” He led her into a simple box step before moving onto something more complicated. Spinning her out, he held onto her hand. “Well, Lace? How are we doing?”

Ravena noticed that Harding didn’t mind the use of her first name, and that a faint blush had dusted her favorite scout’s cheeks. “Not bad, not bad at all. It would probably look better if the Inquisitor was in a dress, but your footwork is solid.”

Ravena shook her head, watching as her brother went over to Josephine and bowed over her offered hand before asking her to dance as well. “If that’s all, I’m going to take my leave. There are some things I would like to take care of before the day’s end.” Shamelessly, she reached down and snagged the entire plate of pastries and sandwiches to take with her. If she was to get a hold of the companions going to Orlais with her before her advisors did, then she would need all the food bribery she could afford.

It was later, belly full from a shared rooftop meal with Sera and head pleasantly spinning from a nightcap or two with Dorian, when she made her way into the stables. As she had hoped, she found Blackwall there working on a piece of furniture. He’d become one of Skyhold’s unofficial craftsman after word got out about his woodworking skills, and as such, a small portion of the barn had been converted as his workshop. She had asked him if he had minded people coming to him with requests before, and he had said that he hadn’t, that working with his hands kept his mind occupied between training sessions with the troops or on nights when he couldn’t sleep, too keyed up from coming back from a mission and unwilling to wake Ravena with his restlessness.

“There you are,” she said, coming up to him. She wrapped her arms around him from behind and rested her cheek against his back.
Blackwall put down the tool he was using and covered her hand with his where it lay over his heart. “Looking for me?” he asked, turning so he could give her a quick peck on the lips.

She fit against his body like she had been made specifically for him, her head resting on his shoulder. “I was hoping to find you before Josephine did.”

“Heate to break it to you, my lady, but she found me first.” He kissed her forehead. “Is my beard truly that overgrown?”

Ravena groaned. “I told her I’d talk to you about it.” She tilted away from him, her fingers running over his jaw. “I don’t think it looks bad, but there’s a general consensus between my advisors that you need a trim.” Her fingers traced his cheek before going past his ear and sifting into his hair. “I did tell them to leave your hair alone. It looks fine the way it is.”

“I have a feeling that once this ball is over, everyone is going to be less on edge.”

She nodded. “I know I will be. Maker, between the dress fittings, the review of names of important people, and trying to talk Sera and Dorian into behaving for one single night, I’m exhausted.”

Blackwall chuckled. “All right, I can see asking Sera to behave is one thing, but Dorian?”

“He said that garish Orlesian balls disturbed his Tevinter sensibilities. He’s convinced that he’s going to be asked to perform some blood magic ritual as if it were a party trick.”

“How did you talk him down from that one?”

“I didn’t bother. I just handed him a list of some of the wine that will be on hand and promised him that once the coast was clear and the Empress out of danger, I’d get our people to acquire as many bottles of Orlais’ finest vintages that I could for him. We agreed that he’d act as a brilliant diversion, should the need arise for me to slip away unseen during the party.”

“What about Sera?”

“I reminded her that with the sheer number of nobles in one spot, opportunities to help her contacts and have her Friends help us out would be huge. I may also be upsetting Cullen when he finds out about me ordering a march on Verchiel once we return and he might not like the fact that I may or may not have been an accomplice in pulling a prank involving his desk this afternoon.”

“You didn’t.”

“It was either Cullen’s desk or Josephine’s office, and I love Josie too much to do anything to her.” She already had plans to let Cullen puzzle over why his desk was suddenly unlevel for only a few hours before offering her help and mysteriously ‘fixing’ things. “And since I went ahead and promised to help Red Jenny in one theater, I figured I’d just go ahead and throw in my lot with them on several others. Sera was beyond thrilled and promised to be on her best behavior.”

Blackwall’s eyebrow quirked. “You do realize that her best behavior still leaves something to be desired, right?”

“Well, yes, but at least now I know no one will wind up getting shot or stabbed in the face before we need them to be and graffiti featuring naked behinds and other private parts on palace walls will be kept to a minimum.”

He tightened his arms around her. “And that leaves you with me. What types of bribes are you offering me to be on my best behavior?”
He could feel her smile against the skin of his throat. “I have a great many things to offer, all of which I’m sure would please you.”

“Would they now?” His hands skimmed down to her waist. Without giving her any warning, he boosted her up onto his workbench and stood between her legs. “Would any of them happen to involve you wearing that blue silk negligee you mentioned owning?”

“I hadn’t thought about that, but I am definitely open to the idea.” She carded her fingers through his hair and gave him a lingering kiss. “Although something tells me that you’d behave even without the extra incentives.”

“I was planning on staying in the background during the main party,” he started, kissing her affectionately. “With Dorian being a distraction if you need to disappear and Sera having an in with possible Friends exploiting nobles, you’ll need someone close by acting as your eyes and ears that other people won’t notice watching your back.”

“I appreciate it.”

He grinned wickedly at her. “But back to that negligee…”

Laughing, she draped her arms around his shoulders. “What did you have in mind?”

Chapter End Notes

I did a lot of skipping around and writing ahead while trying to tackle the last chapter. As a result, I have a ton of prompts already finished before I hit my next portion that’s stumping me, so I can probably do multiple posts per week until I catch up to my block.
Walking hand in hand in the early morning hours was one of the most peaceful things that had happened on their recent trip to Orlais. With the ball at the Empress’ Winter Palace coming up that evening, Ravena figured that this little portion of time she and Blackwall carved out for themselves would be the only peaceful thing on their trip.

Both of them had seemed to have the same idea, waking up well before daylight and silently dressing to avoid alerting anyone sharing the same floor of the inn Josephine had booked for their party. Now that dawn had broken and the light had sleepily crept over the marketplace closer to the residential area of the city, the two of them were able to witness the shops slowly coming to life. They’d taken care to dress in plain clothing, so to the still half-asleep eye, she and Blackwall were just another couple taking a leisurely stroll and enjoying the cool morning breeze.

“Coffee smells good,” Blackwall commented, tilting his chin towards a vendor setting up outdoor seating.

“Why don’t you get us a cup?” Ravena suggested. “I saw a bake shop right next door. I’ll get us something to eat.”

“Good idea. What would you like?”

“Surprise me.” She stretched up on her tiptoes to brush a kiss on his cheek. “What would you like?”

He turned his head and softly kissed her lips. “Surprise me.”

Ravena nudged his nose affectionately with hers before letting go of his hand and heading to the shop where the scent of freshly baked bread greeted her. She traded pleasantries with the owner in fluent Orlesian, her eyes scanning the glass display case.

“Little treats for little girls. Papa knew how much you hated dress shopping with Mama, so he’d take you away while she was busy at the hat shop to spend some time together, just the two of you. Papa would buy you something from a shop like this and you would share your snack over cups of hot chocolate before spending the rest of the trip in a bookstore.”

Ravena smiled. “Good morning, Cole.”

Cole pressed his palms against the glass and pointed at the pink and lavender macarons. “Those were your favorite. You’d insist on the purple ones, even though both of them taste the same. They were small enough that you could buy one to eat now and one to keep in your pocket for the trip home.”

He pointed at a cake topped with warm, gooey apples and caramel. “Henri bought a tarte tatin and a carafe of coffee one cold morning for two reasons: one was to reward the both of you for spending all night linking dates and coins together. The second was because the sugar and caffeine would keep both of you awake long enough to report your findings to your superior so they could give you a time extension for your project.”

“That was a very long night. Henri and I had been arguing the origins of the cache of coins we had found. I said they were a tribute to the statues we had found them under; he said they were a smuggler’s stash. Around one in the morning we made a bet and the loser had to buy breakfast.” She looked up at the bakery’s owner, who seemed oblivious to them, which was odd since Cole now had
his nose pressed up against the display’s surface. “He can’t see you, can he?” she asked, thinking how odd she must look to the owner, especially since it seemed as if she were talking to herself.

“"I made him forget us both for a little while. I wanted to spend time with you in the quiet, just like Blackwall wants to spend time with you before freshly brushed boots, hair and beard trimmed down to military standards, and the blood red uniform all take him further away from the Blackwall you know and closer to the man he was before.“

Ravena frowned in worry. “Is he all right?” Blackwall had been tenser and quieter than usual since they arrived. Whenever he noticed her looking at him in concern, he seemed to shake himself out of whatever anxiety that gripped him, flashing a warm smile and offering his hand to her. She didn’t press him, but she did notice that their lovemaking had taken a more desperate turn recently, his hands holding her to him tighter than usual and his mouth pressing against hers with more urgency.

“Drowning in a sea of memories.” Cole explained. “Flailing about, reaching for something before my head goes under. She takes my hand, pulls me up. Being with her drives away the dark and quiets the mockingbird’s song.”

She bit at her lip in distress. “I shouldn’t have brought him.”

“No, it’s good. He would have followed otherwise. He’d rather help you in a pit of vipers he despises than have you go in alone.” He pointed to a stack of fresh pain au chocolat. “They’re not like his mother’s, but those are his favorites.”

She nodded, a fond smile on her lips. “Yes. He told me.”

“It’s good that he tells you about himself. All the little things he shares with you might add up and give him courage to share the bigger, scarier things he wraps in Warden armor and hides away.” He withdrew from the case and smiled at her. “Thank you for spending time with me.”

“I always like spending time with you. Could I buy you something?”

He shook his head. “I don’t need to eat. Talking with you was enough.” He held onto her hand and gave her fingers a squeeze. “Leliana and Raoul will talk Josephine into letting you sleep in for another hour or so. Raoul wants you to rest because he can see how little sleep you’ve been getting and it worries him, especially since he knows you’ll need to be at your best for tonight. Leliana wants to distract Josephine because she knows that you and Blackwall snuck out and thinks you two deserve a break, if only for a little while.”

Ravena cringed. Nothing got past her spymaster. “Thank…” Ravena blinked, realizing that Cole had faded away. She pressed her hand to her cheek, where a cool impression of the spirit’s lips still lingered.

The owner of the bakery shook his head and looked at Ravena as if he hadn’t realized she had been standing there. “Oh, good morning! I’m sorry, I didn’t see you there. How may I help you?”

Ravena found Blackwall sitting with his back to the coffee vendor and two cups of café au lait sitting on the table. “There you are,” he said, standing up and pulling the second chair out for her.

“I had a nice chat with Cole in the bakery,” she replied, unrolling the waxed paper package to display the two chocolate-filled croissants she had purchased.
His chair scraped against the stone as he moved it closer to hers, their knees companionably bumping. “I didn’t know he was here.” He looked at the pastries and smiled. “Those are my favorites.”

She returned his smile. “I know. I didn’t know Cole was here either. Maybe he’ll show up to offer us some help tonight.” She took a sip of her coffee. “This is good.”

“One of the best shops in the market, if you believe the advertising.” He broke off a piece of croissant and dunked it into his coffee. He reached out and covered Ravena’s hand with his. “Thank you for coming out with me this morning.”

She leaned against him. “Well, it was certainly a hardship,” she teased. “A handsome man asking me out for breakfast? I hardly know how to respond.”

Blackwall laughed. “Ah, Ravena. How I love you.” He brought her hand to his lips and laid a gentle kiss along the back of her palm. They were silent, enjoying the early morning bustle together as the Chantry bells tolled the hour. Birds flocked to the marketplace square, only to be chased away by workers with brooms busily sweeping away the previous day’s trash.

“How long do you think we have before they realize we left?” he asked, finishing his coffee.

“Leliana knew we were gone before we had even left the inn,” she replied, smirking as she brushed crumbs off her hands. “We had an hour before Josephine came to wake me up, but I think that was almost an hour ago.”

He stood and collected their used cups to give back to the coffee vendor. “Then we ought to get back before they force Cullen to organize a search party.”

She laughed. “I think he’d probably welcome the excuse to get some fresh air. Josephine’s driving him batty.” She loved her ambassador, but this ball had her even more stressed than Ravena, which in turn was making Raoul work double-time to help his fellow ambassador relax. Not for the first time, Ravena was looking forward to the end of the night so they could concentrate on moving onward. Throwing their empty package away in one of the carts workmen had set out for trash, she tugged on Blackwall’s hand. “Wait a minute.”

“What is it?”

“I wanted to thank you for coming here with me. I know how uncomfortable this city makes you, and I wanted you to know how much I appreciate you being here.”

He reached out and cupped her cheek in his palm. “Well, it was certainly a hardship,” he said, playfully throwing her words back at her. “Accompanying a beautiful woman to a ball or staying at home playing cards and drinking with Varric and Bull? How could I say no?”

“You say the sweetest things.” She grabbed hold of his shirt collar and pulled him close, melting against him as they kissed. “I love you; remember that when tonight gets hectic.”

He leaned back to kiss her forehead. He looked at her questioningly when she began to rummage in her pockets.

“Here,” she said, offering him a violet colored macaron. “Something to look forward to after the ball.” She slipped the treat into his pocket before wrapping her arm around his waist. Blackwall draped his arm over her shoulders and tugged her close. Around them, more people began to come out. Hawkers from the portable shops began to shout out their wares, food stalls started to set up at every corner, the smell of cooking food beginning to waft through the air. Blackwall pressed his
cheek against the side of Ravena’s hair, imprinting this stolen moment in his memory as apprehension for the evening began to bubble in his chest. He took a deep breath, the floral scent of her hair grounding him.

They’d make it through tonight. *He’d* make it through tonight.

Chapter End Notes

This was inspired in part by a trip that I took to New Orleans with a group of friends a while back. Everyone was still asleep, but I had gotten up early and went out on our hotel room's balcony to watch the sun rise. Watching our portion of the city wake up with hot coffee in hand and listening to the church bells start chiming was one of the most peaceful experiences I had on that trip. I wanted to give Blackwall and Ravena that same sort of calm before things start to get crazy in the next few chapters.
“I can’t breathe properly.”

Ravena looked at Blackwall and grinned. “Lace yourself up in a corset and then we’ll talk.” Teasing aside, she had to admit that it was nice to actually dress up for an evening. She had been seventeen the last time she had been to a formal ball and she had forgotten just how much she used to love them: the gowns, the crush of people, the food and the dancing.

Tonight’s event had a little more at stake than making certain that her dance card was filled, but Ravena still took the time to take everything in.

“You look stunning,” he commented, his hand warm at the small of her back. He had to take a moment to admire her. Vivienne, Josephine and Leliana had dressed her up in gown made of pale teal silk, which contrasted with her dark hair and made her kohl-rimmed eyes look golden in the lamplight where they peeked out beneath an elegantly crafted mask. Delicate bronze colored filigree decorated the plunging neckline and the ends of her sleeves. The lace was a concession Josephine had given her, seeing that Ravena had been reluctant to show so much skin after spending years in informal wear. Blackwall knew the intricate work was meant to afford Ravena a sense of modesty since the heavy brocade bodice pushed her breasts upwards, yet her pale skin and gentle swell of her cleavage still showed through the latticework that covered her like a woman coyly peering out from behind her fingers. He saw what was meant to be demure came off as something elegantly erotic, and he was unable to look away.

He thought that she wore the outfit well. The corset she wore underneath cinched in her waist to the point where he bet that he could almost span her waist with both hands easily. It had to have been uncomfortable, but it did showcase her natural hourglass shape beautifully. Instead of her usual no-frills bun, someone had fashioned her thick hair into a low, braided chignon. He felt a swell of pride at the sight of the comb he had given her for her name day carefully tucked into her inky black tresses. Out of all the elaborately jeweled hairpieces she more than likely had at her disposal, the fact that she had chosen the simply-carved lovebirds over every other decoration made his heart flip in his chest.

The other women in attendance might look like exotic peacocks parading about, but his lady had the understated brilliance of a pearl. While he knew he had to eventually let her go to mingle for the evening so they could accomplish what they truly came here for, he was loath to leave her side.

She could feel the pleased blush that dusted across her cheeks. “Thank you. You look particularly handsome yourself.” She stood closer to him, her skirt brushing against his leg. “Aside from what you usually wear when we go out in the field, this is the closest I’ve seen you in a uniform. You fill it out nicely.” A trip to the barber that afternoon had seen him trimmed and cleaned up. Josephine wanted him to have the entire beard shaved off, which he had vehemently argued when she had accompanied him to the barber, but they had settled on a compromise of a neatly combed full beard that was shorter than how he usually kept it.

The barber had wisely waited until Josephine was out of earshot to quietly commiserate in Orlesian on the stubbornness of women, to which Blackwall had heartily agreed in the same language. Just to be on the safe side, Blackwall had also requested his hair trimmed so he didn’t look quite as shaggy. He’d paid the barber extra for merely cleaning up his looks instead of going to the extremes their
ambassador had wanted.

He ran a finger around his collar. “This damned thing is too damned tight.”

“That’s two damns in one sentence. Is everything all right?” She looked up at him and could tell that he was struggling with his thoughts.

“Yes, everything is fine.” There. He had a habit of looking away from her whenever he lied. It was subtle and he didn’t do it very often outside of card games, but she had picked up on it after a while. Gathering her skirts in one hand, she steered them both towards a darkened alcove underneath an exterior staircase.

“You are not fine,” she accused, crossing her arms in front of her chest and cocking out a hip.

Blackwall sighed and leaned against the wall. “I’m no good at these types of events,” he confessed. “They’re too claustrophobic for my tastes.”

She reached out to cup the side of his face with her palm. “And here I dragged you into this. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t drag me anywhere that I wouldn’t willingly follow,” he assured her, leaning into her touch. “I’d storm the Black Gates themselves if you asked it of me.”

“Blackwall…”

“Don’t worry over me. We still have a job to do.” He softened his words with a kiss to her fingers. Taking a deep, centering breath, he held onto her hand and brought it to rest inside the crook of his elbow. “Now before I have to pass you over to the Grand Duke, shall we make an entrance, my lady?”

“Have you heard anything?” she asked, sidling up to Blackwall.

“Not much. There are two servants on the upper level over there whispering amongst themselves. I couldn’t make everything out, but it sounds like they’re concerned about someone not checking in somewhere.”

“That makes sense. I heard another group of servants talking about the same thing. My money is on Briala and her spies.”

“I wouldn’t leave Gaspard and his men out of the equation either,” he cautioned.

“No, they’re definitely involved somehow.” She gave him a quick glance. “So, the Silverite Wings of Valor?”

He fidgeted, slightly shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “What of it?”

“I knew you had some rank within the Wardens, but I didn’t know you were decorated. I’m impressed.” She took advantage of their isolated location and wrapped both of her arms around one of his. “What did you receive it for?”

He tensed. “For…valor.” His gaze quickly darted to their left. “I thought we were here to save an Empress from assassination, not boast about victories that happened long ago,” he bristled.
He caught her as she did a sort of awkward walk-run towards the ballroom, her skirts fisted in her hands. “Where have you been?”

“I found some things. I’d explain, but I need to make an appearance.”

“That was only the first bell.”

She looked at him quizzically. “And your point is? It would be frowned upon if I were late.”

He smirked. “Ravena, you’ve been away from the nobility too long. Even I know that it’s better to be fashionably late and arrive after the second bell.” He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Slow down and catch your breath.”

“Briala is playing both Gaspard and Celene,” she whispered, putting a hand to her ribcage. “She’s killed people from both sides and is fudging letters to confuse everyone.”

“That’s a good lead. Do you think that she’s behind the assassination attempt?”

“No. I spoke with her. I can tell that even though she says one thing, she still cares for Celene in some fashion. Would she do something to get even with her? Yes. Kill her? No, I don’t think she would.”

“So where does that leave us?”

She sighed and shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t know. I guess we’ll find more information once I get back to the ballroom.” She winced as she attempted to readjust her outfit.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, just being pinched uncomfortably. Corsets were not made to climb lattices.”

His eyes widened. “Tell me you didn’t.”

“Don’t worry, Dorian made good on his promise and kept everyone in the gardens distracted long enough for me to make it over. I heard he made some magnificent fire creations to entertain everyone. Climbing was necessary: how else would I have gotten into the second floor without lockpicks?”

“Whatever am I going to do with you?” he chuckled. His eyes darkened and he moved closer to her, crowding her against a nearby wall. He planted his hand against the stone and leaned in. “Actually, I think I have an idea.”

She jumped when the second bell rang. “Fashionably late,” she whispered, tilting her head to expose
the line of her neck. She slid her palms across his chest until she could drape her arms over his shoulders.

“And with flushed cheeks and mussed hair. Whatever shall the other guests think?” He punctuated his question with a kiss that made Ravena’s knees weak. “The only thing missing is to complete the look with a kiss-swollen mouth.”

“Something I’m sure you’re capable of providing,” she gasped, twining her fingers in his hair.

“More than capable, and definitely willing to do a thorough job of it,” he answered, nipping at her bottom lip. “Problem is, you’re running out of time before the third bell rings. I’m going to have to be quick.”

As it turned out, Ravena made it back to the ballroom long before the third bell chimed. She couldn’t keep the smug smirk off her face when she happened to overhear snatches of conversation behind fluttering fans.

“Really, Ravena,” Raoul stated when she made her way towards where her brother and Josephine were standing. “I don’t know if I should applaud him for stirring up a bit of juicy gossip or challenge him to a duel for my sister’s honor.”

“Oh leave them be. Someone’s court approval shot up,” Josephine commented with a grin. “I’ll have to thank him later.”

“Don’t worry about it, Josie,” Ravena said, casually tucking a strand of hair behind her ear that Blackwall had accidentally pulled loose. “I’ve got that covered.”

“I don’t know how Cullen and Leliana do it,” Blackwall said, quickly stripping out of his finery and throwing on his armor. “It took us – you – forever just to get the location that we’re supposed to investigate in and they’ve already had people stow our gear here.”

“What can I say? My advisors are efficient.” She grunted as she tried to awkwardly bend her arms to reach the buttons at the back of her neck. “Unlike this contraption.”

“Here, turn around.” Blackwall began to undo the delicate row of buttons that ran down her spine. Once he had her unbuttoned to her waist, he started to loosen the laces of her corset, smirking when Ravena took a deep breath. “First time you’ve gotten to do that all evening?”

“I’d forgotten how constricting those things are.” She turned her head and attempted to look over her shoulder as best as she could. “Don’t undo them all, I’m going to have to get back into this outfit after we finish looking around.”

“Right. Lift your hands up.” With the stays loosened, Blackwall was easily able to slide the corset over Ravena’s head, leaving her in a thin camisole that was cut low enough not to be seen from the neckline of her dress yet protected her skin from the corset’s boning. “That should do.”

“I certainly hope that we don’t run into trouble,” she commented, sliding the gown down her hips before stepping out of it. She smiled at Blackwall’s surprised inhalation. “I didn’t want to waste time changing,” she explained, her free hand gesturing towards the pants she had worn underneath the dress.

“I’m more surprised you didn’t just wear everything else underneath as well.”
“Don’t be silly, Vivienne would be disappointed in me for ruining the silhouette of the gown. She didn’t terrorize that poor seamstress in Val Royeaux for me not to flaunt what I have.” For modesty’s sake, she turned away from the door in order to finish dressing. There were some things that she didn’t feel like dealing with, and jokes about her state of undress from both Sera and Dorian were definitely on the list.

“Believe me, I am not complaining. I happen to be a fan of what you’re flaunting.” He couldn’t have stopped himself from staring at her if he had tried, almost disappointed when she turned away and the tantalizing sight of her unbound breasts through the camisole’s nearly sheer material was hidden from his view, Ravena’s fingers moving in a flurry of motion to buckle her well-worn coat before carefully toeing off her delicate slippers and jamming her feet into her usual boots.

“Oh damn,” Dorian drawled, leaning against the doorframe. “I think we arrived too late.”

“And here I was hoping we’d get to find out once and for all what color your smallclothes were,” Sera chimed in. The two of them must have intercepted the Inquisition agents carrying their gear, because they were both equipped and ready to go.

“She’s always so practical and sensible,” Dorian said, giving Ravena a wink. “I’m putting my money on something frilly and scandalous. Blackwall, am I right?”

Ravena’s short snort of laughter was the only thing that kept Blackwall from smacking either of the two. “Get moving,” he grumbled instead, shouldering his way past them. He took his usual spot at Ravena’s side, pausing when she leaned close to him.

“For the record, he’d win.” she whispered, her breath tickling his ear. “I’m wearing extremely sheer black lace.”

“Maker take me,” he muttered, his voice deepened with desire. “I’m surrounded by people that I either want to maim or people that are trying their damndest to kill me.”

Ravena didn’t reply, but she did throw a wicked smile over her shoulder at him and added an extra swish of her hips as she walked away.

“I’m glad we decided to change,” Ravena said, slipping out of her coat. “Blood would have never gotten out of silk.”

“I’m just glad none of it was yours,” Blackwall bit back, trying to quickly help her back into her dress. Unfortunately, his fingers on his left hand weren’t cooperating after taking one too many hits to the shield.

“Oi, you. Get out of your gear and hop into your fancy pants,” Sera ordered, shouldering him aside and quickly pulling everything where it should. “And you. Pick up your arms so I can strap you in.” Without preamble, Sera slipped Ravena’s corset over her head and began tightening up the laces.

“Take a deep breath and fluff up your tits,” she said, pulling on the laces hard enough for Ravena to take a half-step backwards.

“Have a lot of experience with these?” Ravena asked dryly.

Her answer was a manic giggle as she did up the tiny buttons at Ravena’s back. “Oh yeah.” Job done, Sera busied herself by reworking Ravena’s hairstyle, which had mostly fallen out of the
elegant updo in the middle of the last fight. “Can you breathe?”

“Not really.” Sera had managed to cinch her in even tighter than Josephine had, which was a feat in and of itself.

“Good, that means it’s tight enough.” Repositioning her comb, she gave her a friendly swat on the backside. “Now go out there and be all…Inquisitor-y.”

Blackwall found her standing alone out on the balcony. “Some night,” he said, walking up towards her.

She gave him a tired smile and leaned against his arm. “One of the more interesting formal parties I’ve been to,” she said lightly.

“Everything all right?” He covered her hand with his, concerned when he felt her fingers tremble.

“I’m just ready to head back home.” She rested her head against his shoulder. “Did I do the right thing?”

“With getting the three of them to work together?” He took a breath. “There’s hope, if their truce holds. At least no one died.”

She laced her fingers with his. “Yet.”

“It isn’t like you to be this cynical. Where’s your usual optimism?”

“Somewhere else for the evening, I guess. For once, I’m glad that I didn’t grow up in Orlais. The politics are draining.” She stepped away and stared inside the windows, watching as people continued to dance and celebrate. “If you want optimism, you’re going to have to supply it.”

He chuckled. “I don’t know if I can do as good of a job as you usually do, but I’ll certainly try. Being back in Orlais puts me out of sorts as well.”

“I know you said before that you were stationed in Orlais, but had you ever been stationed here, this close to everything?”

He cleared his throat and turned his face away from her to look down at the courtyard below. “Yes, and by now you can see why I prefer recruiting out on my own.”

“I don’t blame you. Even with the Wardens to act as a buffer, dealing with the Game on a daily basis would grow tiresome for someone like you.”

He glanced at the orchestra, realizing that they had started up a new song. “But since we’re here, we might as well make the most of it.” Holding out a hand, he gave her a low, formal bow and a charming smile. “Ravena Celeste Trevelyan, will you honor me with this dance?”

Her lips curved upwards to match his. “How can I resist such an offer?” She placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her into a waltz on the balcony, her skirts twirling around their legs. “I haven’t been called by my middle name in practically forever.”

“It suits you.” He’d seen her sign things with her middle initial before, but it wasn’t until she had been announced that evening that he had finally found out what it stood for.
“Well, our middle initials are the only way to differentiate between my father and siblings. We don’t use our full names often, mostly for important, official matters.” She flexed her fingers against his bicep as he led her into a more complicated step than what the dance called for. If they had been out on the ballroom floor, the move would have won a few murmurs of approval from the crowd for standing out. “I didn’t know you danced.”

His gaze seemed to turn inwards. “In another life.”

“When I was younger, I used to love sneaking out of my room late at night to watch whenever my parents hosted a ball. I adored watching everyone, how the ladies always looked like they were floating across the floor in their dresses and how the men looked so handsome and dashing in their suits. I begged my father to enroll me with a private instructor years before I was supposed to because I wanted to learn everything: all the steps, all the dances.” She let out a small laugh when he spun her around. “I’ve missed it.”

“I’ve never had a better partner.” He tipped her backwards into a dip, punctuating his statement with a kiss.

“Neither have I.”

When he let her back up, he didn’t let go. Instead, he led them into a slower dance step and held their joined hands close to his chest. “We should do this more often.”

“What? Saving empresses from evil would-be gods and their assassins?”

“I could go my entire life without having to do that again. No, this.” He emphasized his point by slowing down even further until they were not so much dancing as they were embracing while swaying to the music. “We don’t get very many moments where we can simply be together.”

“It makes each one we have all the more precious.” Burrowing closer into his embrace, she sighed contentedly. “It’s no ballroom, but the stable has decent enough space,” she offered after a while. His amused snort sounded close to her ear. “It’ll give the horses some entertainment,” he conceded. “Perhaps Master Dennet can give us some pointers?”

Ravena laughed. “We wouldn’t have any music, but I can improvise.” To prove her point, she began to quietly hum a song.

“Sera Was Never?”

“I blame Maryden for getting that song stuck in my head. Really, if you want to get Sera’s attention, just buy her a pint.”

“Or food. Or both.” Holding her tighter, he tilted her chin up so he could look her in the eye. “But enough about Sera.” He bent his head to close the scant distance between them and Ravena quickly forgot about everything else. “There’s something that has been driving me mad all evening.”

“Hmm?” It was hard to concentrate, especially when Blackwall’s hand began to rove across her back. Even through layers of silk and brocade, she could feel the heat of his body, which made her want to curl up close and never move away.

“Three things, actually.” He tilted his head and his breath was hot against her ear. “Sheer. Black. Lace.” He emphasized his words with a nip to her earlobe, his lips moving into a tight smile when he heard her gasp.
“It was the reaction I was hoping for,” her voice was more like a purr, the fingers of her free hand sinking into the fabric of his coat. “And I did mean *extremely* sheer lace. It’s as if I’m not wearing anything at all under this dress.”

“Wicked woman. You have no idea how difficult it was to focus on anything else.”

“However can I make it up to you?” she asked, her eyelashes fluttering closed as he drew her closer than what they were, closer than what was probably proper, given their surroundings. After all they did for the court tonight, Ravena didn’t give a damn.

“I can think of a few things,” he murmured. “Ripping bodices springs to mind.”

Ravena laughed breathlessly, grabbing his hand and leading him away from the balcony. “Celene gave us rooms for the night,” she told him. “I can see what can be arranged.” For once, she was glad that they had left Varric in Skyhold. She was certain that he would have had plenty of fodder for his next novel or two if he had been there.

All thoughts of her companions fled her head when Blackwall stared at her hungrily, his gaze as heavy and tactile as a caress. Shivering, she led him towards the guest suites, making a mental note to stop back at the dressmaker’s shop in Val Royeaux to purchase extra corset laces before heading home.

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to give Ravena the Disney Princess treatment.

A couple of non-story related observations from someone who's worn corsets before for ren faires:
1. Sunscreen. Bodice burn is nothing to fool around with.
2. Boots first, then lace up. Doing the opposite involves a lot of laughing (mostly from friends) and almost strangling yourself in your cleavage before giving up and starting over the right way.
3. Enlist a friend to help pick things up when you drop them, or else get really good at bending at the knees.
4. Conversations in the bathrooms are amazing and people have applauded other women for getting into the stalls while wearing hoop skirts, corsets, and dresses made of extremely heavy material. Also, random strangers will offer to help you check for garb malfunctions before you head out. Good karma.
5. As great as it is to spend a day going braless, nothing beats that initial feeling of your laces getting loosened after 8+ hours.
family

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It didn’t take Morrigan and her son long to settle into Skyhold. The pair of them kept to themselves, preferring to stay close to the Chantry gardens. It was quiet enough, and the few people that milled about gave Kieran all the socialization Morrigan was comfortable with having. Ravena herself had only seen glimpses of the boy a handful of times, but it was enough to form an impression of a bright, curious child, much like her own nephews and nieces. She liked him instantly.

One afternoon, she made a point to visit her arcane advisor. They spoke at length on various topics, but Ravena’s eyes always lingered on Kieran, who was sitting at a nearby bench with a large book in his lap. He was engrossed with the words on the pages and she made a mental note to see what subjects interested him so she could supply him with more books.

“He looks like his father,” Ravena said quietly during a lapse in conversation.

Morrigan straightened, instantly on the defensive. “And how would you know what his father looks like?” she asked, her tone cool where it had only moments before been slightly warm.

“I was in Ferelden shortly after the Blight. Tales of the Hero and the woman he loved ran rampant.” She arched her eyebrow. “Besides, you yourself have slipped and mentioned your Warden several times.”

“Then I guess you have found me out.”

“Even if I hadn’t, I’m familiar with the Couslands. Aidan and Fergus both inherited their father’s eyes.” Ravena braced her weight on one leg. “Before you ask, I’m familiar with them on a working basis that turned into one of friendship. My father has one of the largest fabric productions in the Free Marches in his bannorn and Teyrn Bryce wished to conduct business. I was fourteen when the Teyrn and his eldest son first came to visit.”

“You mentioned Aidan. Surely you must have met him before?”

Ravena nodded. “Yes. My first solitary trip into Ferelden happened when I was in my twenties. Several important tomes in Highever’s chantry had been damaged in a late spring flood. Teyrn Bryce requested someone to come repair what they could, and one of my specialties is book restoration. When he found out who the Chantry was sending, he insisted that I spend the entirety of my stay in his home.” She smiled fondly. “Fergus and I became dear friends, but I didn’t see much of Aidan; he was more interested in traipsing around Highever’s village or wandering the fields with Arl Howe’s youngest son than lingering in the family library. I do remember that he had a terrific sense of humor and could put a smile on even the dourerst of faces.”

Morrigan huffed out a delicate snort. “It would seem as if he has retained that trait,” she said, her chilly demeanor softening once more.

Ravena led them both to a bench further away from Kieran. “Does Fergus know about his brother?”

“That he’s away looking for a method to rid Wardens of the Taint? Yes.” She looked behind her shoulder. “That Aidan is a father? No.”

“I spoke with Fergus shortly after I learned what happened with his family. Devastated would be too
gentle of a word to describe him. To know that he has family beyond his surviving sibling…"

“How exactly should I broach the subject?” Morrigan cut in. “Shall I knock on the castle door and drop the information on his doorstep?”

Ravena shrugged. “Knowing Fergus, he would probably be fine with that method. Surprised, yes, but ultimately fine once he adjusted to the news.”

“Just what is your sudden interest in me and my son?” Morrigan asked, crossing her arms over her chest. “You’ve not given us much thought before aside from the usual politeness you show everyone else.”

Ravena pulled out a letter from her pocket. “I received a message this morning from Teyrn Fergus Cousland himself. He’s planning a trip to Skyhold sometime in the near future to solidify ties. I thought I would speak to you first before welcoming an old friend into my home, to give you time to decide if you’d like to take the opportunity to introduce your son to his uncle or not instead of having it sprung on you all at once.”

Morrigan sat back. “That is…unexpected.”

“I’m not terribly fond of surprises, especially when they could have been avoided by someone telling me a truth before I found it out on my own,” Ravena replied. “I figured you might be the same.” She hesitated for a brief second before letting her hand lightly touch the other woman’s fingers. “I won’t tell you what to do, or what you should do. I just wanted to give you some options to consider.”

She got up, feeling as if their conversation was over. “Inquisitor?” Morrigan called over her shoulder.

“Yes?”

“I thank you, for giving me the choice. I appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” She stared at Kieran, who had moved on from being engrossed with his book to staring up at the clouds overhead. “The bonds between family don’t necessarily have to be made of blood, you know. I’m certain Fergus would welcome you just as warmly as Kieran.”

“I’ve…never had a family,” Morrigan confessed. “Aside from my mother, who wasn’t much of the maternal figure. What is it like, having siblings?”

Ravena sat back down. “I grew up in a very loud household,” she said. “My brothers and I are relatively close in age, so we often ran through the keep and the surrounding fields together. As the youngest and the only girl, there were times where they were extremely protective of me, but they mostly treated me as if I were merely another younger brother to run wild with. There was teasing and bickering and the occasional fistfight that my mother had to break up, but there was also kindness and a great many welcome shoulders to cry on or to share good news with. We were never a family that hid our affections for the other, and all of us knew how very much we were loved, not only by our siblings, but by our parents as well. Our parents may not agree with every one of their children’s decisions or personalities, but they love us nonetheless.”

“Aidan spoke of his own family in a similar manner. He was exceptionally close with his brother and proud to have been an uncle.” Morrigan looked over at her son, a gentle smile curving her lips. “Perhaps family is what Kieran needs.”

“Perhaps it’s what you need as well.” Before Morrigan could answer, Ravena turned away and headed to Josephine’s office.
Stepping in, she smiled warmly at Josephine and sat at the chair closest to her desk. “Afternoon, Josie. So tell me, is this what my diplomats do when we finally get a well-needed break from the action?”

“Until scouts come back from various places with reports and we send you off to parts yet unknown, yes. It gives me time to focus on other trade matters. Your brother, on the other hand, was starting to feel a little confined after getting caught up on his work. I sent him to the training yard before he drove us both crazy with his pacing.” Josephine stood and poured two cups of tea for them. “Is there something on your mind?”

“Actually,” Ravena started, accepting her cup and taking a sip. “I’m going to be writing a letter to Teyrn Cousland and wanted to know if you had anything you might want me to add.”

She pulled out a fresh sheet of stationary. “No, nothing comes directly to mind. What were you thinking of writing?”

“Well, seeing as we don’t have any plans to leave for the foreseeable future, I would like to tell Fergus that he is most welcome in Skyhold. I look forward to his visit.” She meant it too; after her trip to Highever in her youth, she and Fergus had become close friends. Work had prevented her from visiting more often, but she had been present for his wedding and his son’s naming ceremony. After the Blight, she made a point to keep in touch with him through letters. She felt guilty that she hadn’t thought to personally write him since the events at the Conclave, and she was looking forward to catching up with him. “I was also going to ask him if the soapmaker in the village still makes this most amazing smelling soap out of goat’s milk, and if so, request that he bring several cakes of it along with him.”

“I have heard of this soap,” Josephine said, a lengthy list of things needed to be completed before the Teyrn’s visit already materializing on the stationary. Leaning closer, she winked. “If you could, please request an extra bar for me as well.”

Ravena visited with Josephine for a while before excusing herself and heading up to her chambers. She already had much of her letter drafted in her head, but she stopped when she got to the top of the stairs and spied Blackwall. He was sprawled out on her bed, a battered looking copy of Hard in Hightown hanging from his fingertips. She hadn’t seen much of him lately except for at mealtimes and a few hours in the evenings, mostly because he had dedicated the majority of his waking hours in Skyhold to helping in the training yard. She’d spied on him on a few occasions and instead of standing to the side and barking orders, she noticed that he waded in and got a little more hands-on, much like Cullen often did. In fact, the two of them had hosted a sparring clinic one afternoon that had attracted a great many onlookers, mostly due to the fact that both men were stripped to the waist. It had been a good match with both combatants equal in skill, but she, like the majority of the women who had gathered, hadn’t really been paying attention to the tactics and techniques either participant had been patiently explaining. Unlike the other women, she hadn’t given Cullen a second thought beside an initial admiring glance. She grinned as she remembered how she had cornered Blackwall in the storage room they used to house the Inquisition forces’ practice weapons once their clinic was over. She had gained a new bruise on her knee from that one, but it had been worth it to look up and see Blackwall lose himself in her touch while trying to keep as quiet as he possibly could, his hand tangled in her hair as his back arched away from the door she had shoved him against.

Silently padding over to the bedside, she gently took the book from his slack fingers and marked his page before setting it aside. He must have been exhausted, because he didn’t wake when she brushed a kiss across his brow. Ravena’s eyes went to her desk, where she knew letters and reports were waiting for her. She had spent much of her day addressing them, but the stack never seemed to shrink in size.
With that in mind, she didn’t feel the slightest bit of guilt when she slipped into bed with Blackwall, her arm draping over his chest as she curled up close to him. He didn’t wake, but he did shift slightly to his side, which brought him closer to her. Sighing contentedly, she closed her eyes and began to relax.

Letter writing would just have to wait.

Chapter End Notes

For some reason, Fergus wanted to be included in this story. I don’t know if this is a one-time thing yet or if he’ll make another cameo some other later chapter.
I have the next six chapters already written, but in various stages of editing. I'll more than likely go on a posting spree this weekend.

“I would like to know just how these got here so quickly,” Ravena said, settling into one of the plush armchairs in Josephine’s sitting area and eyeing a stack of letters. “Magic must have been involved.”

“Don’t discount that, Inquisitor,” Josephine said, settling down in the chair beside her. “There are instances where mages have been employed to express ship important messages.” Reaching out, she poured a large cup of coffee and handed it to Ravena.

“I would hate to be the poor mage having to use up their mana for something like this.” She hid the yawn behind her hand and gratefully inhaled the rich aroma wafting from her cup. “I love you, I hope you know that.”

Josephine laughed. “You love anyone who gives you coffee, especially at this hour. Speaking of, I hope you don’t mind meeting so early.”

Ravena bit back another yawn. “No, I was actually awake. I had planned on spending some time in the training circle, but talking with you is much more pleasant.” Actually, what she had originally planned on doing before Josephine had requested their early meeting was spending the morning lazing in bed with Blackwall. She smiled over the rim of her cup. He was the reason she had gotten precious few hours of sleep the other night, but she was definitely not complaining. She had left him sleeping in her bed with a brief note perched on her pillow that she’d find him later on in the day. “So, should we stack them all into piles, or just open them up randomly?”

Josephine stared at the large pile of letters. “Whichever you prefer.”

Ravena drank deeply from her cup before setting it aside and picking up a letter opener. Grabbing one of the letters at random, she broke the seal.

Blackwall had just entered the tavern after a good long day of overseeing recruits. As was his custom, he was headed towards the bar for a cold pint when Krem waved him over. The other man pointed towards the stairs. “Second floor, Sera’s nook, might want to take a gander. We’ve been hearing cackling from the three of them for a while now. Chief keeps on saying he’s gonna go check on them, but I think he’s scared of what he’d find.”

Blackwall looked at the second floor landing with some trepidation, especially when he heard Sera guffaw and something that sounded suspiciously like Varric snorting, though Varric professed to never do such a thing. “Should I go in armed, or as is?” he warily asked.

“I’d grab a drink first. A stiff one.”

He had just rounded the corner of the upper landing when he heard Varric reading. At first, he
thought he was narrating a portion of his latest work, because the language was heavy-handed and overly flattering, but then Blackwall caught Ravena’s name.

“Get this,” Varric continued. “And you would be quite pleased at my well-equipped and robust armory. I would dearly love for you to come inspect my sword collection. I daresay you would be extremely satisfied with what you found there.”

Ravena scoffed. “How unoriginal. There are five other letters using variations of that same phrase. Tell me, Varric, why do men describe their penises as swords?”

“Well, it works well on a wordsmithing front. You can innocently state that you enjoy polishing them, or how what was his name, Count Ruthledge, put it; how he’d enjoy having you polish them off while he watched.”

She harrumphed dismissively. “Something tells me that Count Ruthledge is equipped with little more than a blunted dagger, not the massive battle axe he claims to sport.”

Sera’s uproarious laughter greeted Blackwall when he finally reached Sera’s little alcove. “What’s going on here?” he asked with a smile, leaning against the doorframe and eager to get in on the joke.

Sera looked upside down at him from her prone position on the floor, her legs propped up on the nearby wall. “Inky’s got love letters!” she said, holding onto her sides. “Really bad ones!”

Blackwall would have made a joke, but he saw the sudden flush on Ravena’s cheeks and the way she began to stuff letters back into envelopes. “Are they really that terrible?” he asked instead, taking a step into the room.

Varric chortled. “Even I couldn’t dream up half the bullshit we’ve been reading. Look at this one, Hero. Your eyes are like gooey pits of caramel. How I long to become stuck in your gaze. Your lips are like naked red birds that...” He paused. “Well, I’ll be damned. That guy that kept on hitting on Rivaini with bad poetry actually made it out of Kirkwall. Isabela owes me money on that bet.”

“I like all the ones with the offers of stuff. Hey Inky, you realize that you’re worth three sheaves of wheat and a herd of goats?” Sera held up a letter, her nose wrinkled as she frowned. “Makes you look like an apple in a market stall, they do.”

Ravena sighed. “I have to admit, I’ve seen a great many offers of livestock in exchange for my hand. At least some of them are offering more than a goat. Maker, but many of these letters are coming from boys half my age. I could be their mother, for Andraste’s sake.”

“Well, Dusty, there’s that whole appeal of a woman of the world teaching them new tricks. And besides, some men like the idea of having a motherly figure warming their...” Varric laughed as a pillow sailed through the air and bounced off his shoulder.

She picked up another letter, noticing the heady perfume that had been liberally sprayed on the parchment. Breaking the seal, she rolled her eyes. “This one states that there’s a sizeable dowry full of jewels and coin, blah, blah, blah.” Still reading, her eyes widened. “Oh. Never mind. This one was addressed to Cullen, with an invitation for him to privately tour a secret garden.”

Varric wiped tears of mirth from the corners of his eyes. “And I bet that garden’s well manicured, too. I’ll put it in his pile.”

Blackwall sat down next to Ravena. “He has a pile?”

She nodded. “There were so many letters to address that it was inevitable some got in. Apparently
we made quite a splash at Halamshiral. The Commander’s golden good looks attracted his share of admirers.” She picked up the last letter in her stack and broke the seal without even looking, her breath stuttering out in a surprised gasp as she read the first few lines. “Oh, Papa. Not you too.”

That got everyone’s attention. “What, your dad’s pawning you off?” Sera asked, sitting upright.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Read it out loud!” Varric demanded, pulling off his spectacles and reaching into his coat for his well-used notebook when he saw her already reading the letter to herself.

Ravena blinked and shook her head as she tried to hide a smile at whatever her father had written. “Nope, sorry. I’m using my keep one letter private privileges for this one.” Scooping up the rest of her letters, she stood. “Blackwall, could you carry Cullen’s letters for me? Now that we’re done looking at these, I’d like to get them back to her as soon as possible.” With that, they left two disappointed friends in the tavern and made their way to Josephine’s office.

“Well?” Raoul asked as soon as they entered. He leaned against his desk and looked at her expectantly. “Josephine told me about the influx of proposals you received.”

Josephine stood up from her own desk. “Did you go through them all?”

“Yes, I did. I also found several addressed to Cullen, so you might want to hand those to him.”

“We both know that he’ll burn them all without even looking.” She smirked. “I’ll share them with Leliana first.”

“As well you should.”

Raoul grinned. “The three of you are going to tease him mercilessly about this, aren’t you? Whatever happened to solidarity?”

Ravena smiled as she placed the letters on Josephine’s desk. “That’s where you come in, my dear brother. You boys have to stick together.”

“You do know that I’m going to bring up some horribly embarrassing tidbit of trivia about you to deflect from him, yes?”

“I know. I’m counting on it.” She waved to them both. “I know I’m asking a lot from you, but please, turn down all the proposals, especially the one about the goats. Make whatever contacts you can for the Inquisition, but leave marriage off the table.” Twining her arm through Blackwall’s, she led him out the door and back up to her chambers.

“Long day?” he asked, noticing that she placed the letter from her father on top of her desk.

She sighed, rubbing her neck. “The usual. Josie and I met early this morning to tackle the pile of letters, but more important things sprang up. I came back later this evening and took them up to Sera’s rooms to read because I knew she’d get a kick out of them. How did your day go?”

He came up behind her, his thumbs digging into knots that had plagued her all day. “The usual,” he echoed, pressing a kiss to the back of her neck. “The greener recruits are giving Cullen migraines, so I’ve taken them on before he personally shoves their shields down their throats. Hopefully my help will ease some of the burden he places upon himself.” He continued to rub at her shoulders, noting how she relaxed against his chest and that a sigh had quietly escaped her lips.

“My mother must be incredibly pleased with herself right about now,” Ravena commented, rolling
her head to the side. “And my father incredibly vexed.”

“How’s that?”

“If I’m receiving all these letters, I’m certain my parents are under a deluge of them, all promising the best if they would consent to marrying me off to the highest bidder.” She sighed again and turned in his arms. “In hindsight, perhaps being sent to the Chantry may have been the best thing that had happened to me. I avoided all marriage proposals and the circus that comes with them.”

“Are you all right? With all this, I mean.”

“This, meaning the letters from pompous nobles who think they can win me over with vague allusions to swordplay and riches, or this, meaning…” she wrapped her arms around his waist. “This. Us, and how it might affect our relationship.”

He held her close, his face pressed against her hair. “Both.”

She breathed deep, taking in the faint scent of the soaps used in the barracks. “I can handle mountains of letters,” she started, hugging him tighter. “Yet what I can’t handle is the thought that any of this would place doubt in your mind of my feelings for you.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Well, I don’t know what I can offer you that could top a herd of goats,” he said teasingly. “And I haven’t even mentioned my prowess when it comes to wielding my broadsword. Yet I do believe you favor it, even if you need a firm, two-handed grip to manage it all.”

That broke the tension he had felt ever since entering Sera’s alcove. Ravena burst out laughing, her shoulders shaking. “Oh, I do love you,” she said, leaning back to look him in the eye.

“And I love you. No amount of perfumed stationary is going to change that.” His eyes wandered to the open letter on her desk. “But what of your father? Did you want some time alone to read his letter?”

She shook her head. “What lines I read were enough for me. I’d rather spend the rest of the evening with you.”

After dinner, a few games of Diamondback in the tavern with the Chargers, and a leisurely late night stroll through the gardens, the two of them settled in for the night. He’d talked about how impressed he was that the older recruits were beginning to mentor the younger ones, and how he’d managed to talk Sera down from pulling off a prank on the Chantry sisters. It had somehow involved honey and feathers, but he hadn’t quite managed to ask what the end result would have been. Ravena had explained how dull a meeting with several nobles who were currently visiting had been, especially when the Marquis du Something or Other – Ravena’s words, not his – had waxed poetic on the value of specialized fertilizers for different crops and how he had spent several growing seasons comparing the differences made on each. Ravena ultimately ended up falling asleep on Blackwall’s shoulder, the reports from the field scouts in the Emerald Graves falling from her slack fingers.

As gingerly as he could, Blackwall got out of bed and collected her reports. He placed them on top of her desk, the chunk of quartz she had picked up from the Hinterlands acting as a paperweight to keep them from falling. He was about to douse the candles and leave when his eyes fell on her father’s letter. Unable to help himself, he picked it up and with one last look to double check if Ravena was still asleep, began to read.
My daughter, it began.

I know better than to ask about your health, knowing that you would downplay any and all injuries for the sake of my sanity (your mother still mentions the Conclave at times. Any mention of further injuries would send her into fits of tears, so I thank you for being vague.) Fortunately, that is where your brother comes in. Be well in knowing that I keep his missives in strict confidence and your mother does not look upon them, so if ever you are in need of a bit of fatherly advice, or if you would honestly like to talk about your health without fear of unbalancing delicate sensibilities (while I am made of sterner stuff, I do still worry for you, my darling,) I am always here for you.

I send my utmost apologies for the following paragraphs. I am positive that you are well aware that being the Herald of Andraste has made you a valuable commodity. I am reasonable enough to know that you are a grown woman who is fascinating and beautiful; a man would be a great idiot to resist your charms should you cast your eye his way. I know what you’re thinking: that I say this because I’m your father and as such I am biased. Well, I am, yet I also speak the truth. I’m also not fool enough to believe that you have not had your share of dalliances and affairs over the years (Maker, please don’t bring up any said affairs with me. In my mind, you are forever five years old, in braided pigtails, and always willing to snuggle with your Papa and a good storybook on a rainy day.) That being said, thoughts of ever brokering a marriage contract on your behalf have never even crossed my mind, and yet here we are, hosting teas with at least seven families a week.

I have a confession: I am growing rather sick of tea. If your mother wouldn’t notice, I would begin slipping in the whiskey you gave me several Wintersends ago as a way to cope with the jacknapes who think to gain lands, titles, and my dearest treasure (that would be you, my love) by parading in and offering up empty compliments. Your mother is eating up all the attention. Should this be her decision, you would be married off to at least five young men barely old enough for me to call Son with a straight face. We should both count ourselves lucky that Adriana is having difficulty choosing which potential suitor is her favorite.

Unfortunately, it is my duty to present to you at least three of my “top” choices, if only to placate your mother, who is threatening to write a long letter listing each and every one of her favorites’ “charms.” I give you leave to completely ignore the following list, but if asked, please humor me and agree that I had sent one to you.

Bachelor #1: Phillip (note: I didn’t bother remembering any of their last names, so don’t think to find them here)

Pros: Has decent posture, knows his hunting terminology. Has very little political ambition.

Cons: He looks as if he is twelve. I do believe he said he had nearly reached nineteen summers.

Bachelor #2: Phillipe (note: I had a difficult time differentiating between the two, but one spells and pronounces his name with an accent and the other does not.)

Pros: Good teeth.

Cons: Everything else. (For the Maker’s sake, I beg you not to ask. He nearly bored me to death in a single afternoon and your brother would have inherited the bannorn all too soon.)

Bachelor #3: Andrew (for the sake of this list, my personal favorite. Take that as you will.)

Pros: Aged 45, widower. Probably the oldest of our visitors interested in your hand. Intelligent, well-spoken, business savvy. Owns his own bit of property on Starkhaven’s outskirts. Your mother found him to be quite handsome, if you happen to like tall, ginger men with beards, heavy accents and
“startling” blue eyes (your mother’s quote, not mine.)

Cons: Honestly, I couldn’t find any. I tried. He seems like a good man genuinely interested in your cause. If you are not interested in him romantically, as a politician, I urge you to write to him and see if he can better benefit your Inquisition as an agent. I've asked him to accompany me on a hunting trip next week.

Yet all of the suitors and the three that I listed mean absolutely nothing if they do not have your approval. My dear, I know that you are more than likely being inundated with similar requests, and I shall finally be able to give you the same advice that I once gave all your brothers when it came time to pick a spouse: marry for love, not for gold. Find a partner whom you can imagine growing old with, one that inspires you to become a better version of yourself, one you can respect and laugh with. For all my lighthearted complaints against your mother’s silliness, I adore Adriana as much, nay, even more than I did when I first met her. I am blessed to have found such a woman to love and to have raised four fine individuals with.

I needn’t worry about you, I think. Your brother writes to me of a man named Blackwall. He doesn’t tell me much of your private dealings, save that you do go for the tall, bearded type, but he sings praises of the man’s deeds, in Skyhold and away in the field. The fact that this man goes with you and acts as your shield against potentially fatal blows is enough for me to love him.

I do hope that he treats you well and that you are happy with your choice of partner. In my previous correspondences with Ambassador Montilyet (and when may I begin calling her Josephine and inquire about your brother’s interest? Raoul has never been so complimentary about a woman since Eliza, which I am hoping means he has finally found someone that may heal his heart) she echoes Raoul’s opinion of this Blackwall and seeing as she has been with you since the beginning, has been able to elaborate upon your brother’s words with very little prodding. My opinion of him has risen higher.

As I said before, you are a woman grown and fully capable of making decisions on your own, be it with everyday matters or matters of the heart. Yet I entreat you to humor a father who only has your best interests in mind: ignore all your letters. Turn down any and all proposals or see if you can gain help for your cause in ways that don’t include marriage. Follow your heart and do what it tells you to do. If that includes marrying a man who is a stranger to the rest of the Trevelyan family, then bring him to us and we shall welcome him into our hearts and learn to love him as you do.

If matrimony is not on your mind, bring him to us anyway. I should dearly like to get to know the man who won my daughter’s heart. He seems to be decent and kind, with an honorable streak a mile wide. Above all else, he seems to be a man whom you respect and by all accounts, loves you beyond measure. I know you do not need my approval in your private affairs, yet if you seek it, you shall have it. Out of all the men in Thedas, I could not have chosen anyone finer for you, my dearest ‘Vena.

Now, I must close before this missive takes an even more sentimental turn and you cause an old man to shed tears. For a bit of levity, I beg that you give me your unfiltered opinion on your massive list of suitors to see if there are any that may top our dear Phillipe. Write to me as soon as you are able, and above all else, may the Maker and Andraste Herself keep you safe on your journey.

Be well, my beloved girl.

Father

Blackwall carefully placed the letter in the exact same spot Ravena had left it in. Guilt clawed at his chest; at any other time, in any other life, Blackwall would have been proud and honored to know
that he had gained the high esteem of his beloved’s father. Yet now, with a page from Leliana’s reports he had managed to intercept weighing heavy in his pocket, all he could feel was shame.

It took very little digging in Ravena’s desk to find a blank sheet of paper and pen. Haltingly, he wrote a letter to her, the words he longed to write stuck in his throat and lies flowing freely across the page. Taking one last look at Ravena, who still slept peacefully, he shook his head. He ached to go to her side, to wake her and confess everything he had meant to say ever since she accompanied him to the Storm Coast. He wanted to kiss her, to hold her, to tell her how much he loved her, even if it might be for the last time once she found out the truth about him and grew disgusted with the monster he truly was.

Yet he didn’t. Instead, he left her sleeping and went down the stairs and out towards the stables. Taking a single horse, he saddled up and began to ride towards Val Royeaux. *Damn you, Mornay,* he thought, riding off into the night. “No,” he corrected. “Damn me.”
She didn’t really see her surroundings. All she knew was that Blackwall was somewhere down in
the bowels of the jail and she needed answers from him. For someone who prided themselves on
being able to move soundlessly, her footsteps sounded unbelievably loud in the silence of the hall.
Her breath sounded even louder when she finally got to the end and saw Blackwall sitting there with
his head hung low.

“I didn’t kill him,” he said, not once looking up from the floor. “Blackwall. The real Blackwall.” He
continued to bore a hole into the stone in front of him as he explained to her how he had been
recruited by the actual Blackwall, how they had been ambushed and how he had taken the dead
man’s name in order to go into hiding. She stood there in silence, listening as the entire truth finally
fell from his lips. Without being prompted, he told her everything about his past, and she stood and
listened without commenting.

“Say something, Ravena.” She blinked and realized that he had finally turned his head to look up at
her, his face a mess of disgust and remorse.

“What do you want me to say?” she whispered, her hands clenched into fists. “You lied to me.”

“I did.”

“Why?” The single word sounded as heartbroken as she felt.

“I was going to tell you everything that day on the Storm Coast, but then you looked at me and…”
he dropped his eyes somewhere near the vicinity of her boots, unable to look her in the eye. “I lost
my nerve.”

“And you thought that this was the better alternative?” She glared at him, her fingernails digging
into her palms. “That running away and leaving me with just a bloody, piss-poor excuse of a
goodbye note was better?”

He tried not to flinch as her voice angrily rang out in the cell. “What else did you want me to do?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, sarcasm all but dripping off every word. “Telling me the truth would
have been first on my list.”

He stood up and stalked over to her. “What? You’d rather have known that the man you thought you
knew was a murderer, a monster? That you had loved a lie?”

She nearly flinched at the amount of self-loathing that seeped from his voice. “You must think I’m
incredibly dense, Thom Rainier,” she said, using his full name for the first time. It felt strange and
foreign, the syllables rolling around her mouth with unfamiliar sharp edges. “Did you not think for a
second that I didn’t know that you had a past? Did you think that I wouldn’t catch on to all the little
tells, the omissions? I knew there was something there, but out of respect, I didn’t pry, thinking you
would tell me when you chose to tell me. I might not have known exactly what it was, but I had
accepted you, warts and all.”

“You were never…”

“Never what? Never supposed to find out who you really were? Never supposed to track down the man that I love? Never supposed to still love you after I knew?” She held onto the bars and stared him in the eye, “What did you want me to do, simply sit back and accept that you had left? Spend years of my life wondering what it was that I had said, what I had done to drive you away?”

“I left to keep from hurting you!”

She let out a hollow sounding laugh that brought the hairs on the back of his neck on end. “And you broke my heart in the process. Well done, Thom.”

He stood there with his head hanging down. It was quiet for so long that he figured he had left him. He jumped when she quietly spoke again. “You are no monster.”

He clenched his teeth. “How can you say that? There were women and children! The things I did, the things I allowed to happen...” He slid down to his knees, his hands wrapped around the bars.

“They have been paid for.” She knelt with him so she could look him in the eye. “I won’t say that I don’t find the actions you took in the past abhorrent, because they are, but I will say that you are a different man now. If you were truly the monster you say you are, you wouldn’t have joined this Inquisition as readily as you did. And even then, you could have left us at any time instead of sticking your neck out, instead of shedding your blood for our cause time and time again. Monsters feel no remorse; their actions only are for their benefit, not for those around them.”

“I am a coward.”

“Even cowards have the potential to be good men.” She reached out to him, to touch his face and reassure him that despite his horrible past, she still loved him, but he jerked away.

“Why must you try to find the good in me where there is none?” he demanded, his voice raw.

“And why must you cling to nothing but the bad? Between our two opinions, I think we might be able to make a decent man full of faults and virtues.” She put her hands over his and for once, he allowed her to touch him. “I’m still incredibly pissed about the lies and the leaving, but we love each other. We can work through this.”

It was his turn to let out a humorless chuckle. “I don’t think we have time. I’m going to die.”

“Not if I have anything to say about it.”

“You aren’t going to do a damn thing. You’re going to walk out of here and let me go. I deserve it.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Yes, you can, and you will.” He tried not to look away when he saw the sheen of tears that filled her eyes. “You said you wanted the truth from me.”

“And you gave it.”

“No I didn’t. Not all of it. I lied, Ravena. All of this has been a lie.”

She sat back on her heels and looked at him warily. “What do you mean?”
“Come now, Inquisitor. I might have thought you were a sheltered little Chantry girl, but I never would have guessed you were truly stupid. Did you really think that I ever loved you?” He leaned close, his mouth set in a snarl. “I stayed in the Inquisition because it was a better cover than hiding out in the wilderness could ever be. The fact that I found myself in your bed was merely a bonus.”

She shook her head. “You’re lying.”

“Am I? You thought I was telling you the truth all these months easily enough.”

“You’re lying,” she repeated. “I know you.”

He sneered. “You only knew who I allowed you to know.”

“Stop it.”

“I’m making sure I go to my death with a clear conscience.” Blackwall reached out and roughly grabbed Ravena’s chin, forcing her to look at him. “I never loved you. You were a fool to believe otherwise. If this hadn’t have happened, I would have eventually grown tired of you and left.”

Ravena jerked her head out of his grasp. “Void take you, Thom Rainier,” she hissed, standing up quickly.

Thom listened to the sound of her boots as she stormed out of the jail. He let his head rest against the bars when he heard the heavy door slam shut. “It already has,” he whispered.

Ravena leaned against the closed door leading to the upper jail cells and tried to gather some form of composure. Her chin still stung where Blackwall’s fingers had dug in. Drawing a shaky breath, she commanded herself not to cry. “You’re a Trevelyan,” she muttered, hastily wiping at her eyes. “Trevelyans don’t show their weaknesses.”

Her advisors were standing upstairs waiting for her. She looked from one to the other, taking in Josephine’s disbelieving look of shock, Raoul and Cullen’s scowls, and Leliana’s soft, sympathetic eyes.

“How long?” she asked, hating how broken her voice sounded. She glared at Leliana. “How long have you known?”

“Just this morning.”

“And you let me go in there without any warning at what I might have found, what I would have heard?”

“Would you have believed me if I had told you?”

Ravena closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose to stem the headache that pounded there. “No, I wouldn’t have. I apologize.” She gestured towards the report that Leliana held in her hands. “So, will you give me a summary or should I read it in private?”

Leliana handed her the report. “I think you already know what it contains.”

Cullen cleared his throat. “What do we do now, Inquisitor?”

“I don’t know. What would you do?”
Cullen seemed to stop and think his response through. “He is a liar who left men under his command to a horrible fate. I hate him for it, but he has proven himself with our cause. I say we find a way to put him into our custody for further judgment.”

“He lied about being a Warden,” Leliana added. “I would turn him over to them.”

Raoul stepped close and made a move to comfort his sister, but she shrugged his arm away. “I say we leave him to rot,” he growled, glaring at the door leading down to the lower cells.

Ravena looked towards her ambassador. “Josephine, I’m going to need your help.”

“And you shall have it, Inquisitor. What is your plan?”

“We need to get the Empress to release him into our custody. Can you write something up for me, please?”

Josephine nodded. “I already have a document drafted. All it needs is your final approval and we can present it to the Empress.”

“Thank you. Remind me to raise your pay.” The last was said with a ghost of a smile that didn’t quite reach Ravena’s eyes. One by one, they walked out of the jail. Cullen made sure he was the last of her advisors out of the room.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” he said, catching her hand. It was a risky move since she had batted away an offer of comfort already, but she allowed his fingers to curl over hers. “I know that the two of you were close.” His free hand went to her face, his thumb smoothing over the reddened skin of her chin. The gesture was brotherly in nature and she appreciated his concern, even as it threatened to crumble the stoic mask she had put on.

She leaned towards him, her shoulder pressed against his chestplate. “No, Cullen.” Ravena could all but feel her heart bleeding out as she remembered the way Thom had looked at her, his eyes like chips of ice. “We never were.”

Josephine was true to her word, having an eloquently worded document requesting Thom Rainier’s extradition into the Inquisition’s custody ready for Ravena’s signature. “Have I told you lately how brilliant you are?” Ravena asked, the quill poised over the document. The two of them were alone, Raoul leaving them in order to prepare everything for their meeting with the Empress.

“Yes, but it never gets old hearing it.” Josephine watched as Ravena signed, then handed her a bottle of blotting powder. “I would have left him to die,” she said solemnly.

“The thought crossed my mind,” Ravena confessed.

“Why didn’t you?”

“Why would you?”

Josephine placed her hand on Ravena’s shoulder. “Because he hurt you.”

Ravena weakly smiled. “I should warn my brother. Our diplomat is bloodthirsty.”

“Oh, Raoul already knows Antivan women are not to be trifled with. If he ever did anything like this, I’d kill him with kindness. And perhaps poison. Mostly poison.” Expression sobering, she
leaned in. “Are you all right?”

Ravena tiredly ran a hand over her face. “No, not really. Yet I don’t have the luxury to indulge in prolonged bouts self-pity now, do I?” She sighed. “I’m forty years old. I should be beyond feeling this way.”

“Grief knows no age limit. You were dealt a serious blow and you have every right to feel the way you do. If I could ask, what did he say to you down there?”

“He told me the truth. He had lied to me this entire time. He never loved me.” She hung her head down, her throat tight and eyes burning with unshed tears.

“Do you believe him? He could be lying even now, to spare your feelings.”

“You weren’t there. You didn’t see him or hear the way he said it.”

Josephine shook her head. “No. I don’t believe it. I refuse to believe that such devotion he showed you could be false.”

“Oh, Josie. I wish I had your faith in romantic ideals. I used to, but I’m so tired of being walked away from.” She picked the document up and took a bolstering breath. “Let’s just get this over with.”

She watched as Ravena seemed to lock her feelings on what had just happened away, her face smoothing out into an expressionless mask. Silently, Josephine prayed to whoever might be listening that things would turn out for the best.
Ravena stood in front of the throne in the Great Hall and stared hard at the gilded spikes at its back. This is just another judgment, you’ve done this before. Her advisors had praised her rulings in the past, calling her actions fair. She tended to show mercy and give second chances, or she gave prisoners over to the injured parties, should they be better suited to dole out justice than she. Never before had she executed anyone, no matter how badly she had wanted to, thinking of the greater picture instead of what she wanted for her own ends. This is just another judgment, you’ve done this before. There’s nothing different to this one than all the others.

But it was different. She sat at her throne and straightened her shoulders, putting on a mask of calmness she certainly didn’t feel as she pretended to listen to Josephine introduce their prisoner. The rarely worn clothing she had decided to put on that day chafed and made her feel uncomfortable in her own skin. She had chosen it because she didn’t want to confront this prisoner in something they’d seen her wear every day. She needed the more formal looking attire, the dark blue tunic with the multitude of silver clasps running down the front and the dark pants with their studded seams, as an extra layer of armor her usual casual cotton shirts and soft trousers didn’t have. Even her boots were different, the seemingly never ending laces creating that much more of a barrier to take refuge behind than her comfortable, beaten up pair she always wore did.

She looked down at the man with an air of indifference, even when her emotions were twisted up in knots. Each clank of the manacles at his wrists was a blow to her heart. Come on, Ravena, she thought, curling her fingers over the armrests of her throne. You knew it would be hard to see him like this. You just didn’t figure out that it would be this difficult.

She stared at him with her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth. She had spent the entirety of the trip back from Val Royeaux trying to figure out what to say at this very moment and words still failed her.

“How did you manage to get me here?” Blackwall asked, not looking at her as he broke the silence.

“My ambassadors and I went to the Empress with the intention of extraditing you into our custody. We were fully prepared to use her gratitude for saving her life in exchange for yours. It wouldn’t have been an even trade by far, but we decided to try.” That last was a low blow, and she felt a twinge of satisfaction when he winced at her words.

“And show the world that the Inquisition isn’t above bartering for criminals? That it’s as twisted and crooked as every other form of government?” He looked up at her and glared. “I was prepared to end this. I wanted to die, to pay for my crimes. You stole that choice from me by bringing me here.”

Her temper flared and the indifferent mask she had tried to wear clattered to the ground. “You’re one to talk about stealing choices,” she sneered. “Instead of telling me the truth from the very beginning, you ran away. My choices were taken from me before I even knew I had any.”

“Then you should have left me to hang!”

She quickly stood up and clenched her fists at her sides. “I couldn’t do that!” Her exclamation rang out in the hall and she was suddenly aware of the many nobles and soldiers who had gathered to witness the trial murmur amongst themselves. Regaining her composure, she sat back down and stared at Blackwall as coldly as she knew how. “As for bartering for criminals, as you so aptly put it, you needn’t worry. Much to our surprise, the Empress stopped us before we could even ask for your release. We didn’t do anything, she gave you to us. Apparently, Gaspard told her of your past
military history and she came to the conclusion that you and your talents were worth more to the
Inquisition alive than you ever will be to Orlais dead. As a token of goodwill, she also declared that
should you help defeat Corypheus and survive, your name will be cleared and all charges dropped.”

Blackwall’s eyes widened in disbelief for a fraction of a second before narrowing. “Then I have no
other choice but to stay here. It seems as if you own my life.”

She shook her head. “No, I do not.”

“Then what will you have of me?”

She was struck with an image of them sprawled out on her bed. She had been lying on her side, her
head propped on her hand as he ran one large hand down to her hip, drawing her closer to him. What
will you have of me, Love, he had asked her, his lips painting a path down her throat and his teeth
pleasantly scraping against the pulse he found there. It seemed as if that moment was a lifetime ago:
they had been two different people, he a noble Warden who had devoted himself to the Inquisition’s
cause and she a woman who naively believed without a doubt that he loved her. Never in her wildest
dreams would she have even considered that his actions had been carefully calculated as a way to
hide from her who he really was. The fact that I ended up in your bed was merely a bonus. Blinking,
she forcibly pushed aside memories of them: the laughter, the passion, all the sweet words – the lies –
he had ever said to her and the seemingly sincere way he had always said how he loved her and
drew upon an inner reserve of strength to get through this intact.

“I will have nothing of you, nor do I want anything from you in return. You have your freedom:
your life is your own to make of it as you see fit. Stay and fight Corypheus as part of the Inquisition,
leave and head to the Wardens to join the order you pretended to belong to, or run away and hide
like the coward you professed yourself to be. You argued that I stole your choices from you, so I’m
giving them back.” She couldn’t help but notice that many of the soldiers who had gathered to
witness the trial nodded in approval of her ruling. Blackwall had helped train and had gained the
respect of so many of them, taking them from green recruits to the men and women they were today.
Absently, Ravena wondered how many of them still respected him after learning the truth, but she
squashed that worry under the heel of her boot. It doesn’t matter, she thought. Making sure that he is
well-liked is not my responsibility any longer. Standing up, she looked towards Josephine and Raoul
to signal that the trial was over. Josephine nodded and Ravena couldn’t help but see that her
ambassador wore a relieved look on her face. Raoul’s face was more guarded, but she could tell that
he was angry. She had always had a knack for sensing how he was feeling for as long as she could
remember, and it seemed as if their past habit of knowing what the other was thinking or feeling had
slowly returned after being apart for so long. Raoul might be angry, but that anger wasn’t directed at
her or her decisions. His ire was directed more at the man in chains in front of her and Ravena felt a
rush of affection at the fact that for the first time in years, Raoul was willing to stand up for his
sister’s hurt feelings.

It was petty of her, but she hoped Raoul would give Blackwall, or Thom, or whatever the Void he
decided to call himself, a beating the likes he’d never seen. It wouldn’t make her feel better, but it
might give him an inkling of how much she was currently hurting.

She slowly stepped down from the dais and made her way towards Blackwall. “Unchain him,” she
quietly ordered the guard at his side. There were a few quiet clicks and the manacles around
Blackwall’s hands loosened and were taken away. Addressing Blackwall as he silently rubbed at his
wrists, she attempted to make her last words to him as formal as she possibly could. “Do what you
will, Thom Rainier. Your life is your own and it is of no consequence to me now.”

He looked down, his brows drawn together. “My lady, I…”
And that was when her temper well and truly snapped. “Do not call me that,” she hissed, voice low enough for only him to hear her and eyes narrowing. “You lost that privilege once you told me your true feelings. Yet I must thank you for that. You were right; I was a fool to believe you ever loved me.”

“Ravenna, please, let me expl…” He reached for her, but she jerked her arm out of his reach. He flinched at her movement as if she had backhanded him. Had they not have had the audience around them, she just might have done so.

“I might have been a fool once, but I learn from my mistakes.” With that, she turned away from him and strode purposely out the hall and down the stairs, her head held high.

She walked without a true destination in mind, wanting only to get away from the whispers and the many eyes in the hall. Sagging against the stone wall of one of the towers still under construction, she took a grounding breath and stared at her shaking hands. She played the recent events back in her head as she always did after a judgment, wondering if she had done the right thing. Pushing away from the wall, she opened the heavy wooden door and went inside, her mind lingering on the hurt expression in Blackwall’s eyes when she had withdrawn from him.

Once she was certain that she was alone in the tower, the strength she had relied on for the past few days failed her. Ravenna leaned her back against the door and slid down with a muted thud, her legs giving out as she let out a strangled sob. Since learning the truth, she had commanded herself to not cry, to show a strong front so that no one could use the incident against the Inquisition. She put the needs of the many above her own, but she was only human, no matter how divine people wished to depict her. She would continue to place the needs of the Inquisition above all else, but she allowed herself this one moment of weakness, this one moment of selfishness, to bury her face in her hands and pour her broken heart out.

She suddenly thought about the words Cole had said to her in the Emerald Graves when Blackwall had been gravely injured. You would survive, he had told her. It would hurt more than anything you had ever experienced, but you would endure.

Ravenna wiped at her wet cheeks and leaned her head back against the door. Yes, she would endure. Just like before when Simon had left her, she would throw herself into her work. She would devote every waking moment to moving closer to defeating Corypheus without a thought of after to distract her. She might need some time before she could even look at Blackwall without feeling the sharp sting of betrayal, but she would survive.

She had to.
“I figured I’d find you here.”

Ravena looked up in time to see her brother’s head peek over the top of the ladder. She scrubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand, but she knew she couldn’t hide the redness from him. “Maybe I wanted to be alone,” she said instead, hating how her voice made her sound like a petulant girl.

“And maybe you do, but it doesn’t mean that I’m going to let you wallow all by yourself.” Raoul hauled himself up and over the ladder. “That judgment session was difficult to watch; I imagine it was even harder to personally go through.” He gave a soft grunt as he wiggled into a more comfortable position beside her. Ravena had chosen to retreat from everyone by curling up into one of the many reading nooks she had made within Skyhold. This one wasn’t one of the better built ones, especially since the tower roof was still partially under construction.

But this nook was hers and hers alone: there weren’t any memories that might haunt her, unlike some of the other places she had brought someone – him – to. It helped that the bursts of howling wind that ran through her sanctuary suited her mood perfectly.

“I’m fine.”

“You’re lying.”

She winced. After what she had gone through in the past couple of days, being called a liar didn’t sit well with her. “What good would it do if I told you I was miserable?” she demanded, glaring at him. “What would it matter if I said that I felt so damned stupid, if I said that it hurt?” Any other time, she would have been ashamed by the hot tears that fell unbidden down her face, but now, she was too tired to care. Dimly, she felt Raoul gather her in his arms and slowly rock her back and forth.

“I could beat him up for you,” he offered, resting his chin on top of her head.

“I should let you,” she said, her voice muffled in the crook of his neck.

“Well, I would have pummeled the bastard who broke my sister’s heart,” he said, giving her a squeeze. “But Cassandra beat me to it. I do believe he’ll be sporting a black eye and a few other bruises for quite some time. I did put in a couple of good verbal jabs as I dragged her off of him though.”

Ravena snorted, imagining Cassandra standing up for her. She made a mental note to press Varric for more chapters of his romance serial as a show of gratitude. “Serves him right.”

“You could try saying his name.”

“It doesn’t do any good. Rainier. Captain Thom Rainier. I know what his name is. Maker’s teeth, he asked me to call him by his given name before any of this came to light.” She barked out a bitter, humorless laugh. “He said it was a Warden thing to take another name and like a fool, I believed him, but it was just another one of his many lies.”

“I hate seeing you this way, ‘Vena.”

“I hate feeling this way.” She moved away and wiped at her face. “You haven’t called me ‘Vena in years.”
“Not since we were children,” he agreed. “Not since before you went to the Chantry.”

“It always made me sad when you stopped.” She looked down. “It made me sad when you stopped doing a lot of other things, too. I missed you, you know.” She bit her lip; that hadn’t meant to come out, and she hated the hurt that flashed in her brother’s eyes.

“I know. I’ve missed you too. I didn’t know how to talk to you, after. Sometimes I still don’t.” He pulled one of his knees up and rested his arm across it. “I always felt like anything I said would be as if I were rubbing it in that the only reason you were in the Chantry was because I had gotten married first. You’ve always been good at hiding how you feel from everyone, but I could tell how much you resented me for putting you there.”

She shot up. “What? No.” Sitting on her knees, she looked at him. “I blamed an outdated family tradition for me being sent; I never blamed you for me being in the Chantry, Raoul. The only thing I’ve ever wished for you was happiness: I loved Eliza like a sister, and I could tell that the two of you adored the other.”

“I could have tried to stop it. I could have asked our parents to bring you home, but I didn’t. I knew how miserable you were, and all I could think of was how grateful I was that it wasn’t me in there instead of you.” He looked at her and Ravena’s heart ached at his expression. “It was a boy, you know. Mother and Father believe that neither of us knew, but the midwife told us. Eliza was so happy, but then she slipped away from me. She never found out that our son…” he turned his head, his mouth a thin line of grief. “I sat there with one arm around my wife as she drew her last breath and the other around our son, who had never gotten a chance to draw his first, and…”

Ravena embraced her brother, her arms tight around him. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought it was the Maker’s way of punishing me for finding happiness at the expense of another. After, I threw myself into my work to take my mind off of everything I had lost. In time, it got easier to make brief appearances so that Mother and Father wouldn’t worry, to make excuses of too much work because I knew René would understand, to laugh when Robert wanted to go drinking even though it hurt to even think about smiling.” He squeezed her almost to the point of pain. “To ignore my sister’s letters, to pretend that she didn’t exist, to push her away when all she wanted to do was offer comfort. Oh, ‘Vena, I’m so sorry for causing you so much pain.”

“I’m sorry too. There were so many times over the years where I wanted to clear the air between us, but I was so afraid of driving you away from me for good. I should have been braver.” She leaned up until their foreheads were touching. “Can you ever forgive me, Raoul?”

“I should be asking that of you.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I love you.”

“I love you too. It makes me sick of all the years that I wasted, barely speaking to you.”

She kissed his cheek. “Promise me that there’ll be no more secrets between us, okay?”

“I promise. No more secrets.”

“Good.” Now that they had finally spoken, it felt as if a weight she had been carrying for years had finally lifted and she felt the gap that had been slowly trying to close ever since Raoul’s arrival at Skyhold finally seal. Its closing might have left a scar, but she chose to use that as a reminder to never allow things to fester between them again. “Now stop consoling your weepy sister and head back downstairs. I know for a fact that there’s a lovely Antivan lady who better deserves your
attention.”

He looked shocked. “I…”

“Oh please. I’m your twin, Raoul. You can’t hide things like this from me. Besides, Josephine already spilled the beans once I gave her the slightest opening. In case you’re wondering, she’s head over heels for you.”

“Our relationship doesn’t bother you? She is nearly eleven years my junior.”

“I meant what I said, Raoul: all I’ve ever wanted was for you to be happy. You haven’t truly been happy in years; seeing the two of you together is like seeing the old you finally come out and I’m grateful for it. The two of you are good for the other. Besides, Blackw-” Ravena stopped herself, her heart doing a painful twist in her chest. “Thom is three years and several months my senior. I’d be calling the kettle black if I said that I had objections over something as silly as an age gap.”

“You still love him, don’t you?” His eyes were sympathetic.

She looked down, her lip caught between her teeth. “Andraste save me, but yes, I do. I think I’ll always love him, no matter how much I dislike him at the moment.” Or how little he loves me, she thought painfully.

“Do you ever think you could forgive him?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I…” she sighed. “I’m trying.”

Raoul kissed her forehead. “Then that’s all anyone can do. And if it comes up that you can’t or don’t want to forgive him, then that’s okay too. I’m here for you either way. Do me a favor though?”

“What?”

“Brood someplace less drafty. It wouldn’t do if the Inquisitor caught a cold.” He winked at her before starting down the ladder. “And that didn’t come from just me. Dorian, Varric and Cullen worry too, you know.”

Ravena waited until she heard the large door leading out of the tower creak shut before she stretched out on her makeshift cushion of blankets, her head cradled in her arms. “You can come out, Cole,” she murmured. Somehow, she knew that the spirit was there with her.

“He’s not as ragged now,” Cole commented, staring down at the door Raoul had gone out of. “Josephine sews up the torn pieces of his heart, places patches on parts he thought he lost forever.”

“I know. I’m happy for them.” It was the truth. Even through her own sadness, she was thankful that her brother could reclaim some of the happiness he’d once lost.

“It’s good that you can fix things between your brother. The doll’s arm might have gotten put back where it belongs, but now her heart is all jagged edges and crushed pieces.” After a beat, Cole tilted his head. “You’ve given him a painful blow, you know. He sits, bleeding, at your door.”

She knew who he was talking about. “What I gave him is his freedom. He’s free to leave if being here hurts him so much.”

“Going away would hurt him even more. It would have killed him if you had banished him.”

“I don’t see how that could. He made it plain that he never loved me.”
Cole’s eyes went vacant under the wide brim of his hat. “Words like bitter poison, coating the
tongue. Shards of glass slicing the throat as they come out. Heart shattering as she stares down, cold,
so cold. One more regret piling atop the rest…”

“Stop.” She squeezed her eyes shut and curled herself into a ball of misery. “Please, Cole, just stop
for now.”

“I said it wrong, didn’t I?”

“I don’t think there’s a right way to say things here. Thank you for trying.”

She felt him brush his fingers through her hair. Her father had often done the same when she was a
child suffering from nightmares and the move never failed to soothe her. “I could make you forget
him so it would stop hurting, but I don’t think you would forgive me.”

“I know it sounds strange, but there are some pains that people need to work through on their own.”

“And there are some pains that people need to work through together.” With one final pass of his
fingers through her hair, he was gone.

Ravena lay there until the sky over her half-finished shelter grew dark. She spent her time thinking
things through, replaying conversations and going through memories to try and see just when she
might have been able to see through his lies and save herself the heartache she was currently going
through. After lingering far too long on the memory of Blackwall’s eyes and the way his lips curved
into a happy smile when he told her he loved her, she admitted to herself that she was indeed
brooding and decided that she had enough of it. Making her way down the ladder and stealthily past
everyone, she crept like a thief in her own home until she made it to the stairwell leading to her
quarters. Emotionally exhausted, she wasn’t paying attention when she climbed the stairs until the
scraping noise of someone hurriedly getting up off the floor startled her.

So Cole wasn’t exaggerating when he said he was at my door, she thought, trying to steel herself for
a confrontation she wasn’t prepared for.

“Ravena…”

She held up a hand. “Don’t. Just…don’t.” Maker, but she was tired. Tilting her head up, she looked
at him so he could see her red-rimmed eyes and tear-streaked face and felt a tiny bit of satisfaction by
the way his own face crumpled in anguish. Just like Raoul had said, one of Blackwall’s eyes was
swollen shut. “I can’t talk to you right now.”

“I understand.” He reached out as if to touch her like he had so many other times, but stopped at the
last minute, his hand hovering in mid-air before he retracted it. “Will…will there ever be a chance
to?”

Ravena stared at him and tried to see the man who had confessed so coldly that he had never loved
her. She saw instead a man who probably felt as heartsick as she did. Cole’s words came back to
haunt her; had Blackwall lied to her one last time? He thought he was going to his death; had he truly
wanted to spare her from grief, or was this a pretense, just another one of his lies she was supposed
to blindly believe in order for him to get back into her good graces? “I don’t know.” she said
honestly. Quietly, she slipped past him and carefully shut her bedroom door before pressing her
palms and forehead against the wood.

She could have sworn she heard an answering thud as if Blackwall did the same on the opposite
side. “I hope so,” she finally heard him say, his voice hoarse before she listened to the sound of his
boots walk away.
Blackwall knew of the Teyrn’s arrival as soon as he saw the contingent of horses arrive in the stables. He’d taken to hiding out in the hayloft instead of his garden room, mostly because it meant that he didn’t have to go halfway through Skyhold in order to go into the kitchens after hours to get something to eat.

He was avoiding people as much as possible these days. Part of it was because he couldn’t bear the looks that people who had once respected him were now giving him, but the other part was because he didn’t want to run into Ravena until she was ready to see him. After her cold dismissal in the Great Hall and the brief encounter in front of her chambers – Maker’s breath, the sight of her tear-streaked cheeks and reddened eyes would haunt him for the rest of his life – he had tried his best to be as unobtrusive as possible.

“You’re like a ghost, but you’re still alive,” Cole said, startling Blackwall out of his morose thoughts. The spirit sat atop several bales of hay, his legs dangling over the edge of the loft.

“Kid’s got a point,” Varric agreed, making his way up the stairs. While he might have tried to keep a low profile, a handful of his friends had come to visit him on a regular basis. Sera and Bull were the most frequent, with Varric and Cole rounding out the group. As for the others, Vivienne rarely paid him any attention, but that was per usual. Leliana was more upset with herself that she hadn’t figured out his true identity on her own. Josephine seemed torn between her loyalty to Ravena and her unshakable faith that everything would turn out right in the end, offering him encouraging smiles whenever she saw him. Cassandra and Cullen still refused to speak to him. Solas had barked out a scathing admonition before stalking off to his rotunda.

And Dorian…the mage had stormed into the stables one night and punched him in the face. Or at least he had tried to, but his fist had ineffectively swished past Blackwall’s ear, seeing as he had reeked of wine at the time. He put up the smallest of fights as Blackwall had led him towards the tavern and left him leaning against a stack of wooden crates just outside the door, slurred curses slipping past his lips.

“And what do I owe the pleasure of your visit?” He asked, keeping his back to the two of them and trying unsuccessfully to look like he was thoroughly engrossed in carving out the details to a toy owl he had planned to make for one of the children living in Skyhold, yet had never gotten to work on before his past had come to light. He stared down at the rough wooden shape, wondering if the little girl he had promised it to even wanted it still, now that everyone knew what a monster he was.

“You need to get out of this funk,” Varric said. “You’ve been skulking about for nearly two months. Time to re-enter the world of the living and put your Big Boy pants on.”

“Perhaps I don’t want to,” he said, knowing full well that he sounded childish.

“Hey, think of us as the advance scouts. If you don’t come out for dinner tonight, Sera and Bull are already planning on ambushing you and wrestling you into a bath and then some clean clothes. We’re trying to save you the trouble.”

Blackwall cringed as he imagined just how Bull and Sera would go about the task. “Why today?” he asked. “Is it because of the Teyrn’s visit? Need to parade me out to show him how the Inquisition treats liars and traitors?”

Varric crossed his arms over his chest. “And we’re putting a stop to this Pity Wagon before it even
leaves the stable,” he said, his voice firm. “Yes, the Teyrn is one of the reasons. The other reason is because we’ve been keeping our eyes open and ears down to the ground. You’d be surprised at how many people here really don’t give a damn about your past and actually want to see you around again.”

“Initially…”

“Yeah, at first everyone was shocked and surprised, but after a while to process everything, people started remembering the man who taught them how to fight and defend themselves, or this great guy who repaired the roof of their new shelter and carried their kids when the wagon to Skyhold was too full and always gave away his share of the food so someone else didn’t have to go hungry. They’ve all been giving you space to decide what you want to do, but I decided to take it upon myself to drag your ass out of this barn before you start to permanently smell like horse shit.”

“She needs to see you too,” Cole quietly added. “Thoughts shifting around like sand through her fingers. She wants to smile again and Maker, how he makes her smile.”

Blackwall closed his eyes and swallowed past the thick knot that had gathered in his throat. “You really think she wants to see me?” he asked.

“She wouldn’t have thought it if it wasn’t true,” Cole offered. “Will you let us help you?”

Blackwall took a breath and nodded. “I’ll see you both at dinner then.”

Varric jerked his thumb towards the barracks. “First things first, take a bath. I wasn’t kidding about the smell.”

Blackwall took his time in dressing for the evening. He’d picked a light blue tunic that he knew Ravena liked to see him wear and a pair of fawn colored trousers. He’d even taken care to trim his beard from where it had been growing scraggly and unkempt to something more presentable.

“Looking good, Hero,” Varric said as he entered the Great Hall. Tables were laden with food and several dignitaries Blackwall didn’t recognize were seated amongst the usual nobles. “You’re going to knock her socks off.” With that, the dwarf went to sit at the main table where Josephine had planned for him and the rest of the Inner Circle to eat with the Fereldan dignitaries.

Blackwall would have replied, but just then Ravena entered the Great Hall through the door leading to her rooms. It was as if time stood still: instead of her usual pants and blouse, Ravena wore a close fitting gown of midnight blue with silver accents in a style popular in Fereldan courts. It was rare to see her in a dress, but it was even rarer to see her with her hair styled differently. Instead of the normal bun or braid, Ravena had elected to let her hair tumble freely down her bared shoulders. She cast her gaze about the Hall and for the briefest of moments, their eyes locked. It was as if the sky had parted and sunlight shone through after a cloudy day when her red-tinted lips parted into one of the biggest smiles that he had ever seen. He couldn’t help returning it, and he was about to take a step towards her when she spoke.

“Fergus!”

Blackwall’s heart plummeted and crashed onto the rocks when he heard movement directly behind him. A man, Teyrn Cousland, by Blackwall’s guess, stepped forward. His long legs ate up the distance between them and he enveloped Ravena into an embrace that went well past proper decorum and told everyone assembled there that the Teyrn and the Inquisitor were very well
acquainted.

“Maker’s mercy, Ravena. You need to stop growing ever beautiful; else you put my memory to shame.”

Ravena laughed as the Teyrn spun her around. “And you are just as flattering as I remember you. I’m sorry I wasn’t able to greet you at the gates when you arrived; I’ve only just returned from afield myself.”

“No need. Your ambassadors made certain that my men and I are quite comfortable.” He flashed a dimpled smile before grasping her hand in his to press a lingering kiss on her knuckles and Blackwall’s stomach began to unpleasantly roil at the sight, especially when she looked adoringly at the Teyrn.

“Run, I need to run.” Cole looked up at him from under his hat, a concerned expression on his face. “Daggers piercing deep, look at how she looks at him, damn that smug bastard for taking what I threw away.”

“Cole, if you’re truly a compassionate spirit, please,” Blackwall begged. “Stay out of my head until they’re gone.”

Cole’s frown deepened. “You weren’t supposed to hurt tonight,” he said, glaring at the scene in front of him. “Tonight was supposed to be about mending, not…” he made a distressed sound. “Not this.” Without another word, Cole walked over to the far end of the table where Sera, Bull, and the Chargers were sitting. He leaned over at Bull and whispered something into the man’s ear before slipping away and out of the Main Hall. No one seemed to notice his disappearance.

“Well, the kid’s got the right idea,” Bull said, kicking out a chair for Blackwall to sit in.

“What did he say?”

“He said that you need to forget and that he couldn’t do the forgetting for you, so I should help instead.” Tipping back a tankard, he gestured to the bottle of wine in front of them. “What say we get through this dinner and when it’s polite to leave, we head back to the tavern and get you shitfaced?”

Blackwall’s attention was brought back to the head of the table. Ravena was laughing at some story Fergus was telling their companions, her hand on his arm as she sat closer to him than necessary. She seemed to feel Blackwall’s eyes on her, because she looked his way. This time, they definitely made eye contact; she breaking away with a cool, dismissive glance before returning her attention back to her guest, warm where she had only seconds before been glacial. Grabbing the bottle, Blackwall poured himself a healthy serving. “That,” he said, nearly draining it in one go. “Is the best idea I’ve heard all day.”

Ravena took Fergus’ arm as they walked along the battlements. To say that she had desperately needed a diversion such as his visit was an understatement. For the past two months, she’d been following even the tiniest of leads that would get her out of Skyhold, all because she was Void-bent on avoiding Blackwall. It was childish of her and she knew it, but her pride and her feelings were still extremely sore. Brooding alone in her room wasn’t an option; there were rifts that needed sealing and people to help that could not wait until she got over her broken heart. Getting drunk was definitely not an option; she’d already gone that path one night very early on with Dorian. All it had gained her was a sore throat and swollen eyes from crying herself to sleep on top of a killer.
hangover, and an irritable best friend who was a right grump when hung over as well. Talking about it wasn’t even an option because she felt that no one needed to hear the woe-is-me sob story from her after they had very publicly seen it for themselves; besides, the only one she really felt she could confide in was Cassandra, and the Seeker’s opinion of Blackwall only drove home how foolish Ravena had been to believe every single lie he had fed her.

So she did what any love-spurned woman would do: she went out and killed demons, bandits, Red Templars, and any other foe that was unlucky enough to cross her path. She sealed remote rifts, helped villagers on the most trifling of requests that usually involved running all over the countryside to fetch an object for them, collected mysterious shards and mosaic pieces, and slew the rare dragon.

The dragon part had been completely an accident. She, Dorian, Bull and Varric had stumbled across its lair while exploring. Out of the four of them, Bull had been the only one extremely excited to face it. The rest of them had done a lot of running and, to quote Varric, a lot of *not getting killed or burnt to a crisp, thank you very much*.

With everything going on, she had completely forgotten about Fergus’ scheduled visit, which was why she had been utterly mortified when she, filthy from the road and stinking of horse and dead dragon, had spotted him in the outer courtyard talking to Josephine and Raoul. Using every bit of stealth she possessed, she had darted into a side entrance and up a rarely used stairwell to reach her room and make herself more presentable.

“You’re distant, Ravena,” Fergus said, bringing her back to the present.

She shook her head. “Sorry, it’s been a very long day.”

“A long few months, more like,” he replied. “Want to talk about it?”

They made their way towards the portion of the ramparts overlooking the tavern. Ravena briefly smiled, hearing the Chargers start up a chorus to a drinking tune while Bull regaled them of their fight with the dragon for at least the fifth time that night. “Not much to say; we’ve been busy going over the…”

“I meant,” Fergus corrected. “What happened in Val Royeaux. Thom Rainier, in particular. I have ears, dear heart. Besides, it’s impossible to miss, since it seems to be the topic of great discussion here.”

She stiffened. “Not much to say there either.” Tearing her gaze away from the tavern, she resumed walking. “Thank you for the soaps, by the way. I was ever so grateful to find them in my rooms when I came back. I doubt you’d appreciate Eau de Dragon otherwise.”

“Sweetheart, you’re one of my oldest friends. I can tell when you’re hurting. All I want is to –”

“The rose scented bars are my favorites. I should have Josephine draw up a contract with your soapmaker to keep us in steady supply. How is Marta, still in the same shop in Highever’s markets?”

He sighed. “And I know you well enough to know when you want to drop a subject. At least let me know if I have permission to bash my fist into this man’s face?”

She rolled her eyes. “I believe there is a line already formed, or at least there was, two months ago.” Ravena leaned against Fergus’ arm. “I’m a big girl, Fergus. I can handle…*disappointments* on my own. But thank you for your concern.”

He grinned and gestured with his thumb back at the ruckus they were walking away from. “Yes, I’m hearing how you handle things. Though I don’t believe *she climbed the dragon’s back and stuck her
blades into that fucker’s skull has been your preferred method of choice before."

“Thanks to Bull, I’m never going to live that moment down.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I particularly like the part where you slid down its neck and hopped off with a little ta-da flourish at the end.” Fergus leaned against the stone, his expression sobering. “I just wanted to repeat some wise words I once received from a cherished friend when I was in need of it. You are not alone. As long as you need me, I’ll be here for you.”

Ravena leaned against the wall alongside him and fiddled with the sleeve of her dress. “The heartache you went through is a lot more than a simple broken relationship.”

“Heartache is heartache, no matter the scope.”

She looked at him and gave him a weak smile. “I love you, Fergus. You know that, right?”

“Of course I do. And you know I love you right back. You’re like the sister that I never had.”

“We should probably spread that around. I bet you an entire sovereign that by this time tomorrow, there’s a rumor floating about that we’re either engaged or reunited long-lost lovers, or both.”

“I see your rumor and move the deadline up to breakfast, as well as raise you a rumor that we’ve been secretly married this whole time. Which is ridiculous, I might add. Where would we live? I can’t run a teyrnir from way over here and you can’t run the Inquisition from Highever. We’d never fit everyone in the castle and I know my treasury isn’t large enough for a remodeling project of that scale.”

“Trust you to think out logistics.” She gave a theatrical sigh. “And thus, our love was doomed from the start.”

He waggled his eyebrows at her. “So I guess passionate kisses on the battlements to cause more tongues to wag is out of the question?” He pursed his lips and leaned in just to hear her stifle a snort of laughter.

Still laughing, she gently pushed his face away. “I think I’m giving up on passion. Maker, find me a bland, boring, honest man and I’ll be happy for the rest of my days.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“No, I guess I don’t. Boring would get…well, boring after a while. Yet I would like an honest man. Those seem hard to come by.”

He pat her shoulder reassuringly. “Well, if I can find one, I’ll send him your way. And because I adore you, I’ll even make sure he looks almost as good as me.”

The next morning dawned far too early and far too brightly for Blackwall’s tastes. He moaned and clenched his eyes shut, rolling over in bed and pulling the covers over his face. That’s when he stopped. He must have stumbled his way up to his room in the gardens instead of fumbling back to the stables. He inhaled, catching the faintest whiff of perfume that had nearly faded from the sheets.

Ravena. He held the pillow tighter against him. Maker, but he missed her. Drinking himself to oblivion was probably not the best solution; he dimly recalled moodily sitting at a table and not
talking much, Sera poking him in the side and complaining about how she remembered him being much more cheerful the last time they had gotten him drunk. His hands absently went to his beard, hoping that Sera hadn’t done anything in retaliation for his behavior, like put something sticky in it or shave it off altogether. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, he cracked open his eyes and came face to face with Cole.

“I don’t even have the energy to curse,” he mumbled. “What are you doing here?”

Cole held up a large tankard. “I brought this for you.”

Groaning, Blackwall sat up and put his head in his hands. “Thank you.” He eyed the mug dubiously, but then took a sip when he realized it held nothing but water, icy cold as if it had been pulled fresh from the well.


“For a while, yes, but you wind up ultimately hurting even worse when you sober up.” He placed the metal tankard to his forehead, sighing as it soothed his aching head.

“Then why do it?”

Blackwall drank the rest, belatedly realizing that Cole had added in elfroot to infuse in the water when he nearly swallowed some mashed up leaves. “Because it was a temporary fix.” While the booze hadn’t helped him get over Ravena, it had made him realize that the people of Skyhold had, for the most part, forgiven him. That had healed a very painful ache, even if the larger one still remained.

“She loves him, you know. The Teyrn.”

He closed his eyes. “Cole, that is the exact opposite of helping.” He thought of the dress Ravena had worn the other night, how it had clung to her form and matched the Cousland banner colors perfectly. He was already imagining the lavish wedding that Josephine would pull off, the elaborate dress that Vivienne would insist Ravena wear, the weeks of celebration. Then she would be gone from Skyhold, and not for mere months, which in itself had been torture, but forever. The nausea that had calmed only moments before came back with a vengeance.

Cole picked up on his feelings. “No, you don’t understand. She doesn’t love him like she loves you. She loves him the way she loves Cullen and Dorian and Varric: she thinks that it’s funny how she manages to collect brothers everywhere she goes when she already has three of her own by blood. Sometimes she thinks that friendship with a man is better because then she can love them and they can love her, but they can’t hurt her when they leave.”

Blackwall sat up straighter. “Are you saying that she…”

Cole continued, interrupting Blackwall’s surprised question as if he had never spoken. “He’s alone where he was once surrounded by family. There’s a deep, old hurt in his chest that surfaces up every now and again. She helped heal that pain once, back when it was new and still bleeding; all he wants to do is return the favor.” Cole stopped talking for a moment and cocked his head to the side as if he were listening to something before a brilliant smile bloomed on his face. “Oh! He’s here in the garden with two birds, holding onto a piece of his little brother he never knew existed. He’s crying, even though his hurt feels lighter, the smoke and the blood and the grief pushed aside for now to make room for this bit of unexpected happiness. The raven’s trying to hide her tears, doing her best to blend into the shadow and give them privacy. The grumpy sounding crow complains in her head.
about the fuss, especially all the touching, but underneath the bristling feathers she’s happy too.”

Carefully walking to the door, he opened it and stepped outside. His rooms faced the Chantry garden, but were far enough away that he couldn’t make out clear details of the people milling about. He did spot Morrigan right away, the arcane advisor’s feathers and leather standing out amid Chantry white and red. Focusing on her, Blackwall soon spied Teyrn Fergus and Morrigan’s son Kieran. The two of them were sitting at one of the stone benches, the Teyrn’s hands moving about as he said something to the boy that made him laugh before enveloping Kieran in another hug. Movement behind him had his eyes training on Ravena, who was trying her best to quietly slip away. Again, she must have felt eyes on her, because she looked directly at him. She held his gaze briefly before turning and walking away.

“You told me to stay out of your head,” Cole said, quietly coming up beside Blackwall. “So I will, even if I think you need to talk. If not to me or to anyone else, then talk to her.”

“Thank you.” He turned to ask Cole what he meant by not like she loves you, but the spirit was already gone.

“I wish that you could stay longer.”

“I wish I could too, but I could only spare a week.” Fergus replied. “Teyrnirs don’t run themselves, no matter how competent my seneschal is.” He held out his arms and Ravena gratefully went to him. “If ever you need a place to run away to, my castle is always available.”

She hugged him tighter. “I’d love to take you up on that offer, but to steal your words: rifts don’t seal themselves, no matter how much I’d like them to. Yet we have Corypheus on the ropes: hopefully things will come to a resolution soon.” She had just spent the morning with her advisors devising a strategy. There was a darkspawn sighting in the Storm Coast that needed looking after, but once that was done, Ravena needed to decide who she was going to take out to the Emprise du Lion to investigate the red lyrium supplies the smuggler letters she had uncovered while exploring the Emerald Graves spoke of. Dorian and Varric were already locked in, but she was debating on asking Cassandra or Bull. Bull had been making noises about missing being with his Chargers out on missions, and there was an assignment Cullen had brought up that was right up the group’s alley. Then again, Cassandra had made it known that she despised the cold. She would go with her out of sheer loyalty without much complaint, but Ravena disliked causing her friends discomfort. That only left her with one other choice to round out their group, and that…

No. Asking Blackwall to join her was not an option, at least not until she was certain she could be around him and treat him with the same professional courtesy she might show a hired bodyguard on one of her digs.

“Speaking of that,” Fergus started. “I’ve spoken with your Commander. He’s expecting several units of soldiers from me in the next few weeks. Any aid that Highever can offer is yours to command.”

“You have no idea how much I appreciate that,” she told him. “Although since you mentioned any aid…”

Fergus drew away far enough so he could reach inside his doublet and pull out a piece of parchment. “Ambassador Montilyet has already drawn up a business proposal with Marta. If she agrees to the terms, you shall have a steady stream of soap traveling your way.”
Ravena had to laugh. “Josephine doesn’t waste any time, does she?”

“Actually, she had high praise for the orange spice scented bars. I believe this is for her benefit as much as yours.”

The two of them walked towards the stables where the rest of his party were already saddled up and ready to go. “I do hope that this won’t be the last time you visit Skyhold,” she said.

“Absolutely not. Your home is beautiful, and the company even more so. I merely hope that we’ll meet again in more peaceful times.”

“You and me both.” She turned to glance in the direction of the gardens. “And what of Kieran and Morrigan?”

“I spoke with Morrigan at great length. She and her son are family and will always be welcome in my home whenever and for however long they wish to stay. Just being in her presence for a brief time, I can see why my baby brother fell in love with her.”

“Kieran favors the Cousland side,” she agreed.

“Which is why he’ll eventually grow up to be a devastatingly handsome man, just like his father and his uncle before him.” He grinned at her charmingly. “How you never fell for my looks when we were younger, I’ll never know.”

She returned his grin. “Because, while your pretty face was a pleasant distraction, I was more in love with old books and all the knowledge Brother Aldous had stored away.”

Fergus placed a hand to his chest as if she had wounded him. “Since I’ll never be able to compete with tomes and dear Aldous’ lectures, I shall have to be content with your friendship. I meant what I said, Ravena. My doors are always open to you and your Inquisition.”

“As my doors are open to you and yours. Have a safe journey home, Fergus. The roads are relatively peaceful; Cullen and Cassandra keep patrols of scouts on rotation.”

Fergus pressed a kiss against Ravena’s forehead. “Write to me when you can.” He looked over her shoulder towards the stables where he saw the man Leliana had identified as Blackwall working on repairing a saddle. He couldn’t help but glare at him. While Ravena had been silent on what had happened between them, the rest of Skyhold hadn’t and Fergus’ heart ached for his friend.

Ravena knew exactly who he was staring at. “Don’t,” she whispered, barely audible as she buried her face against the side of his neck. Taking a bolstering breath, she stepped away from him. “I’ll write as often as I can. The same goes for you, Ser. I’ll be expecting letters full of overly formal salutations and flowery writing as soon as you return to Highever.”

He looked down at her, knowing when to drop a subject. “And shall I include in these extravagant letters some poetry? Limericks naughty in nature, perhaps?”

She laughed, eyes sparkling in humor where they had been dark only moments before. “The dirtier the better. If they’re any good, I just might have to share them with Bull, Varric and Sera.”

Still grinning, Fergus took her hands in his and squeezed tightly. “With such high expectations, I’ll have to think of some masterpieces while I ride back home.” Gathering her close for one last fierce hug, he swung into the saddle. “Be well, my dear. And remember what I told you.”

Ravena waved to his party as they rode off. Hugging her elbows, she made the mistake of glancing
inside the barn. Blackwall stood there with a piece of leather tack held so tightly in his hands that his knuckles were nearly white. He had a look on his face as if she had picked up a nearby pitchfork and had run him through with it. Her heart hammered in her chest as he opened his mouth and took a step forward.

Like the coward she was, she gathered her skirts in her hand and fled.

She was perched on the ramparts in tunic and trousers several hours later, her finery neatly folded and tucked away in her rooms. “You changed your hair,” Cole said, materializing beside her. By now, Ravena was so used to him popping in and out that his sudden appearance didn’t make her jump.

“No, I put it back how it belongs.” The bun was practical. Simple. She had often worn her hair down as a girl with her head full of naïve ideals, and she had worn it down for Fergus’ visit because… well, it didn’t matter why. She was a grown woman, and foolish notions had no place in her life.

“He likes your hair when it’s loose around your shoulders. His hands burn to touch it, to wrap it around his fists and tug the way he knows you like, but he’s lost that privilege.” Cole looked at her, his face puzzled. “Why do you punish him when all it does is make both of you sad?”

“Believe it or not, Cole, but humans can be horribly petty about things like that.” She sighed and looked out at the sunset. “But the dress, my hair, it wasn’t for him or even for Fergus. It was for me.”

Cole kicked his feet out in front of him until his legs swung around in lazy circles to mirror Ravena’s. “You wanted someone to look at you and tell you that you were loved. You wanted to hear words from a trusted friend’s lips and know that they were genuine and truthful, not some lie to get into your heart or your bed. You wanted someone to make you happy for happiness’ sake, not because they wanted something from you in return.”

She leaned forward, the stone rough underneath her palms. “Is that so much to ask?”

“No, it isn’t.” The two of them sat in silence for a long while, watching as the sun slowly sank over the horizon. “She wants to smile again and Maker, how he makes her smile. I was wrong: that thought was about Fergus, not Blackwall, even though it used to be about him. Why do you think everything he ever said to you was a lie?”

“He flat out told me in Val Royeaux that he had lied to me the entire time. Why would I believe anything that comes out of his mouth now?”

“Then why didn’t you let him die?”

“Because it was the easy way out. He dies and it’s over for him. If he lived and stayed here in Skyhold, then he’d have to own up to his crimes and rebuild trust with everyone.”

“Rebuilding trust with everyone includes you, too. You promised yourself that you’d never let things go so far between you and your brother ever again, but maybe you need to promise to never let things never fester between you and anyone instead.” Cole looked at her pointedly.

“I don’t know what to say to him.”

“Sometimes you don’t have to know what to say, you just have to start talking.” He leaned closer to her. “You smell nice, like roses.”
The non-sequitor threw her for a loop. “Thank you.”

“Walls like roses, especially when they grow near them and climb. They make the wall feel better about itself, make it want to become a better wall than it was before when it was alone.”

Ravena glanced at him. “You’re not being very subtle.”

“You like it when people are direct.” He stared ahead. “You’re a rose that’s more sharp thorns than blossoms. I can’t figure out if the thorns are there to keep people at a distance, or to protect yourself from getting hurt by careless hands.”

She stood up and held out a hand to help Cole to his feet. “I’m having trouble figuring that one out myself. Perhaps it’s a little bit of both.”

“Maybe you could try to trust him again. He’s the type of man who would brave the thorns to get to the flower, no matter how much they make him bleed.”

Ravena looked away. “There’s nothing between us, and there never was. He didn’t love me.”

Cool fingers ghosted across her cheek. “And even now, you still believe his lies.”

“I want to try, but I don’t know how to separate truth from lie, not with him,” she said, turning towards the stairs that would lead her down to the Chantry.

Cole watched her leave. Wrapping his thin arms around himself for comfort, he walked towards the infirmary’s direction. There was a young healer’s apprentice who was tired, but she had so many potions to prepare that she’d never be able to get to sleep. Solas had taught Cole how to cut herbs, how to stack everything neatly to the side for efficient brewing. While he might not be able to help Blackwall or Ravena, at least there were plenty more pains he could ease around Skyhold.
“Gather your gear. We leave for the Storm Coast in ten minutes.” Blackwall’s eyes jerked up from the griffon he was unenthusiastically working on in time to see Ravena walk out of the barn, her long hair swinging behind her in a braid. Without thinking, he began to arm himself, shrugging into his gambeson and buckling on his heavy cuirass and pauldrons.

“Looks like you’re off the bench and her shit list.” Iron Bull cheerfully drawled, entering the stable with several sacks of supplies and Sera trailing after him. He went to the horses and began to load four mounts up with enough gear to last for at least several weeks, if Blackwall judged the size correctly. “After two months and some change, it’s about damn time.”

“I seriously doubt it,” he answered, checking the sharpness of his blade before buckling its sheath onto his belt. “And if I am, she’s far more forgiving than I deserve.”

“Hey you,” Sera said, reaching into one of her pockets for an apple. She took a big bite of it before offering the rest to her horse. “If I have to go out in the cold and the wet while you act all Woe Is Me, I’m gonna pull that broody beard of yours out by the roots.”

“Is that a threat?” Secretly, Blackwall was gladdened that Sera and Bull were coming along. Had Cassandra or Solas joined them, it might have been a more difficult trip. Well, more difficult than he already suspected it was going to be. He winced. The last time they spoke, Solas had apologized for the harsh words he had for him, yet being in the other’s presence was still awkward. Cassandra refused to speak with him still. The loss of her friendship was sad, just another thing that he had brought upon himself with his lies.

“Oh no,” Sera said, hoisting herself up into the saddle. “That’s a promise.”

Bull scratched at a horse’s neck. “Well, have a good trip,” he told them.

“You’re not coming with us?”

“No,” Dorian drawled, sliding his staff into loops on his saddle specifically designed for such purposes. “I am.” He looked like he wanted to say something else, but before he could, Blackwall caught sight of Ravena coming up towards them.

Maker’s mercy, but she was breathtaking. He hadn’t laid eyes on her for nearly two days after Teyrn Cousland’s departure and hadn’t spoken to her for almost two months since his judgment in the Great Hall. His heart clenched with the memory of her face. She had looked tired, defeated on that day. I did that to her, he thought miserably.

He thought she looked slightly better, even if there were dark circles under her eyes that told him that perhaps she had gotten as much sleep as he had during their time apart, which is to say, hardly any at all. She had a new set of leather armor on, the bits of mail and armor at her arms and shoulders winking in the sunlight. Her hair was still in a thick plait down her back and his fingers itched to touch her.

Of course, that was impossible now. He only had himself to blame. “I see that everyone is here,” she began, her voice crisp and businesslike. “Quick overview: there are reports of darkspawn along the coast. We are going to investigate and see if we can find the source they’re coming up from and block it. There are also a few other side missions to complete, but I’ll fill everyone in once we reach one of the main camps.”
“Sounds like a plan, Boss,” Bull said, holding onto the harness of Ravena’s horse.

Ravena took the reins from him. He stopped her by placing a hand on her shoulder. “No promises, Bull,” she murmured.

“Not asking for them,” he replied. “Just go out there and kick some ass for me, okay?”

She gave him a slight smile. “You got it.” Settling into the saddle, she gave him a bigger smirk. “Keep the assassins away while I’m gone, will you? I’d hate to hear that they finally got lucky while I was out.”

“Give her some time,” Bull commented, waiting until everyone had already left the stables. “She’ll come around.”

“I’m giving her time,” Blackwall said. “And I’m giving her as much space as she needs.”

Bull snorted. “I said time. I didn’t say anything about space.” He eyed the rest of the group, judging how much time he had before one of them noticed that Blackwall was lagging behind. “I know our boss-lady. Give her enough room and she’ll think you lost interest. Crowd her and it’ll force her to rethink the situation.”

“Or it could push her away.”

“You’ll never know unless you try.” Giving Blackwall’s horse’s flank a parting pat, he grinned. “You’re all right in my book and something tells me that everything will go as it should. Horns up!”

“Right,” Blackwall muttered, spurring his mount so he could catch up to the rest of the group. “Horns up.” Or tits up, depending on how this trip goes.

The trip to the Storm Coast was actually pretty uneventful. They made good time, mostly because Ravena only stopped to give the horses a rest when they absolutely needed them. If anyone noticed that they hadn’t gone on their usual lingering breaks, then no one mentioned it. She set a hard pace and they reached their destination in record time.

It was difficult. Every time they took a water break, Blackwall would try his damnedest to start up a conversation. She smiled at him and politely spoke in a pleasant tone of voice, but he could tell that her smiles never reached her eyes and that any closeness they once had was gone, especially when she made a point to keep their conversations as brief as possible. Nights were even worse, seeing that Ravena quickly ducked into Dorian’s tent as soon as they set up camp. The mage had a habit of illuminating the interior of their tent with spell wisps, letting Blackwall see two silhouettes sitting close together. The sight of her sitting so cozily with someone else and every so often hearing snatches of animated conversation or laughter made him feel that much more like an outsider kicking himself for throwing away the best thing that had ever happened to him. Then he thought about what might have happened if he had told her the truth right off the bat and he grew even more morose, knowing that a woman like Ravena wouldn’t have given him a second glance had she have known about his past.

“Cheer up, Broody,” Sera had told him one night in the tent they shared, or rather the tent he had set up for himself, but Sera had deemed that he needed her to keep him company. “Things will turn out all right in the end. You’ve got to jump up and down on a board a few times before it breaks, you know.”
He hadn’t known how to respond to that, and Sera had taken his silence as him being sullen, so she decided the best way to get back at him was to stick her ice cold feet up the back of his shirt.

Once they reached the camp closest to the reported darkspawn activities, he had enough. As was their habit, Ravena usually took the lead and he stayed close by to cover her flank while the other two lingered behind to provide cover fire.

“Talk to me, Ravena,” he pleaded. “And I don’t mean what we’ve been doing these past days.”

She slowed down. “Why?” she asked, tilting her head up to look him in the eye. “You have made your feelings for me perfectly clear. While I might still be a little raw about that, I’m trying my best to treat you with some semblance of professional courtesy.”

He stopped her in her tracks by putting both hands on her upper arms. “Maker damn it, I lied.”

Her calm expression finally broke and she sneered at him. “Yes, I am well aware of that.” She tried to shrug out of his grip, but he tightened his hands on her armor.

“No, I lied about not loving you. I thought I was going to the gallows, I didn’t want you mourning someone undeserving of your grief.” He gave her a little shake. “Ravena, I love you. I’ve loved you practically since the moment I saw you. I love you still, please.”

She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it, her lips pressing into a thin line and her eyes tightly closing. He thought that he might have gained some ground when her body swayed towards his, but then she opened her eyes and the flinty glare she shot at him pierced though his armor and hit something vital.

“I don’t believe you,” she said coldly.

“Then why did you bring me here? Why not take someone else if you can’t stand the sight of me?”

“Because, ironically enough, you’re the most experienced warrior I have when it comes to dealing with darkspawn. That is the only reason, nothing more.” She struggled again, this time trying harder to wrestle out of his grasp. “Now let me go.”

His grip loosened and he watched as she stomped away. “Oh, she’s mad,” Sera noted, sidling up to Blackwall.

“Tell me something I didn’t already know,” he told her hopelessly.

She smacked his arm at his tone. “No, no, it’s a good thing. She’s not talking all standoffish businesslady-like to you, yeah? The board’s cracking all right. Give it a couple more good bounces and everything will be right as rain again.”

“I certainly hope you’re right.”

The single darkspawn sighting turned into a long afternoon of several darkspawn sightings. Blackwall was grateful that Dorian had been asked to come along: he quickly sealed off entry holes with magic in mere moments where it might have taken Blackwall hours to do the same with brute force. The worst encounter had been on the beach. By the end of it, everyone was completely out of energy. Ravena, in particular, was exhausted. She had fallen to her knees after the last foe had been slain and the hole sealed, her fingers sinking into the wet sand as she braced her weight on her palms.
Blackwall would have asked either of their companions to check on her if he hadn’t caught the reddish tinge in the surf that washed over her leg.

“We’re stopping here,” he ordered. “Ravena’s hurt.”

“I’m fine,” she countered, rolling over to her hip to take some pressure off her knee. She tried to put up a stoic front, but she couldn’t stifle a whimper of pain when she went to pull her boot off.

“Bollocks.” He marched over to Dorian, who had elected to carry a pack with some essential gear in it while they traveled the areas between campsites. Before he could ask for bandages, the mage had already whipped out a thick roll along with some healing paste.

“You know, we’ve never really gotten along,” Dorian started, holding the bandages out of Blackwall’s reach.

“Is this really the time for a bonding moment?” Blackwall asked, impatient to get back to Ravena before her injury grew worse.

“Actually, I think this is a prime time for it. As I was saying, we’ve never gotten along well, but I get where you’re coming from. I admire the fact that instead of slinking about in some dark hole for the remainder of your life, you’ve tried your best to make yourself a better man, which is better than most would do. I can even understand your reasoning for telling Ravena the things you did, but now that you’re still very much alive instead of swinging in the breeze, that last tall tale has landed you in a bit of a pickle.”

“Understatement of the year.”

“Perhaps not the year. I was thinking Understatement of the Month instead. But I digress.” He handed Blackwall the supplies and leaned in close. “She still loves you, you know. She’s been hurt in the past, so naturally she has difficulty trusting people once she deems that they’ve deceived her. You’ll have to excuse her for lashing out in a manner best befitting a sullen teenager; she never got the chance to act that phase out when she was younger.”

Blackwall ran his free hand over his face as realization struck home. “Maker’s breath. Her family left her with the Chantry against her will.”

“And then a Templar left her heartbroken for some nameless tart. She told me all about him as well. Well, I came to my own conclusions while she drunkenly sobbed semi-incoherently over my shoulder whilst pouring her heart out about how she has horrendous taste in men who make habits of leaving her.” He arched his eyebrow pointedly. “I happen to agree with her on that point.”

“I didn’t…”

“Yes, you did. And with a hastily written note to boot, which I guess is only marginally better than just vanishing into thin air. And yes, I told you about her being so miserable over you that she resorted to drinking herself into a stupor to pour salt in the wound. I couldn’t let her drink alone, so I’m also blaming you for the hellacious hangover I had the next morning. I should probably apologize for whatever I might have done that night, everything was a blur.”

“You tried to punch me in the face.”

“Ah. Well, in that case, I don’t apologize for the attempt because I had good reason: Ravena is a dear friend. I hurt when she hurts and all that rot.” He shook his head. “Venhedis, this whole wounded love thing is not for the faint of heart.”
“No,” Blackwall agreed, turning around to head back to Ravena. “It isn’t.”

Ravena had moved a little further away from the water’s edge. She had already managed to take her right boot off, but was struggling with rolling her pant leg over her shin.

“Look, I understand why you don’t want me helping you and I completely deserve your scorn,” he began, kneeling in the sand at her feet. “I’m the bastard who hurt you. Believe me, if I could have avoided it, I would have. It’s one of my biggest regrets when it comes to us.”

“You could have avoided it by telling me the truth in the beginning,” she countered, ineffectively batting away his hands when he tried to help her. She snorted dismissively. “If that man hadn’t ever been captured, you would have gone on letting everyone believe you were someone else for the rest of your life.”

He ignored her hands and gently rolled her pant leg up to her knee, wincing at the sluggishly bleeding gash he found across her calf. “I would have, yes.”

“Call me Thom,” she spat. “If you never wanted me to know, then why ask me to call you by your given name?” Giving up on fighting him, she merely sat back on her elbows and frowned.

“Because,” he said, twisting open the jar and applying a generous amount of healing paste to her calf. “I wanted the time between us to be between us. I didn’t want you calling out another man’s name when I made love to you.” He finished bandaging her up and carefully rolled down her pant leg. “It was selfish of me, but I at least wanted that to call my own, even if I was too cowardly to tell you the rest. I’m sorry about that.”

“I’m sorry, too. I’m sorry I wasn’t someone you could have trusted enough to tell everything to,” she said quietly, her eyes downcast. She pushed some hair that had escaped her braid out of her eye and sighed. “You don’t deserve how childishly I’ve been acting. I’m…I’m not very good at dealing with failed relationships.”

He helped her with her boot. “It isn’t failed if we’re both willing to try again. I know that I am; the biggest question is if you are.”

Ravena swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat. “I’m afraid to,” she confessed. “I’m afraid that if I put myself out there with you and something like this happens again…it nearly killed me the first time. I don’t know if I could recover from a second time.”

“Ravena, I…”

She shook her head. “No. We don’t know what the future holds. Don’t make me promises you don’t know if you can keep. What I can ask you to promise me is that even if this doesn’t work out, that there won’t be any more lies between us.” She struggled to her feet, allowing Blackwall to pull her up by her hands. He considered it a good sign when she didn’t let go of his hands once she was standing.

“Done. There won’t be any lies. If you want to know anything, just ask. I’ll be as open of a book as I know how to be.”

“I’m serious,” she said. “No more lies; no big ones, no lies by omission. Not even the little ones: if Josephine and Vivienne stuff me into a ridiculously hideous dress for some occasion or another, you tell me how awful the color is and how enormous it makes my backside look.”

The corner of his mouth quirked upwards. “I promise.” He took a step closer to her until there was hardly any room between them. Tightening his hold on her hands, he looked her in the eye. “But
telling the truth goes both ways. I might have lied about who I was, but I never once lied about how I
felt about you. Right now, I’m just a man standing before you, his heart laid bare. It is up to you to
decide what to do with it. Tell me honestly, do you still love me? Do I have any chance at this?”

Her lips trembled as she gave him a small, hopeful smile. “Yes. I never stopped loving you.”

He gathered her in his arms and held her tightly. “I thought I had lost you,” he whispered, his voice
breaking as he pressed his face against her hair. He pulled back only enough to stare down at her, his
head bent for a kiss. She seemed to read what he was intending on doing, because she turned her
face at the very last second, his lips scoring her cheek instead.

“Forgive me for being cautious,” she said, stepping back from him. “I jumped in headfirst the first
time; I want to take this slower.”

“Of course, whatever you need.”

She bit her lip. Reaching out, she tentatively touched her fingers to the side of his face. “Thank you.”
Impulsively, she moved in and pressed a lingering kiss to his whiskered cheek, the corner of her
mouth catching his. “But not too slow,” she whispered.

Reaching down, he captured her hand and brought it to his lips. “I can do that, my lady.” His heart
flipped at the faint pink blush that dusted her cheeks at the gesture.

“I’m still mad at you, you know.”

“You have every right to be.” He held onto her hand a little tighter. “And I’m going to do my
damndest to atone.”

“Don’t bury yourself in guilt, Thom,” she quietly told him. Ravena gave him a smile over her
shoulder as she walked away, her limp barely noticeable. “Perhaps I want you to work for me a bit
more this time around.” The last was said with the familiar flirtatious tone he had so desperately
missed hearing. He stared after her, his heart full of hope for the first time since this all started.

“Well done,” Dorian commented, crossing his arms and giving Blackwall a nod of approval. “Now
we can get back to the matter of stopping Corypheus without all the added dramatic entanglements.”

“I told you it was a good plan to get him to come with us,” Sera added, elbowing Dorian in the side
hard enough to make the man stagger, a triumphant smile splitting her face.

“I’m just glad my persuasive talents are that good. Ravena is more stubborn than I imagined.”

Blackwall looked at both of them. “Wait. You two were the reason I came along? Ravena said…”

“That you had the most experience fighting darkspawn. Yes, that was my doing, with a sizeable bit
of help from the Iron Bull. You’re welcome, by the way.” Dorian leaned in. “It may come as a
surprise, but we were rooting for you.”

Sera rubbed her hands together. “Can’t wait to get back to Skyhold and tell Bull! Gonna spend my
part of the pot on…”

“There was a betting pool on us?”

Dorian rolled his eyes. “Please. Varric lives with us. Of course there was a betting pool. Sera, the
Iron Bull and I might have teamed up to make sure that we received the most advantageous portions
of the wagers, but truly, we had both of your best interests at heart.”
Blackwall thought their advice from the past few days over. If not for their interference, both he and Ravena would have been miserable for a longer period of time. “And I thank you for that,” he told them.

“Good. Now that you’ve got the girl…”

“I haven’t won her yet.”

Dorian waved his hand dismissively. “Trifling detail, yet you might want to actually try courting Ravena this time around instead. A lady likes to be lavished with gifts and affection every now and again, you know.” He sobered. “But as I was saying, now that you’ve gotten into her good graces again, don’t screw it up. She’s the closest thing that I have to a sister and as a necromancer, I have a vast knowledge of spells that can rot off certain bits of manly anatomy, if you get my drift.”

Blackwall involuntarily swallowed. “You can’t actually do that, can you?”

“Care to try me?”

“No, no. Point taken.” Sighing, he glanced down at his boots. “The only problem is that I don’t know how to be with her as Thom Rainier.”

Sera made a rude noise at his left. “Load of pish, that is. You love her, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“And you want to be with her, yeah?”

“Sera…”

“My point is, you love her and she loves you. It doesn’t matter if you’re Blackwall or Todd Reynard or…”

“Thom.”

“Todd, Tim, Thom, whatever. Look, she doesn’t care if you’re the bleedin’ king of Nevarra. All that matters is that you’re you. I’d bet good money you weren’t spending all that time before thinkin’ oh, what would Warden Blackwall do if he had a woman between the sheets, all soft and warm and…” Sera drifted off, a dreamy look on her face. “Moany.” She cleared her throat and visibly shook herself out of whatever daydream that had glassed her eyes over. “Just be you.”

“You know, between all that rambling, Sera makes a good point.”

She looked smug. “I have my moments.”

Dorian began to walk faster to avoid any elbows the elf was likely to jab in his direction. “At any case, she fell in love with you. How did you go about that anyway?” He held out his palms at Blackwall’s glower. “Purely academic question, I assure you.”

“I don’t know. I just…” Blackwall shrugged. “Followed my gut.”

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

“I concur.” Dorian clapped his hand over Blackwall’s shoulder. “I’m sure that between the two of you, things will work out on their own.”

Blackwall watched the two of them follow after Ravena before he himself quickened his pace until
he was back at his customary post at her side. Ravena gave him a sideways glance out of the corner of her eye and shifted just a hair towards him until their arms brushed as they walked.

He couldn’t help but smile. Sera was right after all: everything was going to turn out fine.
Suledin Keep was not a very winter-friendly building. It must have been beautiful in the spring or summer months, but the unnatural chilly temperatures caused the wind to whip around corners and hallways, creating multiple wind tunnels that were freezing cold and all but inescapable. Ravena shivered as she stood close to their flagpole at the top of a tower, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. She’d left Dorian and Varric close to the newly created marketplace. Varric had last been seen haggling a vendor to drop the price of parchment down while Dorian had grabbed as many spare furs as he could and had sealed himself up in one of the tents. From experience, she knew that he had enchanted the interior to be almost swelteringly hot, which was why she had spent only part of one night sleeping in the same tent before escaping to the not nearly as warm confines of Varric’s tent. Varric hadn’t even teased her about not being able to resist the lure of his chest hair; he had been too cold to snark and highly grateful for the two or three enchanted pelts she had managed to drag out with her.

The night sky was clear, which meant that it was even that much colder. Looking up at the stars, she tried vainly to rub some warmth into her arms. After Haven and her long solitary trek through the snow, she disliked colder climates, but she was still too wound up from their most recent fight to think of turning in for the night. She jumped when a heavy coat lined in bear fur carefully fell across her shoulders.

“I thought you might need this,” Blackwall said, his hands hesitantly lingering on her shoulders, as if he wasn’t quite sure if the gesture would be welcome.

She brought her gloved hands up and covered his to keep him where he was. “Thank you.”

“That was a rough fight.” The demon Imshael had nearly bested them several times. Had they not been carrying extra health potions on them, many in their party would have been hurt, or worse.

She thought about the bandages wrapped around her thigh. Dorian had tended to her injury, and what healing magic he knew had dulled the pain of demon claw marks to a low, bearable throb. “Yes, it was.”

“Nice night out,” he started, removing his hands and taking a few steps until he stood beside her. “Cold, but you can see the stars so clearly.”

“Yes. It’s peaceful.” Well, as peaceful as a keep full of red lyrium, giant corpses, and whatnot could be. Inquisition forces had already made a huge dent in destroying much of the lyrium, but she was worried about everyone being in contact with so much for any period of time. They’d developed rotating schedules so no one person would be in close proximity for long, and it had seemed to work in all the other places they had cleared the stuff from.

Blackwall opened his mouth to make another idle comment on the weather, but Ravena stopped him. “I don’t know what I should call you,” she blurted.

He paused for a moment. “I’d like to continue as we have,” he finally answered. “I’m...I’m not ready to let go of Blackwall just yet. It’s become less of a name and more of a title, something to aspire to, to remind me not to slip back to how I was. I never really cared for the Thom Rainier I left behind a few years ago. But Just Thom,” Blackwall turned to her and gave her a slight smile. “I liked
him."

She returned his smile. “I liked him too,” she replied. “And maybe one day you won’t need Blackwall as much as you think you do. I think Thom Rainier has probably learned enough from both him and Just Thom to become a better person.”

“Maker, I hope so. He was a right selfish bastard at times.” He held his breath when Ravena threaded her arm around his elbow and leaned her head against his shoulder.

“Even so, I think I could learn to love him as much as I love Just Thom,” she said quietly. “Perhaps even more.” Ravena looked at him, and then her eyes darted quickly away. “So, are there any wives you might happen to have hiding in the hayloft? Any little Rainiers running around that I should know about?” The two questions were asked in a rush. In the past, her doing so usually meant that the words she blurted out had spent a great deal of time rolling around in her head collecting doubts and worries before she had gathered enough courage to speak her mind.

He shook his head. “No. I was always careful in my youth to avoid entanglements and then later on, family life never seemed to appeal to me.” Until now, he added silently.

“I had to ask, even if it isn’t any of my business,” she told him, her arm tightening around his. “I just…I had to know.”

“I know. I might not have been the best of men in my past, but I do have some decency when it comes to faithfulness. There hadn’t been any women before you in a long time and there weren’t any women other than you while we were together. You needn’t worry on that front.” He shifted to face her, his hand automatically reaching out to tuck a few stray hairs that the wind had loosened from her bun. “You’ve ruined me for all others.”

Ravena closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against his palm. “I need to tell you something, to fully clear the air between us.”

“What is it?” He took a step closer to her. “You know that you can tell me anything.”

She swallowed hard. “I feel like such a hypocrite about lying.” She bit her lip and looked at him. “I’ve lied to you before, Thom. After Adamant, when you asked me what the nightmare demon had told me, what it made me see. I didn’t tell you the truth.”

He could see that she was having difficulty finding words, so he gently prompted her. “What did you see, Ravena?”

“It didn’t show me failure, like I told you. It showed everyone I held dear leaving, and I was powerless to make them stay with me. The demon told me that you would turn your back on me, that it was only a matter of time before you moved on to someone better and forgot me.”

His eyes widened. “And then in Val Royeaux I told you…” I would have eventually grown tired of you and left. “I made your worst fear come to life.”

“It’s why I believed everything you said that day so readily,” she confessed. “I was willing to fight for you, for us. I wanted to make you see the goodness I see in you and the man I believe you to be, but when you said that…my faith in our relationship was the only thing that kept me from succumbing to those fears in the Fade. To have that faith trampled on as if it were nothing killed me.”

His face twisted up in anguish. “Maker. How can you even stand the sight of me?”

“It was hard.” She gave him a wry smirk. “It was why I was gone from Skyhold for two months
“That was torture for me. I wanted to talk to you and explain so many times,” Blackwall tipped his head down to catch her gaze. “I lost count of how many times I had saddled up a horse to follow your trail, but I never got out of the main gates. I thought that I would push you even further away from me if I tried.”

“But we can work past that, can’t we?”

He nodded. “Yes, of course we can.”

Ravena breathed a sigh of relief. “Good.” She bit at her lip. “May I ask…could you…can you…”

“Anything.” He cradled her cheek in his palm as if she were made from delicate glass. “You can ask anything of me and I will gladly give it.”

Her lips trembled slightly. “Would you hold me, Thom?”

He made a small noise before holding out his arms. She walked into them, burying her face against the side of his throat. “Oh my lady,” he breathed, his voice hitching. “I have missed you so much.”

He wrapped his arms around her and held on tightly as she shook.

“I’ve missed you too,” she replied, sliding her hands up his back, her fingers clutching at the fabric of his coat. She breathed deeply, inhaling the slightly astringent scent of the soap he used as well as the familiar scents of leather and man that she always associated with him. She trembled as she felt him press his face against her hair, the lightest brush of his lips against the side of her neck causing her skin to break out in gooseflesh that had nothing to do with the weather.

They stayed like that for the longest time, late-night frost clinging to the fur of their coats. They didn’t care a thing for the cold, not when they had each other again.

Chapter End Notes

Mage-enchanted furs = electric blankets. Dorian hogged all of them and Ravena had to wait until he was sound asleep before stealing a few.
“There you are.” Raoul ambled towards the practice ring where Blackwall was doing some late-morning solitary training.

“Just trying to keep my edge sharp,” he replied, stopping to mop sweat from his brow. “What can I do for you?”

Raoul walked towards the rack where the blunted metal blades were stored. Choosing one, he swung it around experimentally. “Care for a sparring partner?”

Blackwall rolled his shoulders and took a readying stance. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you fight before,” he said, watching as Raoul began to circle. “I would have figured you as a twin blade wielder.”

“Nah, I leave all the cloak and dagger business to my sister. My other brothers are the traditional sword and shield fighters, but I’m more of an in your face two-handed sword type.” He performed a lunging sweep, grunting when Blackwall blocked his blow and quickly formed an attack.

“You don’t have the body type I figured for that. You move well.”

“Thanks, as do you.” He countered Blackwall’s shield bash. “Speaking of my sister, how are things with her?”

“Things are…” Blackwall smiled. “Things are good. They’re better than I ever expected them to be.”

Raoul made a face. “Alright, that little dazed look had better not be you thinking about sex and my sister at the same time. There are a lot of things I’m comfortable talking to you about, Rainier, but that is definitely not one of them.”

He had to laugh. “No. I haven’t even dreamed about regaining that sort of intimacy…”

“What did I just tell you?” He swung his blade in a wide arc, impressed by Blackwall’s ability to dodge it.

“As I was saying,” Blackwall said with a smirk, “we’re talking again.” The trip back to Skyhold from the Emprise was a lot warmer, both in climate and in conversation. Ravena made certain to ride close to him the entire trip back and they spent most of their rest breaks – which had once again turned leisurely instead of rushed, much to everyone’s delight – sitting and sharing stories. He told her everything: where he had grown up, things about his parents, his sister, anything that she asked of him. It was liberating to finally be able to completely open up to her and tell her everything he had longed to tell her from the start, as if a heavy weight he had been carrying around his neck had finally been cut loose. She still shared a tent with Dorian when they stopped to camp, but the little touches to his hand or arm and her whispered goodnights were promising. What made his heart soar were the few times she didn’t say goodnight to him, sitting up with him as he did his turn at watch instead of turning towards her tent, her eyelids growing heavy until she eventually fell asleep on his shoulder. He treasured those times, knowing that she finally trusted him again to lower her guard around him. He would gather her close as she slept; savoring the quiet exhalations of breath against his throat and soft floral scent that always lingered on his clothes long after she woke and left the circle of his arms.

“That’s good. I could tell that something had happened as soon as you got back. She’s happier.”
“Happier now that she’s patched things up with you, too.” Ravena had shared her relief at finally closing the distance that had grown between her and her brother. It did his heart good to see her so at peace with her family.

“I’ve owed her an apology for a very long time.” Raoul pressed his advantage and made three swift overhead strikes, each of them making Blackwall’s shield ring with the impact. “In fact, I owe you an apology as well. I should not have called you…”

“A lying, worm-eaten sack of wyvern shit your sister was too good to even have in her presence?”

“Okay, wow. I make up some creative insults when I’m angry. But yes, that one.”

“Apology accepted, although frankly, I deserved it.” He’d deserved more than just Raoul’s scorn. The punch that Cassandra had given him had come out of the blue, but he hadn’t put up any sort of defense when she had knocked him down and had continued to pummel him with her fists. At the time, he had welcomed the pain, knowing that the pain he had caused Ravena was ten times worse than any physical injury anyone could inflict upon him.

He thought back to their companions’ reactions. After he and Ravena had reconciled at the Storm Coast, people had started to warm back up to him. Now that they had gotten back from their latest mission, even Cassandra was now holding terse, one-sentence conversations with him instead of the stony silence or huffs of disgust she had been shooting in his direction at regular intervals. Cullen had visited briefly, gruffly informing Blackwall that his presence in the training yard was needed, as they had recently received a fresh group of recruits. As the days progressed, Blackwall had been gladdened when Cullen had called out to him and hesitantly offered to buy a round at the tavern as his way of saying that he was trying to regain the familiar rapport they had cultivated before Blackwall’s true identity had been revealed. When they had returned from the Emprise du Lion, Cullen had been even warmer towards him. He had a feeling that the turnaround was mostly to do with the letters Ravena had sent Cullen’s way. Blackwall hadn’t meant to read over her shoulder as she drafted them, but he had seen where she had credited him with discovering the letters detailing Samson’s plans. In reality, it had been a joint effort, but he was thankful to her for helping him mend fences.

“Well, you’re lucky that I fell in love with Josephine.” At Blackwall’s curious glance, he continued. “After your trial and making sure that Ravena was all right, I was furious enough with you to write to my brothers and my father, explaining in graphic detail how hurt Ravena was. The beating Cassandra gave you would have seemed like a gentle massage, and that’s only taking René into consideration. He might have been kind enough to leave enough of you behind for Robert and Father to scrape off the flagstones and kick around. But back to Josephine. She happened to see what I was writing and begged me not to send it. She said it would make her incredibly unhappy.”

“So it seems as if I’m in Lady Montilyet’s debt.” He made a mental note to thank her.

“She loves Ravena like a sister and wants nothing but to see her happy. Besides, she’s too good of a person to actually keep tabs on things like that.” They had stopped fighting, the two of them leaning up against the fence that circled the ring. “But you’re not even going to question why I didn’t send the letter anyway?”

Blackwall shrugged. “As you said, it would have upset Josephine. You love her, which means that you’d do anything to keep her happy. I feel the same way about your sister.”

“It’s true. I would do anything to keep her happy, with or without Leliana’s threat to gouge my heart out of my chest with a rusty spoon, should I cause her any grief.”
“She didn’t.”

“She did. She was eating a grapefruit at the time and did a rather apt demonstration.” Raoul let out an involuntary shudder at the memory.

Blackwall let out an impressed whistle through his teeth. “She’s so quiet that you forget how ruthlessly deadly she can be.”

“This is true.” He moved to place his sword back on the rack. “That’s the good thing about us advisors. People tend to see us in our harmless mode and forget that we have teeth.”

“Ah.” Blackwall put his training weapons away as well and turned to face Raoul. He knew that the last comment was directed towards him.

“I love my sister, Rainier,” Raoul started. “And I would do anything to see her happy. You make her happy. Let’s try to keep it that way, shall we?”

“I’ll do my best.”

Raoul’s smile was all teeth. “Good. Because if you hurt her like you did again, I’ll kill you.” His smile vanished and his likeable, carefree demeanor changed. Suddenly, Blackwall saw a man completely capable of following through on his threat without a shred of remorse for the action afterwards.

He met his gaze and nodded. “If I ever hurt her again like I did, I’ll let you.”

Raoul blinked. “Good.” He smiled, and once again his expression was back to his usual easygoing self. He clapped his hand on Blackwall’s shoulder. “I’m glad we had this talk. Oh, and for the record, none of my other brothers or my parents are aware of this little blip in your relationship. As far as they know, you’re a knight on a white steed.”

Blackwall raised an eyebrow. “Don’t reckon I’ve ever been described that way before. Tarnished armor is more my style.”

Raoul laughed. “See, I knew I liked you for a reason.” Giving Blackwall one last hard pat on the shoulder, he grinned. “I’m glad we had this talk.” With that, he strolled away, his hands in his pockets and whistling a jaunty tune.

Blackwall watched him for a while before making his own way out of the training circle and up to the Main Hall. Just as he had hoped, Varric was sitting at his customary table, a quill in hand and a piece of parchment in the other.

“What can I do for you, Hero?” he asked, noticing how Blackwall pulled up a chair.

“You’re a man of words,” he started, sitting and folding his hands in front of him.

“Only the best ones,” Varric replied. “What’s up?”

“I…ah, need your help.”

Varric leaned back. “Ah, say no more. Give me the afternoon, but I’ll have something ready for you tonight that you’ll thank me for in the morning, if you know what I mean.”

Blackwall frowned in confusion at Varric’s wink. “What?”

“Oh come on, don’t play coy. You want me to write your lady love a steamy letter to get things back
to how they were. Things are going in the right direction, but sometimes you need that little extra push, if you catch my drift.”

Blackwall rolled his eyes. “Yes, I do get what you mean, but no, I don’t need any help in *that* department. I have a matter of great importance, but of a non-romantic nature.”

Varric rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Non-romantic dealings? And here I thought we were going to get something juicy out of you. What’s the problem?”

“Josephine. I need to send her a bouquet of flowers; do you know of anything that says *thank you for keeping your lover from unleashing the wrath of my love’s family upon me*?”

Varric blinked. After a brief silence, he began to laugh for a long while. “Oh, Hero,” he said, wiping at his eyes. “I don’t think there’s enough flowers in Thedas for that one. But come on, we’ll see what we can do with what we have in the gardens.”
Since this chapter happens over the course of several days, it takes place at the same time as the last chapter.

The first time that a still-steaming mug of coffee appeared at her desk, Ravena thought that Josephine had left it for her. It was a bold, dark roasted Antivan blend that the two women had mentioned in their last casual conversation they shared a mutual appreciation for. The drink had come at an opportune moment too: Ravena had been in the middle of writing a report after going on less than two hours of sleep and the words on the parchment had begun to swim in front of her eyes. She’d gone out on her balcony hoping that some fresh air would wake her up, and when she returned, there it was. Yet when she thanked Josephine later on that day, the other woman had no clue as to what she was talking about.

The second time coffee mysteriously appeared on her desk, she was puzzled. It arrived on a tray with a second cup filled to the brim with tea. The scent wafting off the delicate porcelain cup painted with motifs popular in the Free Marches instantly made her feel like she was a girl again, safely snuggled in her father’s lap in his office and watching with childish curiosity as he balanced ledgers or went through his mail. There was even a paper-thin slice of lemon floating on the surface, much like her father favored. Ignoring the coffee – another dark roast with a hint of a chocolate smell – she took a small sip of the tea and sighed happily. Someone had found the exact blend of tea that had been such a big part of her childhood. Setting the cup down, she blinked away a nostalgic tear and picked up the tray. Just as she figured, Josephine and Raoul were busy at work in their shared office, their heads down and quills scribbling madly away, even at the late hour.

“You both need a break,” was all she said, setting the coffee down beside Josephine and the tea next to her brother’s elbow. She had to smile as Josephine finished up her sentence before taking the cup and thanking her before starting up again. Raoul merely did as he had done since they were children: still working, he mumbled his thanks before blindly reaching for the cup and drinking. Only when he swallowed his first sip did his stylus drop from his fingers. He looked up at her, his eyes wide in recognition.

“How did you…”

She leaned over the table to kiss the top of his head, gently ruffling his hair in the process. “Take a break,” she told him, smiling as she left the office.

The next day, none of the cooks knew where the midnight treat had come from. One of the scullions vaguely remembered someone ordering it, but couldn’t quite recall who. Ravena thanked them for the information before heading straight to the third floor of the tavern.

“I’m glad you both liked the tea,” Cole told her, leaning into her hug. It wasn’t until much later that she realized he hadn’t mentioned anything about the additional beverage.
When she came into her chambers and found a third mystery cup of coffee waiting for her several days later, she really wasn’t in the mood for anything to drink. Instead, she took it out to Cullen’s tower and coaxed him away from troop formation reports for a long walk out on the battlements to get some air. He looked tired and more haggard than he had been in a while, which told Ravena that her friend was still having rough nights from withdrawal symptoms, despite Cullen’s claims to the contrary. The fine tremor in his hands as he held the mug confirmed her suspicions, which was why after walking with Cullen back to his office, she ever so casually swiped a handful of reports from his desk before he could notice what she was doing. She didn’t feel guilty about it in the least, especially after he had confessed to her that he had been staring at the same one for so long that he really couldn’t remember which one he had been looking at. She left his tower only after he had promised her he would try to rest.

She spent the remainder of the afternoon by the blacksmith’s forge with Cassandra. The other woman had quickly understood Ravena’s plan and between the two of them, they managed to do a day’s work in a matter of a few hours.

The next day, a better rested Cullen caught on, and after giving her one of his stern Commander faces that usually left green recruits shaking in their boots for rifling through his papers, thanked her for her help. The reward for her thoughtfulness was that he didn’t beat her quite as badly as he usually did during their chess match later that day.

“You are my most favorite person in all of Thedas,” Ravena said, setting the tray she brought with her down on a spindly little side table Dorian had found somewhere. She had a scheduled meeting that evening with him and Varric in Dorian’s little nook of the library to discuss Varric’s latest chapters of *Swords and Shields* before he sent it off to his publisher. She was doing it because somehow between lightheartedly teasing Cassandra about her literary choices, Ravena had actually gotten hooked on the very thin storyline and was determined to have Varric finish the series for both her and Cassandra’s sakes. Dorian was doing it purely to hear Varric read the naughty portions out loud, in character.

“*Obviously,*” Dorian replied, tilting his head to accept the kiss she quickly bussed over his cheek. “But what did I do to earn such adoration this time?”

Varric looked up from his manuscript and glanced at her over the rim of his round-framed spectacles. He watched as she set out three cups and saucers made out of white stoneware and picked up a fancy looking carafe. “And here I thought *I* was your favorite.” He pointed to his chest. “You wound me, Dusty, right here.”

She stuck out her tongue at his arched eyebrow. “You and Dorian rotate on a weekly basis.” Perching on the arm of Dorian’s chair, she reached over and poured a deliciously fragrant cup of hot coffee and handed it to Varric before adding a liberal amount of cream and sugar to the cup meant for Dorian. “You, my dearest mage, are my favorite this week because you found my absolute preferred choice of coffee.” She poured herself a cup and added a touch of cream.

“I thought you said that was the Nevarran blend,” Varric said, sipping his. “This is clearly Orlesian. And hazelnutty. Not my usual type, but this isn’t half bad.”

Dorian made a face. “This isn’t the one where they get cats to eat the beans and then sift through their litter after they shit them out, is it?”
“Maker, no. That type was always far too expensive for my budget as a researcher and I never saw the appeal of drinking it when a good medium roast is just as satisfying to me.” She glanced over her cup. “And don’t mention that little tidbit of trivia to Sera; she’ll never let me drink anything in her presence again without bringing it up.”

Dorian hummed in agreement before reaching over to the tray and snagging a cookie. “Well darling, as much as I’d like to take the credit for making your evening, I wasn’t the one to order drinks tonight. If I had, then I would have ordered something of the alcoholic variety.” He gave the cookie a thoughtful chew. “Yet speaking of Sera, this isn’t one of hers, is it? The last one she made me taste test was drier than this and had raisins in it. Or else I think they were raisins.”

“No, we’re still tweaking her Inquisition Cookie recipe. Once we have it down to something everyone likes, we’ll unveil the final product. I did the baking on this batch.”

“Keep the extra nutmeg,” Varric said. “But take out the currants. Try dried cherries or candied ginger instead. And don’t look at me, I didn’t order drinks either.”

Ravena’s brow furrowed. “Well if you didn’t and you didn’t, then just who has been sending me drinks? I’ve asked pretty much everyone in Skyhold and no one can give me a proper answer.”

“Well, as long as it isn’t poisoned, I’d say that you have an admirer.” Dorian stopped mid-sip and looked at his cup critically. “You did have this checked for poison, didn’t you?”

“Oh yes, because I initially think that my dearest friends are trying to kill me.”

“It’s clean; I checked.” All three of them jumped when Leliana walked in.

“So do you know who sent this?”

The Spymaster nodded. “I do, but I promised them I wouldn’t say anything until you figured it out for yourself. I think it’s a sweet gesture.” She helped herself to one of the cookies. “I like the addition of cloves. And did you put in extra butter? Very nice.”

Ravena eyed her. “So you know who’s been doing this the whole time and you’re not going to let me know?”

She smiled mysteriously. “Exactly. Just know that there’s nothing malicious in their intent and that they want to do something nice. Like I said, I think it’s sweet.” With that, Leliana picked up two more cookies and walked away as silently as she had arrived.

“So, continue drinking or shall I pour it out the window?”

Ravena topped off her cup and nibbled on a cookie. “Continue drinking. We have smut to edit.”

After trying unsuccessfully to wheedle information out of Leliana, Ravena decided to start her own investigation. She had planned to start with the Iron Bull to get his input and make use of his spy training, but he had shot her down even before she could fully get the request out. Apparently, he’d already figured out who her anonymous benefactor was and confronted them on his own.

“Nope, Boss,” he had told her. “I promised them I’d stay out. You’re on your own with this one.”

Ravena couldn’t help but notice that he had a large mug of milky coffee sitting beside him at the time.
and that nearly all the Chargers assembled there had similar cups instead of their usual tankards of ale. When she questioned Krem, he was equally tight-lipped. Ravena might have felt a smidge bad about it, but she walked away without pointing out Krem’s milk moustache in retaliation.

Varric, on the other hand, reclaimed his spot as her favorite person. Not one to let a good mystery slip past him, he kept his ears to the ground and alerted her the next time something coffee-related happened. It just so happened that Ravena was in the Great Hall when he waved her over to report that one of his contacts had overheard someone entering the kitchens and asking the cook how to froth up cream. Not wasting any time, Ravena rushed up the stairs to her quarters and looked around for a proper place to hide. She managed to climb up to the balcony above her bed and hide herself in the shadows just in time to hear the door to her rooms open.

The heavy, familiar sound of a boot tread made her smile. Shaking her head, she couldn’t believe that she hadn’t guessed the identity sooner. Still hidden, she watched as Blackwall looked over his shoulder before setting a large-mouthed mug on her desk. It was the same type of mug she had seen Bull drinking out of, and into that Blackwall poured coffee. From her vantage point, she couldn’t quite tell what type he was pouring, but it smelled heavenly. He then spent a good while whisking cream in a small bowl he had brought with him until it had thickened enough to spoon on the mug’s surface. He was in the process of dragging the spoon through the surface when she finally spoke up.

“So you’re the one leaving me drinks,” she said, her voice loud in the silence of the room.

Blackwall jumped, silverware clattering on her desk. “Andraste’s ass,” he said, quickly turning around to face her. “Give a man a heart attack, why don’t you?”

She climbed down from her perch. “Serves you right, sneaking around like that.” She walked over to the desk and ran her fingers appreciatively over the small bud vase he had filled to the brim with wildflowers that grew all over Skyhold.

He sighed and leaned his hip against the edge of the desk. “I wasn’t sneaking,” he told her. “I was…” He awkwardly rubbed at the back of his neck. “You said you’d forgive nearly anyone if they handed you a good cup of coffee.”

She stared at him for a second before bringing her hand to cup the side of his face. “You remembered that?”

“I remember a lot of things,” he replied, his fingers going around her wrist as he turned his face against her palm. “Especially things pertaining to you, even though it looks as if I bungled this up.”

She took a step closer to him, her fingers carding through the hair at his temple. “You didn’t mess anything up. I like it.”

“You…do?”

Ravena nodded. “It’s a little odd, but sweet nonetheless.”

He chuckled. “I guess it fits; you did call me oddly charming, once.” Pressing his luck, he gently tugged her closer and rested his free hand against the curve of her hip. It was the most physical contact he had with her since returning to Skyhold: he’d taken her request to go slowly with their rekindled relationship seriously, even if it did mean that he spent many a night frustrated and alone in his own quarters with only thoughts of her running through his mind.

“You’re lucky that I like odd.” She twined her arms around his shoulders and gave him a lopsided smile.
He settled his hands on her waist, his thumbs making idle circles against the fabric of her blouse. “I’m aware of how lucky I am every time I think of how you gave me a second chance, considering how undeserving I am of it.”

Ravena frowned and touched a finger against his lips. “Stop,” she said gently. “Clean slate, remember?”

He took a breath and nodded. “Clean slate.” His fingers tightened on her waist. “May I kiss you, Ravena?”

She smiled and pressed herself closer to him. “I thought you’d never ask.” Her eyes closed as he bent his head. She appreciated the chivalrous way he had been treating her, but Maker, how she had missed this man. She half expected him to roughly kiss her, to release all the pent up emotion that both of them were feeling, but he surprised her by being almost excruciatingly gentle, his mouth moving over hers as if she were something precious. It wasn’t until he broke the kiss that she realized she was trembling.

“There’s something wrong with this,” she murmured, going up on her toes to press her lips to his again. He slanted his head and returned her kiss with a bit more firmness than before, his hands threading into her hair.

“What is it?”

“I only see one cup here.” She stepped away only far enough to pick up the cup. She looked at the half-drawn image in the foam. “That’s okay, I’ll share. What was this supposed to be?”

She had to smile at the blush that peeked through his beard. “It was supposed to be a heart, but some sneaky rogue startled me before I could finish.”

“I wonder who that could be?” She took a sip; it was a lighter brew than what she usually drank, sweetened by the cream and something almost vanilla in flavor. “However did you manage to get so many different varieties of coffee beans anyway?”

“I, ah, may owe several favors to Josephine.”

“So she did know about this. Hah! And here she had me convinced that she didn’t.”

“She said it was romantic.”

“Well, she has been one of your staunchest supporters. And she happens to be right: it was a very romantic gesture.” She set the cup down and wrapped her arms around his waist, sighing happily as he held her close. “Other men would have just given me flowers or poetry. I’ve never been courted with caffeine before.”

“I’m glad that you see it that way. Courtship, I mean. I wanted…I want…” his exasperated breath stirred her hair. “I’m shit at this.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I think you’re doing very well.”

“I love you, Ravena. I want to do right by you. I need to do this right.”

“And I love you.” Looking up at him, she took a step backwards. “I don’t think there’s a right or wrong way for this to go. Instead of worrying if our relationship conforms to everyone else’s definition of proper, why don’t we do things our way?” She took one of his hands in hers and led him to the sofa.
“You don’t worry about…”

“And what? What other people would say?” She rested her head against his shoulder and sighed when he put his arm around her. “I worry about a lot of things: do we have enough food and supplies to support our people? Have I collected enough elfroot and prophet’s laurel to supplement the healers’ stores? Why does Cullen still have a hole in his roof? Those are the things I worry over. Us? Not so much.”

He huffed out an unbelieving breath. “Really? You don’t worry about us at all?”

She traced a seam on his shirt with a fingernail. “I used to. When I thought you were a Warden, I spent a great deal of time thinking about how much longer I would be able to be with you before your Calling took you away from me. Then when I found out the truth, I spent that entire time we were apart trying to sift through who you really were and who you had pretended to be. I worried about little things: if you had been swayed by money before, how much would it take to buy your loyalty now? Were you right in Val Royeaux, had I fallen in love with a lie? Would my feelings for you change now that everything was out in the open?”

He tipped her face up. “Those aren’t little things,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“I love you, and I know that you love me. My faith in your feelings might have been shaken for a time, but it was never completely destroyed. We’ll either defeat Corypheus or the world may end in the next five minutes, but we’ll still have this. No one can take that away.”

Blackwall let out a shaky breath. “I won’t allow anyone to take this from us.”

She smiled up at him. “Good. Neither will I.” Rising up to her knees, she swung a leg over his thigh to straddle his lap. Framing his face in her hands, she moved until her lips were brushing his. “May I kiss you, Thom?” she asked, repeating his earlier question.

His hands found their way to her waist, her skin warm even through layers of clothing. “I thought you’d never ask.”
“Have you finished it?”

Blackwall turned towards the stable door. “Just about.” He had finished much of the griffon, all that was left was to put a few final coats of paint and then seal it. If he was honest with himself, he purposely left it unfinished; it gave him one more thing to tie himself back to Skyhold, one more thing to make sure he came back from the Arbor Wilds to complete. “I think there’s a few little ones in the camp who’ll like this.”

She came up to his side. “More than a few. Even in the midst of war, children deserve to be children.”

He smiled. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

Ravena’s fingers touched one of the sealed jars of paint on his worktable. “It’s almost time. Are you ready?”

Blackwall took his time cleaning off his paintbrush and closing up the glass jar of paint he had been using. “No, not really.”

“Are you scared?”

He nodded. “Shitless. I lost you once already, and I’ve only just found you again.” He stepped away from the table and stood in front of her. “Yet here we go, into a place where I may lose you for good. There’s not much that frightens me in this world, but…”

She put her hand against his chest. “Thom…”

“No, don’t tell me that it won’t happen. I couldn’t tell you the same if you asked. But what of you? Are you ready for this?”

Ravena closed her eyes and sagged against him. “The only thing I’m ready for is for this to be over. I keep telling myself that we’ve crippled his armies, stopped his plots, but I won’t get a decent night’s rest until I know for sure that we’ve beaten Corypheus for good.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his shoulder when he held her tightly against him. “We’ve faced so much, but standing here at the edge of it all…it frightens me to look over the cliff and worry that I’ll fall to the bottom instead of flying over the top.” She thought of all the people who had rallied behind the Inquisition; that little rag-tag group of people who dared to stand up to the Breach was now a force to be reckoned with. She might not have Bull’s ability to learn every man under her command, but she had learned the names of many. She’d made a point to take an interest in her soldiers and scouts, wanting to know more about the men and women who put themselves on the line for their cause. Like Blackwall, she’d seen most of them grow from green recruits more used to wielding farming tools instead of swords, and she was terrified of failing them and having them die in vain.

She thought of her companions, those strangers who had joined because they saw something wrong in the world and wanted to make it right. She might not see eye to eye with several of their ways of thinking, but she’d befriended them all in one way or another. The Iron Bull had become one of her close confidants, his no-nonsense way of cutting through bullshit to get to the heart of the problem and knowing just what to say – and what not to say – gave her the boost of confidence she oftentimes needed. Varric and Dorian had become her truest of friends, so much that she thought of them more like family.
She had to smile at Josephine. After the hair-raising theatrical spectacle Raoul had put on in Val Royeaux with challenging her parents’ choice of betrothed for her to a duel over her hand, she really would be family soon. Raoul had proposed to her then and there, and she had accepted. Reports from Orlais had noted that opinions on the Inquisition had turned favorably towards idyllic romanticism after the display. Ravena was certain that Raoul hadn’t spared one thought to what the general public would think of his profession of love, but trust her brother to come out of a situation looking even better than he had going in.

Everyone she had come in contact with was held dear to her, but none were held more so than the man she was currently embracing. Throughout all of this, from being given a power that she did not want or ask for, a title she couldn’t shirk, responsibilities that weighed heavily on her shoulders every day and kept her up most nights, never in her wildest dreams did she dare to think that she could find a man who kept her sane through the trying times. He tried his best to create a barrier between Ravena as a person and the Inquisitor, Andraste’s Herald. They might have had rough times and patches where she wished that things had gone smoother, but even then, they had come through their trials even stronger than before. She loved this man more fiercely than she had ever loved a person in her entire life and she would gladly lay down her life for him, should the need arise. She knew without a doubt that he would do the same for her.

“You’ll make it through this,” he assured her, his hands warm against her back. “As will I. I’ve been hearing the talk around the barracks. The lads might be scared of the unknown, but they have a good feeling about the Arbor Wilds. These aren’t the same people we rescued from Haven, you’ve inspired them to be better than what they were. There’s a lot of talk about the things that they have that are worth dying for.”

She frowned. “That’s the thing, Thom. I don’t want to be a banner or a symbol of what is worthy of dying for. No one should die for me.”

“We rarely get the choice to decide what people cling to, people in positions of power even more so. But if you listen to everyone else, you’ll find that they have things here in Skyhold that are worth living for. Just this morning, Varric told me that he had to come back, because Cassandra would kill him if he left his book on such a cliffhanger. Dorian said that he’d never get to win back his honor and challenge Cullen to another chess match, so he was determined to be a smug bastard when he finally got back and beat the Commander thoroughly. And while I can’t say that I spoke to her, but Lady Morrigan has her son to think of, as well as the boy’s father.”

She held him tighter. “And what of you?” she asked, looking up at him. “What have you got to live for?”

He looked down at her, his eyes reflecting all the love he had for her. “As if you didn’t know already.”

“It doesn’t hurt to hear it.”

He cupped her cheek in his hand. “One thing’s certain about this fight. I’ll fight harder than any man out there. I’ll fight harder than I ever had in my entire life. Want to know why?”

Ravena leaned into his hand. “Tell me.”

“Because after this fight, after we bring Corypheus down for good, there’s so much to hope for and there’s so much of the world that I want to see with you. I want to see your house in Tantervale and meet your cousin you keep going on about. I want to go on one of your digs and see for myself if they’re as exciting as Varric thinks they are or if they’re as boring as you claim them to be. Hell, I want to learn how to swim so we can go deep sea diving for lost sunken treasure in Rivain.”
She laughed. “That’s a lot of things to do.”

“There’s so much more,” he breathed. “I want to fall asleep next to you and wake up at your side. I want to laugh when we both start telling those awful jokes that make everyone else groan and cringe. I want to see the way that your eyes light up when you find something interesting and hear how you start to mumble to yourself when you’re thinking out an idea.”

“I don’t do that,” she scoffed.

“Yes, you do. And it’s one of the most endearing things I’ve ever seen. I even want to meet your parents and introduce myself to them as the man who fell in love with their daughter, but I can’t do any of those if I don’t make it back from this fight. There’s always something worth dying for, but something worth living for? That doesn’t come every day. You, Ravena, are my reason to live and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Thom.” She grabbed the front of his shirt and stood on the tips of her toes to kiss him. She tried to pour all of the words that were flitting about in her head that she didn’t know how to say into her kiss. The I love you was there as it had always been, but after everything that he had said, those three words seemed too small to convey how very much she wanted the same things he did.

“I can’t ask you to promise me that you’ll be careful,” he started, leaning his forehead against hers when she let them up for air, “but I can ask you that you think about what I said and promise me that you’ll do your best to make it back with me. Maker knows I’ll be doing my damndest to do the same.”

“I promise. And I also promise that after everything is all said and done, the two of us are going to sit down and finally talk about our after. That’s what’s driving me forward, what I have to live for.”

He gave her a tiny grin. “After. I like the sound of that.”

“As do I.” She looked at the griffon. “We should get some rest before we head out in the morning.”

Blackwall took her hand in his and pressed his lips against the backs of her fingers. “You’re right; we should rest.”

“I should leave you to your work then.”

He shook his head. Letting go of her hand, he slung an arm around her waist and tugged her close to his side as he steered her towards the exit. “It’ll be there, when we get back.”
The Great Hall was filled with the sounds of music and laughter, of the crackle of fire and the smell of good food. Raoul had even managed to distract Josephine into having as much fun as everyone else was, the two of them sitting close to the other and looking devotedly into the other’s eyes. Yet even surrounded by friends she had come to love as dearly as family, Ravena felt the need for quiet and solitude. She milled about, making sure to spend time with each of her companions, before slowly making her way to the doorway leading up to her chambers.

“My lady Inquisitor. Leaving your own celebration so soon?”

She turned at the sound of Blackwall’s voice. “I’m not one for big parties.”

“I remember. You said the same when we closed the Breach.”

She laughed. “You have a habit of remembering everything I say, don’t you?”

He grinned. “It’s a habit I hope never to break. Who knows when I might need to use your words to my advantage, to remind you who promised they’d stop leaving their socks in the middle of the bedroom, or other such important discussions?” He moved in, his hand pressing against the door at her back and leaning towards her until their chests brushed. “I know you might not be a fan of large parties, but what of a smaller, more intimate gathering?”

She slid her hand up his chest. “Oh, I think parties of that sort are my favorite ones to attend.” Her free hand blindly searched for the door handle. Blackwall pushed against the door and then allowed Ravena to lead him up to her rooms.

They made love slowly, hands long-since memorizing familiar planes and angles. Clothing was shed at almost a leisurely pace, laces and buckles as familiar to the other as their own garments. Fingertips and lips pressed against scars, each telling a story of endurance and survival. Breaths mingled and stuttered as they came together, their bodies joining as neatly as two pieces of dovetailed wood. Names rang out in sighed exhalations as hands clasped together. The passion that they both had for one another was still there, but now that it seemed as if they finally had a chance to breathe, it felt different. This quiet, tender display of affection was just as warm, but more like a carefully banked fire instead of an out of control conflagration.

Blackwall rolled to his side, his arms automatically gathering Ravena close to his chest. “It’s hard to believe that it’s over,” he said, nuzzling her cheek.

She raised an eyebrow. “Oh? I seem to recall us being able to go a few more times before calling it over,” she teased, resting her leg on top of his hip and wiggling her toes against the back of his thigh.

He huffed a laugh against her hair. “Minx. You know what I meant.”

Ravena curled up closer to him. “I know what you meant.” She was quiet for a while. “It almost seems too good to be true.”

“We’ve been through a lot. We should take what happiness we can find as a blessing.”

“You’re right. And we have been through a lot, but it’s all been worth it in the end.” She kissed him, sweet and slow. “There’s no one else I’d rather have at my side than you.”

“I feel the same way.” He ran his hand over her back. “So, it’s later.”
She smiled. “Yes, it is.”

“And we promised to speak of our After. What will you do now?”

After leaving a kiss on his shoulder, Ravena propped herself up on an elbow. “Oh, I don’t know. Certainly there must be some lose ends that need to be tied up, but after? Perhaps I’ll quit the Chantry research work and go completely freelance. Or I could finally work on that paper I’ve been meaning to write.” She looked at him, her finger tracing idle patterns through the hair at his chest. “Either way, I’m going to need a partner.”

“And where do you think you’ll find someone like that?”

She smiled. “I think I might have someone in mind.” Stretching, she walked her fingertips across his bicep. “And you? Do you have any plans, now that this is over?”

He made a great show of thinking about his options. “Well, I did hear that a freelance researcher might be in need of a bodyguard while she’s out in the field. She’ll more than likely need someone to make sure she doesn’t fall asleep on her work and nag her to eat regular meals too.”

“Is that so? And if it doesn’t work out?”

Blackwall shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. A house? A dog? Do you think that Mark of yours could cook eggs?” He played with her hair, letting it slide between his fingers. “Or we could just continue as we are, no eggs necessary.”

She laughed. “Good, because the only ways I know how to cook eggs is scrambled and hard-boiled.” Her fingers stopped wandering and she grew thoughtful. “Do you mean it?”

“What part?”

“The house and the dog part.”

He cupped her cheek in his hand. “It would be nice to have something to call our own that isn’t as grand as Skyhold, but ultimately I don’t care what happens, so long as we’re together.”

Ravena smiled. “Careful, talk like that sounds far too much like a marriage proposal.” She thought he’d join her in finding humor in his words, but he stared back at her with a dead serious look on his face. “That was a proposal,” she breathed, her heart beating fast.

“Was it?” His tone gave him room to maneuver the conversation into several different directions, depending on her reaction.

“I don’t know, was it?” She pressed her hands on his chest and pushed until he was on his back. Moving over him and slinging a leg across his hips so she could sit astride him, she stared down. “Thom Rainier, did you just propose to me?”

He smiled up at her, his hands warm on her waist. “Well, it wasn’t quite the wording I would have picked, but…”

“What wording would you have picked?” She waited, breathless. She thumped him on the chest. “Well?”

“I would have said something on the lines of how you are the love of my life, my motivation for becoming a better man. Then I would have said something like Ravena Celeste Trevelyan, would you…”
“Yes!”

His smile widened until his face hurt. Laughing, he slid his hands down to cup her behind. “You’re not even going to let me finish, are you?”

“Sorry, sorry.” She sat back up as regally as she could and nodded. “Please, continue.”

“Ravena Celeste Trevelyan, would you share your life with me, would you grant me the honor of calling you my…”

“Yes!” She had to laugh at his raised eyebrow and irritated huff that was ruined by his brilliant smile. “It’s a beautiful start, but I don’t think I’m going to be able to let you finish it.”

“Then I’ll have to go a simpler route.” He reached out and gathered her hands in his. “Will you marry me, my lady?”

She leaned down and pressed her lips to his. “Yes,” she breathed. She kissed him again. “Yes. Maker, how I love you.”

“I love you too,” he replied, heart swelling so much with all the emotions he had for this woman that he feared it would burst.

“You do realize that we’re going to have to make up a story on just how you proposed,” she said, laughing when he tipped her back onto the mattress. “Cassandra will love this version, but do you really want they were in bed naked when he asked her to spend the rest of her life with him to show up in the official biography Varric’s been working on?”

“Then I’m just going to have to ask again once we’ve decided to get dressed. How does a sunrise proposal out on your balcony sound?”

“Our balcony,” she corrected. “And it sounds marvelous. Just for the record, I’m going to say yes when you ask.”

“That does take a lot of worry out of it,” he teased. He wove their fingers together and pressed their joined hands above Ravena’s head.

“A hound,” she mused.

He looked up from where he had been nibbling at the line of her throat. “Hm?”

“The dog.”

“What, no tiny, yappy dog to put in your purse?”

“If that’s the kind you really want, then I think I can tolerate all the barking.”

“No, I think a larger hound would do fine. They’re noble creatures. We can teach it to shake hands.”

“And Sera will probably teach it to pee on people’s things on command.”

“And Dorian will teach it to fetch new bottles of wine from the cellar.” He kissed her, murmuring his approval when she wound her legs about his hips.

“At least we can boast on having a talented pet. And I do already have the house in Tantervale, but if you don’t like it, we can always give it to Henri and then look for something for ourselves.”
“Tantervale has always been one of my favorite places in the Free Marches,” he told her. He’d never dared to hope to speak of the future, to let those little seeds of someday and daydreams of their lives after Corypheus sprout and take root. Now that someday had suddenly become today, he couldn’t help but be excited and terrified at the same time.

Ravena seemed to pick up on his feelings. “Whatever happens, we’ll see it through,” she gave his hands a reassuring squeeze. “Together.”

“Together,” he repeated. Bending his head, he kissed her to seal their pact. “Always.”
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Everyone in Skyhold believed that Blackwall lived and slept in the stables since that was where he could be found if he wasn’t with the Inquisitor or in the training yard. He tended to let everyone believe that, mostly because he liked the privacy he found his garden sanctuary. Since the defeat of Corypheus, he had used the room less and less, preferring to spend his nights tangled up with Ravena in her bed. They did, however, retreat to the privacy of his old quarters when the world around them grew too chaotic, which it still had a habit of doing. There were leftover rifts that needed closing, Venatori spies still doing the work of their dead master, and a long host of other things that either Cullen, Josephine or Leliana kept ticking off their lists. Just that afternoon, he had heard Ravena giving the quartermaster directions for packing a crew up in preparation for fighting a dragon somewhere in the desert.

Maker, but he hated the desert.

But this evening, it was just the two of them, she lounging across his bed wearing nothing but one of his shirts – a habit that he found as alluring as it was endearing – and he sitting on a stool and contemplating the case he had set out on the table in front of him.

“What are you doing?” she asked, setting aside her book to look over at him.

“Debating.” He flipped open the lid and examined the contents. The straight razor had been sharpened earlier that day, the pearl handle winking at him in the candlelight.

She slid out of bed and padded her way over to him. “Debating over what?”

“If I should shear off this mess now or later.” He pulled out the stiff bristled brush and cup of dried shaving soap out of the case. “Though truth be told, I’m just trying to gather my courage and get it over with.”

“You’re shaving your beard?” His lip had to quirk upwards at the dismayed tone she had.

“Yes, my lady.”

“You’re shaving your beard?” she asked again, her eyes darting to the ewer of hot water nearby.

Blackwall chuckled. “As much as it displeases you, yes, I am shaving my beard.” He stared at the small oval mirror he had set up on the table and rubbed at his jaw. “I grew this to hide who I was. I’m not hiding any longer, Ravena.” He looked back at her and noticed that she was eyeing him thoughtfully.

“You’re right.” Reaching out, she cupped his face in her palm. “Just don’t expect me to instantly recognize you from afar for a while.”

Serious moment dispelled, he leaned into her touch. “I’ll give you a while to adjust.” Taking a breath, he reached for the small pair of scissors.

“Wait.” Ravena tugged at his shirt and he got the hint to pull it over his head. “You need something to catch the clippings,” she explained, draping it across his lap.
He grinned at her. “You just want to see me shirtless.”

She winked at him. “That too.” Shifting from foot to foot, she bit her lip. “Would you mind terribly if I did it?”

“You want to?”

She blushed and slightly ducked her head. “I…yes.” She bit her lip again and fiddled with the ends of her sleeves. “I mean, I know that you want to do this for yourself, but…”

He interrupted her rambling. It wasn’t like Ravena to be this fidgety. “It would be an honor.”

“Pardon?”

Smiling at her warmly, he held up the scissors. “There’s no one that I would trust more to do this.”

Taking them from him, she allowed him to steer her until she stood in between his legs, his hands warm on her hips. “Cassandra is going to have a conniption when she sees you,” she quipped, her fingers combing through his beard.

He quirked an eyebrow. “Why would she?” He and the Seeker had only just started getting back to somewhat friendly speaking terms. He was grateful; he had missed their talks and sparring matches.

Ravena began to snip at the portion near his chin. “The two of us do talk about other things besides battle tactics and weapon preferences. It so happens that she shares my appreciation for hirsute men, though she prefers the stubblier, less beardy types. I don’t hold it against her.”

“About that. Are you really fine with this?”

She stopped trimming and held his face in her hands. “I love you, Thom. That isn’t going to change once you’re clean-shaven. You have your reasons and I respect them.” She leaned back and gave him a teasing smile. “You don’t have some horrendous scar or birthmark under all that, do you?”

“Would it change the way you feel about me?”

“Not one bit. I’m just looking for something that might have an interesting story attached to it.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint, but no, I do not have any scars or birthmarks, horrendous or otherwise, though I don’t think I’ve ever told you how my nose was broken.” He relaxed in her care as she continued to trim his beard down to nearly nothing. She slipped away and went to the ewer and basin he had set up, taking the shirt full of clippings with her. He watched as she set a towel into the basin before pouring some of the still steaming water over it.

“You look like you have some practice,” he noted, sighing when she wrapped the warm towel around the lower portion of his face.

“I do. My cousin’s hands often tremble, mostly because he refuses to leave any of his projects long enough to get adequate food and rest. Henri didn’t trust himself to not slit his own throat while he shaved, so he asked me to do it instead whenever we worked together. He didn’t ask often since we were both out in the field and neither of us didn’t really care what he looked like, but once we returned to study and write about our findings, he’d suddenly become very interested in his appearance.” She smirked as she went behind him, her fingers massaging his scalp as she waited for the warm towel to soften the hair she had left behind. “I’d bet it was because of the multitude of single ladies in Tantervale. Henri often takes advantage of the fact that just because we’re employed by the Chantry it doesn’t mean that we’re bound by any oath to be chaste. He has quite the
reputation as a ladies’ man. He’s also frugal and refused to pay good coin to visit a barber for something I could quickly do for free.” Moving away, she dipped the shaving brush into water to wet the bristles before working the dried shaving soap into a rich, spicy smelling foam.

She took the towel off and let it rest on the table with a wet thunk. Moving until she was again between his legs, she began to lather his face, taking care not to miss anything. Reaching over him, she took hold of the razor and opened it with a practiced flick of her wrist. “Do you want any particular style? Sideburns?” she asked, tilting his face to the side.

“Whatsoever you decide is best,” he told her, closing his eyes at the feel of her fingers against his cheek.

“All right, but just remember that when you complain about how I left you looking a certain way.” Holding the skin of his cheek taut with one hand, she slowly scraped the blade of the razor down in short, sure strokes. They were silent while she worked, the only sound in the room coming from the scrape of metal against skin. “My mother taught me how to shave a man,” she said quietly, moving behind him to get a better angle at his throat and underneath his chin.

“Did she?” He tilted his head back until he was nestled against the softness of her breasts.

“She did. It was before…” she sighed. “She said that this was one of the most intimate things a woman could do for her husband. Aside from helping my cousin, I’ve never had any desire to offer to do this for another man.”

He was still until she finished his throat. “I’m humbled.” He reached for her free hand and kissed her knuckles.

“You’re foamy,” she said, trying to lighten the mood. Rewetting the towel with fresh water, she cleaned his face of any remaining lather.

“Well, how do I look?”

Ravena stood back and really looked at him. Before, she had kept herself from getting distracted by his emerging facial features by concentrating on not nicking him, but now, she froze, the bottle of soothing balm he had thought to bring up with him still in her hands. “You look…” Surely she couldn’t be this affected by him. Shouldn’t she have noticed his sharp cheekbones before?

Unable to form a proper response with words alone, she bent and kissed him, her fingers learning the smooth terrain of the sides of his face, his chin, the strong angle of his jaw.

“I take it that you approve,” he rumbled, his hands on her hips. Somewhere along the way, Ravena had clambered onto his lap, her legs straddling his. He let out an involuntary groan when she settled firmly in his lap, his fingers slipping underneath her shirt and gripping her hips.

“I didn’t want to,” she confessed. “I mean, I agree with the whole reason you wanted it gone, but Maker, I loved the beard.” She pressed her lips to his jaw and gave him an experimental nip.

“Though I do like being able to do this as well.”

Blackwall reached out and took hold of the mirror. He stared at his reflection, noting that Ravena had left him fairly long sideburns in a style that he had often worn in his youth. “There’s a face I haven’t seen in ages.” He had a thought that he would see the old demons and guilt that had haunted him, but what really caught his eye and lifted his spirits was the tender way Ravena looked at him, not his reflection.

“It’s a good face.” She sat up in his lap and regarded his profile, noticing that he did indeed look like
he had shaved a decade off his visage. Without the beard to distract the eye, the broken bend of his nose was more prominent. He had a small dimple at his left cheek, the mark lending his smile a certain rakish air. “I’m certain many a woman fell for your looks.”

He turned his attention back to her. “There’s only one woman I’m concerned about falling for my looks now.” He kissed her, and it was odd not to feel the familiar texture of his beard.

“Oh, I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” she teased, gasping when he stood up, her legs wrapping around his waist for balance as he effortlessly carried her towards their bed. “I fell for you a long time ago.”

Chapter End Notes

And that makes 50. After nearly a year (I started writing this last December) we're done! Thanks to everyone who stopped by to read, and thank you for all the comments and kudos. I’m happy that people enjoyed reading about Blackwall and Ravena just as much as I enjoyed writing about them.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!