Once and Again

by Kmandergirl

Summary

She had done it once, and it wasn't fair that they wanted her to do it again. Would they ask for her life a second time, or could Idalya take the broken pieces of her memory and make a better world this time?

An alternative universe where the Hero of Ferelden finds out that death isn't sacrifice enough.
Chapter Summary

This is it. The final battle for Ferelden’s survival. Their job is to distract the Archdemon until Alistair can make the killing blow, but Idalya Mahariel has other ideas.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to the rewritten Once & Again! For those returning, I hope you enjoy the changes and additions. For those new to the story? Welcome! I’m excited to share this story with you.

It hadn’t been going well. One by one, Idalya Mahariel’s group had fallen under the attacks of the Archdemon. She rolled out of the way as a wall of flame poured across the battlefields, engulfing the last, lingering members of the dwarves and elves that marched with the Wardens for this last battle. They fought with courage; they fought with hope, and they fought knowing they were the only thing keeping Thedas clinging to survival.

She listened to their death cries, filling the surrounding air. Their screams barraged her ears as she covered her mouth with a filthy hand, trying to keep the smoke and ashes of her burning allies from overtaking her senses. The street of Denerim lined with ash from its burning alienage.

These flakes, floating on the breeze, the remaining pieces of the people who’d helped her make to the platform she fought on now. Her skin crawled at their intimate touch as she brushed the feathered bits from her face.

Morrigan launched fireballs into the dragon’s snout on the far side of the battlefield. Her staff circled her head as her mana churned out repeated plumes of fire. She screamed taunts at the beast to keep its attention and advancement directed towards her, buying the others on the field precious seconds. Her jet-black hair soaked in perspiration, sticking against her cheekbones, her golden eyes glowed with anger as she screamed out a summons in ancient languages foreign to Idalya.

Alistair protected the mage from the waves of demons sprinting at them to protect their master, and like a tide breaking against the shore, so broke the legions of darkspawn as they met a grisly end at the warrior’s sword and shield. His face pulled into a grimace, streaks of tainted blood smeared across his helm, his caramel eyes locked with Idalya’s through the legs of the shifting dragon. A resigned sadness emanated from within them before he broke the glance to swing his broadsword at the next wave of darkspawn encroaching on his barrier of support.

With a frustrated grunt, Wynne forced healing magic into Zevran’s broken body. Leliana drug the incapacitated elf away from the action of battle, leaving a crimson trail along the dirty ground. The auburn-haired sister released a sob, hand grasped at her throat as she watched her lover’s blood spread across the blackened stones. No stranger to battle, Wynne grabbed the rogue, shouting at
her to return to help those still up and fighting. Dropping to her knees, ash being lifted into the air, Wynne closed her eyes. She summoned all the power accessible to her then channeled it through her fingers into the rasping body of the dying Crow.

Oghren tried in vain to find survivors from the dwarves of whom he’d just watched burn to catastrophe by a wayward shot from the fearsome dragon. Between swings of his mighty ax, he checked the bodies scattered around, looking for any survivors, but found them charred beyond recognition. Tears threatened to well up in the dwarf’s eyes, but it was not the time. He would remember his battling comrades later, with an ale in his hand as he shouted and slurred about the grand adventures of a stubborn group of dwarves that took on an archdemon, but first, he needed to survive the swinging claws of the great beast.

As a fireball exploded between its eyes, the archdemon took its gaze off Idalya to focus its attacks on Morrigan. The elf knew this was the moment; the inevitability setting into her exhausted bones like a cool breeze in the center of a roaring summer storm. Sprinting as fast as her legs carried her, she focused away from the smoke burning her throat with every inhale. She struggled to refill her lungs as even her Warden stamina neared empty, her steps faltering as she forced her body onward.

Her trusted broadsword was lost early in battle after her body had been whipped across the field by a flick of the dragon’s snake-like tail. As she ran, she grabbed a great sword covered in stinking demon gore out of the hands of a bloodied corpse lying broken on the ground. She pushed her legs to keep running until she lined up with the tail of the dragon, gasping for breath she could no longer hear, her pulse pounding like a distant, angry drum.

Never hesitating, she launched herself at the demon’s scales, climbing the creature as deftly as her muscles would allow. She perched on its back, the demon still unaware of her presence. She worked her way up its spine, careful with her steps so as not to alert the beast intent on burning her companions alive.

She continued until located at the base of the great dragon’s neck. Her stomach lurched as she looked down, the ground far below her, wind rushing through her ears as the dragon jerked his head. Drawing her sword up, she stalled.

This had not been the plan.

Alistair was the warden destined to take the final blow, to destroy not only the beast but sacrifice his own life. They fought about this—hours and hours in circles offering no exit. They were stubborn, both too embroiled in the outcome, and neither could let go of the hopes and fears driving them onward. At the end when explaining it one more time made her more nauseous than her failure to make her point she had agreed. She relented, giving him what he wanted, and she took solace on the wavering look of relief it brought to his face.

She had lied. It was the only lie she ever told him, but she clung to the reasons she told it to ease her conscience. He was too important to Ferelden - and to her heart - to let him waste himself on chivalry. Alistair had an entire life and kingdom waiting for him after the Blight ended. Idalya only had him, and after the Landsmeet, she no longer had that. Alistair and Anora would take Ferelden into a new age, and she was glad she would never have to see it.

He would never forgive her for lying to him. Luckily, it wasn’t a decision she’d have to live with long.

Idalya’s eyes met Alistair’s as he fought to protect Morrigan and Wynne below the dragon. Realization and fear took over the confidence in his gaze as he understood what she was doing. Her deception and its poison filled him, and she knew he understood she never intended on letting him
carry out this task.

Her name left his lips, echoing across the battlefield as she pulled the sword far above her head. For a moment everything slowed, the sun breaking through the clouds of ash to paint her in a ray of light she saw as an encouragement. The cries of the fallen faded, the roaring of the dragon disappeared, a strange song of light and peace filling her, from head to toe. She knew she had won, and that it had been the right thing to do.

Then she drove the steel deep into the demon’s neck. Alistair’s cry ripped through the scarred air before being drowned out by the shrill screech of the dying archdemon. The two screams blended in her ears as her heart thundered through her body, blocking out every other sound. She pulled her sword from its neck and closed her lavender eyes. She exhaled as she drove it down again, severing the remaining muscles and tendons of the monster’s neck.

A force pushed into her abdomen like a fist, her body seizing, as she lost her grip on the dragon’s scale. She had known it was coming, had known this was the price, but she had not known it would hurt so badly. As the spirit of the demon tried to pass and possess her, scrambling through her veins alongside the bitter taint and vacant hopes, her body filled with flame. Falling through the sky, she sensed the Old God's rage as its spirit died within her flesh-covered cell. Her limbs filled with stars escaping through every inch of her skin, piercing a million holes through her body as the two souls warred within her. The soul of a creature that deigned itself a god, older than their known history, being torn asunder by a mere mortal who lived so little but had survived so much.

Her last thoughts were that they had done it, they were safe, and then it was over. Embraced by the darkness, that thought was her last.

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It was dark. So dark. The tiniest tingling sensation moved in her fingertips as though a wind being drawn across them. The feeling spread into her palm; the electricity moving its way through her body, each inch snapping and crackling as it discovered existence once more. She couldn’t see or move or sense anything else, but she was… alive?

Something about this was off. Energy rolled through her, wave after wave, bringing a deep shadow to the back of her mind. She had no real notions about what death was before she achieved it, but every instinct told her this was not what it was. She was alive, and the wrongness of that permeated every inch of her waking self. Her mind, or form, or whatever it may have been at this moment, itched with the need to escape. She wanted to run, to shy away like a roach hissing at the kiss of a torch’s flame, but she couldn’t yet move.

Her body jerked awake, the lightning that had been a murmur becoming a scream as it sparked and shot across her limbs, searing her with unimaginable pain as though being laid in a bed of hot coals. Heavy winds deafened her as sound returned, and her ears ached with the sound of the screaming that filled her head. Everything throbbed and writhed so she could not shut out the horrible sounds, and with mounting panic, she realized that the scream was her own

Violent waves of pain took her senses, her screaming uncontrollable as they scorched her tender limbs. Fire itself crawled out of her bones and across her abdomen, consuming her from without and within. She was losing whatever consciousness she had to the pain as she drifted in and out of awareness. As her senses became sharper, she realized that she was not alone, that there were many others talking around her, their voices harried and nervous.

“What is happening to her? Did it work?” The woman’s thick Orlesian accent caught her attention
and Idalya’s screams faded as she searched for the source of the voice.

“I do not know. We are in uncharted waters, Leliana.” the other woman was frightened. Idalya heard the uncertain shaking in her voice.

“Lel… Leliana…,” her voice cracked under the simplest of words. A sigh of relief was released before she moved closer.

“Oh, Dal! Thank the Maker, it’s you.” The rogue’s voice was thick with emotion she attempted to hide. “I… I was so worried that the spell had not worked.”

What was going on? “Spell? I can’t see, Leliana.” Every word hurt as it escaped her lips, and she gasped for breath as the pain kept swirling through her body.

“It’s a… it’s a complicated story we can’t discuss, Dal. I promise you, everything will be okay. I need you to stay strong until you’re healed.” Leaning in close, the Orlesian whispered, “I have missed you so, my friend.”

Leliana’s voice betrayed her concern and fear. Both these women were afraid of her, and Idalya became afraid as pinpoints of light grew in front of her eyes. As the light beamed brighter, fire poured through her sockets and she screamed, her back arching as her muscles fought off the crushing pain burning her skull from the inside out. The pain only increased as the light grew unbearable until the universe came into focus with a sickening pop.

Her eyes could not adjust to the light as they ached each time she opened them. Over time, pictures made their way through her sight, and she knew she was inside some stone-lined room, surrounded by a ring of mages unfamiliar to her. Their heads bent in focus with their staffs raised above her body as a jade mist swirled around the room.

Her eyes flicked over to her side to realize the searing pain in her hand was that half of it was missing. The bones and remaining tendons of her fingers spasmed, her skeletal fingers curling. She screamed a blood-curdling wail and sunk into unconsciousness again. A door burst open somewhere nearby, and she heard a man yelling in the distance, demanding an explanation regarding what the mages had done, but he sounded very far away.

Mages shuffled around her on all sides, the smell of sickly sweet mana swirling around her body. Pieces of their murmurs drifted by her ears as her sensitive hearing returned. Corpse. Decayed. Rotted. Tattered. Maker. The undeniable strain of retching. Each sound raising her anxiety over what happened, as she felt the void calling for her. A hand in the darkness pulling her under the waves as she struggled to breathe.

People were frightened, and they were frightened of her.

“Let me die.” She sobbed as the abyss drew near, begging and pleading with no one in particular, to anyone that might listen. “Just let me die.”

Chapter End Notes

Updates will come quickly as I get the story caught up to the end of Adamant. Overall the story will have more chapters, but fewer words as I aggressively edited.
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The Chapter Where Idalya Discovers What's Happened

Chapter Summary

The Hero of Ferelden wakes from a nightmare to find herself in a strange place. Where is she and what has happened while she slumbered?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The sounds of paper rustling stirred Idalya, alerting her to someone moving within the vicinity. Opening her eyes, she found they were no longer as sensitive to light as when the fire poured through the sockets of her skull. She glanced around the room before opening her involuntary squint expecting the excruciating pain to begin again.

This was no place Idalya recognized, the walls made of a uniform gray stone; the air holding a biting chill gripping into her bones even while hidden under stacks of blankets and furs piled on top of her. The woman, who woke her, straightened piles of scrolls, collecting empty dishes and vials unaware that the warden watched her.

“Identify yourself, servant.” The elf stiffened, turning to face Idalya, her eyes wide in horror as her hand tried to find purchase on the desk behind her.

“I’m so sorry to have disturbed your slumber, my Lady,” the woman bowed and Idalya noted she backed away, drawn towards the exit door.

“No need to apologize; also, not a lady. Can you please send a message? I need to speak to the leader of this camp, army or whatever this is.” The servant nodded and exited letting the heavy wooden door slam behind her sending a gush icy air across the room. Idalya shuddered, the cold ripping through her body until she doubled over in pain from tremors that seized up her limbs.

She laid still under the mountain of furs piled on her. Without clear danger, there was no reason for not hiding under the furs until she warmed again. Flexing the muscles in her legs, the heat returned through her sore and aching limbs while she analyzed her surroundings. Nothing telltale in the structure of the room to identify where was, nor any sense of darkspawn anywhere close.

What she sensed was a deep vibration of magic flowing through the heart of the building itself as though the building hummed to itself soothing those that walked its stones daily with a silent lullaby. Tables lined all sides of the room covered with texts, books, and scrolls with piles on the floor the servant was clearing before she startled the woman to death.

Small rays of sun cut through the tapestries hanging in the window and draping across the blankets thrown over her, spots of heat over her body making her sigh in relief as it dispersed like a network of fingers spreading life again. As images from her nightmare came tumbling back into her brain, she adjusted the furs covering the hand she remembered vividly missing its sleeve of flesh.

She drew her breath, as she tried to still her heart threatening to run rampant from her chest as she pulled the cover off to find her hand appeared fine, no bones, and no missing flesh. Huh. Gingerly, she ran her fingers over the top applying pressure to pull the skin taunt, sore but no injury showed.
She released the sigh she was holding and thanked the Maker it was only a nightmare. She flopped back onto the covers, fingers massaging her temples. This must be in the lodging of one of her allies, but how she entered she had no memory of.

What was the last thing she remembered? Every time she tried to think of what happened before the nightmare, the visions blurred, pushing into greater disorder. Every memory coated in a hazy fog, a barrier preventing her from seeing clearly. *My head injury must be worse than I suspected.* Someone would come to her soon to help her sort out what left her stranded in a strange bed.

Footsteps approached against the stone floors a tapping echo that vibrated inside her ears. Leliana emerged through the doorway, sunlight flowing over her shoulders, as she closed the door behind her Idalya’s hand rested over her eyes as her pupils dilated only aggravating the headache threatening to take over her mind. Her friend dressed in deep amethyst robes she didn’t recognize with a dark purple hood hiding her face and lovely red hair. In her hands, she carried a wide silver tray. The bard looked tired, dark circles cut into the layers of her pale skin, lines formed around the edges of her eyes.

“I’m surprised to see you awake, my Lady. You’ve had a trying night.” Her voice sounded strange, her Orlesian accent dulled to the slightest emphasis on words.

The rogue approached and sat beside her on the bed setting the tray on a nearby nightstand. Idalya searched Leliana’s face to remember what happened. There was something hovering close to her mind she couldn’t make sense of. A fuzzy truth so tangible in front of her she could reach out and caress it.

“I assume you have many questions for me now.” Leliana avoided eye contact and her hand twitched before settling over a silver-handled hairbrush with thick boar bristles laying on the tray.

“Where am I, Leliana? How did I get here?” She found no clues to explain where she was. “Why am I here? I can’t remember. I’m… scared, it’s true. Something is wrong…” Her words trailed off as she as the truth cascaded past her lips before she could control it.

It was true. Somewhere deep in her soul, she was terrified of the unknown.

Leliana observed her while she reached for a sealed glass bottle on the tray. She popped a cork on the vial, coating her hands in an oil with a fragrance like a summer day in the streets of Denerim, spicy with a lingering whiff of orange reminding her of the marketplace on any afternoon. Bringing her hands together to warm the liquid, Leliana pushed her fingers into Idalya’s scalp and worked through the tangled nest of knots in her long white hair as she spoke.

“We’ll start with the easier questions: you’re in a place called Skyhold. It is the base of operations for the Inquisition. A trusted group of mages brought you here as part of a very dangerous mission. Idalya, you are here because the world is in danger and we need your help.”

“Wait. The Inquisition?” She’d never heard of this group outside of the ancient Inquisition, the people who established the Chantry and Templar, or ever known of Leliana’s affiliation with this group. Her lavender eyes darted around the room, suspicious and on guard, as she noted the exits available to her. “Why do they need my help?”

Leliana sighed as she drew the brush through Idalya’s tresses freeing hairs from the tangles. “And that, my Lady, is where this story gets a lot more complicated.” She paused pulling the brush firmer through a larger know. “There is an ancient darkspawn magister named Corypheus who used ancient Elven magic to tear a rift in the sky itself. He plans to use this magic to walk into the Fade itself and conquer the Black City and their ancient gods. To help accomplish this task,
resurrected an Archdemon, the Archdemon you killed to end the fifth blight…”

Idalya’s eyes widened. The Archdemon. How had she forgotten the Archdemon? That’s what happened; the memories flooded her head watching the dwarves and elves scorched to death. A wave of nausea passed over her at the reminder of the smell of her burning allies. Her hand ached remembering bringing down the sword to the neck of the mighty dragon and of stars exploding through her body as they pierced through her.

*How could the demon live after having its head cut off?* Her mind spun trying to piece everything back together, blurred spots still existing as she tried to remember the rest of the battlefield.

“How could the demon live after having its head cut off? Her mind spun trying to piece everything back together, blurred spots still existing as she tried to remember the rest of the battlefield.

“Okay. So, the Archdemon survived, what are our options? Do we have any resources remaining that survived the battle?” Trying to remember the battle pained her, a stabbing radiating through her skull. Cringing, she pressed her hands tighter against her temples. Something called to her, reaching for her, begging for her to remember in these memories, but she couldn't find it. Her head throbbed as her vision in the present spotted and she struggled to focus on what Leliana said as her vision became as blurry as her memories.

“Our allies are a complicated issue- the mages and Templar are now at war over their escalating feud. And no, the Archdemon did not survive, my Lady.” She turned her eyes away from Idalya, staring out into the empty part of the room.

“The Archdemon was slain?” Her mind replayed holding the sword and severing its spine behind her eyes. “How is that so? I’m sitting here talking to you right now. Was the Warden magic untrue?”

Leliana returned the brush and vial to the silver tray before wiping her hands on a towel. She rose and headed for the door her head pointed down towards her boots. Reaching the door, her hand paused on the handle for excruciating moments before she looked back meeting Idalya’s eyes and sighed, sadness swelling over her features.

“No Dal, the Warden magic was true. When the Archdemon died, you also perished with it over ten years ago.” She opened her lips to speak but shut them before lowering her eyes in shame and sliding out the door.

The cold rushing past her again to chill Idalya’s frozen bones once more as the warden laid there frozen in shocked silence.

Chapter End Notes

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The Chapter Where Leliana Explains

Chapter Summary

Leliana has been summoned to explain what's happened to the leaders of the Inquisition. Have her decisions hurt the fledgling organization?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Leliana was used to speed walking through the stone corridors of Skyhold. Her boots slipping between servants and couriers who traveled the halls at a more relaxed pace. After leaving her discussion with Idalya, Leliana owned no sense of urgency to arrive at the War Room to face the questioning faces of the Inquisitor and her peers.

Her mind was reeling from the circumstances of the last twenty-four hours. For years she'd served as Justinia's Left Hand. With that position came an understanding that actions have consequences, but nothing had prepared her for the guilt threatening to collapse her into oblivion. The guilt was a raging beast inside her chest, clawing and screaming with every beat of her betrayer’s heart.

Every time she closed her eyes she saw Idalya’s decayed corpse writhing on the table, magic swirling around the room converging around her body until a scream pierced the air terrifying Leliana more than any sound she’d ever heard. How long had it been since she’d known real fear? Its terror grafting its way into the shell of her bones?

What had she done?

The answer to that question was a lot more complicated than she was ready to admit.

Reaching the heavy wooden door that served as the entrance to the War Room, she paused. The urge to flee without having to face the unknown consequences of her actions became more appealing as she stood motionless.

All night she’d perched at the top of the rotunda with her ravens, preparing her defense when Evelyn’s summons had arrived. For minutes she’d stood in the hallway, letting the mountain breeze from the Frostbacks blow through the broken patches of the wall to run across her skin. The bite of the ice-frosted mountain’s sigh was painful as she tried to calm herself, hiding the crushing level of guilt living in her eyes begging everyone to see.

When able to breathe without a stutter to her lungs, she pushed the door open and entered the room. Her eyes adjusted to the dim candlelight filling the room, the curtains drawn, blocking out all natural light.

The Inquisitor sat in a high-backed chair deep in thought, her hand covering the lower half of her face from any discernible reaction. Her other hand fist around a glass that reeked of whiskey.

While most residents in Skyhold had just broken their morning fast, Inquisitor Evelyn was a good way through her first decanter of the day. Her mane of auburn hair blew from the breeze of the shutting door, billowing the long curls around her shoulders. She stared at the war table in front of
her, her eyes unreadable in the hanging darkness in the room.

Commander Cullen kept his face pointed at the table as he dug through piles of correspondence in frustration. His lips were moving without a sound as he pulled out one sheet of parchment after another, keeping his eyes glued on his paperwork and ignorant of the tension in the room.

Cullen was over his head in most conversations with the three women at the war table- his focus torn between trying to keep his eyes off the Inquisitor, his lyrium withdrawal symptoms, and his frequent eye-rolling over any discussion of politics. He was a gifted statistician and commander. Any problem Cullen couldn’t hammer to death, he would instead eye roll his way to the same conclusion until the other advisers would dismiss him with furrowed brows.

Josephine, the ambassador for peace in occupation and life, was the only person making eye contact. The tension was so thick it hung like a fog. Her honed diplomatic expression of neutrality failed as she saw the pain lingering in Leliana’s eyes crawling its bloody way to the surface. Josephine took a deep breath, stepping forward to the table to speak. Before she uttered a word Cullen slammed his fist down on the table sending enemy markers flying, toppling to the floor rolling in all directions- a metaphor of how dispersed and chaotic their allies were. “What were you thinking, Leliana?” He roared across the wooden table, his voice echoing in the rafters, clearing away the last of the left-behind cobwebs. “She trusted you!”

Cullen, a man who never shared the inner dialogue that rambled inside his thick skull was screaming at her, over the war table no less. His arms clenched to his sides, massive hands making fists tight enough that his scarred knuckles were turning white. He was shaking, his breaths drawn in erratic patterns, eyes burning in intensity towards her. She knew this man well enough over the decade their paths crossed to understand his level of self-control, otherwise, she’d have had both of her daggers out in front of her bracing for impact by the fuming beast of a man.

Josephine was fretting over her board of secrets, “Necromancy on the Hero of Ferelden? Oh, what would we do if our allies find out?” She threw her writing board onto the table, papers falling out of their usual immaculate order on the barren surface since Cullen’s fist had cleared the previous occupants. “This will ruin us, Leliana, and anything we’ve accomplished here!” Josephine sat down in a vacated chair, desperation rolling off her sepia skin as she looked to the other two advisers for any declaration of reassurance that wasn’t coming.

The Inquisitor remained silent this whole time, her olive eyes focused on an invisible point in the distance before she looked over to Leliana, narrowing in contemplation. “Why?” Her tone wasn’t accusatory unlike the two advisers, which surprised her.

Pointing fingers and shifting blame was one of Evelyn’s favorite past times. That the woman sat quietly while analyzing the situation, shook Leliana to her core. She met Leliana’s eyes and regarded her. “We may not agree on methods, but I believe you have always done what needed to be done for the Inquisition. What made this necessary?” The unspoken question, and why didn’t you tell me first, lingered in the air.

“After the Corypheus attacked us with the dragon at Haven,” Leliana began, her voice wavering. She doubted any of them would notice. “I sent out my spies to find everything possible. Nothing came back for some time and I exhausted every contact of the Inquisition until I got a lead on a lot of rare and unusual supplies requested and purchased in secret in a magical black market in Denerim.

"My contact followed the purchaser to a what appeared to an abandoned island between the Free Marches and Trevinter where they found an outsider group of Wardens preparing for a very large
summoning. After their spell was over, the wardens left the island, leaving valuable evidence behind. My contact found forgotten parchments left behind explaining the purpose of the summoning was for the dragon that Corypheus used to reign destruction on Haven.”

The Inquisitor’s face paled, the memories as fresh to her as anyone else here.

“They summoned an archdemon into this world.” She paused, waiting until the Inquisitor gave her a reluctant nod to continue.

“When Fiona examined the books used by the Wardens to bring forth the demon, she realized that it was not just an archdemon. They had resurrected, Urthemiel, the archdemon of the fifth blight using magic placing part of Corypheus’ spirit itself inside the beast. Corypheus and this monster are now one.” She looked up at the other advisers who looked away from their notes to give her their full attention.

“This information stays here,” all three nodded in understanding. She was walking a shaking tightrope to plead her case, holding her cards tight to her breast. “When you slay an Archdemon, its spirit travels into the closest vessel with the taint to save itself. That’s why a Gray Warden needs to be the one to strike the final blow, to house the spirit unto its destruction.”

Cullen sighed in the corner, his head rolling back against the wall with a thud, “That’s why you were so anxious when the Wardens disappeared overnight. You knew what Corypheus is.” His hand rubbed against the skin on the back of his neck raw as he took in the Inquisitor's blank explanation. “Are all the wardens working with him?”

“I don’t know. I have located no Wardens other than Blackwall, so far,” she replied. “With the archdemon being raised, Fiona, after many days of research realized there was a loophole created by this unique and powerful magic.” Blood magic. She paused looking down at her hands gripping the sides of the table, her fingers numb from the loss of circulation. “Idalya Mahariel, the Hero of Ferelden, possessed the spirit of the archdemon itself when she… perished. While she remained dead, the Fade would protect the demon from harm while part of it already had its foot in the Fade for Corypheus.

“I sent my spies to bring her remains from their burial spot to Skyhold under the cover of night. Fiona and a group volunteer of former circle mages repeated the spell, summoning her spirit from the beyond, and back into her remains. They healed time's destruction of her body as she screamed in torment for hours on end.

"The demon’s spirit no longer rests in the Fade and we have the ability to slay it, should it attack us again.” Her heart ached, the pain spreading along the lining of her ribs, as her sins spilled past her lips to her most trusted friends and colleagues. She’d pray to the Maker for forgiveness if she wasn’t convinced he’d strike her down on the spot.

“My job in this inquisition is to complete impossible things. Tasks no one should be asked to do. I have never failed you.” She hardened her jaw towards the other three as she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin faking bravery. “Now we have a fighting chance against Corypheus.”

Three sets of eyes stared at her in disbelief and as a light breeze blew across the room, she realized tears trailed out of her own. She wiped them away, impatient at her display of emotion, and turned to head for the door in embarrassment when she needed to stay focused on her job.

The Inquisitor stopped her, the woman’s smoky voice halting her mid-step.

“Leliana, all magic has a cost. What we will have to pay?” Leliana stopped at the door and turned
back to face, wiping stubborn tears that refused to stop falling.

Images of Idalya’s twisted and screaming corpse appeared in front of her eyes blinding her as she closed them, her teeth biting into her lower lip to contain her own. “Have no fear my lady, the cost of the magic has already been paid.” Pulling her hood over her head, Leliana slipped away into the darkened and chilled halls of Skyhold leaving the Inquisitor and her advisers sitting in shocked silence.

Chapter End Notes

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The Chapter Where Idalya Meets the Commander

Chapter Summary

The Commander of the Inquisition forces drops by to check on Idalya. Is he the link to what she's forgotten?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Mama, mama.” She propped her nose up on the edge of the bed as she watched her mother sleep. Her dark curls framed her heart-shaped face, long dark lashes that spread across the golden umber planes of her cheeks, as her chest drifted up and down weighed down by the weight of the Fade. “MAMA.” At her hissing whisper, her mother flinched, rolling to her side until she popped a violet eye open at her eager daughter.

“Everything okay, Dal?” she yawned, stretching her arms to the side as she twisted her back with a groan. She slept in her servant’s clothes again, far more ornate than an elf would wear in the Alienage, from her evening shift serving King Maric and the other royals in the castle.

“I missed you!” the girl whispered, at least she tried to whisper but just hissed again at her patient mother, still hidden below the edge of the bed.

Her mother laughed a rich and warm sound that echoed in their meager housing and stretched out her arms which Idalya, without hesitation, crawled onto the bed into the circle of the woman’s arms. They laid there in silence, content with the shared warmth shared between mother and child. Her mother’s hand drifted across the disordered strands of her streaked white and brunette hair.

Her other siblings resembled one parent or the other, but not her. She was a perfect mixture of the love that had created her. Mother’s rich brown luminous skin, her father’s bright and glowing strands of hair, her eyes a harmonious blend of their plum and storm gray.

“What should we do today, my love?” her mother whispered to the edge of her pointed ear.

“Go see Daddy!” her mother laughed again, squeezing her arms around her bundle of unending energy.

“Well, Daddy is busy at the blacksmith today and he’ll be home before we know it, but that means it’s just the two of us today!” She announced as Idalya cheered and hugged her mother tighter, kicking her feet behind her in joy.

Idalya opened her eyes, blinking away the traces of her dream. Under the pile of furs, she could still feel the warmth of her mother wrapped around her. It felt like a lifetime since she had seen her mother, but at that moment her lavender eyes grew misty in her gratitude that her mother’s features were still clear within the broken fragments of her mind. Her mother’s smile remained etched in her mind, and the look of grief that had clouded her features later that day when the Denerim guard arrived outside their quaint home to announce that her father was dead after a scuffle between the guard and elves in the Alienage.
She glanced at the small streams of light lurking their way under the door. It was much later in the
day than her routine rising time. Idalya had always been an early riser. She had clear memories of
her mother telling the family to keep her barred to her tiny corner of the room she shared with her
siblings when she was a young child. This trend continued through her time as a Grey Warden,
with fast healing and stamina regeneration, she had no reason to stay in bed after stirring and was
often awake early enough to watch the sunrise and warm the surrounding ground.

Today had been the exception. After Leliana had left her room in the early hours of the morning,
Idalya remained in bed until long after the sun come up and considered hiding under her pile of furs
for the rest of the day when she heard the echoing footsteps of boots and the clinking of heavy
armor approaching her room.

After a light knock, a broad-shouldered man with a styled mop of blond curly hair, wearing half
armor. A fluffy decorative cloak thrown over his shoulders. He pushed the door open and entered
her stone prison carrying a lopsided tray filled with food and drink. He set down the tray before
taking a seat in the chair at the foot of her bed.

“I am Cullen Rutherford, my Lady,” he began as he rubbed the back of his neck, his eyes focused
on the floor, “I am the Commander of the Inquisition army and welcome you to Skyhold. Your
help and… expertise will be of value to our cause and I… we are glad to have you here.”

Idalya was compelled to order the bumbling man to leave, but there was something comforting
about this soldier who’d brought her breakfast, struggling to speak to people he was not giving
orders to. He could have sent a messenger, but he saw her himself. It was a sign of respect she
understood from one warrior to another.

She realized he was still talking, and she had not been paying attention. “… we want you to be
comfortable. Let us know if you need anything.”

She had no words that would come to her, so she met the Commander’s hazel eyes and nodded
before her nose forced her eyes to look to the tray of food whose smells were assaulting her senses.

“I didn’t think to ask Leliana what you preferred as meals, so I apologize if this isn’t to your
liking.” The Commander mumbled motioning towards the food.

Something in this man’s awkwardness was helping her feel more like herself than anything else so
far. Pushing herself up on the bed, she looked over the tray and reached out, taking a warm biscuit
from the tray. He smiled and motioned towards the tea. She nodded between chews of the flaky
biscuit as he poured a cup for each of them.

“Four sugars, extra cream,” Idalya mumbled between bites of biscuit which came out, faw zuger,
hextra crem. Picking up the small bowl of preserves that smelled like fresh berries, the warden
smiled. Scooping the fruit with her biscuit, the slightest of moans escaped her lips as the sweet jam
melted against her tongue.

The Commander chuckled as he prepared her tea, a warm and hefty sound that shook his chest
under his heavy armor, “I had almost forgotten the infamous sweet tooth of the Hero of Ferelden:
destroyer of demons and pastries alike.”

Idalya raised an eyebrow and considered making a crude gesture before noticing the plate of
strawberries still untouched on the tray. Grabbing them and biting into the soft flesh that dripped
down her chin, her annoyance forgotten. Realizing that it was too quiet, she turned to see the
Commander watching her.

“It is you, isn’t it?” He whispered. The measure of confidence he had gained disappeared, his hand
rubbing along his neck again. “I know this isn’t the time, but I…” his words trailed off as he found something far more interesting on the floor to stare at.

Idalya interrupted, “I don’t know, Commander. I feel like me, but there’s something missing. Every memory before waking up on that table is a haze I can’t seem to find my way out of no matter how hard I try.”

“You remember nothing before being brought back?” the Commander questioned, his eyes searching hers, “Do you remember me, my lady?”

“I’m not sure,” she shrugged, “There’s something familiar about you and you put me at ease, but I’m sorry, I don’t remember what you’re hoping I do. I have clear memories, like of my mother and growing up, but my time in the Wardens in fractured and lost. Commander, please tell me, help me remember.” She placed her hand over his and squeezed to reassure him to continue. His stared at her hand atop his before swallowing, pulling his hand away to resume his frantic neck massage.

“I… I was a Templar in the Ferelden Circle when it fell. I was a prisoner and attacked by a desire demon for days as I listened to my brothers collapsed one after another under the weight of the demons. Running out of ways to break me, the desire demon appeared with the face of the girl of whom my heart had first belonged. I had watched Solona die the day the tower first fell, she protected the unharrowed mages for hours until... She died a hero, and the demons used her face to inflict unspeakable pain and horror…” He paused, his eyes clouded lost in memories of a decade ago.

“After the demon took her face, it was only a matter of time before I broke, begging the Maker for death. As I prepared to give up, I heard screams echoing down the corridor. The doors flew open and you entered. Blood and ichor covered you, and I thought you were another demon come to break me. Instead, you asked me for help. You asked what was happening and if I knew what Uldred was casting in the summoning chamber.”

Sighing, he ran a hand over his face scratching at the edge of an unkept short beard. “I said horrible things to you. I told you to destroy everyone inside even if they were innocent. I was so broken and afraid and yet you never looked at me with judgment; you told me to rest you would save me… and you did. You returned and dropped the barrier and held me as I dropped to my knees. Told me I was safe. I was so angry that you had saved those inside I couldn’t even look you in the eyes and thank you. I pushed you away and said any abominations were on your head- for that I am sorry. I was terrified, never preparing myself for the thought of surviving that I didn’t know how to react to safety. I thought I would never get the chance to apologize and thank you for not listening but still showing compassion.”

Idalya was running over the information in her head. The memory of a circle seemed familiar, as did his story, but she couldn’t picture it.

“But thank you for saving someone who didn’t deserve it. At that moment you showed a greater strength than I knew could exist. I had all but resigned my grave to Kinloch…”

**Kinloch.** With that one word, she saw it.

*Demons, the smell of blood, bodies lining the halls as screams echo throughout the halls. Being sucked into the Fade and fighting her way out. A broken man on the floor crying in fear. Destroy them all, destroy the mages. Don’t trust them, can’t trust them… Someone argues with her, protect the children. Protect the innocent at all costs. Protect them... protect them...*

Idalya’s hands flew to the sides of her head as the memories exploded into her mind, needles
pressed into the corners of her mind. A pained cry slipped from her lips. As the memories and the piercing pain attached to them dissipated, she realized that the Commander had moved to take her within his arms as she had screamed and trembled.

“Do you need me to fetch the healer or Enchanter Fiona for you, my lady?” His eyes were as full of panic as she felt. Ignoring the man’s help, she regained focus, getting her breathing under control.

“No, I remember. Not all of it, but enough. Thank you, Commander. I need to rest, that was too much.” Her throat was dry, a cracking desert running the length of her mouth to intestines as the heady smells of the corrupt Circle still pressed into her nose.

The Commander nodded, guilt plain on his features, as he helped her recline back into the bed. Her eyes were steel. A growing weight. Her lids already fluttered shut from exhaustion after the assault on her mind.

“My lady?” Idalya made a sound of acknowledgment. “I was wondering if you wanted the Inquisition to contact your companions to inform them of your condition.” She opened her eyes, sitting in silence, before responding. Cullen noticed that she wrung her hands together as she hesitated to answer his question.

“We don’t know how long it will last, so no, please contact no one. My friends have moved on with their lives in the last ten years. I don’t want them to grieve all over again if its turn the magic was not powerful enough to sustain me for long.”

Cullen frowned as he processed her words. “Understood, my lady, we will keep your time here at Skyhold a secret as you wish. Let us know what we can help with.” He stood, picking up the tray now empty of anything resembling sweet and heading to the door.

“Commander?” He smiled, turning around to face her.

“I think it would be acceptable for you to call me Cullen, my lady.”

Idalya snorted. “And you should call me Idalya, as I am no lady.”

“Yes, I suppose, my la… umm, Idalya.”

She met his smile and couldn’t refrain from laughing at his discomfort regarding her name.

“Fantastic, Cullen. Regardless of why I’m here now, I have a job to do and an archdemon to kill which means training. I haven’t picked up a sword in over a decade. I will need to train harder than I ever have if I stand a chance to help the Inquisition. Could you set up appointments with your armor and weapon smiths for me?”

Straightening his shoulders, he was the Commander of forces again, “You’ll have everything you require… umm, Idalya. I’ll inform the healers that the advisers are to know with haste when you may return to training and we have all our best equipment available to you. Until later.” He bowed and exited the room.

Her limbs were exhausted as she curled up on her side under the piles of blankets. Memories of death and killing were trying to push their way to the front of her mind, but she needed rest. As her mind prepared herself to enter the Fade, she thought of the now standing Commander in place of the frightened and broken boy she had found in the tower. If the Commander could heal his internal wounds and move on, then maybe she could too.
Chapter End Notes

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The Chapter Where Idalya Meets Skyhold

Chapter Summary

Idalya is cleared to join Skyhold and meets the world that exists outside of the room she spent weeks hiding in.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two weeks. Two weeks that moved at the pace of honey dripping before Skyhold’s healers gave approval for Idalya to exit her prison and join the rest of the fortress. As servants arrived with her breakfast, a heaping plate of biscuits and the freshest strawberries, they also brought a large weathered wooden chest with an Inquisition insignia carved in the hood. Inside she found a pair of well-made leather breeches that color of tree bark, a simple white fitted tunic with a lace up neck, a pair of worn leather knee-high boots, and leather cord for her hair. Changing into real clothes went a long distance in helping her feel like herself again. She made a mental note to thank whoever had sent her new clothes.

Standing in front of the full length garish Orlesian styled mirror, she looked at her features as though she expected to find something out of the ordinary. Crow’s feet appeared around her eyes and the skin underneath was puffy and squished at her touch. Her eyes maintained a constant look of exhaustion. She looked much older than she remembered. As far as she understood, the magic returned her body to the state when she… well, you know. The stress lines and cracks in her skin had already been part of her as she prepared to fight the archdemon.

Her mane of silver and white hair was longer than she could recall and swung loose around the curved of her waist mirroring her movements. Leliana had requested servants bring her more vials of the orange scented oil for her hair. She knew Idalya’s daily struggles to keep her hair untangled and straight. Rolling a lock around her finger, she inhaled the sweet smell and smiled. As a child her mother could never afford a luxury like hair oils, putting her moonlight-highlighted hair in tight braids all hours of the day. She swore the chronic headaches she suffered growing up had as much to do with the tight braids on her head as the lack of food in her stomach.

Picking up a stiff bristled hairbrush from the table, she ran it through her locks releasing the warm smell of spices and orange in the air. Closing her eyes, she focused on bristles running through her hair and felt a tingle in the back of her mind as something in her memory broke free. She felt the pull in her mind as she searched to find the memory attached. After two weeks of adjusting to this, she was becoming more familiar with the sensation of remembering and was learning how to lead herself into those moments and try to push past the fog surrounding them.

She could feel her edges blurring as the memory attempted to push its way through. Her limbs trembled as she could see parts of the vision falling into place:

A campfire. People’s voices traveled around her. Leliana’s Orlesian accent as she purrs at a man nearby who laughs in response, they cuddle together as Idalya looks out across the fire. Fingers drag through her hair, loosening the knots formed next to her scalp. Warm breath traveled across her neck and she shivered, not from the chill in the air, but from desire and the warmth that traveled under her skin, that spread across her body and lodged in her core. A pair of lips hovered
next to the curve of her pointed ear.

“Your hair is the color of the first snow falling from a winter storm.” The voice spoke. She hummed in joy, laying her head back against something solid and safe. She shifted her weight to turn around to locate the origins of the voice. As she turned her head to see, her eyes met by a blinding light pushing her away. It’s so bright. She can’t focus on what’s behind it and the pain is blinding whatever vision she has left...

Idalya opened her eyes, the rocks of her uneven floor digging through the leather covering her knees. Sighing, she placed her head against the mirror with a thud as she tried to understand what she had seen. The previous visions that had broken through had been similar, trivial details snapping into place than other portions blinding her by something that was hiding them. She wasn’t aware of what she was forgetting, but she knew it was angering her increasingly every day. Leliana had avoided her since her first day in Skyhold, instead, sending servants with trays of her favorite foods or needed essentials. She was taking care of her, but without the courage to face her.

Pulling herself up off the floor, she wiped the layer of dust off her new clothes. Permission to leave her bed could not have a moment later or else Idalya would have fought her way into Skyhold and into some form of life outside her stone prison.

Grabbing a gray cloak hung on a hook by the door, she left the room and cast her eyes on Skyhold. The power Idalya could feel running through the stones made so much more sense once she could see the entire keep and its monstrous size. Skyhold was old, but not just in construction, power radiated off the keep and held more in common with ancient Elven ruins than a military outpost. Walking across the ramparts, she let her fingers drag along the stones feeling the magic reach through her hands.

After over two weeks of being part of the living again, her body had time to adjust to the freezing cold mountain air. Being on the outside was different. As she felt the open breeze against her skin, she made a promise to herself to order a heavy woolen cloak when fitted for her armor. She clutched the cloak around her as she made her way down the stairs in the courtyard where soldiers were running through training drills.

Idalya watched the drills run by duos of one Templar and one mage; soldiers not only parring sword blows but ducking around spells that came flying towards them seconds later. She had to give them credit, the Inquisition knew now to train an army. Her sword hand grew an anxious itch as she watched the soldiers train. From the corner of the courtyard, she saw unused training dummies next to the weapon smith’s workshop.

Entering the candle-lit workspace, Idalya’s cheeks burned while assaulted by the heat of the furnace and her exposed fingers singed with the heat she welcomed. Rows of swords rested on wooden tables. She let her fingers run over the pommels, unsure what she was looking for but would know when she saw it. The Smith stopped hammering the sword he was working on to glare at her.

“You look like no soldier I’ve seen, if you don’t have permission to be here touching my goods then you get need out now.” His scowl was so deep that his eyebrows touched. Heavy footsteps fell behind Idalya.

“She is with the Inquisition,” a quick Nevarran accent answered, “she will have access to everything at your disposal. I believe the special order Leliana placed with you is for her.” Idalya turned to take in a raven-haired, muscular woman half a head taller than her. She stood tall, shoulders pressed back, an Inquisition symbol painted across her breastplate. “I am Cassandra Pentaghast and it is an honor to meet the Hero of Ferelden... even if you might be an abomination.”
It was Idalya’s turn to scowl as she studied the woman in front of her. Her face held no malice, but a streak of honesty that calmed her nerves. She had spent the last two weeks catching up by reading history lessons for the last decade with what history books had been available to her. Lady Pentaghast had been the Right Hand of the Divine, serving with Leliana until the Divine’s death at the Conclave. A distant descendant of the Nevarran throne, Cassandra followed more in the dragon hunting footsteps of her family than the nobility side. Idalya could see as she sized her up that the woman was a formidable warrior even without her reputation preceding her.

“Well, I’d like to inform you I’m not an abomination,” Dal ground her teeth together as she said the word aloud. “But I believe the honor is mine, Lady Pentaghast.” She said with the slightest of bows.

Cassandra snorted. “Please, do not refer to me as ‘Lady’, I am only a soldier to the Inquisition as you are. You may call me Cassandra.”

“As you say, Cassandra. I’m Idalya, you can leave off the ‘Hero’ business.” Cassandra nodded in acknowledgment, the corner of her lips lifting in a slight smile.

The Smith returned with two cloth bundles under his arm. Laying them down, he opened the first one revealing a curved broadsword of copper hue. Idalya gasped, pressing one hand over her mouth as the fingers of her other hand stroked down the curves of the metal that hummed in response to her touch.

“Dar’Misaan…,” the words rolled off her tongue, a spell summoned from her lips. For the first time since she had awoken in Skyhold, tears flooded her eyes and rolled down over her ruddy cheeks. “How? I don’t understand.” Her fingers caressed the pommel and found the small crescent-shaped indentions where she would press her nails into the worn leather for extra grip. “This is my sword.” Lifting it up, its weight felt familiar, a joyful laugh rang out in the room as she hugged the sword to her chest. The sound of the smith clearing his throat brought the elf back to reality.

“You’ll see the blade has been restored, reinforced with dragon bone. The leather of the pommel cleaned and restored, but saved, per request, by Lady Nightingale.” He opened the other bundle of cloth which contained two swords, both identical to Dar’Misaan except one had a dulled edge and weighted heavier than her Dalish broadsword. The other built of wood. “These commissions are from Commander Cullen for you. This is a weighted practice sword to build strength and the wooden sword replica are Inquisition issue for all man-to-man training.” For the expression the smith had started their interaction with, his face now held a prideful smile at Idalya’s reaction to his work. Reaching under the table, he pulled out a worn sword belt and sheath.

“This will be large for your frame, but it’ll do for now.” He passed the belt to Idalya who pulled it around her waist and tightened it as small as it would fit on her slim waist and slid Dar’Misaan into the sheath with a grin on her face.

“Thank you for his… I can’t even express how much this means. Thank you.” The Smith nodded and returned to his work like a small Elven woman crying over his work was a daily occurrence. Cassandra picked up the sword bundle under her arm and followed behind Idalya as she made her way out of the shop and made a straight beeline towards the practice dummies. Handing her the dulled practice sword, Cassandra stepped away to ease her back against the nearby wall, giving the Hero some space.

Idalya held the sword out to her side feeling the muscles in her arm stretch under the unnatural feeling weight. The sword was heavy, but not so that she wouldn’t be able to swing it. Cullen knew what he was doing with his army and how to train them. Bringing the sword back in front of her,
she placed both hands on the pommel, lining up her feet to the dummy. With precise movements, she brought the blade to the ribs feeling the dull thud reverberate back up the metal. Inhaled, spun, and struck the opposite side of the ribs. She pulled back the handle to the side of her face and pierced straight into the dummy while she rolled past its side, hopping up behind it and pushed the blade into the dummy, splitting its back with a forceful flick of her wrists. She watched the hay stuffing fall out to the ground, pleased the movement came more natural to her than she expected.

Cassandra huffed from the wall, “And people say I’m hard on the dummies.”

Idalya smiled, a flush of exertion coming over her cheeks. She motioned to Cassandra’s pile of practice swords on the side. “What do you say, Seeker? Want to see the damage a corpse can do?”

A laugh erupted from Cassandra as she considered Idalya’s offer, it was a relaxed sound that suited the uptight woman. “Thank you for the offer, but no. Leliana and Cullen are protective over you, fear you are made of glass. I do not wish to see the consequences of leaving a mark on you from sparring. Cullen, I have no fear of, I could take him in combat.” The warrior shrugged, no doubt held in her statement. “Leliana though, I need to sleep and would like to keep my throat uncut.” She raised her eyebrow, a smirk on her lips. “Another time perhaps.” And strode away towards the main hall.

Idalya stuffed the pile of hay back inside the dummy. Lining back up, she squared her shoulders and took another hit as the dummy exploded hay back into the sky. An infectious smile spreading across her face.

Chapter End Notes

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The Chapter Where Cullen Loses Focus

Chapter Summary

Cullen has a difficult time staying focused when the Herald of Andraste is in his vicinity.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“... next on the agenda is securing our invitation to the Winter Palace,” Josephine continued her diatribe as Cullen rolled his eyes behind the Ambassador’s back.

Evelyn held back a smile as her olive eyes met his across the table. She inserted an occasional ‘mhm’ of acknowledgment into the conversation but continued to watch Cullen as her eyes made their way down the length of his body, her gaze undressing him one piece of, now too tight, armor at a time.

Cullen shifted on his feet trying to adjust the fit of his leather breeches which were tighter the longer the Inquisitor’s gaze lingered. He shot a pointed look towards the other advisers to remind his leader why they were in the War Room. Her smirk fell as she shrugged, rejoining the discussion surrounding Grand Duke Gaspard and the Inquisition’s plans to stop the assassination at the Winter Palace.

That woman was insatiable. Just 15 minutes before the meeting, Cullen pressed her against the stones of the darkened stairwell in Josephine’s office. One callused hand under the waistband of her breeches and small clothes. The other clamped over her mouth as she came apart from just the ministrations of his fingers. A line of messengers traveled past the stairwell to give parchments to Josephine. None of them knowing their own Inquisitor was muffled, crying out into the hand of her Commander as she had begged for more of him, just yards away from their discussions.

As she descended from her elation, her olive eyes rolled back into her head resting against the chilled stones of the stairwell. Her chest pushed up to gain oxygen through her heavy breaths as her heart fluttered within her. Cullen’s hand moved from covering her mouth to holding her cheek. He sighed as his fingers ghosted across her satin skin, caressing his thumb across the smooth line of her jaw.

Beads of sweat formed on her temples, curling her auburn hair around her heart-shaped face. Cullen could understand how people could believe she was the Herald of Andraste from the second they met her. Her beauty was beyond anything he had ever known. Leaning close to her, he removed his other hand from her breeches and brought it to his mouth, sucking every succulent drop of her from his fingers. The soft noise of suction caught her attention and as she opened her eyes to meet his, a low moan escaped past her rose-painted lips.

Her hands darted to the laces of his breeches, but he smacked them aside with a quiet chuckle and smirk. Adjusting his armor, he enjoyed the desperate look in her eyes growing as she clenched her fists at her side. Gaining control of her breath, her glare towards him softened, her bottom lip stuck out as she pouted over not getting what she wanted.
The look she gave Cullen up through her lashes almost undid him there. He’d turned and left as fast as possible without a response. Knowing if a word passed by her plush lips, he’d have her pressed back against the stones, not caring who heard this time.

Cullen needed to clear his mind, but this whole meeting all he could see was the look in her eyes, pupils blown so wide her eyes turned black, hear her muffled moans into the palm of his hand, or the smell of her on his fingers when he rubbed his neck earlier in irritation. All he wanted was for this meeting to be over so he could bend her over the war table, her breeches around her knees, the sounds of her calling his name as he violated her.

“Cullen?” Josephine’s patient voice broke through his daydreaming bringing him back into the real world with the most awkward of entrances.

Maker’s breath. Cullen’s eyes looked up at the three women staring at him, waiting for a response. It was moments like this where he realized he might not have been the best fit for his job.

“Yes?” His voice cracked as the response creaked out of his throat.

Josephine raised an eyebrow, studying Cullen’s expression. “Leliana and I have shared our thoughts and wonder how you would like to proceed.”

Cullen tensed under the gaze of the Ambassador. His eyes flicked to the door, and he wondered about his chances of just running away without the women forever haunting him with this embarrassment.

Don’t fuck this up Rutherford, you can do it.

“I believe the points the advisers made to be suitable,” He started, trying to keep his nerves in check,” so I will defer to their judgment.”

Josephine’s eyebrows creased as Evelyn tried to hide a snort behind a pale hand drawing the ire of the Ambassador. A smirking Leliana opened her mouth to speak, but she was beaten to the punch by Josephine.

“While I appreciate the nod of confidence you have given us, I believe troop movements are your responsibility, Commander.” Josephine huffed out.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

She paused and collected her thoughts, face softening before continuing. “Forgive me, Cullen, I understand the weight on your shoulders both from the Inquisition and from your lyrium struggles. We should be more understanding. My frustration was inappropriate. Do you need to adjourn the meeting until later, Commander?”

Cullen felt the deep crimson pooling in his cheeks; his face burning as he could see Evelyn’s body shaking with laughter in the corner of his vision uncaring of the chaos she caused. He’d make her pay for this later.

Josephine’s gentle expression as she waited for him only increased his level of mortification over her innocent misunderstanding unknowing of what Cullen was guilty of in her office not even an hour prior.

“Thank you. I… I’m okay, I apologize for getting lost in my thoughts. It won’t happen again.” He laid his gloved hand over Josephine’s and hoped she understood that his apology was sincere. Her smile was kind as she squeezed his hand and restarted from her long-itemized piece of parchment.
“Let’s move on, we need to discuss uniforms, noble allies, and transportation for the Winter Palace.” Now it was Evelyn’s turn to roll her eyes as Josephine spoke.

Cullen watched her pull a dagger from her hip and carve the closest edge of the war table to her Ambassador’s dismay. The distraction lasted her ten minutes until Evelyn, interrupted Josephine mid-discussion, to turn to Leliana.

“Tell me, how is Skyhold’s resident corpse managing?”

He watched Leliana’s body posture go from calm to restrained in moments. His own hand gripping the pommel of his sword. The tension in the room was suffocating until Josephine cleared her throat to interject into the conversation.

“Cassandra finds the Hero’s battle skills to be impressive. She sees no reason she will not be ready for full combat soon. She has also recommended approaching Lady Mahariel to step in as a trainer for our warriors due to her unique skill set.”

“She can stab things with a sword? Yippee,” Evelyn scoffed, eyes still boring into Leliana, “but how is the woman holding up, not just the warrior? This whole plan hinges on the ability of a walking corpse to understand what the Inquisition needs and to follow through with those plans. If she is unable to carry out our plan, then we need to dispose of her and look for other options.”

Cullen’s grip on his pommel made his fingers go numb as he channeled his growing annoyance with Evelyn’s crass line of questioning. Dispose of. Those were her words. She spoke of one of their soldiers no different from clearing away the garbage of the fortress.

“First off, she’s not a corpse, so I would ask you to not refer to her that way.” Leliana made a careful choice of her words as she spoke to the Inquisitor. “Also, all trainers report her mental capabilities are adequate. They agree with the Seeker’s opinion, she’ll be cleared to join the Inquisition soon.”

If looks could throw daggers, then Evelyn would die in a pool of her own blood in the center of the War Room.

Evelyn considered her statements. “What do you think? She was your close friend. Was your magic successful?” The slight uptick of her mouth showed she knew of Leliana’s forced distance since the Hero returned. Leliana was a person who never left loose ends or obvious weaknesses, so Evelyn found immense joy in having found a gap in her armor.

Unwilling to watch his lover and boss get stabbed by their own Spymaster, Cullen blurted out the first coherent thought he had. “She has troubles with her memory still…” Leliana’s eyes widened and focused on Cullen begging him not to proceed as Evelyn whipped around to look at him, her eyes narrowed. It was too late, Evelyn smelled blood and was moving in for the hunt.

“What do you mean memory problems? Tell me, Cullen.”

Fuck. Twice now in the same meeting, he existed without words to speak. He rubbed the back of his head as he decided what he would say.

“Her memory is in pieces. Her recollections of fighting the Blight are…patchy? She’s only recollected some of her companions. In the last few days of training, she’s asked about where Wynne and Sten are, which the Iron Bull helped fill in for her. My concern is that she doesn’t remember him…”

Leliana was shaking her head, her eyes pleading with him as she stood behind Evelyn. Cullen had
stumbled into another game the women of the Inquisition played that he wanted no part of, but he knew Leliana would never hurt Idalya while Evelyn just referenced ‘disposing of her’. Looking at the mischievous glint in Evelyn’s eyes, he realized the Hero of Ferelden’s secrets might not be safe with her.

“I find it odd she doesn’t remember the only other Grey Warden in Ferelden who fought during the Blight.” He said with a shrug. Leliana released a silent sigh, mouthing a *thank you* to Cullen. Their eyes met and hoped his communicated that they needed to discuss this later.

Leliana gave the slightest of nods before jumping back into the conversation to move the conversation along with haste. “Enchanter Fiona has examined her multiple times and says the memory loss could be temporary or long term, but it doesn’t hinder her abilities to slay the Archdemon. Her training routine will continue.”

Evelyn’s disappointment was obvious at not finding out a juicier piece of gossip as she rose from the table, but she appeared to accept Cullen and Leliana’s answers for the moment.

“Fine. How do we make her part of the Inquisition? Ceremony? Sword lifting while we yell out barbaric screams?”

“This is one those rare occasions where less is more, Inquisitor,” Josephine responded with a frown, irritated by Evelyn’s description of her own Inquisitor ceremony. “I believe a simple handshake and ‘Welcome to the Inquisition’ greeting will be more than adequate for the situation.”

Evelyn groaned and moved towards the exit of the War Room. “Anything else needed from me before I go greet our newest soldier?” The room was silent. “Commander, accompany me to see the Hero in case she stabs me.” Evelyn threw the doors open, leaving her advisers without a word, making her way down the hall towards the training courtyard while Cullen kept pace a few respectful strides behind her.

Evelyn was a noble at heart and played the Game with mastery. A weapon like Idalya would be dangerous in Evelyn’s arsenal. Even more than her skills in battle, having the title of the Hero of Ferelden on their side could bring Evelyn and the Inquisition immense amounts of power and influence with their allies. Not only did the Inquisition have the Herald of Andraste but also having the risen Warden-Commander herself could give a level of credibility and influence Evelyn had never had before. Evelyn’s pace did not slow as she made her way down the front stairs of the hall into the training yard.

Cullen’s eyes found Idalya’s slim frame, sun-kissed skin, and silver hair with ease. She circled Knight-Captain Rylen in the sparring ring. Her Elven broadsword ran the entire length of her body, but she handled it as though it weighed nothing. Rylen threw his helmet off into the dirt, sweat pouring down his forehead and the lanes of his tattooed face, as he narrowed his eyes at his competitor. Idalya grinned and mouthed something to Rylen, causing his eyebrows to crease as the surrounding soldiers chuckled, letting out a boisterous cheer.

The Templar grumbled and swung for her unprotected side, but the Warden was expecting the move and countered the strike with ease, sweeping behind Rylen and tapping him with force on the ass with her sword as the crowd grew more in a frenzy.

*She’s toying with him. She could have ended this fight on first exchange of swings, but she’s enjoying taking him apart in front of his troops.*

Cullen shook his head while smiling to himself as Evelyn parted the crowd in front of her to approach the elf. As the circle opened, she walked straight into the sparring ring and met Idalya
eye to eye. One quick raise of the Inquisitor's eyebrow was all it took to dissolve the crowd gathered to watch the fight. Cullen stayed close enough to protect Evelyn but far enough away to keep their conversation their own.

Evelyn’s shoulders tensed, a ripple that spread across her body like her waves of ecstasy earlier. Diplomacy was her skill, but something about Idalya made her uncomfortable. A discomfort her muscles could not hide. Idalya looked curious, but not intimidated by being addressed by the Inquisitor, herself.

Cullen assumed facing down an Archdemon would do that to anyone. Evelyn was years older than Idalya at her death, but you couldn’t tell by their eyes. Idalya’s eyes still carried the weight of the world making her look far older than her two decades of life, while Evelyn’s calculating, and mischievous ones made her look much younger than her twenty-six years.

“Commander?” Cullen approached into their conversation. “I would like to take our new friend to the Winter Palace with us when we leave in a month. That gives you a month to have her prepared to travel and be one of my companions during the ball. I’ll inform Josephine and Leliana of my decision.”

Shit. Evelyn was more than aware of the influence the Hero of Ferelden would have to their cause.

Nodding at Idalya, she motioned Cullen towards her as she stepped away. “Come to my quarters just after sundown so we can go over troop movements in private, Commander.” The way she said his title had a flush of heat rip through his torso and lower, electricity running straight to his cock.

“I have multiple meetings scheduled with the Templar tonight, Inquisitor.” Evelyn raised an eyebrow at his perceived defiance and as she was about to walk past him, breathed up towards his ear.

“Either you come then, or you don’t come at all, my Commander…” She sauntered away, her hips swaying with every step. His eyes could not lift from her ass as thoughts of throwing her over the war table cascaded back into his thoughts.

Cullen’s haze broke as Idalya cleared her throat behind him to break the Inquisitor’s spell.

“So…” She began.

“Yes, that’s Evelyn. The Herald of Andraste herself. I should apologize she can be very…”

“Bitchy?” Idalya offered. Cullen chuckled as he rubbed the back of his neck.

“Ah yes, that is one way to describe it. Headstrong, independent… I’m sure Josephine has a whole list compiled for apology letters.”

Idalya laughed as she picked up her sword from the ground wiping the dust off the blade.

“Evelyn is great with nobles and Orlesians, but her treatment to those without titles is brash.”

“Thanks for the warning. I’ll remember to keep my Elven self in her good graces then.” She watched him with intent as Cullen could feel his cheeks still burning from Evelyn direct orders.

“You’ve got it bad, you know?”

She joked as she tightened her pauldrons while walking away towards the group of soldiers who’d settled in front of the Herald’s Rest, while her words placed a ball of worry into his gut. “Hey Rylen, you finished wiping your tears, so we can end this?”
Cullen chuckled as he made his way towards his tower. Yes, he was aware how he was drowning in his preoccupation with the Inquisitor. Every time he’d tried to distance himself from her for the integrity of their organization, she’d come back to the Skyhold from her travels and run straight to his office. Throwing inkwells and parchments to the floor as he’d welcome her back home, a slave to her desires.

He knew he needed to make time to talk to Leliana about what occurred in the War Room and couldn’t help recoiling at the fear in Leliana’s eyes, and how Evelyn referred to Idalya like she was nothing more than some tool for them to use and discard. He pinched the bridge of his nose as he walked into his office to bury himself in work to keep him and his thoughts occupied until sundown.

Chapter End Notes

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Due to her skills as a rogue, Leliana avoided being confronted by Cullen for the next week. The sheer amount of meticulous planning required from all advisers prior to leaving for the Winter Palace was enough to keep Cullen, and his questioning eyes, far from the answers she didn’t have. The answers she wasn’t prepared to give him. Her scouts were tasked to reroute the Commander’s messengers, so the Spymaster had just left the vicinity when they arrived with a summons to his office.

By day seven of their tactical battle, Cullen grew weary of her games. He gave up trying to contact her. His own stack of work increasing tenfold since the Inquisitor left for the Hinterlands with Dorian, Solas, and Blackwall for visible humanitarian work leading up to their travels to Orlais.

*The Inquisition is a peacekeeping force,* Evelyn told them with a scoff as she’d left an extensive list of orders for the Inquisition to complete in her absence, *we better pretend to act like one before we’re called on it.*

Having the Inquisitor out of Skyhold did much to calm the lurking fear in the back of her mind. For days after the last war table meeting, every set of footsteps or movement in the shadows caused her fingers to travel to the handle of her hidden dagger. To defend herself against what, she was unsure. If Evelyn struck against her, Skyhold could have her surrounded in moments. Evelyn herself moved at inhuman speeds with her flashing silver daggers without her army. She would leave Leliana bleeding and gasping for breath in a darkened corner of the Inquisition fortress with no one ever suspecting their graceful and noble leader.

So far Cullen’s lies seemed to pacify their leader, but Evelyn was skilled in the Game and Cullen, who was a logical man at heart, lacked common sense with her. He failed to realize how dangerous she could be if she understood the bartering chip Idalya would be to the royal court of Ferelden.

Alistair, with Anora’s guiding hand, was successful in rebuilding Ferelden, but Leliana knew for his beloved Warden he would let the entire world burn and fall to ashes. That could happen. There was also the fact the organization dangling Idalya in front of the angry king had stolen her remains from under his nose out of his kingdom.

Alistair was not on speaking terms with the Grey Wardens after he announced that Idalya’s body would not be heading to the Warden tomb in Weisshaupt. If they had a problem with his decision they could take it up with the entire Ferelden army, he screamed at the Warden-Commander of Orlais. She was instead housed in the royal crypt where a beautiful statue of her likeness was carved and placed with her remains next to the plot where he would lay for his eternal slumber after slipping away to the Fade.

When reports filtered in on the Inquisition’s progress in the Hinterlands, Leliana knew it was safe enough to call a war table meeting to answer Cullen’s questions. The next afternoon Leliana followed close behind by Enchanter Fiona, entered the war room to find it occupied with advisers, the Inquisitor’s companions, and Templar and army captains who all arrived early for prime seating. The Spymaster swept through the doors, wearing a sculpted mask of control, as she made her way to the head of the table. Dropping a pile of parchment on the table, she made a simple gesture and Fiona came forward, stepping around Sera who decided the best seat was the middle of the aisle Varric and Iron Bull formed.

“Thank you for coming on such short notice,” Leliana began, “I know this meeting is long overdue, but Fiona and I wanted to be certain on diagnoses from the healers before we briefed
“Diagnosis? Is she ill?” Cullen’s voice reached across the room, concern clear in its tone. Leliana did not meet his gaze but instead gestured once again to Fiona who stepped forward to address the tense crowd leaning forward in their seats, expecting answers to the largest question existing in Skyhold.

“Of a sort, Commander,” Fiona responded, her frail-sounding voice somehow projecting across her audience. “Lady Idalya is suffering from a severe form of memory loss. Her memories are fractured and recalling them has very painful side effects as some of you have experienced in your interactions with her.” She folded her hands against her abdomen. “I know you have many questions for the Hero, but right now our healers have suggested against any talk of her experiences. Triggering the wrong memory at the wrong time could have devastating consequences as her mind tries to piece her memories back together. Letting her memories unfold on her own time appears to be the safest way we can help her.”

As Fiona finished, the room remained quiet until erupting in chatter. Leliana rolled her eyes and cleared her throat. The room quieted down again, except for Sera who was drunk and babbling something about zombies and abominations over Varric’s shoulder until the dwarf shoved a hand over her moving mouth silencing the archer who glared at him in annoyance.

Leliana stepped forward to the table and squared her shoulders. “Speaking of Idalya’s safety, I’m sure it’s not lost on most of you that her existence puts her in great danger. If Corypheus or the Venatori knew she lived, she would be the target of relentless attacks. Idalya is the only thing standing between Corypheus and his immortality for us in the Inquisition, and it is our job,” she met Cullen’s eyes, “to keep her safe as we would any other member. For the Inquisition to succeed and destroy Corypheus, we must have Idalya with us.”

The Spymaster gazed out the rest of crowd, measuring the gazes from within the room. “I trust you will be careful with the information stated here. Anyone could be a threat to the Hero, even within our walls.”

She paused and watched the expressions of understanding click on their faces one by one. What she was saying was dangerous, but she was relying on the loyalty Idalya gained from these people and prayed it was more than Evelyn demanded from them. “Thank you for your time today, I know we’re all busy with preparations, but I consider you all to be important parts of what we’re trying to accomplish.”

Varric rose from his seat to exit with Iron Bull behind him, a passed-out Sera laid over his massive shoulder. Cullen issued orders to the Templar captains, Rylen and Barris, and his army Lieutenants standing beside him before approaching Leliana and Fiona. The Enchanter gave a brief nod before slipping through the bustle of the moving guards, still uncomfortable around that many Templar after her years serving in a circle. Cullen waited for the room to empty before clearing his throat and turning to Leliana.

“Memory loss? That’s all that’s going on?” Cullen searched her face with narrowed hazel eyes that sought information she refused to give. “Why all the secrecy?”

“Because certain pieces of her past could make her a valuable weapon, Cullen, I know you care for Evelyn, but you need to open your eyes. If she knew about Idalya and Alistair’s relationship, we would already be at war with Ferelden.” She leaned forward, so they were looking eye to eye. “Idalya saved your life once when you didn’t deserve it, I was there. I tried to tell her the merciful thing to do was send you to the Maker and move on. She wouldn't listen. The life of one man was of equal importance to her as all of Thedas. That’s who she is. Remember that detail before you
volunteer information that puts bulls-eye on the back of her head from your beloved.” Leliana spat the final words and walked past a stunned Cullen.

She needed out of this office. She was not much of a drinker, but there was a bottle of vintage Ferelden brandy hidden in the bottom of her desk calling her

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The stacks of paperwork and lines of messengers were endless. It seemed the minute any headway was made into finishing stacks, another pile would appear as though the parchments multiplied every time her eyes strayed. Leliana was drowning in row after row of paper, head gasping to stay above the surface, as information on Corypheus and the Red Templar came in from all corners of Thedas.

After signing the last missive in a pile, the rogue dropped her quill in midair watching it strike the ink-stained wooden desk. Reaching above her head, she interlaced her long fingers and arched them, sighing as her knuckles popped one after another.

Her focus was damaged.

Fiona was to have a final status meeting with Idalya before she left with the Inquisitor for the Winter Palace. Leliana argued every point with Evelyn over the safety of bringing Idalya. Evelyn ignored her protests claiming Fiona deemed the Hero fit for combat, and as an asset to the Inquisition she would do her duty. The temptation to play with her new toy was too inviting for Evelyn. Her advisers warned her that once the Venatori knew Idalya lived she would live under constant threat of attack until the decisive battle with Corypheus.

Even knowing Fiona’s dislike for direct confrontation, she expected the mage would approach her after the meeting, but the day grew long, the sun setting over the ridge of mountains lighting the horizon on fire and Fiona had not approached her nor returned to her work.

Collecting the remaining stack of parchment, Leliana tucked them under a weary arm and proceeded down the stone flight of stairs towards the desk where Fiona worked on her research for Skyhold’s growing library of magical volumes. She was unsurprised to find the desk empty, the candle long since burnt down to the wick, hardened lines of wax reaching out across the corner of the desk.

Fiona’s pile of spell books remained in the organized pile she left them in before heading to her assessment of the Warden. As she examined the research table, far off footsteps approached until a messenger acknowledged the Spymaster with a nod. He handed off a significant pile of parchment full of annotated notes in Cullen’s blocky script as she sighed.

“Enchanter Fiona?” She inquired.

“In the garden, Nightingale.” He responded in the flat tones of his Starkhaven accent as she dismissed him.

Leliana added Cullen’s pile of parchment to the previous one still under her arm, the stacks of paper crunching together as she tightened her elbow over them. Light steps took her to the stairway, in the nearby reading nook, Dorian was curled up asleep in his reading chair wearing his garish leather ensemble with more buckles than fabric. A heavy volume on Trevinter magisters laid open against his chest which rose and fell with his deep slumbered breaths.

Heading down to the main hall she relaxed, the overwhelming mobs of nobles that filled the grand
hall as visitors vacated when darkness descended over Skyhold. Varric was writing at his desk, an open bottle of wine keeping him company as his narrative unfolded, his brow furrowed while his quill scratched out his next hit. Allowing him privacy she passed, her boots making only the slightest clicks on the worn stone floors. Entering the garden, she found it free of the occupants and the servants that made their way between wings of Skyhold.

A soft green light emanated from the wooden gazebo. Leliana drew closer to find Fiona seated at the edge of the Inquisition’s garden. Sky-blue robes spilled around her on the ground, soft green tendrils of light drifted off her fingers into the soil. As the sprouts of elfroot would break the ground, her index finger would run along the edge of the plant, its leaves taking on an ethereal glow as they stretched higher and higher. When the plant reached full size, Fiona sighed and hung her head, her hand dropping into her lap in exhaustion. Leliana settled onto the carved wooden bench observing her. Fiona made no motion to speak after a pregnant pause.

“How is she? I had expected you to check in at least after the meeting.”

“Idalya? She’s great. Amazing…,” Fiona scoffed. “Accurate to say, stronger today than the day she died.”

“What is it?” Worry spread through the Spymaster’s gut, a wave of nausea settling in over news of her dearest friend.

Fiona shook her head, regretful while looking out over the garden. “I am so tired, Nightingale.”

“Of what?” Concern flooded Leliana watching Fiona like this. The two women were not friends. For the Inquisition to succeed, the two would have to carry out their duties.

“Of this, of everything. Have we done the right thing, Nightingale? She was just a girl. A girl with the weight of the entire world placed on her shoulders and she never bowed or broke and now we’re doing it to her again. She is but a child and shows more strength and grace than I’ve ever possessed.”

Leliana chuckled despite herself. “Yes, that would be Idalya. She has that effect on people.” She peered up at the constellations forming in the night sky. “I don’t know if we were right, but I know the two of us are old enough now to know the world isn’t made in black and white decisions. Life is hard and brutal, and wars are fought in the gray areas between. Right and wrong no longer mean the same thing.”

“That is true.” Fiona turned to face her. “Within my life I’ve been a mage who lost the only life they knew, a grey warden conscripted to be something more, an enchanter who was brought back to the circle to remain until death, then the leader of a rebellion who had the chance to free my people only to become enslaved to Trevinter. After living all these things, I find myself now a traitor to the few things I thought I held sacred. I’m ready for this to end.” Her eyes were pointed down, shoulders quivering in the cool mountain breeze as her fingers worried the fabric along the hem of her periwinkle robes.

Leliana stood and moved closer to the frail-looking mage. Placing a hand on her shoulder, she squeezed. “The pieces are in place, Fiona. We must follow through on the path we have set them on. You will find the end you seek soon enough; the Maker will see us through. Excuse me, I have to go to the Chantry.”

Fiona’s nod in response was numb, as Leliana made her way to the small Chantry attached to the garden with its white marble statue of Andraste. As she closed the heavy wooden door behind her, her legs gave, and she stumbled the final few steps, falling to her hands and knees at Andraste’s
feet. Gasps escaped out of her lungs, her nails digging into the rough stone floor as tears flowed out of her eyes. The dam broke; she could not hold back the tears as they flowed over her cheeks, dripping to the floor. Shoving a dirty fist to her mouth, a scream ripped its way out of her throat and ended in more gasping breaths as she laid down to place her head against the cool stone of the statue.

Over time, she calmed her breaths, but she remained laying there staring up into Andraste’s eyes in her filthy hooded cloak. The words of Transfigurations worked their way out of her soul, up her throat, and out onto her lips:

“Those who bear false witness  
And work to deceive others, know this:  
There is but one Truth.  
All things are known to our Maker  
And He shall judge their lies.

All things in this world are finite.  
What one man gains, another has lost.  
Those who steal from their brothers and sisters  
Do harm to their livelihood and to their peace of mind.  
Our Maker sees this with a heavy heart.”

The blessing candles blinked in the drafty room. Words she had spoken to Fiona came back into her head. She was right: right and wrong no longer meant the same as they had when she was an idealistic girl following Idalya across Ferelden.

The Maker may never forgive Fiona and her for their actions, but there was still time to make it up to her friend. Pushing away Idalya only worked in some fantasy where watching her friend die a second time didn’t hurt the same way it did before. As Leliana knelt and wept next to her body atop Fort Drakon, she would have given everything for just one more moment with her dearest friend.

Leliana received the most extraordinary gift from the Maker: a second chance. She would no longer run from the fear of pain. After everything she had done to bring back her dearest friend, the last thing she would do is leave her alone in the darkness when she could once again fight by her side for the fate of Thedas.
The Chapter Where Barris Trains

Chapter Summary

Idalya needs to prepare to fight the Red Templars, but can Knight-Captain Barris stay objective when it concerns her?

Arriving early for the scheduled training session arranged with the Hero, Knight-Captain Delrin Barris expected both combatants there and preparing in their respective corners.

When approached for training by the Hero, Barris contemplated her proposal before locating Captain Rylen, who was (no surprise) at the Herald’s Rest. It wasn’t uncommon to partake the elf and the Templar sparring for a rowdy crowd of soldiers after consuming a few ales. He hoped Rylen would be more comfortable stepping into the training ring than himself.

Rylen looked up at him with a frown while tipping back his tankard. With the last of ale swallowed down, Rylen slammed down his cup onto the wooden table and shook his head at Barris.

“Sorry friend, can’t help you with this one. First off, I like the girl too much to beat the shit out of her. Second, I think my men are laughing at me because she shows me up too much in there as it is.” He ran his worn hands over his jaw tattoos. “Why don’t you climb in there with her? Maker knows how long it’s been since you been close to a woman that beautiful. Though knowing how serious you are about your work, I’m guessing there’s a chance you’ve never been close to a woman of half her worth.”

Barris’ shifted in his plate armor, uncomfortable with the current topic. “It’s complicated,” he grumbled, avoiding Rylen’s stare.

Rising from his bench, he clasped Barris by the shoulder, squaring his to his friend as he addressed him with a grin. “It always is. If there’s hope for Cullen, there’s hope for you, Brother.” Rylen chuckled as he walked away. “Just talk to her, I’ve seen the looks she throws you across the courtyard. You might be as serious as a heart attack, but you’re real easy on the eyes.” He called out to him.

Barris huffed and peered around, to see who was witness to his embarrassment. Not wanting to stay in the overbearing tavern, he left for the Templar wing where a younger recruit, Lysette, volunteered eagerly to show her skills.

With everything arranged for training the next day, Barris laid awake in his bunk trying to keep his mind clear. He rolled back and forth, listening to the sounds of sleeping Templar, but his mind kept venturing back to Lake Calenhad a decade ago.

Barris was the second born son of a Ferelden noble family and in being the “spare” son, he followed his own path, unlike his brother who spent his days being groomed to be the heir. On warm summer days, he would walk down to the edge of the Lake and stare across at the mighty circle tower rising out of its center. As a child, he played out fantasies in his mind of fighting demons with his sword and shield. As he gained years, he took on more roles within the family estate. Barris was a natural with animals and would spend hours working in the family stable with his father’s prize mabari. Though he found plenty of find time to sneak away and daydream.
On one such day, he spotted her.

He had ventured closer to the ferry docks than typical for his routine, watching the crowds drifting in and out of the Spoiled Princess tavern. He was fourteen then. All legs his frame hadn’t grown into yet.

From the imperial highway, he heard a group of voices traveling towards him. Barris found them to be a confusing group. They contained a mabari, a massive Qunari, a chantry sister, a petite warrior, a broad-shouldered warrior, and a thin woman with jet black hair and yellow hawk-like eyes missing most of her clothing.

The dark-haired woman was arguing with the excited mabari who was barking and jumping around her as the large warrior laughed at the scene.

“I’ve told you, I have nothing for you to eat dog. Go away!” The mabari flattened its ears and whined as the woman stormed past him ahead of the rest of the company.

The large warrior knelt, scratching him on the head until his tail wagged again. “Don’t listen to her Barkspawn, she’s just jealous of how handsome you are. Yes, she is, yes, she is! I bet she’s so jealous, she’ll have treats for you. Go! Go get her!” The mabari resumed its jumping and barking its approval and ran after the raven-haired woman reaching the docks. The warrior stood frozen in his spot until an angry cry echoed up from the docks along with a bright flash of light. He pumped a victorious fist in the air before he ran off towards the altercation.

As the rest of the group headed past Barris observing them, the smaller warrior slowed down, removing their helmet. Her removal unveiled the most beautiful creature Barris had ever seen in his fourteen years of life. Long silver hair poured over her shoulders as she pulled the leather tie from her sweaty hair. Her skin was a dark shade of tan complimenting her violet eyes.

The world slowed down and narrowed so all he observed was her. She turned to the auburn-haired chantry sister standing next to her.

“They’re children. They’re behaving like children, Leliana. I’d punish them by forcing them to work together if it wouldn’t turn out to be more of a punishment for the rest of us.” For such a young face, her voice belied a strength and confidence beyond her years.

The sister laughed, a high pitch harmony like the ringing of a bell, “You should threaten to put him in charge that would calm him down if he thought he’d have to decide where we’re going next.” The friends grinned at each other.

“If he doesn’t watch it, I’ll put him in charge of the whole country then we’ll see how funny he thinks he is.” The elf joked with a mischievous glint in her eye.

Shaking her head, the sister motioned forward. “Come, Dal, let’s go. Begging a circle for help wasn't on my wish list. Let’s get this over with.” The women locked arms and followed their group. “You know, I have to say for as obnoxious as he can be to your traveling companions, Alistair is pretty to look at, don’t you think?”

The women kept walking until they were out of Barris’ sight. He spent most of the day waiting near the docks for the woman and her traveling companions to return. As the day grew long, he made his way back to the estate for dinner with his family. That night she featured in all his dreams. Now as he battled imaginary demons, her face blushed with gratitude as she thanked him for saving her.
The messenger arrived early the next morning to inform the Barrises that the Circle had fallen to abominations. The Rite of Annulment was requested, but not needed.

Barris didn’t understand what the last part meant, but all he thought of was the silver-haired girl, only a few years older than him, stuck in the tower while abominations attacked.

He ran down to the docks, waiting all day until the ferry returned. His stomach sunk to the floor as he waited for the boat to come close enough for its occupants to be visible. As the sun shifted overhead, the glint of white off her silver hair reflected and he exhaled, his breath jagged and stressed. She lived.

The ferry came upon the shore. Their excitement gone, the group withdrew out of the boat without a word. The elf and the warrior, now helmless with a ragged mop of rusted hair, were the last ones remaining. Standing up, he reached down to wrap his arm under hers and he helped her stand with concern in his eyes. Her face grimaced from a pain deep in her side as he assisted her onto the docks.

None of her companions spoke a word as they made their way back to the highway. Barris stood with the crowds forming outside the tavern to observe the unusual group who prevented the tower from falling. As she drifted by, the elf’s eyes locked with his and he gasped finding her eyes weren’t just lavender, but a swirl of gray and purple. The underside of her right eye was bruising, streaks of blood dried on her face, armor, and clumped through the strands of her hair.

After that day, Barris traced the warden through her journeys during the Blight. He sat silently through the celebrations in town for the slain Archdemon that while Ferelden might now be free, it lost something precious. The next morning, he informed his father he would join the Templar. One month later he left his family behind to gain another.

Now a decade had passed. He saw his brothers and sisters lost and corrupted by red lyrium. At his weakest moment, the Maker granted him a gift: she had returned. A ghost sent to remind him of why he wanted to protect those weaker than him. He kept the secret of her identity when she was introduced to the Inquisition until the Commander pulled him into his office to explain who she was and why it was important to let her train with the best they offered.

If the Commander was surprised Delrin met the Hero during the Blight, he didn’t show it. Barris knew Kinloch was a very difficult time for Cullen multiplied by his withdrawal symptoms so Barris did the kindest thing he could think of--he pretended he didn't recollect Cullen served at Kinloch and the two served next to each other with no problems.

He was nervous to train with the Hero, but it was hard to discredit her dedication. She trained warriors and rogues alike with her mesmerizing speed and was open to any feedback the Inquisition trainers had for her. She pushed herself harder than any soldier on the field and the others respected and followed her example every day. So Barris hadn’t expected just the Hero early and preparing to spar, but also Lysettte.

The two women stood facing each other as they observed the other across the ring. The Templar lifted her sword above her head, stretching out the length of her neck and back. With a graceful sweep, her mahogany strands of hair flowing in the breeze, she brought the sword down blade first in the dirt, dropping to one knee, kneeling behind the flaming blade of the Chantry emblazoned on the blade. Her lips moved with fervor: “Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter. Blessed are the peacekeepers, the champions of the just. Blessed are the righteous, the lights in the shadow. In their blood the Maker's will is written.”

The Hero creased her eyebrows watching Lysettte then looked to Barris and shrugged toward the
praying Templar, “Uh yeah… what she said.”

He couldn’t help the grin that appeared for her. She smiled back holding his gaze for too long and as she turned away to move to the center of the ring, he noticed the tips of her ears shaded the brightest flush of pink. A heat rushed through his limbs as he stared at the visual mark of her response to him.

Remembering his place and why they were here, he walked towards the ring to speak to them.

“We’ll start with basic sparring with Lysette following regulation Templar movements. Warm up. Feel out your partner.” He found Rylen’s voice in his head about to say something vile before he squelched the sound. “When you’re comfortable, Lysette will use pure force on you and you will fight to stay alive. It will be ugly, but this is the reality of what you’ll face when you leave these walls.” Both women nodded while taking their stance in the center of the ring. Barris tapped his sword, bang, against the wooden fence and the fight began.

Two training swords clanged together as the Templar and warrior swung towards each other, the sound echoing through the training grounds. Barris circled outside the sparring ring as he observed the technique of the two combatants. Calling out a footwork critique for Lysette, he was pleased with the competency of both women.

The Elven warrior Dal, as she asked the other soldiers to call her, was an impressive swordswoman. Her movements were quick as she maneuvered around her opponent. Far stronger than her smaller rounded frame gave away. Lysette, one of the strongest Templar in Skyhold, even as a recruit, found herself outmatched in direct combat by the sarcastic and wise-cracking elf who had an unnerving ability to destroy her opponents with ease.

When he asked her why she came to him for help instead of another Templar, she stated Barris was there and watched the Red Templar lose themselves to corruption. The Inquisition viewed them as nothing but monsters, but Barris still remembered when they were men and watched their descent into madness. He knew how the men fought then observed the influence of red lyrium and how it changed them. Dal was committed to remembering these men were used by those they trusted the most, a position, unlike the Inquisitor who told her army she would cut down every single red Templar abomination until the rivers of Ferelden and Orlais ran crimson with their blood.

Trying to keep his gaze objective as the women sparred, his eyes kept wandering to Dal. Her long silver hair tied into a high ponytail which stressed her long face and the points of her elongated ears. Barris watched beads of sweat form across her forehead and run down the curve of her cheeks, across the slope of her neck, and under the collar of her cream-colored sleeveless tunic. Her fitted shirt and tight leather breeches as she crouched in a defensive position, left nothing to the fidgeting Templar’s imagination. The collar of his own armor tightened as the minutes passed and though the day was setting in the icy mountains, his skin bathed in fire as he watched the elf move.

Lysette attempted to charge Dal, but she dodged the attack, coming up behind the off-balance Templar with a lopsided smirk on her face. As Lysette struggled to maintain her balance in her heavy armor on one side of the ring, Dal turned and met Barris’ emerald for eyes with her gray-purple ones. A shock ran through his body making him warmer as she looked through him and her smile faltered as she turned back to the Templar who had righted herself. Grunting with a scowl on her face, Barris saw Lysette was losing her composure against the elf. Tapping his sword against the edge of the ring, he changed up their strategy.

“Good work. Next round: Lysette, I want you to come in close. Disarm Dal. Dal, try to take Lysette off balance and remove yourself from close combat. You’re fast, but you need to know how to defend against pure strength. When battling anything infected with red lyrium, you must be careful
to mind their armor. Shards of the lyrium piercing through the metal slicing into unprotected skin can infect you. This aspect makes battle for warriors and close-quarter rogues dangerous.” He tapped his sword again against the wooden planks to resume combat.

Lysette was quick to take a step to Dal’s right, bashing her pommel into the Warden’s hands. Using her elbows, she freed the sword held loose in her competitor’s injured hands. The sword clanged as it landed in the dirt, and in one step Lysette kicked it away while her free hand clasped Dal by the throat.

Dal’s long, thin fingers tried to find purchase in metal edges of Lysette’s armor, but Lysette squeezed harder, lifting the elf off the ground. Dal’s eyes widened, but she continued to struggle. Giving up on grabbing the Templar’s armor, Dal wrapped her arms around Lysette’s strangling arm. Rearing back as far as the angle would allow, she pushed her momentum forward, kicking forward into Lysette’s midsection with her remaining strength.

Lysette gave out a choked cry and dropped Dal as her hands flew to her abdomen. Dal landed on her back in the dirt, her limbs twisted at strange angles. She held her hand over her throat in a protective action. Coughing, she rolled onto her knees to get to her feet. Lysette’s arm shot out and grabbed her foot, pulling her off balance as she crashed face first into the dirt.

An armored boot struck Dal in the ribs as she crawled away. Dirt entering her mouth from the sharp intake of breath as she gasped in pain. The Templar grabbed her by the wrist and threw her onto her back. With split-second timing, Dal spit the mouthful of dirt into Lysette’s eyes and the Templar roared hobbling backward, her fingers desperate to scrape the debris from her eyes.

Dal moved to her stomach to distance herself from her opponent. The two women were determined to follow through though both would spend the rest of the night in the healer’s tent. Lysette cleaned the dirt out of her eyes, picking her dusty sword up and stalked the crawling elf to the edge of the training ring. The metal of her armor clinked with every heavy step as she neared the warrior, she showed caution.

A heavy boot came down on Dal’s ankle. The Warden muffled her scream of pain into her arm, but Lysette’s boot met her ribs again in the same spot and Barris knew she was in trouble. His stomach clenched as he watched her become desperate to get away.

Rolling her onto her back, Lysette stood over Dal’s chest and dropped to her knees, trapping the tiny elf beneath her as she straddled her chest. The Templar brought a heavy glove towards Dal’s head, but she moved it out of the way just in time. Lysette grimaced in pain as her fist collided with the ground, armor crunching with the impact. Barris watched Lysette in her frustration to end the match, reach back and grab her sword, pommel pointed down she reached both hands in the air. He held his breath as he waited if Dal would dodge the serious blow. As Lysette’s hands brought down the sword, Barris felt the crackle of magic in the air.

In the blink of an eye, a bright light flashed in the ring with Lysette thrown halfway across it, landing with a heavy a *thud*. Before Barris moved, Lysette’s training took over, the ring bursting into bright light as the smite hit Dal straight in the chest. Her scream was tight and over in a second as her body heaped over in the ring.
The Chapter Where Barris Saves the Helpless Warden

Chapter Summary

Idalya is injured in training, but the Templar are reluctant to let Barris help her.

Barris jumped the wooden barrier, reaching Dal in three paces. Fresh streams of blood flowed from her nose, mouth, and ears while purple bruises of gloved imprints formed around her neck. With two fingers pressed against her neck, he sighed in relief sensing a weak pulse beneath. Hearing a sword unsheathed behind him, Barris turned to find a bloodied Lysette standing, sword outstretched, with two other Templar also directing their swords toward him and Dal.

“Stand down! What are you doing?” Barris commanded, but they remained unmoved.

“Knight-Captain, she’s an apostate, ser. An unharrowed mage, she not allowed to roam through Skyhold!” Lysette grimaced out. She pointed to the side of her blackened armor, small tendrils of smoke curling off the scorched metal. “She struck me with lightning, ser. You witnessed it. She attacked a Templar, she must await the Inquisitor's judgment.”

Barris stood up to his full height, unsheathing his sword as he pointed it at the three Templar. “You will not touch her, and she is going nowhere other than to a healer. STAND DOWN. THAT IS AN ORDER!” His voice echoed off the courtyard as people turned to discover the source of the commotion happening in the training yard. The two Orlesian Templar beside Lysette stepped forward with their swords still outstretched.

Barris' voice was low and threatening, “No one will put their hands on her. Her name is Idalya Mahariel, the Hero of Ferelden, vanquisher of the Archdemon, savior of the Blight,” The faces on all three Templar fell as they stared at the still limp body of the elf that bled out in the surrounding dirt. “I order you to stand down.”

Something moved behind the Templar, but he didn’t focus on it. In a concise movement, the three Templar were struck in the back of their heads and they collapsed to the ground, their bodies limp. Barris’ eyes met Blackwall’s as the Warden moved forward to check on Idalya.

“Better get the girl to a healer. I’ll take care of your buddies here until they come to. I’m certain their Commander will have choice words for them after all this. Go quick! Make sure the warden is fine.” Blackwall urged.

Barris scooped Idalya off the ground into his arms and moved as quick as his legs allowed towards the main hall of Skyhold. For such an intimidating woman, Barris found himself confused at how small she was in his arms. She’d curled up like a child as he cleared the steps and aimed for the doorway to the rotunda. Exiting into the hallway, he came into Solas’ work area. The mage painting on his massive murals.

Turning at the commotion, he saw Idalya in Barris’ arms and jumped down from his scaffolding mumbling the word no, repeatedly. The mage swiped his pile of books off the desk and motioned for Barris to place her down on the table, to analyze the extent of her injuries.

“What happened? How could this happen…” Solas’ hands glowed a vibrant green as he pressed
them against her abdomen and chest sensing her injuries.

“She was smited, ser.”

His eyes narrowed as he stared down the Templar. “Smited? She’s not a mage.” Solas projected his discomfort as he examined her body.

Sure that they were alone, Barris leaned forward towards Solas and spoke under his breath, “She was sparring with a Templar as practice for Red Templar... she attacked the Templar with lightning and the Templar smited her in defense.”

Solas’ face was a war of emotions as he processed the Templar’s words. With a sigh, he placed his hands on Idalya’s chest and Barris sensed the rising of his magic as the green swirls penetrated through her tunic into her body. Her breaths became shallower, quickening as her body arched to his magic. A whimper escaped her perfect pink lips and Barris stepped forward in concern but halted as Solas shot him a sideways glare from where he worked.

Her body slid back down to the desk as the mage’s magic wore down. In a more relaxed position than before, she looked asleep other than the streams of dried blood streaking her face, the marks on her neck already lessening from Solas’ outpouring of healing.

Stepping away from the desk Solas stumbled, before receiving help to a chair to recover. Barris’ eyes drifted back to the sleeping elf on the desk. Now that she was safe it was indecent to be standing over her. If he found her beautiful awake, it was nothing compared to her beauty as she relaxed, the weight of the world lifted off her shoulders.

He chided himself for thinking thoughts like that about the Hero. Barris swore to protect the weakest of those who needed help and this girl was the epitome of those who needed his protection. As beautiful and vibrant as Dal might be, she needed his help. She needed everyone’s help if she was to succeed.

A fast-moving pair of footsteps caught his attention, his hand gripping the pommel of his sword as the door from the main hall busted open into the rotunda and Leliana came running through it to Idalya’s side. She dropped to one knee and placed her forehead against the Hero’s.

Barris stood straighter and stepped back from the desk unsure how to handle the spilling emotion from the Spymaster. Squaring his shoulders, he directed his line of sight towards the enormous paintings now covering the walls of the rotunda and tried to block out the soft whispers the Spymaster spoke into the Hero’s ear as she smoothed her silver hair. The minutes lasted for hours until Leliana stood and was once more the Nightingale.

“Solas, please… dear Maker, please tell me…”

“She will be fine,” Solas interrupted from his chair, “I don’t know what happened, but I know you and Fiona are dabbling in magic you don't understand!” His voice escalated in volume as he stared her down.

Leliana’s eyes darted to Barris standing away from the commotion.

“What is he doing here?” She asked, suspicious of his role. “Did he do this?” Her hand motioned towards Idalya.

The elf rolled his eyes. “No, he’s the one that saved her, and I assume he’s here because he’s worried she’ll attack someone else, Spymaster.”
Leliana huffed out a breath of air as she removed a handkerchief from her pocket and cleared the blood from her friend’s face.

“That’s ridiculous. She wouldn’t harm any-"

“She summoned lightning on a Templar!” Solas’ fist pounded the arm of the chair as he stood to face the Spymaster. “A warrior with no discernible mana summoned lightning then was injured to the point of death by a smite. Whatever you have done has bent the rules of magic to their breaking point. If you keep me in the dark, I can’t help you and I can’t help her! I drained all of my mana to heal the internal damage she sustained… damage she shouldn’t be able to!”

As the two argued, the crackle of Solas’ magic filled the room as his anger grew towards the Spymaster. His purpose for bringing Dal here wasn’t to suppress the magic of the elf, but if he needed to protect one of the Inquisition’s advisers, he would do it with no hesitation. Taking a step forward, he reached out his non-sword arm towards the mage, pulling the lyrium in his system to the front. At the first pull of lyrium, Solas turned towards him and hung his head down, releasing a groan. The magic in the room dissipated as the mage ran his hands over his face and swore in Elven as Barris lowered his arm.

“First the Hero is smited outside, then I’m almost silenced in my home. The more things change, the more they stay the same.” He turned to Leliana. “You can both leave now, Spymaster, I need you to send couriers to bring a healer’s cot to the room, so I can make her more comfortable. She’ll have plenty more hours to rest and I need to continue my work. I'll have a messenger fetch you when she has awoken.”

Leliana shook her head and stormed out up the stairway heading to her ravens. Leaving the mage and Templar alone with the Hero.

“And I need you to head to Commander Cullen and inform him about what has happened. I sense there will be damage control he must complete with your Templar before the night is through.”

Barris bowed and made his way to the exit to the Commander’s tower when the elf spoke once more.

“Oh, and Ser Barris?” Barris turned to face him. The mage held his hands linked behind his back as he made his way toward the Templar with deliberate footsteps. When he was face to face with Barris, he stopped to analyze him.

“Thank you for protecting the Hero. Without your quick response, she would have perished in the custody of the Templar when they apprehended her.” Barris nodded in acknowledgment as Solas continued, “Evelyn might have chosen to work with the Templar and bring you into the Inquisition as equals, but if you ever threaten me again in my home, not even your Maker can protect you when I get my hands on you.”

Barris’ entire body tightened at the mage’s words. *This was no idle threat.*

“Understood.” His voice rasped out as he refused to drop his eyes from the mage’s.

“Would you leave that part out of your discussion with the Commander? He’s jumpier around mages than you are, and I’d hate for him to single out mages as being dangerous because I take the Templar doing their jobs personally.” Solas regarded him for a moment with an eyebrow uplifted. “You keep my secret,” he motioned towards Idalya’s sleeping form, “and I’ll keep yours.”

Barris rolled his eyes and continued out to the Commanders tower with heavy footsteps as he heard
Solas’ quiet chuckles echo through the silent rotunda as the wooden door closed behind him.
The Chapter Where Solas Finds the Unexpected

Chapter Summary

Solas follows into the Fade to check on Idalya, but what he finds will change his life forever.

Hours ticked by after the Knight-Captain left the dim candlelit rotunda, but Solas remained motionless at his desk. His long fingers interlaced under his chin as his eyes glanced over the piles of texts on his desk now the least of his current concerns.

Idalya's limp form dozed on the cot Leliana’s messengers delivered minutes after the Spymaster stormed from the room. Solas lifted the incapacitated woman and brought her onto the cot afterward, careful to not hurt her lingering injuries. Her sepiya skin drained of its glow now held a sickening pallor. Deep bruises under her eyes and running the length of her neck. Streaks of dried blood remained on her tunic and through strands of her long silver hair. Traces of violence and grime speckling the surface.

Daylight grew dim through the gap of the heavy wooden doors. The hours of the day ending as the night took over its reign. The stirrings of visitors and servants throughout the tower quieted as people left the dining hall for the Herald’s Rest to close out their day.

Looking up into the balconies, a silhouette stood at the edge of the railing unmoving as they watched him at work. Solas resorted his haphazard piles of paperwork and texts, pretending not to notice Dorian above. The wafting judgment from the Trevinter mage drifted towards him though he had no interest in being on the receiving end of the mage’s venom-filled glare.

Solas’ eyes never moved from his desk and a slight grin appeared on his features when Dorian’s footsteps echoed across the stone floors as he exited the rotunda, joining Evelyn in their ritual overindulgence of wine.

No other sounds lingered in the tower as Solas turned to the sleeping elf. She tossed and turned in her cot, soft whimpers escaping her lips.

Rising to his feet, he walked to her cot, checking for any signs of infection. He sighed in relief to find her clammy, but without fever. She would heal, but the consequences of the day remained unseen. His bare feet moved without sound against the stones as he paced back to his chair. Standing over the desk, he shook his head, arms crossed over his chest as he headed to his sleeping alcove and stepped inside.

Laying down on the minimalist bedding, he pulled a thin woven blanket over his legs as he settled in. Willing his body to relax, he closed his eyes, preparing to enter the Fade. The muscles in his body twitched as sleep overcame them. He focused on Idalya’s face and features, the feel of her spirit, as he drew himself into the part of the Fade she occupied.

The familiar heavy weight of the Fade melted over him as he slipped deeper into the dream world. As Skyhold’s ancient stones over the eons became clearer, Solas moved towards something in the Fade much further away. Images and long-lost dreams blurring around him as he flew around countless memories laid into the surrounding land until it stopped.
His balance was impaired, his vision muddy as he opened his eyes. They adjusted to an image of a camp ahead bathed in night. Abstract parts of the memory were missing. Similar to how dreams resembled when the Fade projected to those who traveled its paths, but much stranger spots in the camp were missing than Solas had experienced.

Objects ripped from the fabric of the Fade itself or covered in light so blinding, he turned his eyes away. Careful not to interact with these missing pieces of time, he walked further into the camp on delicate footing. Unlike his other travels while Fade walking, this memory remained frozen in time.

A large bonfire seated at the center of the camp was the focal point, its flames unmoving, the world paused.

A young Leliana, in thin armor and bow at her side, laid next to the fire. Her head in the lap of a towheaded elf running his hands through her hair, an expression of adoration covering his face as he looked into her eyes. Moving closer he saw how the last decade had worn down the Inquisition’s Spymaster, her eyes so bright and holding no circles underneath.

Without knowing Leliana, you would miss how weighed down from the daily decisions in her job she was. To see her happy and at her most relaxed? Solas turned away uncomfortable with his intrusive spying through memories. Seeing someone who no longer existed. It bothered Solas to see her cold and calculating eyes turned warm and thoughtful, knowing the girl with the kind face had many hard years to face in front of her.

On a further side of a camp, a large Qunari, the current Arishok, sat unmoving in the center cleaning a large broadsword in his lap. Nearby, an older woman with white hair in a tight bun, soft blue mage robes spread around her on the ground, held a massive tome open in hers.

Solas remembered Wynne. He’d observed her in a memory of Cole’s he’d walked through with the spirit. She was a mother figure to the group, looking out for their wellbeing. Using her experience of overcoming adversity in the Circles to help these children survive fighting a Blight alone.

Solas stepped over a Fade hole in the ground as he crossed the camp, finding what he had been searching for.

Idalya rested on the ground, knees to her chest, arms wrapped around her legs. In front of her, a version of herself leaned back in a bundled cloud of light. The light stung at Solas’ eyes, but Idalya remained steadfast as she stared at herself in this memory locked in time.

Solas contemplated leaving.

All of this was wrong.

The holes in the Fade, Idalya separate from a memory watching it as an outsider. Only the most powerful of mages contained this level of power to manipulate the Fade, yet here she was. This moment was too intense; he should not have come here. Preparing to leave, she spoke to him.

“You followed me here.” Her voice was deep, rougher than normal, her throat aching from crying and the damage she taken from strangling in the training ring hours earlier.

There was no accusation in her voice. just more one thing to surprise him in dealings with the Warden. Over his life, he met many that would live forever through mythology and legends. All of them mere fractions of the people in those stories, but Idalya was the exception. Her legend and the surrounding stories didn’t do her justice.
Leading was in her blood, her presence demanding respect. Within days of joining Skyhold, she was respected more by the soldiers than their own Inquisitor. Every morning she was the first warrior out training and every evening the last one on the field. Cleaning up and preparing for the next day to the horror of the servants who begged her to stop lest the Commander think they were shirking their duties.

Solas contemplated if Idalya existed in the time of ancient elves, their fate might not have been doomed. Idalya could have prevented the Exalted March and saved the elves from themselves and those who sought to bring fear and ignorance into the hearts of humans concerning them. It was ironic she had little care for the elves and saw herself as only a person existing in Thedas rather than someone representing elves as a race.

Stepping around pieces of the Fade falling apart, Solas walked to her side. “I followed you here, but I find myself speechless at what I've found.”

Idalya stayed stationery staring at the image of herself.

Lowering himself to the ground, he sat cross-legged next to her as he observed the scene. Within this memory Idalya grinned, tiny lines formed around her eyes, her cheeks glowing with a rosy tint, white strands of her hair frozen in the air flowing in the breeze.

The shape of light behind her mesmerized Solas. He knew of nothing like it in the Fade before. When people experienced memory loss, their visions still existed in the Fade, they were just unable to access them.

This was something else.

Idalya’s memories existed broken and disjointed, her mind disassembled like a quilt, patch by patch. Tears ran down the lengths of her tanned cheeks, pooling onto her arms as she peered over them to watch herself.

“You see it don’t you?”

He looked back to the frozen image in front of him and regarded it, his brows creased.

“I was happy, Solas. What if I can never find what I lost?” Her voice wavered as her fingers clutched into her skin. “Something is missing. I’m… missing?” With that last word, great sobs shook her core as she placed her head down on her arms, letting the tears fall.

Part of him wanted to reach over and comfort her, but he understood when the grief experienced by a person was greater than the comfort one person could give them. He waited out her cries until her breathing returned to a steady rise and fall of her chest.

“Is this what your memories are like?” He asked, and she shook her head in response, her eyes still glazed with her tears.

“No, I see memories through my eyes. Not like this.” Her hands wrung together. “I wasn’t expecting this. This *hurt*. I’ve lost something and now I've confirmed it. It's no longer a lingering question I'm too afraid to ask.”

Watching the armor of the honorable warrior crumble away, leaving behind the trembling girl was too much for Solas to watch. How often had he sat amongst memories of times gone past yearning to be part of something so much larger than himself? He recognized her pain, acknowledged it, and internalized it so much more than he could ever tell her.
“The only people who can access the Fade in this fashion are demons, spirits, and mages.” He watched her face for any change in expression. She winced as he said demon but seemed unsurprised when he mentioned mage.

Idalya hesitated. “Is she… all right?”

Solas nodded. “The Templar?” She was concerned for a Templar who would have slain her without a second thought hours ago. “She’ll be fine. You remember, don’t you?” Idalya nodded as her body shook. “I assume she’s confused and even more so after she woke up from being incapacitated by Blackwall.”

She frowned as she absorbed his words.

“Don’t think poorly of him, you owe Blackwall and the Templar Captain your life. The Templars wanted to throw you into a Skyhold cell until the Inquisitor sentenced you as a hidden apostate. They would have let you die in that cell… well, again.” He gave her a brief smile as she snorted at his inappropriate humor.

She turned back to face the frozen grin in front of her. “Have you seen anything like this before?” Idalya motioned towards the blinding light. “Does this happen when people forget memories? How does that happen? It feels so familiar, yet it’s nothing. There’s nothing there.”

“No, I’ve never seen anything like this before,” he lied.

This girl was already broken and the last thing he’d let her hear was parts of her memories had been ripped from Fade. This wasn’t an alteration of her memories, but an attempt to rip them out of space and time itself.

“Am I… am I a mage?” She looked down towards the ground, her shaking boots digging paths into the dirt.

“Yes, you are not,” Solas answered with confidence. He waited until she turned to gaze at him, with red crying rings around her purple and gray swirled eyes. “You have no discernible mana. The Templar had the advantage, you sensed great danger, and something protected you. In a situation like that, many circle mages would become abominations, but you defended yourself. I do not understand how. That and how you were smited.” That caught her attention.

“Smited? How in Thedas was I smited?” Her eyes stared at him in disbelief as he considered how to answer her question.

“If you haven’t figured out by now, I’m not here just rifling around in your memories… or what’s left of them. You were injured when hit by a smite. Warriors should not be hurt by such an attack, the same way a warrior shouldn’t shoot lightning from their hands. It seems we have many mysteries today.”

She motioned towards the bundle of light again, “What do you think would happen if I touched this dream? Or whatever this is.” Solas considered her question as his own curiosity took over.

“I don’t know, but I am intrigued to test it out.”

She nodded and rose to her feet and approached her smiling twin and its glowing companion. As she reached out of her hand to graze her fingers over the edge, Solas interrupted her.

“I don’t know what will happen. Hold on to my hand to keep us from being separated. Fade walking is not a skill you have developed. You could be trapped because I lost my connection to
Idalya reached behind her, sliding her long fingers into Solas’ palm as her other hand stretched forward hesitantly towards the pulsing glow. Her fingertips buzzed as they drew closer and as her fingers made contact a blinding light overtook their eyes as she was pulled to some other place.

The room was composed of nothing but bright light from floor to ceiling. The buzzing in Idalya’s fingertips now worked its way up and down the length of her entire body.

“Fuck!” she screeched, her voice echoing in the strange room. “I am so sick of this shit! I didn’t want this! No one would ask for this.” Her voice broke on the final words. “I don’t know why I thought it would be different with you here.”

Solas squeezed his hand around hers in reassurance he recognized as inadequate. She shook her head and pulled her hand away and wrapped them both around her chest.

“I don’t know what I am or who I’m supposed to be. I have almost no memories, I’ve fallen into a time I don’t belong. Maker, I’m not even a warden anymore...” Solas stepped in front of her.

“What did you say?” His eyes scanned her face in panic.

She looked at the ceiling, holding back tears, as she refused to make eye contact.

“After a warden undergoes their joining, they are forever linked to the darkspawn. I no longer have that connection.” She closed her eyes, squeezing tears out through her thick lashes.

Solas’ mind had gone blank. All of this for nothing. So much pain this girl had endured, and she might not be what they needed.

“How are you sure the connection is severed?”

Idalya looked him straight in the eyes. “Blackwall.”

“Has Blackwall said something to you?”

“Not yet, but I can no longer sense him. I should be able to sense every Grey Warden and darkspawn within a range of Skyhold and I sense nothing from him. I’m too scared to approach him and ask if he can sense me still. What if he goes to Leliana or the Inquisitor?”

Solas shook his head. “Warden’s protect their own. Blackwall has already shown that today, your secret is safe. We should investigate before the Inquisitor is aware.”

He was concerned for the wellbeing of the Hero. If the Inquisitor discovered she had no value, there's no telling what Evelyn would have planned for her. Experiment? Sell her off to the highest bidder? Anything that gained her more power over others made it worth it to Evelyn. Solas snooped through enough of Evelyn’s memories to know she was not to be underestimated.

The deadliest predators were the ones that looked the least threatening, letting you drop your defenses before stabbing you in the back.

“You would help me?” At that moment she looked so young.

She exuded strength, but this was pure vulnerability and she was trusting it to him. He'd disappointed many people in his life, she would not be one of them.

“You can trust me. I will warn you that sometimes the past is lost from history for a reason, what you find may hurt more than the absence of the memories themselves.”
She smiled and nodded in acknowledgment.

“Are you ready to leave Idalya?”

Her eyes scanned the empty room. “Yes.”

He leaned close to her. “Then wake up.”

Her eyes widened in shock and she faded out of sight exiting the Fade. Solas sighed and pressed his fingers to his temples. This was far more complicated than he imagined. Some spell or magic destroyed the essence of who this girl had been, leaving behind broken pieces for her to put back together. It was cruel torture. Idalya didn’t deserve this.

Solas came into the Fade to make sure she could complete what the Inquisition needed from her. He left wanting to help her. He understood the dedication Leliana and Cullen vowed to the elf, he also understood Evelyn’s deep-seated hatred and mistrust for her. Something deep in that girl’s soul demanded respect and Solas would help her find what she needed even if it destroyed her because she asked for it and not ordered it like the Inquisitor.

Upon preparing to exit the Fade to meet Idalya in his rotunda, something caught his eye. In the corner of the room something, out of place, rested on the floor. Walking over and kneeling, Solas reached out and picked up the object.

A single long-stemmed red rose.

Perfect on all sides, left alone somewhere in what used to be a memory, he theorized. Unsure of the significance of a single flower, Solas placed it back on the ground before willing his soul back into his body.
The Chapter Where Idalya is Terrible With Company

Chapter Summary

After being smited, Idalya is stuck on bed rest. At least she has visitors to help her pass the time.

Six days passed since Idalya was the unwilling recipient of a smite in the training ring. Awaking from her Fadewalk, Solas was waiting, his eyes patient, even if sarcasm flowed from his lips. He used a steady hand holding on to her shoulder to help her sit up while he summoned the healers to assist her back to her room. Her head spun, but the healers forced her to make the walk across the fortress.

Upon arrival, they set about removing her bloodstained clothing and forced her into a metal basin of hot water where they bathed the remnants of blood from her hair. Though she sustained no lasting visible injuries, Idalya found herself to be much weaker than expected. By the end of bathing, she gasped for breath, holding onto the edge of the tub until her knuckles were white in contrast to her tanned skin as the healers’ words became a jumble of overwhelming sound around her.

She sighed in sheer relief when Solas enter the room unannounced. He instructed the servants to remove her from the bath and prepare her for rest. Reentering the room when they finished, he thanked the healers and handmaids and told them he had important Inquisition business with the Warden and would notify them when needed.

Idalya slumped back into her bed in exhaustion and he left her to get rest in peace. Visitors were allowed, but she was advised to stay on the strictest rest since she was leaving for the Winter Palace with the Inquisitor in less than two weeks’ time. Solas warned her that Evelyn had no patience for those who could not pull their own weight.

She assumed no one would have time with preparations for the Inquisition’s voyage, but visitors dropped by during her week of solitude.

Cullen came by with an old weathered chess set and two chatted about their memories of growing up in Ferelden and their mutual love of mabari as they played through a game she lost to the strategist.

Cassandra dropped in with some of her favorite novels for Idalya that turned out to be smutty love stories which Idalya hid under her bed and only took out to read with flaming pink cheeks and a roving hand when alone.

Dagna, whom she helped out of the Deep Roads so long ago, now worked with the Inquisition, came by multiple times to ask for samples of her for testing while Idalya turned her down while internally cringing in horror.

Even Blackwall made time from training Idalya’s soldiers to visit and check on his fellow Grey Warden. Idalya avoided the subject of her not sensing the taint in him and was grateful he avoided the subject. They shared stories of traveling across Ferelden and different anecdotes about their time in the Wardens.
For giving the first impression of a man of few words, Blackwall became more comfortable as he told stories of the sights he’d seen and the places he someday wanted to show Josie. Idalya was shocked when Leliana told her about the Warden and the Inquisition’s Ambassador. Listening to Blackwall speak of her with such warmth and care made it seem unbelievable that she ever thought they would be a mismatched pair even if she knew someday they would be separated by the taint that ran through their veins.

She thanked him for saving her without question in the training ring, but Blackwall was adamant the thanks should go to Knight-Captain Barris. The man standing defiantly in front of a row of Templar swords when Blackwall overheard the commotion. Blackwall recounted how he dragged off the incapacitated Templar and dropped them onto the floor into a very confused Commander’s office as he was in the middle of a lieutenant meeting.

Idalya laughed until tears peaked at the corners of her lavender eyes, holding her ribs in pain at Blackwall’s description of Cullen’s reaction to the disturbance. Blackwall might appear stuffy and cold to others, but as a brother in arms, she was glad to have him fighting by her side.

When time wasn’t pulling her in a million directions, Leliana would come and brush out Idalya’s long silver hair, re-oil it and braid into the current trending hairstyles in Orlais. The Spymaster claimed it was practice for the Inquisitor’s hair for the peace talks, but Idalya knew better. She smiled to herself as she listened to Leliana’s melodic voice drift over her explaining the newest trends in Orlesian shoes.

When Leliana wasn’t there rambling about fashion, Varric would come by and read selections from his works and his fresh finished chapters, much to the envy of the Seeker. Through the darkest hours of the night, Varric would keep her company reading and asking her honest opinion on stories since she hadn’t been alive to read his novels.

The squabbles of the carrier pigeons traveling in and out of the Spymaster’s rookery overhead awoke Idalya from her sleep. Her lavender eyes opened and squinted shut as the rays of sunlight bore into her skull. She groaned throwing an arm over her eyes and rolling to her side.

Asleep in the chair next to her bed was Varric, his head tilted to the side, an open copy of Tales of the Champion in his lap from where he had fallen asleep once again reading to her.

There was the softest rapping on her door and Solas entered his bare feet silent on the stone. He paused and watched the dwarf sleep in amusement before making his way to her side.

“How are you doing, Asha’lan?” He made his way to the empty armchair next to her bed opposite of Varric.

Her expression soured, and she rolled her eyes. “I don’t speak Elven.”

“I know.” He stated. “But I do, deal with it.”

The Warden arched an eyebrow at the mage but didn’t argue with the matter-of-fact tone of his voice.

“I’m very weak. This will improve, won’t it?” Her fingers picked at the sheets of the bed as her hidden level of concern showed through the cracks in her exterior.

“To be honest, it has already. The bedrest was a safety precaution while I waited to see what info made it to the Inquisitor. It appears your loyalty outranks hers since no one, not even the Commander, mentioned what happened in the training grounds.” Solas leaned back in the chair,
crossing his legs with a smug look on his face Idalya assumed was his joy over having any advantage over Evelyn.

Varric stirred across the room, grumbling in displeasure as his eyes adjusted to the rays of light from the bright morning at Skyhold.

“Morning sleepy head.” Idalya giggled as the dwarf straightened himself in the chair and wiped the stream of drool off his face on the back of a tanned muscular arm.

“Shit Kitty, why did you let me oversleep so long? I’m long overdue for my first ale of the day.” Varric raised his arms of his head stretching as a deep yawn worked its way out of his body.

Solas shot an eyebrow up as he took them in. “Kitty?” He asked incredulously.

“Ah, yes.” Idalya began, “After many weeks of trying every nickname on the face of Thedas, Master Tetheras has decided my nickname is Kitty since the Inquisition is hoping I have nine lives.” She shrugged, her shoulders dropping back against the headboard. “Nice sentiment, but I’m starting to think two lives are one too many…”

Standing to his feet, Varric looking at Idalya, his expression softening. “Hey Kitty, two sounds just about right. One life to live the way you see fit and another to fix the mistakes you made in the last one.” She nodded and turned to him with a genuine smile on her face.

“Thank you for keeping me company Varric, even if you snore like a Hinterland bear.”

“Don’t tell Cassandra that!” Solas scoffed. “She has enough prejudices against bears at it is.”

Varric rolled his eyes and made an exaggerated bow as he left her room.

Idalya and the mage sat comfortably in the silence until he spoke. “Why don’t you understand any Elven? Your mother was Dalish.”

“Was is the key word there. Her clan struggled for years with resources, so they picked a clan representative to trade good and wares within cities they passed. In one such city, she met my father. He was a city elf, an assistant to a blacksmith. It was love at first sight.” She looked out the window to place thousands of miles away.

“He would give up everything to be with her. She returned to the first of her clan and asked for permission to bring him in. Even though he was a city elf, his skills with weapons and metals would be invaluable for the Dalish. The clan disagreed. They said she’d never see him again and if he came looking for her, he would be shot on sight.”

“My mother was stubborn. She thanked the elders then in the dark of night, packed her belongings and hiked back to the blacksmith’s cottage and found my father sleeping in the barn. She helped with small jobs in the city until they saved enough to move to Denerim. The Alienage isn’t a wonderful place, but they made a life together there. They had four children while my father worked odd jobs for blacksmiths and cobbler’s. He died in riots with the Denerim Guard when I was five.”

“I’m sorry Asha’lan, I should have realized this would not be an uplifting tale for you to share, forgive me.”

Idalya turned and found nothing but compassion filling his eyes.

“I’m not sure how many of us here today have a happy backstory, Solas.” She noted. “My mother
blamed her clan for his death. She knew he would have strengthened the clan for the better. They were stuck in the past and refused to see reason. After my father died, she never mentioned her upbringing again. She taught my siblings and I to never forget that how we treat others defines you and to not get too caught up in titles or to hold on too tight to your past, so you suffocate your future."

“She sounds like an intelligent woman.” Solas nodded in appreciation.

“She was. I think you two would have gotten along well.” As difficult as it was to comb through more recent memories, her memories of her family were untarnished and almost enough to fill in the empty voids in her mind. Losing her families’ memories would have been more than she could handle.

As Idalya sifted through her thoughts, Solas carried on prattling away on planning for the Winter Palace and what their roles would be when they infiltrated the Elven staff for the night to be the eyes and ears of the Inquisition. She noticed the sound of a particular set of metal boots making their way across the stone walkway outside the windows of her room.

In the near week of being stuck in the room, she amused herself by listening to the sounds of walkers outside her windows, identifying them and creating stories based on what she perceived as they walked by. One set of steps became intriguing to her, a set of heavy metal boots that came by in the morning and as the sun would set in the sky. Their fast steps would slow to an agonizing pace outside her door before picking back up their speed to continue down the walkway like nothing happened. She thought it was fellow soldiers checking in with the guard stationed outside her room, but with her sensitive ears, she would have heard any conversation.

Here were the boots again.

In her deep thoughts, she missed that Solas had stopped talking and was analyzing her with a raised eyebrow. Hearing the same steps, she did, he rolled his eyes, jumped up from his chair, and made his way over to the door. Without pause, the elf threw open the door of her room to unveil a very awkward Knight-Captain Barris, who stopped and stared at Solas in horror before the elf hit his limit on teenage bullshit.

“Ah, Ser Barris, I believe the Lady is awake for visitors if you’re interested.” Barris was silent as he looked back and forth between the two elves and Idalya struggled with all the self-control she owned to not burst out laughing.

Barris cleared his throat, “Yes… I, uhh… I would like that if the Lady is available.” Solas stepped past him out the door while shaking his head.

“Thank you for coming to visit, Solas.” Idalya thanked him with a cheeky grin.

“You’re welcome, Asha’lan. Remember, you are resting. Try not to overexert yourself.” He gave a crooked grin to the elf who now blushed all the way to the tips of her ears.

Maker, take me.

Barris was staring at his feet, his own blush showing through his dark complexion as Solas left them alone with a chuckle that carried down the stone walkway. Her heart raced as her initial excitement faded and she found herself frightened at speaking alone with the Templar. She imagined spending time alone with the handsome Templar before, but talking wasn’t a part of those festivities.
“Please come inside, Ser Barris. I’m sorry I have nothing for hosting, I could order us some tea if that pleases you.” She hoped her voice sounded less shaky than it felt in her chest.

Barris snapped out of his silence and moved forward after closing the wooden door behind him. “Thank you, my Lady, but I cannot stay. I wanted to see how you were feeling.” He took the seat closest to her, his armor dwarfing the average-sized chair, electricity traveling up her spine at the velvet sound of his voice.

“Ser Barris, I am no Lady. I’m an elf and a warrior. I’m confident that moves me as far out of the Lady category as possible.” She laughed as she sat up straighter against the headboard, realizing she was wearing only a thin sleeping tunic underneath her piles of sheets and blankets. The thought set off a cascade of thoughts running straight to her core. She needed to change her train of thought before she said something stupid.

“I am doing well. Blackwall says I have you to thank for that fact.”

“No, my La… Dal. It was my fault you were in the fight. I cannot take credit for helping when I put you in danger.”

His sword hand tightened around the pommel of his sword as the pink in the creases of his fingers suggested as he talked over her without making eye contact finding something of importance on the ceiling.

Idalya took this moment to study him if he was unwilling to look at her. The muscles in his neck tensed, accenting the handsome slope of his jaw, her eyes traveled over his broad shoulders accented by Templar armor. Her mind was cascading down a rabbit hole as she removed each piece of armor with slow precision to see what delicious surprise lingered underneath.

“I suppose we must agree to disagree, Ser Barris. Either way, I’m thankful it was you I had watching over me. You didn’t have to turn yourself against your men after what happened.”

She looked down at her hands, calluses in her palm and lining her fingers. These were the hands of a warrior, not a lady or a woman. Not the refined hands of a Lady that a noble like Ser Barris would look twice at as more than a comrade. These were the hands belonging to a difficult mission, an impossible one if she was honest with herself.

She snapped out her self-deprecation by Barris leaning forward to look in the eyes, his deep emeralds swimming with complicated emotions.

“Yes, I have to protect you. Not only is my duty to protect those that cannot defend themselves, but I could never let anything happen to you…” His words trailed off in a whisper and Idalya’s heart seized.

Her eyes opened in surprise and found Barris shared the same look on his own as though his words had gotten away from him. She moved forward as the compulsion to touch him was screaming through her veins.

Barris’ eyes glanced off her fingers stretching out towards him before drifting back to her eyes. His scanning emeralds traveled the length of her body as he tightened his fists at his side.

This day was taking a much different turn than Idalya expected, but she was okay with that.

As she stretched forward to reach for the Templar that was so close yet so far away, the door to her room opened. An elven servant entered with a full tray of tea and pastries. Unaware of what she just interrupted, the servant hummed to herself as she brought the tray to the empty table.
“Compliments of Master Solas for the Lady and her guest.” She bowed to Idalya and Barris before exiting the room.

Idalya sat in stunned silence, her jaw slack.

*She would murder that smug bastard.*

“You fucking asshole,” she growled under her breath.

“Excuse me, my Lady?” Barris was standing against the far wall since he jumped to his feet, not looking suspicious at all when the servant entered the room. His eyes were wide with horror at her flippant words.

Idalya gasped. “Oh no, not you Barris! Solas. I was referring to Solas… *nevermind.* I’m just going to stop talking now.” She slid a hand over her mouth to keep any other words from leaking out.

Barris shifted from foot to foot as though his armor was on a bed of hot coals.

“I… uh, I must make my leave, my Lady. Thank you for accepting my visit, I am glad to see you in full health again.” He bowed stiffly from his waist, hand wrapped back around his sword.

Idalya nodded still refusing to remove the hand from over her mouth for fear of something else stupid being said in front of this man. Barris waited a hesitant moment wondering if she would speak, but upon realizing she’d committed to keeping her silence, he mumbled something to himself and exited out the door, shutting it behind him without another word.

Idalya listened as his boots paused on her doorstep and she fought her self-control to not run out the door and apologize for acting like an idiot.

After a long pause, his boots began their trek away from her door. Sighing, she threw an arm over her eyes and flopped backward on the bed.

Solas was so on her shit list even if he was her mentor.
The Chapter Where Blackwall Learns Sera's Seduction Skills

Chapter Summary

Blackwall awakens for another morning in Skyhold.

The sun broke early over the peaks of the Frostback’s its reach bathing Skyhold in golden light. Blackwall grunted a muffled sound of displeasure as its unwelcome rays fought their way through the windows. He wasn’t ready to leave the comforting warmth of fine Antivan bedding as soft and silky as the skin of the Antivan who had chosen them. Reaching out a weathered and scarred hand, he found Josie’s side of the bed long absent, his dark-skinned princess having risen for another full day of hectic planning in the final push before the Inquisition would depart for the Winter Palace.

Gripping the sheets in his hand, he pulled them to his face inhaling her sweet scents of soap and the perfume she applied to her neck every morning before dressing. A relaxed smile spread across his features as memories of the previous night awakened in his mind at her smell. Feeling his cock harden between his stomach and the mattress, he sighed face down into the feathered pillow. It would be many hours before Josie returned to his arms, much less moaning underneath him.

With a groan, he rolled to the side of the bed throwing the trunks of his legs off. His bare feet met the cold stones of the floor and he pushed back stretching his weary back, his joints popping to ease the pressure. Picking up his breeches and tunic from the floor, he shivered as his legs slid into the cool leather. He made his way to the washing basin, his knees cracking and complaining about these first steps of the day. The life of a warrior was difficult, taking its toll on Blackwall in many forms, between nightmares interrupting his sleep, nerve damage and scars over his body, to a past he spent a lifetime running from.

Looking into the ornate Orlesian mirror hanging above the basin, Blackwall stared into the eyes of Thom Rainer always staring back at him. He changed his armor, his hair grown long enough to cover his shoulders, and covered his lower jaw with a massive beard. The one thing of Rainer’s Blackwall could never hide were his eyes. Those sky-blue orbs shining out of the weary lids of the would-be warden would always give away the truth and he avoided looking at them.

Blackwall avoided mirrors so often that age crept unnoticed into his features. Years of guilt wearing him down pulled at his skin, leaving behind lines and wrinkles he associated with men much older than his 40 years. He did not understand what Josephine saw in him- a haggard and gruff man.

She was soft and exquisite, her skin’s glowing flush from his traveling fingers. What meant more to him was her heart. Diplomacy was important to her not only because of her upbringing, but because she strove to find a peaceful solution to problems. Josephine committed herself to helping others and stabilizing Thedas as Ambassador for the Inquisition.

The only way Blackwall solved a problem was with the sharp edge of a sword. Her love and compassion were more than he deserved. He was more than aware.

Months before after returning from a difficult Red Templar hunt, he’d spent the night in the Herald’s Rest self-medicating with Evelyn and Dorian. Blackwall found himself outside Josephine’s bedchambers in the middle of the night as the fortress slumbered. He was staggering
on his deadened feet using a forearm to brace himself on the door when it opened.

With nothing to hold him, he collapsed on the floor, air rushing out his body as his chest hit the
floor with a *whoomph*. Josephine, without judgment, helped him to his feet, easing him down to sit
on the edge of her garish Antivan poster bed. As she doted on him, he broke down in tears and told
her for the first time that he was in love with her. He also told her he was not the man he pretended
to be. He spent hours telling her every detail of his former life as Rainer, every detail haunting his
waking nightmares hoping the truth would push this precious creature away from him for her own
safety.

She sat in an ornate chair facing away from her windows, casting her face in shadow, as she
listened to this mess of a man break apart at the seams as a hidden life of secrets came rushing
through. No words broached her lips as she sat in silence, absorbing the information he was
speaking. After finishing his head dropped into his hands as the beginnings of sobriety made their
appearance and the consequences of what he just told the Ambassador weighed on his guilty
conscience.

He jerked with fright when her gentle hands slid along his. Opening the eyes of a traitor, he
expected to see hatred and fear emanating from hers. The look of compassion and love shining out
of her beautiful brown eyes as she knelt in front of him blew him away. She was more than most
good men deserved much less a vile one like him. She accepted his truths and loved him, sharing
the joy of her life with him regardless of the sins of his past. He offered her time apart to think, but
she was adamant she chose him because she knew inside was a good man.

He was not a good man, nor would he ever be.

After running away from himself for so long he knew the closer you kept yourself to someone, the
harder it was for them to see your flaws. If Josie stayed supportive by his side, she could never see
the monster Thom Rainer was.

As he splashed water from the basin over his face, he hoped that Cullen wouldn’t have to
experience the same pain when he stepped back one day as Josie would. Sometimes the truth can
be in front of someone’s face and they can still disregard it.

From the sounds of the birds greeting the sun’s climb through the sky, it was still early in the
morning. Throwing on his insulated pieces of armor, he exited Josie’s room avoiding detection
from the guards lining Skyhold’s halls. Blackwall needed to speak to Cullen at some point. In
months of his covert traveling to Josie’s room, not once was he spotted. Where were they
recruiting these unobservant bastards, anyway?

The only people awake were servants and the night patrol moving seamlessly across the pathways
from one destination to another.

Exiting the front door of Skyhold’s hall, he inhaled, taking in a full breath of the fresh mountain air
before his attention was caught the sound of a sword clanging in the distance. Heading down the
hall’s steps, grimacing as his muscles ached down each step, he followed the rhythmic sound of
metal meeting wood.

Cassandra’s line of training dummies came into view. Blackwall smiled to see Idalya alone
swinging her sword at a stuffed dummy. Pieces of hay sticking out in every direction.

The Warden was thin and looked fragile to the plain eye, but Blackwall knew how much strength
it took to power a two-handed sword with the ease she did. He wondered what the Warden was like
in her first life and how many secrets she carried around in her pockets, ready to spill out the way
he was.

Convinced the elf knew he wasn’t a Grey Warden, he wondered why she hadn’t sold him out. She never mentioned his deception or pushed him to speak Warden knowledge to prove his membership to the club. Blackwall was hiding in plain sight and recognized the slight hesitation in her glace every time she looked at him. The tiniest glimpse under the armor she wore to hide from others that revealed she knew more than she was saying.

Why she chose not to say anything, he was unsure, but he hoped the woman he admired found him to be of value to the Inquisition and was the reason for her continued silence. Were he a braver man he would have approached her, dropped to his knees, and begged her in secret to make him a real Grey Warden, but he was a coward who, instead, made conversations about recruiting and what they’d seen during their travels throughout Ferelden.

Not far over his shoulder, the door to the Herald’s Rest flew open and Bull ducked his massive horns to exit outside. Perched upon his shoulder a yawning Sera stretched out, a roll of bread in her hand she took too-large bites out of that filled her cheeks like a chipmunk. Bull nodded in acknowledgment and made his way towards him with large labored steps.

“Morning friends,” Blackwall greeted the strange pair, “Headed to the tavern early this morning, I see.”

The elf snorted, spilling crumbs down the front of Bull to the Qunari’s annoyance.

“Late. We’re just leaving.” Bull corrected, his voice rough from drink.

“I’m eating breakfast in bed!” the elf chimed in as she continued gnawing on the bread like a ravenous toddler.

The Warden chuckled, “I have to say I’m not sorry I wasn’t part of the gang last night. I’m too old to drink myself into a stupor anymore.”

“Yeah, you are!” Sera enthusiastically agreed, her ridiculous laugh echoing through the empty courtyard. Blackwall frowned and looked down to Bull.

“Why are you up so early, Blackwall? Talking in some of the more beautiful sights of Skyhold?” The Qunari winked as he gestured back towards where Idalya was still striking the Seeker’s dummies leaving a ring of hay floating down through the surrounding sky.

“Dal? Nah, not that attractive- too thin and too elfy for my taste,” he lied.

Bull arched a non-believing eyebrow at the warrior, but let it go.

“Even better. More for the rest of us. I see nothing wrong with every inch of the Hero.” Bull said with confidence. “I know what people need. That woman needs to release tension badly. She’s a bow strung too tight, needing to be stretched and worn in before her thread snaps”

Blackwall cleared his throat as he avoided listening to the specifics of Bull’s words.

Sera laughed, throwing her head back. “Good luck with that! Sounds like a great plan if your goal is to get run through by a Templar sword! She doesn’t even have red hair! Now Quizzie? That one’s got your filthy name written all over it, you brute.” In a single graceful movement, the elf vaulted herself off the Qunari’s shoulders and landed in the dirt, making no sound. “You go keep yourself entertained with redheads and leave the luscious Hero to me. If there’s one thing I know, it’s how to work a bow.” She gave them a cheeky grin.
Pulling her bow from her back, a single arrow was pulled from her quiver with feathers the color of fresh blood. Bringing the tip of the arrow to her mouth, she pressed a single kiss to the line of plumage. Without turning her feet towards the training area, she reached the bow to the side, pulling back the string while wiggling her eyebrows at the two warriors and released.

Blackwall’s heart caught in his throat, but in the blink of an eye, the arrow landed in the heart of the training dummy as Idalya was in mid-swing. Her reflexes kicked in and she jumped back pointing her sword at the resting arrow.

Looking in horror towards the group she hadn’t realized was there, she flipped them off then screeched, “Fuck off, Sera!” Her words echoing through the courtyard.

Sera giggled. “I think she likes me!” The elf skipped back to the Herald’s Rest to start a new day’s worth of drinking.

The two men stared ahead, unsure of what had just happened. Blackwall cleared his throat again.

“Can’t imagine why I never thought of shooting at a woman to get her interest, could have won Josie’s heart over months earlier if I tried arrows instead of flowers.”

Bull laughed and clapped Blackwall on the shoulder as the two of them followed behind the skipping elf to start the day properly.
Chapter Summary

Cullen’s preparations for the Winter Palace are complete. He thinks he’s ready until Evelyn pays him an unannounced visit. NSFW

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was so close. Weeks of frantic planning were winding down, and the Inquisition would set off for Val Royeux in the morning. Countless hours of planning between himself and Knight-Captains, Barris and Rylen, came down to a simple pile of parchment sitting atop his desk between the three exhausted men.

The papers contained the Inquisition’s plan to save Empress Celene, along with every contingency plan the men could think up. Ferelden shows up to talks? There was a plan. Corypheus and his dragon attack the Winter Palace? Plan. Dorian gets so drunk he retches during the peace talks? Plan.

Cullen’s brain was emptied from the sheer number of what-ifs the group covered in the past week but was confident in his soldier’s abilities to execute any contingency thrown their way.

The Winter Palace was a different battle for Cullen, with most orders being given out by Barris and Rylen. Cullen argued with Evelyn when she told the war council her plan to take the remaining members of the Templar Order to the peace talks. She wanted to flex the Inquisition’s power for show. As time drew to a close, the Commander found himself comforted to know two of the best Templar he’d ever worked with would run the show. They’d issue orders while Cullen was the smiling face of the Inquisition’s forces for the crowds. At least that’s what they thought.

The three men were standing around the table, long stripped from armor as darkness descended. Empty bottles of wine lined the edges of his wooden desk as Rylen keep years of compounding hangovers from catching up with him at once. As the night progressed, Cullen pulled a glass out of his desk and imbibed a glass or two over the passing hours, to placate a pounding withdrawal headache looming underneath the surface of his mind.

Barris, ever the professional, raised a judging eyebrow at the two but continued his work without a word writing out the plans since Cullen’s shaking hands prevented him from holding a quill straight, and Rylen couldn’t put down his wine and free up a hand.

Cullen had another reason for drinking he wasn’t willing to admit.

As the weeks barreled towards the peace talks, Evelyn became more withdrawn from everyone, including him. Before, she always made time between meeting nobles and running the Inquisition to visit him. Their relationship wasn’t one based on words, but Cullen found enjoyment in it. She was honest with her needs, having no trouble expressing wants Cullen struggled to phrase in his mind, much less speak out loud.

In the past few weeks, her time became not her own. On leaving each war council, Leliana or
Josephine would grab her by the arm to steer her towards her next dress fitting for the ball. Cullen held no inkling of what a noble woman’s closet resembled for an event such as this. If her constant fittings were an example, it was a world he wanted nothing to do with.

Having Evelyn snared into the Ambassador and Spymaster’s web of planning for the Game only freed up Cullen to bury himself that much deeper into the work he struggled to keep a healthy balance of when she was around.

In the last week, his head had become a stranger to the vicinity of his pillow. The few times he snuck into Evelyn’s quarters when the need to see and feel her became too great, he found her long returned to the Fade in her ornate bed. Empty bottles of wine cluttered her desk and littered about the floor where Cullen assumed she’d tossed them in her frustration at their empty status.

Her sleep was not a restful one. Beads of sweat formed on her brow. The mark sparked erratically in her hand, casting an ominous jade glow over her skin and the room. He tucked back the pieces of her auburn hair fallen out of her loose bun as she’d tossed and turned, trying to find peace in the Fade. The peace that eluded her.

He knew the pressure weighing down on her—playing the Game was what she was raised for. The Inquisition’s hope at Halamshiral would rest on the shoulders of the women of their war council. Cullen only knew how to hurt others with a swing of sword and shield, but Evelyn, Leliana, and Josephine could destroy generations of a family with a well-placed sentence. If it wasn’t for his fierce loyalty to Evelyn and their mission, he would have stayed behind in Skyhold, letting Barris and Rylen the army in his stead.

His eyes grew heavy as the trio compiled the last plans for soldiers housing and guard duties. The door to his office flung open. Its impact cracking against the stone wall, the draft extinguishing half the candles in the office. Blowing the stack of compiled paperwork to the floor.

Fingers reaching instinctively for the sword missing at his side, his eyes focused on the person making a grand entrance into his office in the middle of the night. Hidden by the cover of night, a vibrant flash of green from one hand, the outline of a bottle clutched in their other. Cullen’s hand relaxed as it gripped his side, still looking for his sword stowed with his polished armor.

Evelyn sauntered into the office, staggering on her feet and bringing the scents of wine and one of Bull’s Qunari concoctions wafting off her. As she stepped into the circle of light from the one remaining candle, Cullen’s breath caught in his chest. She wore a simple, white, sleeveless dress flared at her knees, brown leather boots at the hem. Her hair a cascading halo of red curls fell down her back hugging her bare shoulders as the draft from the open door blew the tendrils.

Cullen could feel the Templar’s awkward stances around him as they looked in confusion back and forth from one another, but Evelyn’s olive eyes locked to his and paid them no heed.

“Get out.” Her words sounded gentle, but the meaning behind them was not.

Without hesitation, Barris and Rylen crossed the room and exited. They feed without a glance back.

If Templar did one thing well, it was taking orders without question.

As he took a step towards her around the desk she mirrored the movement, taking a step back in perfect sync. Cullen paused, analyzing her expression, but the drink was keeping her true face hidden from him. He took a slow, deliberate step towards her, and she took a measured step back towards the door. They continued this game, one step after another, in unison until her features
disappeared into the dark and he heard the muffled sounds of her shoulders meeting the heavy wooden door.

He continued his laborious pace towards her. She lifted the wine bottle to her lips tilting her head back against the door, downing the rest of the bottle. As her head bobbed back in his direction, her hand flung out to the side, throwing the bottle, where it exploded against the bookcases.

“Evelyn! What in the Maker’s name is -” He never finished his sentence.

At that moment Evelyn grabbed him by the stiff collar of his tunic and flipped them around until he crashed into the door, the back of his head slamming against the wood.

His anger flared to the surface from the pain radiating through his neck and spine, but as he looked into the endless depths of her green eyes, he pushed it back down as he controlled the hands at his sides pushing into the wood of the door to maintain a level of control.

Evelyn narrowed her eyes as she observed him. Her marked hand drifted up over his abdomen, her fingers playing over the edges, causing his muscles to twitch beneath her touch. His long golden lashes fluttered shut as he listened to the pounding of his heart within his chest. Still racing with anger and being taken over by another emotion, one far darker and hungrier than the one before.

At least it was until, fast as lightning, Evelyn struck him open-handed across the face. Cullen’s eyes flew open in fury, his cheek burning from her assault. He was gasping for breath and fighting to keep control of his anger towards this ridiculous woman.

A slight smile played on her lips as her tongue flicked across the wine-stained flesh.

“You would never hurt me, would you Cullen?” Her question rang through his body like another hit.

Was that what this was? A loyalty test to prove he wasn’t like the men who hurt her in the past? The realization helped him release the anger rising in his throat, the sting on his cheek and the lack of tension leaving him deflated.

“No.” He croaked out. He couldn't swallow his throat was so dry, his head pounding with a complex maelstrom of emotions. “I would never hurt you, Evelyn.”

“Mmm.” His response pleased her as a wicked grin spread across her plump lips. Reaching up to his face, she ran her thumb over his lower lip with a pressure that was painful.

Cullen stifled a moan deep in his chest as he waited to see what her end game would be.

“You care for me Cullen, don’t you?”

He tried to hide any change in his expression, but he knew it was no use when faced with a master of the Game. This wasn’t how he imagined telling her the depth of his feelings, but there were a lot of things in this relationship that were not what he expected.

“Yes,” he stumbled over the words in her presence. He trusted Evelyn, but sometimes he could not help but sense she was balancing on the edge a bottomless pit with holding his hand.

“Tell me.” She purred, leaning her upper body closer to his so only her lips were close to touching.

Words were not his skill, but he was a desperate man, and he’d do anything at her call. He swallowed as he looked into her eyes, olive laid within a sphere of brown.
“You are the first thing I think of in the morning. The last before sleep.” She was a desire demon, summoned from the pits of his fear, dark and carnal and whispering promises bound to be broken. “Every moment I’m near you I want to touch you, pleasure you, worship you.”

“Oh, worship you say.” She arched a formed brow at him. “That sounds delightful.” She backed up, swaying her full hips until her spine was square with the ladder to his loft. “Do you like that I’m the Herald of Andraste?” she leaned her head back against the rungs of the ladder, running her hands over her collarbones and dragging them, ever so slowly, over her breasts. “Or do you imagine that I’m Andraste herself as you slam your hard cock in me? That as my cunt comes around you, I’m absolving you of your filthy sins, one by one?”

In two strides, Cullen was pressing her into the wooden ladder, his hardness jutting into the curve of her hip. He was out of his mind with desire and the simmering shame Evelyn’s words ignited in him, her depravity brushing closer to the truth than Cullen knew.

Electricity sparked through his fingertips at his desperation to touch her, soil her, mark her as his. All of it bringing him closer to his breaking point. As he leaned in to press his lips to hers, her hand flew over his mouth, stopping him with cruel efficiency. Her eyes bored into his, olive challenging amber, before motioning with her hand to the floor.

“Blessed are they who stand before the corrupt and the wicked and do not falter, Cullen. Get down on your knees and pray, sinner.” The groan he’d suppressed worked its way out of his throat as he collapsed to his knees on the stone floor, a broken man come to beg a favor at the altar of his redemption.

He bent down and pressed his lips to the top of her covered foot. Evelyn hummed in approval as Cullen worked his way up her laces. Pressing open-mouthed kisses against the leather, the smell of earth, leather, and Evelyn filling his senses.

“Maker, hear my cry: guide me through the blackest nights.” He spoke against her boots, the leather dragging deliciously against his lips. He reached the top of the border, his lips meeting the skin of her thigh, he moaned into her flesh, marking her not only with his mouth and teeth but with his words.

With his unworthy hands, he pushed the fabric of her skirt up while licking, biting, and kissing his way across her inner thigh while she panted above him. “Steel my heart against the temptations of the wicked.” His erection strained against his breeches as he uncovered her white lace small clothes. Callused fingers hooked into the flimsy cloth he pulled down her milky white legs.

Leaning forward, he pushed his nose into the auburn curls at the apex of her thighs and inhaled. “Make me to rest in the warmest places.”

Evelyn gasped, and Cullen leaned back on his heels to look into her eyes as his fingers slid over her sex to tease at her folds. “See me kneel: for I walk only where You would bid me.” Every muscle in his body tightened as her wetness slipped past his fingers to drip down her legs. His fingers glided between her smooth folds, trailing them around the edges before drawing his thumb across her clit.

Evelyn moaned as her thighs shook with his ministrations. Fingers dragged down the length of her sex, he slid two fingers inside her, fighting back a grin as her eyes rolled back into her head with a sigh. “Stand only in places You have blessed.”

Languidly inside her, his fingers worked feeling every clench. He was drunk on the power of watching this woman, martyr, leader, fall to pieces around his hand. The tiniest of mewls escaped her lips, which meant she needed more, would beg for more. Pressing his nose back into her curls,
his tongue sliding over the outside of her sex. “Sing only the words You place in my throat.”

At the end of his words, he slid his tongue between her folds and Evelyn moaned loud enough to echo off the walls of the office. Cullen lapped at her like a starved man while his fingers continued to stroke inside of her. Her climax was approaching, and he wanted to hear her scream, to throw her head back and cry his name as her walls came crashing around him.

His tongue trailed up the length of her sex, lips wrapping around her bundle of nerves and sucking as he stroked harder within her. That was all it took. Her legs shook before the tremble starting within her core overtook every muscle along her refined curves. Hitting her peak, her cries filled the empty places within the room and she pressed her thighs against the sides of his head. As she arched her back into the rungs, his mouth released her bundle to lick her sweet nectar as it spread down his fingers. “Tell me I have sung to your approval.”

Evelyn’s legs were shaking as she dropped to her knees in front of Cullen. Leaning back against the ladder, her breathing unsteady, a deep flush running across her porcelain skin.

With a moment of clarity, he took her shaking hand and pressed it against his pounding heart. “Know my heart.” He whispered. “Take from me a life of sorrow. Lift me from a world of pain. Judge me worthy, Evelyn… Touch me with fire that I be cleansed.”

An unreadable expression passed over her features. He thought for a second, she might jump to her feet and run out the door, but when her eyes met his again, her walls were secured back in place.

Crawling on her knees away from the ladder, she paused in the stream of moonlight drifting down from the ceiling hole in the loft. Her pupils blown, turning them black as night. Her voice husky as her body quivered with need. “All this is yours… Join me in heaven and sorrow no more.”

Cullen moved forward and wrapped his arms around her as her deft fingers unlaced his breeches, freeing his erection from its confines. As he shrugged his breeches off, he grimaced as his knees came down onto the stone, into the grains of glass from the shattered wine bottle.

Behind her on the floor, Evelyn reached for one of the larger shards and brought it to the front of her dress, slicing through the fabric at her neck. Her other hand grabbed the collar of the dress and tugged, the fabric splitting down the front of her chest exposing her breasts covered by matching white lace Orlesian lingerie.

Not moving her eyes from his, she slid the piece of glass between her skin and the lacey material, gasping a low moan as the glass caught along the smooth surface of her skin. As she pulled the glass forward along the lace, the pattern splintered and broke open, spilling her breasts out to meet the open air, a trickle of blood running down the valley between them. His hands moved with a determination of their own grabbing her breasts, rolling her nipples between his fingers and pinching them as her pants and pleas grew louder until she was crying for him.

Desperation winning, he closed the distance between them. His tongue drove into her hungry mouth. Ev moaned, pushing her chest upwards into his hands, grinding her sex against his bare thigh to find the friction she needed.

“Do you want me to fuck you, Evelyn?”

“Yes.”

“You want me to fuck your cunt until you can’t walk straight, don’t you?”

“Maker, yes.” She moaned as he continued to work his fingers roughly over her.
He pushed her down onto her back, her chest heaving with every breath. “You need me to defile you, don’t you? They all look at you like you’re Andraste, a god returned to save us all, but I see you, Evelyn. I fucking see you.” He pushed her thighs apart. As he crawled over her, the clouds moved in the sky above, highlighting her face where tears were falling from pale green eyes widened as they looked into his.

He turned his head away unable to meet her gaze and moved to pull away before her hands shot to his face to turn him to face her.

“Please,” she begged. His eyes searched hers before she rolled her hips, running her sex along his erection, which throbbed in response. “Please.” She asked again, her voice unsteady.

Cullen inhaled and held the breath as he pushed past her folds to situated himself inside her. Evelyn arched her head back, her auburn hair fanning around her head, tangling with shards of glass.

She was home. The place he could lie down his secrets and fears and live without their weight.

He buried his face into the side of her neck, wrapping an arm around her lower back and thrust inside her. Keeping the pace slow, he felt her quiver with every slow pull of his cock, and every tremble as pushed back inside. “Find me well within Your grace. Make me one within Your glory.” His lips moved against the sensitive skin of her neck and her moans grew louder as she approached her break point again.

“Cullen.” His name spilled from her lips then, becoming her mantra and plea as she repeated it over and over again as the tightness built up within her heat. He needed to hear her, need to feel her clench him in desperation, needed to feel her absolve him.

Wrapping a hand around her thigh, he hitched her leg towards her chest and thrust forward, moaning at how much deeper he was situated in her cunt. Evelyn’s whimper and cries grew louder, her fingers digging into the sides of his back, and Cullen thrust harder as her walls trembled.

“Let the world once more see Your favor.”

Words spilled from her lips- his name, the Maker’s, her cries of yes filling the empty spaces within his heart. Two thrusts later and Cullen followed her in his own release. His eyes shut, he cried her name and the Maker’s as stars exploded across his vision. His lungs were burning as their passion ignited the surrounding air.

Opening his eyes, he found Evelyn staring into them, an unreadable emotion screaming through.

“Get off me.” Her voice was quiet, but Cullen moved like she shouted the words from the ramparts. Rising to her feet without a sound, she pulled the sides of her dress closed before walking to the door, her arms wrapped around her chest.

“Ev…” Cullen’s words failed him.

Evelyn never turned back, opening the wooden door of the office and exiting, letting the door swing shut behind her. Cullen laid back against the rungs of the ladder. A sigh exhaled as he ran a hand over the back of his neck.

“You are the fire at the heart of the world, and comfort is only Yours to give.”
I hope everyone is enjoying the story!
Skyhold panicked as the morning arrived for the Inquisition to depart for the Winter Palace. Weeks of meticulous planning executed with efficiency in the courtyard below Idalya as she watched with curiosity. She sat on the ramparts. Her long legs dangling off the side, watching the crowds scatter in the courtyard. Soldiers struggling to drag carton after carton of supplies to the waiting carriages.

The best part of posing as a servant, Idalya discovered, was packing one small travel bag with her servant attire and light armor. Josephine forbid her to bring her swords, so she sheathed multiple daggers on her body she dared the Ambassador to go hunting for.

She chuckled watching servants carry another crate of Evelyn’s clothing and supplies for the ball. By the looks of it, Josephine and Leliana planned to bring everything in Evelyn's room to the peace talks. The Inquisition would stay less than a week, yet it required numerous fittings and every tailor and dressmaker the Inquisition could find to finish all her dresses before their departure.

Today she appreciated not being in charge.

A heavy wooden door side tower creaked open behind her. The Commander exited with Knight-Captains, Rylen and Barris, in tow. Their caravans and carriages would leave within the hour, so the three dressed casually, tunics and breeches replacing their heavy armor. For men who looked so intimidating during their jobs, the three now looked no different from anyone she would pass in the Skyhold halls during the day. Except the three were far more attractive than anyone she ever crossed paths with.

These were men she viewed as comrades in arms and brothers. Men she trusted, without question, with her life. As she watched the under-dressed warriors make their way across the battlements, blood rushed to her cheeks and other less conspicuous places.

Cullen was tall and broad. It was surprising how broad his shoulders remained after the removal of his armor. His heavy plate fit well and disguised his size. He spent the last two decades conditioning, and it showed. She much preferred the muscled and confident ex-Templar to the mental image of the bloodied and terrified boy she met in the tower.

While Kinloch happened over a decade ago for Cullen, for Idalya it was only months. Sometimes she struggled to separate the two in her head as she worked with him. Memories of his bloodshot, crazed eyes, fear filling his voice with such venom. He was not that man anymore and deserved respect for what he overcame. She vowed to no longer associate him with his weakest moment.

With his sleeves rolled up and spiraling tattoos winding the length of his arms, Rylen’s rebellious nature was on display for all to see as he laughed. In her many passes through Skyhold, she heard attractive serving boys and girls whisper in darkened corners of the tattoos underneath his clothes discovered during drunken flings in the middle of the night.

Her and Rylen sparred each week since her arrival to Skyhold and in all those rounds he never treated her with less respect than any other soldier on the field. When she stepped in the ring, it didn’t matter she was a woman, an elf, or the Hero—he always treated her like a soldier and wasn’t awed the way some recruits were. Sometimes that was not to her advantage as she spent the rest of the night tending to bruises and aching joints in the healer’s after their spars.
And then there was Barris, oh Maker, Barris. He was beautiful. It was the only word that came to mind when her eyes would catch him in her line of sight across Skyhold. He was shorter than Rylen and narrower than Cullen, but thickly muscled and limber. She watched him train with the recruits more times than she would admit and found him built for speed and strength.

What also piqued her interest was that he was also an intelligent fighter. He predicted the next moves of battle as much as countering them from his opponents. He moved shifted constantly in his civilian clothes, just as awkward as Cullen at being out of his uniform. She wondered if they slept in their armor and just took it off for polishing before replacing it to feel safe again.

She hadn’t seen Barris since he visited her during her bedrest the previous week. Everyone of importance in Skyhold was burdened down with planning duties as the time to prepare ended. Idalya was certain after her venomous slip of the tongue that any conversation they could have attempted would be a disaster. She stood by the decision to keep her hand clamped over her mouth to prevent herself from speaking.

When he didn’t approach her for the next week in the training area, she knew she destroyed any chance of getting to know the handsome Templar better. Though the two of them unable to phrase words appeared to be a theme between the two introverted warriors.

The first day she could leave her room and explore Skyhold, she found herself drawn to the training circles after she met with Cassandra and watched the movement and footwork of the soldiers. She was at home in the clang of swords and grunts of trainees in this strange fortress humming with magic. She spotted Barris from the side as he barked out orders to a group of exhausted Templars stumbling through the end of their training.

As she approached the ring to observe, he saw her from the corner of his eye. Turning to face her, she’d never forgotten the look on his face. His eyes narrowed as his lips parted, staring in confusion like his world was crumbling around him.

They stood in silence taking in one another until Josephine appeared, a whirlwind sweeping through, summoning Idalya to the War Room. When she found the two warriors still staring, the Ambassador apologized for her rudeness and introduced Knight-Captain Delrin Barris of the Templar Order and her as Dal, an experienced volunteer who joined the Inquisition.

Barris stood frozen.

Josephine frowned before clearing her throat to snap Barris from his trance. Idalya held out her hand for him to shake, a common gesture between soldiers. When he took her hand in his, turning her palm down to bow low over her tingling fingers while never breaking his gaze from her.

Her hand was on fire as his skin touched hers. She didn’t understand what his look was about, but she understood what it did to her. The fire burning on her skin moved into her stomach and down into her core, an undeniable throbbing causing her to press her thighs together as she kept her focus in front of the Ambassador and the soldiers surrounding them she was sure were staring at this point.

Who was this man? Never in her life had she felt such an instant attraction to someone… at least she thought she hadn’t.

The thought she didn’t know who she was much less who this stranger was, broke her from his spell and she stepped back, ripping her hand back with her from the confused Templar.

Josephine whisked her away after, but as she walked across the courtyard towards the War Room
with the Ambassador, Idalya couldn’t help but keep looking back over her shoulder at the Templar who remained unmoved whom she’d never spoken a word to.

After that first day, she always was hyper-aware of when Barris entered the training fields with her.

She investigated the past of the mysterious man but hadn’t needed to since Iron Bull and his chargers loved to tell stories so all she needed was to mention the Knight-Captain’s name and that the next round was on her and the Chargers were more than happy to indulge the rest.

She learned of the fall of the Templar Order at Therinfal Redoubt. How Barris stood with the Inquisition as the envy demon attempted to eliminate all the Templar uncorrupted by red lyrium. Idalya saw the level of respect Bull held for the man as he recollected the story. The Qunari understood how difficult it was to give up everything you believed in, turning against it for the greater good.

Now she knew he was a good decent man, she didn’t avoid him in her paths through Skyhold. Their conversations stayed brief and professional, even their embarrassing exchange in her room the week beforehand. Part of why she approached him for the Red Templar training was because she knew he would remain a professional. Though she avoided his eyes knowing the temptation that laid behind them.

Barris out of his Templar uniform was not helping her self-imposed control. His tunic and breeches were snugger against his body than the other two since his main skill was speed and deflection over strength. As he shifted back and forth, Idalya could see the hard muscles of his thighs contracting and releasing, his hand opening and closing so the muscles of his arms flexed and peeked out the sleeves rolled halfway up his forearm. The knowledge that he held her in those arms when he protected her was not helping keep her mind out of the metaphorical gutter as her crafty mind was stripping the handsome Templar piece by piece.

“Idalya, are you okay?”

She looked up in surprise to find Cullen standing over her, a look of concern on his face, with Rylen and Barris by his side.

Shit, how long have I been daydreaming?

“Yes… I fine. Yup, fine. Why do you ask?”

Cullen narrowed his eyes at her, small wrinkles framed the ovals. “Your face. You were staring at us like something was wrong.”

“Oh.” Idalya looked at them desperate for any inspiration or answer. “Um, you look strange.”

Dammit, Dal.

The pit in her stomach sank as she suppressed a tragic groan from passing through her lips. A burning passed over the edges of her ears and she regretted pulling her hair up into a loose ponytail, so everyone knew of her spreading blush.

There was a moment of tense silence from the three Templar before Rylen burst into laughter, holding his side in near pain as his two companions looked at him in confusion, their brows raised. He wiped a tear out of his eye as he looked at Idalya, now stabbing him with mental daggers.

“Oh sweetheart, I’m sorry.” His voice was rough, and he coughed as his laughter threatened to overtake him again. “I’m sorry, I am. I wasn’t expecting that face and adorable blush.” He cleared
his throat. “Thing for Templars? I could see that. Have you never seen a Templar out of armor, dear?” He gave her a cheeky grin. “If you haven’t, I’m sure I sure I can fill in some blanks for you if you’re interested.”

“You will not!” Cullen and Barris turned in unison to glare at Rylen.

Tears welled back up in Rylen’s eyes as his chest fought the laughter threatening to rip its way out of his body which would put him in danger of the Commander ripping his heart still beating from his chest. He pulled himself back together when saw the fury in Idalya’s violet eyes. Every minute Dal spent out with the soldiers and wandering the halls of Skyhold, she was the consummate professional. Her presence exuded strength and precision, so to see her so flustered over boys had been too much for Rylen. It made her a more relatable person than an untouchable hero which she wasn’t, but he wished others would remember that.

Idalya ears and cheeks burned as she imagined all the ways she could hurt Rylen before he defended himself. Cullen looked like he was seconds from tackling Rylen himself, but Barris… he was looking at her with such gentle eyes. No anger, no embarrassment, he looked concerned for her.

Her gaze shifted back to a red-faced, teary-eyed Rylen.

“I could slit your throat in your sleep with no one noticing,” she hissed under her breath.

“Oh, I’m aware, my dear, but you wouldn’t because like these two,” he pointed behind him at the annoyed Templars, “you’re the honorable type.” He kneeled to looking her. “You wouldn’t take a life unless you forced to unlike others around here…” as his voice trailed off, his eyes drifted unconsciously to the carriages below where was Evelyn conversed with Leliana. “I’m sorry if I offended you. It was fun to see something human out of you.” She frowned. “Well, you know what I mean. Taking down the walls you keep up won’t kill you… again.” Both laughed at the shocked expression on the Commander’s face.

Rylen stood and turned to Cullen, “I’ll head down and start the final checklists before Josie erupts in flames. Barris.” He gave a nod and wink to Barris as he headed down the flight of stairs into the main courtyard.

Cullen rubbed the back of his neck as he sighed.

“Some days, I’m not sure why I thought it was a promising idea to invite him into the Inquisition. He didn’t just show up at Haven’s front gate out of the blue looking for a job, I insisted he join.”

Idalya pointed a finger at her chin and peered towards the sky in thought. “Because he’s handy with a sword and Bull can’t keep all the servants of Skyhold satisfied by himself?”

Cullen choked, pounding a fist against his chest, Barris throwing a smile in her direction as he chuckled at his Commander’s death throes. Idalya laughed as Cullen’s face turned the brightest shade of crimson.

“You okay, Commander?” she inquired, batting her lashes at him.

He tilted one side of his mouth downward as he turned to Barris, “I will follow Rylen before I die of shock. See you two down there. We’ll be heading out in under an hour.” Cullen left shaking his head and mumbling something under his breath about having the weirdest fucking day as he made his way toward the gathered Advisors.

Idalya looked up at Barris, who was still watching her, a coy smile on his face as he relaxed back
against the battlements.

“Sorry for that,” Barris shrugged. “I swear, Templars can speak with a woman for over two sentences. We’re decent people when we haven’t been awake for a week straight planning military strategy.” As she studied his face, Idalya could see the same set dark circles under his eyes Cullen carried, his shoulders slumped.

“Plan ready to go?” She kept her voice steady and her eyes on acceptable areas instead of the constant flex of contracting muscles below his neck she would not allow herself to watch for her own safety and Barris’ if she was being honest.

“The Commander is an outstanding tactician. Every variable accounted for. Cullen and our army will succeed in eliminating the physical threat to the crown and everything else will fall to the Inquisitor. Cullen believes in her, she will not lead us astray, Dal.” He dropped his hands to his sides and took a step towards her, offering his hand. “We should prepare to leave.”

She looked at his hand before her eyes flicked up to his. Here she was peering into his gorgeous set of deep hazel-green eyes. As she held his gaze with no hesitation, his eyes opened in surprise before he reached down, sliding his hand into hers to help her off the floor while never breaking eye contact.

Her hand closed around his as he pulled her to her feet, much closer than she expected to stand. When she tilted her head back, their gazes realigned, and she focused in on his eyes.

There it was.

The tremors escalated from the back of her mind. A pounding in her skull working its way to the front. A cascade of drums rushing past her. Clenching her eyes shut, she pushed her hands against her ears mumbling “No, no… please no.”

Her vision failed, but Barris’ surrounded her as he pulled her into his arms, securing her against his strong chest as the fractions of memories washed over her.

Her memories could crest over her like waves on the shore, but this time they stabbed like the thinnest of daggers, an image here, a sound there. Nothing concrete and painful.

Brown eyes- the color of melted caramel. A laugh. “I will follow you forever, Idalya…” Short black hair, a flare of magic. “Well, well what have we here?” Swirls of color and shape soared past until the images jarred and faded.

An earthy taste was the first sense that returned. She could taste dirt in her mouth and the acid creeping up her throat caused her to gag. She sprang forward to her hands and knees retching onto the stone pathway. There were voices muffled behind her she could not heed. She couldn't breathe, her body shaking uncontrollably. She jolted in fear when a steady hand appeared on her back. The touch not of fire, but of ice- Solas.

The elf cooled the skin over her shoulders and neck. He opened his mouth to speak, but his eyes drifted to Barris and he pressed his thin lips together before turning back to her.

“It’s… okay. I trust him.” Words stuck in her throat from the violent trembling in her body, beads of sweat forming on her brow.

Solas rolled his eyes before continuing.

“How many times have you slipped into the Fade?” He whispered.
Over his shoulder, she saw Barris’ eyes grow wide before regained control of his demeanor.

“This, this has never happened before. I was awake… how could I be in the Fade?”

“Yet another mystery you have created for me, Asha’lan. I think every mage in Skyhold felt you slip in— that took a tremendous amount of power. Your clever Templar friend here learned from last time and eased you into a dampening field to prevent you from hurting anyone. It drew you safely back. Speaking of, Ser Barris,” the mage turned to the concerned Templar with no humor in his eyes, “How about you drop the field, so I can heal our friend?”

Barris met Idalya’s eyes, conflicted as he outstretched his hand. Solas shook his head in annoyance as the field flickered around them and dropped. The mage reached forward and helped Idalya lean back on her heels, placing his hands at her temples as his healing magic pressed into her.

As the pressure loosened in the base of her skull and shoulders, an illicit moan passed over her lips and her eyes popped open in horror as she saw Barris’ cheeks fill with red as he shifted to the side facing away from her.

Solas’ rolled his eyes again as he continued to send healing magic through her temples. If the elf rolled his eyes again, she theorized they would get stuck that way. As he pulled his hands away, Idalya’s body slumped forward with a sigh, her forehead resting against his shoulder.

“Barris,” Solas turned his head to look at the Templar, “get her downstairs to the carriages. I will cover and say it was a training exercise. For her safety, do not mention this to the Inquisitor. I fear for her life if the Inquisitor believes her to be a danger.” Helping Idalya to sit on her own, he stood to look Barris in the eye. “You will protect her, won’t you?”

Barris nodded and moved to her side, wrapping a muscled arm around her to lift her to her unbalanced feet. “You have my word.” He answered, his authority clear, never breaking eye contact until Solas exited down the side path of stairs to meet with the group of confused mages gathering in the main courtyard over the source of the immense magic radiating through the fortress.

Idalya stood up straight, her posture uncertain, and took a few wobbled steps with Barris’ hand guiding her from the small of her back. Her breath was unsteady, her eyes focused on what was ahead instead of the feel of his fingers pressed against her sensitive skin.

She rolled her shoulders letting her muscles relax. She inhaled, holding it with her eyes closed until she exhaled with a shudder. Her balance strengthened when she opened her eyes. She stepped out away from Barris with hesitant steps until she was sturdy enough on her feet to walk. She paused at the stairway, her back still the Templar. Without his heavy armor that echoed with each step, she gasped to find him silent at her side.

“Are you okay?” He whispered close to her pointed ear. A chill ran the length of her spine at the timbre of his voice.

His face already read he wouldn’t believe whatever bullshit answer she made up to pacify people into leaving her alone.

Her eyes flicked away from him back out over the courtyard full of scurrying servants and soldiers. “I’m not sure. One moment I'm terrified, to being surrounded by friends the next, motivated by a cause I can dedicate myself to. I fall asleep and I'm so lost, but then I wake up…” her eyes flicked over to meet his, “and for these brief moments I’ve never been more home.”
Barris’ breath faltered as she watched him. His eyes searching hers before he backed a step away.

“I understand what you mean. We… we should go before the Inquisition leaves without us.”

Idalya nodded, dropping her eyes to the ground as she followed him down the stairs moving one numb foot after other as she made her way to the courtyard.

She was unsure if her order to leave Skyhold was the worst decision the Inquisitor could make.

Chapter End Notes

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If you're enjoying this story, check out Burning in the Flames, a Cullen/Evelyn prequel fic, in the Idalya Mahariel stories link above!
The Chapter Where Iron Bull is Stuck in a Carriage

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition is traveling to the Winter Palace at break-neck speed, which leaves Bull, Cassandra, and Dorian stuck in their carriage in silence.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The parade of carriages lurched forward in the middle of the gravel-filled road leading to Halamshiral. Iron Bull sighed attempting to rotate the heft of his shoulders in the confined space. His cramped neck yearned to stretch as the Orlesian-style monstrosity Josephine referred to as transportation wasn’t designed to house the height of a Qunari much less the spread of his horns.

The constant ache in his neck began early in the journey and continued as they sped over roads an entire day without stop. Bull hated traveling like this. He was loath to admit he missed Evelyn’s eclectic mix of mounts she kept in Skyhold. The beasts groaned, moving at a sluggish pace under the weight of a Qunari rider, but at least Bull moved his entire body instead of being caged like a Saarebas.

Out the window of their varnished cage, Dorian stared while holding an empty bottle of Tevinter red in his shaking hands, his thumbs running over the smooth glass as his mind was miles away. Distant. Cold to others. Hiding something. Trusts no one. Bull assumed Dorian would travel with his regular ‘drink until they passed out’ companion on their journey to Halamshiral. The Trevinter cursed out Evelyn as a witch, in front of her soldiers, when she grabbed the Commander by the collar and ordered him to her private carriage.

The mage resigned himself at having to slum it with the rest of the companions. Over the past few hours he settled himself in to drown in the bottles of wine he slipped past the Ambassador as Cassandra and Bull watched him in silence from the other side of the carriage.

The Seeker was one of the last companions to join their ridiculous caravan as her, Cullen, and the Templars rechecked the final lists for their voyage. As the carriage door swung open, her weary face fell when she found the only vacancy to be with Bull and Dorian, sitting on opposite sides of the carriage in silence. To the warrior’s credit, she hid her distaste as she took the small opening left on Bull’s side, throwing her bag of supplies on the end of Dorian’s empty seat. She creased her brows at the mage who didn’t appear to have noticed the Seeker joined their party.

Hours later, Cassandra buried herself in a stack of books she’d brought in her bag. Cheeks blushed. Heart rate stammering. The smell of arousal. Bull smiled as Cassandra cleared her throat and adjusted her legs to press her leather-bound thighs together as she read further into the smutty novels she presumed no one knew she read. The Seeker was a woman of many facets she kept hidden, but Bull saw the true romantic lurking inside as much as the woman hid it. Breathing becoming faster. Flush over neck. Legs pressed together tighter.

“Good book?” Bull enjoyed giving the Seeker a good ribbing since he was certain she wouldn’t permit him to give her anything else he’d like to.
Cassandra stiffed at his voice, sitting straight up. *Uncomfortable. Embarrassed. Core throbbing while she pretends to respond in disgust.* “It’s fine.” She spit out at him before slamming the cover of the book shut as the carriage stuttered to a stop on the road. *Relief. Wants out- away from us.* Bull grinned as the Seeker disappeared out the carriage door before the wheels stopped their forward momentum.

“It appears we have the carriage to ourselves if you could think of some ways to waste time.” He turned to Dorian, but the mage had not heard his innuendo as he continued to stare at the canopy of forests lining both sides of the shoddy road. Bull cleared his throat and Dorian startled out of the state to face his Qunari lover. *Dark circles under eyes. Slight tremor in hands.*

He ran a hand over his weary jaw along the slight growth of a new beard, as he sighed. “I’m sorry… I lost track of time, Bull.” *Voice tired. Slurred.*

“When are you going to talk about it, Dorian?” *Flare of anger in eyes. Fist clenched.* “I don’t understand what you’re talking about. I’m great.” The mage scoffed, throwing the empty bottle onto the floor in frustration where it ricocheted across the painted wooden floor. *Lies.*

“I don’t know what you’re hiding, Dor, but you need to spit it out to someone before your secrets run too deep.” He resisted the urge to reach out and lay his hands on the mage. “Trust me, whatever your reason, it isn’t worth this kind of madness.”

Bull once stood at the edge of the abyss, looking across its nothingness until he thought no option existed but Qunari re-education. At the last moment, he changed his mind and asked for reassignment. After looking at Dorian’s dead eyes and loss of life, he understood how one found so much sickness within their soul that starting over appeared the only path. *Anger. Drunk. Needs to escape.* Dorian jumped to his feet far more graceful than a man who just consumed a cellar full of wine should be able to but stopped with his hand clasped on the handle of the door, his back facing Bull. “Just because we fuck doesn’t mean you have any authority to give me advice. What makes you think I want the opinion of a fucking Tal-Vashoth dathrasi, anyway?”

Bull’s face remained unchanged as the mage swept his way out of the carriage, a flurry of robes swirling behind him. The door of the carriage slammed hard enough the hinges creaked with the effort.

The great Qunari shook his head and followed his lead out the carriage door expecting everyone to be staring after Dorian’s scene, but found the members of the Inquisition too invested in stretching their own sore muscles to pay much heed to the Trevinter’s typical antics as of late. Bull rolled his shoulders with a groan as the muscles loosened throughout his upper body.

Dorian disappeared as the other companions filed out of their similar carriages, appreciative for the chance to get out and move from the frantic pace Evelyn had the drivers pushing the horses.

Out of the next carriage, the apostate elf came meandering out, eyes narrowed in his usual suspicion of everyone around. *On guard. Hiding. Feels trapped. Close* behind him were Knight-Captain Rylen who seemed in good spirits (*Smell of lyrium and bourbon, relaxed, but concerned*) and the hero herself, Dal. The Templar leaned close to Dal, whispering something in her ear she nodded numbly to before he slid something into the pocket of her jacket. Dal’s dark-tanned skin held a yellow tint. The girl staggered on her feet, her eyes unfocused. *Smell of bile and booze. Heart racing. Fear in her eyes.*

She had been sick as of late but didn’t strike him like the type to get motion sickness or drink
herself to excess in the morning, unlike his traveling companion. Dark circles pressed under her lavender eyes and there was a desperation showing on her face she kept hidden from those around her.

The Hero looked over her shoulder and Bull’s eye followed her line of sight to see Evelyn and Cullen emerge from the front carriage. Evelyn moved lithely, her body swaying more feline than human, as she stepped down into the chaos of the emptying carriages.

*Smell of sweat and semen, eyes twitching over the huddled masses, anger swelling to the surface.* She paused as she entered the crowd, taking in the surrounding scene instead of ignoring what wasn’t relevant to her. The Inquisitor found herself lost in her thoughts and her attempts to fuck them away on the trip to Halamshiral didn’t appear to help given the look of her very worn out and disheveled Commander. His head a bed of disturbed curls he ran his hands through as he spoke to his captains.

Evelyn made her way to Josephine (Nervous. Hesitant. Feels less strong with Blackwall by her side) and appeared to be drilling her adviser on progress as the Spymaster approached the conversation. Defensive of Josephine. Thinly veiled dislike of Evelyn. Eyes darting around the crowd until they fall on Dal and she relaxes.

Feisty redheads were Bull’s cup of tea, except the spy learned after being around these women for minutes that anyone would be insane to get involved with either of them. Sure, they were beautiful. The most dangerous predators always were.

If Evelyn could not close rifts- Bull would never have allowed the Chargers to join the Inquisition. The Inquisitor was selfish. Only looking to improve her own status as the world came crashing down around her. People presumed life as a noble was kind to the woman and she’d never faced adversity in her life until Corypheus’ hand gripped her throat as the fires burned inside Haven.

Bull saw deeper inside the soul of the redhead. There was something dark resting inside the heart of the woman they called the “Herald of Andraste”. Bull wasn’t sure what happened to the woman to cause such anger to live in her since her skills of deception were equal to those of the best spies he’d worked beside.

Sometimes making tough decisions as a leader came down to saving the entire world instead of just collecting gold for another mission. If the breach remained open, there would no world for the Chargers to work in. So, to the Inquisition they came—where they would stay until they saved the world from Corypheus and his followers.

The Inquisitor and her advisers shifted to their focus to the side and Bull groaned as an inebriated Dorian stumbled his way into their conversation. With an unmasked look of disgust, the Spymaster took her leave motioning the Ambassador to follow, while Evelyn quirked a well-shaped brow at her Trevinter cousin as she assessed his current state.

Bull’s sense of concern for his lover grew as he continued rambling to the Inquisitor. Dorian was full of secrets—he had been for some time. It was only a matter of time before those secrets spilled out. Bull couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that confessing the tales torturing the man in the late hours of the night to Evelyn would only lead to more trouble for Dorian.

Chapter End Notes
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The Chapter Where Bull Gives What's Needed- NSFW

Chapter Summary

Dorian has changed and refuses to speak of what's happened. But the Iron Bull can still provide his mage with what he needs. NSFW

Dorian changed the day Idalya arrived back in Thedas.

He awoke to his large nostrils assaulted by the stench of magic permeating the air of Skyhold, no different from the battlefields of Seheron. Dorian was absent from their bed and as Bull walked around Skyhold, he found the residual magic lingered everywhere.

Few people sensed it, he deduced. Hesitation and fear existed in those who sensed the choking clouds of magic. Solas paced in his rotunda, piles of parchment swept to the floor, elvish words slipping out between his lips. Sweat on brow. Heart racing. Indecisive.

Enchanter Fiona sat in Skyhold’s garden staring at the plots of medicinal herbs she tended during the day, her hands outstretched empty in front of her. Regret. Sorrow. Fear. Haunted by her memories.

It wasn’t until Bull located Dorian hidden in his library nook he knew something terrible happened. Dead eyes. Loss of color from face. Dirty hands and grime on leathers.

Bull’s heart pounded within his chest as he dropped to one knee, putting them face to face. Dorian, still unaware of Bull’s presence, stared out across the courtyard through the window until the Qunari slid his hands over his.

Instead of being startled, as Bull expected, the mage’s eyes moved so slow until they faced him. Exhaustion and grief painted his features, and it broke Bull to see the vibrant man so devoid and stricken. A different man than the one Bull held dozing against his chest the night before.

His lover didn’t speak, he stared at him with a pained expression as he remembered how to react. It was the lousiest of times for Bull to realize the depth of his emotions for the mage, but one can seldom plan when they fall in love.

It was only when Bull raised a scarred hand to the mage’s cheek he saw the guard come up, as the man ripped himself away, burned by his touch. Without a word Dorian rose and left the library. Bull followed behind at an undetectable distance, ashamed to use his Ben-Hassrath training against his love.

He assumed Dorian would gravitate towards Evelyn, but instead Dorian’s numb and labored steps led him to the bathhouse of Skyhold. Once inside, he stripped from his leathers one buckled strap at a time as he on the edge of the copper tub, struggling to lift his legs inside as it filled with water. Bull detected Dorian’s moving mana as he heated the bath until it blistered against his copper skin and the room filled with steam floating through the slat windows, spiraling tendrils through the frigid winter morning in the Frostbacks.

As Bull stood unmoving against the wall outside the washroom, a sound struck him like a lance
through the heart—the muffled sounds of Dorian’s cries. Sobs ripped their way out of his shaking body through the hands clasped over his mouth.

Whatever caused Dorian to suffer was something he had no intention of sharing. Bull would have no objections to secrets with someone who was sharing his bed, but this was Dorian, his mage, his love. He was suffering, and Bull felt more helpless than ever. He remained motionless until the sound of Dorian’s heart-wrenching cries died away. The Iron Bull chose the path of cowardice, leaving to take his seat in the Herald’s Rest like he hadn’t just listened to his own heart cry out in pain and confusion.

A few hours and countless ales purchased for him by the Chargers later, Dorian waltzed into the tavern with Evelyn on his arm—the two already on their way to full inebriation. The mage was outspoken and lewd speaking to the Chargers in tune with his normal behavior, but as he turned to speak to Bull it was obvious, his smile reached nowhere near his eyes. *Pain. Rage. Loss. Confusion.*

He jumped into Bull’s lap after uttering a joke to the Chargers that had the tavern cackling. Bull knew how fragile he was as he wrapped his thick arms around his mage and hoped his touch told Dorian volumes more than his words would express.

Dorian stayed glued to Bull the rest of the night as the two both drank to forget. Whether an arm touching, or Dorian’s leather buckled thigh set next to his, he stayed connected like Bull was his only remaining lifeline in the world and maybe he was.

Bull saw the streak of stubbornness and denial the mage used in place of confidence when they confronted Dorian’s father in Redcliffe. Even confronting the elder Pavus that wanted to change who Dorian is rattled Dorian less than what transpired in the early hours within Skyhold. Bull let Dorian keep up his appearances pretending he didn’t see the pain twisting his soul as the mage threw back drink after drink, pretending to be a whole person.

As the night grew dark, the soldiers filed out of the tavern leaving just a few stragglers, the Inquisitor, and her companions behind. After losing a battle of rock, paper, scissors, Sera and Varric grumbled, each taking an arm of the incoherent mumbling Inquisitor whose feet dragged across the floor more than stepped forward and assisted the woman out the door.

Dorian rose unsteady and staggered his way to the stairs heading towards Bull’s room above the Rest, somehow able to still sway his hips like the rocking of the ocean. He leaned back against the stone wall, focusing his eyes on him before reaching out a smooth hand, beckoning for Bull to follow. *Need. So much need. Need to feel. Need to not fear.*

Without a second thought, Bull was out of his chair and pressing his mage into the wall, his thick horns pushing into the crumbling stone above him. One thick hand slid behind Dorian’s head and threaded into his ebony hair, the other gripped his hip he jerked forward to meet his own. He leaned his head back into Bull’s hand as a moan worked its way up his slender arching throat.

The surge inside Bull surprised him, a flurry of emotions exploding from his need to protect Dorian, his anger at being pushed away, working their way to the surface as his fingers traveled over the bronzed skin of the infuriating creature that dared to shudder against him. The urge to consume was too great, to mark him, possess him, to show him the depth of his anger, love, and fear for him.

“Open your eyes.” Bull’s voice wavered as he fought the violent need to claim this man—*his mage.*

Dorian opened his eyes, after a deep inhale of breath, to let Bull see what was hiding inside. *So*
much aching need. Need to remember. Need to… something. Bull didn't understand the complexity of what was lying deep within his eyes the color of ash.

“Please…” Dorian whispered as he pulled himself closer to the Qunari, wrapping his arms around Bull’s neck and climbing up his muscular body so that every toned curve of his own was flush against the hulking man.

It took all of Bull’s self-control to hold back the groan that wanted to free itself as Dorian dragged a leather-covered thigh over his thickening erection. The mage displaying his strength as he pulled himself to eye level with his lover. Bull pulled back as Dorian attempted to press his wine scented lips against his own. The mage raised an eyebrow, confusion crossing his features, Bull didn’t need to be a *Ben-Hassrath* spy to know how thin the ice he and Dorian were standing on was.

“Dorian… we’re drunk,” the words were heavy on his tongue as the air reached a boiling point around them.

“That’s never stopped us before.” The mage leaned forward and whispered against the corner of his lips, the edge of his mustache tickling over Bull’s skin.

Bull had never known a want like this- the need to heal and harm rolled up so tight within himself that every brush of his fingers over Dorian’s skin was pulling him towards a cliff he hadn’t stood at the edge of for many years.

This was what losing control felt like. In his rational mind he knew something was wrong with his mage. He also couldn’t face the prospect he hadn’t protected him from whatever happened or that this might be his fault. He couldn’t let himself hurt Dorian more than he already had been- he would not. He pulled back his body from Dorian, lowering the mage to the floor. The emptiness pressing against his skin excruciating.

“Dor, we need to talk.” *Panic. Fear. Need help. Need more.*

Dorian’s hands were clutching at Bull’s belt to keep him from moving away, his eyes wide with a gauntlet of fear behind them.

“Bull,” his fractured whisper was almost too much for the Qunari to handle. “I can’t…” Pulling Bull closer he laid his cheek against the man’s full chest mumbling. “I can’t do this. Please, I need…” He turned his face into Bull’s chest as hot streaks of tears ran down the Qunari’s abdomen. ‘… only you.’ The mage repeated over and over as he shook in massive arms of his lover.

Bull closed his eyes and took deep breaths as he imagined backing away from the edge of that cliff; regaining his control and stepping away from the madness held at the bottom of that crevice. Bull needed to understand what was happening, but Dorian was the priority. The rest of the Inquisition could burn down for all Bull cared if his mage remained safe.

Dorian needed him- he trusted him, was helpless, and needed to feel something not fear. Bull could do that for him. Show him how loved he was; how precious he was even if Bull couldn’t say the words aloud.

Able to slow his breathing and heart rate, he leaned closer to Dorian and placed his lips on the edge of Dorian’s ear. “Go upstairs. Remove your clothes and wait on the bed.”

Dorian shuddered again and nodded into Bull’s chest before stepping away and heading obedient up the stairs with a newfound swagger in the sway of his hips.

Sensing eyes on him, Bull turned to the last remaining patrons and Cabot, the barkeep, staring with
jaws slacked open. With an exaggerated shrug, Bull turned and headed up the two flights of stairs remaining until reaching the broken-down room he used in Skyhold, the wooden stairs creaking with each step of his mass.

At the door he paused, eyes closed, the smell of Dorian bare in the next room overtaking his senses as every inch of his body yearned to touch the golden man laid just beyond. This wasn’t about him; this was for Dorian. He needed the ability to fall to pieces in the safety of Bull’s care without judgment or fear. These were things Bull could provide that he wanted to give his mage.

Taking a deep breath, Bull twisted the handle entering the room. Dorian filled the ceiling with twinkling mage lights illuminating the room in cool blue light, bathing his bare skin in the color of the sea. He was laying in the center of the bed unclothed as Bull requested—eyes closed, and cock hardened against his stomach in anticipation of his touch. Bull closed the door behind him, taking slow, deliberate steps to the foot of the bed as he admired the spectacular view.

“What do you want?” Bull’s tone was deep as he assessed all of Dorian’s limbs and saw no bruising or cuts to show injury.

Though they were an asset to the Inquisition, Bull thought of nothing but the Templars when he found Dorian so broken that morning—a proud Trevinter mage in their midst more than enough to incite the anger of a Templar. There was nothing to suggest a physical fight, plus Bull hoped if attacked, Dorian would have come to him, so he could decapitate the attacker joyfully with his bare hands.

Dorian scoffed and opened his grey eyes. “What do you think I want, Bull?” Embarrassed. Vulnerable. What if he doesn’t want me?

“Not tonight, Dor. I need you to tell me what you need.” Bull needed clear consent, anything less and he would sleep elsewhere. He would not cause Dorian to suffer more because the mage couldn’t share what haunted him.

Rounding the side of the bed, Bull rested on the edge next to the mage turned away from him, the bed groaning under his massive weight. He resisted the itch in his fingers to lean forward and trace the length of Dorian’s spine.

“Tell me what you need, Dorian.” His voice was quiet, authoritative.

Dorian turned to face him, and Bull reached out a weary hand he pressed against the mage’s burning cheeks. Running his callused thumb over Dorian’s lower lip, the mage tilted his head back and moaned filling the entire room with warmth.

“Festis bei umo canavarum” Bull mumbled which earned a dark chuckle from Dorian.

“I’ll be the death of you? Shouldn’t that be my line? You’re more than twice my size, you beast.” Bull smiled at the lopsided smirk Dorian gave him but waited until Dorian answered his question.

“I need… trust. I… I only trust you Bull,” and with that Bull understood. Dorian needed to hand his trust to someone and to have it given back as freely as given.

After double checking their watchword, Bull reached into a side drawer of his bedside table and pulled out thin lengths of Orlesian rope wound with silk. He tied Dorian’s wrists together, looping the rope through an inconspicuous metal hook hidden in the headboard of the bed to the casual observer. Each leg he caressed between his massaging fingers as he tied knots around the ankle before securing each foot to a separate corner of the foot of the bed spreading Dorian wide to him
with a moan.

Last, he took a long length of pure silk he draped over the Dorian’s glittering gray eyes. Running a scarred hand down the mage’s chest, he sighed as he took in the vision Dorian created.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” The confined man arched his back, shuddering under Bull’s feather-light touches, desperate to find something to move his aching cock against. But Bull’s patience would not falter until Dorian had what he needed.

Bull spent the next few hours covering every limb of his mage in kisses, nips of teeth, and gentle caresses until Dorian moaned on the bed, begging like a good boy for his release while Bull told him how spectacular every inch of him tasted. He told him how every sound he pulled from his throat gave him life, how every shudder of ecstasy drove his frantic need of him, how much his compliance pleased Bull. He was a good boy and deserved his reward.

When Bull gave his mage permission for release, Dorian’s cries echoed in the empty room, Bull pressed his teeth down into the man’s neck while feeling him erupt into the palm of his hand until Dorian went limp in form and spirit beneath him.

After soothing the bite with his tongue and soft kisses, Bull took a damp cloth from the basin and cleaned Dorian’s body as he untied one limb after another. Removing the silk strip from Dorian’s eyes, he found the mage asleep. Long dark lashes fanning against his cheek, hair tousled from grinding his head back into the pillows all night.

Bull pulled the covers over Dorian’s bare form and the sleeping mage sighed as he rolled into the warmth of the blanket. Bull sat down on the edge of the bed and groaned under his breath at his now throbbing erection refusing his denial. Unlacing his large breeches, it only took three tight-fisted pumps before he found his own release. After cleaning himself up, he relinquished the rest of his clothes and climbed into bed with the beautiful man who was snoring in his escape into the Fade.

Pulling Dorian against his chest he shook his head as he stared down at the still man. He was a goner this time. Bull might have a lot of lovers, but he never let himself move past that into more serious emotions. Dorian had broken down the walls the Qun installed in him. Trevinter mages and Qunari were sworn enemies, but here they proved enemies could be so much more.

“Kadan,” he whispered into Dorian’s ear as the mage snuggled closer to push the early morning chill away

Bull awoke alone that morning. Only the lingering smells of sweat, semen, and the cologne Dorian wore, were proof the mage had laid in his bed. Assuming Dorian needed space, he arose as normal, working through training with the Chargers and parts of Cullen’s army. After long days training and dueling then drinking through the entire night until the world hurt less, Bull would flop into bed ignoring the candlelight still illuminating Dorian’s corner of the rotunda through his window.

It took a week for the mage to approach him once again inside the Herald’s Rest. He looked exhausted, deeper circles beneath his eyes. A constant tremor in his hands now existed not unlike Cullen’s lyrium withdrawals, Bull assumed was from constant drinking from the smell of wine permeating from the mage’s skin.

They’d spent the rest of the night keeping up appearances for their friends, until they’d moved to Bull’s room and Dorian would hand over his trust like a velvet-wrapped box Bull would treat as the most precious gift he’d ever received as he commanded his mage who was so eager to please. Bull woke up alone then and every time after Dorian would come to him when his fear became too
much to bear alone.

Months passed, and they’d continued this silent duel. Any attempt to speak to Dorian about what happened turned into him berated by the angry mage. Whether due to his proximity to Evelyn or the fact he was a skilled member of the Inquisition, people let Dorian’s downward progression slide like nothing changed in the mage.

The only time Bull saw a change in Dorian around others over their weeks apart was when Idalya would be in his vicinity. Dorian’s eyes would fill with fear and some unreadable emotion to Bull before he would leave and head alone to Skyhold’s wine cellars—which Evelyn instructed be open to her cousin at all times of day.

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Bull sighed, leaning backwards against the garish carriage. Dorian remained in the middle of some tangent to Evelyn, annoyance written across her face even for those without spy training. She waved him off as she headed away toward her Commander and Dorian cursed in Trevene as he stumbled on the open ground with nothing to hold himself up.

Bull cursed himself as he headed over to help the man who was too drunk for daylight hours.

He took loud steps in the gravel as he approached Dorian, who tensed by instinct as he heard the Qunari draw closer. His giant hand pressed to the small of the staggering man’s back, the other gripping him by the shoulders.

“Hey Dor- “

“Stop…” Dorian’s voice was weak and foreign to Bull’s ears but touching the mage outside of their weekly meet-ups felt good.

“We should get you back to the carriage, I’ll get you some food and…”

“Katoh.” Bull retracted his hands, the mage’s skin burning him as he stared in shock.

“Dor, I…” he had to be misunderstanding him, he had to be.

“No Bull, katoh. I’m done with this, leave me be.” Dorian’s words answered his question clearer than he’d hoped.

It was as Bull feared. Dorian was fighting his way back to surface to breathe but chosen to let himself drown beneath the waters of his fear and guilt instead.

A light and musical laugh broke him out of his shock.

“Well isn’t this just precious?” Evelyn stood in the distance, one hand on her jutting hip, the other holding an uncorked bottle of Antivan Red. “Come Pavus, I’ve had the wine stores brought to my carriage. Let me rescue you from this mediocrity.” With a laugh she turned, her hair reminding Bull of the blood-soaked beaches of Seheron. The members of the Inquisition filed back into homes for their next long trek towards the Winter Palace.

Dorian let his chin fall against his chest before sighing, never turning back to face Bull. He staggered after Evelyn as Bull watched his kadan walk away for the final time.
The Chapter Where Idalya Drinks All the Alcohol

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition is making its way closer to the Winter Palace, but Idalya still struggles with what happened before leaving Skyhold.

The constant jostling of the carriage made Idalya’s still weak stomach ill, bile bouncing the back of her throat with every lurch of the cabin. After falling into the Fade before leaving Skyhold, she’d been awake, afraid of what happened if she entered the Fade. She was a disaster waiting to happen and should not have come with the Inquisition for whatever purpose intended for her.

For three days they traveled at breakneck speed, only pausing when the horses refused to move any further, desperate for food and water. The Inquisition left the Frostbacks behind them in record time.

On a stop to water the horses, she observed Cullen questioning Evelyn in raised whispers behind the train of carriages on what made travel at that speed necessary. Without hesitation, Evelyn threatened him with a forced demotion for questioning her decisions before huffing away, her frustration far greater than Cullen’s inquiry.

Such a spoiled princess.

Leliana’s scouts and spies guarded the path ahead to make sure the Inquisitor remained safe, but at the speed they traveled, the scouts struggled to keep ahead while the Inquisition ripped through the gravel roads bringing them to the palace.

The second day she overhead Scout Harding and Leliana in a heated exchange after Harding lost two scouts to bandits. Their inability to move undetected through the countryside compromised by rumbling coaches. The consummate professional dwarf kicked a stone into the empty woods with a growl of frustration before slipping back into the shadows to forge ahead for everyone’s safety.

As much as being stuck in the carriage grated on her nerves, getting out during stops provided a similar level of irritation. The drain on her energy from her collapse into the Fade, and refusing to sleep, was taking a toll on the warrior. Every time she exited squinting into the daylight, Varric handed her a flask noting she needed a drink. Rylen continued the mantra as they shared a carriage seat while Solas glared at her.

As the carriages pulled to a stop, Rylen held a triumphant fist in the air. “Praise the Maker,” he stood, stretching his neck. He motioned out his hand towards her, waiting. “Hand it over, Doll.” Idalya raised an eyebrow, then in defiance raised the container to her lips, draining everything left inside before handing it over to the Templar who grumbled in annoyance.

“Oh whatever,” she huffed, “find Varric and tell him to refill that since I’m still in need of that drink he claims I so need.” The Templar shook his head at Idalya before exiting the carriage as Solas glared at her.
“What?” She yelled at him, surprised at the volume of her voice.

“Am I bothering you, sitting here?” His annoyance pronounced in his tone.

“Yes… No. I don’t know.” She rubbed a weary hand against her forehead before resting her head back against the plush seat. Three days without rest was making the simplest interactions more complicated.

“How long have your memories been causing this?” He moved forward on his seat, his elbows touching his knees.

“This… This was the first time it happened.” Closing her eyes, the images of the visions soared behind her eyelids.

Eyes of the brightest yellow questioning with a strange curiosity and another pair of copper ones caused an ache deep in her chest the longer she held them in her thoughts. Solas remained silent until she continued.

“Before, I was pulled into the dream, surrounded by this overwhelming sensation of everything rushing through me.” She lifted her head and opened her eyes inspecting the elf to find only compassion within the mage’s.

“This time was different. Fractured pieces of memory. Painful, attacking, the images were fighting their way to the surface past something stronger than myself. It frightened me.”

The elf’s frown lines deepened as he listened to her confession. After a long moment of silence, Solas reached into the simple traveling bag he brought on the voyage, pulling out a dust-covered, bound volume he opened wide across his lap and combed over the text, allowing Idalya to fall to pieces in peace on the other side of the carriage.

Her limbs numb, her body choosing to fall asleep on its own, whether the warrior herself rested. She released a sigh as her eyes rolled back in her head as her body relaxed.

The carriage door opened. Sunlight filtered through and burned her eyes, aching from the stimuli while her body tensed at the intrusion on her safe place.

“There you are, Kitty.” Idalya’s muscles calmed at the sound of Varric’s gruff voice. “A bitter Templar informed me you needed this.”

More on instinct than the ability to see, Idalya caught the metal flask in midair, twice the size she and Rylen shared the past day.

“Try not to drink so much you puke on Chuckles here. As Dorian can vouch, he doesn’t enjoy it.”

Solas’ eye roll was powerful enough to crash the entire carriage. If she wasn’t inebriated beyond rational thought Idalya would have laughed her way to tears at her mentor’s expression of venom.

Varric leaned out the hinged door. “Hey Squeaky, there’s room in this carriage if you’re looking for a spot.” She cringed at the volume of the echoing dwarf as she curled up into a ball.

“Thanks, Varric,” a voice with the timbre of velvet responded, and Idalya groaned out loud when Knight-Captain Barris’ head came into view. He stepped up into the carriage, squinting as his eyes adjusted to the darkness of their suite.

He motioned to the seat next to Solas, “Is this taken?” The elf shook his head and moved his bag
out of the way before shooting Idalya a pointed glance with a raised eyebrow before returning to his book.

He used an awkward hand to rub over his eyes. Barris’ body tensed as he settled into the seat, realizing who occupied the darkened corner of the carriage. His glance moved back to the door as he contemplated sprinting away.

Never had she wished she remained dead as right now.

The Templar, still out of uniform, twitched, uncomfortable without the constant safety of his armor to protect him. He opened his mouth to speak, reassessed the decision, then reached into his bag to pull out a large handful of parchments she assumed were memos from Cullen. Meticulous notes taken into a small leather-bound notebook as he kept his eyes glued to his work.

After minutes passed in silence, Solas closed his book, reaching below his seat for his bag to tuck the volume away before heading to the door.

“Where are you going?” Idalya didn’t recognize the slurred voice exiting her body.

“I’m just going to check on something, I’m sure you’ll be safe with your Templar friend here.” The elf paused considering something as he watched Barris’ nervous body language, “While we have a Templar here, rest. Go to sleep, Asha, before I force you to sleep with magic. Do not mistake my threats as idle.”

After Solas exited the carriage, the swinging door closed, the bars of a cage snapping shut around her. She kept her eyes pointed out the window before Barris deciding to broach the subject.

“You haven’t been sleeping.” It was a statement, not a question. She resembled a corpse by this point. Dark circles taking over the plains of her faded and ashen skin.

“No.” the anger carried in her voice startled her. She swallowed, trying to push the bile back that crept up her throat. “…she hesitated, unsure how much to tell this man whose presence set her aflame. Her eyes flicked to his, and the force of his emerald ones caused her to look at the floor, her focus disrupted. “I’m afraid.” She wanted to hide the secrets terrifying her, but someone needed to know the truth.

“I can protect you.” Another statement, with no hint of questioning, came from the Templar, and Dal was becoming overwhelmed with everything within this carriage.

Her hands fumbled with the top of the flask and she sighed, contented when the pressure of the cap gave. Nostrils twitched at the burning smell of relief contained within the metal receptacle. Her hand shaking, she moved it to her lips and tilted the flask back, body relaxing as the first drops of burning liquor touched her tongue.

The liquid flowed past her dusty-rose lips, Idalya chasing a sense of peace she never found at the bottom. As she pulled her hand back, her breaths coming in shallow gasps while the liquor pushed its way through her limbs, trying to restore the life slipping away while locked within the carriage carrying her to the Orlesian throne.

Emboldened by the half flask of rotgut she just consumed, she locked eyes with the Templar.

“That’s a pattern, isn’t it?”

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She wasn’t wrong.
He tensed at her question. Every time danger reared its face near her, he was there, his shield in hand, to step in front of it. She may believe he took his role as a Templar seriously, but the truth was when she was near he never took his eyes off her.

“Or maybe the truth is I bring danger around you, and you should avoid me.”

Maker, what am I saying?

The impact of his words bounced around in the cabin until they found a home in the empty spot within his chest fueled by anxiety and fear. The elf watched him, cautious, her lavender-swirled eyes narrowed as she rolled his suggestion over inside her mind. After too long of a pause for the sweating Templar, the side of her lips upturned in a lopsided smirk as she leaned her head against the window, without taking her analyzing gaze from him.

“You’re trouble, huh? The cute ones always are.” She winked at the Templar, who grew warm even without wearing his armor.

He watched the upward movement of her hands as she pressed the flask against her pouting lips, wrapping them around the mouth of the shining silver. She tilted her head back, swallowing the vile smelling liquor. The smell of the fumes filled the cabin, the heat of her words pressing against him. Though it was nothing more than a drunk woman continuing her downward descent, it was the most erotic thing Delrin Barris had seen in his life.

Without his armor, he was helpless. Confined within this cabin staring at the woman of his daily fantasies. She was older than him in the technical sense, but Barris reminded himself she just entered her womanhood at age twenty.

A girl now sitting across the cabin from him, in tight leather breeches hugging the abundant curves of her hips and a sleeveless high-collared tunic that more than hinted at the outline of her shapely breasts. A grin that could crumble the resolve of the most pious Cleric in the Chantry.

In their normal interactions, Idalya kept her eyes focused away from him, but emboldened by drink, the swirls of violet and gray within her eyes were mesmerizing him every moment. He had to stop this now, or within minutes he’d have his trembling fingers sliding through the strands of her hair made of liquid moonlight. His lips against hers coaxing the sounds he yearned to hear from her throat.

Her eyes locked on him as if undressing him, piece by piece, and he knew from that look alone he could bury himself inside her and bury his fear and his inhibitions within her.

But he couldn’t.

She was a terrified girl dulling her fear with every flask available and could not consent to anything between herself and Barris no matter how much both might want it.

What wouldn’t he give to have an Idalya sitting across from him whose veins weren’t thundering with poison? He would crawl on his hands and knees to beg her to let an unworthy man run like hands and lips over every inch of her flesh until he was the god she screamed to for release, the Maker a forgotten relic in her past.

Clearing his throat, he looked away, his eyes trying to find an object to anchor his focus on, to keep it away from the eyes luring him closer as the moments ticked on.

“Why did you join the Inquisition?” Her question took him by surprise. The slurring of her words reinforcing his willpower to keep his itching hands away from her.
“The Inquisition gave me a purpose after my order ended. Recruited as a status symbol for Evelyn’s fledgling Inquisition,” the elf nodded while listening. “Cullen took me under his wing. He told me to never give up fighting or to compromise on what you know is wrong. I’ve been given a second chance to atone for what happened to the Templar, and it’s not one I take for granted.” He flicked his eyes up to meet her lavender ones. “I should have died with my brothers at Therinfall, but the Maker held another path for me. I intend to walk it with no regrets in my heart.”

“Don’t say that, Barris.” Shock filled him when she turned on her seat to reach forward and slide her thin callused hands over his. “Please, don’t say that. You're supposed to be here…” her voice trailed away as she looked at him, her eyes glassy with brewing emotions. “If you had died, you wouldn’t be… I… Barris, I don’t know how you…”

“Delrin.” he interrupted. She raised an eyebrow at him as she waited. “My name is Delrin.” A smile spread across her face and she nodded in understanding.

“Ida…” She started.

“Idalya Mahariel, I know.” He watched her eyes open in surprise before she regained control of her cool exterior.

“How? Did Cullen tell you?”

He scratched at the edge of his overgrown beard. “I grew up in Ferelden, on the north side of Lake Calenhad, north of Kinloch. I saw you heading to and from the Circle during the Blight.”

The color drained from her face as he finished the words. He had stepped over a line of comfort for her into a subject of uncertainty as she pulled her hands away. Her eyes wide as she processed before looking away with an expression resembling shame.

“You knew who I was the moment I walked into Skyhold.” Her voice was thick with emotion, fingers picking at the nails of her other hand, balled into a fist in her lap.

Willed forward, he slid his large hands over hers this time, separating her fingers to prevent the inadvertent harm she was causing herself. She released a haggard sigh, looking up to meet his eyes.

“My lady, I would recognize you across the Fade, from this life or the next.”

Her lower lip descended downward, leaving her mouth open as her brows rose. She stared in confusion while a fire burned beneath his skin, threatening to break loose and bathe the cabin in flames.

Idalya pressed her lips back together, swallowing before reaching into her jacket and shoving something into Barris’ hand. He investigated his palm to find her flask.

“I’m drunk.” She pronounced out loud, causing a grin to break across Barris’ face. “I’m very drunk.” Idalya corrected as she wobbled, her body swayed with the bouncing of the carriage. “I need to sleep. Will you watch over me?”

*I’m not sure I could look anywhere else if I tried.*

“I’ll keep you safe,” the words came out sounding confident. Thank the Maker for years of Templar training.

Idalya slid to the middle of the seat before falling backward and landing with a dull *thud* which caused a giggle to work its way out of his throat before he stopped it.
“Why are you with the Inquisition?” Why did she allow herself to be paraded around as a servant? She was the Hero of Ferelden. A Grey Warden. She was no servant.

“Didn’t you hear? Your Spymaster suffers from extreme separation anxiety and called up her oldest friend to fight more dragons at the first sign of danger.”

A barking laugh escaped Barris, and Idalya chuckled from her prone position.

“That’s why you joined the Inquisition, not why you’ve stayed.”

Idalya stared at the ceiling in silence, contemplating before she shrugged her shoulders. She rolled her head to face Barris, and her exhaustion reflected in her eyes and the purple circles spreading beneath them. She sighed, her lips parting on the exhale.

“I don’t know,” she shook her head. “Maybe I stayed for you…”

There was no oxygen in the cabin. There can’t be because Barris couldn’t breathe.

If his heart beat harder, the force would crack his ribs and explode through his chest. He was a trained warrior of the Chantry, trained to stand up to the most frightening of demons, and an elf destroyed his entire world with one sentence.

She stared back at the ceiling, releasing another sigh as her body relaxed. Barris’ hand flexed into a fist. Solas left behind a worn blanket on his side. He gathered it in his arms and crouched in front of her before placed the blanket over the fading girl, gaining him a hum of approval. As he turned away, her quiet voice stopped him.

“Barris?” He turned back and met her eyes, a cascading universe behind them. “Do you think I’ll remember any of this?”

A soft laugh answered her as he continued to stare into her eyes.

“I’d be surprised if you did.”

“Good.”

Before Barris raised an eyebrow in confusion, a pair of thin hands, far stronger than he expected grabbed him, dragging him forward until his lips pressed against hers. His eyes widened to the point of pain and he pulled back so there was barely contact between them for a moment before his resolve broke and he framed the smooth edges of her face with his hands as he pressed his mouth and soul against her.

A deep sigh worked its way out of her lips as she moved them, agonizingly slow, savoring every second of their touch. Barris kissed enough people in his life to know the power of the first kiss. He was unprepared for the explosion of longing pouring out of both.

It was a kiss that spoke not only of a moment but the possibility of a lifetime. A lifetime stretching and unraveling itself.

With a final sigh, she pulled away, her eyes closed, a swollen smirk on her face as she settled onto the cushion. Running the tips of his fingers over his lower lip in wonder he realized he was wearing a matching grin. Settled into the Fade, Idalya relaxed, and Barris had seen nothing more beautiful in his life. He used his fingers to push the loose strands of hair from her face, then tucked her in tighter amongst the worn linen blanket.
He was a goner.

Barris hid the torch he carried for the Elven beauty since the first moment he laid eyes on her as she’d traveled to Kinloch. What he felt as a boy watching her was an infatuation, but what he felt towards her now, as a man, was a much deeper, richer emotion pouring its way out of his heart to fill the empty cavity a life dedicated to service left him.

“In your heart shall burn an unquenchable flame, all-consuming, and never satisfied.” After the words left past his lips, he knew they were true.

Idalya belonged to the Wardens, then to the Inquisition. Her existing was enough for him. She would never belong to him, but the act of loving her filled him with a greater sense of purpose and duty.

For all the grief he gave him, he understood Cullen. Evelyn would never be his, yet Cullen understood that it was the act of loving someone itself that transformed you.

Delrin Barris changed forever as his lips met the Warden’s, but he couldn’t think of a sweeter battle to lose.
The Chapter Where Idalya Finds Solace

Chapter Summary

It's time for Idalya to deal with the consequences of her method of coping. She hopes Solas can save her from her self-inflicted prison.

A piercing pain ripped through Idalya’s skull before her eyelids fluttered open. With a gasp, her arm flung to guard against rays seeking to penetrate through her sockets. She lowered her protective bar and felt her brows rise.

Night draped the unmoving carriage, her aching bones radiating in the hanging darkness. The Inquisition set out as dawn stretched her arms across the open sky. The effect of her chaotic inebriation was being pulled out of time and placed into another. This time by her own hand.

On the ceiling, the images of Andraste and the Maker painted with a delicate hand filled her vision. The creeping dark altering their visages into ominous demons approaching as Idalya watched. She battled her mind to leave and cling to the first area drenched in light.

It was a secret of which even Solas was unaware. Since returning, the dark frightened her. A terror penetrating deep into her soul. The dark waited for her, its relentless fingers of death reaching out to retrieve its prize, to return her to the darkness where she belonged.

Every day she was envious of the soldiers training around her. They didn’t understand their sprint towards death’s doorstep. Farmers, smiths, children, mercenaries: they walked away from professions and families to put themselves between Thedas and a monster.

Idalya was brave once too.

Now she understood it was ignorance that kept one foot falling in front of another as she marched towards her own destruction, no thought for her own survival. No one understood the emptiness of death awaiting them.

She pulled herself to a sitting position with a grumble. A gasp of pain escaped her lips. A streak of agony ripping through the back of her skull. Her breaths jagged.

The carriage was empty.

Solas waited near a warm fire, a grin of mockery splitting the plains of his pale face. She needed to find the mage before her existence crumbled around her. Every muscle in her body screamed as she placed her feet on the floor and braced them with weight. With a whoompf, she landed hard on the seat below; the impact pushing a groan from her chest. She could fall asleep and call him in the Fade to come heal her. That could work, right?

Why did she bother waking up?

Her head in her hands, she pieced together the memories of the carriage. She remembered setting out, her outburst at Solas for caring if she destroyed herself one sinful sip at a time, Varric speaking to her, making room for… Oh, sweet Maker.
She knew Barris got into the carriage, and that’s where her memory ended. He could be halfway across the country running away from her drunken rantings, she suspected.

With her harsh hands, she rubbed life into her face. As her fingers drifted across her lips, an image popped into her head. *Soft lips, a pair of rough hands massaging the sides of her face, a sense of sadness that stung…*

“*Maker.*” Her hands wove into her hair as the images warmed her body.

Were these memories? Dreams? She knew it could be a trick of the Fade to show her what she most desired.

Her cheeks burned thinking of a Desire demon fighting its way into her dreams. She was an easy target as of late, unable to keep her thoughts out of the gutter when the man was on the other side of a courtyard, much less confined in a moving carriage with her.

She should tell Cullen or Rylen she suspected Desire demons of tempting her. Rylen would torture her for developing feelings for his best friend. Cullen taking her words to heart, so she would never sleep again without a Templar watch.

She was torturing herself, and there was no point. After she found Solas and forced him to heal this nightmare of a hangover, she would find the Templar asking him something Inquisition related and watch his reaction. She wasn’t sure what her feelings for him were, and to just spurt them in a drunken stupor would humiliate her beyond belief.

She wouldn’t know until she was moving outside this blasted carriage.

The strain of moving was exhausting. Pain hammering in her head. She pushed forward until she stood, her fingers digging into the sides of the door frame. Breath coming in hard gasps. Idalya, determined to keep the contents of her stomach within her body, moved in lazy movements, her eyes closed as she pushed the door open.

The chill air escaped around the edges of the swinging door slapped her across the face, and she doubled over as the rich smells of a stew pot and campfire poured past her.

A soldier stationed to the side of the door straightened their posture as the respected warrior wavered in the doorway of the carriage starting to collapse. She blearily assessed the risks of the two stairs to the dirt road. After clearing his throat, the soldier stepped forward, saluting Idalya.

“Ma’am.” He fidgeted in his Inquisition-issued armor, “The Commander stationed me to keep watch over you.” She could sense the judging eyes of the soldier, assessing her condition. “Anything you need, my Lady?”

“Y... yes.” Her voice cracked as she pushed sound through her swollen and aching throat. “Solas, please bring me Solas.” The soldier nodded and left.

Idalya sighed and flopped on the stairs leading out of the carved monstrosity that was her home for more days than she could remember. Her hands pressed hard against the sides of her head, squeezing the pain away. She fought the waves of nausea, the Waking Sea tossing a ship from coast to coast, in the core of her stomach. The sound of pebbles crunching underneath a pair of light moving feet greeted Idalya’s ears, and she sighed as she lifted her head, prepared for the condemnation over her current state.

Her eyes opened to meet a pair of kind hazel eyes, housed within the shell of the dark-complexioned chantry sister. Tight ringlets of brown hair stuck out around the edges of her
Chantry robes, a fuzzy halo, framing her face. A woman standing too close for comfort.

“Who in the void are you?” Idalya said.

The sister’s eyes opened in surprise before returning to their calm state.

“I am Sister Dominique, Lady. You needed counsel?” The sister’s face remained unchanged as she stared at Idalya, waiting for participation in a conversation that would never happen.

“The fuck? I told that idiot I needed Solas, and he brings you.” This girl’s only issue was existing in the spot where a bald elf should heal her.

“Yes, my Lady, I’m here to offer solace should you need it.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake…” Idalya groaned as she wrapped her mangled brain around the idiocy of this moment. “No. Solas. Mage roughly yea tall with no hair and pointy ears?” She could see no sense of recognition on the girl’s face. “The fucking apostate!”

“Ah, yes. I… I am sorry for the misunderstanding. I’ll fetch him.” The woman shuffled away, cringing at her obscenities.

Idalya would have remorse for her treatment of the young sister, but not now. She’d have plenty of time to make amends to the girl, and the Maker himself, though she wasn’t sure where the two of them stood on this whole “revived from the dead” issue she experienced.

Silence crept around her, the quiet chatter of the Inquisition moving further away. She blocked the imaginary demons and wanting hands reaching out to her within the darkness.

She never heard Solas approach but sensed him long before his cool fingers wove through the wild crown of her hair. He pushed the humming of his healing magic through her temples where it throbbed along the harsh angles of her skull. After the heavy magic trickled away, he massaged sides of her head, his fingers laced with ice.

They maintained their silence as Solas healed her, without the condemnation she expected. When she had the courage to open her eyes, she saw Solas’ face etched with a sadness like her own.

“What’s wrong?” How long passed between opening the first flask with Rylen until now? She didn’t trust herself enough to presume she went the whole period without saying something brutal to everyone stuck with her.

“You’re in pain.” It was an acknowledgment of more than her immediate hangover.

Solas lived inside her mind every night. He’d seen the torment awaiting her every time she closed her eyes, knew why she raced to see the bottom of the metal flask. Concerned for her, he held no judgment for how she forgot those empty gaps of herself haunting her every waking moment.

She looked away towards the ground as he continued massaging portions of her skull with ice in silence. “The magic isn’t stable, is it?” She hadn’t dared to form the question within her own mind, nor voice it out loud.

“All magic has its own complications…” he began.

“No, my magic. It’s unstable.”

“Stable is a subjective term. I’ve seen nothing of this magnitude succeed in all my wanderings
through the Fade.” He pulled his fingers from her hair, Idalya sighing at the loss of contact. “But you,” he placed his icy fingers below her rounded chin and tilted her head up towards him, “are one of a kind, Asha. Never forget that. This magic may frighten you, but you are extraordinary. You’ve shaped this energy to make something new and fledgling within this world. I will fight to preserve it at all costs.”

Tears from relief and the weight of Solas’ words fought for release from her lavender eyes. She allowed a genuine smile to bloom across her features despite the hurt bellowing within her soul. The sadness on his features transformed back to his traditional sarcastic expression. With an arched eyebrow and a lopsided smirk, he looked at her.

“How was nap time with the hyperventilating Templar?”

With a miserable groan, Idalya collapsed backward onto the floor of the carriage as the mage’s chuckle carried through the empty air, pushing the darkness back inch by inch.

“That well, I see. When you’ve recovered from your mortification, come eat to keep up your strength.” Solas’ chuckles grew quiet as he returned to camp, his bare feet silent on the uneven gravel.

With a heroic effort, she lifted herself to a sitting position. The night’s suffocating effects lessened now since alcohol was no longer threatening to collapse her brain. After a deep yawn and the long stretch of her limbs, she put her feet flat on the ground and stepped onto the lumber blocks forming her legs, impressed with her decent balance. Each foot fell in front of the other as she wove her way through the carriages, following the sounds of distant laughs and the smell of game cooking over a fire.

Around the last bend of carriages, she entered the campfire clearing. Idalya found a few members speckled around the fire. The separations by rank gone, everyone remained sitting in a large circle, broken into small groups sharing stories of past travels and battles.

Leliana, Cassandra, and Cullen sat in one corner, laughing over Varric’s tales of Kirkwall hilarity about the self-proclaimed “Warrior of the Maker” Queen Marion Hawke, and her husband the pretentious King Sebastian Vael. Idalya knew little of the Champion of Kirkwall beside what Varric read from “The Tales of the Champion”. She couldn’t rationalize a friend of Varric’s being as obnoxious as her literary counterpart.

Bull and Solas were in the middle of an intense game of chess, both their heads bowed over their respective sides of the board. Bull was at a disadvantage, having Sera passed out asleep and wrapped around his horns like a hammock. The Qunari showed no weakness as he moved a pawn to steal a rook from the Elven mage, who let the faintest impression of a smirk pass his lips. Dal knew it was only a matter of time before Bull would submit to his opponent.

She chose an empty spot on a log occupied by Blackwall, sitting apart from the rest of the energetic groups. He regarded her with a nod as he stared into his bowl of untouched stew. The chantry sister Idalya screeched at approached her with her own bowl. She thanked the girl with the humblest words she could before bringing a large spoonful to her lips and gulping down the hot food. The stew was bland for Idalya’s taste, but she never turned away free food after having spent so many years of her life consumed with the thoughts of where her next meal would appear.

“I swear, somewhere in the tiny print on the Joining, there’s a clause that states Wardens will always be separate from everything around them.” She thought the words in her head and furrowed her eyebrows when she realized she’d spoken them out loud.
Blackwall let out a gruff laugh as he put his spoon in his bowl.

“When you’ve seen the worst things in existence, people sense it and move away for their safety. Can you blame them?” Blackwall put down his bowl and reached into the side of his armor to pull a small leather pouch, which opened to an aged wooden pipe with a small vial of tobacco.

With slow thorough movements, his thick and clumsy fingers packed the pipe before bringing two small rocks out of his pocket; one a deep ebony sparkling in the darkness, the other a brilliant red with orange flecks. As he struck them together, they ignited a tiny flame he used to light the tobacco until it glowed in the receptacle of the pipe.

He brought the mouthpiece to his lips inhaling deep from the chamber, the embers glowing brighter as he pulled the heavy smoke into his lungs. With his mouth round, he exhaled, forming the smoke into rings as it passed over his cracked lips. The intangible circles drifting upward, high above the camp.

Idalya laughed at the ridiculousness of this man entertaining her with shapes of smoke like a child. He didn’t know the irony of her nightmares that were clouds of malformed smoke hiding the truth from her. But she appreciated the effort. He paused, turning to Dal to extend it to her, offering her a chance to partake.

With a smile, she shook her head. “No thanks, that stuff will kill you.”

Blackwall laughed again as he turned back towards the fire, inhaling again from the wooden pipe while Idalya shoveled spoonfuls of cooling stew into her awaiting mouth filling the silence between the two Wardens. Near to Blackwall, she sensed nothing from the Warden. No sense of the taint crawling its way and corrupting his veins. She knew he kept her secret. One perk of being old friends with the Spymaster was it was hard to keep secrets out of her ears.

As the silence stretched between her and Blackwall, it became difficult to entertain any topic besides Barris’ location. “The camp is quiet. Where is everyone?” She kept her voice level, her face blank without emotion.

The Warden arched a knowing brow and chuckled at the dark-skinned girl, visible blush on her cheeks as she avoided eye contact. “The Inquisitor couldn’t take the speed we were moving at, so she took Dorian, Josephine, her Templars and rode to meet the Grand Duke.” Obvious irritation coated the man’s words at the thought of Josephine galloping across Orlais without the protective guard of the Inquisitor.

Idalya contemplated telling him not to worry. Barris and Rylen would die before they saw harm come to the Inquisition’s Ambassador. That wasn’t an outcome she wanted either. She decided silence was the correct path instead of both Wardens focusing on the people they cared for riding unprotected through the night.

“So, none of the Templar stayed?”

Blackwall laughed and nudged her shoulder with his own. “Sorry Dal, he oversaw the party leading Evelyn away. Though he was concerned with leaving you asleep and asked Cullen to station someone to your carriage to ensure your safety.”

The elf radiated multiple shades of flushing magentas and pinks through her face as she absorbed his words. “Oh. That’s very… thoughtful of him.” She responded, lost in the memories of Barris’ hands sliding over her cheekbones as his full lips slid against hers.
“Mhmm… thoughtful isn’t the word I’d use for it.” Blackwall’s eyes glittered in the night, seeing right through the wall Idalya built for protection.

She shook her head as she wrapped her head around everything. “I’m no good at this.”

“No one’s good at this, Dal. Otherwise, there’d be more people in this world.” The Warden joked as Idalya rolled her eyes at his quip.

“I know that. I get so overwhelmed by him I can’t think straight.” She grabbed hold of the edges of her ponytail and curled the tips of the white hair around the dark skin of her fingers. “It’s been so long, I can’t control what I feel. Maybe I need to pick a random soldier and work this sexual frustration out.”

Blackwall choked on the drag of his pipe, smoke escaping through his mouth and rolling out the ends of his nostrils as he beat on his chest with a closed, dirty fist. “Well… I… umm…” the Warden spurted out.

“Oh, Maker’s breath, Blackwall! I’m not talking about you!” Idalya laughed as the ridiculousness of this whole night continued.

Between not remembering her words or what happened with Barris, her misunderstanding with the well-meaning Chantry sister, Solas breaking her with his empathy, and now Blackwall thought she propositioned him. This trip was an odd one for her, and she couldn’t imagine the night could get any stranger.
The Chapter Where Leliana Tells a Tale

Chapter Summary

Nestled around a campfire, Leliana tells the tale of the battle for Fort Drakon

“… and then Marion turns to Isabella and says, ‘Turns out I didn’t know what cuckold meant,’ and the Hanged Man erupts in laughter.” Varric grinned as he delivered the punch line. A relaxed Cullen snorted, his hand flying over his face in embarrassment as Varric and Leliana doubled over, clutching their sides in pain, as laughter gripped them.

“Okay, now tell the one about Hawke trying to convert the Qunari on the Kirkwall docks.” Cullen got out between gasps. “The look on their faces as she asked if they had accepted the Maker is something I’ll never forget.” Cullen laughed harder as Varric groaned, remembering the insanity of his former leader.

“I’ll get that, Curly. I’ve waited long enough, Nightingale- tell me about the Archdemon! Not a word will end up in a book, I swear, but you can’t hold out on me any longer.”

Leliana’s face paled at the dwarf’s words. Her eyes drifted across camp where Dal laughed with Blackwall. She knew, with her sensitive ears, Dal heard Varric’s words. She sat in silence unable to form an answer.

It was a day Leliana tried to avoid but often ran through the back of her mind. The images haunted her dreams. Dal’s lavender eyes grew curious as she watched Leliana before she nodded in encouragement for her friend to continue.

“I’ve never spoken about it.” She stared into the rolling waves of flames, her mind carrying her far away from Orlais to Denerim. “The streets burned. Darkspawn everywhere. Climbing out of buildings, slaughtering every innocent person in sight.”

Their screams welcomed her into the Fade every night as her eyes closed. Men, women, children… the Darkspawn destroyed indiscriminately until the streets of the capital flowed with a river of blood. Even with reinforcements, it wasn’t enough to save the citizens of Denerim. That guilt forever changed those who fought within the city that day.

“We couldn’t save those crying for help, so our team pushed further into the heart of the city. After being wounded, the demon landed upon Fort Drakon, where we made our final stand.” The embers of the campfire caught in her nose as the smells of roasting soldiers came to the front of her mind. Her own screams echoing off the stones. Zevran falling beneath the giant cloven foot of the beast, bones crunching under the weight until his agonizing staccato scream turned to silence.

“It was not an easy fight. The Archdemon, even injured, took out our entire army within minutes.” She paused, pulling her hood firmer over the top of her head. “Soon it was our traveling party and few remaining allies left. I remember watching Dal’s body flipped across the battlefield by the tail of the beast. She flew through the sky like she weighed nothing, slamming against a crumbling wall of the fort before collapsing.”

Leliana thought she was dead on impact. The invincible elf became a broken girl, her charred
remains sliding to the ground. She sprinted to her side as Wynne pumped her magic into Zevran’s body. When Dal’s eyes opened in confusion, Leliana praised the Maker for sparing their leader.

“But a Warden is not easily slain by an Archdemon. She jumped to her feet, eyes engulfed with fire. She grabbed any weapon within reach, destroying wave after wave of Darkspawn, between turns flanking the beast.”

The beast awoke something frightening within Idalya.

The gentleness of her friend melted away within the heat of the Archdemon’s flames, forging a weapon whose sole mission was to destroy the beast at all costs. Her and Alistair both channeled their fear and pain to make them unstoppable, refusing to fall before the demon as they killed the Darkspawn, their blades slicing through the blighted abominations with ease.

“When it appeared the battle was lost, I saw her climb the hide of the beast- maneuvering around the dragon’s scales as she made her way up the spine of the Archdemon.” Leliana shot every arrow in her quiver to keep the path cleared for Idalya, and the rushing swarms of demons from Alistair and Morrigan, who were keeping the dragon’s volatile attention on the ground.

She never forgot the sound exploding out of Alistair’s chest as Dal’s blade sliced into the dragon’s neck. As a Chantry sister, she didn’t understand the price Warden’s paid for fighting an Archdemon, but Alistair knew. The sounds of sorrow echoing out of his chest crippled Leliana in her confusion.

“On top of the beast, she grabbed her sword, plunging it deep into the neck of the screaming Archdemon- it tried to buck her off, desperate to survive, but she held on before pulling the sword loose and striking the monster one last time, separating its head from its shoulders.”

The melded screams of Alistair and the demon would haunt her until her dying day. She couldn’t lift her eyes from the Darkspawn, still coming to defend their master to its dying breath, but she knew something was wrong when Alistair ran full steam towards the beast.

“The beast fell to the ground with a heavy thud. Then the dust cleared. There she was, on the ground next to the slain creature. She was so peaceful like she was asleep, but she… wasn’t.” Leliana’s voice broke.

She pulled Dal into her lap while sobbing, her head tilted back, screaming her words of damnation to the Maker and his cruelty. Wynne’s gentle hands pressed on the back of her shoulders and she slumped forward, her tears washing across Idalya’s soot-smeared face. Morrigan and Zevran held Alistair as he crumbled to pieces, unable to look away from her face, as though if he blinked she would disappear.

Idalya recruited these companions, and here they stood, her witnesses as she exited this world for the next.

They took turns sitting with her, petting her mane of white hair, speaking hushed words as they waited for the remaining army to reach them. After an eternity, the army reinforcements arrived to find their King holding a dead elf in his arms like she slept while he whispered into her ear, her companions surrounding them, fiercely protective as anyone approached.

“We laid her to rest a week later in a formal ceremony in Redcliffe. It was beautiful. So many turned out to show their respects to the Warden who saved Ferelden. She was a legend. A story to become myth over time, but to us, she was so much more.” Leliana wiped at the tears running out of her eyes, annoyed at showing weakness in front of others.
As she continued, a weight pressed against her back. The smell of orange oil wafting to her nostrils as a rough hand with thin fingers threaded between hers she squeezed with her own.

Alistair carried her body himself to the castle, unwilling to let her go, knowing it was the last time he would touch her. He headed to the Chantry chapel, setting her limp body on the stretch of the altar before taking a knee in front of her.

There, Alistair, Leliana, Zevran, Morrigan, Oghren, Sten, and Wynne sat vigil in the candle-lit Chantry for two days, until it was time for her final journey to Redcliffe. The women and Zevran accompanied her to her final resting place, but the new King could not follow. Leliana’s heart broke as she watched Alistair’s eyes become desperate as the clerics came in to wash and wrap Idalya’s linens for transport.

“Wait.” He stopped them as the clerics carried her out.

From the pocket of his golden breastplate, he pulled something small attached to a silver chain. He fumbled with the object between his numb fingers before Morrigan came to him and took the object with his permission.

It was his mother’s locket.

Alistair fitted the locket with a likeness of a griffon before giving it as a token of his devotion to Idalya months ago. Morrigan saw the broken clasp, reaching out her hand to cast a minor spell that fused the edges of the silver together. When she reached the wrapped bundle, she loosened the cloth around her face and held back her own sobs as she secured the locket around Idalya’s neck.

The four companions traveled by her side, Morrigan keeping the Warden’s body chilled until they arrived at Redcliffe where the clerics took her for final preparations. Leliana chose a deep sapphire dress with silver stitching for the ceremony. Idalya’s sword was placed by her side as she was surrounded by thousands of blue and white flowers, a patchwork of their grief spread across Redcliffe for all to see.

The King and his future Queen arrived the morning of the ceremony, and the ruddy-cheeked, blushing and bashful former-Templar no longer existed. Frigid eyes peered out of his skull as his expression remained blank, even as he eulogized his “fellow warden”. Idalya’s companions allowed him his space to grieve, even as they knew she wore the only memento he owned from his lost mother- another woman lost to Alistair too soon.

The official royal wedding was within a fortnight, by order of Anora, claimed the gossip traveling through the crowd. She wanted the wedding over with to not only give their people something hopeful to look forward to but to mend the damage caused by her father’s coup of Ferelden.

Leliana heard Alistair’s coronation, and the wedding that followed was beautiful. None of Idalya’s companions attended the festivities.

It was only after working for the Divine that Leliana discovered Alistair transported Idalya’s body back to Denerim in secret, her body laid next to his own spot in the royal crypts. Bucking the Warden tradition of burying her at Weisshaupt. He hardened to the rest of Thedas, but Leliana knew his every heartbeat called for the person who would never respond again.

Her eyes came back into focus as the fires continued to lap at the night. Leliana realized she’d fallen silent, lost within the thoughts she kept locked out of her mind. Dal’s hand held hers as the elf curled up against her back, and Leliana broke again knowing she could watch her best friend crumple at the foot of an Archdemon once more.
Cullen and Varric watched in silence, the camp focused on her and story.

“I’m so sorry.” She whispered gripping Dal’s fingers. “There should have been another way. It should have been someone else. I’m so, so sorry, Dal.” The elf’s other arm wrapped around her torso and held the rogue as she crumbled in the safety of her treasured leader’s arms.
Chapter Summary

Evelyn and her Templar ride to Grand Duke Gaspard's villa, but what awaits them when they arrive?

When Leopold entered the dining room to change out the tea service for his room full of Orlesian loyalists, Grand Duke Gaspard knew his insurance policy had arrived. The elf’s head pointed towards the plush carpet, his large brown eyes with a golden sheen never looking up from their duties. His presence alone was a signal for the Grand Duke to leave.

With a scarred sword hand, he lifted his crystal goblet of wine. The Grand Duke stood, toasting his supporters on the eve of the peace talks. Celene weaseled out of his grasp one time after another. This time she would sit at a table of peers and listen to sanity. To argue her case why she should stay leader of their empire while towns burned to the ground as the mages and Templar swept through the charred hills of Orlais.

Gaspard could not argue that Celene’s focus on culture and education over her twenty-year reign had not made Orlais the pinnacle of civilized society in Thedas. But outside her protective palace, there was a war raging his cousin was in over her head to resolve.

As his allies rose from their seats to raise their glasses in an early celebration, Gaspard reveled at the moment he’d waited for his entire life. The throne was his heart’s desire since he was a child and by the end of this week, he would lead the greatest country in Thedas. He beamed a natural smile below his golden mask, politely met and returned by his guests. Even after spending his entire life in Orlais, he could never follow the rules of the Game like Celene.

Mastery of words wouldn’t keep Celene on her golden throne any longer.

Gaspard waited while his supporters were lead out to their elaborate wooden carriages awaiting their nobles to return home for the coming ball. He kissed his sister Florianne, ever his supporter and cheerleader, on the forehead as she retired to her chambers for the night. There was a frigid bite to the air that night and the breeze chilled the golden mask on his face as he stood in the front doorway of the villa. The line of carriages became smaller in the distance of the growing darkness. When he felt assured any witnesses had departed, he closed the door and entered the hallways now in utter chaos after the farewells from their visitors.

Servants rushed across the hallway as Gaspard made his way towards the drawing room hidden towards the back of the winter villa. With a wry grin, he chuckled as the elves carried serving trays larger than themselves towards the dining rooms to prepare for the Inquisition within the fortnight.

It was a risk to align himself and his allies with the Inquisition by inviting them as a neutral guest in the peace talks. It was a risk that could pay off if Gaspard could convince the established organization into backing his petition for the throne.

Members of the Inquisition’s cabinet included both the former left and right hands of Divine Justinia. The Chantry separated themselves from the Inquisition when it was struggling to get off the ground. The support of the hands of the Divine and the Herald of Andraste could only boost
Gaspard’s chances of proving his worth to the council.

As he walked through the bustling servants, Leopold fell into line with Gaspard, his suspicious almond-shaped eyes never leaving the lines of Elven servants as they stepped out of Gaspard’s way, their faces and glances pointed at the ground. Never in his years had Gaspard thought he would appoint an elven servant as the spymaster within his home.

After seeing the benefits Celene received from her handmaiden Briala, who now controlled the eluvians throughout Thedas. It was only natural to promote, the hardworking and honest to a fault, Leopold to his point man for information. Gaspard himself hoped to one day control said eluvians. Travel between the mirrors was impossible for anyone, not Elven, and Gaspard needed an elf he trusted to run missions.

Towards the rear of the villa, no servants were in transit. Gaspard stopped in the middle of the long hallway. Bookcases lined one side, the moonlight streaming through the stain glass windows portraying the life of Andraste on the other.

“He arrived early, and I escorted him to the back room. He claims to come alone. Surrounding areas are scanned, and I believe he tells the truth.” Leopold’s voice was much deeper, gruffer than expected from the small thin frame of a rabbit.

Gaspard nodded at the elf’s assessment before continuing to walk, Leopold remaining behind as the Grand Duke approached the back office he used when he needed a moment of silence. At the wooden doors rising to the ceiling, carvings of Andraste inlaid, the chevalier paused as he considered how his coming decisions reflected the code of chevaliers he lived his life by.

Dishonesty was not allowed, but tactics were. His critics viewed Gaspard’s attempted overthrow of the Empress at Halamshiral as dishonest, but his plan was tactics. Gaspard forced Celene’s hand as she torched the Elven uprising in the slums and knew her tired army approached the Winter Palace and would fail to protect their Empress. He was a strategist at heart and outplayed Celene on every detail. Yet he’d let the woman and her former champion slip away as the fires of the alienage continued to burn filling the night sky with smoke and a reflected orange flickering light.

With a firm hand, Gaspard pulled the doors open and entered with confidence into the room as the doors swung shut behind him. The walls were vermilion and decorated with the mounted trophies from his many wild hunts over the years. A towering and wide man that could fill a doorframe, stood stoically in the middle of the room dressed in makeshift leather armor with a polished, plain silver broadsword strapped to his side. Rust colored hair fell over parts of his eyes and hid the man’s noticeable Ferelden features.

“I see you’ve accepted my offer.” Gaspard strolled past the man, taking a seat in the plush leather chair at his desk while pulling a decanter out of the bottom drawer with two crystal glasses.

The man huffed. “Just because I didn’t grow up in Orlais doesn’t mean I don’t understand the Game. If I didn’t accept your offer, my men and I would be dead before sunrise by the hand of your chevaliers. I have no choice.”

Gaspard shrugged, pouring the copper liquid into a glass he offered to the mercenary captain who refused. “You’d do the same in my position, I’d wager. A man always has a choice when he can die with honor.” As he drained his glass, he noticed the mercenary stared at him with contempt, but his body language relaxed. The man would help him with his plans and carry them out without question. “Let us talk payment…”

“What point is there to discussing payment? Won’t you have us slaughtered the minute our mission
is complete to dispose of evidence?” The captain asked incredulous regarding his intentions.

Gaspard’s eyebrows pressed together in offense at the man’s accusation. “On my honor as a chevalier, I swear no harm will come to you by my hand. When I ascend to the throne, I will need trustworthy men willing to follow orders to keep Orlais the greatest country in the world. As you know most of the Game happens behind closed doors in meetings similar to this. So, whatever your standard payment is, I will pay extra to convince you my orders are the only ones you should consider.”

The mercenary’s eyebrows raised as he listened to the Grand Duke’s speech. After a few moments, he nodded. “Agreed. We will carry out the plans as you have outlined them, sir.”

Gaspard broke out into a true grin this time crinkling the aged skin around his eyes hidden behind his mask. “Excellent! One last thing…” The Duke tipped up his glass draining the last of the burning liquid before giving the captain a sly grin. “If you’re caught, tell the guards you were hired by Arl Teagan Guerrin.”

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As the night blanketed the fields of Orlais, Briala arrived exhausted to a tall golden mirror hidden in the basement of an abandoned winter home. Her hand rested flat against the glass, she whispered, “Fen’Harel enansal” and the glass turned to a bluish-purple liquid throbbing, a wavering heartbeat, as she passed through the eluvian.

The paths lit up, their runes spurred to life sensing her entrance. Inside the door, she found her canvas bag with a change of clothes and a larger set of distinctive Silverite daggers too distinctive to carry around when she needed information.

Out of her plain servant’s dress and into her smooth Elven leather armor helped Briala become herself. Even though she’d worn a servant’s uniform her entire life before gaining possession of the eluvians. The longer she lived away from Celene’s home, the stranger it was to dress in the uniform she wore in her earliest memories. After stowing away any evidence of her links to Orlais, Briala grabbed her pack and jogged over the rune-lit path now energized within the elves domain.

Though she cleared distance fast, minutes became days as the time within the eluvian passed with a different perception than the outside world. An empty clearing with a canvas tent appeared ahead, Briala slowed to a casual speed as she approached the remaining distance to her hidden camp. She still used her senses for her own safety for the day she did or if something ancient awakened like her first trip here.

Briala dropped her bag as she flopped on a blanket next to a fire pit she built by hand. Her fingers shivered as the freezing chill of Orlais lingered within her bones as she struck the flints together to start a fire. After many attempts, the kindling lit, a fire taking root in the dried sticks Briala transported earlier in the week from a dry desert climate she found she hypothesized was somewhere in Trevinter.

After removing her provisions of food out of her bag, Briala sighed, a sound that echoed off the surrounding emptiness. She was in Orlais for days straight to discover the information available for the coming peace talks this weekend. The network of spies Briala established after her falling out with the Empress brought together information from nobles attending the upcoming ball. Her book
of notes bulged from the information gathered. She'd spend hours looking at it to find the one piece of information that didn't fit, pointing her toward those who sought to derail the talks before they started.

These talks needed to happen. The future of the elves in Orlais balanced on the outcome of these talks. Briala fought to make sure the elves came out of the talks with the best chance of a future. Which leader running the country depended on who stood against their constituents and said they supported the elves and their demands for equal treatment.

If neither Gaspard nor Celene pledged their support, then Briala had contingency plans in place for who brought the elves into their next golden era.

Her hands warmed by the fire as she let her muscles release their tension. It was so infrequent that she allowed herself a moment to relax and let her mind empty of everything weighing on her shoulders for one precious moment. Before their separation, that moment for Briala was laying within Celene’s arms hours after devouring each other.

It was the only time she’d slept and felt truly safe in her life, even though the danger of her being caught as the lover of the Empress always existed. On the worst nights, she awoke alone in her tent, the smell of Celene’s perfume still in her nostrils, the phantom warmth of her body burning its image into her skin. Those were the nights she allowed herself to grieve the loss of her love, at the lies Celene built their love around, the deceptions Celene accepted the consequences of on her rise to power.

She loved Celene since she’d been a girl, devoting her entire life to the woman and her empire only to learn Celene’s rise to power fueled by the vicious spilled blood of her Elven parents. Her love murdered her parents to eliminate witnesses and garner sympathy among pitiful nobles. They assumed Celene too weak of a girl, after the death of her parents, to orchestrate a plan that caused the death of the Emperor. She secured her ultimate rise to the throne over her cousin Gaspard, the natural successor.

Briala knew there was nothing Celene was not capable of in securing her throne.

Even though her anger still clouded her feelings towards the Empress, Briala couldn’t help, but yearn for the woman who occupied her heart her entire life. Despite the lies she knew Celene told her, Briala never once questioned the affection the woman swore to her. Celene cared for her regardless of her being an elf, she believed Celene when she said she wanted the elves to have more than they had in Orlais. She knew the push back and anarchy that would happen within the country if the elves received the rights they deserved.

Briala believed Celene only cared for two things: Orlais and her. As much as Celene cared for her, she knew without question Celene would do whatever it took to keep Orlais out of Gaspard’s hands. The hands itching with the violent need to declare war on Ferelden and reestablish the Orlesian empire he felt the world deserved.

Her stomach ached with hunger, but she couldn’t force herself to shove any of the dried meat or bread in her mouth. She crawled into her makeshift tent. Sleep was needed before she could read over each line of her notes with a critical eye. This was not a situation where she could afford to make a mistake, missing a piece of information to help her maneuver herself in the Game, so she could secure the gains the city elves of Orlais earned with their blood, sweat, and tears.

Her head rested on the small stolen Orlesian pillow. She forced her muscles to relax and mind to drift forward into the Fade. Her eyes fluttered closed as she heard the voice that always whispered in her ear the second her guard was down: “… I will take joy in my love finding her people, even as
my breast aches with every heartbeat I live without you.” She could see Celene’s battered face as she uttered those words- the heartbreak shouting from her eyes as she reeled from Brial’s unexpected deception.

“As does mine,” Brial mumbled into her pillow as the Fade carried her far away from her lingering pain.

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Someone’s here.

Brial’s eyes snapped open, aware of something moving within the space between the eluvians. Her daggers were in hand as she exited her tent in a defensive position. She'd spotted no one unexpected in the lands behind the mirrors, but Brial remembered how she gained access to the eluvians and didn’t presume Imsheal was the only creature who existed before the age of man, who knew a way to access the ancient passages.

Her eyes adjusted to the light and found a figure in a dark cloak, hood over their head approaching her, loud steps, to make their presence known. She replaced her daggers into her belt, approaching the thin person who floated on air as they traveled the rune enchanted path.

“Sorry for the intrusion.” The elf gave a slight bow to Brial, she relaxed at the elf’s Orlesian accent.

“What’s happened?” she knew for a member of her network to come into the eluvians meant something demanded her attention outside the mirrors.

“The timeline is moving ahead- Inquisition forces approach the Grand Duke’s villa in the late hours of the night.”

“Confirmed?” This can’t be right. A headache pounded in the back of Brial’s skull from the lack of food she consumed in the last few days. The Inquisition’s early arrival was considered gossip-worthy rude by the rules of the Game.

“Yes, a dream walker informed those with direct contact with you that the Inquisitor, accompanied by a squadron of Templars, approaches the villa. They’ll arrive soon.” The elf kept his face pointed towards the floor, the hood obscuring the top of his features. Years of hiding behind masks made one nervous to bear their true face in public.

“What was the name of the elf who informed you?”

Could it be Felassan?

Her Dalish mentor had been silent since Brial gained access to the eluvians. She presumed he was off with his clan preparing for what the future held, but the longer the silence became, the more her worries grew.

The elf shook his head. “No name, no memory of their face. A voice of warning insisting you prepare.” With a more pronounced bow, the elf turned and walked away, the path making him fly over the routes until he vanished from her vision.
The Inquisitor was arriving early. This couldn’t be a random coincidence.

To travel alone through the Orlesian countryside while a civil war raged was dangerous. The fact she had the nerve to travel without her army spoke volumes of what Briala could expect from the Herald of Andraste than any expression she read from the woman’s pale Free Marcher features.

She pulled her notebook of information out and a dinner roll, now stale from the air. She needed to go over every detail and she needed to do it fast.

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As the heavy door shut behind her, Florianne exhaled, her shoulders falling from their prideful position.

The week was a tiring parade of meetings with one supporter of Gaspard’s after another as the peace talks loomed in the distance. Peace talks? What a joke. No peace would result from these talks, regardless of the victor. Gaspard hungered for the spilling of Ferelden blood, Celene hanging her brother from the gallows as a traitor if she kept her throne, and the knife-eared “ambassador” threatened riots if the elves requests for more rights were denied.

With solid strides, Florianne crossed the room to her mahogany-carved vanity that filled an entire red velvet covered wall of her room. She sat on the plush stool, reaching up to pull her golden mask off in annoyance, sending it toppling to the wooden tabletop. Her fingers were careful to remove the pins from the back of her platinum-blond hair. She sighed and massaged her scalp as she pulled herself back together.

She'd sung Gaspard’s graces in public for the past few months. Each time sanding away at her soul. Gaspard had always been an overpowered idiot with a sword whose main qualification for gaining the throne was the act of being born. Their mother did everything in her power to assure her son became Emperor, even naming her own daughter to gain attention.

Mother never imagined Gaspard had any future than becoming Emperor, leaving Gaspard without the skills to cope with the shocking event of her cousin’s nomination to the throne. For the past two decades, she watched her brother take on the mantra that his throne was stolen away, and no one would prevent him from reclaiming it.

Gaspard shouldn’t plan a private salon much less lead Orlais. His only response to obstacles standing in his way was to hit it with the largest stick at his disposal. The attack on Celene’s life after Halamshiral occurred in the open with her army surrounding her. Anyone half versed in the Game knew the proper methods to dispose of royalty were up close and personal. Poison, assassins, information… there were a million ways Gaspard could have attempted to take Celene’s throne and been successful rather than attacking her army in the open. But that was Gaspard and the infuriating code he lived by.

The Inquisition rode to Orlais to sway nobles to his side. Neither she nor Gaspard had an interest in the Inquisitor, nor her organization, other than their army strengthened by the remainder of the Chantry’s Templar Order. Florianne scanned through reports of the attack on Haven as they arrived in Val Royeux months ago.

The Inquisitor and her army were impressive to stand against a Trevinter magister, an army of Venatori mages, and red lyrium affected Templar. Though they lost Haven to an avalanche of snow, the Herald of Andraste rose from the ashes of the burning buildings to live another day and live forever in the legends of Thedas.
In the Intel for the Inquisitor, Florianne found nothing extraordinary in her history other than the Herald, regarded as immensely stunning, was still unmarried as she neared her thirties. The Trevelyans were successful, but not rich. Most of their wealth secured through trades with Free Marcher noble families and the successful marriages of Evelyn’s older brothers.

Evelyn’s personal history remained as boring as every noble woman’s until, out of nowhere, her father sent her to the Conclave as an ambassador for their family. While there the Maker chose her to stand against the coming evil. A former spoiled noble now with her own army to march behind her? Florianne seethed at the thought of having to entertain this gregarious woman and her entourage of Ferelden dog fighters in their home.

Her fingers reached into one of the vanity drawers, they dragged along the grains of wood until locating the edge of a lever. The latch clicked under her fingers as the drawer popped open and a small inner compartment slid out containing a thin piece of stone the length of her forearm. The surface covered in engraved runes. After placing it on the top of the vanity, she prepared herself with steady breaths.

Her unblemished fingers drifted towards the stone, she paused, her digits dangling above the artifact calling to her. Energy pulsed out of the runes as her fingers made contact. Her mind rushing open to a hurricane filling her senses.

“Florianne…” the deep voice placed the words within her head. “what is your status?” Within the speaking stone, there were no lies, no Game, only the truth- the truth to set Orlais free.

“Everything is as you wish. My brother hired the mercenaries as you suspected. It will be easy to tip off the Inquisition that Gaspard is trying to derail the talks.” Florianne didn’t phrase or think the words, they appeared when she touched the stone.

The Venatori gave Florianne something no one in Orlais ever had- a chance. She was no less qualified to be a leader than her brother. Gaspard and Celene spent last two decades squabbling over which would lead Orlais without considering that the correct person to run the Game was right here.

“Excellent, the assassins are moving into place and await your orders. For Corypheus and the Venatori!”

The voice faded away. She was alone once again in her cage of luxury. Only a few more days to pretend to smile and continue playing their game before Florianne got the power she desired. After Corypheus rose to rule Thedas, Florianne would own Orlais as the magister remade the world. She’d win the Game without Gaspard or her conniving mother’s useless help.

This was Orlais’ chance to lead the new world order as Florianne rode the front of the wave from the golden throne itself.
The Chapter Where We Meet the Girl

Chapter Summary

*Trigger Warning* NSFW

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of the story tags and warnings.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Rise and shine!”

The covers lifted off her legs as another servant threw open the velvet curtains, spilling daylight into her chambers. With a smile, the girl stretched her arms above her head, sighing as each vertebra popped and released its tension. Helen, her handmaiden, hummed as she poured a fresh cup of tea for her mistress from the porcelain set seated to the girl’s left. She propped herself up on an arm still coated in sleep, as a massive yawn erupted from her thin frame, both servants giggled at their mistress’ playful nature that morning.

“Someone appears in bright spirits.” Helen mused as she collected the blankets from the bottom of the four-poster bed, her heavy Starkhaven accent melodic. “Though I suppose it isn’t every day a Lady turns seventeen.”

The girl squealed and jumped out of bed, grabbing Helen by her wrists. “Please tell me, dear Helen, do you know what my father got me for my birthday?” Helen laughed, removing the girl’s porcelain hands from hers.

“Ay lass, I’m but a servant and am not informed of important dealins in your family.” There was a twinkle in her eye as she finished, and the girl groaned, her chin falling forward to her chest.

Helen gestured the girl towards her enormous vanity where her fresh cup of tea rested, and a beautiful white chiffon gown for her presentation ball that night.

As she sipped her tea, a hardy morning blend, she reached to pick up the notated list her father left her on the families attending the ball and the details she was to memorize about each one. He also supplied a list of conversation topics for her to limit her conversation to, and what family business dealings she was to omit.

Most of the topics covered a recent warm stretch of weather occupying the Free Marches or the newest breeds of horses her family gained from their renowned stables. The Blight and political
unrest in Ferelden topped her barred subjects.

A Ladies mind were not meant for politics, her father always told her. A woman was unattractive to young men if she held too many opinions different from her future husband. The girl listened and keep her mind away from subjects her father deemed unfavorable to the other sex, and so far, she was successful. At her ball tonight there would be a handful of families bringing their heirs to see her unveiling. The girl hoped she showed she could be a considerate wife who knew how to follow the rules of the Game.

The waif servant, pleased with removing the knots from her hair, called to Helen, who came over and separated the girl’s hair into strands and braided the pieces around her head, pulling tight against her scalp. Only preoccupied with herself, the girl squinted at her reflection to see if she looked any older. After inspecting every feature- her porcelain skin, her angled cheekbones, her plump rose lips, and rounded chin, she found everything the same.

She noted the shape and color of her eyes with pride: almond-shaped eyes, of the palest green, thick dark lashes surrounding them. They were her father’s eyes, identical in color and structure. She watched them move in the mirror. The outsides lined in the deepest brown fading into the pools of olive green as Helen continued to braid intricate designs into the back of her head.

Her hair finished, a team of servants swooped in with brushes and tubs of makeup, proceeding to paint her face until the greens of her eyes popped across a room, a natural blush painted across the apples of her cheeks, and her lips coated in the deepest red lipstick she had ever seen.

As she rose to her feet, the servants motioned for the girl to place her hands above her head, and four women surrounded her in a circle. Two tightened her corset while the others lifted the white dress over her head. She remained still as the servants pulled the smooth fabric over her body until it rested into place around her trim waist, fanning out in all directions like a princess from a storybook.

The thin servant appeared behind her, draping a shoulder cape of matching soft material over her shoulders. The servants nodded in unison at the vision she made, proud of their work. She spun, her dress orbiting around her, as she headed towards the door to the hallway, floating on air. She remembered exiting the door before she stood at the entrance to the ball.

Each family announced in line before entering, and she would be last since this was her presentation. Time swirled around her in a mass of sound before she saw her father waiting at the doors with a toothy grin and his hand outstretched. She placed her trusting hand in his and moved into the spotlight. The room focused on her as they hushed to a murmur.

“Now presenting Lord Trevelyan and the Lady Evelyn Trevelyan.” A polite clap worked its way out of the crowd through hushed whispers as they walked to the middle of the landing.

“Thank you, everyone, for attending.” Her father’s Free Marcher accent boomed along the walls as he projected his voice. “This is an important day for our family, as my only daughter has reached womanhood. If her mother were still alive, I know she would be proud of our Evelyn.” The room’s applause grew louder, and her father stepped away to engage families on one side of the long room while the girl went to other side and her brothers mingled amongst families throughout the ballroom.

The night moved like a dream as she passed from one set of warm dancing arms to another until she staggered lightheaded from the spinning.

By the end of the night, most families left to return to their Free March estates, leaving just
business partners of her father’s and close family friends. As the girl leaned on a wall at the side of
the dance floor to catch her breath, a flute of champagne in hand, a throat cleared behind her. A
servant awaited her attention.

“Lady Trevelyan, your father expects you in his study for business.” The girl acknowledged the
servant before he left on his next errand.

She turned, her skirts gliding around her, and made her apologies to the next in line for a chance at
her graces. Her heels traveled with haste towards her father’s drawing room, where he retired to
smoke pipes and drink scotch with old friends after these sorts of festivities. She’d never entered
these meetings before, but it could be part of her new adult responsibilities.

Arriving at the door, she rapped against the thick wood which echoed in the empty hallway, until
the servant who informed her earlier opened it, showing her in. Her father seated behind his large
desk, a full glass of thick amber liquid in his hand, three older men seated in the plush chairs her
father furnished his office with. She was hyper-aware of the sets of eyes observing her in a way
they hadn’t when presented to the crowd.

“Come forward, Ev.” Her father motioned, and she walked into the room with hesitation, to hide
her sudden nervousness with each solid step. When she was ten feet from his desk, her father
motioned for her to stop with his hand, his chunky fingers twitching, and she stilled, unmoving as
the men in the room continued to stare.

“So, gentlemen, these are the terms: ten thousand gold per night, unless you have a trade to offer.
No bruises, no marks, nothing to harm her maidenhead, but other than that, I leave it between you
and your Maker, you sick fucks,” Her father said with a laugh, as the other men chuckled.

She couldn’t swallow. Her throat so dry the act of breathing made her lungs squeal. Beads of sweat
broke across the top of her forehead and the back of her neck as she became lightheaded. This had
to be a misunderstanding. This was her father. Her only parent. They were never close, but no
father would consider doing this to their only daughter…

His words as he dropped off the lists to her last night echoed back into her empty mind, ‘It’s time
you can help the Trevelyan family.’ She was proud when she heard those words, thinking they
meant her securing her a marriage to boost the family’s status at the ball.

She was confused about what was happening. She had to be. If she wasn’t, then she was nothing
more than one of her father’s prize horses being put up on the auction block.

What would they do next? Check her teeth, examine the long lines of her form, look under her
skirts? She had the giddy thought perhaps she should prance about the room, showing them what
fine trotting skills, she had, to toss her silky mane so they could see her careful breeding. The
giddiness turned into a fissure of terror working its way through her chest, and the girl bit down a
cry trying to escape her throat.

She thought to call out for help but knew no one would come to save her in her father’s house. She
couldn’t breathe. Her stays kept her lungs from expanding, and as her heart beat faster, less oxygen
made it into her limbs. Her legs shook beneath the many layers of now sweltering material.

The man sitting closest to her father, with a mop of thick white greasy hair and matching handlebar
mustache, stroked his chin with one hand before licking his lips. He turned to her father without
breaking his sight from her. His hollow cheeks seemed to flutter as the muscles along his jaw
rippled, tensing as he clenched against a smile she could feel in his predatory gaze but find no trace
of across his mouth. She was among wolves, and this man, with his starving eyes and sunken skin,
had the look of a scoundrel on the hunt long before she heard its howling in the woods. He was hunting, and he was hungry.

“Twenty thousand for tonight.” Her father burst into laughter before reaching over and shaking the man’s hand as he looked the girl up and down. Pleased with his purchase.

“Well gentlemen, it appears we must take our negotiations elsewhere for the night.”

Her father and the three men rose to their feet, and the two strangers exited the room before her father came to her. Leaning forward, he whispered, his mustache grazing her skin. “Do what the man says Ev, or I’ll beat you until you wish you died with your mother.” With a smile, he patted her on the shoulder and exited the room, leaving her behind with the greasy-haired monster whose dubious grin matched her father’s. Though her father shut the door quietly behind him, it was an explosion of thunder bursting across her eardrums, causing her to jump.

As she watched, the man approached her, the hunter closing on his prey. She closed her eyes, trying to calm herself before she passed out.

This was a story. This was all a bad dream. She was the girl lost in the woods, wearing a hood of red against the cold and the shadows, against the things wearing the faces of the people she once loved.

She would not be afraid of the big, bad wolf.

Don’t be afraid, just survive. Just survive. She repeated the words in her head as a mantra, even as she sensed the greasy man’s foul breath on her skin.

*****

Hours later, hours she hadn't counted and didn’t want to, Evelyn sat on the edge of her fresh bed, still adorned in the white dress she’d been so excited to wear that morning. Every inch of her body numb.

Looking down at her hands, she noticed the smallest speck of blood dried onto the top of her skin. One bead of crimson proof, staring into the face of all the denial echoing in the cavernous hole in her heart. She jumped to her feet and ran to the wash basin where she thrust her hands into the freezing water and grabbed the bristled scrub brush.

She focused her attention to where she’d seen the spot. She couldn’t see it anymore, but she felt it, nestled against her skin like a tattoo, a sign to the world her worth was compromised. She scrubbed and scrubbed, trying to remove the spot until she had taken off the top layer of skin, her hand bleeding freely into the basin, turning it into a spiraling crimson pool.

With a sharp cry, she grabbed the basin and threw it against the wall where it shattered. Pieces of heavy porcelain exploded against the force, flying by her face in slow motion as she continued to scream, a blood-curdling sound that channeled her fear and pain.

Helen burst into her room, her nightdress and hair out of sorts as she ran to her screaming mistress.

“Lass, what is wrong?” Helen grabbed her profusely bleeding hand seeking to keep her from harming herself, but Evelyn pushed her away as she continued screaming—nonsensical words pouring between her lipstick-smeared lips.

Helen’s was terrified. She didn’t know what to do. From the shadows of the open doorway she saw a large figure walk through, she sighed in relief at seeing Lord Trevelyan enter to investigate.
the commotion occurring within his home.

Evelyn’s heart froze as she saw the man heading towards her. He gripped her by the wrist, dragging her across the expanse of floor, to examine her bleeding hand dripping streams of maroon liquid across the plush Orlesian carpets and her ruined dress.

“Ugh, that beast Tomlinson. I told him not to ruin the goods... Though for twenty grand?” He shrugged with a sneering grin, and she melted away to absorb into the carpet like the pools of her blood. “Go to sleep Evelyn and appreciate that due to your help you’ll have a roof to sleep under for that much longer, instead of living on the streets of Kirkwall as a disgraced noble trying to earn food in her mouth the way you did last night.”

With a chuckle, the man left, leaving his bleeding daughter with her servant, whose eyes were filled with fear. He hadn’t bothered to send the handmaiden out of the room before speaking his vile words out loud.

Her lips quivering, she avoided Helen’s eyes and collapsed as the servant wrapped her worn limbs around the trembling child. She dropped to the floor sobbing and laid there until the early rays of the sun peaked through the edges of the window.

Helen pulled herself from Evelyn and rose clasping her hand as she helped the shaking girl to her feet and over to her closet. She opened the swinging doors and chose a simple dressing gown. Evelyn was stripped from her soiled clothes and into the soft fabric. As she slid into bed beneath the heavy covers, and her eyes shut, she heard Helen whisper.

“Get rest, My Lady. I believe you have many long days ahead of you…”

*****

“Rise and shine!”

Evelyn lurched forward in bed, gasping, her hand wrapped protectively around her throat. Her desperate eyes took seconds to recognize her bearings, but the Free Marcher style furniture melted away, leaving behind grand pieces of Orlesian fashion. When she was sure she was no longer within the bedroom of her former estate, she swung her legs off the side of the tall cushioned bed. She placed her head between her knees as her gasping breaths shook her abdomen. When a calmness slid across her body like a gown, she sat up, wiping her sweat-soaked hair out of her eyes.

It had been weeks since she’d dreamed of her father and months since a nightmare so vivid about the hell that was the last decade of her life. She knew she was in the guest suite of Grand Duke Gaspard’s winter villa, but she still had a fear swirling within her gut she’d open her eyes and find herself locked back within her gilded cage. Cracking her pale eyes open, she found the villa as she remembered. The decorating was exquisite, speaking of the cultured people of Orlais. An elegance worthy to aspire to, one she would claim for her own because she willed it.

Her sweaty dressing gown clung to her fear-frozen skin, and she trembled from the light breeze drifting from the cracked window. For a moment her body craved a pair of strong arms wrapping around her shoulders from behind, the pair of soft lips pressed against the skin just behind her ear to tell her the dreams were over, the way they had the past few months.

Evelyn shook the thought away as it entered her mind. Cullen did not differ from the men who
used that frightened girl. In ways he was worse than those men—he pretended to be something more to her while using her title, power, and body.

The clients her father secured understood what the arrangement was and there were no lies, only the brutal honesty that comes along with stripping the humanity from another human being. Men stuck around for one reason, and it was that they hadn’t taken everything they wanted from her.

She was the girl no longer and understood the rules of the Game. Taken enough lessons on the matter to fill a textbook. Someday she’d repay her father for teaching her the lesson of trusting no one and finding any way to survive that you can. For years while her father sent her from estate to estate to comfort lonely and rich nobles, Evelyn always kept her eyes and ears open.

In the beginning, it meant telling her father the pieces of information she deciphered from her conversations with her father’s clients. Over time it led to her being braver, making her own requests of the men who paid exorbitant amounts of their family fortunes to spend a night with her.

From one client, she blackmailed, threatening she would inform his family of their dealings. In exchange for her silence, she received training as a rogue. From another, she beguiled away jewels and Orlesian trinkets unaffordable on her own, and from yet another, she extracted information on her father’s dealings to find a loophole to buy her freedom from her father’s clutches. His grip over her grew tighter after her two middle brothers died in service as Templar, another favor granted by a dedicated and fearful client of Evelyn's.

The less Trevelyan’s existed, the more value Evelyn gained, and the prospects of a potential marriage she could secure. As her list of clients grew, the potential marriage opportunities slimmed. Well-respected men had no qualms sexually assaulting a girl for a cash exchange but grew a conscience when it was time for their heirs to marry. Evelyn descended from the most desired catch in the Free Marches to alone and followed by whispers as she traveled to the weddings of far less desirable and younger women.

The morning of her twenty-fifth birthday, her father threw open the door of her room and announced she was too old and matronly for the prospect of marriage, and his heir, her oldest brother Michael, would escort her to the Divine’s conclave, where she and Michael would speak on behalf of her family. She'd be given to the Chantry, in a sign of solidarity with the Divine, to live out the rest of her years as a Sister in service to the Maker.

She sighed a breath of relief and anger in unison. Her father deemed her of having no more value to him, so he was disposing of her. She failed to secure a marriage since he forced her to service the men of the Free Marches for business partnerships and opportunities for himself. Her worth as a commodity used up, and so she was being donated to charity to make space for something more precious.

She secured one last favor from her clients before boarding the ship to take her across the rolling ocean to the Conclave; a vial containing the essence of hemlock. When she gained the vial, its purpose had been to feed it to her father.

She fantasized the ways she would deliver it to him- in his brandy, in his food, pouring it into his mouth as he slept. Whatever the way, she wanted to watch the fat fucker die, to watch the life pour out of him onto the floor the way her blood had from her hand that first night.

As the nights drew closer to her to leave, she realized murdering her father would not improve her situation and would condemn her life to the Chantry since she couldn’t survive as a poor spinster. _Never lose a chance to gain, Evelyn. Never give up power until you get what you want._ Revenge, like all things, had a sweet purpose she would bend to her will. She would gain,
and everyone else would lose, and that suited her better than a simple murder.

Into the pocket of her dress, she stashed the vial, with the comfort when the time came she would drink it, freeing herself of the cage her father placed her in, the fear that cursed her womanhood.

But first Evelyn would destroy his world.

She would follow his plan and speak at the Conclave, but no one could keep her from telling the truth to implicate not only her father but every noble house in attendance to the Divine. The minute she opened her mouth for those black words to tumble out she knew she would live on borrowed time. No one in the Game could destroy so many houses in one fell swoop and survive to tell the tale.

She would tell them the truth, drink the vial, and forever free herself from having to do anything that corrupted and vile man wished of her again. Her poison tinged lips would be the wings she would use to fly, and the devastation she left in her wake would be the vengeance she deserved.

But Corypheus’ plan and an exploding Conclave changed her fate.

As Inquisitor, Evelyn was provided with opportunities she’d never received in her father’s house. Instead of being valued for her beauty, they valued her honed skills in battle, her ability to think quickly in the Game. She was elated after Haven as the first marriage proposals poured into Josephine for the great ‘Herald of Andraste’. She told her Ambassador to string the families along as she found as much information as possible about the those who now clamored to have Evelyn boost their family’s status.

The world watched her every move as she collected pieces of power to throw around the board. Surrounded by her own staff and advisers, ultimately, she was always alone, as mornings like this one proved.

Leaving the sweat soaked bed behind, she took steps appearing more confident than the shaken noble inside. She peeled her drenched sleeping gown over her head, letting the moist satin fall to the floor before pulling a heavy dressing robe off a hanging hook. Wrapped tight around her curves, she sat down at the massive vanity stretching across one side of the room and towering to the ceiling.

With a slight knock, the door opened and a line of servants wearing the golden masks of the royal family entered, each carrying a small silver tray containing everything from beauty supplies to snacks and tea. A tray of tiny cakes caught her attention, but Evelyn feigned ignorance of the small tower of confections making its way to an adjacent table. As the food and tea were set down along the tabletop stretching to infinity, the line of servants turned and exited, leaving behind the two handmaidens Gaspard appointed for her while the Inquisition stayed with him.

Evelyn ignored the servants as they brushed out the long red hair curling over her shoulders and cascading down her back. She thought about the plans for the day while sipping her tea. Her arrival two days early from the expected for the Inquisition, gave Evelyn enough time to speak with their host and see what kind of man the future Emperor was.

She received enough letters from the Grand Duke to understand what his purpose was and how she could help with those goals, but she liked to speak with people in person to see what their tells told her. Watching, gathering information. Men could hide behind the brush of the pen, but in person, their rushing blood and filthy thoughts always gave them away. They could never hide the truth in their eyes.
Glancing up from her tea, Evelyn froze. The eyes in the mirror were not her own, but her father’s, always shining out of her skull, judging her every decision. She thought of the eyes once belonging to that bright-eyed girl who sat in front of a similar vanity, in the excitement of walking out and joining the Game, unknowing the evil resting within men’s hearts. No matter how far she ran, no matter how much power she gained, his eyes would always remind her of how easy it was to become powerless.

Her fist flew out and smashed into the mirror. The glass cracked up to the ceiling before shattering in pieces to the ground as the two servants screamed, fleeing to the other side of the room letting the shards rain down on their mistress, who didn’t flinch as the pieces of glass cut her ivory skin.

As the eyes disappeared from the mirror, she breathed a sigh of relief and slid back on her own mask of protection. She raised an eyebrow as she took in the two shaking handmaidens.

“What kind of service is this? You destroy my mirror then stand there instead of cleaning it up? I’d hate to report this to the Grand Duke and get you whipped.”

The women nodded, their faces pointed towards the ground as they darted across the room to pick up the broken pieces of glass from the floor. She reveled in their obedience, in the power that came from commanding their fear. The nasty petty things were no doubt there to watch her, to send details along to Gaspard and inform him of all the cracks in her armor. He would never get the information. He'd find her armor flawless, as smooth as the mirror she destroyed.

Let the servants see the fear in their own eyes as they plucked the reflective shards from the ground and let the jagged edges scrape against the palms of their hands. Let them remember that when Gaspard asked them for a report. Let them remember what her wrath could look like.

Evelyn walked over to her hanging closet to look over her dresses, every step a declaration of her superiority over the dithering handmaids. There was a loud and sloppy knock before the door opened, and Dorian stepped through, dressed in a suede leather outfit that contained more buckles than actual fabric. In his hand sloshed a large goblet of wine, and she licked her lips watching the alcohol move closer to her.

“My, my… what has happened here?” Dorian sauntered forward and rested against a post of her bed.

“Sloppy servants, that’s all.” She replied as she pulled a deep crimson dress from within the wardrobe. Dorian shook his head in disapproval before walking up beside her. He pulled a slim black dress with gold trim from its hanger and tossed it towards the bed. As he reached to remove the red dress from her hands, he stilled observing the crimson cracks oozing across the tops of her knuckles, still shaped into a fist.

“Those servants are truly careless.” He muttered as he pushed his healing energy over her fingers, sealing shut the wounds. His magic spread across her arms, healing the many tiny cuts from the raining shards of glass. “Bad dream?” his whisper barely reached Evelyn’s ears. Her silence enough of a giveaway that the mage sighed and reached behind her, pushing the goblet of wine into her hands. “You need this more.”

Evelyn tilted the goblet back, consuming more than half the large glass in just a few swallows. She sighed as the familiar burn enter her chest, and Dorian made his way to the bed to unlace the bodice of the black dress he chose for her.

He motioned her forward and Evelyn stepped into his domain. Stepping out of her robe, her cousin pulled the smooth black dress over her curves until the fabric gathered on the floor. They were
silent as he pulled the laces on the back of her corset to tighten it until she looked the part of an ancient goddess. She swigged down the rest of the wine and turned to Dorian, who clucked in appreciation.

“My darling Evelyn,” he mused. “You look to die for.”

Evelyn smiled, her wine-stained lips tilting sideways. “That’s the plan, Dorian… that’s the plan.”

Chapter End Notes

PS. Thank you to everyone who let me know I pasted the chapter twice! Whoops!
The Chapter Where Solas Gain a Hat

Chapter Summary

The Peace Talks have arrived and Idalya finishing prepping for her role, but her hardest challenge may by avoiding the monstrosity on Solas' head.

Morning arrived, and the Inquisition was in turmoil. Their party arrived the night before to the villa. Greeted by the Grand Duke’s personnel, the Inquisitor’s companions and council were guided to their lodgings while the rest of the army marched to join the Templar in the army camp set up just south of the Winter Palace. Now the halls of the villa bustled, crowded with servants running back and forth bringing crisp uniforms to members as the Inquisition prepared to make its first official presentation to the nobles of Orlais.

Idalya sat in the corner of the suite she shared in secret with Leliana. Her long legs folded beneath her, a dusty tome on ancient magisters splayed wide in her lap. Her head bobbed, nodding off since she hadn’t slept well, averse to accept Solas' babysitting in the Fade.

Leliana laid out every set of Orlesian slippers she owned, handling them like pet nugs, undecided regarding her attire for tonight’s festivities. It had been so long since the auburn-haired rogue attended an Orlesian event she struggled over which of her jeweled slippers would make their debut to the crowd.

“You're so smug.”

Idalya looked up at her friend keeping her features neutral, but a grin cracked at the edges of her lips.

“And why would you suggest that?” She gestured to the hefty tome. “Does homework from Solas look fun? Because if it does, I’m doing it wrong.” She slammed the book shut and frowned as the poof of air blasted the front strands of her silvery hair in a thousand directions, the volume over her current level of glibness.

“No, you are smug because you believe you won't take part in the Game.” Leliana settled her hand on a pair of emerald slippers with miniature jewels sewn in a swirling pattern. “But you forget servants are one of the most significant pieces on the chess board. They have entry to all areas, invisible in a noble’s line of sight. They hear secrets every day that could crumble the entirety of Orlais.”

Putting the pairs of shoes aside, the rogue sat on the corner of the bed closest to Idalya. “Your own mother was a servant, surely she must have taught you these things, no?”

“She was a servant in Ferelden, not Orlais, and wouldn’t lower herself with the game.” Leliana was listening, her cobalt eyes thoughtful. “I don’t want to say those of us from Ferelden are simple, I’m just saying ham tastes like ham there, if you know what I mean.”

“Think what you will.” Leliana rose, strolling to the vanity to grab a brush to straighten out the strays in her own hair before she struggling to tackle Idalya’s rat nest of cascading hair, “but appearing simple does not mean what you think it does.”
She motioned for Idalya to sit in the chair as she finished glossing over her auburn locks. The elf rose with a groan and grumbled as she sat on the cushioned stool worth more money than she’d ever owned in her lifetime. When told she would be a servant during the peace talks, Idalya assumed they meant simple attire and being left alone. She forgot she was working in the Winter Palace with the Empress in residence.

Leliana poured the orange oil through her hands, running it through Idalya’s tresses with her bare hands to ease out knots before taking the assortment of brushes before her to the elf’s defiant locks. They spent many nights on the road traveling like this. Hair oils were a luxury they could not afford, but Leliana made due with dampened brushes and leather cords she used to tie off Idalya’s braided hair to keep it presentable until the next battle they faced.

One night darkspawn attacked in camp as Leliana finished straightening her hair. Idalya would never forget the rogue’s fury and reddened cheeks matching her hair after stabbing the last creature to see the elf’s completed hair now knotted, thick streaks of tainted blood coating it.

Idalya smiled, remembering her laughter at her friend’s anger over something as menial as her hair, but she was appreciative to have a lucid memory of something not painful from that time she kept for herself.

Solas spent the last few nights on the road helping her navigate through the Fade. Her ability to move from one memory to another improved, focusing her attention on a certain location and seeing the memories it contained over history. They were nowhere closer to her being able to unlock her missing pieces.

Solas stayed by her side the entire time much to the warrior’s growing annoyance. He knew the minute she was alone she would try to Fadewalk through her own memories to learn what happened between her and the muscle-clad dark-skinned Templar. The mage chuckled at her obvious frustration.

After piecing together everything she remembered, she was confident the kiss happened… she hoped. She grew apprehensive, a knot forming into her abdomen instead of her hair for once, knowing she would see him soon. After the talks concluded she travel with him and broach what happened, but until then there was a lot of work to complete.

She never voiced it, but she was excited to be a servant during the proceedings. Not only was she out of Skyhold, but amongst strangers. To be a servant, even for a night, brought her closer to her mother. Her mother lived an entire life Idalya never saw. There was a growing warmth in her chest to be part of that world for just one night. One chance to appreciate the years of work her mother dedicated in serving the royal family of Ferelden to support Idalya and her siblings after losing her father.

Satisfied with her progress against the knots, Leliana brushed her luxurious hair with long strokes as electricity crackled between the strands. Tight against her head her hair was secured into a high ponytail. Idalya winced at the pressure against her scalp but knew there was no point in arguing.

Leliana nodded in approval before walking around to her front to survey her face. She moved a metal box from the top shelf of the vanity. The rogue opened it unveiling makeup in every color Idalya could ever imagine. Leliana combed her fingers through the pieces before choosing a deep liner, wine-colored lipstick, and a few more unfamiliar pieces to the city elf in over her head in Orlais.

She applied the black liner around the elf’s eyes, smudging the line to make Idalya’s lavender eyes pop before applying the rich lipstick to her lips and dusting something else over the rest of her skin.
Leliana hummed in approval of her work.

Idalya didn’t recognize her own reflection. Her deep skin glowed with a glittering shimmer and the colors of her eyes swirled on their own, lined by the darkened kohl. She tore her eyes from the image as she knew it was an illusion created for the Orlesians as she rose to retrieve her red servants dress from the closet.

The fabric was stiff as she slid into the jacket, Leliana straightened the collar around her neck and unfastened the silver Warden locket Idalya wore around her neck. Royal servants may have nice uniforms, but they didn’t own silver jewelry, much less wear it in front of nobles who could order them to hand it over.

Leliana paused clutching the locket in her hand. She wasn’t sure why she gave it back to Idalya after her restoration. It was a stupid idea to hand the hero back a piece of jewelry belonging to the King, but it was as much a part of her and who she was as her flowing mane of hair. Pulling open her own uniform jacket, Leliana stuffed the necklace into a hidden inner pocket to ensure its safety.

A knock at the door startled both women lost in the past. The heavy door opened, and Cullen stepped through in his own matching velvet uniform fitted much tighter than Leliana’s or Idalya’s.

“Hey Cullen, you sure you aren’t wearing Dorian’s uniform?” Idalya called over Leliana’s shoulder and the Commander’s face flushed, a rose tint rushing from the apples of his cheeks to his temples, a hand flying to his blushing neck, overly aware of how fitted his uniform was.

“Maker’s Breath,” he scowled, “are you two ready for…” Cullen paused in mid-sentence as Idalya stepped out from behind the Spymaster. “Wow… Dal…,” he cleared his throat, “you look beautiful.” Now it was Idalya’s turn to blush, though her dark skin shielded her from being as obvious a target as the Commander.

“Commander, lift your jaw off the floor, we have work to do.” The Spymaster mused as Cullen turned an even deeper shade of blush.

“Dal,” Cullen said, his eyes focused on an interesting patch of carpet, “I’ll take you to Solas, he can show you to the servant quarters.”

Idalya followed behind and as she passed Leliana, the bard cleared her throat and thrust the pair of emerald slippers into Idalya’s gut. The elf laughed at her bare feet forgotten in her eagerness to get started. She gave her best friend a grin for loaning the beautiful shoes as she dropped them to the floor and slid her feet into them before catching up with the blushing Commander who exited the room.

“If Solas must wear shoes here, so do you.” Leliana’s Orlesian accent carried to the elf as she exited to chase down Cullen.

Every single detail from the bookcases to the end tables spoke of a legacy of elegance and wealth. This wasn’t a part of any history Idalya understand, nor wanted to be a part of.

Cullen moved with a grimace on his face, his heavy boots making no noise in the carpeted hallways unlike the obvious commotion going on inside the Commander’s head. Everything around her so controlled from the servants to the attire it stifled her. To Idalya, her mother was a free spirit and to think of her in such a controlled environment made the elf’s heart ache as the memory resonated in her mind.

“Sorry about making fun of your jacket.”
Cullen huffed but slowed his demanding speed so the smaller-stature woman could catch up.

“It’s tight. Who did the measurements for that? If you swing a sword, you’ll rip the fabric right across the back…”

Cullen’s feet stopped, and he turned to the elf babbling in the empty corridor. “I’m aware that it’s tight, thank you for informing me.” His eyes squinted, a pain running through his head into his eyes. Possibly a lack of circulation from his coat. “Your apology is unnecessary.” He shifted on his feet not making eye contact with her.

“I do.”

He raised a brow in confusion.

“Need to apologize, that is. That’s what friends do, at least I’d like to be your friend if I’m not… I consider you a friend so… yeah.” Speaking wasn’t her strongest skill some days.

“I would like that,” Cullen mumbled as her observed the elf who looked so different tonight. “When you’ve seen the things we have, it’s important to surround ourselves with those who care about our wellbeing, I accept all friendship you wish to grace me with.”

A smile lit up her features and the knot in Cullen's stomach grew once more over risking this woman needlessly when she had an uphill battle in front of her.

He knew Evelyn demanded Idalya be a servant on this mission as some message to the Warden. What Evelyn didn't understand was even thrown into an environment where Idalya should falter, the Warden would prosper and gain the respect of others. The Warden could dress in rags beneath a golden mask and still stood greater than the surrounding people. Her heart generated kindness, and she always put others before herself. Something, Cullen could admit, Evelyn lacked on the best of days.

“We should get you to Solas, so you two can begin.”

“Yeah, he’s salty enough in the first place, he doesn’t need extra motivation.”

Cullen snorted and slowed his walk to a pace she could follow. The Commander was uncomfortable surrounded by this much wealth as she was. His body posture remained stiff their entire trip through the hallways.

“So now that we have the friendship discussion out of the way,” Idalya stared down at her emerald slippers as they maintained their pace, “have any of your other friends, by chance, mentioned me?” The end of her sentence rambled out. The silence between the two remained until the elf peeked up, unable to handle her curiosity and found the former Templar staring at her, his brow furrowed.

“What?”

He was making her uncomfortable.

“You want to know the details of Rylen’s shared fantasies?” He questioned, incredulous to her motives.

“No… I wanted to… wait, ew!” The elf stopped in her tracks, her jaw gaping open. “Andraste’s frilly knickers! No, that isn’t what I wanted. Never mind.” She took off ahead of Cullen who caught up in a few large and silent strides.
“If that isn’t what you were asking about, who were…” Cullen paused and chuckled, understanding why the elf was so embarrassed. “No, he hasn’t mentioned you outside his duties.” When he saw the elf’s shoulders slump, guilt flooded through him.

He answered her question since she asked if Barris spoke of her, but anyone with eyes could see the way his friend burned for the Hero when she graced his presence. Most of Rylen’s detailed boasting about Idalya’s abundant features was to see how long the Templar could handle hearing about the Warden in the basest terms possible before storming away.

Rylen’s prized record stood at a mere thirty seconds before his best friend threw a gauntleted fist into Rylen’s armor-covered abdomen after a vivid retelling of a sweaty sparring match the Templar and elf just finished. Idalya ended the match in spectacular fashion pinning Rylen’s shoulders to the ground with her knees. It took Rylen and Cullen days to get Barris to speak to them again after Cullen laughed as Rylen doubled over with the hit.

“Can we forget I mentioned this?” Her shoulders slumped, head down as she followed.

Cullen nodded as they turned the corner into a wide furnished room with many service members of the Inquisition inside.

“Thank goodness, there’s Solas… WHAT IS ON HIS HEAD?”

With loud and defiant steps, the elf strode away from the Commander, not hearing his response to her question, to where her mentor stood with the most ridiculous monstrosity of hats perched upon his head.

“What is this?” She demanded, pointing to the top of Solas’ covered head. Solas looked taken aback before raising a brow. The top was metal with a red scarf wrapped around the bottom. It was the single most insulting piece of clothing she ever laid eyes on.

“It’s a hat, obviously.” His irritation was clear as he adjusted the hat’s placement on his head.

“I thought we’re supposed to be inconspicuous on this mission?” Idalya blurted, confused why anyone would wear something as ridiculous as that hat.

“We are,” Solas replied flatly.

“Then why are you wearing that?” She flailed her hands in front of him in frustration. “I can’t take my eyes off that abomination! Do I need to find a Templar to vanquish it?”

A rueful grin broke across the apostate’s face. “I suppose any excuse to speak to a certain Templar.” He mused.

“Excuse me?” Idalya’s voice rose an octave as tried to hide her annoyance brewing with the mage since they set out on this mission.

“I don’t think you’re angry at my hat. I think you’re upset I wouldn’t let you search your memories to see what you forgot in your drunken stupor.”

“Yeah, maybe I am! Maybe I’m embarrassed by my actions!” Idalya yelled back, her face turned to one of embarrassment as the truth spilled past her wine-colored lips. She leaned forward to the cocky mage. “How do you do that?” She whispered now aware of the surrounding glances.

“Do what?” His confidence was obnoxious.
“Make me tell you things I would never admit to others.” Her nostrils flared as her breath exited through them.

“Ah.” He sighed, some of his sarcasm melting away. “It is but the folly of youth, Asha. It’s been a long time since I’ve been young, but as mind-blowing as the concept may seem to you, I was young once and loved.”

The warrior darted her eyes to the floor as a deep flush came into her cheeks.

“No matter how extraordinary your own history may be, humanity is universal, Dal.” He waited for the girl to look up at him, but she was stubborn like himself. “I’m sorry I upset you.”

“I still hate your hat.” She mumbled, guilty regarding her outburst, but not enough to apologize.

“We must disagree on that subject.” A deep chuckle resonated within his chest and Idalya shook her head as she looked at him. “Ready to get started?”

The warrior nodded, and they made their way together to the carriage taking them to the Winter Palace.
The Chapter Where Idalya Become a Servant

Chapter Summary

The Orlesian Peace Talks have begun. Idalya discovers the people they're protecting are just as dangerous as their enemies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The jade jeweled slippers on loan from Leliana moved without sound over the granite polished floors of the Palace. This mission wasn’t what she expected.

Upon arrival, the Empress’ staff escorted the undercover elves to the kitchens where they would transport information and messages over the course of the peace talks. Her skills were wasted during this excursion, but it was a great plan. Elves moved unseen through the palace in servants’ dress. They kept their ears and eyes open while remaining invisible, silent ghosts sneaking through the darkened hallways.

The staff was a warm and friendly bunch. The cook, an older, heavyset woman with dark blond curls caused Idalya to ache with memories of her mother as she barked out orders to the servants. Assorted elves smiled at her as they zig-zagged across the large open kitchen leading massive trays back to the starving masses in the main hall.

There was an intricate beauty in the organization and execution here the nobles never saw. As massive of an event as this was for the Inquisition, it was an average day in the Palace. They would clean up after the festivities and head home late in the darkness to their waiting families.

As someone up before the sun rose each morning destroying hay stuffed dummies beside Cassandra, Idalya appreciated those who worked as hard as demanded. The exquisite detail of every tray traveling by spoke not only of the Empress’ wealth but the pride these servants took in their work.

Her specific role in this mission was a simple one: take updates back and forth between different members under the guise of communication from the Inquisitor herself. After all these months of training side by side with Cullen’s army, she still didn't feel part of the Inquisition. They needed her to take down Corypheus’ dragon, but once completed there was no use for a Warden beyond her time.

If there was a life after defeating the Archdemon.

The elf admitted she wasn’t envisioning any future after the ultimate battle with the Archdemon. She was certain the magic coursing through her limbs, connected her to the beast. There was no point planning when once the dragon was lying dead on the ground, Idalya assumed her lifeless body would lie beside it.

There was a morbidly beautiful symmetry about the whole idea.

Stop thinking like that.
Solas’ voice popped into her head and a slight smile tugged at her lips at the thought of the
curmudgeonly mage berating her for being so pessimistic. As much trouble and eye-rolling as she
gave the man, she owed him for the help he gave her while working together. Solas could strand
her frightened within the Fade but guided her between memories without judgment.

He pointed out many times she should not be able to Fadewalk, much less be as talented with the
skill. She presumed it had to do with being ripped out of the Fade. Maybe the more time a soul
spent in the Fade, the more natural it was to control the nuances of dreams.

She ambled through the back hallways of the Palace, focused on nothing. Cullen waited, expecting
her and the information she carried, to plan his next tactical move. The hallway turned into the
Empress’ personal gallery of art, paintings hung in elaborate golden frames depicting the former
rulers of Orlais.

Around the furthest corner, she nearly collided with two Orlesian men. Very established and
wealthy men by the design of their ornate masks. They’d been whispering away from the main
path for the ballroom. A small gasp escaped her lips as they realized the servant’s interruption in
their discussion.

Her eyes lowered, she curtsied showing their position of importance the way Solas showed her,
even as she gritted her teeth. Fucking Orlesians. The taller of the two men tilted his head, paying
close attention to her every movement while the stockier one with greasy dark hair approached her,
a grin below his well-groomed handlebar mustache hidden by the silver and emerald jeweled mask
he wore.

“Well… look what we’ve found.” The shorter man spoke to his friend, an Orlesian accent slurring
his words. “She’s quite a lovely one, isn’t she?” He reached up with his oily fingers and ran them
along the outline of Idalya’s cheekbones as she flinched at the contact.

Her heart hammered in her chest as she maintained level breathing. Should a servant be used to
this? She was cornered. Her body withdrawing as the two men moved closer. The stiff linen of her
skirt brushed against the contraband dagger strapped to her thigh as she stepped backward.

In half a heartbeat, she could have her weapon drawn and have both men writhing in pain on the
floor, but her mission was to remain invisible. If she followed her instincts and hurt these idiots,
she would hang for committing treason and bringing weapons into the palace.

When she felt the press of the cool wall against her back, real fear ran through her veins.

“An Inquisition servant, no less. Where are you from, girl?” The stout man approached her so the
foul stench of alcohol along his breath soured her stomach. The hairs on the back of her neck
standing on end.

“Fer… Ferelden, sir.” She stuttered the words, ashamed at following this man’s games.

The men uttered a chilling chuckle as they looked at one another.

“I may have to hire some Ferelden maids from now on. Orlesian elves are never this beautiful.
Who knew the Doglords could breed such mongrels and knife ears?”

Knife ear. The words echoed through her skull as a brewing rage consumed her fear. She’d grown
soft to the names thrown at her every place she traveled after working for months within the
protective bubble of the Inquisition. She may not identify with the Dalish or elf customs,
but damn anyone to the Void anyone who thought of her as weak or less for being born an elf.
“I wonder how much the Inquisition would sell her for. I’d like to take her back to my estate.” The stout man spoke to his friend as he dragged a greasy finger down the length of her uniformed arm.

The taller man huffed a breath of annoyance underneath his gold and opal mask.

“Philippe,” Idalya saw the taller man’s brown eyes rolling beneath his mask. “Why would you even bother? She’s a mudskin, you can’t bring her within the villa without her leaving stains everywhere.”

The stout man laughed while licking his thick chapped lips as he reached closer to her face. Her heart beat swayed her body back and forth with each booming echo of the muscles. Her fingers drifted towards the dagger on her leg, the closer the disgusting man moved.

“Guess I’d have to keep this one out in the stables then, Fredrick.” The greasy man ran his fingers over the lengths of his mustache. “She’s got a streak of wild in her, I could just tame her like another one the horses.” He raised his hand to Idalya’s chin, pinching her skin and tilting it towards him. She winced in pain from the contact. “From what I know about the Trevelyan woman and her giving nature, I bet she’d be willing to part with this one for free.”

Damn all of this. Damn Orlais. Damn the fucking Inquisition.

This isn't what she agreed to. As her fingers reached under the edge of her skirt to grab the handle of the dagger, a throat cleared with authority behind the two Orlesians who turned in shock to see who dared interrupt their shenanigans as Idalya’s hand returned to her side.

A tall woman with deep ebony skin stood with her shoulders pointed back. An elegant hat shaped into white horns adorned her head matching her white Orlesian mage robes. She held a graceful white wooden staff with glowing sapphire jewel braced on top and an eyebrow raised as she awaited recognition by Idalya's perpetrators.

“Madame de Fer.” The two men spoke in unison as they bowed to the dark-skinned mage who nodded in approval at their startled reaction.

“Forgive our rudeness, Madame, we did not hear your approach.” The stout man spoke with a nervous timbre as he approached the woman. She remained still as a statue as he took her hand.

“All is forgiven, Philippe.” The woman’s voice was deep with a soothing purr. “I overheard the Dowager speaking of your humanitarian work for the unfortunate refugees of this terrible civil war we find ourselves in. You are an asset to Orlais and set such a visible example of how to serve the Empress with integrity.” She smiled at the shaking man. Idalya identified the venom behind her eyes, the slight twitch of her fingers along her staff the only things betraying her cool exterior.

A blush of horror spread over the skin not protected by his mask. The stout and disgusting man grumbled before walking away as fast as his small, thick legs would carry him knowing he had been bested in the Game. The taller man bowed again for the regal woman and left before forced to explain what happened.

Madame de Fer remained still, tilting her head to the side as she listened to their footsteps grow quieter through the hallways until even Idalya’s sensitive ears no longer heard their trace steps. She turned to peer at Idalya, her features softening, becoming more expressive concern denting into the corners.

“Are you…” her velvet voice drifted over Idalya with a warmth like the passing rays of the sun.

“Yes. I… yes. I’m fine. Thank you, Madame.” Idalya interrupted, remembering her place in this
mission.

This woman had power, whoever she was, and Idalya needed to be careful to not let any Inquisition secret out. She stood quiet, her eyes focused on the floor, waiting for dismissal by the mage. After a lifetime, the woman broke the silence.

“You are aware, I’m sure, if you pulled your weapon on those brutes, the guards would hoist you up on the Gallows, as we speak.”

Idalya gulped and nodded her understanding. The longer she stood there her body trembled as the fear from her last encounter released into her muscles.

The woman reached out her thumb dragging it along the outside of Idalya’s lip, the elf widening her eyes in surprise. She held her hand up showing the excess lipstick she cleared off the side of her face from the smudging her greasy friend left. Idalya calmed that the woman was helping her and was not another well-dressed enemy in wait.

The mage stepped forward until she closed the distance between the two of them looking into Idalya’s eyes with her own eyes the color of the sky on the Storm Coast.

“They will always underestimate you.” The woman motioned her head towards the ballroom. “They see a mudskin, knife-eared bitch and they overlook you, presuming with one glance they know you and what you’re capable of.” She spat. “The same way people once looked at me and saw nothing more than a mudskin mage and assumed I’d never pass my Harrowing, much less lead a Circle.” She leaned closer, the sweet fragrance of Andraste’s Grace flowing off the mage’s immaculate robes.

“But we proved them wrong. We used their failure to recognize greatness and propelled ourselves into power with it.” The mage moved back looking at Idalya thoughtfully. “Always remember your strength is your power and it will always allow you to persevere no matter what is ahead of you.” Standing up straight, the woman once more transformed into Madame de Fer.

“It has been an honor Lady Mahariel.” The mage gave the slightest bow with the edge of her horned head. Idalya’s jaw dropped open as the mage walked away, her tall white heels producing a clicking echo in the gallery.

“How did you know?” She had to discover how the mage knew her identity. What else did the palace know about their mission? Were they in danger? If one person could identify her, dozens could alert the Venatori.

The mage stopped and tilted her head back over a slender shoulder, “The Hero of Ferelden walks through the front door of the Game itself and you expect one of the Court Enchanters to not recognize you? Your secret is safe, my dear, you pose neither me nor my Empress any danger. Though I need to get back to seeing what trouble your Inquisitor is getting into while assuming she’s inconspicuous.”

Idalya had to give it to the woman, she did her job well. “You’re fantastic.” She admitted as the mage swayed away again.

“Yes,” the woman mused, her grin audible in her response. “I am.”

She remained motionless, watching the elegant mage make her way towards the ballroom as the first bells chimed for the guests to return to the local area.

*Cullen. The ballroom.*
Rushing, her feet carried back into the foyer as she tucked her head down and meandered past the patrons taking their sweet time moving back into the ballroom. Her eyes scanned the crowd before spotting the Commander backed into a corner, swarmed by a group of over-amorous Orlesians, panic clear on his face.

After covering her disdain, she approached Cullen until feet away. As Cullen’s eyes met hers, there was an immediate relief as he sidestepped a male noble who was getting too handsy for anyone’s comfort, much less the uptight Commander.

“Yes, Servant?” His voice sounded shaky and as much as Idalya wanted to poke fun of Cullen’s dislike of attention, she felt remorse for him being stuck in tight uniforms to entertain nobles eyeing him as nothing more than a potential bedding.

“Ser, the Inquisitor has need of your council….” Her instruction was to give him information on troops and Evelyn’s movements throughout the castle in her search for the Venatori’s plan, but she saw the Commander needed a rescuing of his own.

Cullen gave his farewell bows to the nobles who scoffed in annoyance as Cullen took elongated steps to the exit to leave the stifling crowds behind as fast as possible.

As they exited the ballroom, Cullen sighed, his breath stuttering with the exertion. Leliana approached at a faster pace for the guarded woman though those around them wouldn’t notice.

“Commander, the Inquisitor has verified the Venatori are in attendance. She found murdered servants on the upper floors of the palace to hide their entrance. The time has arrived.” She turned to Idalya, who remained silent behind the Commander as expected by a servant. “We should not have brought you, Dal. I’ll summon Solas to find you and escort you back to camp. Go to the kitchens and stay there until Solas finds you. You will be safe there. The Venatori cannot discover you are in attendance.”

The fear in the Spymaster’s eyes was clear and Idalya understood better than to push her friend when she was throwing orders out. There was a time to lead and a time to follow and following Leliana’s orders would help take worries off her friend’s mind while they saved the Empress. For the success of the mission, Idalya would listen and stay guarded in the camp, like a damsel in distress, while the Inquisition sought to change the tide of history. She would be remembered as a team player, damn it. With a curt nod of acknowledgment, she turned in her jade slippers, returning to the kitchens.

With the ringing of the first bell, early arrivals made their way towards the ballroom and Idalya hid her revulsion passing through the waves of masked faces. It was very Ferelden of her, but she couldn’t overcome the distrust the Orlesian masks invoked within her. To wear a mask to show one’s true self rang hollow to the elf. A mask identifying your family and titles no different to her than the branding of slaves. The individual disappeared replaced with a title and role. She hated everything about it.

The further she passed into the heart of the palace, the more the crowds thinned until she traveled the dimmed hallways alone. Servants of other nobles passed by not acknowledging her presence which bothered her the more it happened. Heading towards the servant entrance, Idalya bowed her head in passing to a Lady in a deep maroon and black gown standing in the darkened shadows at the head of the staircase. She crossed the hall at a casual pace to not draw attention to herself.

As she neared the door to the servant entrance, the lightest footsteps approached her. Her hand slipped to the dagger at her side as she turned to confront whoever was trying to get the drop on her. Spinning around, she looked into Solas’ cerulean eyes.
“Maker!” The sound echoing off the ornate walls, not expecting the elf to have closed the distance so soon. She peered up to where the Lady stood but breathed a sigh of relief she had returned to the ball before the two elves made a scene.

“Dal… you’re okay?” Solas’ features filled with worry, his features showing more age than he’d ever admit.

Idalya curbed her desire to roll her eyes at everyone’s intense need to worry about her- she was a trained warrior. Everyone forgot that.

So yeah… she died once, that was her own decision. She wasn’t bested in battle or struck down by darkspawn. She gave her life to protect those around her which should get her more respect from people instead of being treated like a child. They feared some outside force coming for her when the only danger presented to her so far had been from the nobles they were here to protect.

“Yes, I’m fine Solas. Let’s get going.” She was proud of herself for not sounding irritated at the mage. He was protecting her to the best of his abilities, but she wasn’t as fragile as they thought.

Grabbing the door handle of the servant’s hall, she twisted the large brass knob and froze as the door opened, the overwhelming reeking of iron assaulting her sensitive nostrils. Her and Solas looked at each other preparing for their next movements.

Chapter End Notes

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Thank you for reading and all your support. I hope you enjoy the fic.
The Chapter Where Idalya Finds the Collateral Damage

Chapter Summary

Idalya and Solas discover the collateral damage of hunting the Venatori.

Chapter Notes

*Trigger Warning for graphic descriptions*

With a flick of her wrist, her dagger was in her hand. Solas’ eyes glowed with a green luminescence as he channeled his mana into his palms. In a defensive position, she crept through the door into the now pitch-black hallway as the aroma of rusty iron overwhelmed her. The silence in the hall was claustrophobic as Solas inhaled before his magic passed around her illuminating the lamps at once.

“NO!” The word shot from her throat ending in a sob as her eyes adjusted to the lit hallway.

The deafening silence was due to every servant lying dead upon the ground; the reeking of iron, their flowing blood bathing the entire length of the hall in a crimson river. Her body trembled as she inched forward to the first body- a young elf, no older than sixteen, features twisted in pain, hand outstretched toward the door to the main hall of the palace.

She swallowed the bile rising in her throat as she investigated the girl’s chest to examine the eight stab wounds delivered to sever multiple organs. From her expression, Idalya knew the wounds did not end the girl’s life quickly. She’d lain on the cement floor reaching for the door, praying to any god listening for help as her life spread across the rocks.

Butchered then left to die like cattle.

Solas remained silent behind her and when she turned to question him through tear-strewn eyes, she found his face contorted in fury. His mana pulsing around him, his rage enough to blow the palace into oblivion.

“Why, Solas?” Her voice sounded weak, desperate. “They were just servants. I don’t understand…” her voice faded away spotting a woman farther down the hallway with blood-soaked golden curls framing her round cheeks.

With a sob, her hand flew to her mouth as she recognized the cook so like her own dear mother. She waded into the pools of blood which soaked through her once immaculate slippers, unable to stop herself.

Reaching her, she found the woman’s dead eyes, once a rich brown that mirrored her mother’s, staring lifelessly at the ceiling. The skin of her face taking on a gray hue from her blood loss. Warmth still radiated from the bodies, the choking humidity from the massive pools of blood filling the room. She kneeled and pushed the dampened curls out of the woman’s face, a mother
grooming a sleeping child.

“You want to know why this happens?” Solas’ voice startled her, the venom in his tone terrifying. “This is our fate in the Great Fucking Game. Elves become fodder for fighting nobles, objects disposed of on a whim.”

Idalya’s tears crippled her at the thoughts of families sitting awake tonight waiting for the loved ones who would never return home. *I should have been here. I could have saved these people.* The thought rang in her head on repeat deafening her.

“History is full of these invisible massacres of our people.” Solas’ continued, his anger growing with each chosen word. “The woman we’re here to save set an alienage on fire to destroy a minor uprising. These elves paid their lives in an attempt on hers. *How many elves are worth one Orlesian?*” He howled in anger as he stared at the servant's unmoving bodies. His voice boomed in the stone room and Idalya shut her eyes to hold whatever composure she had left.

She was so shaken she never heard the sets of footsteps approaching from the outer hall. Over her shoulder, she saw the Inquisitor enter through the doorway, her dress was golden with black accents, setting her hair ablaze in the burning candlelight as she stepped into the room. Dorian, Blackwall, and Sera all followed close behind as Solas stepped back into the furthest corner, releasing his mana as Dorian raised a concerned eyebrow at the elf on his entrance.

The members of the Inquisition observed the carnage in silence. The Inquisitor’s face remained unmoved while the looks on her companions faces portrayed a much grimmer image of what they discovered in the other wings of the palace.

“Your handiwork?” The Inquisitor inquired, arching her eyebrow towards Idalya.

“*Evelyn!*” Dorian turned on the Inquisitor before Idalya reacted, shock on his tanned features. “If this Inquisitor job doesn’t work out for you, you should think about becoming a magister- you appear to have a similar set of humanitarian values. I think Trevinter is a natural fit for you.” He spat, unable to meet his cousin's eyes.

Evelyn shrugged and looked at Blackwall. “Help me through to the other door, I can’t soil my good heels.”

Blackwall frowned, his beard taking over most his face and groaned before approaching Evelyn, lifting her by the waist and placing her over his shoulder to carry her through the blood-soaked sunken hall. On the other side, Blackwall placed her on the dry steps as Evelyn took off through the door without as a pause as the grizzled Warden shook his head and followed her drawing his sword.

Dorian turned to face Solas who remained silent in the dark corner. “I know it changes nothing, but I’m sorry. There is no excuse for any of this.” Whether he meant the dead elves, Evelyn’s comments, or everything, Idalya wasn't certain.

The mage waded through the bodies, making his way after the Inquisitor who hadn’t waited for her companions to follow. As he exited with a sigh, leaving Sera behind. Her face unreadable as she stared at the scene in front of her. As the rogue watched, Idalya reached out a shaking hand and closed the eyes of the cook, smearing a trail of blood across her eyelids from her soaked hand.

Sera looked at the faces of the dead as she passed, memorizing every detail her mind allowed, the horror of their last moments etched forever in their skin. At the stairway, she stopped, her shoulders tense as she tried to control her anger and keep her tears inside.
“Hero?” Idalya met the rogue with a weary face. “Never forget the little people. No matter how good we do, no matter who we save… we’ll never be them. It could be any of us who died here, and no one would care.” Sera’s features contorted as emotions threatened to come tumbling out. “Thank you for not forgetting them.” The elf ran an angry hand across her cheek, rubbing away the evidence of a runaway tear as she exited to the other side of the palace.

Idalya heard the unsheathing of the daggers before footsteps as a darkened figure stepped into the room. The amethyst hood fell back as Leliana’s head appeared. Her eyes wild and full of fright, she scanned the room before resting her sights on Idalya.

“Oh, thank the Maker...” She turned to Solas. “Please, I beg of you. Take Dal through the front doors to the Templar camp. We’re surrounded by Venatori, many people have lost their lives. Idalya and the Inquisitor must be protected at all costs, Solas.”

The mage was silent, his back pressed against the stone as rage bellowed through his limbs. The Spymaster walked close, so they were eye to eye.

“There will be revenge for your people, Solas, but not today.” Any mortal would not have deciphered her careful whisper, but Idalya’s Elven ears made it sound like she was shouting in the quiet room.

Grinding his teeth, Solas forced himself to meet the Spymaster’s eyes then they drifted to Idalya who was still shaking in the middle of the room surrounded by the dozens of dead elves. His eyes softened as he watched the guilt and grief, emotional wounds, poured out to blend in the mixing sea of red.

“Idalya, come with me.” His voice was a cool breeze of air across the desert.

The fight moved back into her limbs, her anger strengthening them as she rose to standing. Solas’ face returned to its normal expression, but his eyes remained weary and defeated. She suspected he was using his magic to draw her out of the room. Any other day, she'd have been offended, but right now she was a minute away from lying beside the cook’s body and crying for the mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters lost this day.

As she reached the stairs, Leliana flew the remaining steps wrapping her arms around Idalya. “We will hold the Venatori responsible, my friend,” Leliana whispered. “Go. Please stay safe. They will make their move soon.”

Idalya nodded, numb, against her friend’s shoulder before pulling back to look at Solas. Leliana pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and wiped the blood from Idalya’s hands until they appeared as clean as they could get, the symbolic taint still resonating in her skin.

“Come, Asha.” Solas’ hand cooled her shoulder as he helped guide her up the stairs to exit out of the blood-soaked servant’s quarters, into the over-sterilized world of the nobles.

Her body shook as the temperature difference between the halls hit her. The main hallways of the palace were peaceful and coated in grandeur, unlike the world the two elves just left smeared with gore. Idalya was aware Leliana exited behind them, but never saw the rogue step out into the darkened corners of the elaborate and garish building.

The two elves walked in silence towards the front of the palace, Solas standing straighter than any other Elven servant daring a noble to make a comment to him about knowing his place. They received nothing more than hushed whispers as they passed. Large crowds gathered and drew
closer to the front doors, a soft murmur passing over the Orlesians as they waited for the second chime of bells to arrive late to the ballroom.

As Idalya spotted the massive wooden doors to the ballroom, Solas turned to the left steering her with him, a thin hand placed at the curve of her spine to direct her away from the gathering crowds. The sounds of voices echoed, followed them as they traveled closer to the exit.

A red Inquisition uniform lingered in the distance and she sighed as Rylen came into focus. He was leaning against a banister, a lopsided smirk on his face as he flirted with a handsome Orlesian man, at least from the nose down, a bronze mask covering the upper half of his face matching his rust-colored hair.

Solas didn’t slow his pace as he headed for the Templar. “Knight-Captain, I have a special assignment from the Nightingale to escort this woman to the Templar camp for holding.” Concern passed over Rylen’s jovial face as he looked towards Idalya who continued to keep her face directed down even though their time pretending to be servants neared its end.

“Understood.” Rylen nodded at the disappointed Orlesian man with a wiggle of his eyebrows and a wink before turning to escort Idalya.

Solas reached over, taking her hand in his own and squeezed. Words were unnecessary. He planned to travel back into the palace, destroying every Venatori agent he located. Telling him to stay safe was unneeded while vengeance brewed behind his eyes. Her mentor Fade stepped away before Idalya adjusted her vision. Woe be to those he discovered within the darkened passages.

They walked in silence, the elf’s feet dragging with each step, her emotional pain manifesting through her limbs.

“Are you okay?” He asked unable to discern what happened.

“No.” She was so exhausted as she fought to push each foot forward. Even combat wasn’t this tiring.

“You want to talk about what happened?” Rylen stopped to examine her, his concern etching further lines into his eyes. She scoffed.

“No.”

Rylen sighed, running a frustrated hand through his deep brunette locks slicked back and styled for once. Looks like Josephine got to all of us, too bad the servants of Skyhold are missing this. The thought of Skyhold filled her with sadness and a shred of bitterness.

She yearned to see how the world changed over a decade but found it still unbalanced in the favor of the rich and noble born. Ten years, a Blight, and a magister ripping a hole in the sky didn’t steer Thedas off that path.

Rylen grasped her by the shoulder and gave a supportive squeeze before continuing his lead to the Templar barracks. The silence between friends was respected. Both understood there were moments where vocalizing what you’ve seen can make the truth so much worse. The further her steps carried her from the scene of the carnage, the less Idalya occupied her body, part of her soul had died, left behind forever with the elves laying silent in the hallway.

Senseless violence never made sense to her.

Her mother spent days explaining how her father died in a scramble between elves in their alienage
and royal officers of King Maric’s army. A heated argument over taxation burned out of control into a riot between the tense sides. Her father was returning home from work at the blacksmith’s shop when trampled by an angry crowd.

Her mother and siblings explained what happened to her father repeatedly, yet Idalya spent hours staring at the tattered wooden door waiting for him to walk back inside. The same part of her consciousness held its breath, waiting to see the elves standing in front of her, warm smiles returned to their pink ruddy faces, not the gray and sunken skin that replaced any warmth left.

A side door opened, and Rylen withdrew his sword as a large figure passed through the frame into the candlelit hall. Idalya didn’t need to lift her gaze to sense Knight-Captain Barris entering.

She wouldn’t let herself meet his eyes. For the sake of those around her, she was controlling her emotions. Just one moment of kindness within the emerald eyes of the Templar would undo her—her resolve crumpling as she yearned for nothing more than the safety of his arms to hide from the world around her.

The sound of sniffling coming from behind the Templar caught her attention. Tucking his sword away, Rylen stepped closer to Barris, curiosity on his face. A young elf with brunette hair braided on the sides of her head stepped out from behind Barris, cowering as she saw Rylen approach.

“What’s happened?”

Idalya wondered if Rylen understood both elves heard him as he spoke a breathed whisper to be respectful of the elves while he addressed his fellow Captain.

“Spy of Briala’s.” Barris’ voice was low, but not a whisper understanding the women heard everything.

Idalya skinned warmed as his eyes bored into her but kept her own focused away.

“She knows incriminating information about Briala and sprung a trap in Lady Florianne’s room. The Inquisitor wants her taken to the Commander for protection until her time to testify against the Ambassador and Empress.”

The Templars continued to talk, but Idalya stopped listening. Terror glued on the young elf’s face, a small stream of blood flowing from a healing gash on her forehead. She couldn’t separate the image of the slaughtered girl with her hand outstretched towards the door with this crying girl.

Were those elves her family? Friends? Lovers?

The thoughts were a lance through her chest. She moved to the young girl, wrapping her arms around the shaking elf as the girl burst into tears, pressing her face into the bright crimson fabric of Idalya’s uniform.

“You’re scared, but you’re safe now.” Soft and calming words, the only condolences she could offer. The girl breathed deeper as she let herself believe the words the servant spoke. “I am with the Inquisition. We will let no harm come to you. I will protect you with my dying breath.”

Idalya knew it was the truth as the words tumbled out. She’d struggled to come to terms with where she belonged. This was her drawing a line in the sand and making her choice to stand with the Inquisition if it allowed her to help those in need.

This trip reminded her of what it meant to be powerless. Something harder to remember the longer she was a Warden since she’d gained the power to control her own fate—something not granted in
Thedas to dark-skinned elves. Duncan saw something in her the day he conscripted her, setting her feet on a path that freed her from a life within the alienage.

She shushed the frail girl until she stopped shaking in her arms. Idalya took the girl’s shoulders in her hands as she looked in the girl’s large brown eyes that looked unsettled, but no longer terrified. “My name is Idalya and I swear I will keep you safe.”

The girl nodded, confidence returning to her features. She turned to the two Templars who now stood and watched the scene in front of them unfold.

Rylen’s features were unreadable as he looked back and forth between the two elves, but Barris’ eyes locked to her blood-soaked slippers and the splashes of blood littering her ankles. The dried crimson stains running along the backs of her hands, dread setting into his face as he tried to imagine what happened to the Hero within the velvet plush lined rooms of the Winter Palace.

“I will escort her to Cullen.” Idalya drew back her shoulders as she stared down the two Templars who had matching pairs raised eyebrows.

“Dal,” Rylen began while stepping towards her with his arm outstretched. “I’m under orders by Solas and Nightingale to make sure you arrived in camp. Your safety is integral to the Inquisition, Doll. We will make sure you two arrive at the Commander.” This was as serious as Idalya had ever seen her friend, but she would get her way.

“Rylen, do you think you two could protect us any better than my own skills?” She noticed the briefest flicker of a smile on Barris’ gorgeous lips before fading back into work mode. Rylen went to respond, but Barris cut him off.

“She’s right Rylen, I’ve seen her knock your ass across a training ring enough times to last a lifetime.” Surprised Barris vouched for her abilities, she stumbled, surprised, when he looked at her. “Be careful.” His voice trailed off as though there was an unspoken part of his warning, something they would not express in present company.

A lifetime ago she held a ball of wound knots in her stomach at the thought of facing the handsome Templar again. But facing him now her fear gone, her apprehension in his presence nothing more than the overwhelming need to stay by his side. She knew for certain she kissed the handsome Templar. How could she not? How could she travel by his side and not have the compulsion to give him everything she had?

There was an emotion behind his emerald jewels of eyes she wasn’t ready to name, but the thought he could feel the same way about her filled her with a courage she needed. She needed to escort this girl to her friend, but she wasn’t done with this Templar- not by a long shot.

Through a sheer act of willpower, she drew her eyes away from Barris back to the no longer shaking elf, whose bloodshot eyes were fading back to white. “Come with me.” She outstretched her hand, and the girl took it with no hesitation. Idalya turned back towards the ballroom with more certainty than she’d had since awakening in this new world.
The Chapter Where Cullen is Trapped by Orlesians

Chapter Summary

Cullen underestimated how aggressive the Orlesians would be, but a distraction will present itself at the exact moment he needs it to.

Chapter Notes

Hello readers! The final chapter of the rewritten Burning in the Flames, the prequel Evelyn fic is posted. You can find it in the Idalya Mahariel Stories link above.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The vapid Orlesians closed in the minute his decorative boots returned to the ballroom. Hunters stalking their prey as they’d maneuvered the Commander into a distant corner away from the dance floor while droning on about earlier salons and scandals.

At first, Cullen thought he’d find pertinent information buried within rumors the nobles whispered out of earshot if he observed hard enough. He realized the error of his ways as it became plain the nobles knew far less than he gave them credit for. He’d opened himself up for discussion as Josephine threatened him to, not expecting the nobles to pursue him with the intensity they exhibited.

One man came close to ending up with an ornamental sword rammed beneath his Adam's apple after his hands wandered into places off limits. The Commander wasn’t certain his blade was sharp enough to elicit blood, but he was impatient to confirm if he could stab with sheer force through the next violating noble that dared put their hands on him.

When he addressed the Ambassador, red-faced and aggravated, Josephine responded with enthusiasm much to Cullen’s horror. She was pleased the nobles were enamored with him and the potential allies it could help them bring to the Inquisition. *If I’m not careful, I’ll leave Orlais engaged to a minor noble’s youngest daughter to gain entry to their stables. We will have a frank discussion about my role in the Inquisition when we’ve returned to Skyhold.*

Stuck in the corner, sweat running down the back of his stiff collar, he waited for a distraction to present itself. Minutes earlier an Inquisition messenger approached Leliana. Cullen’s stomach sunk as the bard’s face fall, color draining from her pale features. Without making eye contact with either of the other advisers, she exited the ballroom, covering her auburn hair with her hood at a running pace and had yet to return.

He trusted in Evelyn’s skills as their leader and her skills with her daggers, but they were in dangerous unknown territory. Cullen knew how easy it was for the lives of talented soldiers to be lost in the heat of combat.

*Evelyn.* He tried not to dwell on the thought of her fighting throughout the palace walls but now struggled to think of anything else after watching Leliana rush out of the room. In a normal battle,
he was lucky to be back at Skyhold with his general anxieties instead of the fear of knowing your loved one is fighting at this exact moment within your reach. At this point, he gave up any pretense of pretending to listen as the Orlesian nobles prattled on.

As the minutes ticked by, each of his heart beats boomed within his throat as it threatened to squeeze shut around him. His lungs fighting against every breath as the Orlesians continued to speak. Their voices cut him like shards of ice. Everything was out of control.

The ballroom spun around him while his feet remained stationary. The edges of his vision blurred as less oxygen made its way to his head. Gripping the edge of a dessert table, he counted each individual intake and exhale of breath until the spinning slowed and the overwhelming fear of hidden demons subsided. When his eyes focused on the nobles still clattering on, Cullen raised an annoyed eyebrow that none of his admirers noticed his sudden meltdown.

If he didn’t see Ev, unharmed, with his own eyes soon, he would lose his mind.

Evelyn remained out of his line of sight their entire time here. She explained during their travel to the palace she would have a room near Grand Duke Gaspard as befitting her station and rumors of the Inquisitor and the Commander together could be disastrous to any attempts of Josephine’s gaining allies through casual slips of the tongue in mentioning potential marriage alliances.

As ridiculous as it was, any questioning of the Inquisitor’s purity could equal lives lost on the battlefield for them later.

It was disgusting. She was no one’s property.

The whole build-up to the Winter Palace drained her to empty. While raised in the Game, everyone in the Inquisition knew failure was not an option. Someone must leave these talks in charge of Orleis if they were to weather the storm coming. Cullen’s job here was to send orders to his Lieutenants and look pretty as Leliana pointed out to him on multiple occasions.

In comparison, Ev expectations were to be a leader, a warrior, a diplomat, an investigator, and a negotiator all while stabbing Venatori in a ball gown and high heels. Day after day she pushed herself too hard, and he knew if there were any mistakes in how the peace talks played out that Evelyn would take the brunt of the blame for her lack of preparation, regardless of her performance. He didn’t envy her for one second.

She withdrew from him on the journey to the Grand Duke’s Villa. Her behavior the night before their departure still bothering him until she dragged him by the hand into her carriage. Throwing herself into his arms before the door closed. As his lips parted her wine-flavored ones, relief bubbled up in his chest, releasing the sense of dread that culminated when she sprinted out of his office in the early hours of the morning with tear-filled eyes.

Cullen understood what it was like to live haunted by demons whether real or imagined. Evelyn needed time off after the peace talks concluded before her ability to do her job was affected.

Time off.

Just the phrase drew an aching longing from his chest. He loved his work, but there’s only so long you can pour your everything into a goal before you have nothing left. He shook Cassandra’s hand a broken man, fear, and anger filling his eyes when he joined the Inquisition. Years later, he’d made progress letting that fear go, made harder by giving lyrium up as he joined. Withdrawal still reared its ugly head at him daily, as a headache flitting over the edge of his brain reminded him, but he was closer to destroying that leash than ever before.
How much of his progress did he owe to Evelyn? To protect and advise her, Cullen dug deep into his broken spirit, finding a strength he hadn’t known he could harness. When giving in to his addiction tempted him, it was the thought of her that kept his boots traveling in the correct direction.

Maybe after the palace, he could talk Evelyn into traveling with him. A way to thank her, taking the weary load off her shoulders for one day. Skyhold wasn’t far from where he grew up and if he was convincing, the other advisers might allow Evelyn and him to travel to the area. There was a lake where he spent so many hours as a child he would love to take her to.

Closing his eyes, he could see her sitting on the edge of the dock. Boots and socks off, trailing her feet across the top of the water. A smile beaming on her face while the sun set the red of her hair on fire in its rays. Cullen always found her beautiful, but the thought of her dressed down and relaxed in the sun in his old stomping ground brought a content smile to his face in the middle of this parade of deceptions.

Opening his eyes, he groaned at seeing the waves of Orlesians still vying to get his attention. They moved closer to him, violating any common-sense knowledge of personal space. He prepared to give any excuse necessary when he saw a ponytail of pure moonlit hair moving towards him, weaving through the crowds.

Part of him relaxed to see an uncovered face among the throngs of beast-like nobles while his heart tightened when any Inquisition messenger approached. Idalya pushed her way through the crowd of his admirers and popped out between two women whose faces curled back with disgust at the proximity to an elf. From behind her, she pulled her arm trailing behind and a much smaller elf stepped out from behind her. Dark hair and similar dress to the Inquisition scouts- her eyes red from falling tears. Something was happening.

The Warden, just a servant to those surrounding them, didn’t wait to be addressed first, as was proper in Orlais. “Cullen, this girl is a spy of Briala’s. She knows dangerous information and almost lost her life to the Game once tonight. The Inquisitor wants her under your protection until testimonies.” Cullen struggled to hear her whisper over the scoffs of the crowd who dispersed around him instead of risking being seen so close to a servant, much less an elven one.

I must thank her for that later.

The lines on the elf’s face were harsh, a concealed anger brewing beneath the surface of her words as she held her composure. Cullen was floored by how beautiful she looked when he retrieved her earlier and now found radiating guilt from the weariness stripping away her vibrancy within these cursed halls. She should not have come here; she wasn’t prepared for this.

Maker, I hope It’s time, we all need to leave here to reduce our losses.

“Thank you, Dal,” his voice came out scratchy and parched. His fear taking hold in his throat growing tighter each moment as his fear for Evelyn’s safety and his equal anger at her commands took hold. “Have you heard anything about the Inquisitor?”

The Warden flinched at Ev’s title as though the mere thought of her burnt the elf to her core. She shook her head, not meeting his eyes, her hands fistat her sides. Cullen sighed with a sense of guilty relief, knowing Leliana would have her beloved friend out of the building the moment Evelyn was hurt or lost. Cullen pushed the thought far from his mind. He needed to focus on the Empress they were there to save.

“Dal, head back to your station.”
“No.” She responded, a dark-skinned elf in servant’s dress, with insubordination in front of a crowd of shocked Orlesians, her hand held in front of the other elf protecting her from an unseen enemy.

Cullen waited to see if they would call for guards or if they would let him deal with this developing situation. Cullen knew little of the Game, but most of what he learned from Evelyn, Leliana, and Josephine comprised someone knowing their place and regarding those of higher station with the respect their culture deemed fit.

When all the Orlesians remained motionless, it was safe to proceed. Dal being thrown into an Orlesian prison was the last thing the Inquisition needed. This was a country whose Empress burned down an entire alienage, killing hundreds of sleeping elves, to send a message to a political rival. What would they do to a defiant Elven servant in view of nobles from throughout Orlais? A sudden wave of nausea gagged him as he pushed out of his mind the image of his once savior being dragged to the hangman’s gallows.

“Servant,” he prayed to the Maker Dal understood what he was doing. “Both of you follow me.” Channeling his “Commander” tone put the nobles at ease as the servant was put back in her place.

He squared his shoulders and marched towards the front doors praying no guards would follow. Idalya’s expression was more reminiscent of Solas than of her more humorous self.

“I’m sorry about that Dal…”

“It’s fine.” She cut him off before he could finish, and he frowned, his concern growing over what caused this torment to his friend.

“It’s not. Now that the whimpering Orlesians are gone- what’s happened?”

Idalya looked down after his question, the creases in her face deepening as his eyes caught on the blood stains on her once emerald slippers. “Too many innocent lives have been lost today. The world has changed little in the decade I was gone. I’m ready for this to end.”

*That was something both could agree on.*

It was a dangerous question to ask, but with Evelyn, he couldn’t help himself: “What happened with the Inquisitor?”

A flash of rage poured over her as the words tumbled past his lips was immediate, but he needed to know Evelyn was okay somewhere in this monstrous building or he feared his own emotions would come apart at the seams at the thought of her broken body laying somewhere while the halls.

“She…,” Idalya paused as she looked up into Cullen’s eyes. It was frightening how much pain swirled through her lavender ones. “she was less empathetic about those lost.”

He exhaled as his eyes closed, needing a brief respite from the cascade of emotion threatening to drown him. *Of course, that happened.* Idalya would risk her life to save everyone around her while Evelyn could name the number of people, on one hand, she would consider personal sacrifice for.

Cullen understood why she feared to let people in but couldn’t help being frustrated as her advisor when troop losses were nothing but numbers to her logic. Hepinched the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger until the pain centered his focus.

“Okay, you can stay here with…,” he stared at the dark-haired elf drawing a blank if Dal spoke her
“Sia.” The young girl spoke up timid behind the Warden.

“Thank you, Sia,” Cullen said carefully to acknowledge the girl who cowered behind Idalya. He turned back to the Warden. “Dal, stay here with Sia and make sure she remains safe. I believe the time for action is close. Are you prepared to fight if needed?”

Idalya cocked an eyebrow and slid her hand along the side of her skirts producing a thin Silverite dagger strapped to her thigh. A chill crested over his spine as the blank expression remained on Idalya’s face. Whatever she experienced within the palace was dismantling the guard Dal kept up to the rest of the world.

The weight on the warrior’s shoulders and conscience were tremendous, but she kept her sanity by surrounding herself with friends and her sense of humor. Now stripped of both, she concerned the Commander. He knew the dangerous look flitting through her eyes. That look of self-control eroding in a person as their self-destructive tendencies carried them through their grief and pain.

“Good.” He swallowed roughly.

A blur passed by the corner of his vision and he tracked it to find the Spymaster standing in the entrance to the ballroom, a glare of annoyance directed at the Warden who knew she was standing behind her but refused to acknowledge her best friend.

With a nod to Idalya, he walked forward to greet Leliana. “Don’t even ask,” he mumbled upon arriving next to her as the two of them turned and surveyed the two elves.

“Idalya, keep your back guarded as the violence draws closer.” The Spymaster spoke in controlled notes, her Orlesian accent thicker than usual. “The Templars will arrive soon to help… If they still live.” That was what it took.

The blank expression dissolved from Dal’s face revealing the compassion and grief she always held so close to her heart, her eyes filled with regret and guilt at her realization over how the rage had taken her away from herself.

Leliana stepped close to the elf, so they were only inches apart. “Don’t let your grief let you lose sight of what still lives. Vengeance will distract you from protecting what is struggling to thrive.” Her whisper hit Cullen like a shock wave.

A slight tremor ran through the Spymaster’s body and Cullen realized Leliana’s words spoke of her own regret of losing herself in her work for the Divine after losing her beloved warden. Every member of the Inquisition had lost something vital to their being, but they kept going because it was their duty, required of them. They pushed on, they kept fighting because Thedas depended on them doing so. Every day people in their company lost companions, lovers, and children- each piece breaking them a little more. Hundreds died as Haven burnt to the ground. But still, they fought.

Cullen let his vengeance and trauma consume him in Kirkwall under Meredith’s command. Demonized those he vowed to protect. Cassandra and Leliana took a risk handing the Commander’s helm to him. A man who cowered at the memory of who he once was and the man he could be. People called him a hero for standing up to Meredith at the last moment and in front of him stood a true hero who had laid down her life without question to save all of Ferelden.

Maker, I swear to you I will not let her end up on the same path.
“Can you do this? I understand if you cannot.” Leliana’s whisper drew him out of thoughts.

The Warden drew back her shoulders, rolling them in place to get her circulation restarted from her tense position. “I’m here.” She sounded like Idalya again, her confidence reinstated, though her eyes spoke of the pain she would have to confront later. “Seeing death has a different impact after you’ve done it yourself.”

A punch struck him in the center of his mass as he processed the weight of his friend’s words. She was falling apart. Her time in the Inquisition controlled, protecting her until ready to face the Archdemon. Cullen couldn’t imagine the fear gripping the elf as she stared at the dead. Seeing them with new eyes.

Mid response Dal’s face tilted to the side, the look of once-faded anger taking over again. Evelyn was returning to the ballroom, Idalya’s ears hearing her approach before any visible sign. A second later his eyes caught her fiery auburn curls as she marched her way back into the beating heart of Orlais.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.

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The Chapter Where the Venatori Strike

Chapter Summary

The Peace Talks have reached their climax. Who will leave the night leading Orlais?

Dorian, Blackwall, and Sera followed behind the Inquisitor, a mixture of disgust and helplessness warring on their faces. Halamshiral was not what they prepared for. Orlesian duelists tip-toeing through the shadows was more suited to Leliana’s training than Cullen’s “hit them as hard as possible” mentality.

Though having Evelyn within his sight healed his heart, seeing the harsh lines pressed into her face caused a new level of unease. It was rare for Ev to show when the pressure of leadership got to her, but she was struggling to keep her thoughts concealed. As she approached Cullen and Leliana, Dal backed away into the candlelit shadows of the foray.

“Inquisitor,” Leliana gave a formal bow to her leader knowing every set of eyes were watching. “Were you able to find what you needed?”

“And more…” Evelyn curled her hand, her fingers tensing reflexively. A grimace pulled at the corners of her lips.

Dorian reached out, taking her fingers in his own to inspect her knuckles over the remnants of an injury. She recoiled, ripping her hand back to her side. He raised an inquisitive eyebrow at his cousin before shrugging and resuming his position back with Evelyn’s companions, whose flat expressions said more than words allowed.

“The time is now,” Evelyn spoke as Josephine joined the group. “I have seen enough to move forward. We must be on our most cautious behavior as we enter. Inquisition, wait for my signal.”

Cullen’s stomach dropped at her words. His active nature demanded something happen soon, but action meant Evelyn’s life on the line once more. The thought of losing her gripped Cullen in fear. What started as an attraction, a distraction to push aside his struggle with lyrium addiction, turned into so much more than he ever expected or hoped.

“Commander, are you ready on my word?”

“I am always at your call, my Lady.”

She acknowledged him with a nod, their eyes meeting for the first time since arriving. His heart swelled at the fear lingering in her olive eyes. It’s almost over, Ev. It’s almost over. It was painful resisting the urge to reach out and take her within his arms- to caress the softness of her skin and feel her safe, one moment where he pretended he could protect her from those seeking to tear her down.

“Thank you.” She was quiet, her eyes flooding with unspoken emotions.

Her hair had fallen from the intricate web of braids nestled on her head and now billowed over her shoulder in loose ringlets. She’d shocked the court by refusing to wear a mask, a message she viewed herself above the Game, but her wild hair added to the display, making her more dangerous
to the casual observer.

Her defiance only made her more beautiful to him. The harder she pushed back against the expectations applied to her as a woman leading the Inquisition, the harder he’d fallen for her. She was as essential to him as the air he breathed. His heart pushing through each beat to draw him closer to the next time he saw her again.

She broke eye contact to verify the plan with Josephine and Leliana. Everyone would hold until her signal. What she was waiting for, Cullen did not know, but it was not his job to question his leader’s directions.

At her motion, her companions dispersed throughout the crowd, blending into the activities as they waited for her signal. The Inquisitor turned on her heel, her shoulders back, chin pointed prominently as she entered the ballroom. The crowds quieted, parting to make room for the woman who thought herself better than the Orlesian nobles around her. She walked by the sea of masks without paying them heed, her heels clicking echoes in their silence.

Evelyn approached the peace talks where Celene, Gaspard, and Briala were still in negotiations. Each sway and swing of her full hips dragged him further with each deliberate step. Her black and gold dress hugged her curves and held none of the modesty seen in Ferelden for these affairs.

Rylen asked him once if he was jealous watching Ev paraded for the nobles' enjoyment. He’d responded that as different as they were, he trusted her instincts. She made her own decisions as Inquisitor and chose him. He wasn't jealous. He was blessed by the hand of the Maker that a woman of her caliber wasted her time on a broken man like him.

When she called him out on his feelings for her during their last night in Skyhold, he hadn’t intended for that to be the way he expressed the depth of his emotions. He avoided lying if he could. Withholding his knowledge of Idalya was enough to break him in guilt. He understood why Leliana begged him to withhold the information. Evelyn turned away no opportunities to push her goals forward.

Cullen winced at the thought of Ev dangling the King of Ferelden’s dead lover in front of Alistair’s face while demanding his military force. Leliana committed treason against Ferelden when she stole the remains of her best friend from the royal crypt of Denerim. Idalya was a dangerous pawn for Ev to have at her disposal.

He didn't know why Ev had yet to negotiate over Dal. She only held her cards tight against her breast when she had a specific use for them later. Whatever her purpose for Dal was, it would be dangerous for the young Warden.

As Ev rose over the stairway to enter the peace talks, Cullen kept seeing her in flashes from his fantasy, resting next to the water of the home he grew up in. A sun-warmed smile and joy written upon her face, instead of the mask of stress and disgust occupying it.

He swore he’d make her role easier. To find a moment she could let her guard down. The longing for a holiday together was a deep need to remove her mantle from her shoulders. To let her fill her chest with air empty of expectations.

Cullen was the guiltiest of stacking too many responsibilities on her plate. When she first joined, he pushed one mission after another to improve their organization’s visibility. Each time she came back after achieving everything they asked and more, she returned wearier and less trusting than her last visit.
People could question her style, but never her outcomes. She produced results no matter the task. His throat grew dry watching her converse with the Empress, his brain superimposing the image of Haven burning around her as she ran out to fight Corypheus. 

She left with an entire volunteer battalion of soldiers and returned alone a day later as the flurries of snow threatened to swallow her life forever into the mountain, claiming one last victim for Corypheus. *This is different. This is the Game, not an avalanche.*

The crowd murmured before settling into silence. Negotiators rose to their feet, heading to the front platform elevated above the dance floor. Celene wore a dignified smirk, while Gaspard wore a blank expression under his golden mask, and Briala’s lips curled back in anger. It appeared the outcome the Inquisition expected was coming to fruition.

Joining them, Duchess Florianne and the Inquisitor made their way to the front. Cullen’s eyes glued to Evelyn’s every movement, waiting for her signal, as Celene waited for silence from the room. The energy filled with a tension so tight it brought memories of being locked in Kinloch tower cascading back into his head.

“My dear Orlesians,” the Empress began. Her brilliant sapphire skirts and silver mask set her apart from those standing around her. As eyes in the room sealed to her every move, the members of the Inquisition kept theirs peeled awaiting the Venatori’s ambush.

Ev’s eyes caught his across the room. He saw a sadness hidden in her depths, she never allowed him to see. With a blink, his guarded love returned.

“Our country has been held in limbo as battles carved the landscape of our beautiful home into bloody battlefields. Today my regents and I have come together to build a plan to end this violence.” The crowd applauded her words as hushed whispers grew around Cullen. “A compromise to bring peace to Orlais and end this civil war!”

The applause grew deafening as Cullen watched Evelyn. He knew every signal, every command, but none were issued. She looked calm and at ease, a great contrast from the woman who entered the ballroom with the weight of Thedas balanced on her shoulders.

Celene motioned to the group behind her, “Come forward so we can celebrate this victory together.”

Gaspard and Briala advanced on Celene’s right, while Florianne and Evelyn approached from her left.

“None of this could have been accomplished without the challenging work and focus on Orlais that all have shown tonight. Gaspard,” she turned to face her cousin. “I know we haven’t seen eye to eye on many things over the years, but I am grateful for your help in leading Orlais’ armies to fight the darkspawn magister.”

Cullen saw a shuffling of movement behind Celene’s left shoulder, but Evelyn remained stationary, a noble’s smile adorning her face mirroring the surrounding masks.

“No greater military leader has ever existed in the history of our fine country and you will continue to do so…” Celene’s mouth dropped open forming a loose *O.*

His heart sunk into his chest as the crimson pool formed across the bodice of her dress. Every breath was a lifetime as the Empress took one staggering step forward before tumbling over the banister. Her vibrant blue silks billowed through the air before her body hit the polished wooden
floors of the palace.

His eyes flicked the banister above to see Evelyn sink her steel dagger deep into Florianne’s heart. The Duchess crumpled to the floor, her arm flinging out to the side as the dagger used to stab Celene rolled out of her hand over the banister to land next to the Empress’ unmoving body.

Screams rang out in the palace. Some nobles fled while others pressed closer to see their leader bleeding out into the night. Cullen’s limbs were numb as he pushed forward, scattering the nobles ahead of him.

Arriving at the Empress’ body, Leliana swooped past him, dropping to her knees as she held out a trembling hand towards Celene’s neck while watching the pool of blood collect around the woman. She glared up over the balcony at Evelyn, with a grunt of frustration, who looking on the scene with a blank expression covering her face.

A wail of despair escaped past Josephine’s lips. Leliana turned and wrapped her arm around her friend’s waist to pull her back from the scene in front. Blackwall appeared from behind, a stoic look signaling he expected no outcome different in Orlais and led the shocked Ambassador away from the crowds of Orlesian nobles.

Cullen couldn’t breathe. Oxygen disappeared from the room as his eyes met Evelyn’s. Evelyn stood and watched as Florianne thrust her dagger into the Empress’ back before murdering the assassin. The members of the Inquisition could not have been the only people to watch this set of events happen.

His eyes floated across the crowd. The Orlesians now stood back in their usual positions, the whispered murmurs restarting over the newest victim of the Game. Leliana and Blackwall removed the grieving Josephine from the spectacle, Sera and Idalya gone, leaving only Dorian standing off to the side. A bewildered look on his face. A cruel laugh broke from Cullen’s throat, wildly inappropriate, at seeing his exact emotions portrayed on Dorian’s face. Whatever happened in the Winter Palace tonight, Dorian was not a party to.

Cullen stepped back from the Empress’ cooling body as a file of servants swooped in carrying a travel cot. Together they lifted the body before covering her with a sheet and filing out of the ballroom. The other servants scrubbed on their hands and knees to clean the large pool of blood from the floor as the nobles around resumed their normal conversations like nothing out the ordinary just happened.

What the fuck was wrong with Orlais? They watched their leader die and now they’re discussing the dining service from a salon last week.

F*ck this place, I hope it burns to the ground.

The finish on the floor sparkled as the servants exited the festivities. Cullen searched behind him unable to locate any other members of the Inquisition. Dorian still stood against the far wall of the ballroom staring at the empty mark on the floor where moments before a dying woman lain.

He peered at the top of the podium where Evelyn stood motionless returning his gaze. Nothing changed in her features, her thoughts running so deep it was impossible to differentiate from the surface. The two stared at one another, his eyes asking hers questions his lips could not speak.

The nobles quieted as Gaspard moved to the front of the podium beside Evelyn.

“Orleans,” his deep voice boomed through the ballroom causing a shiver in Cullen’s spine.
“Great tragedy has struck tonight, but we will not let it distract us from Celene’s vision of peace!” A polite applause and nod of heads swept through the crowd. “Celene wanted us to unite to fight our enemies and that we will be. I, Emperor Gaspard de Chalons, am proud to announce an alliance between the Orlesian throne and the Inquisition.”

Gaspard reached out taking Evelyn’s hand and raised it in the air as the crowd cheered, the hum of whispers suffocating Cullen. Evelyn smiled at Gaspard before he motioned to her to speak. She stepped forward, the crowd watching her with tense interest.

“Corypheus and his Red Templars are a threat to every human in Thedas. We must compile all resources available to defeat them. The Inquisition’s alliance with Orlais is the first major step needed to defeat our enemies and secure our lands!” She held her anchored hand in the air which sparked, illuminating the ballroom with her brilliant green light as the crowd clapped and cheered in adoration.

Cullen’s hand clutched at his chest as his heart thundered in his chest. Each erratic beat sent pain through his limbs as a headache pushed on the sides of his skull. How could she do this? There had to be a reason. There had to be.

She was their leader; she would not lead them astray, would she? They came here to secure an ally to beat back the sea of darkness threatening to sweep over their lands and she had. Just not in any way Cullen could have imagined.

Gaspard approached Evelyn’s left, a victorious grin floating across his lips as he wrapped his arm around Evelyn’s waist. His hand gripping her hip. Fingers pinching her flesh. She smiled back at him, her hair swaying in the breeze through the balcony doors.

Bile threatened to leap from Cullen’s throat. His feet backed up faster than he could register, running into the Dowager who gasped in surprise at the collision. He tried to issue an apology, but he needed to leave this room.

Work. Focus on work.

Barris and Rylen were out there waiting on commands Cullen was incapable of giving. His men, his army needed him at his best. He needed to pull himself together in front of the gossiping Orlesians, but first, he needed answers.
The Chapter Where Cullen Dances

Chapter Summary

Cullen confronts the Inquisition demanding to know if they knew about Evelyn’s future deception.

Waves of rage washing over Cullen, lapping at him like waves on the shore. She’d lied to them, to him, as they’d laid out their plans as a team.

As he passed the crowds of remaining Orlesians in the foray, he overheard a group of nobles discussing how mighty the joining of the Inquisitor and Emperor of Orlais would be. They were entering the golden age of Orlais and Evelyn’s army would crush the Ferelden dogs beneath her heeled boots without mercy.

This couldn't have been the plan.

His headache was now pounding in his skull, blurring the edges of his vision, as his heavy footsteps lead him towards the minor office the Inquisition used as a base within the palace walls. He entered the room without knocking finding only Josephine, mahogany eyes still bloodshot from crying and attempting to collect herself, as Blackwall whispered into her ear, his hands resting on her biceps.

“Did you know?” He roared at their Ambassador. The sound echoing in the narrow crimson room. His plan to keep his anger in check until he found answers, but he was incapable of that at the moment.

Josephine’s eyes refilled with tears as she looked at Cullen helplessly. A firm shove to Cullen’s chest sent him reeling backward as Blackwall stood in front of his love without hesitation to defend her.

Cullen was begging for a fight, and he’d enjoy putting a fist into the warden’s hairy countenance without regret. With a grimace, he restrained himself as the haggard warrior moved closer to him to put more distance between him and Josephine. The fire coursing through his veins dulled recognizing the look of protectiveness that radiated out of Blackwall’s eyes- a look he often saw reflected on his own face around Evelyn.

“Do you think any of us would have gone along with this charade if we had known? Our Inquisitor just let a woman be murdered in front of a live audience! This is not what we stand for!” Blackwall spat with venom. “You’re furious and want answers, but get in fucking line, Commander.”

Cullen respected the warden’s skills in battle, but at this moment as fury lit his eyes, he realized Gordon Blackwall was a dangerous man if you threatened what he cared about. With a growl, Cullen grabbed a ceramic vase close to him and flung it into the wall. It exploded. Pieces of ceramic dispersing through the room as Josephine screamed and covered her ears. Tears falling harder from her desperate eyes.

The door opened between them and before Cullen could turn, a sharp dagger pressed against the underside of his chin.
“Are you playing us as well? Are you some kind of lapdog with no morals?” The Spymaster was panting as she leveled each precise word at Cullen. “She let Florianne kill Celene! We saw it! We warned her Gaspard was dangerous, and she’s aligned our entire organization to him and Orlais.”

With a grunt he shoved her dagger out of the way as he glared at the rogue. “I knew nothing, but now it’s too late.” His hands curled into fists at his side. “What kind of spymaster are you anyway, Leliana? With a traitor right in front of your nose. Whether you did or didn’t know, you fail either way don’t you?”

Leliana’s eyes filled with rage at his comments, winning a verbal joust against the Spymaster would have him bursting at the seams with smug joy, but he felt his anger emptying, running through his limbs out onto the polished floor below him like Celene’s blood had.

Rage was always brief before it would crumble away leaving him alone in his decisions again. They knew nothing. For all he knew the entire palace was teeming with spies and all Evelyn could trust was herself. He would not point fingers or accuse until he heard it from her lips. She was their leader, and he had to believe this was best for the Inquisition until shown otherwise.

He had to believe for his own sake or Maker help him.

“What do we do?” he shrugged helpless to the situation as he resigned himself to what reality the truth would bring. A soft, but shaking, a hand rested on his forearm and he looked down into Josephine’s bloodshot and tear-lined eyes.

“We do our job, Commander, and play the Game.” He covered her hand with his large and callused one and nodded. She was right.

They still had a job to do. Venatori were hunting the halls of the palace. They needed to be visible to those who would dare strike at the Inquisition sensing weakness.

“We need to go back out there and act like everything went to plan before anyone suspects there’s discord in our regime,” Josephine spoke, her voice much stronger than her trembling hands conveyed.

Leliana walked over to him and smoothed his curls back, disheveled from running his hands through the strands. She swept the shards of the broken vase off his Inquisition uniform with a soft touch.

“I’m sorry, Cullen.” She spoke soft words not meeting his eyes. “you deserve better.” He had no words for her. What he deserved at this moment was the truth...

Cullen stood in silence, his body stiff, as she walked to Josephine. She slid her thin fingers into her friend’s trembling hand and led her back into the foyer. Blackwall approached him from behind and clasped him on the shoulder as the two men took their time reentering the Game.

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Hours passed, and the crowds were beginning the dwindle down over the excitement seen at the peace talks. Noble after noble told him this would be talked about for years and how excited they were to have witnessed the Empress’ death in person.

I fucking hate Orlesians.

Talking to one minor noble at a time kept him distracted from Evelyn who spent most of the last hours waltzing across the dance floor on Gaspard’s arm. When they weren’t dancing, Gaspard
spoke to groups of enthusiastic backers for his campaign to become Emperor, all the while keeping a possessive hand on Evelyn at all times. As the crowds made their way out of the palace, Cullen took the chance to exit this ridiculous building before the urge to burn it all down became too great.

The fresh air he gulped into his lungs was a gift from the Maker. The path out of the back exit of the ballroom leads him to a stone walkway that lead around the palace to the Templar and soldier camps set up to the South. Music from the ballroom drifted down through the open balcony doors and Cullen found his feet walking in the rhythm of sweet harmonies despite how *fucked* his night had been.

Around the corner, there was a plateau stretching out far below the balcony across the land. Not far in the distance, he spotted a figure standing against the image of the setting sun. Her now loose iridescent hair splayed over her shoulders, making Idalya recognizable even across the trimmed grass.

His feet steered him towards her. She swayed in time with the orchestral music flowing over them like the overlapping waves of the sea. Her Inquisition jacket removed, laying on the ground at her feet, her arms wrapped around her in the cool breeze.

Gooseflesh across the tops of her arms and behind her neck from standing in the cold. Her shoes and ankles were still stained with blood, but her chin was held up proudly despite what she’d experienced tonight. Cullen made careful steps toward her out of respect knowing she heard him the minute he stepped foot on the path.

Cullen couldn’t help but compare her to Evelyn. Two women who were both strong leaders, and yet so different. Evelyn ruled from fear- a fear of being powerless and cornered, she would do whatever it took to not be helpless. Dal lead with her heart. She was the hardest worker in his army, but she showed a gentle hand and empathy to those unworthy of it, as he remembered from first-hand experience.

*She would not have let Celene die tonight.*

The thought twisted his heart to pieces, but without doubt, it was true. She would have done everything to ensure no one died in the palace who didn’t have to. For Dal, there was no acceptable collateral damage. Every soldier she trained on the field had a name, a background, a family waiting at home for them.

He shook his head to clear his thoughts. If he started this path, he’d drive himself insane. He would let her explain why things ended the way they had. There must be a reason.

He stopped a few feet away and looked out over the rolling acres of manicured gardens, “How are you doing?”

“I’m shaken.” She shook her head in annoyance. “Seeing those servants plus our outcome was unexpected. I thought I wanted to see the world outside Skyhold. I was wrong.” Her hands gripped her forearms, so the indentions drained of color.

“Dal, I’m sure Evelyn has her reasons,” he wondered if there was a point to say the words he feared out loud. “She investigated much further into the palace than we did, there must have been something else she found… I have to believe that.”

“Do you?” She turned to face him, an eyebrow raised in shock.

“Yes, I do. I am here serving the Inquisition to atone for the previous griefs I’ve caused others. I
chose Evelyn as our leader and I love her so I have to keep faith that all of this was in our best interests… or I don’t know what I will do.”

Her face softened at his words as she empathized with his current plight while her own demons plagued her.

“This is a good look for you. You’re much less threatening out of thirty pounds of armor.” There was a smile on her lips, but Cullen saw the sadness stinging her eyes even as he rolled his at her. Humor was her shield. She’d use it to protect herself until her dying breath.

“The ridiculous nobles inside agree with you.” He snorted out. *This felt good.* One moment to speak like the world wasn’t crumbling down around them, the ground threatening to spiral away.

“They have your dance card filled all night, Commander?” She grinned at him, each moment morphing back into herself. The two recognized the other’s pain and persevere.

“Oh, they tried!” Cullen chuckled warmly, “but I avoided them the entire night, but not their wandering hands.” His tone turned bitter.

Idalya laughed, a calming sound melting into the music flowing around them as she rubbed the sore spot on the back of her head where Leliana bound her hair impossibly tight. It was rare to see her hair down, he found it lovely. The white ends trailed against the small of her back, loose waves reflecting the growing moonlight so she looked magical, or more so than she already did.

“So you’re telling me, you show up to the fanciest ball in all of Thedas, dressed like a prince from a fairytale then deny those wound up Orlesians the chance to dance with the dashing Commander of the Inquisition? You’re a cruel man, Cullen. *I like you.*” She laughed loudly this time, which helped heal cracks in his guilty heart as he watched her crooked smirk.

He was a broken man incapable of picking up the pieces anymore, but if he helped her or anyone else maybe it wouldn’t matter as much.

“What can I say? I can’t tolerate Orlesians. Ferelden women are much more beautiful and don’t have to hide their features behind hideous masks. I suppose I didn’t find the right partner to dance with.”

*Even without a mask, people still hide who they are.*

“Trying to win my favor, Commander? Nice try, I can’t dance.” She poked him firmly in his chest and he squinted in discomfort unused to being without his protective breastplate.

Cullen grabbed her hand, pulling her forward. “That works out since neither can I.”

Dal tried to protest, but he took her hand in his as he placed her other on his shoulder and then his at her waist. He mumbled the count under his breath and tried to move with her, immediately stepping on her foot. A barking laugh rose out of her as Cullen readjusted stubbornly and attempted to start again before stepping on her other foot after only three steps.

“Wow, you’re terrible at this.” She choked on laughter and he couldn’t imagine a more wonderful sound to hear. Maybe saving the hero, would help him someday save himself. “Here let me lead.”

She whispered the count under her breath before leading him into the steps of the waltz. When Cullen lost the timing, she steered him back on course as though she was born on a dance floor. They waltzed around the garden as the orchestra continued their tirade of Orlesian tunes.
“You’re a great dancer,” Cullen said flatly.

“It appears so” she mumbled.

“You don’t remember?” His heart ached anew for the impossible girl who led his moving feet across the land. A girl who had lost so much. He had lost Evelyn, but he held tightly to their memories and that was something she could never take away from him.

“I don’t remember learning, but there’s a lot of things I don’t remember…” her voice faded as she looked out over his shoulder her face softening and a hint of a smile ghosting over her rose-colored lips.

*She deserved to know about Alistair. Maybe this was that moment.*

“Speaking of that…” Leliana warned him of the consequences of having Idalya remember too much too fast, but he didn’t *fucking* care anymore.

Who were they to withhold something so precious from her? Withholding information is what deceitful people did, it’s what Evelyn did.

“Dal, there’s something I wanted to discuss with you…”
The Chapter Where Idalya Doubts

Chapter Summary

Cullen is interrupted, and Idalya questions the correct path for a woman whose destiny is larger than herself.

A throat cleared behind the dancing pair, echoing into the surrounding vastness. Cullen turned to see Barris cutting a striking figure in the rising moonlight behind him and understood what spurred the change in Dal.

“Can I step in?” Barris bowed, his eyes never leaving the Warden like she would float away on the breeze if his eyes strayed. Her smile was infectious, eyes projecting more happiness than the entire time he’d known her, which at that moment meant everything to Cullen.

“Of course, Ser Barris.” A flush of pink spread over her cheeks as she extended her hand to him.

Barris removed his dress gloves with haste, shoving them into Cullen’s chest as he stepped forward eager to take her hand as Cullen laughed. She peered up at him. Though he was smiling, she saw the fake facade of the man whose soul was crying out for answers. She reached her other hand out to catch Cullen’s as he turned to leave them to their happiness. As he turned, he knew his sorrow was unmasked in his features.

Dal whispered, “Cullen, someday you’ll find the right dancing partner. I know you will.” He inhaled and turned to leave as he patted Barris on the shoulder, his boots stepping back onto the stone path leading back to the barracks. He hoped to find Rylen in need of help to keep his mind occupied until the sun rose over the camp.

This would be a long night, withdrawal being the least of his concerns.

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Barris placed his hand into hers with a gentle touch while his other took her waist. Her cheeks burned as a flush spread across her chest and back, his warmth emanating from the thick woven fabric into her flesh. He squared his shoulders to hers, waiting for some signal, some sign not to proceed. When no sign of resistance appeared, his hesitation melted away as he twirled her across the courtyard.

She’d watched him perform countless spars but found him light and graceful as he moved in perfect rhythm with her. Everything else melted away until only the distant music of the orchestra prevailed over the pounding in her ears.

The music slowed down into a slower melody. Barris pulled her forward until her body was flush against his. She sighed as she gave in to temptation and rested her cheek against his broad chest. One of his arms slid around her waist while the other hugged her shoulders.

She breathed him in, leather, stiff linens, and a drifting scent of steel. Her cheek pushed by his expanding lungs and she smiled as he rested his on top of her head, his nose pressed to the hair tumbling like a waterfall down her back.
She felt out of place in this new world. A relic—dust-covered and unnecessary. He made her feel alive, vital and struggling. This was the spot fate intended for her, every disaster she survived carrying her to this moment. Their bodies fusing together by some unspoken element.

A wind blew across the terrace carrying a biting chill from the mountains and Dal shuddered in his arms. They had stopped dancing and were holding one another as the insane world passed around them. There were no armies, no dead Empresses, no darkspawn, no dragons… just Idalya and Delrin. She would accomplish everything the Inquisition threw at her if he was by her side.

She unwrapped her arms from around him and placed them on his chest. The curve of her lips raised at the pounding of her his heart beneath her scarred fingers. Words escaped her. In his presence, she was not confident or sure. She was clumsy, tripping over words as they exited her tongue.

She was a fragile object just one crack away from breaking apart into a million pieces. Barris was gentle with her like she was precious. The softness that clouded all his actions with her was about his emotions and not his concerns over her frailty.

She leaned up to look at him, his eyes bored into hers with an emotion she was too afraid to read even if they were desperate to tell her. What if she had misunderstood this? She watched Cullen’s hopes and dreams bleed out on floor alongside Celene’s tonight. What gave him strength in one strike had become his greatest weakness.

Maybe she was a misguided hero-worship; a drinking story to boast with the Templars later. The broken part of her did not care. She understood that he might use her, but she couldn’t stop herself. His touch made her skin electric, currents streaking through her limbs. She’d lived in a nightmare since waking and he was the only thing she’s found that calmed her fears and doubts. What did I matter if he held that much power over her?

He cast his eyes away from hers, overwhelmed by contact. A smile fluttered across her lips as her fingers drifted over his heart, her own surging at the rush of power at his beating erratically at her touch. Having the Templar out of his uniform was a good thing, something she’d miss when they returned to Skyhold when the daily regime of training would take over their lives again. A Templar out of uniform was a novelty, they felt weakened without their defenses, which now, put them on an equal footing.

With a sharp inhale, he turned his head to face her, the arm around her shoulders moving away. The chill of the air painful as it brushed across where his heat abandoned her. His hand came up and gently guided a loose piece of hair out of her face over her shoulder as he searched her eyes.

His hand hovered over her skin before he let his fingertips ghost over her cheekbones, his palm settling over her cheek. Her skin warming against his touch, lips parting as the universe pulled them closer.

*She wanted this man.* She’d take anything this gorgeous Templar would give her and it would never be enough.

All her senses at overload- eyes glued to his deep emerald eyes, the smell of leather and steel, the pounding of his heart strumming beneath her fingers, the sounds of his shallow gasps matching her own.

In this chaos, she was desperate to know what he tasted like. If she stood up on her toes and pressed her lips to his, she wondered if her repaired heart would cease beating for good? The thought of her tongue sliding along the ridge of his lower lip caused her to clench her thighs together.
This is enough, no, it’s not enough.

Just touching would never be enough. The pace of her heart made her head spin as she swayed on her feet. Barris tightened his arm around her, pulling her against his muscular frame. Her teeth pressed into her bottom lip to keep from groaning. Barris’ eyes flicked down to her lips before locking back on hers, a hunger spreading through the emerald ponds.

Her body burned as his heat spread through her limbs. His muscles twitched around her trying to hold his self-control in place. She didn’t want him too. What would unleash the Templar? To throw aside his forced gentleness? She did not need to be treated like she would shatter at the merest bobble.

She was certain she’d kissed this man in the carriage. But she needed him to give her some sign that this was what he also wanted. What was he so afraid of?

His thumb ran over the perimeter of her cheek as his tongue darted out to wet his lips as he closed the distance between them painstakingly slow. He used his fingers to tilt her head back, and he rested his forehead against hers. Their noses touched, and both closed their eyes, gasping for breath from their minor contact.

She found comfort she might have the same effect he had on her. He drew closer, the edge of his velvet lips connecting with the corner of her mouth as she sighed.

His head jerked back, surprise filling his eyes. She drowned in an ocean of self-doubt as he looked her, concern replacing his previous emotions.

“I’m… I’m sorry, Dal.”

Her heart smashed at his words, teeth biting down into her lower lip to keep her vulnerabilities from spilling out. This wasn’t what she hoped for- what she needed him to be. Idalya stepped back from him defensively and as he reached for her, she sidestepped and continued moving away.

It was only when she reached a shaking hand up to cover her mouth she discovered the streams of tears pouring from her eyes. Frozen in the chilled air, she watched Barris approach her with apprehensive steps, his hands up to convey he was no danger. He stopped a few feet away, worry etched into every line of his smooth ebony skin.

“I’m shouldn’t have pushed you into something you weren’t ready for.” His fingers twitched at his sides as he searched for the correct words. “You weren’t crying because I... kissed you?”

“No,” she laughed, wiping the trails of ice from her freezing skin. “or maybe they’re tears of relief since you took so long.”

A deep blush bloomed high on his cheekbones as he stared at the grass like he had found the most interesting object ever. She smiled at his theatrics as he reminded her of Cullen.
He analyzed her for a moment before swallowing and closing the distance until their two bodies were touching again. She prayed to the Maker he intended to pick up where they left off before her eyes watered the overly manicured lawn.

The world of only them cracked apart at the seams as loud clanging footsteps approached from the palace. In a heartbeat, Barris stepped away and she shuddered as the cold attacked every inch of her that was just connected to him. Turning to the stairway, she saw Cassandra and Blackwall approaching toward the barracks.

“Dal, there you are.” Her thick Nevarran accent was normally a welcome sound to her, but right now it meant work for the warriors. “You’re being summoned to meet with Leliana and Josephine in camp. It appears we may have side missions to address on the return trip to Skyhold.” Of course, they did.

Cassandra straightened her soldiers and stood waiting for a response. The Seeker did not have to share her displeasure of the night’s outcome out loud- it was written everywhere in her expression. Idalya was afraid of what her voice would sound like as she attempted to speak but Barris spoke first.

“Thank you for your time, my Lady.” He bowed and turned to leave giving curt nods to both Cassandra and Blackwall.

“Barris?” He paused, his body stiff, with controlled movements he turned his neck to gaze at her. “Thank you, but,” she motioned to her servant’s dress, “I am no lady.” He looked at her thoughtfully and shook his head.

“I beg to differ. You are more of a Lady than the entirety of nobles in Orlais. They should strive to follow your example.” His sweet smile added one more crack to her deteriorating shell as he made his way back to the stairway and continued to where the Templars awaited him.

Blackwall laughed, a loud sound that made Dal cringe as the rest of the world came rushing back as the booming sound of her heart slowed. “That one is smooth for a Templar!” Cassandra made a disgusted noise and turned back to Dal.

“I’ll be down in a just a minute, Seeker. I need a minute to collect my thoughts before speaking.” Cassandra nodded in agreement, her eyes betraying a similar feeling of apprehension as she and Blackwall followed the path where Barris exited.

She turned back to the rolling hills, wrapping her arms around herself as she shuddered from the loss of Barris as much as the cold. Tears threatened to prick up behind her eyes, but she forced them back. This was not the time for such things. She was a tool of the Inquisition and she was getting lost in infatuations like a school girl that could amount to nothing since she was not sure she would even survive fighting Corypheus’ dragon.

What am I thinking?

She shouldn’t get herself involved with someone in the inquisition. When you harbored attachments, it interfered with your decision making as a leader. No matter how much it might hurt, it was cleaner to stay away. It was easier to walk out and present yourself to die when there was nothing tethering you here.

Her head ached. All of this was too much. Evelyn, Celene, Barris… the attacks on her mind were relentless that night. Skyhold built her strength up to swing a sword and fight, but she found herself worried the contained environment shielded her from the fact that her own mind and heart were
more fragile than her body.

With a forlorn sigh, she turned to follow on the path when she heard voices drifting down from the upper patio attached to the side of the palace. Above she spotted Evelyn standing at the edge of the deck, her elbows popped up on the banister ledge as Gaspard was standing behind her his arms wrapped around her waist as his lips whispered to the pale skin of her neck.

Dal locked eyes with the fiery redhead unsure of her emotions. She got her job done. Did collateral damage matter if you got the correct outcome? She had no answer, but maybe Evelyn didn’t either. Maybe the Inquisitor’s own strategy was aligning herself with the strongest ally she found when the opportunity arose.

Idalya cared for Cullen, but was it any of her business who Evelyn hurt as she tried to steer the Inquisition through these uncharted waters? No, no it wasn’t. Maybe Evelyn was right that an involvement was only as important as what it helped you accomplish.

As a grin spread across Evelyn’s crimson-stained lips, Idalya diverted her eyes away feeling more alone than ever. Evelyn might be correct, but it didn’t make her more palatable. The weight of the night was sinking her below the depths of what she could handle.

No amount of booze would drown her thoughts tonight, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t give it her best try.
“This partnership between Gaspard and the Inquisition is ingenious, how long has the plan been in the works? It made for an entertaining event. Nobles across Orlais will talk of nothing but your brass Inquisitor, who we presume will be the next Empress.” The Dowager tilted her head towards Leliana, her silver mask unchanging, as the bard smiled, her blood boiling inside her limbs.

“You know I’m not at liberty to say, Lady Mantillon.” She straightened the hem of her uniform. “The safety of the Orlais is foremost our goal in the Inquisition. We are proud to make the announcement of our partnership public tonight. Excuse me, work cannot be delayed all night due to a party, no matter how exceptional it is.”

After a curt bow and smile for the woman’s benefit, she excused herself from the Dowager’s eager eyes. If the old bat thought she would get any information from the Inquisition’s Spymaster, then she wasn’t as intelligent as she gave the woman credit for.

Cullen stood in the corner of the ballroom like a ticking time bomb, his emotions displayed for the world, and anyone trained in the Game until he had fled out the back door of the ballroom to the barracks.

She’d pity him if she wasn’t filled to the brim with anger and embarrassment at her own failures tonight. Her job was to know threats were coming before they arrived and twice she had failed the Inquisition- first Haven and now their own Inquisitor.

Hundreds of hours of planning had gone into this mission. Maker, she even allowed her best friend, to be strung along as just another pawn in Evelyn’s game. Early in the night, she introduced Evelyn to Celene’s Occult Adviser, Dal’s former companion, Morrigan. She held her fear clutched inside that Evelyn would say something about Idalya joining the Inquisition, but the rogue’s distrust of magic had worked in Leliana’s favor. The mage never made eye contact and Evelyn kept her lips sealed.

Why had she brought Idalya here? Was Dal’s true purpose to be among the slaughtered Elven servants? Yet another piece of collateral damage from Evelyn Trevelyan’s reign?

To avoid facing Cullen again, since she owed him one apology for shoving a dagger into his throat, she headed out the front doors. The air of superiority became stifling inside the ballroom as her lungs begged for air untainted with privilege and deception. She used to live for the Game; the thrill it gave her to be part of the machinations of Orlais. Now she felt used and bloodied by the system she was so eager once to excel in.

After her rage subsided watching Celene’s body carted off the dance floor like a broken goblet of wine, she knew her first assumption was correct that Josephine and Cullen were not part of Evelyn’s plan. The Inquisitor had taken the history of Thedas into her own hands without informing her advisers.

Leliana knew every detail of Gaspard’s history and would not have trusted him unless necessary for their survival. Briala was a far better choice to lead in the wake of Celene’s death as she wanted to better the lives of those living in Orlais. The man may be respected by his soldiers, but as far as politics, he gained zero respect from her. His obsessive need for the crown existed because he felt it was owed not out of any need to preserve Orlais. Gaspard’s end goal was starting a war with Ferelden and Evelyn handed him the reins of their army to do as he saw fit.
The further she moved from the eye of the palace the more inconsistent her breath became as the implications of tonight wracked themselves through her exhausted brain. Her silk slippers moved silently across the rocky path and though she heard no other echoes, she knew someone followed.

The presence followed her out the front doors of the palace and continued to track her as she made her way toward a garden area far to the side of the palace. If she fought, she would make sure it wouldn’t be visible to prying eyes.

When she entered an area with plenty of coverage, she turned on her heel, as quick as night, withdrawing and throwing her dagger at the chest of the figure moving in the dark toward her. Upon drawing close to connecting, the dagger fell out of midair uselessly as it hit a magical barrier.

The figure did not pause as they continued and exited from the dark into the clearing. Jet black hair, deep purple gown, and menacing golden eyes that narrowed as she stepped forwards into the light: Morrigan.

The last thing she needed was another classic lecture by the mage who thought too highly of her own opinion. Before Leliana could tell the woman to leave her sight, a force hit her square in the chest knocking her back into the tree trunk behind her. A violent crack exploded in her chest that knocked the rest of the air from her lungs.

She crumpled over, coughing, as she tried to draw air into her chest as Morrigan walked towards her, her flowing skirts swishing in the breeze.

It was not until she was standing over the struggling woman did she speak. “My, my… what has the Nightingale gotten herself into this time?”

Leliana glared up with disdain at the mage. They worked together because Thedas had needed them to. Morrigan’s face might look calm to those unaccustomed to her abrasiveness, but Leliana saw the fury brewing in the mage’s golden eyes.

“Did you think I would not know what you had done?” Morrigan’s voice was dangerous as she came closer to the vulnerable Spymaster, her teeth bared.

Leliana tried to crawl towards her dagger that had tumbled free when thrown, but Morrigan kicked it aside out her reach as her fingertips stretched for the blade.

Some of her ribs had shattered when the mage threw her against the tree, poking holes through her unprepared lungs. How could she have underestimated her? In the Great Game, there was nothing more dangerous than a familiar face. Morrigan was sent by Gaspard and Evelyn to take care of the Inquisition’s loose ends now that Orlais owned the organization.

Evelyn wasn’t the type to keep around those she didn’t feel one hundred percent allegiance from. Her thoughts flew to Josephine and the realization that if the mage or that fire-headed whore touched a hair on her friend’s head there would be no one that could save her or Evelyn from her wrath from the Fade.

Morrigan knelt to peer in her face.

“Is there no line you will not cross, Leliana? We weren’t close during the Blight, but I thought we respected one another enough to not do something like this. Idalya! She… she was my only friend; how could you do this?” The desperation in Morrigan’s voice scared her more each second, she laid prone under the powerful witch towering above her.

Leliana gasped for broken breaths as she tried to talk. Dal. Maker, of course, she’d seen her. “I…
she… Corypheus…” she collapsed as her lungs refused to draw air, instead forcing blood up her throat as she spat on the immaculately tended lawn of the palace. Blood splattered across her face, crimson beads dripping down her Inquisition uniform.

“That’s the Inquisition’s excuse? You use your treachery and lies to kill an Empress, so you can defeat Corypheus? I heard rumors of Lady Nightingale, but I never thought you’d sink so low as to steal Idalya’s face to get the upper hand.” The mage rattled on, her weariness cutting through her anger. “Did you not think you could complete your plan without distracting me? To see my greatest regret walking by unknowing of my existence. I will hate you forever for what you have done Nightingale, but luckily for you, your life will end soon.”

Morrigan’s words stuck in her chest like she was impaled on her own daggers. She did not know what Idalya was. She believed the servant was a spy resembling a dead woman as a distraction.

With all the energy she had remaining, she reached out and grabbed Morrigan by her onyx leather boot not pulling forward but holding on and willing the witch to look at her. Vengeance filled Morrigan’s eyes, but Leliana numbly reached into the side pocket of her uniform to remove a silver locket with an engraved griffin suspended on a long silver chain. She shoved the necklace into Morrigan’s skirts as the witch looked down in disbelief at the Spymaster’s odd maneuver.

The mage’s breath caught in her throat as she caught sight of the pendant. One hand flying over her mouth as the other ripped the chain from Leliana’s.

“No...” the witch kicked out of Leliana’s faint grip and retreated until her back was flush against the line of manicured hedges. “No!” her cry of anguish as she pressed both hands over her face was more than Leliana could handle.

She laid her cheek down against the cool blades of grass as she tried to block out the witch’s cries, feeling the blood fill her lungs. This is what I deserve. This is the least I deserve for what I have done to Idalya.

Her senses dulled, and she found she cared less at how difficult it was to breathe as the cold spread throughout her limbs. She was jarred as her body was flipped over, a stream of ice spreading across her chest. Her vision cleared as Morrigan poured healing magic into her broken chest cavity. Her lungs contracted strongly at once and she gasped out loud as air rushed back into her chest. Morrigan’s eyes continued to direct fury in her direction. “No dying Spymaster until I have answers.” Leliana could feel life spreading back into her limbs as her lungs pushed life-giving oxygen back to her floundering body.

“I had… to… dragon.” Speaking was still beyond her abilities.

“Dragon? Corypheus’? Why would that have anything to do with Idalya? Unless…” her golden eyes grew wide. “The archdemon.” The witch ran her fingers over the clasp on the necklace she once repaired with quivering hands in her grief.

“How?” she asked. “No, I do not want to know. Violating some laws of magic are too much.” She’d really get along with Solas. “You brought her spirit out of the Fade after ten years?”

“… Not exactly.” Leliana gasped as she moved upright. Her head spun from the blood she had lost.

“What do you mean?” the witch was on her faster than she expected, grabbing the collar of her dress uniform and pulling her face toward her so they were nose to nose glaring into each other’s eyes. “What does not exactly mean?”
“Her spirit…” Leliana’s voice broke. She brought a fist to her mouth as she fought to keep tears back in front of this woman she couldn’t stand.

Morrigan remained disturbingly close to Leliana waiting for whatever the woman could not say out loud. Leliana swallowed and met the mage’s eyes. “Her spirit was not in the Fade, Morrigan.” The mage’s hold on her weakened enough that she could wrench herself away and stumble back from the witch.

“Not in the Fade? That cannot be… not Idalya.”

Leliana struggled to rise to her feet and would not let herself look away from the woman’s pain. *I deserve this, never forget that.* She caused this to happen to Idalya and she would pay the price forever.

“When an Archdemon dies, its soul leaves its body and enters the nearest blighted creature. Darkspawn are empty vessels, but if it enters the body of a Grey Warden which has a soul…” Leliana shook her head as the words poured out of her. Other than discussing with Fiona, she had never uttered these secrets out loud. “the two fight and destroy one another.” She wiped a tear from her eye, “When the archdemon entered her body, her soul destroyed it saving Ferelden at the cost of her own.”

Morrigan backed away, Leliana’s words washing over her in waves in horror.

“Using contacts, I discovered the Wardens were importing rare ingredients for a ritual and on site, they found how they pieced the demon’s soul together. Morrigan,” the witches’ hands balled into fists with magic circling them, “without her, Corypheus was immortal and… I could not leave her like that. She died to save us, the thought she did not rest in the Fade destroyed me. How could the Maker do this?” her face fell into her hands. “She gave everything to save his people and her reward is an eternity of nothing? How could the Maker do this?”

“Because there is no Maker!” Morrigan shot back. “If there was, why would the Blight exist? And if by some reason the Maker cursed the world with darkspawn and Blights, why would he rest the fate of the world on the shoulders of a child, Leliana?” Morrigan turned her back, the magic in her palms glowing brighter. “She was a frightened child your Maker cast into oblivion after she sacrificed herself. Talk not of your Maker because he is not listening to your prayers.” The witch’s words were filled with venom as she spat them toward her.

The Spymaster stopped holding back her tears, and they rolled over her cheeks leaving streaks down her Inquisition uniform mixing with spatters of drying blood. Morrigan gave a grunt of disgust and strode away, her boots clicking along the stone path. At the edge of the garden, she paused, her back still facing the Spymaster.

“Is it her?” she asked quietly.

“Yes. Her…,” she hesitated, she was still in dangerous territory, “memories did not return with her, but it is our Idalya. You should see her. She loved you.” Her shoulders slumped as she watched conflict spread over the mage’s body.

Morrigan turned to face her with an emotion in her eyes that Leliana had never seen from the mage.

“She was my greatest regret. I could not save my only friend. She only saw the best and made us more than we knew we possessed. How did I repay her?” The mage asked bitterly. “*I let her die.* She deserved better than the world gave her. I hope she finds it this time.” She traced her hands over her skirts shuffling the wrinkles out of the fabric with jerking and frantic motions. “Speaking
of doing better, how have you kept her away from her Ferelden dog lord?”

Leliana stiffened and straightened herself up onto her feet. “We need to talk.”
The Chapter Where Leliana Finds Evelyn

Chapter Summary

After her confrontation with Morrigan, Leliana just wants to return to camp. Unfortunately, she finds a drunken Inquisitor in her path.

Leliana shuffled through the halls of the Palace, sulking to camp. Her limbs ached in her exhaustion.

The building was empty save for servants crossing her path at random, avoiding eye contact. Morrigan healed her obvious injuries, but the breaks in her ribs needed time and the cracks in her heart throbbed after talking to that fucking witch.

Morrigan raged but loved Dal enough to overlook what restored her soul. To give the girl a chance at a life she deserved. The Spymaster was overwhelmed with guilt since restoring Dal. She would not regret having Dal alive even if she regretted the actions needed to complete the ritual.

Fiona’s motivations for agreeing to help were secret, but Leliana selfishly did it have her friend back. To fill in the empty piece of her heart. That one more day, she begged the Maker for as Idalya lain still within the quivering shell of her arms.

The Maker remained silent, so Leliana did his work for him. If that banished her from the Maker’s side- so be it. She was over caring about the consequences. Here, the ends absolutely justified the means. Idalya was worth any price. Leliana found comfort because Morrigan came to the same conclusion- disgusted and horrified, but she would never suggest undoing the ritual.

As she cut through the now darkened ballroom, Leliana paused sensing someone else. Her feet slowed as she scanned for danger. Identifying no immediate threat, she climbed the steps leading toward the open doors of the grand balcony.

Her searching eyes found Evelyn in a grandiose chair overlooking the rolling hill of Orlais. She sat adorned still in her flowing ebony and gold gown. Her loose auburn curls floated behind her from the chilled breeze. She held a glass of sloshing amber liquid in one hand and an almost empty bottle of brandy in the other. The anchor sparked, reflecting fragments of light through the remaining liquor.

“Is this not a grand night, Leliana?” Slurred words slid out her deceitful lips as she lifted her glass in the air unsteadily.

“It is a night that will be remembered in Orlais for many generations, Inquisitor” Leliana found the ability to slip back into her role after her confrontation with Morrigan. Evelyn was the last person she trusted to see her vulnerable.

“The Inquisition and Empire of Orlais- the greatest partnership in the history of Thedas. We will send Corypheus tumbling into the deepest pits of the Fade.” She clinked her glass to the decanter celebrating only herself.

“Then what? We defeat Corypheus and find ourselves aligned with Orlais. That will cause
problems with Ferelden."

“And what of them?” Her brandy splashed as she refilled her glass and absorbed into the embroidered fabric of her dress. “That is for Gaspard to deal with as he sees fit. I have no interest in the brutes, but Gaspard wishes to see them bow down and beg like the dogs they are. So, it shall be. Ferelden will come to fear the power of the United Inquisition and Orlais.”

A chill ran the length of her spine at Evelyn’s belligerent words. She may be drunk, but Evelyn was, for once, being honest. Gaspard’s wish to invade Ferelden would come true with the power the Inquisition granted them. Half their army was Ferelden-born, yet they’d be tasked to attack their homeland for the glory of the Orlesian Empire, an empire that controlled their home just a generation ago.

Her fingers dusted over the edge of her concealed dagger as she considered slitting the Inquisitor’s throat as she sat intoxicated in the ballroom. The scene of the gregarious display which allowed an Empress to die in cold blood, the same as Evelyn sliding the blade across her neck herself.

“Was it worth it?” The question forced its way past her lips.

Evelyn threw her head back and laughed, a throaty sound that echoed in the empty hall.

“It was the fairy tale of girl meets boy and then the boy offers her the entire world on a platter. I spent my entire life being groomed to be a decoration on a man’s arm, a trophy of conquest until I fulfilled my duty and birthed that idiot a son to continue their name.” She spat on the floor in front of her. “You ask, ‘Was it worth it?’ What do you think, Spymaster? In one night I destroyed the cage waiting for me after this end. Yes, it was worth it. It will always be worth it.”

“Understood, Inquisitor.” The Spymaster nodded and limped her way past the drunken bitch.

“I thought if anyone understood surviving, it would be you.”

“Oh, I understand. I feel remorse and guilt where you have none.”

Evelyn tilted her head back and emptied the contents of her glass. “There will be plenty of work available for a woman of your skill set when this Corypheus business is over, Spymaster, I hope we will have your commitment and dedication as time continues.”

Leliana shined the brightest fakest smile she could summon towards the vile woman. “Inquisitor, I shall remain your adviser while the Inquisition has need of me.”

“Good.” Evelyn straightened in her chair, “your skills are necessary ones. It is so easy for soldiers to die in the field when given bad intel. It would be a shame for something terrible to happen to anyone you care about.” Evelyn cocked an eyebrow at her as the Spymaster’s blood ran cold.

“Understood.” Her answer was curt. What else was there to say? Well... “Hey, Evelyn?” The Inquisitor tilted her head, intrigued. “Go fuck yourself.” It was undignified, and she was sure she’d pay for the comment later, but at this moment it felt right.

Evelyn grinned, her burgundy painted lips upturned into a sneer. “My dear Spymaster, why fuck yourself, when you can get an Emperor to do it for you?” Her smile held, but it did not reach her eyes devoid of their normal fire.

Leliana thought of her own face as she laid down her cheek onto the chilled ground, giving up her life force to the Fade and wondered if her own eyes reflected the same look.
This was a nightmare come to life. She'd rather face Morrigan squeezing the life from her lungs than watch this volatile woman make threats against Idalya. She expected this move earlier. Dal commanded more respect than the Inquisitor because she earned it instead of controlling through fear.

Evelyn should fear the Warden. Idalya could topple an empire by willing it. Evelyn outmaneuvered people and tried to outsmart and trick people but Idalya would make it happen through the loyalty of those who served her.

She now knew the answer to Morrigan's question: The Maker placed the world on her shoulders because she could carry it. She poured her heart into everything she did whether fighting, training, friendship or love. You knew she would never steer you wrong, and that is why Evelyn should fear her. The dark-skinned, white-haired elf she saw as weak held a strength Evelyn would never understand.

She exited toward the barracks. Leliana took deep breaths of the cool air letting it fill her functioning lungs as she avoided the thought of close she came to opening the slender throat of the woman to whom she swore her allegiance to in front of Orlais.
The stone path opened into the split camp in the fields below the palace. Soldiers marched in ordered lines. No one made eye contact as Idalya moved silent past. No one noticed the elf with the solemn and sunken face drifting like a spirit.

Cullen's Commander tent was easy to decipher. Massive compared to nearby tents and the focal point for both sides of the camp. Cullen was forced, per Josephine, to stay in a golden room, befitting his position, in the palace. Away from the Ambassador’s prying eyes, he spent the most time here, losing himself to work to keep his mind off the coming talks and Evelyn’s avoidance.

The guard on duty stepped aside allowing Idalya to push aside the leather flap and step into the dimness.

Around the makeshift war table in the center of the room stood Cullen, his jacket removed, cream sleeveless tunic underneath. His hair was a frazzled mess as he ran his hands through the locks at every tense turn of conversation. Dark circles set deeply under his eyes. From his gaunt features, she knew sleep would elude the ex-Templar.

Leliana signature amethyst woven jacket had returned. Its hood pulled far over her auburn hair to disguise her eyes. Her hands gripped the sides of the table as she avoided acknowledging Dal.

Their Ambassador looked immaculate as usual still in her evening's attire. Her eyes held heavy bags as exhaustion set in.

The Seeker was back in her armor, elbows propped on the table. Her face pointed at the table hiding her expression which Dal presumed to be a perfect combination of disgust and frustration.

Idalya remained quiet, hiding in a far corner. Her blood-stained servants dress distanced her from the frustrated and forlorn advisers.

“What do you suggest we do, Leliana?” Cassandra’s heavy accent boomed.
The Spymaster’s face reflected her annoyance. “I suggest we stay focused on our needs and finding the resources to accomplish them, Cassandra.” Every syllable was overemphasized as the bard made sure her meaning wasn’t twisted. “Varric’s letter said Marion Hawke is heading towards Skyhold as we speak. If the situation is as dire as she states, a group should meet her in the Western Approach. If this concerns the Wardens, it’s important that we discover what’s happening. We must find volunteers to set out…”

“I’ll go.”

Idalya voice was clear as exited the dark toward the candlelit table. She hadn’t known she would volunteer until her feet propelled her forward to join the circle of advisers. If there was information about the disappearing Wardens, the responsibility was hers to find it.

“Absolutely not, I forbid it!” Leliana’s answer was a lightning-quick slap to her face. The Spymaster was on edge, but even Dal was taken aback to hear the anger surging in her voice. Even more surprising was the anger erupting to the surface out of the depths of her soul, deep-seated and slow burning, since the day she awoke screaming on a table like an infant entering the world.

“You forbid it? Am I a child to you, Leliana?” Her anger flew past her lips toward the woman who she thought of as a sister. “I am no one’s to control!”

Before she contemplated moving, Cullen blocked her view. One hand braced against her shoulder, the other wrapped painfully around her wrist- in her hand the dagger she did not remember removing from its sheath.

She stumbled in confusion, the dagger dropping from her hand to the floor as she avoided the concern in Cullen’s hazel eyes.

Josephine quivered as she watched their organization crumble to dust between her trembling fingers. “Please stop this! We need to keep ourselves together. Our people outside this tent need to see a united front. That is what we are going to give them. No matter what it takes because that is what they deserve!” Josephine never raised her voice, but the effect was immediate as she looked to Leliana with a pointed expression as something passed between the two women.

The Spymaster gave a sigh of defeat before turning to Dal who was barely visible behind the Commander’s broad width. “I’m sorry. We don’t know the repercussions of what happened tonight. Your place is in the Inquisition… for now.”

It was not the answer Idalya sought, but at least Leliana acknowledged that she wasn’t a prisoner of the fortress.

Cullen grip remained tight as she struggled to manage her dissipating anger. It faded away much slower than needed to attempt communication with her infuriating best friend.

“Fine.” She freed herself by pushing Cullen with her full force. He stumbled backward from her unexpected show of strength. “I’ll stay at Skyhold while the Inquisition needs me. I am not there to be babysat. I am following orders for the good of Thedas, not for you to keep as a decorative lapdog.”

She stormed out of the tent. Any response from the Spymaster would send her after the woman again with a dagger in hand. Two full strides into the darkness and she crashed hard into a solid mass which jolted her back into reality. She grabbed her aching arm and adjusted her eyes to the
darkness.

As her pupils dilated, Evelyn suddenly came into focus, the rogue’s eyebrows raised in genuine surprise that the elf barreled into her. Idalya should have known Evelyn approached by smell alone since the waves of liquor wafting from her were nearly visible.

Her and Dorian’s life goals of becoming a walking decanter were becoming closer to the truth. The two women stood in silence glaring.

“Are we letting any rabble into meetings these days?” Evelyn questioned.

Regretting her decision to not retrieve her dagger, a noise of frustration ripped from Idalya’s throat as she strode past Evelyn. The Inquisitor chuckled to herself as she tried to keep her inebriated balance in her ball gown and heels.

Dal didn’t slow her pace until she was deep inside the Templar side of camp and the memory of the woman’s laughter faded. Rylen directed soldiers for overnight patrols ahead. As she approached him, his eyes caressed from shoulder to hip with a cheeky grin as she stomped towards him, her hand out in expectation.

“Mmm… servant looks good on you. You should keep this outfit.” He joked with a wiggle of his eyebrows. Idalya was not in the mood for his usual antics. Unphased by his advances she kept her hand extended.

“Hand it over.”

“No idea what you are talking about, Doll.” The Templar replied, both hands up in innocent surrender. Dal cocked an eyebrow.

“Booze. Hand it over. Do not make me find Cullen and have him requisition it away.”

Rylen rolled his eyes in defeat before pulling a full flask out of the breast pocket of his uniform. She quickly uncapped the flask and tipped her head back as burning relief traveled the length of her throat. Comfort spread through her stomach to her chest from the disgusting blend of wine and whiskey, she guessed. She didn’t care if it dulled her aching pain.

“Drinking to forget, dear? If not, I would slow down.” he shrugged, “plus it's all the booze I have and Skyhold is far away to listen to Cullen speak that much.”

“I’ve forgotten enough things, I don’t want to feel right now.”

“You know what I do? A roll around with a pretty little thing- I bet I could help clear your mind.” His mouth turned up in a crooked grin at her, his eyes sparkling. A wicked child pushing to find his boundaries.

“I'm almost desperate enough to take you up on that offer, Rylen.” She sighed.

At her confession, his face sobered. He moved to stand shoulder to shoulder staring out across the camp.

“What happened in there, Doll?” He whispered as he peered past her. Soldiers walked their routes ambivalent to the scene of their Knight-Captain speaking to the Hero of Ferelden covered from toes to knees in dried spirals of blood.

The tenderness flooding his voice caused her to lose her barely sustainable composure. Tears
pricked her eyes, but she eliminated the evidence since Rylen’s job wasn’t to sew the broken pieces of her heart back together. She tried to fake a smile for his benefit, but sighed, realizing she couldn’t lie anymore.

“I just need this.” She jiggled the flask. “I will stay here with the soldiers. I can’t return to my room.” The Templar looked concerned but continued listening. “Inform Cullen. He’ll be concerned, but not surprised.”

Rylen nodded in agreement as Dal passed him to find his tent intermixed between the soldiers’ huts. She regretted not being able to return to the Villa room on Gaspard’s property. The beds carved from pieces of the Fade itself. No amount of comfort she could make her stomach Leliana or the rest of the Inquisition right now.

She needed peace. A moment to let the demons quiet inside her mind. Peace would elude the advisers of the Inquisition tonight.

She reached into Rylen’s travel rations to pull out a well-worn linen shirt. Pulling it to her nose she grimaced at the musty worn smell before throwing it back into the bag. Deeper inside, she found a darker shirt that was less offensive than its counterpart. Just the familiar smells of steel and leather.

She pulled her blood-ridden fabric over her head and slipped the shirt over her shoulders. It hung like a potato sack on her frame before crawling into the corner cot and pulling the thin furs over her body.

It required every ounce of her willpower to not run out in the camp and find Barris. What would she do? Demand to know if she was insane? Were they more than comrades?

The fearful part of her did not approve. If she allowed herself to be vulnerable, it could be more dangerous than any enemy they would face. She needed to keep focused at all costs. Whatever almost happened between them already left her feeling shivering and lost. Just a taste of something so sweet made the pain of her existence unbearable.

Her hands shook as she lifted the flask to her mouth downing the end of the volatile mix. She threw the flask aside, flopping back onto the bedroll.

So confident she’d been entering this mission. Hours later, she was a drunken and shaking wreck hiding in Rylen’s tent. Too afraid to face her own emotions. The alcohol strengthened her limbs, and she prayed peace would follow, in some form.

As her eyes fluttered closed, the last thing she saw was Delrin Barris’ emerald eyes boring into hers.
The Chapter Where Idalya Travels Away

Chapter Summary

After her chaotic first day with the Inquisition, Idalya prays to find some peace in the Fade.

Bare feet slapped the polished stone floors as she walked down an elaborate hallway. Framed portraits of pale-skinned wealth lined both sides. A single door closed in the distance. Her eyes drifted toward other details, but the dream pulled them back to the entryway, unable to look elsewhere.

She reached the mountainous and ornate door, two distinctive voices raised on the other side. Her fingers ran along the grain of the wood, sensing the thrum of the fade running through it.

The longer she fade walked, the more an outsider she became to her memories. As time passed, the less she cared who she was. The drive to uncover lost. Nothing positive waited in these memories.

The voices grew louder as a dull ache radiated through her chest. There were rules to the visions Solas carefully laid out for her- rules to protect her as she navigated the broken parts of her mind.

Rules she was violating, by traveling here without the elf’s guidance.

She gripped the knob of the door within her shaking hands to gape it open wide enough to hear.

“Why would you do that? What about us, Dal?” The Ferelden is frustrated, his accent striking her in the pit of her stomach. The same voice whispering across a million memories, now entering her ears unfiltered.

A muffled sob echoes before her own voice, desperate, rings out. “I know. But this is important.” Her heart breaks as she hears the words. They have no context, but the lingering pain in her chest is real.

More words come from the man’s voice, his anger rising, but Idalya cannot understand, but their menacing tone indisputable.

“It's the right move, the smart one. And I think you know, too.”

Something crashes within the room. Heavy booming footsteps speed toward her. She ducks out of the way, hugging her back against the wall. By instinct she threw her hands over her eyes as she waited, her heart pounding in her throat.

Holding her breath, the form of the human-shaped cloud of light stomped down the hallway muttering curses in the accent twisting a knife in her chest. When the sound of footsteps disappeared, she lowered her hands and slowly opened one eye at a time to find she remained in the memory and avoided being pushed away by the approaching light.

She stepped through the now open door. It was a well-decorated study with tapestries hanging over golden walls, a warm fire burning in the fireplace. Her numb feet follow the sounds of muffled cries.
Sitting alone on the floor Idalya sees herself. Warden armor glittering in the reflected flames. Her despairing face resting on an etagere, hands over her mouth to push the sounds of sorrow back down her throat where they belonged. This was a broken girl, a child expected to do the impossible.

Idalya knelt next to the girl. With shivering fingers, she brushed the tips over the girl ’s braided white hair trying to smooth the flyaway, but her fingers drifted through the strands instead as the Fade parted.

A flickering presence from the distance grew stronger as it flew toward her.

With slow and precise words, she whispered, “Go. Away. Solas. Leave here now.”

The elf ignored her and entered the room. He took a seat in the opposite elegant chair.

Idalya turned to him, anger filling her. “What are you doing? I told you to leave!”

His demeanor remained calm as he watched the scene, his features unmoving. “You’re not supposed to be here either. We agreed that I would help you navigate the Fade to ensure your safety. You cannot have another accidental slip into the Fade. There’s only so many excuses a Templar will accept before they come for an untrained apostate.” He threw his hand out to his side in irritation. “And yet here you are, by yourself in Denerim of all places…”

Solas wove his fingers together, resting his chin on the threading as he scolded her like a child. They all treated her like a fucking child. Idalya darted her eyes away, her anger too deep, but it was not for him. It was not for Barris, nor the Inquisition, or even Leliana as much as she deserved it. Her anger belonged to herself as stupid as it was. She placed the entire blame for her missing memories on herself and her misguided attempts to navigate them.

Solas sat quietly, his analytical cobalt eyes memorizing every detail around them. He rested his hands on his knee and he leaned toward her, the harsh lines of his face softening.

“What did you see?” he coaxed.

Idalya couldn ’t break her focus from the sobbing girl. Deep inside she knew this was her, yet her desire to hold and comfort the girl, to wipe away her tears of grief was too much for Dal to resist.

Solas was right, she should leave. She did not want this memory and for the first time was grateful she didn ’t remember the purpose of this fight, the person she was arguing with, or the trauma it caused.

“There was an argument…” her voice cracked, eyes glued to the sobbing Idalya. “A man, Ferelden, was arguing with me. I don’t understand what about, but it broke my heart. The memory sewed into my flesh.”

Solas focused, nodding his head as she explained the details from the argument.

“Your suggestion to not engage with the missing pieces worked- the man stormed out, and although I felt the pull to be closer, I remained after he left the memory. I didn’t want this memory back. Maybe I forgot everything for a reason, Solas? How much pain can a person take before giving up? I think I wanted to die…” her voice faded as tears welled in her eyes, matching the destroyed version of herself still quivering on the floor.

“We need to leave,” Solas announced and was on his feet in a graceful motion. “You... we need to be somewhere safer. You’ve had a difficult first night with the Inquisition. This is not the time for
traumatic memories to cascade back.” He walked held out his hand.

She knew it was there but would not look away from her crying self.

“Now. Idalya. You will come willingly, or I will force you awake. You are hurting yourself.”

Dal saw the truth in his words even if it hurt to acknowledge them. She placed her shaking hand into his and their fingers wove together as she felt the pull of the memory around them fade.

“Take me where you’re safe” he instructed, and she hesitated that she had no such sanctuary.

A brief flicker of standing in Barris’ arms earlier filled her vision. She clenched her eyes and threw the image out of her mind before it could take hold. She might share her unknown past with Solas, but she was not ready to share her current failures with her teacher.

He squeezed her hand sensing her hesitation and the image lingering shifted away as their bodies moved through the mists at incredible speeds. She opened her eyes, as they came to a rest, and a ball formed within her chest.

A tattered hovel, a small fire burning in the hearth. Fresh vegetables filling the air from a metal cauldron boiling over the fire. Small bedrolls aligned on the floor next to a small, crumbling bed.

“Where are we, Idalya?” Solas asked, still on alert for anything lurking within her memories.

“Home.” She mumbled to not betray the emotions rampaging through her heart. “I grew up here. My mother raised my family here after my father died. She worked as a servant in Denerim castle. The older siblings minded the younger until old enough to find their own work.” Every detail remained from twenty years ago.

“It makes sense I came here. Even with the chaos happening in the Alienage, it never came past these doors. My mother shielded us from the violence and anger in the world. I never knew growing up we needed anything or how much people hated us beyond the walls. I inquired for books on the fifth blight but discovered Skyhold had none. Leliana found that the Alienage burned down when the darkspawn attacked.

“All of my siblings died that day. Leliana could not find any information on my mother. I suppose that’s for the best. My mother could not live with the loss of all her children in one day.” She sat on the small bedroll that once belonged to her much smaller form. “What I would not give to have this place still be real…”

Solas approached and using a long, thin finger tapped on the top of her head as she frowned at him.

“It does, Idalya. It exists in here, in the Fade. You still have these memories, these moments that defined who you were. They will always stay with you.”

There was a kindness in his words she craved more than air. She needed reassurance there was more to life than regret and death.

Idalya smiled. A flicker of something resembling happiness that she could come back here whenever she wanted. Solas kneeled in front of her.

“What happened, Asha? You were upset from the Palace, but I can sense something else. Are you okay?”
She scoffed at his question knowing he saw the same atrocities she had.

“No. I am not close to all right. Seeing those slaughtered elves reminded me of my mother. Thinking about all the families that would wait for someone to return home, I remember what that feeling when my father never came home. Then Evelyn… Maker, take that woman. She let Celene die after we came here to save her. Evelyn has her own agenda and who knows the damage she’ll cause. Then Barris….” Her words trailed off. Solas remained kneeling quietly as he waited for her answer.

The mage looked uncomfortable as her words dawned in his head, his empathy turning to anger. “Did… did he harm you?” He whispered, his mana swirling around him. She shook her head.

“Nothing like that.” She sighed as she looked away. There was no doubt she was a total mess. “We were dancing and then he… held me. In the middle of the palace after all this pain and I felt a joy greater than I remembered.” She shook her head at her honest confession. “I wanted more, but… I am uncertain he wants more from me.”

Solas rolled his eyes hard

“Are you kidding me? I am questioning your perception skills and your memory- if that Templar burned more for you, he would erupt in flames, child.”

Dal’s eyes cast to the dirt floor below her, cheeks filling with color as she processed his words.

“Dal,” he reached and took her cold hand between his, “You have been through so much. Asha, you deserve happiness. Do not deny yourself those moments because they are the true regrets when the end comes once and for all.” The two elves sat in silence as Idalya considered his advice.

He stood. “I must leave. I need to fade walk through parts of the palace before we leave. Will you be safe?”

She nodded, laying down on her side, pulling her knees tightly to her chest. Shivers wracked her body as she realized she was still wearing Rylen’s shirt. From within her memory, Solas removed a hand-stitched blanket off the bed and draped it over her quivering frame as her eyes became heavy. She was uncertain what sleep in the Fade looked like, but she felt so unburdened it seemed insane to not follow her instincts.

Her eyes shut against their will as Solas tucked the blanket around her while humming an unfamiliar song. Under his breath, she could hear him singing words in Elven she didn’t understand as she drifted away, but still made her smile just the same.

“Elgara vallas, da len, Melava somniar, Mala tara aravas, Mala tara aravas.”
The Chapter Where Barris Assumes

Chapter Summary

The morning after the peace talks, it doesn't take long for Barris to discover where Dal spent the night.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delays in posting. I had some major dental issues pop up on Tuesday, so my posting schedule will be off for a few days until I get my tooth fixed.

As predicted, Cullen woke the entire camp, a frantic ball of energy, at the first rays of dawn broke across the horizon. Barris used the back of his wrist to wipe an errant trail of sweat from his forehead as he packed another crate to return to Skyhold. Everyone worked in silence. Eyes pointed toward the ground to avoid attracting the Commander’s menacing and bloodshot ones.

Hard labor was not a regular duty for Templar, but Barris enjoyed it, reminded of his early years on the family homestead. Long summer days spent tending to the land and stables. His parents disapproved. Luckily, his father was so invested in training his brother, the heir, that Delrin slipped out of the house every morning to care for the family’s horses and mabari.

Physical work was a comfort to him, but today his stomach twisted and felt as unbalanced as their exhausted and confused Commander looked.

Securing the crate with a shove, he stood rolling his shoulders back to release the tension settling into his collarbones. Across the camp he spotted Rylen, propped up against a tree on the outskirts of the camp, directing the soldiers pulling a wooden hauling wagon through the camp to collect the crates.

Rylen’s eyes were morose, heavy-lidded with a ring of ruby darkening the rim. Barris noted Cullen’s guards stationed outside Rylen’s tent upon rising. It hadn’t taken long for the rumors drifting through camp that the Elven warden spent the entire night within to find him. He cringed as what his soldiers crassly conjectured what happened within the confines of its walls last night. The Knight-Captain had bedded the spark-fire Warden becoming an overnight hero to the young recruits.

Unable to listen further, he had snapped at the soldiers to channel the energy their mouths were using into their hands and get packing.

The Warden was a grown woman and allowed to make her own decisions without judgment, but Barris’ stomach dropped into the bottom of his armor when he had heard she entered his best friend’s tent under the protective cover of night.

He focused on the unending list of tasks needing to be accomplished, but his betrayer mind kept
drifting back to her encircled within his arms as they waltzed below the great balcony; of his lips drifting across her silky skin to brush against her velvet-coated ones before they were interrupted by the Seeker and Warden.

After his farewells, he’d arrived in camp to find Cullen sitting behind his desk, his face devoid of emotion, staring blankly at the wall. Barris knew no adequate words of comfort for his friend. He followed their pattern of ignoring the horror surrounding them and spoke directly to the Commander always on duty even when Cullen could not function for one of his many ever growing complicated reasons. To his relief, the Commander gave direction for the soldiers as he prepared for to meet with the Inquisition’s advisers.

Barris set about delegating the Commander’s instructions, his body defaulting into officer mode until he flopped exhausted onto his bedroll still dressed in his dress uniform, staring at the tiny irregularities on the ceiling. As his tasks diminished in number, his mind was overtaken by images of Idalya’s gray and lavender eyes peering up at him through her long lashes and her fragrant perfume that permeated citrus deep into the linen of his uniform.

Staring into her endless eyes, he doubted everything the Chantry taught him. His job required everything. His heart, his mind, his body… the Chantry expected no less, but as he felt her trembling against his fingertips- *he hadn’t cared*. He swore his life to the Chantry but found himself pulled away by what they’d call an *abomination*.

For one moment he allowed himself to wish he’d walked a different path. To live the sheltered life of a noble, to sit and bide his time until her feet graced the dirt of Thedas once more.

They were both soldiers. Barris understood the ramifications that neither might survive this fight against Corypheus. There was a possibility he could lower his guard to let himself hold her, only to have her life slip away again through his fingers.

His rest was fitful as he tossed on his cot trying to choose his words while fighting the growing fear that as the morning dawned she would doubt her actions.

Cullen came barging into his tent at the first break of light, as expected. His eyes bloodshot and hands shaking violently at his sides from withdrawal. Barris stepped away from Cullen to take his morning draught of lyrium. Many of Templar drained theirs in front of the Commander without pause, even as they suspected Cullen had stopped taking his, but Barris couldn’t. He knew he’d never drink lyrium again in front of his friend while he struggled with to break away from the chains of the Chantry. The chains he’d spent the night questioning himself.

Close to afternoon, he approached Rylen after avoiding him all morning. He pushed down the insecurities that made him feel like a child. The group of soldiers he was directing, left to disassemble the last part of the camp, while Rylen’s hands massaged his temples and he leaned back heavily against the tree keeping him upright.

He was hung over and in bad shape. Barris couldn’t find it within himself to have empathy at this moment.

“You’re lagging.” He announced, much louder than needed, and grinned internally at Rylen’s painful flinch at the booming words.

“I’m aware.” Rylen grimaced, his skin dampening to a golden shade as the waves of nausea crested. “I could really use help over here if you’ve got men to spare.”

“Or you can show up to work, prepared to… I don’t know, actually work.” Barris wasn’t a flippant
man of anger but having Rylen within his sight proved that assumption wrong.

Rylen scoffed, as he pushed himself off the tree and stood unsteadily on his feet in the swaying world. “Maker, Barris, I thought you’d be more understanding. I was up-all-night comforting…”

Barris’ fist moved of its own accord as, within a blink of an eye, he socked Rylen straight in the nose, his full weight behind the swing. The motion pushed Rylen behind a few paces until his back pressed against the tree, his hands holding his nose as a trickle of blood oozed out of both nostrils.

Barris’ eyes opened widely, understanding sinking in, his breath ragged as his anger rushed to the surface. Part of him was mortified while part filled with gratification at watching his friend’s pain—this day was not starting on a high note.

“FUCK!” Rylen screamed as he wiped the blood onto the sleeve of his tunic. “What in Andraste’s name has gotten into you?”

Barris was silent as he decided the cost of discussing his anger or if he should apologize and walk away. What was he doing? Rylen was Cullen’s second-in-command and his superior in the Inquisition, who could order him into shackles and thrown into the dungeons of Skyhold when they returned. If he wanted a career, and a friend, after today then he needed to speak his mind.

Clenching his jaw, he looked his friend directly in the eyes. “Idalya.” The word was harsh as it gritted out through his teeth and he wasn’t surprised as the confused look on Rylen’s face melted away into understanding before transforming into a look of unease.

Rylen held up his hands in a gesture of placation, his friend an animal he feared spooking. “Look Delrin, I didn’t realize it would upset you. She found me and said she was desperate…”

This time Barris purposely propelled his fist forward as he punched Rylen a second time. Blood flowed gushed from his nostrils down the front of the man’s tunic as he sunk down the tree, dizziness overtaking him as he mumbled curses the entire sinking trip. Barris wasn’t proud of his actions, but at this moment he didn’t care, as he shook out the radiating pain in the knuckles.

Rylen uttered a groan as he held the nostrils together on his broken nose to keep the gushes of blood contained. He looked up at Barris, shaking his head. “That’s the last time I let that girl steal my stuff,” Rylen mumbled, spitting out a mouthful of blood.

Barris raised his eyebrows. Now he was confused.

“What do you mean?” He asked, the understanding he might be wrong spread quickly through his limbs.

“Doll. She was a total disaster. The damn girl demanded the last of my booze and someplace to sleep, so I gave her my tent for the night.”

“If she took your booze, how are you so hung over?” Hope blossomed in his apprehensive gut.

Rylen shrugged, another gush of blood leaking out between his clumsy fingers. “I needed someplace to sleep, so I figured I’d take Cullen’s tent since he was in the Villa, but I found him in his tent and realized he shouldn’t be alone. I was awake until daybreak drinking with him.”

What in the Maker’s name have I done?

“Please forgive me.” Barris sank to his knees, armor rattling, as he examined the crooked appendage formerly known as Rylen’s nose.
“Delrin, man… what has gotten into you? I’ve been sucker punched by a lot of Templars, but never in my days did I think you’d be one.” He spits another mouthful of blood onto the emerald grass and Barris cringed as the crimson beads slid down the blades.

Disappointment funneled its way through his body for not giving Rylen a chance to explain himself and for knowing he had no reason to feel like he lost something he never had. She had no obligation to him, and yet the pain that manifested at the rumors swallowed him whole. Now forced to look at consequences of losing control as a Templar.

“I don’t know, Rylen. I really don’t know.” He squeezed one arm underneath both of Rylen’s as he helped the wobbling man to his feet. The longer his nose gushed, the paler he became from blood loss, hangover, and exhaustion.

“Where are you taking me?” Rylen slurred, as Barris dragged his feet across the ground.

“To Pavus, for healing.”

Dorian was one of the few people here that understood discretion. He could try to seek Solas, but he half expected the elf to strike him with magic for putting his unworthy hands on the Warden. Barris continued helping Rylen, which more resembled him pulling the large man to the side camp out of the line of the sight from his soldiers.

“So… you and the Hero, ay?”

He knew the question was coming, and he didn’t feel like answering, but Rylen had just taken two fists for his insecurity. He deserved to know.

“It’s complicated.” He spoke under his breath as Rylen’s weight grew heavier on each step as his legs gave out.

“It always is.” Rylen was drenched in his own blood and looked like he’d taken a stomach wound. “You care for her?”

Barris turned to meet his friend’s exhausted eyes. “I really could.” He admitted. The possibly of loving the guarded Warden passed long ago and had grown into something deeper, richer, the closer he moved to her.

The two men remained in silence for a moment until Rylen cracked a bloody-toothed grin. Both men laughed as Barris dragged him across the field towards the only member of the Inquisition drunker than the Knight-Captain himself.

A pair of noisy footsteps approached, and Barris mentally prepared excuses as to what happened to Rylen. Turning his head, he noted it was Jim, a messenger for the Inquisitor who approached as quick as his awkward limbs allowed. Jim wasn’t the smartest, graceful, or agile of runners in the Inquisition, but he was one of the few scouts that would work with Evelyn, so despite almost falling over his own feet every few steps, his job position remained a stable one.

“Excuse me, Ser Barris!” As he ran to catch up to the two Templars, he tripped over his own boots and Barris reached out on instinct with his free arm to catch the diminutive man from face-planting into the field. “Oh, thank you! So sorry, Ser. You’ve been summoned to speak with the Inquisitor.”

Barris sighed as he stood the messenger up and balanced the fading Templar’s weight against his other hip. “Do you have other messages to deliver?”

The messenger shook his head, a blush flushing across his cheeks at the embarrassing accident that
“I need you to fetch Master Pavus, immediately. The Knight-Captain has broken his nose and Dorian is needed urgently to attend to him. Can you deliver that?”

Jim nodded and turned on his heel to leave almost tripping over his boots again while both Templars cringed at his. Barris set Rylen down against crate on the outside of the camping field.

“Sorry buddy, I got to take this,” Barris observed helplessly the mess Rylen’s clothes were.

“I understand, brother.” Rylen reached out his arm and Barris knelt to match it, hand to elbow.

“I really am sorry…” He began before Rylen’s hacking cough silenced him.

“It’s okay. Go talk to Lady Betrayal before she gets her small clothes in a twist and sends Cullen to the brig.”

Barris nodded as he rose, his guilt overtaking him at the horrific scene he’d caused. More apologies wouldn’t remedy the situation.

Rylen understood his reaction. There wasn’t time to rethink all his decisions, he needed to accept responsibility for them and move on.

But first, he needed to see why Evelyn summoned him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Keep your eyes peeled for the first postings of the O&A AU I've been working on for Camp Nanowrimo to pop up. I'm hoping to have the first chapters up by the end of the week. I hope you guys will enjoy it, it's been a blast to write while editing this massive opus. :)

Follow me on Tumblr: http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com
The Chapter Where Idalya Comes Apart

Chapter Summary

Idalya leaves the Fade, but what awaits her on the other side?

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the gap in posting. I've had some serious medical issues that have come out of nowhere, so I've spent most of the last week curled up on a couch on doses of painkillers. The regular posting schedule should be back up to speed in the next few days. Thank you for your patience.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The painful throb radiating through her temples was the first sign she was exiting the Fade. The waves of nausea washed over her, crashing against her senses as the tide threatened to pull her under. With a groan she pulled the furs further over her face, cheeks still burning from the poison charging through her veins all night like an angry Qunari.

*I can’t keep doing this to myself.*

The world was too bright, too sharp, too hard for her to handle. If she continued this method of coping, she’d be on death’s doorstep with Dorian and Evelyn, her blood a mixture of wine and self-hatred.

This time she would not hunt out Solas to remove her self-induced pain. She deserved the pounding thunder throbbing in her temples as the soldiers broke apart their camp outside the protective walls of Rylen’s tent. She needed the pain to ground her in reality.

With another groan, she rubbed away the sleep from her eyes with a delicate touch. Her behavior toward Solas in the Fade had been uncalled. He was intruding, but she’d asked for his guidance as she pushed the boundaries of her new skills. His advice worked- she saw more than she believed possible. An apology was unnecessary with her teacher, but she prepared to give him one because that is what good people do- they accept responsibility for their decisions.

Right after she finished emptying the contents of her stomach. She threw the furs off her burning skin as she scrambled off the bedroll and retched. The dirt floor kicked back clouds of dust into her face in retaliation for her unwanted gift.

After her nausea passed, she returned, head resting in her hands as she tried to connect one cohesive thought to another. Her mind reeled while balancing the weights of the Fade and the real Thedas. She had no idea what was happening. She assumed Rylen delivered her message to Cullen since the entire camp wasn’t destroyed by the Commander and Spymaster searching for her.

At the memory of her outburst last night, a diminished wave of anger swept through her. Lucky for the Spymaster, her rage had quelled since last night. *What had gotten into her?* She had seen
Leliana angry, but she’d never seen her best friend unhinged before. Fury filling her cerulean eyes.

Evelyn’s betrayal threw her friend for a larger loop than expected. What else could cause her to lash out like that? The Spymaster was a different woman from the fresh-faced and eager girl who traveled glued to her hip throughout Ferelden. But the same heart beat within her chest and Idalya couldn’t imagine a world where that woman would harm her.

If anyone’s anger needed examination, it was hers. Maker, she pulled a dagger on her best friend. Without Cullen to stop her, what could have happened? She hadn’t known the depths of anger running through her veins, until it poured free, poisoning everything around her like the Blight.

*I owe a lot of apologies on the way back to Skyhold, I better get started.*

She lifted herself to her feet, gasping as the room swung wildly away from her while she tried to gain a solid footing with bare limbs. Her patience was rewarded as the world slowed its contempt-filled spinning and she sighed in relief to see a small bucket placed inside the front flap of the tent for her use. After emptying her bladder, which almost required more skill than she owned, she arched her back, her vertebrate popping one at a time. Rylen’s dark linen shirt fell off the sides of her narrow shoulders, while the hem caressed the top of her knees, her legs chilled from the breeze venturing through the fabric wall of the tent.

Her toes brushed against a bundle of fabric next to the door. Reaching down, she picked up her servant’s dress from the day prior, large mahogany stains still damp and tacky to the touch. By reflex, she dropped the garment back to the dirt floor as images of their blood spreading across her limbs filled her vision. Her heart pounded in her ears as she stepped back to shake the visions from her mind.

She could see it, their faces and gaping mouths, their dead eyes watching her accusingly. The warm drops of their blood dripping from the tips of her fingers. Her wrists pushed against the drumming in her ears as she dropped to her knees, the stones rough against her bare skin.

*The blood. It was everywhere. The floor filling with blood. The rancid smell of copper overwhelming her senses as she gasped for breath. Their faces … No. Their faces replaced with her mother, her siblings, the elves in Denerim. All those faces she’d failed.*

*The young girl was gone, replaced by a dark-skinned elf. White strands of hair painted crimson. Warden armor is broken and buckled as she laid motionless face down in the growing pool. A cry escaped Idalya’s lips as she stared at the dead girl. An elf no different from the rest.*

*The history of Thedas was built on the blood of dead elves. What made her think ten years could change anything? So much blood, it was rising quickly, threatening to drown her, as she knelt in her weakness, paralyzed to save herself.*

The hands on her shoulders jarred her back into the reality of the tent and her magic exploded out of her chest before her vision returned. Solas’ barrier absorbed the force as he knelt without flinching, clasping her wrists as he drew them apart, mumbling Elven curses under his breath.

A cry of pain escaped past her lips, the muscles in her hands clenching back into fists, but Solas’ thumbs forced her closing palms open. Her hysterical and cruel laugh met her ears as she found the deep wounds she carved into the flesh of her hands trying to forcibly remove the blood that would forever stain her thin and quivering hands.

Showing his strength, he pulled the trembling Warden to him, wrapping his arms around her and squeezing to secure her as her tears fell. He was much stronger and muscular than she would have
assumed from his thin frame, but he protected her from the monsters waiting in the dark. Pools of blood collected on the back of his tunic, oozing from her wounds.

The elf never hesitated, securing her against his chest as the shaking erupted over a body that sensed safety. He shushed her, a hand traveling gently over the back of her hair, a touch reminiscent of her mother’s as she clenched her eyes shut and accepted his comfort.

“I don’t think I can do this, Solas…” her voice so weak.

“Mala suledin nadas, Asha.” The words were a song washing over her as he whispered them to the crown of her hair. She felt strength from his voice even if their meaning was beyond her comprehension. She exhaled, her chest vibrating with each shaky breath. As if reading her mind, he spoke. “It means ‘we must endure’.”

“I don’t think I can.” She admitted. That truth scared her more than facing the Archdemon again. “I can’t forget their faces. Can’t stop imagining what their last moments were like. They deserved so much better, Solas.”

“Do not forget their faces. You must never forget them. It’s what elevates us above others. Use your strength to keep pushing, keep fighting, but never let the image of what Orlais deems an acceptable loss slip far from your mind. Remember their names, their faces… their lives will not be vain, as we tear down the chains that locked them to their fate.” His whispers flowed across the waves of her hair as his strength passed into her like the flow of his magic.

Her face buried in the front of his tunic, the strong scent of elfroot made her smile despite the insanity that had happened. Solas was right. She would never forget their names and faces, and she would always remember the look the disdain of Evelyn’s face as she walked around their bodies like they merely impeded her passage.

Those people deserved a death many years in the future, surrounded by their families, not harvested like cattle in a slaughter. Their deaths belonged to people like her and Evelyn. How many had died by the edge of her sword? Those servants were civilians who died a soldier’s death, and she swore to never forget.

Solas’ grip relaxed as he waited for her response. When her movements remained stable, his arms unlocked behind her and slid down her arms to take her wrists and extend her bloodied hands out to him as he sat on his heels. Her lavender eyes focused on a point far away as his magic sweep over the areas, cooling and with care.

The mottled skin pieced itself together as the magic swept over the rest of her body shrinking the hangover she’d forgotten. The magic receded from her body back into Solas’ hands, a candle extinguishing its flame as the room grew darker and ominous.

“No more hurting yourself.” His tone was direct as he tended to her. “There are enough people in Thedas yearning to harm us, let’s not do their work ourselves.”

Worry grew in the pit of her stomach. What was wrong with her? Last night she threatened her only friends with daggers, a day later she was clawing the skin off her hands, lost in a waking memory.

Perhaps the magic that poured life back into her bones added something else. Something foul and venomous filling the gaps where a soul used to live. She didn’t remember life being so painful, but as the Fade reminded her last night, there was a lot she wouldn’t let herself remember.
Satisfied with his work, Solas rolled his feet under him and stood in one fluid motion, her hands falling away to her lap. He observed the pile of soiled clothing, a sour look on his face. “You need proper attire and a basin.”

The mage reached out to part the hanging leather and, as she presumed, found an Inquisition soldier standing guard. Cullen’s way of ensuring his own restless sleep, to know she was safe.

“Soldier?”

The man jumped in surprise as faced Solas, his cheeks blossoming into crimson at his embarrassment of being mortified by two elves. He was young, eighteen at the oldest, too young to be separated from his family fighting for the chaos that was the Inquisition. He remained standing in silence as they waited for him to respond. Following a few awkward seconds, Solas shook his head and continued.

“The Lady needs a set of women's clothes; her uniform is bloodstained, and she needs more presentable attire to return to the villa. Do you understand?”

The man cleared his throat, his eyes as wide as saucers, and replied in a crisp Ferelden accent that made Idalya smile. “Yes, Ser, I have a sister.” He turned on his heels and skidded away, his armor shuffling.

Both elves quirked their heads in unison at the man’s strange statement. Shaking it off, she went about stretching her dehydrated and sore muscles regretting last night’s actions as each limb pushed back in retaliation.

“You need to talk to someone.” Idalya looked up and Solas’ piercing sapphire eyes looked more tired than she had ever seen. “Whether the Spymaster, myself or someone else, you need to talk about what’s going on. Keeping everything inside will destroy you. You have so many people around you, stop acting like you have to wage your battles alone, Asha.” There was a clear irritation in his voice as he looked at the drying pools of her blood that had collected on the dirt floor.

“Asking for help is difficult.” She pulled her hands back into Rylen’s crimson shirt in growing discomfort. “I don’t know what I’m feeling.” Her head shook as she thought over the complications she caused the Inquisition just leaving Skyhold for one mission. “I’m part of the Inquisition, their goals are mine, and yet I’ve never felt so alone in my life.”

“That I understand.” He watched her carefully, her words surprising him, the ghost of a smile gracing his lips. “Then we shall stand-alone- together.”

Small shuffling footsteps approached the tent and a distinctly Orlesian voice called out. “Lady Mahariel, I have what you have requested.”

Solas threw back the leather flap unveiling the Chantry sister Idalya had the misfortune of yelling at with her last hangover. A deep ruby flush spread high across her cheekbones at once again having to face the sister in not her greatest moment.

Draped across the sister’s arms, she had a tunic and leather breeches and a small pack wrapped in linen. Solas reached out for the clothes and the Chantry sister moved back as she tried to look over his shoulder to see Idalya hidden within the tent.

“Pardon me, I was told the Lady needed garments.” She spoke, her discomfort obvious.

“Yes, I am the one who requested her things.” He said frankly before he reached again and once
again the Chantry sister stepped away her black curls bouncing around her face with the movement.

“It is not appropriate it, Ser… if I could speak to the Lady for a moment?”

With a silent curse, Solas moved faster than the indignant woman and grabbed the bundle out of her hands as she protested.

“Ser, you should not…” Solas opened the linen wrap flippantly to find an assortment of rolled linen strips, the guard’s strange comments about having a sister now making sense. His eyebrows raised before in unison before settling over his brow as he glared at the now mortified Chantry sister.

“I am her physician,” his words were slow and Idalya covered her mouth with the back of a bloodstained hand to keep her laughter from echoing out of the tent. The sister opened her mouth to object, but Solas cut off before words could exit her throat. “Void take all of you heretics!” He let the flap fall on the woman’s face as he scoffed. Thinking better of it, he opened the flap again at the woman who was still standing frozen in disbelief. “Humans: you ruin everything.” As the flap closed for the last time, a snort escaped Idalya and Solas turned his eyes on her sharply, his mana swirling in his pupils.

“You find this to be entertaining?” He asked, a hint of rage floating on the surface of his words.

A light laugh exited her chest and shoulders which felt good after her experience earlier. “Let’s say this isn’t my first run-in with that particular sister. Thank goodness my end goals don’t include standing at the side of the Maker because I am not doing well.” A smile made its way to her lips which calmed his magic as his eyes returned to their color of the cloudless sky.

“I’ll leave you to get dressed, the Commander has the rest of the Inquisition packed and is waiting for you to rise.” He handed the bundle of clothes and sanitary products of confusion as he turned to exit the tent, Idalya stopped him.

“Solas?” He paused, his narrow back pointed towards her, her bloodstains still evident across the back of his loose tunic. “Thank you… for everything. Not just today but I’m sorry about how I behaved last night.” He nodded, the use of words unnecessary for two people who traveled dreams together. “That’s one awkward apology out of the way. Fifty more to go.” She chuckled in discomfort. “Is Ser Barris nearby?”

At the Templar’s name, the mage stiffed, his chin lowering toward his chest. “That’s why I came here.”

Idalya was confused as she waited for the elf to speak as the silence stretched out her confusion branched to much darker emotions.

“What’s happened, Solas?” Her heart paused in her chest as the muscle threatened to break under the pressure. Solas sighed.

“I’m sorry, Asha. Ser Barris is gone.”

Chapter End Notes
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The Chapter Where Solas Asks a Question

Chapter Summary

Solas has growing concerns regarding the Warden and the only person with answers is their tight-lipped Spymaster.

The lines of scouts were endless all morning as plans came together for the Inquisition’s return to Skyhold. Missions for the dozens of new Orlesian allies Evelyn and Josephine procured during the peace talks flooded in as the morning grew longer. Leliana got little sleep within Gaspard’s Villa last night after she and Josie returned alone with escorts. Cullen refused to halt his work, Idalya refused to look her in the eye, and Evelyn made herself at home in the Winter Palace.

She built a makeshift desk out of an old barrel, combing through the massive pile of parchment that kept accumulating through the night. New and enthusiastic partners of the Inquisition, who all had issues they deemed urgent, were awarded priority by Evelyn to prove the Inquisition’s commitment to Orlais.

Every missive got ridiculous as she proceeded through the stack: guests insulting food, private trysts with servants, secret bastard children. It was valuable information for a bard, but Leliana and the Inquisition’s responsibilities were much greater than minor facets of the Game. Dumping the papers on the top of the barrel, she reached into a side pocket of her plum jacket to pull out a folded piece of parchment, running her fingers over the broken extravagant seal of Starkhaven.

Varric,

I hope when this letter reaches you that the Maker has blessed you with good health after what befell you at Haven. My daily prayers fill with thoughts of your men now resting at the Maker’s side. It was a tragedy that occurred but not surprising the Maker would exert his will against an organization that turned away from his Chantry.

I did not know how to react when I received your letter. After these years, I assumed Corypheus to be a distant point in history. It appears my father’s blood magic has once again corrupted and murdered the innocent. Night after night, I kneel in prayer to the Maker to right the evil my father took part in. The Maker's voice has remained silent as many in Thedas flaunt his words and teachings. I believe his back is turned to his children.

This breach you describe is an affront to all Andrastians. It is our responsibility as Corypheus’ liberators, to return him to the Fade. All unchecked magic, allowed to simmer and corrupt, will explode and destroy the world. This was the deplorable lesson I learned from Anders. We must march against these Venatori and Templar abominations as Andraste once marched against the Imperium.

Against the wishes of my husband, I reached out to contacts in Kirkwall and discovered large procurements of magical items of great power. Used together these items would cause a catastrophe of an unimaginable kind. The travel of the blasphemer items appears tied to a Trevinter man by the name of Erimond. Along with those items he appears to have collected one more thing: Varric- I have located the Grey Wardens. They are in the Western Approach and we need to know why they're there. There are reports of massive swells of magic coming from the
I am not sure what to believe about your ‘Herald of Andraste’. If you follow the Maker’s words and steps, we must be his guiding hands to stop this insanity and save Thedas once and for all.

I am on my way to your Skyhold immediately.

-Marion Hawke Vael

The Spymaster exhaled, her breath harsh from her sore and throbbing lungs. Her eyes retraced over the words to discern a secret meaning. The discovered Wardens were a relief, but it meant now they would discover why they disappeared. Having Marion Hawke involved now added another complication to the growing list.

When she and Cassandra were desperate to have someone lead the Inquisition, they traveled to Starkhaven. The Vael’s declared the Left and the Right Hand of the Divine entering Starkhaven to recruit their queen as an act of war. Cassandra had gone as far as kidnapping Varric and dragging him to the Conclave hoping Marion would follow so they could state their argument. Hawke hadn’t taken the bait. Varric had told the Seeker, as much, as she lugged him from Kirkwall with their newly recruited Commander in tow.

Marion’s guilt over Anders’ actions in Kirkwall clouded her beliefs on magic and the outside world. She spent time after Kirkwall, hidden inside her castle, funneling money into the repairs for areas Anders destroyed in his fury. Varric accepted her money and their secret partnership to repair Kirkwall was a fruitful one. No one questioned how the meager writer came up with funds for the city.

People were so desperate that no one dared question free money even if the coins had the crest of Starkhaven imprinted on the copper. Cassandra was furious that Marion chose now of all times to come to their aid. She ignored them at a critical time. Leliana saw Cassandra’s mind wrestling with the thought that Marion accepting their invitation could have somehow prevented the Divine’s death.

The Spymaster was so lost as she stood next to the empty barrel in silence. In the same night as Evelyn’s betrayal, she'd almost died by the hand of a mage she hadn’t seen in a decade. After her confrontations with Morrigan and Evelyn, Leliana lost it when Dal volunteered to head out to the Western Approach with Marion. It would remove her from the protective umbrella of the Inquisition, which under Evelyn's leadership might not be that secure. But Leliana knew great harm would come by Marion’s hand if she discovered who Idalya was. She was not the type to take anything she considered an abomination lightly after her experience with Anders.

Dal’s fury had cut her to the core, even if it wasn’t unexpected. The girl struggled daily, and it was only a matter of time before her anger spilled out into Skyhold. She did not begrudge the Warden her anger, she earned it. Though the answer to how to address her friend’s immense anger was not clear. Having Idalya alive was good for Thedas and the Inquisition, but the Spymaster wasn’t expecting the crippling loneliness her guilt instilled in her soul.

She only heard the elf’s footsteps as he was upon her. She cast her eyes up, shocked by the creased lines of worry etched into Solas’ face.

“Nightingale.” He addressed her. “A moment of your time?”

Leliana didn’t need to ask what he wanted to speak about. Idalya. She carried the same weight on her features as she worried for the young Warden. She tucked her parchments beneath a weary
arm, then followed the mage towards the forest line. Dried leafs cracked and snapped under her boots as they pushed their way through the dense foliage. At a small clearing in the forest, the mage stopped turning to face her, his concern growing.

“I need to ask something about Idalya. I need an honest answer to help her.”

Leliana was cringing in her sore chest as she poured over all the questions she could not answer for the elf. Her face was blank as she refused to let him see her sweat.

“What was the Warden’s mental state like before she died?”

That was expected. She felt her features fall as the truth Solas presumed showed through her expression against her will. The edges of her eyes burned as tears threatened to swell up and escape. The mage sighed, his hand rubbing roughly against the top of his bald head.

The Spymaster took a deep breath to calm her nerves. “What’s wrong?” This was her fear since she heard Idalya scream as the magic poured life back into her skeleton. It was one thing to bring a body back to life, but completely another to bring someone’s soul and emotions back into the waking world.

Solas hesitated as he watched the Spymaster’s body language go from blank to frayed. “The events in Halamshiral have affected the girl profoundly. I have concerns about her being able to continue serving her purpose.”

Only a fool would miss the level of affection the mage had developed for the lost Warden. At first, she found herself jealous of the mysterious mage. After watching him step out to protect and assist Dal, Leliana accepted that Solas would never harm her. Dal always found comfort in her teachers whether her mother or Duncan. She understood the heartache that following and assisting the Warden was and she didn’t envy Solas as he tried to speak of her struggles unbiased.

“This doesn’t leave here.” She waited until the mage nodded in agreement. “She was broken. By the time she faced the Archdemon, she’d lost everything and gained nothing in return. Years after holding her lifeless body, I still couldn’t see the truth staring me in the face. It wasn't until I saw her living and breathing once more that I understood—she wanted to die.” She inhaled far into her chest cavity as her heart pounded.

“I always assumed it was an accident. She took the blow because she saw the opening and didn’t hesitate. I am older now. That day played out the way she planned it. We lived another day while she and Archdemon were laid to rest. She ended the demon and her suffering with one final strike of her sword.”

Solas’ face was expressionless as he listened to the first honest thing the Spymaster had shared about the Warden.

She couldn't distract herself by his reaction. "She had... nightmares. That’s how the Wardens know it's a Blight is through their dreams. The other Warden traveling with us would wake frightened, but it was nothing like hers. Her screams echoed through the camp, hysterical that the Archdemon was coming for her. We’d pack camp and leave with haste to ease her mind that the darkspawn weren't hunting her down.”

Leliana wiped a stray tear from her cheek as she struggled to keep her voice steady. “I failed her. We all failed her. She was so young, and we looked to her for everything, Solas. She never complained, never said no. She kept giving more of herself until her body was lifeless on the charred ground. None of us realized how much we cared and needed her until it was too late. She
decided to die without consulting us because that is the responsibility we handed to her. We convinced ourselves she was invincible and the Archdemon would fall over dead at her feet like magic. She never forgot she was mortal though. She knew the cost of failure.”

Speaking pained her, Evelyn’s betrayal spinning her far harder than expected. To force open these gates to allow her guilt and grief to flood her spirit might be enough to break her. Solas’ shoulders slumped as she’d talked, the weight of her words affecting him more than he expected. The affirmation that the Warden wasn’t stable before her death could be helpful for the elf. They both needed to acknowledge that her current condition might keep deteriorating.

“It is, as I feared.” His voice was far away, speaking from another time. “Do you think she expects to die while fighting the Archdemon?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation from the Spymaster.

“We must find her a reason to live.” There was no disagreement on that point. Both wanted her to live, needed her to survive their final fight.

“Does she know?” Leliana was avoiding the question. It should have been her to speak to Idalya. After their last words to each other, she couldn’t handle facing the Warden and voice the apologies that words were inadequate for before breaking her heart.

“Yes, she knows. She did not take it… well.” The mage looked frustrated. “What is Inquisitor’s plan?”

“As far as I can tell, it is to punish Dal while showing her power. If she has her way, Knight-Captain Barris will never step foot in Skyhold again.”

Leliana awoke early that morning to a flurry of activity in the Gaspard’s villa. Dressed in her hooded jacket, she exited her room, her quiet footsteps turning to soft thuds on the wood as her pace broke to a run. Around the corner, she found most the Inquisition’s Templar at ease outside the front doors in full armor. Evelyn wore a thin dressing gown with a fur-lined coat wrapped around her. Hair flowing in the surrounding breeze.

She stood next to Ser Barris as she barked out orders to the Templars. The Spymaster observed that the Commander, nor Ambassador was nowhere in the vicinity as the Inquisitor carried out her orders. On her words, the Templar turned and marched towards the main highway away from camp.

“What’s happening? Is it the Venatori?” How could the Inquisitor issue orders like this without consulting her advisers?

“Oh, it’s you.” Evelyn seemed confused. “I presumed you were Cullen come to judge my actions, again.” She blew air out of her nose in frustration. “I realized the Inquisition wasn’t using our Templar resources when much of Orlais desperately needs their help. The Knight-Captain will lead a group across the country as they show others the value of the Inquisition in keeping the peace.”

“You mean, flex your power at them.” The Spymaster was furious. How dare she sendoff resources without her knowledge?

“Same thing.” Evelyn shrugged as she watched the Templar shrink in the distance. “Plus, keeping them holed up in Skyhold is a distraction for those who have more important things to worry about in these chaotic times.”

Leliana was seconds from exploding. The Inquisitor wasn’t blind to the devotion the young elf had
earned from those who lived in Skyhold. Unable to phrase words, she stormed off back into the villa to wake Josephine, so they could argue over who would inform Cullen.

Her eyes focused as she watched the elf who looked defeated from the info she shared about her closest friend. “I don’t know what Evelyn’s plans are, but I can tell you Barris and Idalya are in great danger if we don’t follow through with what she demands.” She shook her head, a rare moment of vulnerability shifting over her. “I don't know how we will run everything without Evelyn.”

Solas creased his eyebrows. “What are you talking about?”

“Evelyn. She’s staying with Gaspard in Orlais.”

The mage’s eyes flared to life as his anger was plain. “She has the mark, the only one who can close the rifts… She can’t stay here!”

“Cullen, Josie, Cassandra, and I tried to argue those points with her last night, but she will not listen. We must find some way to carry on without our soldiers and allies growing suspicious though we already have deserters from our Ferelden ranks. Turns out our soldiers aren’t interested in fighting their own countrymen on the orders of an Orlesian. Corypheus must be our priority, we must destroy him, and we must do whatever it takes to make sure it happens. Even if Evelyn is not part.”

A billowing cloud of crackling magic formed around Solas as his breathing grew labored. In the blink of an eye, the mage fade stepped away and disappeared from the clearing in the wood. This was ridiculous. Everything was complete insanity and if she left the world spin away from her, she’d fall from the side.

Today was a new day in the Inquisition. The camps were packed, and it was time to make the march home to the new future Evelyn set in motion as she watched the blade slide into Celene. She worked her way out of the woods as the soldiers trekked by, the Commander’s biting commands echoing across the field.

As much as things changed, their chance of victory might be born from what stayed the same.
The Chapter Where Rylen Watches Events Transpire

Chapter Summary

Rylen just wants to be away from the Winter Palace, but some members have some parting words before their exit.

A gentle breeze blew through the slats in Rylen’s armor as he stood at the side of his Commander, he shivered with the early promise of winter drifting in the wind. Their army filed into lines behind them as the Inquisition prepared to leave Halamshiral. An ache still radiated through his restructured nose.

Rylen was a forgiving man, who didn’t hold the misunderstanding over the Knight-Captain’s head. Pavus did an impressive job patching his features back together, so the only visual reminder of his crooked appendage was a soft red ring around the edges.

Dorian took his sweet time making his way to the injured man, while he bled out over the trampled ground after Evelyn’s clumsy servant was ordered to find him with haste. Rylen smelled the mage long before he heard the man approaching, the reek of stale wine permeating the air from his leather robes. Dorian knelt in front of Rylen, an examining eye coasting over the damage Barris had inflicted.

He would sit Barris down and have a frank conversation on asking questions before throwing fists in people’s faces. He chuckled despite his predicament over how fast Barris lost his trademark cool head when Doll was involved.

Dorian raised a thick eyebrow at the Templar’s unexpected laughter. “Something humorous at the moment?” His irritation obvious, thinking himself to be the subject of the Templar’s humor.

“I’m laughing at how I end up in these situations.” He grinned a bloody mouth at the mage who cringed in disgust.

He ignored the man’s antics and continued examining Rylen’s face for all potential points of damage. While Dorian checking his injuries, Rylen examined the distracted mage since he’d never been so close. He had frequently seen the man carried around by the Inquisitor’s companions in his drunken stupor, but never did the Trevinter mage dare look to a Templar for help.

Dorian’s eyes were the color of a storm rolling over the ocean, deep set with dark circles creasing below his eyelids. All Skyhold knew the mage didn’t sleep willingly and if he wasn’t in his library reading, he was face down on a table in the Herald’s Rest. Being the Inquisitor’s cousin earned the man a lot of slack in duties and expectations.

The graceful lines of his neck were hypnotic. Rylen watched the muscles flex and contract underneath Dorian’s deep golden skin as the mage prattled on about Inquisition matters. The smell of the man’s cologne intoxicating at their distance even though aura of stale wine. He was startled when the mage shoved a sloshing wine bottle, an Orlesian Red, into his hands and advised him to drink.

Before cracking an inappropriate joke, Dorian reached up and with a fluid motion, snapped the
pieces of his nose back into place with a chuckle as Rylen almost passed out at the blinding pain centered in his face. He held his breath as green tendrils poured out of Dorian’s fingers and wove their way up through his blood-soaked nostrils.

Rylen didn’t have the same apprehensions regarding healing like Cullen, but it was still an uncomfortable feeling to have the unnatural churning of mana through his body, stitching the threads of his biology back together. A sigh released from his body as the focal point of the pain dimmed and his muscles relaxed.

He’d thanked the mage, but Dorian made some disparaging remark about filthy templars before staggering away, then properly staggering back to rip the rest of the remaining bottle of wine from Rylen’s trembling hands and swaying away.

Rylen rested his back against the tree until his bearings returned. Barris left some time ago to meet with Evelyn and the longer he was away, the more worried Rylen became. The Inquisitor ripped Cullen’s beating heart from his chest and he could only imagine what she'd have in store for a true man of dignity and honor such as Barris.

Commotion back in the remaining Templar camp caught his attention, heading over he saw a large group of the Templar, standing at attention, fully armored, turning to march toward the villa. His heart pounded in his throat as he searched through the rows of marching Templar, looking for Barris’ Knight-Captain insignia.

At the remainder of camp and found a few young recruits left behind. He questioned them all as they stared in terror at his blood-soaked clothes. They informed him that the Inquisitor ordered the Templar into Thedas to protect civilians from the dangers of magic. Fuck.

As his feet darted into a run, his head pounding as the remaining blood he owned quickened through his veins with each step. In the Commander’s tent, he found Cullen where he left him before exiting this morning. Shoulders slumped, staring off into space. Now dressed the part of the Commander, red lion mane laid across his faltering shoulders, instead of sleeveless tunic and lace loosened breeches. He still carried a faint waft of whiskey as it purged itself from his pores.

“Commander.” Cullen’s eyes gained clarity from their fogged-over state as he turned to stare at his beleaguered friend. “They’re gone.”

Confusion poured over his features as he tried to understand Rylen’s words. *I knew it, that fucking bitch didn’t tell him.*

“What are you talking about, Rylen?”

Rising from his chair, Rylen’s words carved themselves deeper into his conscience, until Cullen shot forward out of the tent with Rylen close on his heels, gasping from the hangover threatening to cripple him out of existence.

The Commander’s feet fell silent on the dirt path as he watched the marching Templar far in the distance. To his credit, the Commander’s shoulders or legs never wavered as he stood and watched his greatest resource sent away to do his ex-lover’s bidding. They were her army, but these were their brothers in arms, closer to Rylen than his own blood and he feared their fate if tied to the commands of Evelyn Trevelyan.

They remained in silence until the Templar disappeared over the horizon.

Cullen’s jaw clenched, fist gripping the pommel of his sword until his knuckles drained white.
When the Commander turned, Rylen saw the continued sorrow in his friend’s eyes. That was a problem for another day.

They were obligated to not disobey the Inquisitor’s orders, so they would find a way to succeed without most of the Templar in Skyhold. Evelyn instructed Cullen to build their army around the strengths and weaknesses of the Templar as they joined, and now they were gone leaving an army unequipped to fight without them. Cullen returned in silence to his tent to prepare their exit immediately.

Hours later he stood at Cullen’s side, the only remaining Lieutenant of their armies remaining actively with their soldiers. Anger pooled from Cullen as he stood watching the Inquisitor and Emperor give directions to the advisers and army. The desperation in Josephine’s eyes was clear as she looked back and forth between the Inquisitor and the line of carriages packed and awaiting the Inquisitor’s companions to return to Skyhold.

The news traveled quickly through the ranks that Evelyn would not return with the army, instead staying at the Winter Palace as she made new allies for the Inquisition, at least that was her story.

She dressed in a crimson gown matching the fabric interiors of the Palace, hair piled high on her head in a pile of curls as she instructed her Ambassador and Spymaster. The Nightingale’s face said every word for her. Waves of disgust rolled off her as she barely tried to hide her anger. He wasn’t sure what words the Inquisitor imparting on her staff, but by the Spymaster’s face, she was close to taking a dagger of insubordination.

As the Ambassador and Spymaster were dismissed, a commotion came from behind him. He remained attention as the Commander looked to see what the ruckus from back behind the army was. As soon as Cullen turned, he heard a low groan release from the man’s throat and kicked himself, as the voice grew louder. The promise he’d already forgotten.

“Asha, stop this now.” Solas’ voice grew louder, the characteristic clack of Idalya’s boots crescendoing.

She cleared the distance much faster than an elf should, soaring past him and Cullen as she headed toward Evelyn and Gaspard. Gaspard held a grin of curiosity sneaking out below his golden mask, but Evelyn’s face remained still without a mask.

She identified that Doll carried none of her typical weapons, but as Rylen knew from their spars- it hardly mattered when the Warden was determined to get her hands on you regardless if she was armed. She carried no weapons he recognized, but a bundle of blue cloth within her hands.

Leliana’s eyes grew wide as her friend charged towards the Inquisitor and Emperor. Before she stepped forward to stop the charging Warden, Josephine reached out and placed a firm hand on her forearm. Whatever Idalya’s actions were, they were her own and Leliana’s intervention meant dragging everyone into the altercation. Their army watched the scene unfold so they needed to be clear they were impartial to what happened.

Idalya stopped as she reached the two leaders, standing in silence. Her anger carried her feet before she decided what to say.

Evelyn betrayed the ideals they build the Inquisition on. Rylen left the Chantry to improve the world, not force down the weak so the strong continue to prosper. Once again, the Templar were lured into an institution that transformed them into overpowered thugs. A well-armored hammer, to drill down the nails most inconveniencing those in charge.
Evelyn spoke first. “Enjoying your time out of Skyhold?” She arched an eyebrow at the elf while her hands rested on her hips.

This time it was Rylen’s turn to play diplomat, he cleared his throat as Cullen lurched forward. He had one hundred percent confidence there was nothing Cullen could say between the two women to improve the situation. Inserting himself into the conversation between would only instigate the Warden’s thin temper in defense of her friend.

“It was an eye-opening experience.” The Warden’s responded, voice haggard and bare. “You never know who people are until you see them under pressure.”

Evelyn’s smirk faded, while Gaspard’s grew wider. He found the elf entertaining which could keep her from hanging from the gallows if the mood struck Evelyn to dislike her tone.

The Inquisitor cocked a hip further to the side. “Agreed, you never know the strength someone possesses until you watch how they crumble to their knees.”

Rage flared into Cullen and Leliana’s faces and he was glad he could not turn and see the murderous anger installed on Solas’. Everyone knew what the two elves discovered in the servant’s hall of the palace, and no one would take someone’s reaction to it lightly… unless you were Evelyn Trevelyan.

She was a woman much smarter than she appeared. She wielded words sharper than the daggers clinging to her back. Rylen’s mouth gaped open as Dal’s body posture stayed firm, prepared for the words that passed through Evelyn’s rouge-painted lips. Her calm posture and silence unnerved Evelyn too.

“Is there something you wanted to say?” The rogue moved closer to the Emperor who squared his shoulders back to appear taller next to the average sized Inquisitor, who stood eye to eye with the dismissive Warden in front of her.

“Yes, I wanted to thank you for the opportunity to leave Skyhold and see the Inquisition for the organization it truly is. I wanted to return what’s left of your servants before I forgot.” In a quick movement, she thrust the small bundle of cloth into Evelyn’s hands, as Gaspard’s entire chevalier guard moved to an active battle stance.

Before Evelyn understood what happened, the Warden had left, making her way to the carriages uncaring to the Inquisitor’s reaction.

Evelyn looked down at the bundle of cloth in confusion. As she opened it a silent gasp escaped her lips and the bundle of cloth landed on the ground. Rylen then understood what the elf gave her- her servants dress still soaked with the blood of Gaspard’s slaughtered kitchen staff.

They may have scrubbed the floors and walls clean of any trace of the tragedy, but Idalya was not one to let them forget what was lost. As Dal drew near, her skin was pale with a heavy yellow undertone as she wasted away before their eyes. Her expression as dead as the bodies he cleared out of circles, her lack of emotion a chilling similarity to the tranquil he spent years observing.

As she passed, her eyes were unfocused and paying no heed to her. Elven whispered behind him, Solas cursing her impulsive behavior when they were close to escaping.

Further behind, Varric expressed his annoyance at not taking bets that “Kitty” would refuse to leave Halamshiral without getting in the last word to Evelyn first. Rylen prepared himself for the Inquisitor to order Gaspard’s guards to apprehend the willful elf, but the woman remained frozen,
anger brewing steadily in her eyes as Gaspard observed her reaction.

The Knight-Captain sensed the unease of his Commander as he stepped forward for departure assignments. Cullen’s breath was jagged within his confining armor as he kept his personal anger separate from his professional responsibilities.

*This is why you don’t start relationships with coworkers.*

Cullen, Barris, Idalya… all suffered from searching to find a moment of happiness in an insane world. The Inquisition was not the place to kindle the sparks of a budding romance, yet they were desperate enough to feel that connection they braved the treacherous waters only to drown in the incoming tides.

In a moment of indecision, Evelyn turned to Gaspard to speak before pulling her robes tight around her and marching off to the Palace. Cullen made a move to follow her before Rylen cleared his throat again and the Commander’s boots moved back to their prior position.

“Commander, approach.” Gaspard’s thick Orlesian accent sounded like razor blades.

Cullen inhaled and stepped forward to begin his approach to the Emperor. He cocked an eyebrow as he found Rylen moving with him, matching step for step. In any other company, the Commander would order him back to his place, but Cullen would refuse to show disconnect within his ranks in front of Gaspard.

He was aware his dear friend was considering the consequences of running the newly crowned Emperor through his center with a sword.

In his opinion, the Inquisition could not leave this bastard place fast enough.
The Chapter Where Morrigan Gives Advice

Chapter Summary

Morrigan shares some words of wisdom with the Inquisitor.

Far below the grand balcony, the Inquisition tucked their tails to head home without their illustrious leader. The visible reminders of Evelyn’s betrayal of her soldiers and companions- their slumped shoulders, fear accumulating behind their eyes.

They should be afraid.

Morrigan was more acquainted with women like Evelyn than comfortable admitting. If the Inquisitor’s resemblance to her mother continued, then the full toll of her decisions had yet to take root in the stones of their mountain fortress.

The witch chuckled as Vivienne instructed for her bags to be loaded into the line of simple Inquisition carriages. Gaspard informed her the night prior that Vivienne would leave to join the Inquisition. She would stay to advise him and the Inquisitor on magical matters, a plot she suspected to betray information on Idalya.

But it appeared neither knew of her former ties to the Spymaster, Warden, or King of Ferelden, a fact she was pleased with. The most logical assumption was her being untrustworthy and unlikely to feed information back to Gaspard than Vivienne. The circle mage, always looking to improve her position, looked despondent as she stood next to the Inquisitor’s companions. A look of disgust moving over her features as she reacted to the wafting fumes from the Trevinter mage barely standing next to her.

She scanned the lines of soldiers, her heart seizing as a ponytail of glistening white came into her view. Her nails dug into the marble banister below her hands frantically to find purchase in the stone. Hearing the Warden lived was one thing, seeing her move and breath was another. It took all her strength after talking to Leliana not to run through the Inquisition camp until she found the struggling Warden and cried herself to sleep in her arms.

Her mind was still fragile, on that point she agreed with Leliana as she spent the night watching her out of the Warden’s view. She would not be responsible again for the loss or damage of her friend. She failed the woman once and would not do it again. If she reappeared in the elf’s memories, she would be at her side in a heartbeat.

She was not surprised that Dal flung her servants dress back at the Inquisitor. She couldn’t think of anything that screamed typical Dal than reminding the joyous royal couple of the slaughter they caused within their own home.

A decade ago, she admired the Warden for her courage and bravery for her age. After experiencing more of the world, she realized that Dal’s fervor for defending what was right was brave for any age. She was unique in her refusal to take collateral damage. That was why she took the death blow from the Archdemon. It would have been unacceptable for anyone else to have been lost if the plans had fallen apart. If the Warden could have fought the dragon by herself, she would have battled alone on Fort Drakon without hesitation.
Dal was arguing with the bald elf who was livid at her display. He believed she endangered herself by sticking her neck out to the trigger-happy Inquisition. The Inquisitor would not lift a finger unless compelled to. Leliana told her Dal’s role in the Inquisition’s plans. As much as it angered Evelyn, she needed the elf. Her survival demanded the girl at her side at the end.

Evelyn craved power and superiority, but she wasn’t dumb enough to think she alone was strong enough to defeat Corypheus alone. The magic in her palm made her special, but Evelyn herself was just a human. The blood of an Archdemon itself ran through Idalya’s heart. Many saw her as just a Grey Warden, but Idalya was never an ordinary warden even before her rising.

The desire to comfort her friend blinded her to distraction. She couldn’t imagine how alone the Warden felt separated from everyone she had ever cared for. On their travels, Morrigan always rolled her eyes and dismissed Alistair as nothing more than a filthy, mangy dog, but he made Idalya happier than anything else. As the world crushed in on her from all sides, he stood bravely beside her sword and shield in hand without hesitation. It wasn’t until Arl Eamon became involved with Alistair and talks of the throne and future, did problems arise between the two love-struck teenagers.

Alistair was delusional on how the future would play out, but one of Idalya’s greatest strengths was being grounded. From the moment she learned of Alistair’s identity and Eamon’s plans for the Landsmeet, she understood they would be parted by forces beyond their control.

The future king pushed back on his destiny, refusing to accept the weight of his fate until it was too late, and the Warden laid quiet on the charred ground. Idalya knew the future depended on Alistair surviving that battle to heal the land she loved so much that she ensured he would survive no matter the cost. Would the clumsy Warden even be enough to comfort the terrified girl at this point or just another reminder of things she’d loved lost to her?

Tearing her eyes from the beleaguered elf, she found Leliana staring up as Gaspard signaled for the Commander to set out. After Morrigan healed the rogue of her injuries and they spoke, they made a tentative agreement to keep in contact and help one another. Morrigan would be the Spymaster’s eyes inside the Winter Palace while Leliana swore that she would do whatever it took to protect Idalya from all those that would seek to strike at her.

Even without the threat of the Inquisitor, the Venatori would still search every surface of Thedas once learning of her existence. The thought of Idalya lost to some dark spawn worshipping mage cult, angered Morrigan beyond her senses. She would reach out with what remaining contacts she had, to find out more about the Venatori before they reached Dal.

The sharp clicking of heels approached Morrigan from behind. She did not have to turn her head to sense Evelyn had stepped out on the other side of the balcony. Carriage drivers snapped their reins to urge their horses forward for their long trek back to Skyhold. Evelyn’s face was flushed, her breathing irregular as she rested her hand on the ledge, her head pointed down.

“… and at the close of one chapter, we open another.” Her words were a faint wisp on the wind.

“Even when we are unsure that what the future holds, we tell ourselves that what will come will be better only to find ourselves full of regret for what we let happen.”

Evelyn’s head snapped up in surprise unaware the mage joined her on the balcony. Morrigan frowned at her own words, she meant to scorn the impulsive woman and instead spoke her own words of truth.

“What would you know of my regrets?” The Inquisitor barked, her mark sparking jade rivets of
light from her hand in her irritation.

“I’ve lived and lost enough to know the clear path to victory can be the one that destroys the thing you took for granted- yourself,” Morrigan admitted.

The fury in the auburn woman’s eyes calmed returning to her normal stone appearance as she examined her. Pushing her hands off the banister, she made her way toward Morrigan, the slow click of her heels echoing in the carved molding of the deck. The curls on top of her head swayed in the gentle breeze, her hips sauntered toward her. She stopped a mere breaths distance away.

When she spoke, her voice was filled with ice. “Unless you’re being asked, keep your opinions to yourself mage.”

Morrigan would not make the mistake to speak freely to the woman again. As the Inquisitor turned to leave, she cast one look over the Inquisition disappearing on the horizon before heading back into the heart of the Palace.

Whatever Evelyn Trevelyan was planning, Morrigan was uncertain she was ready to accept the responsibility for the outcome.
The Chapter Where Cassandra Hates Hawke

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition investigates Hawke's lead for the missing Grey Wardens.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the patience on slower postings of chapters. I currently have two abscessed teeth and I've been having troubles with my gallbladder, so editing/writing time has been significantly less. Thank you for your constant support. I hope everyone is still enjoying the rewrite. :)

Grains of sand traveling on the dry winds across the Western Approach blew across her face. With a disgusted noise, Cassandra swept the errant pieces of rock from her mouth onto the back of her hand. The deserted camp they set up for their return trip from tracking the Wardens was ahead. She was tired of the heat, tired of the sand, and most of all she was tired of listening to Marion Hawke and her non-stop talking.

She had forged far ahead of the main group to find silence in the abandoned desert. Varric, the Iron Bull, and Vivienne traveled together, speaking in hushed whispers, nervous if the Champion heard them talking she would view it as an invitation to join their conversation. Behind the Inquisition, Marion traveled with her Warden contact, Stroud, who enjoyed Marion’s incessant chatter since they had arrived at the Approach weeks ago.

“Varric, what’s the deal with the Champion?” Bull asked while rotating a sore shoulder as Vivienne gave him a scornful look to tread carefully.

The dwarf shrugged. “Which deal? That woman is a basket full of broken promises.”

“You two are friends, right? You’ve barely spoken since she joined the party.” Dots of blood worked their way through the bandage wrapped around Bull’s arm. Vivienne used all the mana she had left at her disposal to fuse the pieces back together where a Warden controlled demon sliced into his bicep. “The Maker crap. Has she always been like that? Doesn’t strike me as characteristic of most your friends.”

Varric sighed, running a hand over slicked back hair to unleash the grains of sand stuck through the strands. “No, she wasn’t always like this. Despite how she acts, she has the best interests of Kirkwall in mind. I can’t even count the amount of her husband’s money she’s funneled in secret into projects restoring the devastation Anders caused.” The dwarf’s voice lowered as the mage’s name came up to avoid Hawke overhearing him. “All these years and she has taken no credit for her help.”

Vivienne huffed as she re-balanced her staff on her back. “This conversation is undignified and also inappropriate since she’s following behind us.” She lowered her voice “If either of you speaks loud enough to distract her from Stroud- Maker help the both of you…”
Both men smiled at her threat as Vivienne moved ahead, her knee-high boots digging their way through the messy dunes of sand as they approached the final hill to the camp.

Plowing her way up the massive hill, Cassandra entered the camp. Her heart beating in her throat. Before the other companions scaled the large dune, she’d completed a perimeter check and inspected the empty tents. It was unnecessary to examine everything as closely as she did, but after the fight with the Wardens, the Seeker didn’t feel safe even alone in the desert.

Bull was first to clear the hill, his massive gait helping him propel past the other companions with each large thrust of his legs. “Seeker, I’ll start…”

“It’s done.” Her voice was rough with the stress of what they’d experienced and the letters she still needed to write.

“Oh, is there anything-” There was a clear concern in his eyes, but she did not have the energy for it.

“No.” Cassandra was moving inside her tent as the tips of Vivienne’s pointed cowl appeared over the crest.

As the flap closed behind her, her legs wobbled, and she sat straight down on her bedroll feeling streams of the sand slide out from between the plating of her armor. This was a disaster. The only thing worse than her discovery was having the send the information back to Skyhold, who she knew were waiting impatiently to hear their findings.

How could they have known? Even Marion and Stroud were shaken, and it was their lead. A demon army. The words were terrifying, but a demon army working for Corypheus made it a million times worse. After facing the mage Erimond and Warden-Commander Clarel, the fleeing wardens were followed to Adamant fortress- an impenetrable stronghold to a great army, but to one without a leader and members dropping out of ranks each day? They would need a miracle to breach the walls much less subdue the Wardens inside.

She wanted to climb to her knees and pray to the Maker for the strength to see their mission through, limbs so exhausted from trekking through the desert, they hung numb at her side. Fighting a brigade of summoned demons, tracking them to Adamant and heading back had taken everything out of her- even the energy to pray. She heard Bull’s laugh echo through the camp as Varric scaled the hill with help from Hawke and Stroud.

Varric. She couldn’t look him in the eye right now. How dare that little man be so right? Marion caused more problems than she solved. To Varric’s credit, he hadn’t given her an ‘I told you so’ speech… at least not yet. Now they had their confirmation of the Warden’s troubles, they needed to return to Skyhold quickly. she had no intention of letting Hawke travel with them if she could prevent it.

She was a failure. Failed to protect Justinia. Failed to find a proper Inquisitor. As her faith broke, she knew she was failing herself. Anthony would be so ashamed of me. The thought repeated through her head. Giving up wasn’t in her vocabulary, but what other options did they have?

There’s no way they could face the Wardens at Adamant and survive. They could not allow Corypheus to raise a demon army without standing against him. Maker, how have things come to this? Fighting against the Mage-Templar War was easier than standing against an ancient darkspawn Magister when your army was disintegrating at your feet.

Patches of Marion’s conversation drifted to her on the breeze. She never stops talking. After
traveling with her for weeks, Cassandra was convinced Marion was afraid of silence and could not risk being alone with her thoughts. The Champion radiated regret. Leliana met her back in Kirkwall while working for Justinia when Hawke still strove to make Kirkwall a better place. The Spymaster found a warm woman surrounded by friends and though the Maker had dealt her a rough hand, she appreciated the moments of joy she found with her family and the friends she had accepted to be another.

The Hawke her friends knew dissolved away as she experienced one loss after another. Her brother Carver died before the Hawke family left Ferelden. Bethany, her mage sister, died at the hands of Orsino trying to protect her as the Mage-Templar War started. Hawke thought the hardest blow was the loss of her beloved mother, which she still blames herself for. She was too involved in Kirkwall politics to notice her mother being lured into the arms of a murderer. Watching the Kirkwall Chantry explode had broken Marion.

Varric told her during his interrogation that the explosion was the moment Hawke ceased to exist and she became Marion Vael - separate from the world and afraid of drawing the Makers scorn. The dwarf said he believed Marion loved Anders, despite their differences. Anders showed her the world and the injustices within it she never knew growing up in Lothering.

Marion had been a quiet girl, horrified by the violence of the Blight when Varric and his brother first encountered her in Kirkwall. Anders opened her mind to question the teachings of her beloved Chantry. She hadn’t hesitated to turn Bethany over to the Templars upon arriving in Kirkwall until Anders showed her the scars a Circle-bound mage had fused for a lifetime on their skin. She vowed to help mages and assisted Anders with his underground medical clinic that treated the poor and forgotten while also funneling apostates out of the City of Chains.

Varric wasn’t sure how much she understood about Anders’ fusion with Justice, only that Marion knew he was an abomination, but she swore by her heart he worked toward a better future for mages. King Sebastian Vael joined their group as the pressure on the Chantry grew more demanding to stop the early flames of the uprising in Kirkwall from happening. At the time Vael was nothing more than a religious fanatic swearing to be the King of Starkhaven. Many of her companions told Marion to turn him away, but Hawke saw pure intent in the man and brought him into their fold against her friend’s grievances.

According to Varric, Vael questioned Marion’s leadership and dedication to the lessons of the Chantry from day one. Multiple times he threatened to turn Anders and the Dalish mage, Merrill, over to Templar authorities, but his plans were constantly foiled by Varric and Isabella striving to keep their dysfunctional family together.

Marion lived in ignorance of what Anders’ machinations behind her back, even assisting him in ignorance with the mission to plant the bomb that would blow that fateful night. Varric told her that Marion fell to her knees as the sky beyond them roared with oranges and reds as the explosion spread across the neighboring areas.

From her earliest days, Hawke had a singing voice deemed a gift from the Maker. The cry she uttered at the destruction reigned from the hands of the man she loved echoed through the quaking streets of Kirkwall. When her sobs stopped, and she rose to her feet to face the man that just ended so many lives in the blink of an eye, she was no longer the Marion Hawke they knew and loved.

In shock of the events that had just happened, only Varric and Isabella noticed that Sebastian stood at the grieving woman’s side as she rose, a glowing fury matching in their eyes as they stared at Anders, who held his shoulders back, accepting his fate. Varric admitted he couldn’t watch her behead the mage, even as Hawke’s other companions forced themselves to.
It felt wrong to him. He knew Anders had merged with Justice, but he also knew the mage loved Marion more than anything in his meager life and Justice was in control of the actions that day. It was too late for what could have or should have happened. As fire licked the surrounding sky, the mage’s blood spilled through the streets of Kirkwall as Marion’s sword cut through flesh.

Without time to grieve, they had made their way back to the Gallows in time to side with Cullen against Meredith and Orsino, where Hawke’s sister Bethany died taking a blow for the rogue who was fighting like she had nothing left to lose until she lost more. Marion stood frozen above her sister’s lifeless body as the battle raged around them. Her eyes wide with the realization she allowed the last member of her family to die due to her carelessness.

Cassandra refused to admit she identified with Hawke’s immense amount of self-blame. She blamed herself daily in her prayers for forgiveness for the death of Anthony even though she was unsure how she could have saved him. Her guilt was always with her, an unwanted, but deserved traveling companion as they had waded the long hours through the desert.

Cleaned of sand-strewn armor, the rest of the crew were out of their tents and setting up for dinner. Stroud took cooking duties as he had most nights they traveled together. The quiet Warden was experienced creating meals on the road and enjoyed working with the ample supplies the Inquisition brought with them after being accustomed to a full kitchen staff in Skyhold. Stroud’s concocted dishes simple, but a huge improvement over what Bull or Varric would cook. Their usual grayish color stews weren’t an option since they couldn’t afford to waste the extra water in the scorching temperatures.

Releasing a massive sigh, Cassandra unbuckled each piece of her armor cursing herself for not loosening the sand outside her sleeping quarters. After removing and wiping the pieces clean, she strapped them back into place on before heading out of the tent. The Seeker controlled not rolling her eyes when the first thing she spied was Hawke and Stroud in engaged in conversation over their cooking food. With their dark brunette hair, the pair resembled siblings from a distance. Marion had grown her hair past her shoulders to erase the image of her iconic short crop she wore for years in Kirkwall.

Ignoring their current debate on passages of the Chant of Light, Cassandra cut a sharp right, to take a seat next to Vivienne who was reading through a tome while blocking out the sounds of Varric and Bull’s enthusiastic game of cards from inside Varric’s tent. Cassandra needed to be writing to the waiting advisers at Skyhold, but she couldn’t force herself to find the motivation to make it happen. She continued to stare at the remaining husk of the Champion of Kirkwall, convinced Hawke came on this mission more for the chance to leave her self-induced exile than to fix her mistake in releasing Corypheus.

Vivienne flipped a long thin page which crackled in the dry heat. “The Champion concerns you.” She didn’t lift her eyes as she spoke.

“Yes.” Cassandra hissed out through her teeth.

Vivienne bothered many people since joining the Inquisition due to her strong beliefs in the Maker and Circles. The Inquisitor’s companions also suspected she was a spy for Gaspard. Cassandra recognized a woman who guarded herself against institutions she had no control over her entire life. With others, Vivienne would put distance, but over the course of their trip the two women found a commonality and shared their thoughts freely with the other.

“Do you think she’s dangerous?” Another crisp page turned as the mage stared into her tome.

“Because her name still holds power- yes. She and her husband are fanatics. They believe the
Maker to be judgmental and vindictive and strive to be his *warriors of faith*.” Cassandra picked at a piece of dried wood with her nails, feeling it crumble between the pads of her fingers. “She is no Andraste. She will get innocent people killed in her wake.”

The mage watched the Champion thoughtfully as the woman rose to enter her tent. As was her ritual, Hawke’s voice drifted through the coming night like a hummingbird in flight as she sang the Chant of Light. Her voice was clear and unburdened of the struggles the woman suffered. If life turned in one of a hundred different directions for the woman, it was easy to picture her singing the Chant for crowds of within a Chantry.

> “Maker, my enemies are abundant. Many are those who rise up against me. But my faith sustains me; I shall not fear the legion. Should they set themselves against me.”

“She is no Andraste,” Vivienne agreed, “but I’m uncertain that message is clear to her.”

The Seeker scoffed as she pried another withered piece of wood apart in her agitated fingers. “I’m hoping you’re not suggesting that it’s my job to set her right.”

Vivienne closed the large leather-bound tome on her lap. “Certainly not, Seeker. Even if you tried, she’d refuse to listen. That woman has been formed and shaped by loss. It’s all she understands anymore.”

> “In the long hours of the night
When hope has abandoned me,
I will see the stars and know
Your Light remains.”

“I suspect Marion Hawke has not seen the last of her losses.” Vivienne continued her voice floating lightly upon the music that filled the air. “Her first loss, her father, brought Corypheus out of his prison, free to walk through Thedas as he saw fit. What else could her destiny have in store for us?”

Cassandra stood, her muscles protesting the angle as she brushed the errant grains of sand off her leather breeches. “Remind me to never get on your bad side or ask you to tell me my future, *Madam de Fer*.”

With a mutual nod, the Seeker made her way past the cooking station to enter through the flap of her tent. She had put this off long enough. Better to finish it and deal with the hand fate had dealt them.

**********

*Nightingale-*

>The Bird’s suspicions turned out worse than suspected. The Wardens are under the thrall of Corypheus and have taken refuge in Adamant Fortress.

*Corypheus convinced the Wardens of a false Calling. He uses them to raise a demon army to destroy every corner of Thedas. This cannot happen.*

*The Inquisitor must be informed.*

*The Inquisition is going to war.*
Leliana read the parchment repeatedly before crumpling the paper and tossing it across Josephine’s office. It hit the wall and rolled across the floor until it came to a stop in front of the doorway. Josephine frowned over her writing board as her quill worked.

“Six weeks since they’ve arrived, we hear nothing, then this!” The Spymaster kicked the far leg of the sturdy wooden desk as the Ambassador put her quill down with a sharp snapping noise.

“I understand you’re frustrated, but none of this childish behavior will help us right now. Between you and the Commander, unknowing people would think the Inquisition is run by spoiled children.”

“Fine, Lady Voice of Reason, tell me what I should do since my current behavior is unbecoming.” Josie glared at her with annoyance, but there was understanding in her eyes. She wasn’t pointing out her weaknesses for cruelty but reminding her that the eyes of the world were upon them.

“For your information, I am writing letters to every ally we have between here and the Western Approach, asking for armed men and for the trebuchets Cullen needs to breach the walls. Get up and pack your bags to leave within the hour.” Josephine said curtly before returning to the parchments that needed her attention unlike the immature rogue in front of her.

Leliana straightened herself in the chair. “Where are we going?” The Ambassador raised an eyebrow as she waited for the Spymaster to catch up. “Maker…” the auburn-haired woman slumped back as she stared at the ceiling. The day had already twisted the dagger of emotion plunged into her side.

When Cassandra’s raven was spotted entering Skyhold’s rookery, Leliana and Cullen had raced the steps of the rotunda two at a time until they pounced on the famished raven quenching its thirst. Cullen retrieved the message from the squawking bird’s feet with his trembling fingers, but as the parchment rolled open, he went still. The paper falling from his hands to the ground as all color drained from his face. Whatever she was expecting when she grabbed the paper, a false Calling and confronting the Grey Wardens in battle were not what she expected.

Soldiers left their army by the day and after losing the Templar for direct service, their army was less than half of what they departed for Halamshiral with. She couldn’t blame the soldiers, many of the Ferelden men and women serving came from families still impacted by the Blight. After aligning with the Orlesian Emperor? She would have left too.

Better to return home and protect their families than forced to fight them on orders from the Orlesian empire. Now the remaining army would lie down their lives against the order of Grey Wardens on a suicide mission to breach the walls of Adamant. With that information, she was surprised they still had half their army, though she was certain it was the soldier’s dedication to Cullen and not the Inquisition that kept them training day after day.

“I see you’re not moving.” Josephine’s eyes never lifted from her stack of parchment, but Leliana understood the meaning.

“There’s got to be another way, can we-”

“No. There isn’t. I have family business to attend in Val Royeaux, so you’ll accompany me for safety. There’s no other way.” She flipped to another piece of parchment, her quill never stopping its swooping movements. “We need help. Prepare to leave now, the carriage will be prepped. We
depart within the hour for the Winter Palace. Evelyn is our only hope if we are to survive that battle.”
The Chapter Where We Catch Up With Ferelden

Chapter Summary

Anora presides over Teagan's latest tantrum while Alistair receives a letter that changes everything.

Chapter Notes

We've reached our first 100k words! I know a lot of you have been waiting for this chapter, so here you go! Enjoy!

“First order of business on this month’s agenda are the mounting costs of rebuilding Redcliff.” Teagan Guerrin announced to the court, a frown pressed into his hardened features. “Builders are difficult to come by as rumors continue that the castle remains haunted by the spirits of blood mages.”

He didn’t bother hiding his hostile body language anymore as he stood defiantly in front of the crown. Murmurs spreading throughout the crowd of citizens waiting to voice their grievances.

Queen Anora Theirin gripped the edges of her chair with her polished nails, keeping her face neutral in front of the irritating little man. Her platinum hair twisted into a tight bun at the base of her neck.

If she were a crueler woman, she’d have declared Teagan a foreign dignitary years ago and sent him away. His obsession and anger against Orlais consumed him in the years following the Blight that besieged their lands. But Anora was not a cruel woman, so she allowed her in-law to berate her again in front of the royal court as the urge to throw him out into the streets became a more agreeable idea.

Her dusty sapphire eyes glanced over at the ornate and empty chair beside her. She should not be disappointed that her husband shucked his duties once again. When she settled into bed, he was just opening a decanter of brandy in the sitting room. His yearly tradition as winter crept over Ferelden, and the anniversary of his fight against the Archdemonloomed around the corner. Not that the full decanter wasn’t already his nightly tradition, but the foul mood that accompanied him through this season made him reprehensible to be around.

“Costs are quick…” The man continued.

“Teagan stop.” Her command wasn’t loud, but the man’s face darkened to the color of fresh beets as the quiet chuckles echoed out through the hall and its lofty ceilings. She motioned to her side and her servant was at her hand in seconds. “Where is my husband?” She whispered.

The servant looked nervous as his eyes slid away from hers. “The King is still asleep, your majesty.”
Of course, he was. The day she needed him to stand and appear, he’d hidden within his private chambers for the day.

“It’s the middle of the day. Go wake him up. That is an order. If he has issues with my orders, he can come out here and tell me himself.”

The servant swallowed loudly then took his leave to awaken the King, who would not take the intrusion of his drunken stupor well.

“Sorry, for the interruption Teagan, continue.” Teagan’s crimson cheeks turned a splotchy amethyst as the angry man stopped breathing with regularity. He stood rigidly, his hands clasped at his sides, shaking in his tiding rage. “If you have nothing else to add, we can progress to other issues.”

If allowed to smile at the man’s breakdown, she would have. Despite everything falling apart, she had this one moment of vindication. She wasn’t allowed to mistreat the man next in line for the throne should anything happen to her or the King since after a decade they were still without an heir. She had toyed with him enough.

“I understand your frustrations with the rebuilding efforts for Redcliffe, Teagan, but there is a breach in the sky, an exploding Conclave, and a darkspawn magister wreaking havoc through Thedas currently.”

“In Orlais!” The man cried. “What care have we to what happens to Orlesians?”

“Because terror cannot be confined within the borders of a country!” She was done listening to this man put his personal needs over the citizens of her country. “Once this magister has conquered Orlais, who will stand with us when he comes for Ferelden? You dare tell me to ignore the pleas for help because they were silent during the Blight, but now you demand we let our ears be deaf against their cries!”

“But your father…” Teagan began.

“I am not my father!” The Queen roared at the man whose eyes filled with fear. “My father was so paranoid of Orlesian occupation, he nearly let his own country be overrun by darkspawn, maiming and killing all. His isolationism earned him a beheading, do not forget that fact, Teagan Guerrin.”

As she placed her fury back into the box she held inside herself. All eyes were directed to her side. Turning she found her husband leaning against the far wall, his arms crossed over his wide chest while listening to her overtly threaten his uncle.

“Good morning, your highness.” She mouthed at the man, who threw her a crooked grin that didn’t rise beyond his mouth.

His deep under eye circles were halfway down his cheeks, blending into the messy edge of his auburn-colored beard. She sighed in relief he had thrown on basic minimum attire for the proceedings. The last time she summoned him, the King showed up reeking of whiskey, loose ties on his breeches, and bare feet in retaliation from her demand to do his Maker-given birthright.

With a groan, he pushed himself from the wall and took slow and staggering steps toward his vacant spot on the throne. He was hung over from his drinking the night before, and knowing him, he hadn’t stopped drinking for the night yet. He flopped ungracefully into the chair and slid down into a slump with a cringe as his brain throbbed in pain.

“Teagan,” he started too loud for his own health, “Why are you provoking my wife this early in the
morning?"

“It’s three- in the afternoon,” Anora whispered under her breath as her eyes continued staring at Teagan who looked less happy with his circumstances.

Anora’s reactions and irritation were predictable, but with his nephew, you never knew who would be on the receiving end of your questions. Her husband turned to her and shrugged before returning his gaze to the swollen pomegranate of a man.

“Well… do you have an answer Teagan? What issue could be so demanding that you’ve stopped breathing? Stop that by the way, that’s an order… or something. You look like you’re about to pass out.” His copper eyebrows rose as he watched his uncle shake in his fury.

“*You! You’re my problem!*” The man sputtered out as he gasped for breath.

“I actually didn’t see that coming.” The King admitted to the Queen, who bit her inside lip to keep from laughing. For the many things they disagreed with over the years, their dislike of Teagan was not one.

“You’re the one who agreed to let those mages have my home- what was once your home! They took it over and kicked me out to live on the streets like a pauper!” Teagan’s coloring improved, yet Anora hoped the man would suffocate his brain from lack of air.

“If those mages hadn’t kicked you out, you would have been slaughtered with the Trevinter invasion.” The King added helpfully.

Teagan’s jaw fell open in shock as he stared at his nephew. “And what? You want me to thank you for having my home forcibly taken away?”

“It’s a start.” The hung-over man mumbled as his fingers massaged at his throbbing temples.

The blowhard wasn’t giving up on this topic today. One day a month she spoke with their citizens to lend assistance in their kingdom and once again Teagan disrupted the proceedings for his own priorities. Her father and Teagan would have made great friends.

For now- she was over this discussion. She would give the man the resources he demanded and send him on his way. “Teagan, the crown has heard your…”

“Your grandmother would be ashamed of you!” The man bellowed towards the King. “People thought your father was an appalling ruler, but they had no idea what was coming. The Rebel Queen would be disappointed in you all.” Teagan’s eyes narrowed as he stared down his nephew. “For the good of Ferelden, you should have died in the Blight.”

Her husband moved with a speed she hadn’t seen in years as he exited the chair and headed toward the now sputtering and fearful man. He stopped in front of Teagan, towering over him as he stood at his full height. When he spoke, his voice was quiet and filled with rage.

“Because you are family, I’ll give you one warning: go home, Teagan. Leave here and only communicate through letters. If I see your face again, there won’t be much left to bury in the family vault.” As filled with anger as he was, the King’s movements were clear and concise as his years of battle training took over. Teagan’s tears streamed out of his eyes as he gasped out apologies for insulting the crown.

“Get out. Everyone.” The King’s words were quiet, but everyone moved towards the exits without question.
Within moments all that remained in the empty hall were the King and Queen and their guards. The Queen couldn't remove her eyes from her husband as he stood tall at the beginning of the pews. As he turned, his shoulders slumped to their usual position as the King people expected transformed into the man he was. His eyes down as he headed back towards the rear door he had entered the fiasco from.

“Alistair…” Anora reached out to him, but he dodged her hand walking past.

“He’s right, you know… *I should have died.*”

Anora sighed, closing her eyes as he slammed the wooden door behind him. The sounds of shattering glass echoing through the lofty ceilings.

Why did that insufferable man have to bring up the Blight? Despite all his outward appearances, Alistair was a good man who wouldn’t forgive himself. As fearful as Teagan appeared, he knew the King wouldn’t lay a finger on him. Make him spend a night in the jails? Yes. But harm the only remaining family he had? Never. It wasn’t in the man. It used energy he needed to drink and blame himself, so it was toward the bottom of his priorities.

Remembering herself, she dismissed her guards with instructions to summon cleaners in the Kings exit and placed an order for a pot of extra strong tea to be brought to the drawing room with any daily correspondence. She was disappointed to not have more contact with the citizens needing help, but she had few answers to give them if they were concerned about the events outside Ferelden.

Orlais was tight-lipped over any information slipping out concerning the partnership between the Emperor and the Inquisitor. Lips at the Inquisition were much looser, and she was pleased to hear more Ferelden-born soldiers escaped the organization each day. Gaspard never openly threatened to invade Ferelden, but his hostility towards the former territory of Orlais was well known. His experience was in moving militaries and sneaking up on opponents, Ferelden would not be caught unaware if the snake struck in their direction.

Evelyn Trevelyan was a separate complication of her own. Anora only met the crimson-haired beauty in their brief passing in the aftermath of Redcliffe. Whatever Anora expected an Inquisitor to be, Evelyn was none of those things. She was called the “Herald of Andraste” and at least the portraits that would someday cover Chantry walls would be easy on the eyes.

Both women were identical in height as they stood to address one another with their shoulders back. She instantly disliked her. One skill she picked up from her father was trusting her gut instincts- and her gut told her the Inquisitor was not to be trusted regardless of the help the Inquisition was supplying throughout Ferelden.

She followed that instinct and refrained from telling the woman any details of importance or that it was her husband, the drunk who decided in her absence to allow the mages to take refuge in his childhood home. She was glad to have given as little information to the Inquisition when the ravens arrived in a flurry to announce the death of Empress Celene and that her cousin Gaspard would take the throne with the help of the Inquisitor.

Anora felt a touch of satisfaction at the death of the former Empress. Cailan nearly left her during their marriage for the woman to unite their countries. It was a crime her father never saw past, but as she told Teagan earlier; she was not her father, nor would she ever be. After leading Ferelden for ten years and understanding the sacrifices needed to bring change to a country, she had nothing but respect for Celene and the improvements she made during her reign.
After she allowed adequate time for her tea to arrive in the sitting area, she rose from her empty throne and followed Alistair’s path of destruction that lead its way up the winding stairwell which servants quickly cleared away. Her heels echoed through the turns as she reached the floor holding the royal chambers.

Her and Alistair’s private chambers were separate from one another as it had been since their elaborate wedding, with a large open drawing room between the two. It was the one area they were free from being politicians and the place the King was found drowning his sorrows on a nightly basis. Entering the room, she found him sitting alone watching the flames devour in the hearth with an empty glass, from what she suspected was brandy.

She unclipped her fur cape from around her neck and sighed as the weight lifted from her muscles as she hung it from the back of her chair. Her tea had arrived, as requested, and all correspondence arriving overnight. She poured two cups of the strongly brewed tea and set one before her husband whose eyes never moved from the lapping fire. Slipping her shoes off behind her chair, she sat and grabbed the pile of letters from the carved silver tray.

She worked her way through the piles of parchment in silence. It was all old business: allies sending their wishes for a light winter, minor nobles voicing their grievances, foreign kingdoms sending marriage requests for any future heirs.

At the bottom of the stack, there was small, dirty letter with a scrolling word across it: Alistair. The handwriting was elaborate, yet unrefined, and unrecognizable to her observant eye. A flare of jealousy streaked through her as she looked at the letter addressed in intimate terms. In her knowledge, the King had never taken a lover or mistress in their decade ruling. Her affection for the broken man was not a romantic kind of love, but it still pained her to think of being excluded from something in his life.

Alistair shifted in his chair, startling her as she held his privately addressed letter hard in her hands. He’d been awake for an hour yet looked exhausted. As the hours of light grew short in Ferelden, the King’s nightly watch would begin. All hours of the night you’d find him awake in the drawing room lost in his thoughts. Replaying slaying a dragon over and over, each time changing the slightest detail in his memories hoping the outcome was different.

Anora understood regrets. She’d never again speak to her father or get to talk him out of his lunacy. If she kept her eyes open closer to home instead of fearing what could come to attack, she would have seen the beginnings of her father’s treason before it was too late. There was no apology to be made that would ever heal the hurts her father caused, so instead, she pledged her actions to improve Ferelden, one person at a time.

She was aggressive in rebuilding their country after the Blight, which threw the kingdom into financial turmoil. Her patience was rewarded and years later Ferelden’s gold stores recovered though it would take their lands far longer to recover from the taint sunk deep below the layers of dirt.

“I’m sorry for what Teagan said.” The words flowed out before she thought them through. She felt guilty for not handing him the letter and fighting the urge to open it herself. Bringing the Blight up during this time of year wasn’t a promising idea, and she needed to tread with careful words.

Alistair scoffed, his eyes rolling toward her, the warm mahogany already dilating as the booze worked its way through his system. “He’s not wrong, you know.” His voice was haggard as life slipped away from him one sentence at a time.

“Wrong about what?” She would play stupid with him. Teagan was an idiot and his opinions meant
nothing to her. He was a man too focused on the past to see any value in the future. Just Alistair’s name gave people hope and helped her secure rule for over a decade in a country that saw one tumultuous event after another for the years previous.

“You know. Coy isn’t a good look for you, Anora.” Alistair answered frankly as he reached out to refill his glass with a shaky hand.

“You know my opinions on Teagan. He’s a pathetic old man whose jealousy gets the best of him. Pay him no heed.” She crossed her arms over her chest as she exhaled through her nostrils.

He chuckled into his glass as he lifted it to his lips, a sound that made her yearn to help him find happiness again. “You don’t have to defend me. I’m a grown man, or something, and can supposedly fight my own battles.”

“Then next time show up when I ask you to.”

His smile faded as he tipped back the glass and swallowed down rest of the just filled glass. “I’m sorry about that, I really am.” He said while reaching again for the bottle.

“I know you are, Alistair, yet you never show up. You never do what is expected. The world is in chaos and if the time comes, I’ll need your help to lead our armies.” Anora was desperate. If war came to Ferelden, she would need him to make a stand.

“You must be thinking of someone else then, I merely follow, not lead.” What was left in the decanter only filled his glass halfway and he looked disgruntled at the empty bottle betraying him.

“How would you know? You’ve never tried.” The response came out so fast, she instantly regretted it, but after ten years she was finished feeling sorry for him. The change in his expression was immediate as he sunk deeper into the darkness awaiting him. “I’m sorry.” She knew the words were meaningless, but it was important to her she told him.

“It’s okay.” His voice telling her that everything was not okay, but there was little to do about that now. The glass tipped and emptied down the back of his throat as he finished the entire bottle. He cleared his throat roughly as his eyes moved away from the fire onto his wife. “What did I interrupt, anyway?”

He could keep changing the subject, but Ferelden’s need of him would not diminish soon.

“Monthly grievances,” Anora mumbled as she continued to clutch the unknown letter within her itchy fingers. Alistair’s body language shifted as his realization of the time of the month became clear.

“Already the start of the month again…,” he sat up in his chair as he head bobbed, the weight of the drinking setting into his neck. “So, you’ll need me to…” he couldn’t say the words- he never could, but she understood his meaning.

“I have to see the healer, but yes, in two days.” The King nodded as he acknowledged the uncomfortable arrangement they sustained.

Their main expectation as leaders was to produce an heir. After a decade, they experienced nothing more than false hopes and heartbreaks. The night of their marriage the two sat down, in this room, and agreed the terms of their marriage and how they would produce an heir.

With Cailan she felt a natural love and adoration, sharing their lives had been an easy balance though she had failed many times to carry a pregnancy to term. With Alistair things started
anything, but easy. Still in shock from the losses of her husband and father, she married her bastard brother-in-law days past losing the love of his life.

They made quite the pair.

When the healers would indicate it was time, they would lay together as briefly so his seed could take root in her womb and then they would wait. Each month as her moon cycle rolled around, her tears fell harder as the building sense of failure and disappointment built in her soul.

After two years he admitted he wasn’t certain a Grey Wardens could reproduce, and he had fears of passing the taint to any child they bore. He told her to find a lover resembling him and he would accept the child with his entire heart and crown them as the rightful heir to the throne. But she wouldn’t do it.

She knew the pain Alistair lived with his entire life being the illegitimate son of a King and would not risk their child feeling the same way. Regardless of their feelings toward each other, she knew the man with a hidden soft heart would love a child of his own more than anything else in the world- and maybe that form of love could be the one that mended the unending breaks in his heart.

They had a steady routine after all these years. The first months were the worst when the expectations were high for them to provide an heir as fast as possible. He would arrive at her room so drunk he staggered and it ended with him in tears, guilty for lying with another woman who wasn’t the deceased Warden, even if Anora was his wife.

Over the years, they had developed a sense of professionalism for the monthly occurrence. He showed more sober than usual and refrained from calling her the name of a dead woman and they avoided all physical contact during the act other than what was necessary. It was a strange arrangement, but one that helped them keep their sanity.

“I’m sorry, I can’t give you what you need.” Anora’s brows lifted in surprise as she turned to her husband. He apologized frequently when he was drunk for a lot of things but remained mum on his struggles with his duties as a husband. “You deserve more than this, Anora. You should find someone else to provide you with what you need… and soon” Her heart broke at the sadness lingering in his eyes.

“Alistair,” she waited until the man focused his dark eyes upon her. “I told you the night we married I didn’t need that in my life and I’ve never lied to you. My life has purpose and passion for helping our countrymen and you have given that gift to me.” She would reach out to touch the man and comfort his agonizing thoughts, but it would disrupt the careful stasis they had created in their marriage.

Her words echoed in her head: *I’ve never lied to you*. She felt the seal loosening on the small letter held in her hands as she watched her husband as the liquor told hold over his body. Jealousy and fear would not rule over her and her pride.

“You have a letter.” Alistair looked confused at her sudden subject change not knowing what was rolling through her mind.

“Throw it in the pile with the rest and I’ll look at them in the morning.” He was serious, but the thought he would read the letters addressed to the King much less do it in the morning was outrageous. She knew no such thing would occur.

“It’s not for the King, it’s addressed to you.” She held out the unknown letter with its looping script and saw her husband’s muscles tighten as he spied the writing on top. *He recognized the*
He reached out reluctantly, taking the letter in his calmer moving hands now that the drink had hold of his reflexes. His eyes stared at the writing before he flipped the letter and snapped the blank seal. As he read, the color fell from his face in the opposite effect of Teagan earlier. Finishing the letter, his arm dropped numbly to his side as he gazed into the fire.

She watched something slowly change over his features as he processed what was contained in that parchment. While built like a Templar, his body grew softer over the years without training daily with a sword, but as the reflection of the fire grew over his form, could she see a moment of the man he was once had been- the warrior, the uncompromising fighter. When he stood, his balance was steadier than she expected, and he turned to storm off towards his room, his boots echoing in the empty chamber below.

“Alistair, what in the Maker’s name is going on?” She had never seen him behave like this in their entire marriage. What did that letter contain? When he turned, he was a different man than the one who just begged her to find another lover.

“Call the Lieutenants and Captains immediately: you were right, Ferelden marches to war.” With his chin, he motioned to the letter thrown haphazardly to the side as he had sprung from his chair.

Her hand reached out with shaking fingers as she picked up the crumpled parchment and opened it. A headache set into her temples as she scrolled over the words. No, this can’t be happening. Not now. If this letter spoke the truth, it could destroy everything she had built. The only outcome this would lead to would be more pain and devastation that she and her country had more than its fill.

She stood on shaky legs as she heard Alistair digging through his weapons chest. Alistair, what are you doing? Her husband was a fragile man on the best of days and she feared that he just received the news that could finally break him.
The Chapter Where The Inquisition Sends Letters

Chapter Summary

While separated, letters provide an opportunity for the Inquisition to express some unsaid feelings.

Chapter Notes

Hey readers!

For anyone interested I've been RPing an older Idalya in the Chasing Remnants stream of the Dragon Age Tabletop RPG on Twitch on Saturday nights at 9pm PST at https://www.twitch.tv/zombolouge

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Filthy Dog-lord-

I assume that heading should be enough to confirm my identity.

The Wardens are compromised- your Calling is false.

Evelyn Trevelyan is leading the Inquisition and Orlesian armies to confront them at Adamant Fortress.

Verify with your contacts, you ’ll find it to be the truth.

The Inquisitor is not who she appears. Her secrets will come back to haunt her when they see the light of day.

Be vigilant and discover what she hides from prying eyes.

-M

*****

Commander-

Our forces have routed the Venatori in Val Colline. I've put our people to work on the relief efforts until we're recalled to duty.

Thank you for letting us help this place. It is good to give the people a reason to trust their Templars again.

-Ser Barris

*****
Barris-

How ’s the road been treating you? Skyhold isn’t the same without your lack of a sense of humor, I spend my days irritating Cullen between the non-stop training we have.

You ’d be pleased to know the Hero has taken up your training helm. She’s good, we might replace you with her. Tried to convince her to become a Templar, but she’s not interested.

It’s for the best since it would be a shame to cover those curves of hers with heavy plate.

Don ’t be a hero. Come home.

-Rylen

*****

Ser Barris-

I ’ve heard nothing but positive feedback from your intervention against the Venatori. Many lives were saved thanks to your fast response and rebuilding efforts.

-Commander Cullen

P.S. Rylen, How in the void did you get access to the ravens?

*****

Knight-Captain Rylen-

Being away from Skyhold has been difficult. I did little traveling as a noble ’s son then joined the Templars before I was a man. To build camps and live off the land is a new experience.

I ’m still alive, but our troop has been attacked multiple times en route to the locations the Inquisitor directed us to. The civilians are grateful for our help, but we’ve lost two young recruits already- good men looking to improve the world only to be ambushed by cowardly Trevinter mages.

I ’m glad Lady Mahariel has stepped up in my place, especially since I know you’re slacking off with the rest of the Templar gone. Can you do me a favor? Keep an eye on the Lady, please? After everything she’s been through, discovering we’ll battle the Grey Wardens will be painful. We know the heavy heart of fighting against your own brothers.

I would do anything to save her the anguish we have suffered.

Stay true, brother.

-Barris

P.S. Please refrain from discussing the “curves” of the Warden. She deserves more respect than that, you buffoon.

*****

Knight-Captain Barris-

Rylen “accidentally” left your letter out on the tavern table tonight.
While I appreciate your thoughtfulness, I’m managing as well as I can. I didn’t expect Cassandra to find the Wardens doing the dirty work of Corypheus. Every day we train, yet at night I’m left tossing and turning with the thought if Blackwall and I can fight the magister since the taint flows through our veins. If I cannot fight him, everything the Inquisition has done for me would have been for naught.

Stay safe. The road is a cruel place. Do not be deterred in your goals. Believe in yourself the way the Inquisition and I do, and you’ll be unstoppable.

-Idalya Mahariel

*****

“Stay still! I can’t keep the thread straight if you’re moving all over the place!” Recruit Dowers furrowed his hefty brow as he refocused on stitching up the laceration across Barris’ collarbone.

Barris flinched as the recruit pulled the loose flaps of skin closed on his shoulder. He was too tired, making amateur mistakes he’d chastise recruits for. Weeks on end they’d traveled with no rest. The Templar were doing necessary and important work, but they were few and so many places were ravaged by the end of the Templar-Mage war. They fought rogue mages, Red Templars, and everything in between as they traveled across Thedas.

A burning pain ripped across his collarbone as Dowers pulled the final stitch tight. It was lopsided and shoddy work, but it was all they had. The poorly constructed poultice pressed against the wound burned worse than Dowers’ shaky needlework.

Taking a bladed Venatori staff across his neck was not how Barris thought his day would end when he awoke that morning. Recruit Jenkins gave his life blocking the blow from fully connecting, a hit he would never leave himself open for except the supreme levels of exhaustion and their limited supplies of lyrium.

He didn’t believe the Inquisitor and Emperor were withholding supplies no purpose, but more likely they didn’t understand the amount of lyrium needed to keep a troop of Templar battling multiple times a day. His first letter to the Inquisitor asking for reinforcement soldiers was denied as she wanted the Templar to “appear strong without the assistance of an army” and his other letter asking for increased lyrium rations was unanswered.

The Inquisition had secured lines of lyrium through the dwarves yet were reluctant to use it. The young recruits managed well with the lowered doses, but veterans, such as himself, struggled battle after battle while the Venatori continued to assault them at every stop.

Their camp was close to a restocking outpost, retrieving the supplies was a duty that Barris took on himself to keep the young Templar safe, but after his injury, his two youngest recruits volunteered to head to the outpost and return with any supplies and information left there. Barris tried to argue with the two men, barely old enough be considered men, but as his consciousness faded, the two men left to complete the work he could not.

The healing waves radiated through his shoulder from the poultice. It wasn’t as effective as those made in Skyhold, but after they ran through their entire supply two weeks after departing Halamshiral, makeshift ones made with elfroot found along the sides of the road were all they had to work with as their list of injuries continued to climb.

He laid on his bedroll, a sigh releasing from his chest as he found a brief respite from the pain. With his eyes closed, the only thing he could see was Idalya. As it was every night before he
drifted into the Fade before his long watch during the night began. Her pink and lavender eyes
staring up into his begging him to move closer, filled with fear he’d push her away. Even at her
most vulnerable, she had been so beautiful waltzing with Cullen as he’d approached.

The way her eyes lit up when she saw him broke the discipline he spent a decade honing as he
wanted nothing more than to take her away from all the death surrounded their every move. Her
walking willingly into his arms was the most joyful moment of his life. He held her, but let his fear
consume him until it was too late.

Like every other idiot soldier, he had forgotten their unspoken lesson to not count on having a
tomorrow. Once you get comfortable thinking tonight might not be your last, you made mistakes-
like he did tonight. Jenkins should have been sitting on his bedroll, not him. A distracted and
exhausted Templar would soon be a dead one- it should not have been Jenkins.

It was his job to lead these men to safety and his body failed him as the withdrawal headaches and
body pain took its daily toll.

The camp was so still Barris hadn’t realized he’d fallen asleep until he heard voices chatting
around the cooking station. With a groan, he stood and threw on as unsoiled of a tunic as he had
over the badly healing wound. The crimson swelling around the border of the thread indicated
infection, and they were far from help from Inquisition mages. Exiting his tent, he felt a wave of
relief as he saw the two recruits returned and unharmed.

They could use good luck today.

“Knight-Captain.” The men said in unison as they rose, fists braced against their filthy steel
breastplates.

“At ease.” He mumbled as he hobbled to where his recruits were waiting. “Everything went well, I
assume?” At least he hoped. That was all he had.

“Yes, sir. We returned with supplies and multiple letters from the drop point.” They motioned
toward a wooden crate hidden out of view and Barris knelt in front of the aged box praying to the
Maker there was a summons home from the Commander or Inquisitor amongst what they returned
with.

On the first letter in the stack, Barris recognized the Inquisitor’s elegant penmanship. He broke the
seal with haste, almost ripping the parchment in half in his eagerness to read the words. His eyes
skimmed over each paragraph looking for keywords. Coming to the word lyrium he read in earnest.
Evelyn approved his request to increase their lyrium stores. The veterans would now stand a
chance fighting back as the Venatori kept coming at them. That news alone was enough to dampen
the blow of the two additional pages of problems for them to assist with.

Folding the letter, he opened the next one with Cullen’s signature block writing. The
Commander’s letter checked in on their progress and informing him of how training fared in
Skyhold. Barris knew the Inquisition was hemorrhaging Ferelden soldiers as the days passed
Evelyn’s betrayal at Halamshiral.

As bad as his situation felt, he wouldn’t consider trading to be in Cullen’s shoes. Evelyn left him,
then he returned to Skyhold to run the entire Inquisition after the Ambassador and Spymaster left
for Val Royeaux to call in every favor the Inquisition earned to even think of bringing down the
Warden in Adamant.

Cullen Rutherford was a stronger man by far than him- of that he held no doubts.
The next two letters were much smaller. One contained handwriting he didn’t recognize with a simple Barris inscribed on top. The writing wavering and inconsistent as though the person questioned their words.

Flipping over the parchment he found two overlapping seals. A Templar seal placed over a broken seal of the Commander. With a raised brow, he broke the seal and opened it unsure what he would find. His eyes scanned the bottom of the parchment until his throat seized as his eyes traced over the signature: Idalya Mahariel.

He closed the letter with haste, clutching the pieces of parchment as his heart threatened to burst out of the shell of his chest. With a nod to his recruits, he vacated back to his tent and before the flap settled he reopened the letter, his hands trembling as he traced over each word the Warden wrote.

She worried she was unnecessary to their cause. As acute as her vision in training and battle was, she was blind to how much she meant to those around her. Every soldier in the Inquisition studied her with such reverence.

The first one awake, the first one training, and the last person to leave every day. Her vow was a silent one that her actions spoke; I will stand with you, no matter what comes for us. In this desperate time, she stood for something they desperately needed: hope. She was their living proof that miracles existed, and it kept them all fighting when it felt like the night couldn’t grow darker.

“Believe in yourself the way the Inquisition and I do”, his eyes kept drifting over the line as he read the words over again. The penmanship wavered, her hand shaking while writing the line. She believed in him. He laughed at the ridiculousness.

She was a legend, brought back to life by the Maker’s hand to save Thedas from the clutches of Darkspawn… and she put her faith in him? The spoiled son of a noble who left his privileged upbringing to follow the example she set. A man bitching and moaning in a tent over injuries his negligence allowed to happen. Injuries that had a good chance of killing him if he didn’t locate a healer soon.

Once more in his life when he felt helpless and lost in a losing battle, she emerged from the flames to remind him of what true strength was. There were a lot of things Barris was given in his life and when he joined the Order he was determined to earn his way instead of using his last name. Over the years he earned ranks and titles and recognition, but he knew in all those years he had done nothing earning him anything as magnificent as Idalya.

She was beyond him in every way and he had nothing to offer her than his heart and the slow decline of his mind over the years to lyrium. At this moment, shaking and alone in his tent, gripping her words between his grieved fingers, he refused to let fear keep him from attaining a moment of happiness.

Pulling out the small letter beneath the Warden’s, he saw Rylen’s familiar embellished writing.

*****

Barris-

I totally opened Doll’s letter.

You’re welcome.

-Rylen
Lady Mahariel-

I am pleased beyond words to receive your letter. Correspondence is few on the road. My family stopped writing years ago, I didn’t realize how much I needed to receive a letter without troop movements and commands.

I want you to know something- even if you could not fight Corypheus, you have been integral in the Inquisition’s efforts to fight against this madman. An army depends on those who inspire and teach ethics in their actions as it does from those who teach swinging a sword. The odds are stacked against these men. Training beside the Hero of Ferelden, who took down an Archdemon by her sword, inspires them to believe in what they can accomplish though their numbers are small. Your value is more than holding a sword.

You matter to so many people and I hope my words ease your mind as you lay your head down to rest. Not that I think you think about me when you’re in bed. Wow, that got awkward fast.

My Lady, I miss being able to see you every day. No matter where my orders carried my boots in Skyhold, you were always in my sight as I could never tear my eyes from you. These longs nights in camp I’m left alone with the thought that I should not have hesitated to kiss you outside the Palace. I fear it may be the last time I ever see you. If surviving this mission is not in my fate, not being able to say goodbye will be my biggest regret.

If I survive, it is a mistake I hope to remedy on my return, should you permit it.

-Knight-Captain Delrin Barris

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your kind comments and suggestions. It really means a lot.

Follow me on Tumblr: http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com
The Chapter Where Idalya Needs a Rest

Chapter Summary

Idalya's mind struggles to deal with her ever more complicated emotions after leaving the Winter Palace.

Chapter Notes

*NSFW for graphic content*

The letter clutched in her quivering hand caused her mind to reel as she rolled over the words for the millionth time: *It is a mistake I hope to remedy on my return.*

When Idalya wrote Barris her letter weeks ago, she never expected a response like the one she received that evening as the winter winds howled outside her room in Skyhold, screeching through the hallways. The blush in her cheeks burned as the cold threatened to creep inside and burrow its way into her unwilling bones.

The storm blew in from the East, pelting them with heavy rains for most of the day. She expected Cullen to run his drills at the death pace he trained his army as of late, but the chilling winds and rain were the perpetual final straw for the ex-Templar and he screamed for the army to bring in their equipment and take the night off as he sealed himself away in his tower.

It pleased Solas to have an evening to put Dal through his own training, which she was reluctant to agree to, but later backed out of. After receiving the letter from the gorgeous Templar that could have no other interpretation, she needed time to process.

She also had other ideas of how her time could be better spent this evening than walking through the ancient paths of Skyhold through the Fade with the apostate. She had been suspicious when he agreed without argument that she deserved time off. Raising a questioning brow, she leaned forward and made the mage swear to respect her privacy, which he swore to.

This is what she wanted- undeniable proof that what she felt between them wasn’t a figment of her imagination. But what she hadn’t expected was the emptiness that followed. *Yes* she knew he felt the same way she did, but the way his letter was written bothered her.

*Something was wrong.*

Barris was more like her than anyone else in the Inquisition and for him to speak plainly meant he thought it was his last chance to tell her. As her time ticked down before the Archdemon battle she allowed herself to tell her companions how much they meant to her, taking the time to say goodbye, even if they hadn’t understood her meaning.

From under her bed, she retrieved a folded piece of parchment that opened to reveal a basic map of Thedas where she’d recorded notes since Halamshiral. She might not lead anymore, but some
habits die hard. A small dark X placed next to a minor village at the foot of the Frostback mountains, that was the safe hold where she mailed her letter, but she wasn’t certain where the Templar had relocated. Her finger traced a delicate line between Skyhold’s location and the hundreds of miles separating them.

Her eyes ghosted over so many locations on the handmade map. *Where could he be now?* Was he traveling home or traveling to the place where he would die, and she’d live in ignorance until Cullen broke the news. If the Knight-Captain died would they send his body back to Skyhold or would he be buried along the side of the road- another loss to the Inquisition’s great plans.

A gasp escaped past her lips, her hand covering her mouth in horror with the image of his body devoid of the life illuminating it. The thought of her own death filled her with fear. Nothing like the crippling terror that seized her at the thought of her loved one's passing to the other side. After experiencing the nothing she’d found after her own, she struggled as each of the companions left Skyhold on missions afraid that they would never return.

The map fluttered out of her fingers to the floor as she pressed the palms of her hands to her face, trying to calm her erratic breathing. These thoughts chased her waking hours every day since her return from the Winter Palace. She separated herself from the other companions as the thoughts of when each would find their death and how overwhelmed any other thoughts in simple conversation.

Training was all that cleared her head. To focus on the physical and pour her pain and fear into each swing of steel was all that set her soul at ease. Her brain only rested after a full day of training exhausted her to the point of collapse. It was something she shared with Cullen and appreciated being able to funnel her anger into something strengthening her and those around her instead of draining her life away from her irrational fears.

When her breathing returned to normal, she released a sigh and flopped backward onto her linens, the boards underneath groaning from her weight settling in. Having an entire night off left too much time for her brain to travel these painful paths. While others enjoyed each other’s company and relaxed, Idalya spent the afternoon pacing from one end of her stone room to the other.

Sia, the Orlesian elf she comforted in the Winter Palace who’d sworn her allegiance to the Inquisition, came by to inquire with a shy stammer if she’d like to have dinner, but Dal made excuses about needing to train with Solas. To Solas, she’d given the excuse she was taking a night off to spend with her friends. Back and forth she continued to pace until a knock from the courier with a letter that threw her entire world off kilter.

She stared at the ceiling praying for any thought that wasn’t the Templar’s hand sliding down the length of her body, or the gratuitous murder of her friends to intrude its way into her mind. *Why was she like this?* This isn’t how normal people operated. The ignorance she once lived in of how close her own mortality could be was gone. The surrounding people were trained warriors, they trained in acceptance of what they could lose in any battle. No one understood those consequences like her and it was impossible to push it from the front of her mind.

Clenching her eyes shut she focused on one clear memory to straighten her mind, but all she could see was standing inside the circle of Barris’ arms outside the palace and how safe she had felt. *What did she feel for the man?* He was beautiful to look at, held kindness in his heart despite what he had seen, and believed in his vows to protect the innocent to the best of his ability… but did she *love* him? Her stomach hitched at the thought. To love- that was a *scary* thought. She was a broken creature born through magics she’d never understand that he had sworn to stop at all costs.

Did she care for the man or did she need to feel protected from the pit of emptiness in her soul that
threatened to devour her? Being in his presence was the only thing that made her feel alive since she returned. Was she longing and yearning for that feeling or for him? How could she love someone when she didn’t know who she was? She was Cullen obsessed over the lyrium that made him unstoppable at the cost of who he was.

*I can’t do this anymore.*

If she allowed her fear to run rampant, the servants would find her drowned in a puddle of her tears by morning. She unlaced her boots and kicked them to the corner of the room. *Rest.* Rest is what she needed. Not guided training through the mists of the Fade and Solas’ lectures. She needed true rest that’s why she had burned out with haste since her return.

After tucking Barris’ letter away from prying eyes, she extinguished the candles illuminating the room and returned to her darkened sanctuary. When she awoke in the morning, she would have a serious talk with Solas that she needed a break for her own mental being, at least what was left. Her mind floated into the Fade blissfully without a thought.

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“Dal, you look beautiful.” Leliana’s musical voice startled her as her eyes fluttered open, beams of sun stinging her eyes. “What do you think Cullen? Isn’t she beautiful?”

Her eyes adjusted to the light, and she gazed into a mirror larger than she’d ever seen. It was ornate with a carved golden frame that towered towards the ceiling in the room. When her eyes focused, she gasped, her body stiffening within the confines of the stays of her gown. Her dress was floor length lavender chiffon built around battle maidens armor, streams of the softest pink and gray running the length of the train. The most delicate gauntlets of carved Silverite rested from her wrists over her forearms. She never imagined a dress more beautiful or more her. Her hair pinned up high on her head with tiny blossoms of amethyst flowers wound through the sides, drawing your eyes to where a small silver tiara sat fitted to her head.

“She… yeah.” To her left, Cullen sat in a high-backed leather chair of a modest style, out of his Commander’s uniform, wearing a soft brown leather ensemble typical for formal events back home. The man’s cheeks flushed as he could not make eye contact.

“Oh, Cullen- don’t be modest. She looks stunning!” On her right, Leliana stood in an Orlesian style fitted gown of deep crimson with a plunging neckline, which made her hair moving fire. The under-eye circles that haunted both the advisers were gone allowing them to look years younger, the stress of their positions lifted from their shoulders. Leliana kept twitchily adjusting the chiffon of her friend’s dress as though the breeze interfered with her greatest work.

A soft knock sounded at the door, Leliana and Cullen looked at one another with solemn nods. As the door opened, Idalya’s heart exploded as Delrin Barris walked in, dressed in similar formal wear as his Commander. She couldn’t tear her eyes away. A hundred years had passed since the last time they stood in the same vicinity. The wide-mouthed smile that lit up his face at taking her in began the lengthy process of stitching up the wounds in her heart.

No more Wardens or Templars- just Dal and Barris. This is all she wanted. His steps were confident as he closed the distance and outstretched his hand.

“Isn’t this supposed to be bad luck?” She teased with a wink to the ebony-skinned god that stood proudly before her.

*His laugh seized her heart as she remembered how much she missed and needed the sound.*
“How so?” He asked, a curious brow raised.

“I distinctly remember my mother telling me it was bad luck to see the bride on her wedding day.” She chided him, her unquestioning hand slid into his, her ice meeting his fire, as she stepped forward to stand beside him.

Barris laughed again as he leaned forward, placing the gentlest of kisses on her temple, his lips lingering as her skin burned to life. “Only for the groom.” His breath slid over the tops of her pointed ears which shuddered as the weight of his words set in. She looked up, her eyes filled with questions as Barris’ smile had yet to falter. “It’s time. They’ve been waiting for you, Dal.”

He pulled her gently forward toward the door where he entered. She had so many questions. Where are we? What’s going on? She peered back at Cullen and Leliana who stood motionless watching her leave with sadness written across their youthful features. At the door, Barris opened the heavy wood on its silent joints and motioned for her to continue. As her feet crossed the threshold, she realized the three remained behind in the room.

“You’re not coming with me?” Idalya asked panic setting into her bones.

Leliana shook her head, her melancholy more pronounced. “Not now, but I swear we will all follow in time.” A single tear escaped from her eyes, as Idalya watched Cullen slid his hand into Leliana’s now shaking one and squeezed it in reassurance.

Returning her eyes to Barris, his grin replaced with an emptiness blanketing his features as he watched her every move as if memorizing what he saw in front of him.

“Please.” She reached out for him again, but he stepped back. His eyes searching the darkness behind her with concern.

“Soon, but not yet. Go. They’ve been waiting, Dal.” He reached out and instead of taking her hand, he pushed the edge of the door shut leaving her in complete darkness.

She heard each breath echoing around her as she remained stationary, her heartbeat booming within her pointed ears. From behind her, she heard the low murmurs of voices she strained to hear, before turning to follow them to their source.

An entryway became clear in this distance- giant double doors engraved with an insignia she couldn’t discern in the lingering darkness. As she moved closer, there was a movement to her left. Her heart broke as a deep golden-skinned man with his black hair pulled back into an elegant ponytail made his way towards her. She couldn’t hold herself back as she ran forward into the man’s arms, a sob leaving her throat as she buried her face in the stiff collar of his dress shirt as she held on like her life depended on it.

“Oh, Duncan.” She held the man as he shushed her quietly.

“Are you ready, Child?” She pulled back to look at the man’s features. Every detail exactly the way she remembered, but why wouldn’t he be?

“Why does it feel like it’s been a lifetime, Duncan?” Her mentor smiled, lines crinkling around his eyes. “There’s so much... but I can’t remember.” She sobbed. “I can’t remember, Duncan. So many important things... but they’re gone.”

A gentle chuckle flowed past the man’s full lips. “There’s no rush, Dal. We have all the time in the world.” His no longer scarred hands reached up and wiped the falling tears from her aching cheeks. “Come,” her feet moved obediently to his order as they made their way together towards
the large door, “It’s time. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“We can’t go. I have to take you back to meet…” She could see the door in her mind, she could remember it closing. There were people behind it… but who? The information gone. Stricken from her memory as unnecessary. “Duncan, there were people… they…” She closed her eyes and shook her head to clear the fog. She sighed in defeat.

“Don’t worry your head. It must not have been important, my child. Let’s get going, we can’t keep them waiting.” She smiled at the man who had taken her from the path her birth set her on and given her one of purpose.

“Yes, Duncan.” He was right. This was Duncan, he always knew the right path for her. Sliding her hand into the crook of her mentor’s elbow they walked proudly, their shoulders back to the large door, and the doors opened and spread apart on their own as they grew closer.

The hall was massive, sunlight streaming through stained glass windows depicting Andraste’s last moments. The pews ran into the distance though there were few people seated. A gasp and a murmur ran across the left side of the room as she and Duncan began their march down the center aisle towards the alter a million miles away.

Two men seated together on Duncan’s left whispered to each other as they grew closer. Idalya recognized the younger fair-haired man as Cailan Theirin, the King of Ferelden. His golden armor shone as he leaned back against his pew, the older man beside him had long silver hair and matching beard, dressed in elaborate decorative armor with the Ferelden crest hammered into the chest and all supplemental pieces.

“I don’t get it.” Cailan mused. “Knife ears never caught my attention.” The older man shrugged as he examined every movement of Idalya’s like she was a horse he considered bidding on.

“Who they are matters more than their ears, Cailan.” The older man scolded as the brat King rolled his eyes. “Maybe the curse was in his blood from the beginning, it’s hard to deny half your nature.”

Duncan scowled at the rudeness of the men as they passed and Idalya wasn’t bothered by their words. The two men rose to their feet and followed them down the aisle. It was a special day. The moment she’d been waiting for her every time she closed her eyes. Just beyond the boundaries of her memory.

In the farthest corner on the right side of the Chantry, Idalya’s eyes caught a dark figure under a black cloak seated in the last row. How had she missed them as she entered? A hood covered their face blocking all features from view as they remained unmoving in their seat as other patrons rose to nod to her and Duncan as they passed.

“Oh, Idalya.” Her head whipped around as an older woman, silver hair in a bun with simple sapphire mage robes stood alone, the beginning of tears in her eyes.

“Wynne?” Idalya’s voice wavered as the mage drew closer. “Oh, Wynne!” She wrapped her arms around the woman, joy bubbling over the course of her body.

“Wynne, there’s so much I want to tell you. I can't remember… I'm sorry Wynne, my mind is gone.” Her friend smiled, and it calmed her fears as she stopped focusing on what was so hard to
remember. She'd remember tomorrow, she had nothing but time to remember.

“You’re here now and that’s all that matters, my dear.” Duncan resumed his steady pace as Idalya’s hand fell from Wynne’s solid grip.

The closer they moved to the altar at the front of the Chantry, the more Idalya’s anxiety and fear climbed. She sensed someone waiting but didn’t understand who they were nor, did she care. Each step more labored as she resisted the forward progress until Duncan was dragging her down the aisle, unwilling.

“Duncan, stop.”

The Riviani rogue regarded her in curiosity as he motioned toward the front. “We really need to be going, Dal. You’re not afraid, are you?”

Dal ignored the judgment in his voice as she glanced behind her at the dozens who’d risen from their seats and followed down the aisle. “Something’s wrong. I don’t think I’m supposed to be here.”

“Dal, of course, you do. You belong with us, child.” He reached out for her as Idalya backed away slowly. “Idalya, now!”

“NO!” Her voice echoed through the vaulted ceilings back into her head. “I’m not going anywhere until someone tells me what the fuck is going on!” There were people waiting for her, people who needed her... but they weren’t here. She searched for exits to the building and as she turned back, a vile sneer replaced the look of adoration on the older man’s features.

“You ungrateful brat. I saved you from the slums of Denerim and this is how you treat me? Disrespectful little bitch.”

She felt her soul crush as he uttered the words. Her own teacher. The savior who delivered her to a new life. The fog grew heavier in her mind. What am I forgetting? What’s waiting for me?

The rogue tried to grab her wrist, but the young Warden evaded him.

“I’ll warn you once, Duncan. Never put your hands on me again or you’ll pay for it.” The image of the man who once cared for her stood back offended at her threat.

Think, Idalya, think!

She closed her eyes and focused. She pictured Duncan, visualized every detail she could remember, but what was missing? Something was still missing. Wait... No. Maker...

She opened her eyes, tears filling and spilling from her round eyes. “Oh Duncan,” she whispered, “You died. I... I’m so sorry Duncan. I wish I could have saved you.”

The angry lines faded from the man’s face, his complexion growing paler and taking on a gray tone. “It happens to us all, Dal. We’re just glad you’re with us now.” As the realization of his words sunk in, she turned to face the crowd following them.

All the lost pieces of her past stood and before her eyes, their skin cracked and peeled, their lips receding over grinning teeth. She turned back to Duncan and screamed, a high pitch wail that stung her ears, as the man’s eyes sunk back into the shape of his skull and the skin on his face slid off exposing the decayed flesh beneath.
The smell of the putrid, sickly sweet decay stuck in her throat as she gagged while backing away from the corpses towards the altar. Bile filled her mouth as the taste penetrated deep into her taste buds and skin. The smell was everywhere, and she couldn’t avoid it.

“Where are you going, Dal?” The corpse of Duncan bellowed. “You belong with us, you know that! Stop denying what you are! Wardens end one of two ways—remember Dal, there are worse fates than death.” He motioned toward her arm.

She frantically looked down to see the skin above her gauntlet cracking, the flesh black and mottled underneath. She stared in horror as acid boiling through her veins rushed through her body as she understood what his meaning. With a sharp cry, she wretched her nails into the skin, ripping the broken skin to unveil the smooth black flesh of a darkspawn underneath.

Sobs wracked her body as the corpses progressed on her as pieces of decayed flesh dropped off useless limbs to the consecrated ground. She didn’t belong here. She might have once…but not now. She would fight with every ounce of her being to free herself from their clutches.

“Don’t you want…to meet…your groom?” The Duncan corpse could barely speak for the lack of the flesh remaining in its mouth.

She kept her eyes away as when she caught flashes of their decay her screams were impossible to hold in as she ran out of vital breath needed to run away from this grotesque place. She didn’t want to see the groom. Anything waiting for her was damaged and if part of this world, she wanted nothing to do with it.

Her cries grew louder as she felt the skin crack across her chest and down the lengths of her legs, the darkspawn clawing its way out from the inside. This can’t be her fate. Everything she’d gone through to lose her battle against the taint. She continued backing until her heels hit the steps at the edge of the altar.

Looking back at the corpses she realized in horror that they had stopped in their tracks, looking high above her as her heart sunk low into her chest.

Oh Maker, please help me.

As she turned, shaking in her terror, into the snarling face of the Archdemon, its teeth bared as it roared, filling the hall with its Void forsaken screech as it blotted out the sounds of her desperate scream.

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The cloaked figure opened the final door entering the room the elf first found herself in, the giant mirror still dwarfing everything else within, a gentle light emanating from its surface. The elf’s blood-curdling screams rang through the entire building as the figure tried to escape their sounds.

Approaching the mirror, the glass glowed brighter, a fluctuating rainbow of color flowing like water lapping over the coast. The figure pressed a long flat hand to the mirror whispering in a forgotten language before a flash of blue light overtook the moving glass and without hesitation, they stepped through as the girl continued to scream in terror.
The Chapter Where Skyhold Goes BOOM

Chapter Summary

The Templars enjoy a night off from work, but Rylen can't silence his feeling that something is wrong.

“Deal,” Rylen took a swig of his weak sour ale as Matthews dealt the next hand of Wicked Grace. The Templar tower buzzed with excitement as the Templar enjoyed their first night off from responsibilities in a lifetime.

“Hey Rylen?” the Templar quirked an eyebrow as Jacobs shuffled the cards in his hand, hiding his tells at the pair of ladies between his fingers ensuring his win.

“What do you want, Jacobs?”

“The elf… she single?” Rylen laughed as he chugged down the rest of his beer.

“Which elf? There’s a lot here.” Jacobs was almost stupid enough to take the bait.

“The one with the legs that go on forever and the white hair. I’d love to go a round with her if no one’s claimed her yet.” He chuckled at the thought of anyone trying to claim Dal. She'd make them regret putting their hands on her.

“You should try going a round with her in the ring first before you assume you can make her do anything you’d want.” Jacobs huffed before returning his rolling eyes and heavy jowls back to his hand as Rylen sorted his cards. Sometimes Solas was right- Templar were fucking idiots.

Frankly, he was reluctant to admit he worried about the ghost-haired Warden since returning to Skyhold. Each day she retreated further away until he hadn’t seen her outside training in over a week. If she wasn’t training, she was hiding in her room doing Maker knows what. Rylen took the long way to Cullen’s office through Solas’ rotunda and found it absent of her presence. Each day she was further away though her feet never left Skyhold. She skipped mealtimes, and he wondered when she ate as the lines of her cheekbones became sharper.

“Two queens.” The turns went around the table and Rylen closed out his hand in boredom. A persistent nagging feeling in the pit of his gut whispered that something was amiss. Part of his survival in a Circle all these years was listening to his instincts when something was abnormal in his home.

“I’m taking a break, guys.” Rising from the table, the other Templar too distracted with their round to notice Rylen heading out the door of the tower into the pouring rain coating Skyhold in a flowing sheen.

He had forgotten the downpour and as he opened the door, the rain flowed over the frame onto the center of his head before he threw a helmet on and headed out into the flooding world. Skyhold was creepily quiet as everyone stayed indoors. The only men visible were the door guards blocking entry into the Fortress. Though their job was a mind-numbing one as no one braved the torrential downpour blanketing the mountains surrounding Skyhold.
His feet traveled the ramparts as his discomfort continued to grow, pecking at his mind. His feet navigated through the crumbling stones on the ground as he felt compelled toward where the private sleeping quarters of the Inquisition lived.

_There it was._ He felt the mana build- a swirling and erratic pull until a scream pierced the empty sky and the force released. A whiplash sensation causing the windows surrounding Rylen to explode and almost knocking him over the ramparts to his bloody death to the ground.

“What the fuck?!” He regained his footing and ran to Dal’s room two doors over.

Forcing the splintered wood open, he froze in horror as he located his friend. She sat in the middle of her bed, her arms wrapped around her legs, mumbling under her breath as she frantically rocked back and forth.

“Fasta vass!”

Rylen turned in horror at Dorian standing out on the stone path alone with him, hair dampened to his forehead as the streams of water poured over the sharp angles of his clothing.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Rylen muttered, “it’s Dal, we need to help her.”

Voices grew louder as soldiers and Templar alike ran to see the commotion attacking Skyhold. Matthews was first to reach Rylen.

“Knight-Captain, what are your orders?” Rylen looked between Dorian and Templar before swallowing hard and turning back to Matthews, who had his hands clutched around the pommel of his sword.

“Excuse the mess gentlemen, I was trying to make the Inquisitor enchanted grenades, but it appears the recipe has not been perfected yet.”

Rylen turned in shock to Dorian with a new-found respect. He stepped up to protect Dal, someone he avoided, without being asked. Taking responsibility was dangerous with a group of trigger-happy Templars.

“Stand down men, I’ll call for clean up when the weather improves. Back to the tower.” He wasn't certain the recruits would heed his commands, but he prayed to the Maker they did.

The Templar looked at Dorian with disgust in their eyes. “Try not to kill anyone, Pavus, you idiot.” Matthews took off with Jacobs in tow as Rylen’s breath calmed as the Templar disappeared into their tower across the courtyard.

Dorian leaned around to peer past Rylen into Idalya’s room where she still rocked like a broken child. “What happened to her?” A look of concern on his sculpted features.

“Everything- that’s the problem.” Rylen pushed by the mage as he entered carefully into Dal’s room. “Dal, it’s Rylen. Everything will be okay. I need to make sure you’re okay.” Rylen’s steps were cautious as he approached, his hands raised to show he posed her no threat.

The elf didn’t respond as the Templar drew near. Rylen saw the strains of blood flowing from her arms where the flying pieces of glass cut into her flesh.

Idalya had not yet to acknowledge their presence as he drew closer to the frantic Warden. It wasn’t
until Rylen was within feet of her that words became clear. ‘I’m not dead. I’m not dead. I don’t belong there. I’m not dead. I don’t belong.’

*Oh, Doll.*

Listening to the Warden fall apart, was harder than he expected. Since they returned from the Winter Palace, she wasn’t the same. There had been the briefest moment after he left Barris’ note out on the tavern table within her view he saw a slight warming of her icy armor. He used his *connection* with one of Leliana’s scouts to get access to the rookery to read the note she smuggled in secret to send to his best friend.

He would never understand why the two were so secretive with their hearts. No one wasn’t aware of the attraction between the two. They were kind people cut from the hero cloth. They deserved happiness and if they found it with each other, that only made him happier. Life in Thedas was difficult enough for civilians. For a Warden and Templar to find any contentment in this crazy world then he would do what he could to push the shy and reluctant pair together.

Reaching forward, he clasped the Warden by the shoulders. She gasped, and Rylen felt her mana pull again, but his outstretched and already prepared hand silenced it away until it disappeared from the room without harming her. *Maker- what was happening to her?* Her eyes were frantic as she looked around for something Rylen didn’t understand.

“Doll. It’s Rylen. I swear I won’t hurt you. *You’re safe.*” He meant to calm her, but at his utterance of ‘you’re safe’ her panic rose as she scrambled back into the headboard, crashing into the wall.

With a grunt of frustration, Dorian stepped toward the scrambling Warden- his arm extended.

“*SLEEP!*” It was the word Rylen heard but understood that the mage hadn’t uttered it in the common tongue as his eyes grew heavy and the weight of his upper body became too much for his legs to carry.

“Not you, big boy!” A sharp elbow jammed Rylen in the stomach, jarring him awake, as his eyes opened in surprise at the mage.

“What was that for?” Rylen choked out as he held an arm protectively over his abdomen.

“Because I needed you awake, you brute.” Dorian motioned ahead of them and Rylen looked up to see the Warden curled up and resting on the bed, the signs of distress already easing from her features. ‘I’m not usually welcome in Solas’ domain, especially carrying in his star pupil unconscious. He’s, unfortunately, more likely to believe you about what happened here, than me.’

The two men watched her in silence. Yet another time the non-mage had magic at her disposal. It made no sense. *None of this made sense.* She kept her walls up around others, but Rylen could tell how scared she was every day, and from his extensive experience in Circles, that a scared mage, was a dangerous one. Idalya might not be like other mages, but Rylen worried to the core of his existence about what would happen if she stayed in this state. Could she become an abomination? Could demons speak to her? He had no idea and worse- he was certain *she didn’t know either.*

He moved forward with silent steps and scooped the now calm Warden into his arms as Dorian exited the room.

“Hey, Pavus.” Dorian turned at his name. “Thank you. You didn’t have to do what you did. I can't tell you how thankful I am for what you did.” There was a moment of genuine reflection from the mage before he waved it off like shooing away a gnat.
“You know us mages, always foiling Templar. It’s my second job.” He said casually.

“I appreciate it, if you ever need a favor. Please, ask.”

Dorian raised a curious eyebrow as his eyes drifted over the entire length of the Templar and back again to rest at his eyes.

“I may just do that.” He mused as he sauntered his way out of the room back towards the rotunda.

“Okay, Doll. I’m taking you to Solas now, I hope you understand.” He whispered to the side of her pointed ear as she curled up tighter against his warmth in the freezing room.

The rain still poured as he entered the walkway to the rotunda. He curled his shoulders over the head of the sleeping girl, but the rain had no effect on her slumber. In the library, he maneuvered the flight of stairs careful to not scrape the Warden against the rough stone walls.

Entering the rotunda, the mage looked up from his desk with a look of horror on his etched into his skin at the image of Rylen carrying the incapacitated Warden to him. The elf rushed to see her.

“She’s fine… well, she’s asleep now.” Rylen struggled as he cleared the last few feet to the high-backed chair next to the mage’s desk.

Wardens were far heavier than he had ever imagined. Lifting her this way he understood how the warrior wielded a two-handed broadsword like it weighed nothing. She was solid muscle, hidden to put doubts into the heads of those who fought her. Any soft edges she held melted away as her diminishing appetite kept her mind anywhere than the dining hall. She carried an aura she was days from full and complete collapse.

As he deposited the sleeping warrior into the chair, she curled up against the haggard arm of the chair, a content sigh passing over her lips. Solas swept in covering her with a thin homespun blanket from his sleeping cove that the Warden snuggled deeper into without waking. After the girl remained calm, Solas turned on the Templar, his eyes glowing green with seeping mana begging for a fight in his distress and anger.

“Was this you?” The mage’s voice turned to a deeper pitch as magic radiated through his words.

“If it was, you think I’d be stupid enough to bring her in here myself?” Rylen sputtered in his annoyance.

He was sick of the elf pointing the fingers at Templar when it was magic that caused these accidents to happen to the first place. Solas’ brow creased as he considered Rylen’s words and the mage’s magic calmed as his concern for her took precedence as he noticed the stains of blood across her tunic.

“She cast magic again.” The elf’s shoulders slumped as the words exited Rylen’s mouth. The mage didn’t argue. He accepted Rylen’s answer as his eyes rested on the peaceful girl.

“From her bed, she caused half the windows on the East side of Skyhold to explode, Solas. Without Dorian’s help, I’m not sure I…” Rylen paused as the thought entered his head angrily.

“Where were you?” He demanded as the mage turned to look at him with widened eyes that held the color of the sky.

“I was… unaware it happened.” Solas’ swallowed as the tips of his fingers trailed over the edge of his tunic.
“No, no, no.” Rylen shook his head as he watched the mage’s behavior. “The Templar across Skyhold heard the commotion, you’re not even half that distance away.” A dripping sound caught Rylen’s attention, and he turned toward the scaffolding on the other side of the room, where two of Solas’ jars of paint spilled away from the direction of Dal’s blast. “You heard nothing, yet it was strong enough to knock over your paints. You’re lying. I don’t know what you’re hiding, but you’re lying.”

The mage’s eyes narrowed at Rylen as he stood motionless. It was unnerving how tall he was for an elf. Before the man could open his mouth and hex him he kept talking.

“She’s dangerous, isn’t she?” The mage remained quiet as he appeared to be carefully thinking over his next choice of words. “But you already knew, didn’t you? That’s why you aren’t surprised. You knew this could happen!”

“Idalya’s predicament is unique,” Solas uttered as he made his way back behind his desk. “I don’t understand how she’s come to exist or the power that sustains her because I’m in the dark like everyone else.” The mage snarled as he flopped ungracefully in his chair.

“Bullshit,” Rylen spat back. “You know more than the rest of us combined. if there’s something you don’t know, get your ass out of his building and go knock down doors until you know what’s happening to her!” The Templar dropped his voice as Dal readjusted her position in her chair.

Solas scoffed as he pulled a stack of parchment out of a lower drawer. “I’m tired of Templar coming into my home telling me how I’m supposed to do my work.”

“And I’m tired of mages giving me excuses that ‘no one understands’ and hiding what’s important,” Rylen whispered. “We don’t understand? Great, then tell us! You need help? Ask for it. You’d be surprised what people will do to help her.” His anger faded as he watched her for a moment, remembering how desperate she was when he found her bleeding from gashes mumbling obsessively under her breath that she wasn’t dead. Solas closely watched him instead of Idalya.

“What happens next time?” Rylen muttered as his mind wandered into the future, a place he tried to avoid. “You know what it would do to her if she found out she killed an innocent because she couldn’t control what’s happening to her.”

Solas’ fingers intertwined and rested under his chin as he thought over the Templar’s words.

“What are you doing?” Solas questioned from behind.

Rylen nodded numbly as the weight of what could have happened tonight set in on him. Walking towards Solas’ desk, he sat down on the cold ground as he leaned back against the stained wood of the elf’s workspace.

“What are you doing?” Solas questioned from behind.
The Templar shrugged. “I’m not leaving her. I don’t know how long magical sleep lasts, but I will be here when she wakes up in case she needs a Templar.” He heard the mage grumble, but he spoke no other words as he picked up a quill and added notes around the edges of his missives.

Sighing, Rylen rubbed his eyes. *So much for a night off.* As he leaned the back of his head against the desk, he sensed the other mage hovering above them in the darkened alcoves of the library. He had entered when they had but kept to the shadows as he had listened to the confrontation between Rylen and Solas happen floors below him.

Dorian came through for Idalya in a way Rylen couldn’t expect. His words to Solas about how dangerous their fledgling Templar could be was as much for Dorian’s benefit as it was for the elf. He stepped between the Templar and Idalya and, most likely, saved her life, and potentially Rylen’s because he would have fought the multiple men to the death if they’d tried to put their hands on his helpless friend.

But he put his own life at risk.

As much as Rylen wanted to say there weren’t bad Templar amongst them, he knew that was a lie. He could never forgive himself if something happened to Dorian in a back corner of Skyhold. Some recruit with a chip on their shoulder deciding to deal with a reckless Trevinter mage in their midst as the world outside Skyhold spun out of control.

For the tough guy act he played, Dorian had a streak of kindness lingering within him wherever Evelyn’s genetic line ended. But the man struggled obviously not unlike Idalya. The two had experienced too much so that functioning with everyone who hadn’t had become unbearable. Those that cared about them could lift the enormous weight off their shoulders.

Rylen sighed as his eyes became heavy. He couldn’t help the mage lay down his burdens tonight, but maybe he could help the warrior wake up feeling safer than she had the night before.
The Chapter Where Idalya Learns of What Was Lost

Chapter Summary

Idalya awakens in Solas' rotunda and discovers what was lost while she slumbered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The smell of a fresh pot of brewing tea met Idalya’s nostrils as she woke. In a happy daze from her dream, it was only when she tried to stretch did she find her limbs confined to her sides. Her eyes blinked open in shock, she was no longer in her bed, but resting in the better of Solas’ two high-backed chairs.

There’s were many burnt candles flickering in the rotunda casting a soft glow across the rising walls making Solas’ murals appear to breathe with life. Solas working in silence, as usual, but a labored and heavy breath reeking of ale moved her focus toward her feet where Rylen was asleep on the floor, propped up against the side of Solas’ desk.

“Is this the Fade?” She mumbled mid-stretch, raising her sleep-heavy arms above her head.

“Nothing in the Fade snores at this volume.” Solas scoffed as he set down his quill, looking at her.

There was something wrong. She worried that forcing his promise to avoid snooping through her dreams had upset her teacher. His eyes had grown wide in genuine surprise when she told she needed a night off to rest, or more precisely, fall apart in the privacy for once.

She wished there was another way to tell him she trusted him without enlightening him to her struggles. Allowing someone a full pass through your mind also included the dark thoughts you keep hidden from the rest of the world. Neither of them needed to see the demons that haunted the other’s dreams.

“Why is Rylen passed out on the floor?”

Solas met her eyes, his cobalt ones filled for a moment with a sadness that took over his entire face before morphing back to the blank canvas he held over himself. He stood from his chair and approached her, kneeling in front of her chair so the two were at eye level.

“Asha, there was an accident.” The mage whispered between the Templar’s soft snores.

The blood pumping with a feverous pace through Idalya’s veins. Oh, Maker, no, this can’t be happening. Her hand grasped her throat as she clenched her eyes shut, the visions of Barris’ broken body bleeding out on the cold ground that haunted her thoughts pushing fiercely behind her eyelids.

Solas spoke, but she couldn’t understand his mangled words. She wasn’t aware of the pressure building chaotically around her until a pair of warm hands cupped her shoulders and the pressure released like water emptying through a drain. Idalya opened her eyes to meet another pair of cobalt eyes, but not the one she was expecting.
Rylen’s concerned eyes, that bordered on fear, watched her. She was trying to be brave, but she couldn’t. Her bottom lip quivered as the tears, freed from her eyes, rolled down the planes of her cheeks.

“How did it happen, Rylen? How did he die?” The whisper caused a physical ache to ricochet through her chest.

*I knew this would happen.*

Confusion registered over Rylen’s boyish features until his understanding kicked in. “*Oh no, Doll.*” He reached forward pulling the sobbing elf into his arms. “Barris is fine.” He gripped her tightly, murmuring unintelligible words to calm her shaking.

His ire found Solas. “What in the Maker is wrong with you? You have no experience speaking to living people, do you?”

Solas opened his mouth for a hasty retort but decided against it as he watched the girl fall apart from his thoughtless words.

“He’s okay?” Her voice was so fragile, too terrified to allow hope to branch its roots into her soul. If she hoped now, and he rested in the Fade, she didn’t know what it would mean for her.

“Yes, I swear, Doll.” Rylen leaned back to meet her swirled eyes.

She gasped for breath as the room spun around her, limbs weaker than she remembered.

“What in the void were you talking about?” She turned on Solas as her anger swelled to take the place of the weaker emotion. The mage didn’t turn away and took the brunt of her venom as she yelled at him. “There are better ways to give information than cryptically, Solas!”

“Yes, Asha. You are correct. I’m sorry for grieving you so.”

Her shoulders slumped as she returned to her regular state of *too tired for the world.* Solas wasn’t an affectionate person and only touched her when in she needed healing, but at that moment she swore he needed a hug more than she had in her swelling of temporary grief. Something weighed behind the sky in his eyes, but she knew better than to ask her teacher to share his thoughts.

“You are forgiven, Solas. *You are always forgiven.*”

His expression faltered for a moment before a smile appeared on his lips she didn’t believe for one second. Solas was a man who lied and hid his true feelings, who would claim he did it to keep others safe. The only thing he protected was himself. He could lie to others and himself if he wanted to, but when you’re alone, you must listen to those voices in the back of your mind that refuse to be silenced.

“What was the accident?” She forced the images of Barris’ broken body into the farthest corner of her mind, where she wouldn’t have to deal with it until she was alone with her thoughts in the late hours of the night.

Rylen cleared his throat as he stood. “After the Barris scare, this should seem much more reasonable… You caused a fair number of windows in Skyhold to explode last night.”

The elf’s mouth gaped open like fish displaced from water, as Rylen re-tightened his armor.

“I... What?” Her voice had risen in unexpected volume as both men stood back almost assuming
battle stances.

“Your magic.” Solas cut in. “The magic that threatened to escape when you believed the Templar lost. It’s growing stronger and is connected to your emotions. We need to address it before something serious happens.” His voice was calm, with a commanding undertone like her mother used to give instructions to her siblings.

“But I’m not a mage!” She cried as she tried to understand what in Thedas was going on.

“No, you’re not. You are something else.” He admitted. “But that makes it that much more important to learn to control it safely.” A strange look fell over his features as looked deep into her eyes searching for something he refused to name. “We don’t even know what you’re capable- of what you could be.” The final words came out as a whisper drifting over the wind.

She ground her teeth together as she struggled to control her thoughts. “Okay…” Each word was carefully chosen as she tried to keep her magic… no, the magic, from growing out of control. “How do we control it?”

“That is the question of the hour. Solas has ideas and I’m heading out to speak to Cullen so he can take the damages out of my wages.”

“Rylen, I can’t let you do that!” She tried to argue.

“Do you have any money?” Rylen stood, his chin tattoos looking as menacing as he could try to make them on his handsome face.

“Well, no, but…”

“No, it’s settled. I’ll take care of it. You set up a plan with Solas, whatever you need, I’ll be there-no questions asked.” With a shallow bow, the Templar turned to head to the bridge that leads to Cullen’s office.

“Rylen? Thank you- for everything.”

“You’re welcome, Doll. I made a promise to an overbearing friend that I’d keep an eye on you- I didn’t know how much trouble that would mean.” Flashing a brilliant smile and wink for her behalf he made the last few strides out of the rotunda as he headed toward an unpleasant conversation with the already stressed Commander.

Now just the two elves remained as Solas stood stationary, his arms linked behind the small of his back.

“When do we start?” She wanted nothing to do with this magic, but if learning to stop it would help her complete her mission, then it was required of her to try.

Leliana and Josephine had yet to return from Orlais, her best friend and the Ambassador would be completely up in arms at parts of Skyhold exploding and trying to cause her magic to flourish so they could monitor and teach her to control it. So, she was glad they had yet to return.

Solas chuckled to himself as he rounded his desk to pick up his wooden staff. “I would suggest now.”

“Yeah, I knew you would say that.” She sighed as she pushed her weary body out of the chair that supported her through the night.
Whatever she was or is, there was no going back. No more pretending in ignorance. Once she stepped out this door, everything had to change if she stood a chance to take down the Archdemon.

“I need to change into better clothes, I’ll meet you at the front gate?”

Solas nodded as he packed his parchments filled with notes away.

Almost at the door, she paused. *It was now or never.*

Turning around she headed straight back toward Solas and without pause wrapped her still shaking arms around him and squeezed her teacher in a hug. She was unable to see his face, but the man’s posture remained still, and he spoke no words as the small Warden clung to his side. When the moment grew awkward, she pulled back without meeting his eyes.

“Let’s pretend that never happened.” She returned to her room much quicker than needed, desperate to exit the rotunda before awkwardness ensued. So fast she missed the true smile that spread across the mage’s lips as he stood in shock from the brief showing of affection from the aloof girl.

The smile faded as he finished packing his notes away, the guilt rushing in like piling dirt burying him alive after his blatant lying and spying on the Warden last night.

He listened to her terrified screams and done nothing for fear of exposing himself and his lies. *She deserves better than this. She deserves better than us.*

If he couldn’t be honest with the Warden about who he was, then he needed to distance himself from the girl or risk having his heart broken when she pushed him away when she learned what a vile man he was.

Chapter EndNotes

Follow me on Tumblr for Once & Again posts and as well as the announcement of the new project I've been working on!

http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com
Cullen is running the Inquisition by himself after the Inquisition's return from Halamshiral. After weeks of little sleep and lyrium withdrawal, he won't be able to make decisions needed of him for long.

*Content warning for graphic material*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The demon’s claws raked across his back, his blood-curdling scream echoing through the hall of the Circle.

“Give in, you know you want to.” For hours the torture continued uninterrupted as the demon sensed Cullen’s fortitude faltering.

“I’ll give you nothing, demon.” He spat back through his crimson-coated teeth.

“See I’ve taken the wrong approach.” The demon mused as it swayed around Cullen, the click of its feet like a metronome over the screams in the atrium. Screams of his order murdered one by one by Uldred and his followers.

It placed purple-skinned hands of mottled flesh over its eyes. As their fingers dragged the length of its hideous face, the only one left remaining was Solana’s- his beautiful mage. Her straight, flowing hair the color of night. The glowing hazel eyes that used to put him at ease now filled him with a terror he never felt before when the demon whispered into his ears.

“Cullen,” Solana’s voice was an oasis in the desert to a man dying of thirst. The frightened Templar clamped his lids shut as his hands found purchase around his ears, pushing against the sound funneling grief into his soul.

He watched the mage expire alone on the stone floor while he fought to protect the innocent in the tower when the uprising began. She fought bravely. Her emerald-toned staff swinging freely in the air as her magic reached for the assailants storming in from all sides.

She never showed fear as the blood mages came for her, never cried out when the blade struck deep into her side. Her fading hazel eyes caught Cullen’s as her body collapsed limply to the ground, blood flowing over the cold concrete as triumphant cheers rose from the revolters.

From the confrontation, Cullen flew into battle, fighting his way up the floors of the Circle with a group of Templars hoping to stop this uprising in their tracks. They were captured by Uldred and his group of willing blood mages.
After an eternity, he knew not how many of his brothers lived and as the screams grew fewer and farther apart the Templar gave in to the fear of becoming one more demon for Uldred’s army.

He had yet to grieve the loss of the black-haired, soft-smiled mage that infatuated his time in Kinloch. The smallest touch from the woman with the gentle eyes kept him smiling for hours as his shifts through the night would drag on with no end. It was the folly of youth to believe in anything resembling a future for the Templar and apprentice mage.

That flame of hope burning brightly within the heart of the boy who allowed himself to look deep into her questioning eyes and ask, ‘what if?’

The demon now wore her angelic face twisted into a canvas of evil as she smirked at Cullen, leaning in front of him as he recited the Chant of Light to block out her lies.

“Open your eyes.” She commanded, and Cullen’s eyes opened against his will, looking deep into her pair of hazel with a sinister glint hidden in their paths. “Good boy.” Her slender hand rose to her throat as she untied the stays of her robes. As her fingers crested down to the swell of her breasts, Cullen swallowed hard, tasting the blood leaking from the lacerations inside his mouth.

“I like you, I can’t wait to give you what you’ve been waiting for.” She pulled the front of her robes open, revealing the flimsy band that covered her breasts. “I think you’ll going to enjoy this.” She breathed as she leaned forward to place her mouth on his.

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Cullen’s body spasmed as he woke. Heart pounding so violently in his chest that his vision spun as he focused on his surroundings. He focused on the hole in his ceiling, counting the stars until he could move without the threat of vomiting the bile and acid coating the sides of his throat.

Sweat covered every inch of his body as the chills set into his muscles, adrenaline wearing off. A warm weight snuggled against his arm as he gained control of his erratic breathing. She was awake. Her breathing shallow as she curled around him, comforting him with her presence when words would be insufficient. Her hair wrapped around his shoulders and neck, fingers trailing over the side of his bicep.

Every time he blinked the images of Kinloch flickered behind his exhausted eyes. He started another round of star counting of the stars as the image of Solona’s decaying body pushed its way to the front of his mind.

“What if all this is for nothing, Ev? What if we work so hard building our army only to be crushed as we arrive to fight Corypheus? If something happened to you…” His words trailed off. The image of Evelyn’s bloodied body now taking the place of Solona’s twisted one on the ground in his vision.

Ev’s hand reached up, wrapping around the far side of his face as she turned his head, his ear resting against her plump lips.

“We stand as gods among men, Cullen. You are the sword and shield guarding Thedas against harm—her chosen protector.” Her answer sent chills down his spine as she breathed the words. “Lay down your worries. I would rip open the Fade to slaughter every demon within to keep you safe. They will cower at my feet and know the price of what it means to threaten Cullen Rutherford. As you guard Thedas, I will keep you safe.” Her crimson lacquered nails dragged across the stubble of his throat turning his head to face hers, so their gazes met.

“Evelyn, I…,” Words failed him as searched her olive eyes. Sleep was heavy in her features as she
laid facing him on the bed. A weak smile appearing on her tired face.

“We’ll talk about it in the morning, Cullen. Sleep in peace knowing I’m here.” Her eyes closed as she pressed her forehead against his and drifted off back into the Fade.

He watched her, the slack from her face falling as she fell heavier into slumber.

There were so many things he wanted to tell her that fear kept shoved down with the bile stuck in his throat. As terrified as he felt in his dreams, he felt invincible in his waking hours by her side. She shared her strength freely, and he believed her when she said she would let nothing harm him.

His lids drift closed as he chuckled as the softest snore passed over her lips. She was right. There was time to discuss these things later. There would be time to tell her he never wanted to wake without her by his side. That standing by her made him a better man. There would be time tomorrow.

Turns out tomorrow is a fickle thing.

“Recruits left!” The Commander’s voice echoed over the training fields as he pushed the army through their morning training.

A withdrawal headache pushed on all sides of his head as he struggled to keep his eyes focused on the recruit’s awkward movements. Cullen’s poor sleeping schedule degraded as the Inquisition returned from Halamshiral. Since Leliana and Josephine left over a month ago to beg for any military help they could muster, his sleep was nonexistent. As focused as he stayed on his essential work, his traitorous brain filled his mind with memories of Evelyn.

Scouts appeared magically every second he wasn’t paying attention with another stack of missives needing his immediate attention at all hours of the night. The longer he went without sleeping, the stronger the sweet song humming lullabies from the little vial of glowing blue promising him a release and relief from his suffering. Pain haunted his waking hours as he single-handedly kept the Inquisition moving forward towards the beast known as Adamant would wear him down until the song became too irresistible to resist.

The Inquisition’s army was less than half of what they left the Winter Palace with. Guards were stationed heavily around the perimeter of Skyhold, not to keep the enemy out, but to contain the soldiers within. The Commander believed most of the army that wanted to desert already left and had been proud of the progress his remaining recruits made despite only being half an army. The remaining men were committed and believed in their cause that stopping Corypheus was more important than anything else.

As betrayed as Cullen felt at his Ferelden soldiers deserting, in the quiet hours of the night he wondered if he would do the same in their position. No- he had decided. Not that he felt his family needed protection from him, but he would be too stubborn to admit his organization was led astray.

Look how long he had lasted in Meredith’s vision of what the Templar should be before she had passed the invisible line in the sand that prevented him from condoning her actions. It took threatening the lives of every mage in The Gallows for Cullen to see the insanity lurking behind Meredith’s eyes. How far could Evelyn push them from their ideals before Cullen stood his ground, a sword pointed at her heart? Or could he ever? It was a trail of thoughts he wouldn’t allow his mind to follow, afraid of the truths his mind would whisper in the dark.

The lack of veteran Templar also hurt their training processes in Skyhold. Knight-Captain Barris oversaw all training for recruits and follow up. Cullen and Rylen together paled at his organization
and innate detail, their training schedule loosening at the seams. Until Idalya entered and helped them pull the threads back together until they had a cohesive and effective training program back in place for the slow trickle of recruits that still made their pilgrimage through the mountain paths leading to Skyhold despite everything.

*We will rebuild* the elf said as she gripped him by the forearms when he told her there was no point in preparing for Adamant. Her words had been so confident even as the woman looked frail. All the elf’s softness melted away over the previous weeks as she skipped more meals and remained alone for all of her off hours.

The few younger recruits struggled as the reps edged towards its completion. Cullen's feet led him over to their exhausted faces against his will until he was looking over them and their incompetent footwork with scathing fury brewing beneath his skin.

“Your feet are sloppy. Clean it up! Shields higher! Look,” he poked his sword into a recruit’s shield, “a fireball would have crashed around your shield. Hold it angled down just below your eye level. Now!” The recruits shook as their Commander barked out orders, embarrassing them in front of the most seasoned soldiers.

There was no room for softness with these men. Adamant would not be kind to these men nor their fate and neither could Cullen to give them their best chance of survival. Most of them would not live through the battle against the highly trained and resilient Wardens, but he wasn’t certain that the soldiers knew the power of the Wardens they would face after a treacherous hike for weeks across the desert to the fortress.

There was an instant surge of gratification when the young recruits cleaned up their footwork and moved their shields to the proper positions. It was such a small thing, but it was what he needed. Nodding his approval, he looked off to the next training ring, where Idalya demonstrated how to avoid contact in the battle to a group of soldiers, putting her phenomenal speed to use.

She casually moved back and forth between the roles of a soldier and instructor as she went from showing half the group the proper way to attack a dodging enemy while shifting to the other side to show the proper way to dodge the incoming lethal blow. The recruits looked at her with such admiration in their eyes, that she if she told them frilly dresses galore was the way to bring down the Red Templar, the men would show up proudly in full skirts ready for battle.

She broke the recruits up in pairs as they took turns lunging with their practice swords as the other half of the pairing avoided the hit. Slowly she worked her way through all the pairs, pointing out critiques or edits to fix their form or for where their eyes to watch their opponent to have the greatest range of view. The men smiled and congratulated each other as they became faster with the moves as Idalya sped up the drill until the soldiers were pouring sweat from under their helms as they ducked and dodged the blows that an hour ago seemed impossible to avoid.

Dal clapped her hands at the end of the drill as the recruits shook hands and clasped one another on the back. It had been ten years and the young elf still schooled him on how to do your job with honor and grace in the face of adversity.

“Okay recruits, we’re done for now. Get some water then head to Knight-Captain Rylen for Templar work.” The soldiers stood at attention, then left to rehydrate at her dismissal.

At the makeshift desk he had scouts bring out to the training yard for him, Cullen flipped through his growing pile of missives as he searched for any sign that the two other Ambassadors would arrive back in Skyhold soon. They sent word a week beforehand about leaving to make their way back to their mountain fortress, but that was the last communication Cullen received. Even
Leliana’s scouts claimed to have had zero interaction with the Spymaster which was unusual for her.

Finding nothing from the Ambassador in the pile, Cullen sighed out of earshot of his soldiers. When the women returned, he planned to move forward to approach Cassandra to find his replacement as Commander.

The nagging and unrelenting cry for lyrium plaguing his hours before was destroying him as every inch of his body begged for the return of the crystal blue savior. Whispering secrets no one else would understand. He asked Cassandra to replace him once, but both she and Evelyn adamantly denied his request.

In the past, Evelyn helped him keep his focus on the future ahead and to keep pushing forward, but now he spent more of his days lost in the dark days behind him. The light at the end of the tunnel was no longer visible if you turned your back to it. Cullen didn’t want hope anymore. He held it tenderly in his hands once, before it slipped away, disintegrating in the air like falling grains of sand caught in the wind. Ev stood beside him and told him they were strong and could face any adversity that came their way. That was until someone stronger came along and told her they alone could keep her safe in this world waiting for her to fall.

Cullen shut his eyes as he burned out the image of her glowing auburn hair. Thinking of her made the veins in his arm twitch, silently yearning for the pierce of the needle, the push of the plunger, until… no, I can’t do this.

His teeth gritted together, and he opened his eyes to find himself alone at the pitiful desk as no one paid him any heed as he fell to pieces in the middle of training. He flexed the palms of his hand open and closed as he tried to move the sensation out of his traitor arms.

He was shocked back into reality as the front drawbridge clicking into movement, servants running about clearing the entry area as the door opened into Skyhold. Please let this be Leliana and Josephine. The faster they returned, the faster there would be a replacement in his position- someone that could hold themselves together as they prepared to march to war.

Cullen was not that man.

He hadn’t realized he headed that direction until he was waiting at the entry for whatever group waited on the other side.

As the group entered Cullen’s line of sight, the half-smile playing on his lips faded. His stationed patrols unit entered with a line of dirtied Inquisition soldiers behind them, their hands tied behind their backs. The deserters.

His soldiers entered solemnly, jaws set into a tight line, eyes facing forward as they marched. Their prisoners marched single file in between as people gathered around in the courtyard to see the traitors returned home as prisoners.

The Commander’s grip on the handle of his sword caused his hand to go numb, an improvement over the anger pumping through his veins as the men continued to file into the courtyard. Their heads down in shame confronted by their former Commander.

These men swore their allegiance to the Inquisition and snuck away under the cover of night. They abandoned their brothers in arms and their vows when they escaped from Skyhold. Cullen would make an example of these men of what happened when you broke your word to the Inquisition and to him.
His Captain ran over, saluting Cullen as he drew near. “Commander.” He was out of breath after the trek up the mountain. “We found them holed out in a small encampment to the woods south of here. They had a plan to get out of Skyhold, but not how to travel in the frigid temperatures back to Ferelden. They were fish in a barrel, sir.”

“Good work, head in and debrief with Rylen.”

The Captain nodded and set off up the side stairs to make the trek back to Cullen’s office where Rylen was buried under stacks of paperwork Cullen dumped on him before taking over the training any man below could have run. But with Rylen, Cullen didn’t have to tell his friend he was so exhausted he was falling asleep on his feet. He couldn’t risk sitting down to sort paperwork since he’d pass out at his desk in the middle day or worst, his nightmares follow him into the daytime while surrounded by the soldiers that followed him.

He should call Rylen down now; Cullen knew he wasn’t in the right mind to deal with something like this. Better to wait for Leliana and Josephine to return to make a group consensus. Cullen knew all these things, but his anger was getting the best of him. Weeks of poor sleep compounded him to the point of explosion and these men returning from their failed attempt at escape was his last straw.

The deserters’ eyes widened as Cullen pulled his sword from his scabbard and walked to stand a few steps on the stairs leading up to the front doors of Skyhold to look at the men. He rested the tip of his sword on the stone as he spoke.

“You have failed the Inquisition. You gave your word to our organization, broke it, and abandoned the second you had questions.” Fury sizzled through his veins. “You were not conscripted or forced to join— you joined our cause then abandoned us! We will make an example of what happens when you break your word!” He snarled at the line of men. “Prepare them for execution.”

A collective gasp escaped the watching crowd as the shocked Inquisition soldiers made the deserters form a single file line while another soldier brought a wooden box for the men to bare their neck to Cullen’s steel that shined cruelly from his side.

“Cullen?” A gruff voice from below caught his attention in his steaming anger towards the cowering men, many who had tears streaming down their cheeks.

“What, Blackwall?” He didn’t have time for this. The man had no sense of timing. Blackwall walked hesitantly past the line of waiting deserters and closed the distance to Cullen’s side.

“What are you doing?” The man’s whisper threw Cullen off guard like a shield blow taken to the chest.

“Excuse me?” Yet another time the grisly Warden was out of line with his opinions.

“This isn’t the man you are, nor want to be.” Blackwall’s features were grave, his tunic covered with wood shaving from some carving project he wasted his time on.

“Since the sword is in my hand, apparently, I am, Blackwall.” The Warden’s jaw clenched as he considered his options and Cullen wondered if the Warden would have the gall to attack him in front of his own men and hope to survive.

“Have you ever killed an unarmed man before? Have you ever looked a pleading man in the eye and brought the sword down? That changes you, Cullen. Murdering a man in cold blood changes you and changes your men forever. This isn’t you…”
The last word hung invisibly in the air, but Cullen knew it was *anymore*, he wasn’t like that anymore. Or was he? As poor of an answer as it was, he didn’t know who he was without Ev. He could fight every day if it meant he could live another one by her side, but now his struggles overwhelmed every decision he made.

*He couldn’t think.*

The Warden refused to break his stare as he expected an answer from Cullen.

“This isn’t how we do things here, you know that. These are *your* rules, Commander.” The Warden leaned his closer, the earthy smell of wood radiating from him. “*I’ll do whatever I have to stop you from yourself.*”

*That was it.*

Cullen was done with soldiers not listening, he didn’t give a shit if Blackwall was one of Evelyn’s companions- the Warden was out of line.

“Guards, grab this man. I’m charging him with insubordination, take him to the holding cells for judgment.”

The guards moved forward without hesitation, grabbing Blackwall by the arms, pushing him further up the stairs as Blackwall continued yelling toward Cullen, but he stopped listening. That show was embarrassing in front of his men.

With careful movements, Cullen walked the final steps until his boots met the solid ground and were numb as reached the makeshift execution block his soldiers set up to stand in silence and watch their brothers be beheaded.

The door on the side of the entry drawbridge opened and Idalya and Solas entered, fur-lined winter jackets over their thin limbs as they approached the gathered scene. Confusion scrolled over Dal’s face as Solas hung back, the mage understood what was happening, remorse heavy on his features. The next Warden pushed her way to the front until she found her way in front of Cullen.

“What’s happened? Who are these men?” She turned to look across the line of the men and as her lavender eyes happened across a dirty Inquisition-issue tunic, she understood, her eyes wide in terror as she followed the line through and saw the wooden box set up for them to advance.

“Please, I beg you. *Do not do this.*” She whispered. Her eyes desperate as she pleaded into his, but he turned away before his stubbornness could falter in the path of her hope and resilience.

“Think of it from their point of view, Cullen. They’re afraid. Just look at them. They’re terrified, not just of your sword, but about what’s coming- and they should be! Every single one of these soldiers should be quaking in their boots about facing down Corypheus and his army, Maker knows I am!” The elf’s hands shook as she pleaded with her friend, hoping to get through to him before it was too late.

“You remember what the Blight did to our home, Cullen. They lost friends, family, and children. The darkspawn killed indiscriminately. Our ability to have remorse and grant mercy separates us from them. Look at them, they’re fucking *children*. None of these men should be old enough to join an army, much less die in a war.” She squared her shoulders back, her body standing proudly as her face told another story. “You don’t understand what you’re sentencing these men to.”

He tried to speak, but she held her shaking hand against his chest and he quieted as she stared up, sorrow filling her eyes as the pink and gray hues fought one another for dominance.
“You don’t die and find yourself held in the warmth of the Maker’s bosom. You die, and there’s nothing. No resolution, no peace, no salvation. You’re just gone and no longer exist.” Her voice so fragile as her pleas grew exhausting. “Please swear you’ll only take a life if you have to.”

He felt ill as her words exploded in his head. He knew Dal well enough to know she wouldn’t lie. *What if there was no Maker?* What was the point of breaking his chains to the Chantry if his noble death due to lyrium meant nothing? His feet stumbled as the sunlight became too bright for his eyes. The Hero’s hand on his arm steadied him, her touch funneling strength into his weakening body.

“I am so sorry, forgive me,” he whispered to the warrior who sighed as she nodded with understanding at the broken man who used to be a Templar. “You understand why I will do what I am, right?” He mumbled out of the corner of his mouth at Idalya who briefly raised an eyebrow at the Commander before resigning herself to the consequences of her actions with an annoyed sigh.

“Guards, take the other Warden to spend a night in the jails for insubordination.” He boomed across the field.

Solas nearly slapped himself in the face, as his hand rose too fast to his forehead, his jaw falling open. Idalya stood proudly in place, the deserters watching her like she was the second coming of Andraste as the guards carefully pulled the Wardens arms behind the small of her back and escorted her upstairs to the holding cells.

“Captain,” the young man made his way to Cullen’s side with haste. “Take these men to the cells, I will discuss their fate with the Spymaster and Ambassador when they’ve returned.” The look of relief that passed his captain’s face made Cullen’s guilt multiply. In his impulsive anger, he nearly made the wrong mistake until two people stood up to him the way he had to Meredith.

*Meredith.*

His head swam at the thought of his previous Knight-Commander. She started on the righteous path only to be pushed astray by her fear of mages. He drowned in shame as he became the woman he loathed.

Lyrium withdrawal had pushed him to the point of no return. He owed Blackwall an apology, the man was right- taking those men’s heads would have changed him forever. Never did he want to be the man lashing out in judgment against his soldiers instead of ruling logically.

His fellow advisers needed to return and needed to do so quickly.

For all his disagreements with Evelyn, he now had a saddening realization: *I could never do the job required of her.*

Chapter End Notes

I'll be RPing Idalya in the Chasing Remnants Dragon Age Tabletop stream tomorrow at 9pm PST https://www.twitch.tv/zombolouge Come check it out and say hi!
The Chapter Where Idalya and Blackwall Spend a Night in Jail

Chapter Summary

Dal and Blackwall managed to convince the Commander to save the deserters, but that won't make their night in jail pass any faster.

“So…” Idalya began from her cell.

“Yeah,” Blackwall answered from his own.

A hint of annoyance lingered in the Warden’s voice, an unmasked sense of relief the Commander changed his decision to execute the Inquisition deserters. Criminals housed in the main area of the cells.

Idalya and Blackwall were brought to the cells in the back of the jail where a waterfall rushed through the missing part of the floor into an endless tumble below. She wasn’t sure if it was the endless fall feet away from her cell or something else, but the room caused her great discomfort. A need to flee the area with haste. Tonight, could not be over faster.

She understood why Cullen detained them for the night. He needed their help to make the right decision, but they questioned his orders in front of his men. That could not stand. Neither Warden was angry at their current fate but freezing cold as the winter air whipped through the room leaving them unprotected from the harsh, frigid environment.

“I’m trying not to complain, but I could use a blanket.” Idalya’s shivering shook her entire frame shake. Chilled to the bone was her regular state, but this elevated that to another level.

“I’m doing okay, we’ll see as the night progresses.” The gruff man huffed.

“Well yeah, you have an entire blanket attached to your face, you better be holding up better than me.” She barked out as she tried to breathe warmth back into her cramping and aching hands. There was something to be desired in necromancy concerning heat retention. Every exhale of breath left her colder than the previous.

“Too bad they threw us in separate cells, we could have at least kept each other warm.” Complained the other Warden who wasn’t as warm as he pretended.

“Oh, what would Josie say to that?” Dal joked through the iron bars.

Blackwall sputtered and cursed from the other side of the wall as Dal’s head titled back and roared with laughter at upsetting the grisly man.

“I didn’t mean like that! You insufferable elf, I…”

“Blackwall, it was a joke. I’m sorry if I offended you.” She apologized but covered her mouth to stifle her giggles from echoing over the wall. “No one doubts how much you care for the beautiful Miss Josephine.”

Blackwall ceased his mock outrage as the two endured in silence listening to the sounds of the
waterfall flowing roughly over the cliffs of Skyhold.

“I hear a rumor that your boy is heading back towards Skyhold.”

Now that got her attention.

“What boy are you talking about?” She pretended her ignorance. When the Warden refused to take the bait and didn’t answer she followed with another question. “Who did you hear that from?” She waited as her heart skipped every other beat.

“Group of Templar outside my barn, talking about Evelyn calling the Templar back for her Grand Tour. That’s got to be exciting for you.”

_Exciting and fear-inducing._

Evelyn’s tour would arrive south of Skyhold in the next few weeks. It was the compromise constructed with Josephine and Leliana when the two women had gone to the Winter Palace for help. Somehow, her companions back at the fortress kept up with the number of missions that came across the Commander’s desk, except one—rifts.

More opened across Thedas daily and only Evelyn could close them. Solas researched day and night to close them magically, but all he’d managed was slowing them. A small group of soldiers left behind with a mage dampening the rift could handle the lazy trickle of demons from its mouth. Evelyn, accompanied by her Orlesian caravan would travel through Thedas shutting these rifts while hitting other objectives overdue on her list, including meeting with their Qunari contacts with Bull and the Chargers.

“Yeah, I guess. We’ve only sent brief letters back and forth, so it’ll be different to see each other in person. It’s been a few months now.” She tried to not let her own words get into her head. This was the time of night she paced through her room as terrifying thoughts flew through her mind without control.

Knowing Blackwall was in the next cell, kept her calm or at least pretending to be. With her eyes shut, she could imagine the warmth of Barris’ hands running the length of her arm the last time they touched. She understood why he hadn’t said goodbye, but she wished he’d found a way.

It was easy to imagine her arms wrapped around his neck, head arched back as his gorgeous lips parted hers painfully slow. What if she wasn’t what he wanted anymore? In the privacy of her mind, it was easy to question a sure thing. A chill blew over her body and she curled into a ball on the floor as she trapped whatever heat remained in her body. She considered asking Blackwall if he thought it was possible to freeze to death before the morning guards came to free them but was afraid to know the answer.

A _clang_ from the entrance got their attention. Both Wardens stuck their faces to the cold bars to see who entered their section of the jail. The wooden door opened, and a servant entered holding a tray with steaming bowls of food into the dim light. As they neared their corner, the giggling snort alerted Dal that it was Sera who entered with their nightly dinner.

“Hiya, gorgeous!” Sera’s head of hand-cropped hair popped in between the iron bars causing Dal to jump in surprise. “You too, Ugly.” She leaned over to yell into Blackwall’s cell, as the man snorted through his large nostrils like an angry horse. “Ready for dinner? I cooked it! Just kidding!” Dal sighed in relief at not having to eat anything the elf had prepared by hand.

Instead of shoving the trays under the divot at the foot of the bars, Dal’s eyebrows quirked as she
heard a metal key inserted in the lock and her cell door opened to the pathway. She jumped to her
feet, stretching out her back as she walked forward out of the cell. They had only been inside for
half a day, but they were freezing hours.

“Have you always had a key to the cells, Sera?” Blackwall inquired, irked because he was still
locked in his cell with the Hero was free, stretching out in the clearing.

“Nah, Rylen is drinking his guilt away in the tavern with Bull over Cully-Wully going psycho, so I
made quick work separating him from his keys. He’ll find them in the morning and never know
they were gone.” Sera picked up the roll on Blackwall’s tray and bit into the side as the large man
scowled in hunger from inside the bars. “You’d be surprised how easy it is to steal keys from
Templars, they never know their gate keys are missing.”

Something about that statement struck Dal as strange as Sera kept prattling on.

“They would you need gate keys… it’s you!” It was so obvious in her face the entire time.
Blackwall looked out at the Hero in confusion before Dal turned to him in annoyance sensing his
question. “It’s her. She’s been helping the Ferelden soldiers leave, they’re not escaping as much as
they are being led out of Skyhold.” Blackwall’s jaw dropped open in shock as he looked between
the two elves. “That’s why you’re down here, you normally wouldn’t care less that we got thrown
into the brig for the night, but you feel guilty and wanted to make sure everyone is okay.”

Sera shrugged as she leaned against the stone wall dividing Dal and Blackwall’s cells. “Sexy and
smart, you’ll make a great Jenny someday, Hero.”

She waggled her brows at Dal, who refrained from rolling her eyes as she snatched Rylen’s keys
out of the rogue’s fingers before opening the lock of Blackwall’s cell. Dal chugged her bowl of
stew, ignoring the stares of the other two companions. It was over salted with too little meat, but it
was the greatest thing she’d ever eaten.

“I have to check on Cullen. You guys staying or coming with?” The Warden and elf looked at each
other, shrugged, and followed as Idalya as she made her way towards the exit.

“Hey, wait up.” Sera ran forward and reached around the edge of jagged rocks and pulled out an
assortment of Inquisition soldier and servant uniforms. Dal chuckled as she shed her fur jacket for a
soldier’s jacket and full coverage helm.

“How do I look?” Dal’s voice echoed inside the large helm as Blackwall laughed tucking his hair
into the back of his collar as he slid a larger-sized helmet over his massive head.

The three walked out the doors with no soldiers giving them a second look as exited into the
courtyard of Skyhold. Night settled in hours ago and most of the fortress was quiet other than
soldiers patting across the battlements, their eyes cast to the horizon.

At the Herald’s Rest, Idalya wasn’t surprised to see a substantial crowd packing the chairs of the
tavern. Inside they kept their eyes fixed down as they squeezed past Maryden the Bard singing and
found their way to a crowded table with Bull, his Chargers, Varric, Rylen, and Dorian well past
drunk and moving into a shit-faced label.

Dal sunk into the chair across from Rylen as her two companions took seats at the far end of the

table. The Templar startled until he glanced at the rest of her and gave a warm smile and a raise of
his beer to the new woman seated across the table.

She chuckled lightly before angling her head down so that her eyes met his through the helm. His
cobalt eyes widened in surprise as he realized who was hiding underneath the uniform.

“How did you get out?” He whispered. At least he thought he whispered but shouted is a more accurate description.

“Sera.” The elf mumbled before grabbing the rest of Rylen’s beer from his hand and pouring it down her throat. “Make sure you get your keys back from her tomorrow.” She slid the empty stein back in front of the confused man as he fumbled through his pockets trying to find the keys he was certain were still on his person. “Have you seen Cullen yet?”

“Tried.” He admitted. “When I heard what happened I tried to stop in twice, and he threw me out twice. The last time by force, I’d like to add! He’s even more stubborn than you.”

“I could have told you that!” She joked as she rose from the bench. “I’m heading to check on him, I’m faster than you so if he wants to throw me out he has to catch me first.”

“He’s not himself, Doll. Be careful” Rylen’s face was dourer than she had ever seen. Everything the Inquisition faced was taking a toll on their most enthusiastic members.

“None of us are anymore.” She mumbled under her breath as she ascended the tavern’s flights of stairs to head to the battlements. At the last landing, she paused, staring into the emptiness of the corner, before shaking off the feeling of behind watched and excited into the frigid winter air.

“Where the Hero headed?” Varric asked over Rylen’s shoulder.

“She trying to talk some sense into Cullen. I don’t have high hopes.”

Bull’s brows rose to twice their height from Rylen’s right.

“Varric, double my bet.” The Qunari called out to the dwarf, slamming his rounded fist to the table which shook under the force.

“Double? Tiny, if you win this bet we will not have enough to pay you. Let’s hope Curly has more self-control than you suspect he has.” Varric shook his head and pulled out a small leather-bound book, which is he opened and made notes in before slipping it back into the pocket of his overcoat.

“What was that?” Rylen asked. It seemed most Varric’s time was spent making bets on the most ordinary of things within Skyhold. He did not understand when the dwarf had time to write novels.

“While everyone else has kept themselves busy betting on when Kitty and Squeaky will finally get together,” Varric explained between gulps of his ale. “Tiny here is determined the Commander will beat his friend to the finish line. He’s bet everything the Chargers have made in the Inquisition. I’m about ready to fake a letter to Squeaky from the Inquisitor just to get him back to Skyhold and end this insane betting.”

“Woah… Cullen and Dal?” Rylen asked incredulously. “You’ve got to be kidding me?”

Bull shook his head, a knowing smile on his face. “I know women and that one is so wound up she’s about to explode. That opens the door to a million bad decisions and I think the Commander will be at the top of that list.”

“Why Cullen? Am I on that list?”

Bull laughed, a loud sound that echoed into Rylen’s already sore and prideful ears.
“Anyone who can’t take that woman in a battle doesn’t stand a chance of taking her in the bedroom. She gravitates towards strength and control… two things you’re not well known for.” The Qunari slapped Rylen across the back of his shoulders as the Templar got saltier.

Rylen thought Idalya and Barris were inevitable, they needed to be in the right place at the right time for the two stubborn warriors to express their true feelings with one another. In a time of war, things weren’t as cut and dried as they appeared. Maybe fate destined for the Templar to drop the torch the man carried for a decade for the girl he saw once through the hormone-driven eyes of a teenage boy. If that was the Maker’s intention, it was too bad in his opinion, the two complimented one another, both stubborn to a fault.

The Warden came with her own set of unique issues he was certain Cullen couldn’t handle. The former Templar spent every moment awake, and sleeping, pining for the Inquisitor. Rylen warned him when he first confessed the feelings he’d developed for the devious woman that it would end in nothing but pain for the Commander.

Evelyn surprised Rylen while they were together. She was odd and often forced her opinion into being, yet with Cullen, a softness appeared, she hid from everyone else. As far as Rylen could tell, the two were happy with their arrangement and it had done wonders for Cullen when he hit the worst parts of his lyrium withdrawal.

He had feared for his friend when he figured out that Cullen was no longer taking his daily rations. Never in his years in the Templars did he know of anyone who quit lyrium and survived. Those that tried either gave up, died from withdrawal, or driven insane as years of repressed memories and emotions rushed back. Lyrium was great for numbing yourself to the pain of being a Templar, but once you were off it, many Templars were forced to deal with the mental consequences of their actions in the Circle and it broke them.

Cullen didn’t speak of his time in Kinloch or Kirkwall, but Rylen met him there when he was a struggling Knight-Commander trying to keep the Templars together after the explosion at the Chantry. He knew the man was not proud of his years working under Meredith and how he was manipulated by the woman, but more Templars had familiar stories to Cullen’s than Rylen was comfortable admitting.

Cullen barely clung to reality these days. He wasn’t certain recently if Cullen was awake most of the time he spoke to him or needed orders. Since the Spymaster and Ambassador left weeks ago to Orlais, Cullen stopped sleeping. Something that would take a man down in full health, much less a lyrium-starved, grieving man. If the two other advisors did not return soon, Rylen feared for his friend.

He almost executed a group of sobbing boys who ran away to return to their families. They weren’t malicious, they were terrified war was coming to Ferelden and needed to be home when it arrived. If Cullen let the anger get the best of him and took those men’s heads, he never would have forgiven himself.

He loved both his friends, but together they weren’t even foundational enough to make one full person. Plus, Rylen was certain the Inquisition would find pieces of whatever woman Cullen ever put his hands on while Evelyn Trevelyan lived. She might have made her choice, but Maker help any woman Cullen tried to touch again and Rylen knew that woman being the Hero would set Evelyn off like an explosion.

“Hey, Varric?” The dwarf lifted his heavy head from the table as Bull laughed, his voice always too loud for the small rooms.
“What Tats?” Varric pushed his lopsided ponytail out of his face as he wiped a thin trail of drool from the corner of his mouth.

“Can I bet on myself in this?” He might as well ask, before placing his money since you never knew.

“No.” The whole table answered in unison.

“Fine.” Rylen ground out between his teeth as he looked towards Bull who had a knowing smile on his face. “I’ll double Bull’s bet on Barris.” A few members of the Chargers whooped as Varric groaned taking out his leather book again to make a note of the ridiculously large bet.

“Time?” Huh. He hadn’t thought this one through. *When would they see each other again?* “My bet’s for Adamant.”

Bull raised a competitive eyebrow but still reached over to shake the man’s hand.

Rylen hoped for the sake of his savings that his two friends found some way to tell each other how they felt.
Idalya arrives at the Tower to check on Cullen's condition and discovers the secrets their Commander has been withholding.

Idalya’s feet fell silent on the empty battlements after leaving the Herald’s Rest. Soldiers paid her no heed in her uniform as she traveled across the fortress toward the Commander’s tower. This path led her by the Templar stone home ascending into the sky, the one part of Skyhold she never investigated. After her run in in the training ring with Lysette and the other Templars, she hesitated to go near Templars that weren’t in her circle of trust.

She paused, staring at the dark tower with few recruits still left inside after Evelyn ordered them to free Thedas from the burden of magic. A strange tingling massaged its way up her spine as she imagined how Barris spent his time and slept in Skyhold when he was here. When he was here. The thought clawed at her heart remembering the images of him laying broken and bloody on the battlefield. She prayed to the Maker every night for his safety, but she had no luck and her prayers could doom him to death.

She was annoyed for allowing herself to develop feelings for someone within the Inquisition. What was she thinking? A walking corpse reanimated by magic to bring down the spirit of an ancient old god ripped out of the Fade and placed in a lyrium dragon. If she wasn’t living this life, she would have told the author of the story they were insane. To find any crack in between where love might even hope to flourish was foolish.

Her eyes drifted toward Cullen’s tower. To hope for a moment of respite from the pain living brought him, he allowed his heart to be sliced to pieces by the rogue’s daggers. If given the choice, Cullen would have avoided every moment the two spent together to save his heart from the excruciating pain that her exit from his life caused.

Her footsteps were unsure as she covered the rest of the path to the Commander’s. The Cullen she saw earlier shook her with his resemblance to the scared and bloodied man she once found in the Kinloch Circle Tower. He let his abandonment take control and destroyed himself over her unreciprocated affection. The Inquisition needed him to lead and each day another piece was missing from the Commander as he prepared them to enter a battle where they were certain to die.

The lighting was dimmed in his office, but the man wasn’t sleeping. She would still pace at these early hours of twilight. The doorknob turned on his side door and she pushed it with a gentle force, to not startle a man with a loose grip on reality with abilities that could kill her.

Her eyes squinted to the minimal lighting as she slid into the room, her ears sensitive enough to duck from the object hurtling through the air that smashed into the stone just behind her head. The box crashed into the wall and a cloud of fine glass exploded out of the edges as Idalya stumbled to the side away from it.

Maker, what was it about people in the inquisition and throwing shit?

She had to restrain her immediate instinct to retreat when she turned to face her friend. Whoever
this was, was not Cullen. She understood why Rylen was thrown out twice when checking on him. The man’s skin was clammy with hollowed cheekbones, red-rimmed and bloodshot eyes. His usual brushed hair was a tangled nest of curls on his head. Tunic open revealing the map of scars spread over the plains of his chest. The knuckles of both hands bloodied as he rested his fists down on his desk holding his weight up, his head down not sensing she had entered the room.

Idalya peered down at the broken box laying in pieces around her feet. With her boot, she flipped over the large piece of lid remaining intact. A hand carved insignia of the Templars flaming sword was prominent as her eyes drifted back to him. Was this about the Templars? Cullen was devastated when Evelyn ordered the Templars away, but she never thought his anger ran this deep.

She pushed her weight into each step making them louder than usual as she approached him. The man pretending to be Cullen lifted his head in surprise as she closed the distance to his desk, her hands open to her sides to show she posed no danger to the man whose eyes were looking for a fight.

His hazel eyes drifted from her to the broken the box in the corner and his features crumpled in his embarrassment in letting one of his soldiers see him like this. “I… I am sorry. I’m…,” the back of his hand rubbed against his forehead as he wiped the pouring perspiration from his damp skin.

With slow and careful movements, she removed the full helm covering her face and hair. The freezing air bit against her skin as her protective layer left her. Cullen needed to have his ceiling fixed, it was never more than a few degrees warmer in his office than outside even in the middle of winter. The man could freeze to death in his sleep if he ever slept again.

Cullen’s eyes blinked as he tried to adjust to her face. “Dal? How… I thought…” he swiped at his forehead again in frustration as he flopped down in his wooden chair that creaked under his hefty weight.

She remained unmoving as she studied him. “I needed to check on you. Which was a good instinct it appears…”

Cullen needed a healer, and now. The smell of wine was heavy around him as she noted the empty bottles of wine scattered around him on the stone floor. She needed to help him. Before she opened her mouth to speak, his head fell on his arm on the desk, his despair palpable.

“I can’t do this anymore. I can’t.” His voice was so broken. The longer she stood in this room the more scared she became.

“Cullen,” she said in her calmest tone. “You need a healer. I will get someone and be right back.”

“There’s no point, they can’t help, remember? This is my penance. This is what I deserve.”

“What do you mean the healers can’t help?” Oh Maker, no. The thought of Cullen up here dying alone one night at a time, seized her heart in a frosty grip. No one would survive the coming battles without Cullen. She had so few real friends that losing even one almost caused her to break down in front of his broken man.

“It’s the lyrium, it’s only a matter of time before the withdrawals either drive me mad or kill me.”

Withdrawals? What was he talking about? Oh no… oh god, no.

“You’ve stopped taking lyrium.” It wasn’t a question, but she prayed she misunderstood what he said.
“Yes, before I joined the Inquisition. I could no longer live in the chains of the Chantry.” His voice was so quiet as the tears filled in her eyes.

*How could I have been so blind? How could I miss so much pain?* Not listening to her own instincts, she rounded the corner of his desk and knelt beside her friend as she tried to summon her tears back. There was plenty of time for grieving, but not now.

“Cullen?” She spoke evenly to get his attention. “Cullen? You need to take the lyrium again. If you don’t it could kill you. I… we need you. Cullen, *please don’t die.*”

“I know.” His throat was haggard as the words croaked out. “I can’t have this argument with you again. I’m too tired, it’s all too much, but you won’t let me go. You and Cassandra denied my request for a replacement, how am I supposed to keep doing this job?”

Dal quirked a confused brow as contemplated the safety of reaching out to touch the man.

“You were all I had, then you left. I can’t do this without you. Please just let this end for me?” He pleaded.

Lyrium withdrawal coupled with weeks without sleep and now he didn’t know who she was. She was a figment of Evelyn left in his imagination running out of control.

“Because the Inquisition needs you.” She reached forward with shaking fingers and slid them between his fingers and he raised his head to watch her hand as his fingers twisted around hers holding them gently in his large grip. “We can’t do this without you. We’ll find a way for you to stop after Corypheus, Cullen, but we can’t lose you.” Her voice wavered as she tried to keep calm. Any emotional outburst would only make this situation more crazed despite her wanting to kick and scream that he was being insane for making this decision in the middle of a war.

“I am sorry.” He mumbled as he ran a thumb over the top of her hand. “I know how much this scares you, but I can’t be that man anymore. I need to be a better man for you, Ev. A man deserving of your love.”

“Cullen, please stop.” Her voice broke as the tears refused to be reined in. “She… I don’t want you to die. You need not die to be deserving of love.”

He reached to take her other quivering hand in his as her words stung her. Finding his eyes, she recoiled at how maddened they appeared, his pupils dilated and surrounded by the darkest rings of solid crimson. She needed to get to Solas and fast.

“The things I did… I was ashamed for you to discover them. I told you what the demons did in Kinloch,” the acid in Dal’s stomach pushed its way up her clenched throat, “but what I did in Kirkwall- that was me. I did those unspeakable things. That’s my secret,” a cruel laugh echoed in his hollow chest, “that I don’t blame you for the decisions you’ve made in fear because I’ve *made them too.*” He allowed his guilt to consume him until there was nothing left of the Cullen she cared for.

“Maker, I *begged* you to side with Gaspard. I pushed you to make a decision you weren’t ready to decide. I used our personal relationship to influence you. What kind of man does that make me?” Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes as he stared down into hers seeing a pair of olive-green ones staring back. “I knew how men used you, but I didn’t hesitate to be like them when I thought it would make my job easier.” A sob racked his chest as the tears flowed down his haggard cheeks into his mess of a beard he’d grown over the past few weeks.
“I forgive you, Cullen.” You are forgiven Solas. You are always forgiven. Her words to Solas rattled around in her confused mind as she watched the change in the man at her grace. Perhaps there were wounds that only others could sew shut. All of them radiated guilt from their past decisions but no one offered them the forgiveness they needed to be granted for their sorrow.

Her eyes popped opened in surprise as Cullen dropped her hands and slid his burning fingers along the sides of her face, drawing her close enough for their foreheads to touch as their tears mingled together.

“Oh… I…” Dal tried to pull back, but the crying man held tightly against his face.

Even now her physical strength was much greater than the struggling man. Hurting Cullen was her last priority, but she would not hesitate to break the Commander’s nose if he got too handsy with her.

He pulled back the smallest distance, so his eyes filled her entire field of vision. There was so much pain inside she understood. She recognized the fear and pain of your soul crying in pain, she saw it reflected as she saw in tangible form what she had been like since her return from Halamshiral.

“Why did I never tell you?” Cullen mumbled as he stroked a searing thumb across her cheekbone, her skin warming in response to the memory of another Templar who once caressed her the same way. “I should have told you in the carriage. You were pleading with me to just take the lyrium, you swore we would find a way past it when the battles were over. I had never seen you so upset. You begged me not to make you order me to take it, but I looked you in the eyes and said no, that I couldn’t. That was the moment it happened, I know that now.”

He leaned forward so their faces we separated by only a fingers-width. “The words were there on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn’t say them- I was afraid. If I told you and you felt the same, then I would have to do everything I could to make sure I wasn’t taken from you. I can’t do that. I will die before the chains are tightened back around me.” The self-directed fury in his laugh caused her to retract in his reach, his eyes softening as he recognized he was frightening the woman in his grip.

“I’m sorry.” He whispered as he searched her eyes for something he wouldn’t find within her own.

The longer he looked, the more sorrows spread across his features. For his safety, she needed to call a healer and fast. She afraid the fragile man would hurt himself if left in this state. She closed her weeping eyes as Cullen’s were replaced by a pair of emeralds ones that haunted her waking moments.

“I’m sorry I was too scared to tell you how you felt.” The words were a whisper as they snuck past her lips. “I’m sorry I let my fear control me and push me away from the one thing that could have brought me happiness. I’m terrified that all of this is temporary and if I open myself up to someone what could happen. Even a heart that’s stopped beating can still break.” Tears poured out of her closed eyes as Cullen’s thumbs wicked them away. It wasn’t the same as being able to tell Barris, yet her soul felt lighter than it had minutes ago.

As she opened her eyes, she found Cullen with the softest of smiles pulling at the corners of his lips as he continued to clear the tears that fell from her endless wells of sorrow. “Ev- I love you.” His voice cracked as the words came out between his tears. “I have since the moment I first saw you outside the Conclave. I’m sorry, I never told you. It’s too late, but at least you’ll know.” A great sigh passed through his body as his wet eyelids became heavy.

“I always knew,” she whispered in response as he smiled at her, his body swaying from the
combination of exhaustion and alcohol consumption. “You need to rest. I’ll be here when you awaken.” Cullen nodded numbly as he still stared into her eyes.

The thumb on Cullen’s left hand dipped down as it traced the edge of her lower lip as Dal’s eyes were open wide enough to hurt in her shock. He leaned forward until she felt the tip of his nose drifted across hers. Her heart pounded in her throat in panic as her friend closed the distance until she felt his breath spreading across her lips. Idalya pulled back unable to keep the charade going even for the desperate man’s sake.

“I’m s… sorry. I can’t. It’s… it’s too fast for me.” The stammers barely made it out as the man looked at her in confusion before understanding spread across his expression.

“You’re right, Ev. As usual.” A sad smile moved across his lips as drifted his thumbs across her cheeks one last time before releasing her from the cradle of fire of his hands.

“Let’s get you upstairs to sleep, okay? You don’t have to sleep for long, but I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

He sighed as he began the laborious task of pulling himself out of his chair to climb his way up the steep ladder into his loft. Stumbling on his feet, she rose and grabbed him by the arm, wrapping it around her shoulders to help drag him towards the rickety wooden ladder. Cullen, at least, was too tired to put up a fight as she pointed toward where his bed was located.

“Head up, I’m going call for some tea for when you wake. I’ll be right behind you.” The former Templar grabbed the rungs in his giant hands as he began the slow climb up to his rest. Idalya cringed each time he pulled himself up another level even though he was far steadier on the ladder than she presumed. “We need to put in stairs, Cullen. That thing is a death trap.”

The man chuckled as he continued to climb. “I’m surprised to hear you say that after all the creative uses we’ve found for it.”

Instantly, Idalya gasped in disgust from the ground as she tried to clear those mental images from her head. As the Templar cleared the final rung, pulling himself onto the wooden beamed floor, she hid her expression as her gag reflex threatened to betray her.

“Get in bed and I’ll be up soon.” She called up the top of the ladder. He didn’t respond, but she heard his dragging footsteps move across the floor and the groaning sound of his bed distributing his weight. Grabbing the metal helm, she threw it over her head as she opened the front door of Cullen’s office surprising a very confused soldier standing guard outside.

“Fetch Master Solas. The Commander… has eaten something that is making him ill. Bring the mage now.” The soldier set off confused from the instructions the woman in mismatched armor just issued him. It wasn’t a great excuse, but the only one that sounded plausible, so she didn’t scream ‘THE COMMANDER IS DYING’ in hysterics.

There was no noise from above as she waited at the door for the mage who some poor soldier had the misfortune of waking from his nightly traverse through the Fade. She watched clouds pass over the full moon even as she shivered from the lack of heat protection the room provided.

Anytime she was at her most overwhelmed she’d always remind herself that some things were inevitable: the sun always rose in the morning and always set in the evening. She was just one piece of some gigantic plan the Maker had for them. That thought used to bring her comfort in her travels as a Warden, but now after what she experienced, she wasn’t certain anything was guaranteed.
She recognized the familiar hum of Solas’ mana before he materialized from his Fade in front of the Commander’s tower. Before the elf asked why he’d been summoned for food poisoning in the middle of the night, she grabbed him by the forearm yanking him into the room harder than she had expected.

As the mage lifted his hand to defend himself, she pulled the helm off, her tangled white hair falling out around her shoulders like a ruined veil. Solas’ jaw slacked as he took in the last person he expected. Opening his mouth to speak, she lifted a finger to his mouth effectively hushing him.

“Before you say anything condescending and logical, let me speak since I have limited time: You’re now Evelyn. He’s upstairs. Don’t kiss or lead him on. I have to find Blackwall and get back in jail.”

The mage stood speechless, his brows raised, and mouth gaping open unsure how to process what the girl just spoke to him. He swallowed heavily and took a deep breath before trying to speak.

“I…” that was it. That was all he had.

“I’m so sorry. It’s been a weird night. Please just do this favor for me? Cullen is sick, and I don’t have anyone else to ask.” The elf shut his mouth, his head tilting to the side as he contemplated her offer.

“I get one of day training where anything you’ll try anything I suggest… and you won’t complain about it.” He added at the end.

“Fine.” She ground out through her teeth as she threw her helmet back on and opened the door to leave. “You were going to help, and I just agreed to these bogus terms, didn’t I?”

“Yes.” The mage said gleefully, shutting the door in her face with a grin.
The Chapter Where We Meet the Vigilante

Chapter Summary

A vigilante prowls the countryside of Ferelden hunting those who seek to harm the innocent.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From the tree line, he watched the bandits carry on their conversation. The fat and oily disaster of a man, that appeared to be their leader, grinned as his greasy fingers slid through the bag of coins they separated from their previous owners.

He’d followed them for two days now. His intuition told him to keep an eye on the bandits traveling off the main highway South of Lake Calanhad. As usual, his feelings were correct. They attacked farmers struggling to survive north of where Lothering once existed before being erased from the map by the Blight.

Over the years he perfected his patience. Waiting for the critical moment when you had the information needed from those who used their energies to hurt others. In those early years, no hesitation lingered in his vengeance. His need to watch them suffer as he protected those who could not protect themselves. He matured over the years, learned to watch for larger patterns instead of flying into battles with his daggers outstretched.

Patience was rewarded, anger was frequently not.

He continued watching the bandits travel when they took an unexpected turn towards South Reach and continued to hide from the Imperial Highway. The sun rose and set one more time before his patience was rewarded- a camp. The four bandits strolled into the camp hidden deep in a taint-filled field. Ten years had passed but the tainted earth spread throughout Ferelden still made his flesh feel like it was crawling off his bones.

At least twenty men camped out together in this disgusting field, eating roasted meat, an unfortunate halla he presumed by the smell, and laughing jovially around a fire. He moved silently around the perimeter until hidden behind the camp in an outcrop of trees that somehow survived the darkspawn’s corrupting touch. A smile tugged at the corner of his tired lips as he gave one tree a pat of admiration on its jagged bark at its will to survive. He admired survival as a skill, some were far better at it than others.

His sensitive ears listened to their conversations, making notes of where the men said they stole goods, money, or lives from. He would add them to his list to travel later to right their wrongs. An army of men could do the work he was and there wouldn’t be enough to help those victimized and left for dead by filthy criminals with no respect for the value of life.

When he’d heard enough, he rose from his crouched position, walking into the center of the camp where the men sat circled around the roaring fire. Gusts of wind threatening to move winter on them faster than it had in years previous. A dark woolen robe covered his head down to the tops of his knees that swayed with his precise movements as he entered the bandit's circle claiming an
empty seat between two dirt-covered and indecent smelling barbarians.

The bandits quieted as the stranger entered their fold. All eyes remained glued as he sat in silence waiting to see their reactions. This was his favorite part- opening the trap and watching his prey walk willing into it. He compiled enough evidence to send these men to their King to be beheaded, but they were undeserving of mercy. These men preyed on the weak and struggling, not to survive, but for their enjoyment. No, they would receive no mercy from the King or him. Pulling back his hood, a strange murmur moved through the group.

“Ay, who invited the knife-ear?” The greasy man calling the orders shouted.

“Was this not an open fire?” He asked, feigning his innocence. “I merely saw a festive group and came to join to warm my frigid hands.” A few bandits dismissed him and moved back to their previous conversations, but the greasy man did not.

“If you didn’t get the point, we don’t like no stinking knife-ears. So, you can get gone now before we make you go.”

“Ah, I am swayed by your eloquence.” He stood as laughter burst out among the other bandits as the leader turned on them with venom in his eyes.

“Wot you laughing’ at?” He yelled at the other bandits as they silenced in their fear.

“I am sorry to have caused a ruckus among your men. Shall we shake on my apology?” The leader’s eyes narrowed in rage at the elf that refused to leave with an outstretched hand.

“I won’t shake your….”

The man’s eyes were huge and gaping as the blade slid through the center of his throat. His lips opened as thick greasy blood bubbled over his lips and flooded over his chin. Many of the bandits hadn’t realized what happened as they continued their conversations without paying heed to who the elf could be.

The elf’s daggers flashed to his sides as he slit the throats of the men sitting on both sides of him. Their arteries audibly spurting as their life force sprayed out coating the surrounding men. The bandits jumped up to draw their weapons, but the rogue moved too fast.

They all wore flimsy leather armor which allowed his shining steel of justice to cut into one artery after another as the burly men came for him. A man’s life could be taken away with the simplest flick of his wrist, but as he fought his way through the camp, he leaned less towards easy death and more towards pain. Let these men feel the pain they’ve inflicted on others. Let them feel what it felt like to beg the Maker to save you and hear silence.

I am a weapon made by the Maker. I avenge those who cannot speak anymore. My steel is the instrument of their vengeance that shall bring great pain upon those who seek to harm the weak and helpless.

As the remaining men ran from camp, he made easy work with the throwing daggers pulled from his boot, each piece of steel landing with brutal force in the base of their necks as the bodies fell limp to the ground. He wiped his daggers against the edge of his cloak as his keen ears listened for any men still on the feet. There were none. The last that remained alive, groaned and cried out to their Maker to help them.

After an hour the cries silenced, and the elf set about emptying the pockets of the bandits, collecting gold, trinkets, and anything else of value into his leather carrying bag. There’s was a lot
here. These men helped themselves for some time to what little the people of Ferelden had. It would take time to discover who the people were that the men harmed, but he would find a way to repay the families for their losses.

Coming last to the greasy leader whose eyes were still wide open in death, he pulled two golden coins from a hidden pocket in his armor. A man could have great humanitarian inclinations, but he still had to eat. Something he had not done in days as he’d traveled in secret following the bandits to their location. Slipping the coins into the waistband of his pants, he left the camp heading closer to Denerim for lodging and food for the night. If he was lucky, there might be an attractive bar wench to seduce to make the entire trip a success.

As much as he avoided larger cities, news traveled faster into taverns in the city than speaking to simple farmers and mabari raisers in the countryside of Ferelden. There was a simplistic beauty to Ferelden compared to his homeland, but that applied to all its citizens. People would speak until they spotted his pointed ears under his hood or his vassalin across his darken skin and suddenly they all needed to report to their homes. Ten years ago, an elf gave her life to save every one of their lives, and a decade later an elf making conversation was enough to send people running into their homes.

With no more bandits to follow, he made his way to the Imperial Highway and made better time as he traveled towards his destination for the night. On the edge of the South Reach, he found what he was looking for. A humble tavern with a vast array of travelers coming and going from the capital. This was the prime location for a man of his skill set. Countries were built and broken in places like this; where people carried information from the rest of the world back and forth.

He entered inside, grateful for the blaring heat pouring from the fireplaces. Weaving between patrons, he made his way to the bar where he ordered a bowl of stew, the Ferelden national dish, and a fine bottle of Antivan red wine to wash the grey goop down with. He slipped the other gold coin to an older homeless man who had a seat at a table in the center of the room. The man understood his intent and left without hesitation, clutching the coin within his eager fingers.

The stew was terrible, but the wine was more than enough to make the night worth it. He scanned the tavern and saw no servers that caught his fancy to his dismay, but there were plenty of conversations to keep his interest piqued.

“I didn’t like Celene, but she was, by far, the better of the two over Gaspard. The man’s an idiot with an army and now with the Inquisitor sided with him? I can’t imagine what she offered him to accept that deal!” The men at the table next to him, merchants from all over Thedas with their varying goods, clapped and laughed as they consumed their ales.

Gaspard is now emperor? The Inquisitor sided with Orlais? So much had happened since the last time he checked for news.

“You think that’s crazy? I just left the capital and the Ferelden army is preparing to march out of the country! I didn’t have enough wares to sell them! War is coming and we all will end up very wealthy men, sirs!” They raised their beers in solute as they spoke joyfully over the how well the misery of their common men could mean to their finances- not unlike the bandits who he slaughtered earlier tonight.

As he absentmindedly downed the rest of his wine, listening to everything around him, he could not fade the image of bright auburn hair from his memory or the smell of Andrastra’s Grace that perfumed her skin. It had been a year since the last time he saw her with his own eyes, standing proudly by the side of the Divine. Her monthly letters slowed since the explosion at the conclave but never was the thought and memories of her diminished in the heart of the elf.
He wished his life could have been different, so he could stand proudly by her side, but it was not. After being hunted the past ten years, someplace to call home was a fallacy men like himself were not afforded. He might not spend his nights in the arms of the woman he’d loved forever, but he helped people and he knew she was proud of the work he did. There was no such thing as balancing the scales, but he spent the last decade using the skills taught to him to gain power for others, to give back power to those who had it taken away- all because eleven years ago an elven Grey Warden with a sword to his neck, stayed the blade and reached out her hand instead.

Her own companions called her insane and told her to kill him, but she defied their wishes and told him everyone deserved another chance. Without question, he followed her every order even as it dragged him into the path of a roaring archdemon that nearly killed him as it crushed his ribcage underneath its cloven foot.

He did not regret any moment after the Warden gave him a new life and for the first time believed not just in what he was trained to do, but who he was. No one was worth more than the innocent- that she proved as she struck the beast a fatal blow then fell helplessly through the air until her body was motionless on the charred ground.

Two days later he awoke from certain death to find his leader gone and her companions and friends shattered as they grasped for some deeper meaning in what they lost. They swore they’d stay together, but within two weeks they scattered separately to the winds, unable to bear one another’s grief. Soon after he traveled through the countryside of Ferelden, his chest still mending from the press of the dragon when he met people in need of help. It started as one person here or there, but over time turned into hunting down the groups of men profiting from the pain and suffering from those his leader died to protect.

For ten years he avoided the world his love lived in under the premise of helping people, but if war was coming to Thedas, maybe it was time for him to pick a side. He would leave in the morning for the girl with beautiful auburn hair and laugh like the soft ringing of a bell. Once he knew what was going on, he could choose a side to fight for. Regardless of side, he knew he could trust her.

One night so many years ago, they swore their hearts and minds to one another no matter what may happen. She would tell him where his efforts would be most easily felt without him having to travel directly into the path of the Crows. In the morning he would check all their drop points for letters, then cross the Frostback’s to the fortress that held back the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Follow me on Tumblr: http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com

Tune on Saturday nights at 9pm PST to see me roleplay Idalya in the Chasing Remnants Dragon Age Stream on Twitch! https://www.twitch.tv/zombolouge
The Chapter Where the Advisers Return

Chapter Summary

Leliana and Josephine return to the Skyhold after spending weeks in Orlais. What awaits them on their return?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A sigh of relief shuddered through her as the wheels of the carriage came to a halt to signal their return to Skyhold. Leliana parted the curtains, peering out into the night to see the torches hung on the entrance gates.

“Josie,” the bard whispered to her friend, her hand massaging the passed-out shoulder of the Ambassador.

The tiniest sigh escaped her lips as she curled closer to Leliana. It was a difficult trip to Orlais. Let the woman sleep before her mountain of work buried her when they reentered the Inquisition’s headquarters.

Reaching out, she rotated the knob of the carriage door, and it opened automatically as one of their soldiers finished opening it for her.

“Lady Nightingale,” he said with a half bow.

“Good evening, can you let Warden Blackwall know we have arrived and to meet the Ambassador here?” The soldier left to bring the Warden to his love.

Leliana was strong for a rogue but carrying a sleeping Josie back to her room was where she drew the line of things she would do without question for the woman. Ensuring guards stationed outside the carriage, she grabbed her bags and after turning down offers for help, made the walk into Skyhold.

It was late. The fortress empty other than soldiers on patrols and a random drunk making their way home from the Herald’s Rest. If she took part in group debauchery, she would have considered joining the companions in the tavern. Her presence made people uneasy, especially Dorian who lived in the tavern, so she kept to her own parts of Skyhold unless summoned elsewhere.

She contemplated heading straight to her ravens to gauge her workload. All duties shifted to Cullen in their absence, and as far as her scouts reported, everything ran smoothly under Cullen’s command. Turning from the path leading to the rotunda, she approached her own quarters. After her time in Val Royeux, she needed time alone from prying eyes.

The trip Josie was so hopeful for was a disaster. Evelyn refused to return to Skyhold and was uncertain they could depend on Orlais for military assistance at Adamant. The whole point of allying with the Emperor was to gain his military experience and army so they could save Thedas and now Gaspard wasn’t sure if he wanted his army to be involved in Inquisition politics? He was a monster.
Evelyn seemed off and Leliana couldn’t decide how. Living in the Winter Palace looked good on the rogue. She wore a dress of the thinnest spun gold that shimmered as the rays of the light drifted over the fabric. Her accents and jewelry all gold as she looked more appropriate for the Emperor’s art collection than for daily business in Orlais. As she talked, Leliana kept her attention from the delicate gold woven slippers the Inquisitor wore accented with pale rubies that matched her flaming hair.

But for all her finery, there was something different in her eyes. A hesitation? No, that wasn’t it. Living in the crosshairs of the Game for months changed the rogue. Since Haven, she’d grown more reserved, but Leliana presumed to live every moment with eyes watching on all sides was wearing down the trained assassin. Anyone could be listening or watching in Orlais. For those not raised to control every minor movement and tell their features had, the Game could chew you up and spit you out before you could learn the ropes. Evelyn knew how to play the role of the noble, but the Free Marches were for amateurs, while Orlais for those who mastered the game, Leliana mused.

Josie pleaded with Evelyn for her leadership. Only she held the ability to stop the deserters leaving in fear that the Inquisitor would never return. Leliana chimed in that rifts were still open all over Orlais and Ferelden that could only be closed with her help. Evelyn stared at her, a faraway look peering out behind her fading eyes until she dismissed it and said she’d discuss the details with Gaspard later.

She sensed Evelyn was about to say something when Josie uttered the statement she should have never said to the Inquisitor: “What are you going to do about Cullen?” And that’s the story of how two of the Inquisition’s advisers were thrown out of the Winter Palace of Orlais by the Emperors armed guard.

The comment wasn’t made to incite the Inquisitor, but Josie was concerned about her friend struggling with the lack of official ending they had. She knew it was the questions in his head driving him insane.

The two went from a visible tandem rarely seen separated inside Skyhold, to not. Evelyn just left with no parting or goodbye, she disappeared without explanation. The answer might have been obvious, but Cullen deserved to hear the answer through the woman’s wine-dripping lips with his own unbelieving ears. Evelyn’s cheeks burned as a flush spread across her face and chest, her eyes blazing as she instructed her guards to remove both women and not to let them return- they would leave that leg of the journey out of their notes.

A week of unsuccessful tries to re-communicate with the Inquisitor later, the two packed their carriage to return with nothing more than the fulfilled promises of a few noble’s houses that pledged their men previously. The royal messenger arrived as they had prepared to leave. She recognized Evelyn’s elegant handwriting and broke the Orlesian royal seal before skimming the words.

Gaspard would consider lending his army to the Inquisition but was still undecided. As far as the rifts, Evelyn would set out from Halamshiral in a few weeks to travel around Thedas closing rifts and other necessary Inquisition business with a royal guard accompanying. She would arrive at Skyhold within the month. It was something, but not enough as they drew closer to Adamant.

Leliana wasn’t certain Evelyn would be in attendance for the battle. How could they hope to take down the Wardens and their demon army without their own leader sending their men in to fight for their lives? She hoped their words cracked sense into the woman’s skull, so she would stop playing house long enough to do her damn job.
Her legs were sore from the carriage jostling the bumpy mountain path to the front gates. Each step up worn stone steps pulled the muscles in her calves tight as she pushed through the stretch down the familiar path to her bed. She needed a moment to relax, a moment to not be the Spymaster and lay down her worries until the sun broke the horizon bringing a new day to start again. The sound of her large metal key in the lock, echoed through the hall as the lock clicked. Pushing the door open, she dropped her travel bags to the side as she closed the door behind her.

As the door clicked shut on ancient hinges, she knew she wasn’t alone. There was no light other than the lightest trace of moonlight that lit the far side of the room. Her thumb slid along the handle of her hidden dagger as she gauged her perpetrator's location. A quiet chuckle floated out of the darkest corner where no natural light connected. Leliana stood straighter with a sigh as she took her palm off the dagger.

“I’m sure you find this hilarious, don’t you?” She said, slipping her heavy hood off and began unbuttoning her jacket.

“Of a sort, I’m just glad working in the Inquisition hasn’t made your reflexes ineffective.” A thick Antivan accent coated the words as the elf stepped into the dim moonlight.

He looked older than the last time she saw him, small lines etched into the skin below his eyes where deep purple circles worked their way down his cheeks. But that lopsided smirk was the same, it was always the same. Without hesitation, she walked into the man’s arms, which wrapped around her waist as they stood and held one another. It had been too long.

“This is what I needed.” She mumbled as she inhaled the smell of fine Antivan leather from his cutlass.

“Mmm… I’m sure I could think of a few more things you’re in need of.” Zevran teased, running his fingers through the hair at the base of her skull as her eyes fluttered closed, soaking in how wonderful it felt to be near him once more.

“Not that I’m not grateful to see you, but what are you doing here? Skyhold’s visible when you’ve spent a decade being hunted by the Crows.”

“I came to see you. Is that not enough?” Lust hung in the man’s words as he dragged his nails over her scalp eliciting a soft moan as she leaned back into his touch.

“But why now,” she mumbled unable to think straight from how glorious his hands felt. Her eyes reopened, and she looked at her long-time lover. “You know about Evelyn.”

“Love, everyone knows about Evelyn.”

Leliana sighed and returned to unbuttoning her jacket with flimsy fingers in her frustration. He was here because he’d know how much of a failure she’d feel like after their own Inquisitor abandoned them for Orlais.

“You should have sent a raven. I have secure channels.” She ground out as she separated the last button from her jacket, sliding it off to hang on the back of her chair.

He walked behind her, his hands caressing the blades of her shoulders and upper body slumped as his expert fingers massaged over her tired muscles.

“I’m well aware.” He mused, “but it doesn’t have the same level of intimacy.”

Maker, she had missed him.
It was late, but hours until the sun would rise over the Frostbacks and she intended to use them to remember every inch of the elf’s body. His thumbs pressed into the base of her neck and she groaned as the pressure released from the length of her spine. His hands moved up working the muscles on the sides of her neck as the world spun from true relaxation and burning lust coursing through her veins at every touch of the man’s velvet skin sliding along hers.

The tips of his fingers reached around her throat to intertwine as her head leaned against his shoulder. She shuddered as his breath grazed over the shell of her ears reaching straight to her burning core. A smile spread across her weary lips. When his lips touched the bottom of her lobe, she closed her eyes in this one moment of needed release.

He slowly inhaled as he pulled against her neck, his lips pressed tighter against her ear. “Why didn’t you tell me the Warden lives?”

Chapter End Notes

Follow me on Tumblr: http:/kmandergirl.tumblr.com

On Saturday nights at 9pm PST, you can find me role-playing Idalya in the Dragon Age: Chasing Remnants stream on Zombologue's Twitch

https://www.twitch.tv/zombolouge
The Chapter Where Leliana is Trapped

Chapter Summary

Zevran knows that Idalya lives. Leliana's next steps could change everything.

Leliana’s eyes opened, understanding the position of vulnerability she was in. He wouldn’t have made the mountain trek just to check on her. Her stupidity had no bounds. “I can explain.”

“Oh yes, you will explain everything while I decide whether I will cut your throat.”

“It's not what you think it is.” She started, but angry laughter caused her heart to seize. Bitterness coating the voice that whispered nothing but the gentlest of words in her ear.

“What is it then, Leliana? I came here concerned about you and what do I find? Idalya Mahariel walking around like the Archdemon fight never happened. I trusted you with every secret of my life and I have been repaid with your deceit and lies.”

The bard pressed her teeth into the flesh of lower lip drawing blood to stop her tears. She would refuse to show weakness, even as her heart broke. He was right. Their promise to the other was never about their bodies, but about their souls. Years ago, as the darkspawn closed in on them with no hope in sight they swore their trust and honesty with joined hands as the rest of the camp dozed one summer night. She broke that vow the minute she changed Dal’s fate.

She couldn’t tell him or anyone else what she planned because they would try to stop her. That was something she couldn’t let happen. She deceived the only man she ever loved for that one more day she cursed the Maker for denying her with her best friend.

When she and Fiona constructed the plan, she understood it would destroy everything of importance in her life, but she took that chance to save Thedas from Corypheus. Dal was still angry but would forgive her. She wouldn’t have hesitated if it meant saving Thedas from facing the legions that would follow the darkspawn magister.

Her eyes darted across the room to find some angle or escape route only to find none. His words drifted to the front of her mind: I was concerned about you. That wasn’t like him. “Why were you concerned about me?” The words sounded short as she rasped them out. “Why did you come here?” She tried to sound as non-accusatory as possible, but in their eleven years together never once had he shown up out of the blue for concern.

“The Nightingale sings a secret song.” The elf ground out between his teeth behind her.

“What? What does that mean?”

“I received information that the Ferelden army is marching West away from Denerim with the King at the helm.”

 Fucking shit. She stiffened at his words in shock, but the elf pulled back increasing the tension on her neck until her vision swam and she stopped struggling.

“I sent a private raven first, so you’d have the information quickly as I made my way towards you,
but in our private communication post, I found a scroll with a fresh Orlesian seal: 'The Nightingale sings a secret song.' What song could that be? I did not know, but for the first time, I feared for your safety.”

Leliana flexed the muscles of her neck to clear necessary breathing room, but the assassin’s trained hands refused to bend to her will. “Where is Ferelden marching to?” The words barely sounded like her voice.

“My contacts had no idea, but if I was a betting man, I would say it has something to do with your Inquisitor and her new alignment.”

* Fucking Evelyn. *

She was over dealing with the fallout from the woman’s decisions. It was one thing to laugh at a poor leader from afar, and something else to clean up the daily amounts of shit they caused. Yet another reason she hadn’t remained behind in Ferelden to assist Alistair after he took the throne. Better to turn her back and ignore his pain than to be responsible for the grieving man’s actions and public downward descent. She was well suited her position as a hand of the Divine and Spymaster but poorly suited to be a friend.

In her obsessive planning, she never prepared a conversation to break the news to Idalya’s companions that the Warden lived and why. When Idalya adamantly said she didn’t want her companions contacted, she breathed a sigh of relief to not see betrayal in the eyes of those who followed the young Warden without question. In their shoes- she wouldn’t understand or condone her actions.

There was a reason Idalya decided to sacrifice herself without their consideration- *because she had to.* The rest of her companions, including herself, could not put duty before their wants and needs. Dal had understood at her early age how much larger their duty to Thedas was than the rest. Alistair signed on to the Grey Wardens for an escape from the Templar, but Dal was destined for something greater- a trait Duncan identified in the ruddy-faced girl in the Alienage.

Arched over the elf’s shoulder, there was no movement to defend herself that wouldn’t end with her throat snapped between the man’s fingers. She willingly walked into the assassin’s trap after making a naïve assumption he wouldn’t know Idalya lived the moment he entered Skyhold. She knew he would be furious that was why she hadn’t planned to tell him until she knew the Warden’s eventual fate. Once he knew the truth of why Leliana brought her back from death, there would be nothing she could do to stop him and Alistair from dragging the kicking and screaming Warden out of Skyhold back to Ferelden for her protection.

She gasped as the elf tightened the tension in her throat. “I’m so sorry.” She whispered as the tears welled up in her eyes.

This was not the way it was supposed to be. Someday she would have finished her work, lay down her burdens, and the two would sail far away from the reach of the Crows to live a quiet life they had both earned- together. That could never happen now. Corypheus forced her hand to betray everything she held dear when he resurrected the Archdemon. She was a pawn in play on his chessboard as she waited for her secret to come to light.

Zevran would never allow that to happen, he would keep Idalya hidden forever, to let her grow old and gain the gray hair and wrinkles that she earned with her sacrifice.

“Idalya Mahariel died facing the Archdemon.” The words burned her chest as she uttered them. Sensing hesitation in his hands, she wretched herself forward and stumbled forward falling to her
hands and knees on the cement floor. She coughed violently, her throat spasming as it opened to pull air deep into her lungs.

“Then who is the elf in Skyhold, Leliana?” Zevran demanded, his boots walking to her side. He knelt so she could see the anger etched into his face. “I saw her. I’ve watched her for three days and she is the Warden.”

She turned her eyes away from the elf as her breathing came under control. She kept her promise made that night so many distant years ago to never lie.

“That is Idalya.” She didn’t need to investigate the man’s face to feel the change come over him. The wave of horror and nausea the reality of Dal’s situation brought to anyone as he retreated until his back pressed against the far side of the room.

A bitter chuckle rang out of the rogue as he leaned back against the wall, his head resting on the cold stones. “Oh, my red-haired beauty, what have you done?”

She remembered the accusing looks of the Inquisitor and advisors the morning after Dal returned— their looks of disgust at what she had done to give them a chance in this war. “I did what had to be done.” She growled through her teeth still staring at the floor.

“I am certain, you did.” The man answered earnestly, and she looked up in surprise, her eyes widened from the unexpected tone of his voice. His hazel eyes watched her with an understanding she didn’t deserve. He walked forward, offering his hand, his other raised to indicate their deadly dance of assassins was over. “Do I even want to ask?” He questioned as she slid her shaking hand into the smooth texture of his to pull herself to her feet. As she stood, she moved away to give the man a respectful distance.

“I’ll give you briefest explanation possible.” She offered as her hands rubbed the muscles in the sides of her neck as he diverted his guilty eyes from his handiwork. “Corypheus’ dragon is the Archdemon Dal slew brought back by the Warden’s and the only way to defeat it is with Dal. Magic brought her back and when the final confrontation happens, she’ll fight the demon once again.”

Zevran ran his fingers over his temples as he dwelled over the words that would have been pure insanity if he hadn’t seen the living breathing Warden with his own two eyes the last week.

“It’s a lot to take in.” She grabbed her amethyst-linen coat, pulling it over her aching arms from the tension gripping her muscles. When the coat was buttoned over the rising marks around her neck, she relaxed. “Would you like to see her?” It was dangerous, but there was something irresistible about bringing him to see his lost Warden.

The elf laughed, a warmer sound as the bitterness in his heart turned to dismay and sadness at the reality of the situation. “I’ve spent all week seeing her, my sneaky friend.” The Spymaster turned towards him, a calculating brow raised at his cheeky grin even in a situation like this.

“Do you wish to speak to her? I give you no promises.”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation in his answer.

Leliana nodded solemnly as she headed to the door. “Her memory is… inconsistent. It’s blocking painful memories and whatever else she associated with them.”

Understanding floated across his features as her meaning became clear. “So, she doesn’t remember the crowned brat then? That complicates things, doesn’t it?”
“Immensely.” The Spymaster answered as she motioned him to follow.

“If he knew...” Zevran shook his head. The multitude of disastrous scenarios that would occur if Alistair discovered his greatest love lived and breathed were breathtaking in their level of destruction. “If he doesn’t know the fate of the Warden, why is the Ferelden army marching west?”

Leliana’s steps were quiet as the two assassins set out down the stone paths around Skyhold. “I do not know,” she admitted. “And that is a frightening thought.”

Their silent footsteps carried them from one side of Skyhold to the other as the views of the mountains passed them on their right. As they made the final turn on the ramparts, her boots slowed as she saw the windows had wood hammered over the frames being replaced.

“Rumor says an irresponsible mage blew your windows out.” Zevran mused as they moved closer and the Spymaster sighed.

“The worst part is that doesn’t even narrow it down enough for me to know which one did it.” Whatever happened, constructions efforts were already underway so at least there was visual evidence that Cullen had been on top of work within Skyhold.

Coming to a plain wooden door nestled within the stones of the fortress where Dal lived, she paused, turning to the elf but unable to hold sight of his hazel eyes for more than a second. “We need to go slowly; I’ll go in first and explain who you are before she sees you.” His face held a look of confusion before he agreed with a nod. She knocked her traditional two short raps in succession Idalya would recognize anywhere before turning the knob and entering.

The Warden was sitting cross-legged on the bed; a large tome open in her lap as her fingers scrawled across the lines. Finishing a paragraph, she looked up with a grin crossing her thick lips.

“And you think I had bad luck before? I’m guessing adding mage to the mix will not improve it.” Dal chuckled as her fingers moved across the long lines of text. Her long hair was up in a high bun on her head and she wore a long sleeping tunic that ended mid-thigh.

It was noticeable how much thinner she was. Wardens were notorious for their unending appetites for food, Dal included, so for her to look visibly thinner concerned her.

“What?” The Spymaster gasped in surprise. “Who thought to teach you magic was a promising idea?”

“Apparently, everyone who doesn’t want me murdered by Templars.” She answered with a hint of bitterness behind her words.

Leliana wasn’t certain what happened while gone since she hadn’t wanted to risk revealing Dal by sending a communication. She would sort it out with Cullen in the morning and discover what happened in their absence.
“Dal, we need to talk.” as Leliana’s tone grew serious, the elf looked up with concern. “There’s someone here to see you.” Idalya peered at the darkened doorway with questions in her eyes before looking back to her friend.

“Please tell me it’s a handsome Templar because I could use one of those about now.” Dal stuck out her tongue in defiance as Leliana rolled her eyes.

When first traveling with the Warden, Leliana had complained that she joked about every matter and took nothing seriously. Now she understood that Dal looked at everything seriously but protected herself with humor. Whenever the laughter stopped, the tears would begin and never end. Before she could speak, a voice behind her interrupted.

“I’m not a Templar, but most would agree I am devilishly handsome.” Zevran leaned in the doorway, a beaming smile on his beautiful face at watching his two favorite women converse again. The Warden turned to him, brows furrowed as her head tilted and her brain searched for the connection hidden beneath the layers of smoke and fog.

Leliana reached out placing a delicate hand on the Warden’s arm. “Dal, look at me.” The elf could not turn away, staring at the man her mind could not recall, but his heavy Antivan accent wrapped around her like a hymn long since forgotten. “Idalya? Are You Listening? Please look at me.” She pleaded to try to get the elf to break her eye contact.

The Warden’s eyes grew into large ovals, the gray overwhelming the pink as they darkened. She stared at the rogue dressed from head to toe in night whose face was losing its jovial expression as the look of concern grew more pronounced on the Warden’s. Swinging her long legs over the side of the bed, Dal pushed Leliana’s hand off her arm as her feet met the cold stones of Skyhold, its magic buzzing through pads of her humming feet.

Zevran took a step forward towards the standing girl who seemed unsure whether to run towards the man in front of her or turn and run the other direction. She looked so confused. It was heartbreaking to watch the confident girl fumble her way clumsily through her emotions as she tried to make sense of the static running through her brain.

The Spymaster shook her head as the Warden took a hesitant step forward towards the unknown rogue. How hard was it to listen? She told him they needed to introduce him slowly, and he walked in without care like the consequences for Dal didn’t matter. Anything that happened now was on him. If something went wrong, she had contingency plans in place- it was her job to keep in Skyhold protected, but risking Dal’s safety was never the optimal solution.

She could see the Warden’s hands shaking as she inched closer to the unknown rogue unable to tear her eyes away from his face. As Dal passed her to move forward towards the stranger, her view was of Zevran’s confused expression until time slowed down around them and his expression turned to one of horror as he reached toward Dal and the Spymaster saw she was falling toward the floor. Down she soared through the air until her body hit the stone floor with a solid thud before Zevran could move to catch her.
Idalya collapsed when seeing Zevran. What will she remember once the dust clears?

Her reaction felt slow, but Leliana was by Idalya’s side before Zevran could reach her. Rolling the Warden to face her, she gasped finding Dal’s lavender eyes rolled back within her skull. Tremors struck her body as her limbs convulsed wildly against the cold stone as both rogues restrained her to keep the elf from harming herself.

“Dal!” She screamed as the incredibly strong Warden flailed on the ground, a choked groan escaping her throat.

Tears streamed down Leliana’s face as she kept her friend confined for her safety. Zevran yelled, but she couldn’t focus as the Warden elbowed her deep in the side. She refused to let go of her friend as she flinched from the exploding pain in her ribs.

She had done this to her, she would refuse to leave her side until she knew she was safe. No girl the size of Dal should have power this strong. She was unsure how the Warden lifted a glass in the tavern without shattering it within her palm. They had dueled together in training, but she’d never faced a true Warden’s strength untethered. The horrifying reality of Adamant becoming clear. Two trained assassins were using all their might just to keep her from hurting herself and doing a poor job.

Idalya’s back arched as a full choking noise escaped her spasming throat. Her body slammed back against the stone and she was still, her chest heaving with mighty breaths as her lungs expanded pulling vital air within. Her lids closed like drifting away from the end of a nightmare. Leliana reached up with trembling fingers after the blow she took to her ribs to brush the loose pieces of Dal’s hair bun from her sweaty forehead as the Spymaster sat back on her heels, her head hanging low after the pain of watching her friend convulse.

When her tears dried, she looked at Zevran. She should have been angry with the elf, but when she saw the panic and pain etched on his face, she could only empathize with his plight. Understand what it was like to cause the Warden pain, how it ripped at your soul until you weren’t certain there was anything left that could hurt you more than watching her writhe in pain. Dal’s breath steadied, and she rested on the ground, her hand clutching Leliana’s within her now limp fingers.

“Is she… is…” Zevran’s eyes were full of fear as he scanned over the Warden’s now relaxed features.

“I think so. This is worse than I’ve ever seen, but the memories are painful when they return.” Her fingers traced lightly over the hair at the Dal’s scalp as the girl leaned into the sensation with a slight lift at the corner of her lips as she snuggled against her friend’s hand.

“This happens every time she remembers something?”

Leliana nodded solemnly. “More or less. I told you we needed to go slow.”
She couldn’t look at him, unsure what memories his face brought back to Idalya. Someday at some point, something she encountered would trigger her memories of Alistair and Leliana feared for what would happen to the Warden when the emotions tied with the King of Ferelden came pouring back into her fragile mind. All she could picture watching her sleep against her hand was the screaming corpse on the table, the cries of fear echoing underneath Skyhold, her silent prayers to the Maker that she had not made a mistake.

“I’m sorry… for everything.” Zevran whispered beside her.

They had too much history together to rehash what happened. She wasn’t sure there was an “us” after this. She didn’t blame him for his anger and trapping her the way he did. It was the only way he could gain an advantage and he took it the way she would have. Whether he thought she lied to him all this time was another subject.

“I never wanted to cause this.”

“I know.” It was a simple response, but he needed for her to understand hurting Idalya was the last thing he wanted. Her fingers reached further to slide gently against the Warden’s damp forehead.

“Dal, wake up.”

The elf’s lips pushed together before her lashes fluttered until she eyes opened to the light of the room. She groaned, moving her shoulders and aching back from the hard stones poking into her overwhelmed skin. Her eyes were bright and glowing pink as she focused on Leliana like coming out of the hangover of a lifetime. Leliana gripped her hand tight around Dal’s, as she pulled the Warden to a sitting position. Her head down-turned as she stretched the muscles of her neck refusing to release their tension.

“Are you okay?” Leliana pushed her friend’s messy hair over her shoulders as she soothed the loose strays on top.

Dal released a deep sigh as she shrugged, a motion that moved all her stiff upper body at once causing her to flinch. Her head pulled up as her eyes focused as she turned from Leliana to look at Zevran, still kneeling at her side. The silence tense as she waited for the Warden to respond.

Dal dove forward, wrapping her arms around Zevran as the elf closed his eyes, his arms wrapped around her torso. Her sobs were heavy as they broke free, tears flowing into the black woolen cloak the rogue now wore.

His eyes opened with tears brimming for the first time Leliana had ever seen. She was uncertain the elf could cry. Due to the trauma he suffered at the hands of the Archdemon, he had suffered from severe pain through all the preparations for Dal’s burial and never once had a tear fallen from his eyes. Now holding the hero he thought lost to the winds of time, emotion flowed over for the elf as he clung together tightly to the girl who inspired him to help so many over the decade she lay at rest.

“Shhh.” He whispered softly to the top of the girl’s head. “No more crying. You know I can’t handle beautiful women crying over me.” Dal snorted, an ugly sound mid-cry, as her laughter broke through her overwhelming emotions.

“I have missed you, my friend.” She spoke into the folds of his cloak taking the brunt of her sloppy tears.

“As I have missed you.” He spoke to her hair as his eyes met Leliana’s.
The emotion pouring out through his hazel windows was too much for her, but she had remembered the complicated ball of feeling bringing Dal back into this world gave her daily. Grief tied up with joy was complicated in so many varied ways. She wasn’t sure what route theirs would take them, but it was their journey to walk together.

The silent and overwhelmed rogue moved one hand up over the shoulders of the Warden to hold her tighter to his chest as he rested his cheek on top her head, his eyes closed as he released the sigh he hadn’t realized he’d held for the last decade. His other hand reached out to the other rogue who diverted her eyes from their intimate reunion. His warm fingers intertwined with hers as her own surge of emotion became too much and he pulled her forward until she curled up against the calming Warden’s back and Zevran’s arm wrapped around both women whom his second chance at life revolved around.

The Spymaster lost track of time as the three laid together, their breaths entering and exiting their bodies in unison as the rogues transferred their strength and energy into the struggling Warden’s veins as she received the physical contact she hadn’t realized she craved since her return. Leliana stirred from her near sleep as the Warden shifted awkwardly below her.

“Eh... Lel, I love you, but you’re killing my back.” The Warden squeaked out as Leliana chuckled, sitting up and rubbing circulation back into her cheek that lost feeling pressed against the cool back of the girl. Zevran helped Dal sit up straight as she rubbed her thin hands over her red and swollen face where the paths of tears carved their way out of her eyes.

“No more crying, okay? I dislike when my girls cry. No more of that.” The Warden nodded as she stretched her shoulder muscles out, the joints popping as they released their tension. “Tell me about your life. I want to hear everything.” He urged as she shrugged.

“It’s not much.” She answered, but he pushed her arm in humor.

“But it’s yours and that I care about.” He grinned at the Warden, who mirrored the smile. She dove into an explanation of her recruits and their training and talked shop with the rogue as she gained his advice on teaching skills to help keep their soldiers alive in the coming battle.

Zevran asked her thoughtful questions about their training programs that helped Dal find some holes she knew existed but could not spot with her own eyes. She explained the few friends she made in her months within the fortress that transformed from her cage to her home.

The rogue hooked a thin finger under her chin as he turned her face to towards his. “And anyone special in the life of my Warden?”

“Well… I…” A deep flush spread over her cheeks as Zevran lifted a corner of lips in a lopsided smirk.

“That’s what I thought. Who is the Lady or Gentleman, so I can I threaten them at knifepoint?”

“Zev!” Dal laughed as she pushed the elf hard in the chest, his own laughter echoing in the stone room. “No need.” She pressed her lips together as she thought quietly. “He’s a good man- kind, considerate, and always looks out for my safety even when it threatens his own.”

A conflicted expression passed over Zevran’s face watching her speak about the person inspiring affection in her heart. He looked deep into the swirling colors of her eyes before he decided, and his hesitancy melted away.

“Good, you only deserve only the best and someone who will give you nothing but joy.” His hand
pressed affectionately against her cheek as he finished the statement, finding the happiness he had forgotten he could own in watching the Warden find contentment. “Now, I will need all the details. Tell me everything about this fine gentleman. How far has it progressed?” He wiggled his brows at the girl who laughed as she fell into his chest again her arms wrapped around his back as she listened to the pounding of the rogue’s heart.

“Not far, sadly. We both doubt ourselves. Once, we almost kissed but were interrupted. The plan is to pick up where we left off next time we see each other.”

Leliana gasped behind the Warden in disbelief. “How did I not know this? When did that happen?” She questioned the Warden with narrowed eyes at being left out of happy gossip.

“Recently.” She hummed from against the rogue’s chest. “He sent me a letter saying not kissing me was the biggest mistake of his life and that he’d fix that once he returned to Skyhold.” A giggle of pure elation escaped the Warden as she burrowed her face back into Zevran’s woolen cloak.

“Well, looks like I need to find reasons for the Templar to return to Skyhold quickly then.” Leliana retorted as she leaned back against the edge of Dal’s bed. This reunion was wonderful, but they should have moved it to something better padded better than a stone floor.

“A Templar?” Zevran exclaimed. “Dal, I’ll never understand your preoccupation with Templars.” The Spymaster’s eyes widened as Dal turned her head up in confusion towards the rogue.

“What are you talking about?” Idalya asked, her eyes squinting in curiosity.

Leliana held her breath as she prayed silently to the Maker and anything else listening for Zevran to navigate his way around this near disaster. Without pause, the former Crow responded.

“I remember how you used to eye the Templar as we traveled from Chantry to Chantry for supplies, don’t play dumb with me.” Dal cringed as she buried her face back into his cloak as Zevran’s relieved eyes met the Spymaster’s understanding how delicate the balancing act Leliana played for months was.

From the distance, a bird cawed to greet the coming morning. Zevran bowed his head, placing a chaste kiss on the top of the yawning Warden’s dismayed hair. “The morning comes to Skyhold, my pet, and I’m sorry, but I must take my leave soon as my work will not wait and you need your rest.”

An exhausted Dal nodded against his chest as he pushed his arms below the girl and scooped her up before standing up with a forced grunt from her unexpected weight. Curled within his arms, Leliana turned and drew back the covers, as Zevran placed her gently on the bed and they pulled the blankets over her together, like parents tucking their child in after a long day of excitement.

“I’m sorry for any discomfort I may have caused, but this meant so much to see you.” His hands petted over her mess of hair that Leliana would have to fix later in the day since Dal was too stubborn to allow the servants to cause pain to her scalp.

“I’ve missed you too.” She sighed as her lashes fluttered, eyes growing heavy. “Thank you for reminding me that my life is my own. It might not feel so impressive, but my friends and my mission give me focus and that’s enough to be content.”

He nodded as emotions threatened growing thick in this throat again.

“Good night dear Warden, until we meet again.” A relaxed smile stretched across the elf’s lips as
she snuggled deeper into the pile of pillows she slept among. The two rogues stood frozen over their sleeping leader as words were too difficult to summon on their lips.

Leliana moved first, her boots quieter than normal to not bother the Warden’s sensitive ears. After they left the room, shutting the door behind him, she placed a finger over her mouth indicating silence until she could be sure they were out of the range of Dal’s hearing. He followed her without speaking as they made the way back to her room. He entered without a word at the Spymaster’s motion as she followed behind him into the room where the candles long since burnt down covering the traces of their previous altercation.

Before her eyes adjusted to the lack of light, the rogue’s hands were sliding along the curves of her hips as he pressed his lips against hers. He led her backward until her shoulders pressed against the door, his skilled tongue working his way past her dry and worn lips from her travels. He pulled a moan from her throat as she wrapped her now trembling arms around his neck pulling him tighter against every curve of her body. A gasp echoed through her mouth as she rolled her hips sharply against the erection straining his breeches as she grinned against his mouth.

He leaned back gasping for breath as he rested his forehead against hers. “You’re right.” The words confused her. “I couldn’t see her then let her die again.” He shook his head as the words stung him, his burning hand leaving her hip to reach behind him. “She has to complete her mission and I can’t let her. I understand now why you didn’t tell me.” He pressed something cold and solid into her hand. “Make it quick.” He mumbled against her lips.

Leliana glanced down at the ornate Orlesian dagger held within her grip. “NO!” She dropped the dagger to the floor as she pushed him away, her heart throbbing in her throat where his fingers pressed the life out of her body hours prior. “Not now, never, Zev.”

He reached down to pick the dagger up to place it back in her shaking hands. “You must protect her at all costs. I will save her even if it means death to the rest of Thedas. You must not hesitate in completing her mission.” He lifted the blade within her hand as he placed it against the side of his neck. “Apply the pressure then stay with me until it’s over. My life for hers is a trade I will happily make to save the world again.”

Leliana pulled the blade away, tossing it across the room where it clattered loudly against the wall, falling to the floor. “Never.” She snarled at him, refusing to have this conversation. She hoped seeing her would sway the rogue from the path she knew he would follow, but it wasn’t enough. She walked forward the two steps necessary so that her hands were on the cheeks of the assassin as she marveled at the beauty of his dismayed hazel eyes.

“There is another way.” There. She had done it. Moved her feet to the path she swore she’d never walk again. This was for Dal and her safety, but she refused to allow that mission to include the blood of the only man she’d loved in her life. “I will always love you with all my heart.” She whispered as the tears swelled uncontrollably.

“As will I,” Zevran whispered back unsure what the Spymaster had hidden up her sleeves, but he knew he trusted the auburn-haired beauty until the end of time and that she would not lead him astray needlessly.

*Please help me, I need your help.*

The words echoed so deeply in her soul it deafened her. She felt the room shift. Undetectable to those not trained to expect it as the air was displaced in a corner of the room as someone appeared behind them. *I’m so sorry, Dal,* was her thought as she played over all the scenarios she should have prepared before the secret of Dal’s existence leaked out among the people she loved. She
would have prayed to the Maker if she thought they would have bothered listening to her.

As the boy stepped forwards towards them she thought the Maker had a cruel sense of irony.
Chapter Summary

Idalya's secret is safe for now, but how will Leliana live with the consequences of what it required?

Chapter Notes

Sorry, this update took so long, I've been having a ton of trouble getting Ao3 to work. Hopefully, this will post and I'll have the next up soon!

The early rays of light broke over the peaks of the mountains, blanketing the fortress with the promise of protective warmth from the frigid winter night. Leliana sat in her creaky chair, head resting on the wall as her ginger hair dangled against the stone. Her fingers glided along the goose-pimpled flesh of her neck that still throbbed from the rising purple spheres of Zevran’s fingers.

The boy sat on the floor, his legs crossed underneath him as he spun a single immaculate Andraste’s Grace within his pale fingers. It was a gift. A gift Zevran brought her from Ferelden, a symbol of her significance to the mysterious rogue. A simple smile of joy peeked out below the wide-brimmed hat the boy wore to cover his stark features.

When it was done, she fell into her chair, legs wobbling, unable to remain standing while her heart left to his next mission without a concern on her behalf. She could ask the boy to leave. All she would have to do is imagine the words and he would leave her sight. There was a strange comfort in having someone around who knew all her secrets. A fact the boy knew.

“Have you enjoyed the honey?” He asked in his wavering tone. His fingertips ran along the edges of the flower as though it were precious. Each petal a miniature world he observed through the lenses of narrowed eyes as he watched the rising day change the burning orange center of the tiny universe he held in his hands.

“Mmm?” She wasn’t listening. Her mind unable to conger any clear thought after what just occurred. A day ago, she looked forward to resuming her work within the headquarters of the Inquisition. They would expect her at the War Table within the hour at the top of her form, yet an emptiness filled her heart where her hope used to reside.

“The honey. I sweeten your wine to remind you of home and of safer times.”

Her eyes traveled lazily down to the boy who replied innocently. A broken smile graced her lips despite the aching loneliness screaming inside. Her plan worked- no one died, but this alternative left her feeling worse than she expected as the thought come into being in her mind and the boy had appeared.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” The boy smiled wider as he moved his attention to another petal of the flower.
“So many layers protecting the center, so much decoration outside to distract from what’s contained inside.” He lifted the flower in front of his nose as he squinted to view it closer.

“Yes, I suppose that’s one way to describe flowers.” She told him with a sigh. Her body begged for rest it would not receive as she and Josie would be expected to fill the Commander in on the details of their trip. She’d have to report on the resources they could secure and their arrangement with Evelyn, which she was certain Cullen would lose his mind over.

“No, people. People are hidden, hiding so much away. Like fragile flowers, here so briefly before they flail and flutter away. Hearts held secure within their chests yet damaged hastily.”

A fist of emotions lodged in her throat as the tears that hadn’t fallen since he’d left threatened to awaken anew. “That’s the nature of people.”

She sat up in her chair, rolling her shoulders as she begged life to reach back through her limbs and give her the energy to get up and pretend to do her job. Later, she’d come back to her room in the middle of the night and collapse in despair and guilt that pulled and plucked at her like petals being yanked from a flower.

“I can help.” She paused, her eyes focused ahead, unable to meet eyes of the well-meaning boy. “Take the pain away, quiet the voices screaming, screeching, clawing away inside your heart.”

“No.” She picked up her amethyst jacket, sliding her arms into the cold and stiff fabric as she resumed the uniform and position of Spymaster. She might be in pain, struggling with her own decisions, but that was not for her to place on the shoulders of those who followed her, unlike other leaders in the Inquisition.

“Why?” He asked, brow furrowed in confusion. “Why is it okay for the others, but not for you? I don’t understand.” The boy’s eyes glazed over as he looked out in the distance at the rising sun on the horizon. “Blackened skin prowling the streets for prey. Women and children scream as their blood fills the streets. Who will help them? Is there a Maker? Who will protect them if he won’t? You were scared, still scared. Every night in your dreams you watch them slaughter the innocent. Why must you keep these thoughts? They only hurt you.”

“Because ignorance is bliss.” She threw her hood over her head blocking the growing light over the distant peaks clawing her eyes and the headache pushing from the opposite direction. “That is not a fate I deserve.” Daylight would bring a unique set of challenges as she prepared to deliver the news of Evelyn’s arrangement to the Commander. “Plus,” she added, trying to convince herself not to take the strange boy’s offer. “If no one remembers, what stops us from repeating the same mistakes?”

The boy’s head tilted to the side, his overly large and decrepit hat covering his pale sapphire eyes from her view. “You sound like Solas, he can’t forgive himself either.”

Leliana turned to the boy to inquire further, then decided against the decision at the moment where she was against the thought of holding everyone’s secrets. Her head held secrets to last a lifetime. She alone held secrets of every member of the Inquisition she could hold over their heads when the opportunity arose. The mage had only shown Idalya, and those who fought for her safety anything but the purest form of kindness and for that, this one time, he’d get a reprieve from her suspicious nature.

“Where did he go?” She crossed the frame out the door as the question passed her lips. It was better not to know, but she couldn’t resist.
“Back to Ferelden. He will investigate the contacts you considered giving him. You were right— he would make a good Jenny.” The boy’s attention was back on twirling the one perfect flower far from its home within his feeble-looking fingers.

“Thank you.” She meant it.

Zevran spent ten years looking for redemption he would never find, but he could put his skills to work and help more people than he ever imagined. She always thought he would make an impressive addition to Sera’s arsenal, and she was glad her suggestion might give him a lingering sense of peace he could not find within Skyhold.

She had doddled enough. With a final nod to the boy she exited, the door shutting like walls of a jail slamming in place behind her. Her job wasn’t to be concerned about other’s feelings, but she couldn’t help feeling pity for the Commander and his poor choices in who he loved. His reaction to Evelyn’s plan would be clouded by his out-of-control emotions concerning the Inquisitor, regardless of how well he would try to receive the news.

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“This is ridiculous!” Cullen screamed across the war table.

Josephine stood silently to the side, writing tablet pushed in front of her face making a barrier between herself and the man’s ire. Leliana knew since departing Orlais how this meeting would go. Their entire motivation was to secure allies for the coming battle and to return with the Inquisitor. They returned with only the pledge of a few noble’s houses while the rest remained uncommitted if the Inquisitor was not indicating that she was taking part in the battle.

“She is our leader, and she should be here leading!” He swiped the tokens off his corner of the table as Leliana stood frozen, letting the man have his tantrum. After running the entire Inquisition for weeks alone, they allowed him; neither woman stopped him from the outburst bordering on childish.

The Commander’s under eye circles lessened since the last time she saw him, but Cullen had slimmed down during their absence as the toll of the lyrium withdrawals inflicted on him became obvious. She noted his leather straps buckled down as far as they could, yet a loose fit to his armor remained. Analyzing him, she would remind Josie that they would need to ensure the Commander was eating before they set out to the Western Approach.

“Don’t you have anything to say?” Cullen snarled as she raised a defiant brow towards the angry man.

“We went to Orlais to convince Evelyn to return to her duties. Next week, she sets out to close rifts through Thedas. It’s not optimal, but it’s what we could agree on. When she’s here, we can try to renegotiate terms of our arrangement.” Cullen’s face fell as he registered her words.

“She’s coming here?” He questioned, some mixture of complicated emotions rolled up behind his eyes she didn’t have the time to unravel. Unfortunately, in her position, rolling her eyes in front of the hysterical man wouldn’t work either.

“Yes, if you would have let me talk before you screamed you would have heard she’s called the Templars back to the Inquisition.”
Cullen’s hand swung to pinch the bridge of his nose between his forefingers as he processed her information. His behavior suggested hostility to the uninitiated, but the Spymaster knew it was his method of coming to terms with what was happening.

“That will at least be helpful.” He croaked out and Leliana stifled a giggle that threatened to breach from her throat.

Helpful was the farthest word from how she would explain Evelyn, but yes, at this one moment when she was expected to do her job, she had done absolutely anything. With how little they had seen her for months, the starving Inquisition would celebrate in elation as the Inquisitor returned with her Orlesian escorts in tow.

“On the Inquisitor’s coming visit, we must make repairs on Skyhold to make sure it’s acceptable to our guests,” Josephine added, revealing herself from her hiding spot from flying map markers she had found in the corner of the room.

“She’s not visiting, she lives here.” Cullen ground between his teeth as Leliana turned to look at the man with empathy for his struggles.

Evelyn may have had kicked them out of the Winter Palace, but maybe Josephine’s words swayed her mind and she would speak candidly to the man on her return. The fact he argued Evelyn’s residence meant he wasn’t ready to accept things were over. Months went by with no direct communication and yet he still held out hope.

If it wasn’t so pathetic, she’d be moved by his dedication.

But it was pathetic, and they had work to do.

“I agree with Josephine. We should expect the Inquisitor within three weeks and need to prepare to accommodate her and her guests.” She would plan over the stubborn man if needed. “If there’s no other news, I need to see my scouts.”

Josephine packed up her piles of parchment and she carted them out into the hall towards her desk. Cullen hunched over grabbing the thrown map markers off the floor at an awkward angle.

“Cullen?” She waited as the man stood up to his full height with a groan from years of taking blows to the back. “What happened to the windows?” She asked and watched the man deflate, a blush spreading across his cheeks.

Her finding the broken windows only occurred because she had been moving within the fortress in the long hours of the night. She assumed that Josephine had spent her night occupied after Warden Blackwall fetched his sleeping beauty.

Cullen shrugged as a frail hand ran through the disheveled curls resting on top of his head. “Dal.” He admitted and Leliana’s heart sunk into her shaking feet as he confirmed her worst fears.

“This is why teaching her magic is dangerous, Cullen!” She cried out, surprised at her own loss of control. Her behavior no better than Cullen’s she judged harshly just minutes ago.

“No! Dal is being taught magic because she blew the windows out. She’s scared and needs help. Rylen and Solas came with a plan- a course of action. I approved it because I thought it’s what you would want for her!”

Leliana grabbed the edges of the table, her face pointed down towards the map, her eyes lingering over Denerim. “Oh, Dal.” She whispered to the two-dimensional locations. “She will get herself
killed.”

Cullen walked to her side, he refrained from reaching out to comfort his cold associate.

“That’s what they’re trying to prevent by teaching her control. She’s making satisfactory progress, give her time.” He added as she held herself from rolling her eyes in annoyance at what he didn’t understand.

“That’s what I’m afraid of, she doesn’t have the time needed to gain control before it’s too late.” She pulled the sides of her jacket closer around her as she stormed out the doors of the War Room, "I must be going."

The doors echoed through the hollow hallway as she passed the Ambassador’s desk, ignoring Josie’s call for her attention. Work was what she needed; to sit at her desk and bury herself in the network of secrets that was her home.

There was too much running through her head to clear from her memory as she made the turn to climb the stairs of the rotunda towards where her raven’s called home. She kept her face hidden within her heavy hood as she passed Solas’ workspace and Dorian’s prying eyes from the next floor. She found her desk blissfully full of missives and parchment requiring her unending attention.

Someday she would hit a point where there was nothing else to distract her, and she’d be forced to confront the screaming voices in the back in her mind.
The Chapter Where Bull Asks a Question

Chapter Summary

Bull’s interrogation of Dal’s habits is interrupted by an unexpected visitor to Skyhold.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Using the tines of her fork, Idalya pushed the hefty chunks of meat in her stew, watching them disappear under the lake of brown gravy they swam in. Her brain journeyed thousands of miles away from the main hall of the rock fortress to the dirt paths leading back to Skyhold. After Zevran’s visit last week, she had awoken and ran straight for her desk where she sent out an identical message to each of the stopping points for Inquisition travelers on the way to Skyhold.

Each one read:

Knight-Captain Barris-

Your plan on returning is to kiss me? Finally, an Inquisition plan I approve of!

-Idalya Mahariel

As the daylight broke over the mountains, she snuck to where Leliana housed her ravens, sending the birds away to their trained destinations. Her body filled with anxiety as she watched the birds take flight to the sky and grow smaller along the horizon. Now was the waiting game. Thankfully, her days were long training their soldiers to fight Wardens and helping Cullen and Rylen work the strategy for the siege at Adamant.

When time allowed, she slipped out the side gates with Solas and Rylen in tow to develop her magic. So far that amounted to her burning searing blisters across the palms of her hands as her spells would sizzle out when she projected them. From training, she would head to meditation in the rotunda which Solas adamantly claimed was useful in learning to channel her mana.

During the night he would train her in the Fade. She’d gained skills quicker than Solas expected and could now progress from one memory into another effortlessly, even if still unable to breach the missing parts of her own mind. On the plus side, she had no instances of uncontrollable magic since they started that form of training, on the not so plus side, she was exhausted.

Food was the last item on her list of priorities. Since Leliana and Josephine returned, each meal she and Cullen were dragged to the main hall and watched until they consumed the food laid before them. Her lavender eyes poked up to find Cullen sitting in a similar stance to her own, staring into his stew like it was a fount of answers to whatever questions his mind mumbled to it.

She heard Leliana’s subtle slippered footsteps in the distance before she saw the rogue reach the table, a shiny red apple clutched within her elegant fingers as she straddled the bench at the head of the table. Dal flinched at the loud crunch of the apple between the Spymaster’s teeth as the rogue took one massive bite after another. They had little time to spend together after Leliana’s return to Skyhold, but what little time they had was spent with the woman policing Dal to make sure she was
taking care of herself. Every meal she felt the woman’s eyes boring through her to ensure she was getting enough to eat. The two sat in silence respectfully at the table, eating their meals.

There was a commotion in the distance and Sera burst through a side door skidding through the hall past their table, freshly baked loaves of bread tucked under her arms stolen from the kitchens.

“Hey, fire-hair!” She blurted out, seeing the Spymaster in a moment of relaxation. Dal couldn’t help but chuckle at Sera’s ridiculous actions. “Thanks for the recruit! The Ferelden Vigilante? I’m a huge fan of his work! The South Reach Massacre?” She blew a kiss of appreciation into the air. “Now that was a thing of beauty.”

Leliana raised an eyebrow at the unprofessional elf shouting in front of a hall full of Inquisition members and guests. A barking laugh erupted out of Sera before she sped off as the Inquisition’s Baker turned into the hall, an angry flush spread across her abundant cheeks.

“What was that?” Dal mumbled as they watched the archer duck into a far hallway of the hall.

“Zev,” Leliana answered, a matter of fact. “He’s joined up with the Jenny’s until this Corypheus business is sorted out. Eat.” She emphasized when the elf’s fork stopped moving.

Dal rolled her eyes, plucking a piece of dark meat and placed it between her teeth to gnaw away at the unappetizing food.

“I have to check in with Harding, I’ll see you at dinner.” The rogue announced as she rose from the bench, a devious twinkle in her eyes at her persistence.

Dal noted her eyes drifted to Cullen whose food remained untouched, her expression unreadable as she processed the man’s pain.

A pair of heavy footsteps approached from the side as Leliana exited, the benched seating groaning as a massive weight was cast upon it. Bull sat across the table from her, a lopsided smile on his lips.

“How’s it going, Hero?” The Qunari said casually as he studied her for some quality over her head.

“Fine, but I’m tired of being babied.” She grumbled, and a gruff laugh came from the man’s throat.

“I have the best idea ever.” Bull started, which garnered a raised eyebrow as she prepared herself for whatever offensive thing he would utter. “When the Inquisitor gets here, we’re heading out to meet some of my Qunari contacts, come with me and the Chargers. It’ll be a blast, you’d fit in well with the crew.”

The thought of traveling with Evelyn for weeks made her brain ache. She couldn’t leave Skyhold soon, the traveling Templar were nearing home, and she had a date set with an ebony-skinned god with the softest set of lips she’d ever seen on a man.

“I… I’m not sure that's a great idea. If people discovered who I am, it could cause a lot of problems. I have men in need of training. I couldn’t walk away… from them.” She hoped Bull couldn’t see right through her flimsy excuses to stay behind and see Barris. There was wisdom in giving their soldiers all the time they could to train since few grasped the concept of not sticking themselves with the pointy end of their swords.

“Come on, Dal. You, me, Sera, Blackwall… Think of the mayhem!” Bull refused to take no for an answer, but he underestimated her stubbornness when she had little interest in something.
“Wait… that’s the team Evelyn is taking out with her Orlesian escorts? I thought this was supposed to be a classy endeavor?”

Bull laughed as he stared longingly at the remaining part of her stew she'd pushed around with a fork until it was as chilled as the biting air outside.

“Yeah, this is Evelyn, if Gaspard’s got his eyes glued to her she’ll find some way to rebel against it. What better distraction can you get from armed guards than our shenanigans?” The Qunari shrugged, a massive lift and drop of his hefty shoulders. His lips upturned in a devious grin as Dal pushed the remainder of her bowl towards him, Cullen’s judging eyes piercing her side.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, but it’s sort of brilliant,” She laughed at the thought of Sera stealing breeches from frustrated Orlesian soldiers. Some days, she was such a Fereldener, it was painful. “I hate to say the words: ‘I agree with Leliana’, but she’s right; I need to stay within Skyhold to minimize visibility.”

Bull looked disappointed as her inevitable answer came tumbling out, but he could tell she was serious about keeping her soldiers safe.

“Hey Cullen, you going to finish that?” The Commander looked up startled at the man’s words, before sliding his untouched food to the side with a roll of his hazel eyes. The Qunari pounced on the meal with a satisfied moan through his lips.

“Do you ever stop eating?” Dal asked, watching the large man consume everything within his vicinity unspoken for. Bull chuckled, the sound bouncing around in his cage of a chest.

“Now that is a comment I never expected to hear from a Grey Warden. Rumors are you lot chase off Darkspawn by eating all viable food sources before they can enter an area.” The bowl of stew lifted in the air as Bull drank it down, giving up on the speed of utensils

Dal's cheeks burned as her eyes narrowed. Well, yes… Wardens were known for their appetites, but joking about Darkspawn in casual conversation was never appropriate. She wondered if the Qunari had seen Darkspawn in his travels; if he knew what it felt like to be in their presence as they tainted everything they touched with vile corruption.

“Hey Hero, I didn’t mean to upset you. You okay?” When she looked up, Bull watched her, concern clear as his spy skills allowed him to peer into her brain as she fought the monsters buried in the back of her mind.

“I’m okay,” she lied, hoping he wouldn’t call her on her bluff as she brushed off his concern. Bull’s expression showed he didn’t believe her but would respect her wishes for the time. She should leave since her required meal time had ended.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” Bull spoke again, his voice gentle as he observed her. “You know, I’m rather talented at giving people what they need, right?”

Idalya nearly knocked herself off the bench with the eye roll that ensued as she laughed at the beast of a man in front of her. “Yeah, I’ve overheard quite a few rundowns from the staff at Skyhold.” She joked as she stretched her shoulders.

“I’m serious,” Bull said, agitation showing in the deep lines of his face. “Whatever you need, as your friend, I’m here to offer it. Don’t give that look, Dal.” She’d rolled her eyes again. “Not everyone’s need is sex. Sometimes people need to speak the truth and have someone to listen without judgment. You definitely need sex, but that’s not everyone.”
A combination of a cough and gasp screeched out of her throat at his words. “Excuse me? How could you possibly know if that is what I need?” She whispered with venom coating her words. “I’m missing memories. I was dead for ten years. Most of the people I knew are dead. Yet, you think a good tumble in the hay is what I’m lacking?”

Now, she was pissed.

“Without a doubt.” The Qunari uttered as she glared across the table. “How often are you taking care of yourself?”

Just when she thought her mortification couldn’t get worse…

“That is none of your business!” She whispered back across the lopsided wooden table.

“It’s a simple question, Dal. Weekly? Nightly? However much it is, it’s not enough.”

A furious blush rose over Idalya’s cheeks as Bull continued to poke at this question she wanted no part of.

“Oh no,” the words passed quietly over Bull’s gray-skinned lips as he watched her reaction. “This is worse than I feared. No wonder you’re so tense you’re about to explode, Hero. You work 24/7 and never relax, that’s good for no one who lives the life we do. If you have nothing to fight for, you’ll be too tired to fight anything. Talk to Rylen or one of the other eligible members of the Inquisition.” He tilted his head towards where Cullen was now staring longingly out the front doors of the hall, counting down the minutes until he could return to work.

So maybe he was right. So, what? There were tons of people lacking in that category and they functioned just fine.

The thought of Mother Giselle popped into her head and her vile mood soured further. Not that she wasn’t interested in self-gratification, but she was busy. Her dreams were monitored by a suspicious elf who would know immediately if she’d been up to personal shenanigans before entering the Fade. You try to knock one out with Solas in your damn dreams!

Pulling back from the bench, she rose to her feet with a frustrated sound, a groan nearly overtaking it at balancing her weight on the sore arches of her feet from non-stop training. Cries of urgency rang in the far distance, just at the edge of her hearing. Bull turned to face the same direction. Looking at one another, they moved in unison as Bull tapped the Commander to follow with them. The three warriors hurried together as they cleared the main doors of the hall to exit to the courtyard where they saw a commotion at the entrance gates to Skyhold.

“Maker,” Cullen mumbled as he took off down the stairs at a run, his sword out at his side.

Bull squinted into the distance and his face paled as he realized what was causing the disturbance at the gate. “Dal,” his tone was level and serious. “I need to head down there, keep out of sight until it’s safe.”

He left no room to argue as he followed behind Cullen taking two massive stone steps at a time. What was going on? She couldn’t see far in the distance and was oblivious to what was happening until she heard a soldier running below her and the words ‘The Qunari are here.’ She knew Bull’s contacts the Inquisitor would meet were barred from Skyhold by Cullen’s orders. You can take the man out of Kirkwall…

She followed down the stone stairway until standing in the back of the gathered crowd of soldiers, their weapons drawn, as she watched Cullen trying to speak with the two lines of Qunari soldiers,
their faces and arms painted in matching crimson paint in ornate designs.

Bull made his way through the crowd and reached the Commander’s side as she watched him engage in conversation. She inched through the crowd until she heard some conversation happening. Bull was speaking in Qunlat to the group as Cullen stood beside him aggravated that Qunari soldiers would show up to their home who didn’t speak or understand the Common tongue.

The Iron Bull turned his head towards the Commander and mouthed something at which Cullen shook his head no. Bull continued to mouth silent words towards the ex-Templar as Cullen continued silently yelling back. This continued for multiple passes until the Commander reached up a hand to grab the bridge of his nose, and Dal knew whatever their argument had been, Bull won.

“Hey Dal, come here.” Her eyes widened in shock as Bull called for her to meet them at the front gate.

They’d been arguing about her? What did Qunari soldiers have to do with her? Were they working for the Venatori?

Her heart pounded like a booming drum as all eyes followed her path towards Cullen and Bull at the gate. The lines in Cullen’s face were deep set, and he did not approve of whatever was happening. As she cleared her way out of the crowd, the Qunari soldier in the front looked at her with recognition in his eyes.

“Dal, these fine gentlemen here are part of the Triumvirate, otherwise known as the Arishok’s personal army, they come with something for you and they will only leave once their mission is complete.”

So that’s what had the Commander bent out of shape.

She approached with hesitation as the Qunari she presumed was their leader, stepped aside to unveil the two Qunari behind him carrying an ornate carved wooden chest. The two soldiers moved forward and placed it gently on the ground in front of her. As she looked up to Bull for some sense of guidance, their leader studied her again.

“Are you Idalya Mahariel, the Hero of Ferelden?” His voice in Common was jagged and rough as his words startled her and left her feeling like everyone was staring at her rarely heard title spoken out loud.

“Y-yes.” She stuttered as she prepared for a trap. This had to be a trap, right? The leader reached into a small bag and pulled out an ornate metal key that dwarfed his massive hand he extended out to her as she remained frozen.

“The Arishok sends his regards and offers a token of his respect.” Dal was taken aback at his words until recognition rang in the back of her memory: Sten.

Bull explained in the weeks after her awakening that Sten returned to his homeland, after his mission with her was complete, and ascended to the position of Arishok. With unsure fingers, she took the large and intricately designed key from the soldier who saluted her as he stepped back into his ranks.

The soldiers stood unmoving in silence as they awaited her to open the chest expectantly. Her steps were wavering as she reached the trunk with designs carved into the lid. Dropping to one knee, she placed the key inside and turned until the lock gave with a monstrous click.

Pushing the corners back of the lid, the sweetest smell rose into her delicate nostrils as her eyes
closed in a moment of simple happiness. Her eyes fluttered open, and she was taken aback by the selection of tiny cakes presented in colorful rows. Without hesitation, she reached out and grabbed one and popped it into her mouth and moaned out loud as the sweet cake melted her against her taste buds.

A throat cleared, and she looked up in embarrassment, realizing that everyone in the crowd was staring at her as she feasted on tiny delicacies. The Qunari leader spoke once more.

“Besides the Arishok’s confections, the bottom of the trunk contains handmade Qunari armor of the highest quality and daggers for the Hero crafted by the Arishok’s smith. The Hero has been granted an open invitation to visit Par Vallen, as the guest and *kadan* of our fearless leader.”

*Kadan.* She tried to remember that word like reaching through smoke to grab onto something solid, but then the memory came back.

“I know that one!” She exclaimed. “It means ‘friend’.”

Behind her, she was unaware of the Iron Bull’s widened eyes as he turned to the Commander and mouthed: *No. It really doesn’t.*

The leader looked confused at Idalya’s statement but continued. “With our mission complete, we will return to our homeland.”

The crowd released an audible sigh, relaxing as the Qunari turned to leave. Everyone was determined the confrontation would cause a battle, but the soldiers completed their mission and would sail back across the mighty ocean to the Arishok’s side. Cullen deflated watching the hulking men turn their shoulders to depart.

Idalya’s eyes glanced towards Bull as a realization screamed in her mind. Jumping to her feet, she sprinted after the soldiers out the front gates until reaching them halfway across the bridge.

“Wait, I have a question.” She gasped, as the Qunari leader stopped to listen. “If you can bring messages here, does that mean you can take one back?” The leader nodded in acknowledgment as Idalya grinned.

It was a crazy idea, but potentially the only backup plan she could think of when their safety nets were disappearing by the minute in the Inquisition.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your support, comments, and questions.

Hang out with me on Tumblr! http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com
The metallic clang of the swords’ impact echoed through the glade where Idalya and Rylen sparred under Solas’ supervising eye. Her limbs groaned through each full swing of her steel, after indulging too many of the tiny cakes Sten, err the Arishok, sent.

As the early morning rays of light drifted through her windows, Dal had covered her face from the invasive light, moaning as a sugar headache ripped through her skull. She never thought tiny cakes could wreck her like she kept pace with drunken Templars in the tavern.

“Are you warmed up enough now?” Solas inquired, a knowing lift to his lips telling her he knew why she took forever to be ready for training.

She refused to acknowledge the smug bastard. Her sword would keep swinging just to spite him. On the plus side, even nauseous, she was faster than Rylen on his best day.

“I thought you stopped binge drinking, Dal?” Rylen asked as his sword greeted hers in the air, the recoil shrieking through the bones of her arms to reverberated deep into her chest.

“I did!” She gritted out.

Turning in a tight circle she forced the centripetal force into her blade as she swung with her full power towards the Templar. As the swords reconnected, the metallic crash echoing in her elongated ears, Rylen’s weapon crashed to the ground and his hand gripped the opposite forearm, as he howled in pain. Whoops.

“For fuck's sake, Dal, you have a shitty temper!” He shook out his arm as Solas frowned at the display, disappointed in her actions, as he reached the Templar. Rylen reluctantly held out his arm and glared towards the Warden as the mage looked over his exposed skin.

“Fractured.” Solas scoffed as his healing magic wove out of his fingers into the flesh of the grimacing Templar. “He’s right, you know.” The words were so quiet she nearly didn’t hear them pass the mage’s lips.

“Wait. Did I hear you say Rylen was right?” She was shocked.

Rylen and Solas only acknowledged each other when it was time for their next exercise. Rylen looked at the mage with confusion in his sky-lit eyes as he brushed his growing chestnut hair out of
his vision with his non-broken arm.

“Yeah, what she said. I’m right? You feel okay, buddy?” Solas rolled his eyes at Rylen which verified to Dal that it was definitely Solas and not an abomination, as she’d momentarily feared when he agreed with Rylen.

Satisfied with the status of Rylen’s arm, Solas analyzed her with a critical eye as he contemplated a plan in his shining bald head. “Training hasn’t been working as I’d hoped. We need to take another approach.” His feet were silent in the fallen leaves as he approached Dal. “When did your magic first manifest?”

Dal nearly laughed at his question. He’d healed her injuries then appeared to her in the Fade for the first time after it happened. “The fight with Lysette.” She answered dryly while raising a defiant brow.

“What? We’ve been training for weeks and you’ve can barely summon sparks, yet in that fight, you struck a Templar with lightning.” His eyes narrowed, and she shifted away from the intensity of his gaze.

“I don’t know.” She sputtered ready to end this conversation and get back to swinging a sword. “I was afraid. It showed up to protect me.” Her boot kicked at the dirt beneath her feet as she blocked the memories of the Templar crushing her windpipe between steel-coated fingers, the sharp metal edges cutting into her flesh as she struggled to rip the Templar’s hands from her.

“And the latest example was after a nightmare, correct?” Solas asked, undeterred by the Warden’s discomfort that spoke that she was done discussing this subject.

“She’s over the line, Solas.” She never thought she would face her teacher in battle, but if that was his request there was no way she would stand by and accept it. “There’s no way Rylen would ever…”

Her words were cut off as the armored glove contacted her exposed jaw. In a fraction of a second, she was face first on the ground groaning from the radiating pain through the side of her face, neck, and chest.

“Maker.” She mumbled as she pressed her hands into the dirt to push herself to her feet planning to clock the mage upside his head. Her arms shook as she pushed force on them and her chest heaved as she spat out a mouth full of crimson onto the ground to mix into the earth below.

With a growl, she forced with all her strength, getting her upper body moving as her clumsy feet found traction beneath her. The world was spinning as she tried to focus her swaying eyes on Solas, trails of blood running down the length of her chin. She used the back of her sleeve to wipe the
blood from her skin as she glared unafraid at the cold man.

“Fuck you, Solas.” She uttered, rage tunneling its way through her limbs reminding her of her strength. The mage stood unmoving, his expression unchanged as he watched the scene unfold.

“Again.”

It was one word, but as Solas spoke she felt a level of betrayal she hadn’t remembered could exist. The blow struck her from behind as she fell to her knees, crying out in pain. Her vision blurred as the world swayed away from her. Her stomach threatened to revolt as the world spun faster and faster and she gasped for breath.

“Again.” The word rang out as a cry passed her lips.

“No. This isn’t working. We’re just hurting her, Solas! I’m trying to save her, not cause her more pain!” Rylen yelled back at the mage.

She didn't know where either was located as her ears pounded from the increased swelling in her jaw.

“If you won’t help me, I’ll continue myself.” Solas’ words were ice.

She couldn’t sense his location as she panicked, digging her fingers into the ground for purchase, pulling herself forward, her muscles screaming as pain exploded across her upper back.

Her eyes burned from tears dripping over her cheekbones while pulling herself away from the two men in desperation. In their attempts to help her, she would end up dead again. The clack of her teeth chattering echoed in her throbbing ears as she continued pulling herself in whatever direction lay in front of her. Her senses were lousy now, it could have been the Archdemon standing behind her watching her crawl towards her death. The beats of her heart an explosion as her unnatural strength overcame the injuries she sustained at the hands of her friends.

As her fingers dug once more into the earth, she felt it- a scream unwinding out of her soul. Pure fury and anger gathering to escape. A rage growing stronger in her chest until she’d tear at the seams. Her exhausted arms failed as she fell forward into the dirt, sobbing tears dripping into the dry soil. Sensing a presence, she followed her instincts to survive. Rolling to her back, her eyes squinted closed as she sensed around her. A shape moved towards her in her blur, she couldn’t see color or differentiate details, but at this moment, she didn’t care.

Pushing her hands towards the shape, she screamed as flames erupted from her palms pushing away the shape in her terror. The fire continued to pour out of her until her arms fell numb to her sides, chest gulping scorched air into her lungs. She closed her eyes tightly, sobs racking her system.

From the back of her mind, a shadow moved quickly to overtake her.

No, not now.

The cavern was dark. Streams of corruption leaking down the walls as her feet pushed forward in exhaustion. The acid boiling in her veins screamed as the darkspawn turned the corner to greet them, their distorted visages the creation of nightmares. The cries of her party rung out in the clearing. She brought her staff in front of her, light bursting from the crystal affixed to it reflecting off her sapphire and silver Warden armor.

Her staff struck the stone as electricity sought the corruption sprinting towards them. The beasts
screamed out, the char of their flesh choking the party in the small cavern as they worked their way toward where she sensed the darkspawn gathering. This entire plan was insane, yet they continued through the tunnels. Now the beasts knew they were here. They needed to run before their deaths could catch up to them before they completed their mission.

Idalya’s body jolted as a warm hand touched her shoulder.

“Dal, it’s Rylen. It’s over. Drink.” His voice was thick with emotion as her head lifted gently and a vial of foul-smelling liquid pressed against her lips.

She opened her swollen lips and choked as the bitter fluid passed over her tongue. After each swallow, the potion moved quickly to start the healing process. When no more liquid flowed from the glass, she opened her eyes to find Rylen’s sky-blue ones welling with tears.

“I’m so sorry, Dal.” He whispered as he helped her sit up, her head still spinning, though at a lesser degree than before.

“I know.” She mumbled as the two of everything she saw melted back into one image. “I have to go.”

Rylen’s strong arms lifted her until she staggered on her feet. She took one weary step but willed her legs forward as she wrapped her mind around what she saw in her mind. Her heart seized that the one person she wanted to tell what happened, was the person who caused it. She had to leave. She wouldn’t be able to see him without spitting on him in rage.

Without another word, she kept her eyes locked on Skyhold in the distance as her feet broke into a run. She wept the entire way back into the fortress.

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Rylen watched Dal sprint away from the glade towards Skyhold. It was a long time since he’d felt this level of guilt. Over the years as a Templar, there were questionable orders he followed because his Knight-Commanders had issued the, but watching the Warden curl up on the ground, sobbing while betrayed by those she trusted was one of the worst outcomes he had ever experienced. There was not enough booze in the Herald’s Rest to drown the emotions pushing the bile up his throat.

He turned to where the mage was still laying stomach-up in the thick grass, where the warrior’s flames had thrown him. Rylen looked down at the man staring up at the sky with an unusual look in his eyes. His tunic and breeches scorched and a patch of flesh streaking across his face was blistered and peeling by her magic rushing him at full force.

“You’re an asshole, Solas.” He spoke to the mage who didn’t acknowledge his presence. “And a terrible friend.” He added since it was rare to say anything to the man without him arguing back.

“I am well aware.” He replied with a sigh which shocked the Templar. Reaching deep in his side pocket, Rylen grabbed his last elfroot potion, which he threw down to the smoldering man.

“Why was this necessary? She has so few people she trusts. Why would you do this?”

The mage chuckled darkly as his eyes turned to look at him, reality-shaping them into daggers. “You want the truth? Or a convenient answer?” Rylen’s furrowed his brows at the man’s question.

“The truth, Solas, for once.”

The mage shook his head as he pushed himself to a sitting position, his cheek oozing a thick and
viscous fluid down the side of his face as he uncorked the bottle with his teeth.

“I don’t understand her magic, but I know it will get her killed; whether it harms her, happens in battle, or in front of Templars or the Inquisitor. If something happened to her…” The elf’s voice trailed off as his eyes traced the path where the Warden just ran from them like her life depended on it. “It would destroy me.”

Rylen’s eyes grew large as the mage’s words sunk in. “Oh… I…”

Solas rolled his eyes as the flesh of his cheek wound its way back together.

“Not like that.” He shook his head, his shoulder’s deflating even as his tattered clothing still smoldered. “I was born to fight, to march to war, to revolt against those who would harm the innocent- not a life where you imagine children. Being alone was a fate I accepted long ago. She’s all I ever could have asked for in a daughter.” The mage’s eyes were downcast as he finished.

*Well, this is awkward.*

Rylen took a step back. Solas kept his internal dialogue internal, so this one moment of letting Rylen in on what he was thinking showed just how much what happened affected him, regardless of how cold he appeared.

“If what you say is true, that’s even more reason to say *why the fuck did you do that to her?*” He was furious at the mage. Was this some form of power trip over the Warden? Just one more person fucking with her head.

“There’s no room for softness in this world,” Solas spoke quietly still staring towards Skyhold. “To teach her anything different, would do her a disservice.”

“Bullshit.” Rylen ground out as the mage turned to look at him with narrowed eyes. “You turn her into just a weapon, for what? To accept her fate? To do as she’s told? That is bullshit, Solas, and you know it.”

The urge to smite the bastard grew harder to resist as he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the elf. Few people in life inspired him to be a better man the way the Warden had. Fighting by her side made him a better soldier, a better instructor, and a better friend- his entire life was better for having her in it, so for Solas to presume she needed to be hardened to accomplish some outlandish goal made him furious.

He was no better than the Chantry controlling their Templars and their lyrium leashes. The more he thought of the comparison between the Elven mage and the organization he vilely despised, the angrier Rylen found himself. *Fuck Solas and fuck the Chantry.* There were people who needed his help instead of standing over the elf who acted like he was better than everyone else.

“I need to check on her.” He mumbled as he turned to walk back to Skyhold. A good man would stay and ensure Solas was okay, but at this moment he couldn’t care less. He knew both were far more worried about Dal than each other. The waves of flames erupting out of her hands were stronger than any magic he’d seen from a non-harrowed mage. It was terrifying to watch, but she did it- she used her magic and channeled it.

His feet moved forward, armor heavy with regret, without waiting for a response from the mage. Even if he was right- the guy was still a complete asshole.
The Chapter Where Vivienne is Summoned

Chapter Summary

Vivienne is summoned to the healer's area. Is this the contact from Orlais she's been expecting?

Vivienne raised a sloped brow when the messenger arrived requesting her presence in the healer’s area at her first convenience. They rarely used her healing talents in Skyhold, so the request was surprising. To cure her curiosity, she rose from her chair overlooking the courtyard, following the long spiraling sets of stairs to the ground floor of the fortress and heading towards the healer’s area next to the small Chantry in the smaller courtyard.

The young mages tending the injured looked up at Vivienne as she entered the room. Fiona’s trainee’s skills were suitable for their work, but most had never lived outside of a Circle and found themselves lost making a life for themselves outside the Chantry’s iron grip. If the Circle’s dissolved many years ago, when she passed her Harrowing, then she’d have the same fears coating her eyes as she looked at the world.

All she saw now was an opportunity. Celene gave her a position of power unimaginable at these children’s age, but when the Empress had fallen over the edge of the podium to die on the glistening stones beneath, Vivienne’s life changed.

Many thought her membership in the Inquisition by the Emperor was a punishment for the working relationship she shared with the former Empress. Vivienne viewed her placement as an opportunity after meeting the Hero of Ferelden within the halls of the Winter Palace, a secret she’d chosen to withhold from the Emperor. The Inquisition was far busier than they hinted to their allies. Since arriving Vivienne kept her eyes open and observed, relieving the members of the Inquisition secrets one at a time.

As she strode into the room, the oldest mage, a girl with dark blond hair in a single braid down the length of her back, stepped forward with a respectful nod of her head in addressing Madam de Fer.

“Madam,” she spoke quietly, her hazel-green eyes pointed towards the floor. “She’s on the far side of the sheet.” She motioned toward the far corner of the room.

Vivienne found her curiosity growing. Who would summon her? An Orlesian spy sent to gain information to bring to the Emperor? She assumed there would be contact between her and the Empire, but so far no one reached out.

She kept her eyes glued to Briala since the day both joined the organization. While commanded to join by her Emperor, Briala joined the organization of accomplices to the murder of her love under her own volition. The elf worked her way to a trusted scout of the Spymaster. Vivienne found no proof the rogue had anything but the best intentions motivating her work, yet she kept observed the woman the same.

The clicks of her heeled boots echoed in the small room as the three younger mages exited the door with haste as she progressed towards the cream-colored homespun cloth hung from the ceiling for some sense of modesty. Pulling back the curtain, she gasped at the Warden sitting atop the unstable
cot, face bruising in pools of purple, dried blood covering the top of her tunic, blistering burns across her palms riding up her forearms.

Something tore at her heart as she took in the girl. She would be a liar if she denied the resemblance to herself once when new to living in the Circle. Her boots made a silent approach as she reached out taking the unblemished tops of the Warden’s shaking hands in her own as she studied the map of burns and oozing blisters covering the lengths of her arms. The patterning of the burns was explained as accidental in training with mages, the swollen blows to her face were another matter altogether.

The Warden’s supernatural healing was trying to mend the flesh together as massive blisters still formed. “These burns may scar,” Vivienne whispered as she healed the outside edge of the burns.

The Warden nodded numbly, her eyes focused on the floor. The elf’s lack of speech worried her the longer she stood in front of her healing. Wherever the girl was, her mouth was moving whether telling jokes, speaking sarcastically, or giving orders, but seeing her silence was unnerving Vivienne.

Why would she ask for her? There were plenty of healers in Skyhold. She was disgustingly glued to the hip of the apostate, yet when injured she called for her- a woman she didn’t know well. Dorian, Solas, or Fiona all would have been better choices to call unless... She paused as she examined the girl’s injuries. Could her burns have been in defense from a mage? The injuries on her face were far worse than from a fist- armor, perhaps? She listened for any other presence.

“Do you need herbs, child?” She whispered to the Warden as she lessened the swelling in her blisters.

“Herbs? What would I need herbs for?” The Warden asked with confusion as she finally looked up to meet the mage’s eyes. Her right eye bloodshot and sealing shut.

“To prevent being with child,” Vivienne responded with an even tone. The poor Warden- even on her second chance at life and she was still so innocent. The mage’s heart broke at the thought of how many young girls had come pleading older mages for help after Templar had forced themselves upon them then sent them stumbling to their dormitory with tears in their eyes.

“With child? Oh...” The Warden responded. She shook her head as Viv sighed an internal breath of relief. “This is training that got carried away.” Vivienne reached under the side table and handed two bottles of elf root potion to the warrior as she intensified the healing on her arms. The elf grimaced as she chugged both bottles down without complaint.

“This was vigorous training, I should complain to the Commander about his treatment of our soldiers.” The mage pulled the bloody strands of hair away from the injured side of the Warden’s face as she poured magic into the socket around her eye to bring down the massive contusion on her cheek.

“This wasn’t Cullen, it was Solas’ training. He feels I allow my fear to control me and it's holding me back from whatever potential I could have.” Years of training in the Game and Circles allowed Vivienne to keep her expressions neutral as the Warden spoke, but it shocked her the apostate would allow this level of harm to come to the girl he fiercely protected.

Yet, she had to admit there was wisdom in his words.

In her time in the Inquisition, the Warden had wasted away from not eating and avoiding anything that wasn’t hauling a weapon since her return from Halamshiral. Something had gotten into the
Warden’s head to cause this self-destruction. For her sake and the rest of the Inquisition, she needed to get her shit together, and fast.

She thought over her words before speaking to the shaking girl. Part of her wanted to tell the girl that there were no such things as monsters and that Solas was out of line in trying to protect her. The part that grew up seeing mages beaten like slaves by their masters knew real monsters existed and that they were all around. She blocked the two warring halves in her mind as she instead told the Warden the truth.

“Solas is trying to protect you from what seeks to harm you- it is a horrible and terrifying truth, but none of us are safe in Thedas. There will always be those waiting to tear us down the minute our backs are turned whether because of our skin color, our gender, our talents, our wealth, or our homes. People will find excuses for their behavior, but we know they’re out there and we will be prepared.”

The Warden looked at her as tears began welled in her soft pink and gray eyes. She, too, wanted to protect Idalya, but it wasn’t in her nature to coddle. The Warden had an important job only she could accomplish and if Solas believed there was something holding her back, then she believed him.

“I’m not sure I can face him.” The Warden mumbled as she vainly tried to keep her tears contained.

Vivienne wished she could wrap her arms around the girl and protect her from the world outside the walls but keeping her ignorant of people like the Venatori who would murder her on sight, did nothing to help her survive the astronomical odds she faced.

Viv pushed her sleeves over her ebony-skinned forearms as she forced her healing magic, soft spiraling, and emerald-toned, out into the charred edges of the Warden’s burn at her highest output. “Hiding from adversity is a privilege not afforded to those born special, Idalya.” The mage spoke quietly as she watched the misshapen patches of flesh return to their smooth texture and tone as pigment was restored to the surface. “Face the apostate and get it out of the way. You need his help to be successful. If he says you’re afraid- believe him. Find that fear and destroy it. Take any advantage your enemies would have over you and make it your strength.”

Pleased with the results of her work, Vivienne pulled her sleeves down the length of her arms as she wiped a trace of perspiration along the trail of her brow.

“Thank you… for everything.” She was satisfied to hear more confidence in the Warden’s voice than when she arrived.

The hourglass was soon to empty on the Inquisition for their greatest test to date. Evelyn would return to the fortress any day to prepare for Adamant and then history would cast its judgment upon the stumbling organization. Vivienne sensed the success of the Inquisition hinged on the futures of the two women whose fates were now unwillingly linked to one another.

Idalya never returned to duty and wasn’t surprised when no one came looking. She assumed Rylen informed Cullen of their misadventure. She had sensed no smites firing within the fortress, so it was safe to believe Cullen hadn’t stormed into the rotunda and attacked Solas as he brooded over his piles of research. Not that she would have blamed him if he’d gotten a look at her before Madam de Fer healed her face and arms so that the damage she’d sustained this afternoon was unnoticeable.
Before dark, she drafted a note to Rylen that said she wasn’t angry and that he needed to be easier on himself. She suggested they sleep it off and head back to training in the morning like nothing happened. For weeks, she’d been stuck by Rylen’s side whether she wanted to or not as he watched her like a hawk to ensure her safety. She knew right now he was so drunk he couldn’t read the note, but maybe in a moment of clarity, as he sobered up, he would read her words and understand she didn’t blame him for what happened and viewed him only as a friend.

As the sun sunk behind the peaks of the mountains, she curled up shivering under piles of blankets and allowed herself to sink into the Fade. When she opened her eyes, she was unsurprised to find herself on a dirt floor in a worn hovel, a fire crackling in its fireplace. She smiled as she gazed at the details of the home where she had grown up. For hours, she stayed under the blankets resting in the memory of the straw bed that belonged to her mother and ignored the stings of pain that the hole-ridden sheets didn’t hold the woman’s sweet scent as she remembered.

The presence in the distance was slight at first, but over time grew as the concerned mage couldn’t stay away as he drifted closer and closer to her location in the Fade. She pulled the covers off over her head as she sighed, watching the sloping beams of wood overhead.

“Solas, just come in. I know you’re out there.” The presence flickered as though he turned to flee but decided against it. She felt the shift in the foundation of the building as the mage Fade stepped into the clearing inside it. He was wearing heavy winter dress, she felt a pang of guilt knowing he slept outside Skyhold for the night, exposing himself to the harsh elements the mountains sent upon him.

The mage awkwardly adjusted his jacket as he tried not to make direct eye contact with the girl he pushed too far. He cleared his throat as he finally. “Idalya, I…”

“Please, wait.” She stopped him. A confused expression on his face as this meeting was already not following the plan and apology he carefully crafted inside his bald head as he was pelted by the elements. “I’d like to speak first.” The mage nodded as he prepared himself for the profanity-laced tongue lashing he was about to receive. Dal sat up on the bed, pulling the covers tighter around her.

“I’m not angry at you.” Her speech started, and the mage’s eyes widened in further surprise. “I understand why you push me the way you do. You’re right- I’m terrified. In your shoes… well, maybe not shoes,” she looked down at the mage’s bare feet. “But in your position, I would have done the same.” She shivered as she pulled the covers closer around her. “I act like a bratty child when you give me directions and don’t respect you use so much of your own time to train me. There are a million other things the Inquisition could use your help with, yet you waste your time with me.”

“It is an honor to work with a pupil as yourself, it is never a waste of time.” He corrected as the warrior looked up with emotions clouding her swirled eyes.

“We can agree to the disagree then.” She continued as Solas lifted the corner of his lips towards her in amusement. “It is a fact that there’s a lot I don’t know, and a lot I still need to know before the end. From this point forward, I swear that I will give you nothing but my best. I swear it, Solas. I will not let you down.”

*****

Solas’ eyes changed that moment as he stared at the girl, no, woman, who sat in front of him, so different from the elf he first met. As much as he tried to keep the tenderness from showing through, it was a losing battle with the Warden. The affection he felt for the girl was nothing he had ever experienced in the centuries of his life. He knew ultimately for her safety, he needed to
push her away, but that urge only made him draw her closer under some unrealistic expectation he could protect her from the rest of the world. A father protecting his daughter.

Maybe he could tell her.

Though she was an elf, Idalya was raised to value one’s independence from traditions and the stifling and restrictive culture her mother knew in the Dalish. Her mother refused to teach her Elven or anything about her former culture as she wanted her children to make their own decisions about what the world was like. If anyone would understand what he was and not ostracize him, it would be her. How could he tell her? He stopped, realizing the Warden was staring at him, her brow raised as her teacher had just stopped and stood in silence as he fought an internal war.

*****

“Everything okay? Did I upset you?” This wasn’t how she thought Solas would react to her fully committing herself to his training. She honestly expected a cocky grin and an ‘I told you so’, so it confused her as the elf stared at her with a blank expression poured across his features.

“Things are fine… Your answer was unexpected.” The mage sighed as he watched her every movement.

“You thought I would scream, didn’t you?” She blurted in annoyance.

“Yes.” There was no hesitation in the man’s answer.

Her eyes narrowed at the mage as he chuckled in the dimly lit room.

“You may speak now if you like.” She offered as she remembered Solas had spoken first before she interrupted him.

“I think you covered it well enough yourself.” Solas mused as she watched him. There was something the man wasn’t telling her, but this wasn’t the time to force it. “You’re wise for your age, Idalya.”

“It’s probably because I’m a lot older than I look.” Her voice was full of humor as she climbed out of her mother’s bed and stretched out her sore muscles. “I’m sure you hear that one a lot, don’t you, Egghead?” She headed out the front door preparing to get back to training.

The mage smiled as he watched the girl head out into thick fog of the Fade as he followed her. “You have no idea, Asha, you have no idea.”
Chapter Summary

After months away, Evelyn Trevelyan returns to Skyhold, but as usual, her arrival causes more complications than it solves.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Skyhold’s courtyard bustled at capacity after the announcement spread like wildfire that someone spotted the Inquisitor and her entourage along the horizon. Murmurs of excitement running through the nervous crowd surprised Idalya as she rested against a column on a chilly day. Watching soldiers sprint across the battlements preparing security for the Orlesian royalty.

The Warden expected crowds of angry people with pitchforks in hand as the gates opened, yet here they were waiting out in the frigid weather as Evelyn returned home for the first time in months. Maybe that was her secret, commit an awful act then avoid those who’d hold her accountable until long enough passed that they forgot why they were angry.

“Hiya, Kitty.” Varric wiggled his way through the crowd to lean against the other side of the column. A deafening cheer rose through the crowd as the gears on the drawbridge click into motion. “I have to say I’m surprised at the warm welcome at Skyhold.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” She yelled over the obnoxious cheering echoing inside her sloped ears. “At least they’re excited about anything at this point.”

Varric barked a bitter laugh, his features melting back into a mask of worry she was certain she carried on her own face.

The Inquisition accomplished far more than they expected post-Halamshiral, but Evelyn was an unknown variable strutting back into their lives. An action that could turn all the planning they’d accomplished on its head. Cullen hadn’t spoken a non-order in days, Leliana’s hadn’t left her ravens in a week, and Josephine had a permanent smile glued to her features as she ran from one end of the fortress to another with panic clear in her eyes.

Idalya hadn’t slept well since confirmation on Evelyn’s return arrived attached to the foot of an exhausted raven. While she had little interest in the Inquisitor’s arrival, she was very invested in the return of those who traveled with her. Cullen received confirmation that Ev and her entourage convened with the Inquisition’s traveling Templar two weeks prior as the Inquisitor made her way across Orlais closing rifts on her way back to Skyhold.

She hadn’t realized in her time training, how many soldiers Cullen used, and lost, protecting innocents from the demons that poured through the rips in the Fade allow to remain open for months. As the rifts closed, soldiers flowed through the gates and their army tripled in the few mere weeks Evelyn worked her way across Orlais and Ferelden shutting the rifts per her agreement.

The three advisers and Cassandra stood in a uniformed line in front of the main hall awaiting the
gates to open. Cullen, Leliana, and Cassandra’s faces were blank as they waited in silence for the procession, while Josephine had the same nervous smile glued to her unwilling lips.

Other companions made themselves scarce, unlike Varric who came out to watch the mind-boggling spectacle happening to document later. Dorian hadn’t left The Herald’s Rest since the previous night and she’d heard rumors that Blackwall had taken an empty seat beside the belligerent man early this morning. Bull was busy packing to depart soon with the Chargers to meet his Qunari contacts. Sera was nowhere to be found while Vivienne sat out on her balcony from the main hall looking like a queen awaiting her own procession. Dal invited Solas to join the commotion, but he rolled his eyes as an answer and sat at his desk as though it was a routine day.

The crowd quieted, parting as the Templar emerged from their tower, led by Knight-Captain Rylen. They march to line the front entry as the Inquisitor made her appearance. Rylen hadn’t spoken to her since the last training he’d attended with her and Solas. They’d been running their training without a Templar, but she managed to not let her magic overwhelm her.

The drawbridge lowered, and the crowd erupted into enormous cheers as the first horses passed through the archway into the courtyard. Chevaliers dressed in fine Orlesian uniforms rode on the backs of white stallions, unphased by the hollering crowd. They dismounted in unison, drawing swords at their sides. The crowd pressed in tightly to get a view of the Inquisition soldiers traveling back with the group, smile’s breaking on the soldiers’ weary expressions as they found their loved ones hidden among the sea of faces.

Their excitement was contagious.

It had been months since she’d seen Barris with her own eyes, but the waiting time was over. In minutes he’d walk through the gates of Skyhold and she could see if he received the messages she’d sent to every Templar stop between their last mission and Skyhold. She wasn’t surprised to receive no answer from the busy Knight-Captain, with their unusual travel path back to Skyhold, but it caused her to fret just the same. She couldn’t help but question her own thoughts and feelings while she was still missing substantial portions of her memory.

She’d avoided thinking about her life in Skyhold with Barris returned within its halls. Barris was witness to her struggles with magic, so luckily that wouldn’t be an unpleasant surprise to the man fighting dangerous mages since the Inquisition left the Winter Palace. Also, on her mental block list were the details of any reunion between her and the attractive Templar. Her eyes, while scanning the crowd, almost fluttered shut as she remembered the feel of his burning hands along the sides of her face like it just happened instead of months ago.

An uptick in volume from the crowd dashed her memories, as the first Templar marched through the gates helmed, the soldiers parted, a horse larger than any Dal had even seen prance ahead unveiling the Inquisitor atop in full crimson armor with golden trim. People shouted and screamed in joy as she waved to the crowd, her eyes directed towards her advisers as she whispered to the Templar at her side. The Templar nodded as took hold of her reins, and Evelyn flung her leg over the massive hide of the horse as her feet set foot inside Skyhold for the first time since her betrayal.

The crowd parted as Evelyn strode toward the stairway with no hesitation, her Templar moving in unison to her. The courtyard erupted into a flurry of movement as soldiers embraced their families and servants ran to bring the Orlesian horses to Master Dennet, who was about to experience heart failure when he learned how many additional stallions he needed to house.

Dal slipped inside a side door and jogged up the passage until she exited into the main hall and secured a spot up front as her eyes located and focused on the Templar still by Evelyn’s side as they entered the hall while her entourage of Orlesian visitors took their time traveling up the stone
Her advisers were ahead of her, their faces blank as they waited to hear what Ev had to say. As Ev and her Templar entered the doors, the Inquisitor nodded, and her Templar slammed the doors shut behind her and dropped the wooden plank across the catch, bolting the door from the inside. The Inquisitor reached up removing her helm and shook her sweat-ridden auburn hair from her face.

“We’ve got a minute until they find a way around.” Evelyn bit the tip of her gloves between her teeth as she pulled them off removing a slim slip of paper she handed off to Leliana as the Spymaster rose her brow in confusion.

The rogue pocketed the slip of paper as she followed in the same direction they would have traveled if they hadn’t stopped. Evelyn’s eyes met Dal’s as she turned to follow.

“Aren’t you a brazen one?” Evelyn asked, sliding her gloves back on, pushing her loose hair back out of her olive eyes.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dal knew Solas would be disappointed for engaging the Inquisitor in petty conversation, but she was tired of putting up with the woman’s shit.

Evelyn narrowed her eyes as she stepped closer to the elf so that there were only inches between them. “If you think there aren’t Venatori spies amongst the visitors from Orlais, then you’re far more ignorant and naïve than I gave you credit for. Stay out of sight for yours and everyone else’s safety. If any of the Orlesians think you’re anything more than an elven commoner, a lot of innocent people will be hurt.” Ev turned and in a few strides caught up with the slow-moving advisers when the side door perpendicular to their position slammed open and three chevaliers strode through the door stomping towards Evelyn.

“Are you safe, my Lady?” The Chevalier in charge asked of Ev.

The Inquisitor’s eyes opened as she looked around in mock surprise. If the change hadn’t been so effective on the soldiers, Dal would have laughed.

“Is something wrong?” She batted her eyelashes at the soldier, as she fretted with pieces of her clothing, weaving her spell over the Chevalier.

“The door locked behind you as you entered, and we thought it was an ambush.” The man replied standing straighter as Cullen and Cassandra fought to keep their eyes from rolling back in their heads in irritation. Dal couldn’t help but smile thinking of how many times Cullen had fallen prey to this same routine.

“Knight-Captain?” Evelyn called, and the Templar strode to her side and stood at attention. “Do you have any explanation?”

The Templar reached up, pulled off their helm unveiling a cascade of sunlit red hair that tumbled behind her shoulders as Dal’s eyes opened in shock. “I am sorry, my Lady, it was my mistake. It won’t happen again.” The woman’s smoky voice projected through the hall as the chevalier raised the point of their sword to the woman’s throat who didn’t flinch as the leader intimidated her.

“It won’t happen again. We’ve got our eyes on you, Templar, another mistake won’t be handled so delicately.” He growled into her face, pressing the point of the blade up so a single stream of the woman’s blood ran down the handle, yet her face remained unchanged, never breaking eye contact with the irate chevalier.

As fascinating as this exchange was, the most distracting thing in the room were the looks on
Cullen and Cassandra’s faces as they gaped at the woman like a ghost appeared suddenly amongst them. Whoever she was, they knew her and looked horrified at her unexpected arrival to Skyhold.

“Thank you for the quick reaction. You have proven why Gaspard has the highest regard for your service.” Ev smiled up at the Chevalier who shifted from the display in front of the Inquisition’s advisers. He removed the point of his blade from the unphased Templar, nodding as he returned to stand at attention with his two comrades. “I am tired from my travels. We will convene at the War Table in two hours after I have rested and bathed. Knight-Captain, with me.”

Evelyn walked past the confused advisers with the female Templar in stride behind her and the chevaliers following behind, taking their positions guarding the Inquisitor’s chamber door after the two women entered inside closing it behind them. The advisers stood and watched Evelyn exit into her room, then Leliana turned to the group.

“War Room. Now.” Cullen opened his mouth to speak, but Josephine slid a tiny hand into the elbow of the irate man and steered him toward her office before he could complain about having work. “You too, Dal.” Leliana spoke under her breath without moving lips as she headed towards the drafty hallway leading to the fortress’ War Room.

It was a trick they learned many years ago on the roads of Ferelden. As a former bard the Spymaster could throw her voice amongst other tricks and Idalya had sensitive hearing, so they spent weeks practicing how far Leliana could be from Dal and have her understand what the Chantry sister spoke. The elf slid out of sight, throwing her hood over her head as she made her way through the hall cutting between soldiers and servants as she entered the dim hallway.

Her feet were silent as she walked down the steps. She palmed her hidden dagger from her waistband to ensure she had a defense if attacked. Her heart pounded as she passed the torn and broken walls.

*Where in the void was Barris?*

Evelyn’s game with the Chevalier had distracted her from looking for the man, but when the Templar removed their helm and revealed herself as a woman, a knot formed in her stomach as she couldn’t help but wonder why this woman now had his title. She worried about him when she’d received his last letter at his tone, but she never thought he could be… no, she couldn’t think like this or she’d drive herself insane.

Reaching the heavy wooden door, Dal rapped with her usual pattern alerting Leliana that she was entering. She had never stepped foot into the War Room while the advisers gathered. A few times she located Leliana here while she was giving instructions to Scout Harding and repositioning the complicated network of figures laid out on the massive map. Simulating the dozens of missions the Inquisition was executing throughout Thedas.

Josephine was nose deep in a stack of paperwork. Cullen was sulking in a large chair in the corner like something sucked all energy from his limbs as he stared across the room, unaware the Warden entered. Leliana and Cassandra were both staring at the thin slip of parchment in Leliana’s grip that Evelyn nearly caused the death of a Templar to give to them.

“I don’t understand,” Cass remarked staring at this paper in confusion. “These are just names. What are we supposed to do with this?”

“*Lady Evington.*” Leliana read out loud as she rolled the name around in her head. “*Wait, Josie,* check back in the files about two months ago on something the scouts reported back on the Evington family.” Josephine considered lowering herself to their level by rolling her eyes at them.
but instead rifled through a side drawer until she pulled out a blood-stained and torn piece of parchment and read.

“Circumstances of Duke Evington’s murder remain mysterious. The Widow Evington, to console her grief, has traveled across Thedas to ‘see all the locations her dear husband never got to see’ including Ferelden, the Western Approach, and...” Josephine paused as her mind caught up to her lips. “And Trevinter for an extended stay.”

“Maker,” Leliana whispered, as Dal approached the women and removed her hood to see the room clearer.

“What is it?” Cullen asked from the chair realizing that life was moving without him.

“I can’t believe this…” Leliana threw her hood back as she rubbed her hand against her forehead.

Both Cassandra and Cullen looked confused as Josie rose from her desk and took the paper with shaking fingers from the Spymaster’s hands. The Ambassador read over the list and stopped as she reached the bottom, her face paling and she grabbed on to the corner on the table to steady herself. The slip of paper fell from Josie’s wavering fingers to the floor as she looked up in disbelief at her friend.

“Would someone explain what in Andraste’s name is going on?” Cullen yelled across the room at the two women trained to be spies. “Is Evelyn in danger?”

Josephine laughed a cruel laugh which caused even Cullen to cringe as the Ambassador fell to pieces. “Oh yes, she is in great danger, but she might have just saved us all.” Cullen sat up as concern etched its way across his features.

“What do we do?” The ex-Templar asked as he rose from his seat to resume his position around the table.

“You do nothing,” Leliana responded, taking a deep breath. “This is my job.” The Commander frowned as he stared at Leliana trying to see through her secret meaning.

“What connects the names?” Dal asked from behind them. The softest of smiles graced the Spymaster’s lips.

“You always know the correct questions to ask, Dal.” The Spymaster mused while turning to look at her. “All these people have been under investigation by the Inquisition for connections to accidental deaths, arsons, thefts, illegal trading, you name it. The whole time this invisible thread existed we didn’t see. What I believe that list contains is all the high-ranking Orlesian members of the Venatori. I don’t know how Evelyn confirmed these names, but she has put herself in incredible danger for the Inquisition.”

Dal felt dizzy at the reality of Leliana’s words. It was one thing to find spies hidden amongst a crowd, but another to dispatch nobles from their mortal coil. The accidental death of a noble could be explained away in the Game, but the deaths of many could set off a dangerous chain reaction that harmed many innocents in the path of the destruction once the Venatori knew they were exposed.

She heard the heavy armored boots heading down the hallway long before anyone else in the room was aware. As she pulled her dagger loose, she listened to the rhythm of the steps. Yes, she knew the pattern: Rylen. The Templar opened the door without pause and closed it behind him, heading straight toward Cullen without examining the other participants around the table.
“Rylen, what in the Maker’s name…” Cullen began before the Templar cut him off.

“Commander, I need to speak to you about…” Rylen’s words cut off, freezing, as he saw Dal standing on the far side of the room.

“Yes, I’m already aware of Lilly,” Cullen answered as Rylen stepped back.

“What are you talking about? What’s happened to Lilly?” Rylen’s face took on a dark look as his hand tightened around the handle of his sword, his other hand shaking as it drew into a fist.

“You don’t know?” Cullen asked, confused to know more than someone else in this institution. “Lilly’s fine, but she arrived with the Inquisition with the rank of Knight-Captain- whoever made that reckless decision will have to answer.” He scoffed as Rylen stared in confusion.

“That’s why I’m here.” The Templar’s eyes flicked toward Dal before looking back at the Commander. “I think we should speak outside.”

“There’s no place safer to speak than here, so say what you need to.” Cullen grabbed the pile of missives he threw onto the table earlier in his irritation. Rylen shifted on his feet as he tried to push the words across his tongue.

The world was spinning around Dal.

Cullen was not trained to read body language, but she understood what the Templar’s was screaming to her. As her hand reached out to grab hold of the table, it met a solid and warm source as Leliana grabbed her hand with the beginnings of tears in her eyes as she watched her friend dissolve into disorder.

“I think I have an idea why Lilly was promoted,” Rylen spoke, his voice pained as he couldn’t let his eyes focus on the Warden.

“Why would anyone think promoting Lilly Hawke was a wise decision?” Cullen asked, still oblivious to what was happening.

Rylen took the two steps forward until he was close enough to the Commander that he could reach out and place his hand on the man’s forearm, grabbing the irate man’s attention. “Because of what happened to Barris.” He whispered as the entire room turned to silence.

Chapter End Notes

Follow me on Tumblr: http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com

Thank you for reading my story and commenting. ;)
The Inquisition discovered that Lilly’s Hawke promotion is due to something that happened to Barris. How will the advisors and Idalya react to the news?

A painful cry ripped from Dal’s throat as her legs wavered, bringing her to one knee, as Leliana held the Warden’s hand tight within her warm and shaking one. She buried her face in the amethyst folds of the Spymaster’s cloak as tears flowed from where the Warden kept them trapped.

This was the reality of a soldier’s life. You never knew which moments were your last or when someone you cared about would disappear. Leliana’s free hand petted across her disarrayed head smoothing her cow licks back as the elf sobbed and soaked the fabric of her coat. The advisers were speaking around her, but Dal couldn’t listen. She didn’t want to know the details.

A larger, warm hand rested upon her shoulder and she recognized Rylen by the smell of his spiced cologne he always wore that reminded her of traveling through the Denerim market as a child. She pressed her eyes tighter together as she could hear a muffled sound through the weave of Leliana’s fabric as the Templar spoke to her. Wide and calloused fingers drifted across the side of her cheek as her head turned so her blurry vision focused on the Templar with tears forming within his own pools of daylight.

“Dal,” his tone was controlled and calming as though she was a creature ready to strike at anything standing within her reach. She tried to pull her face away, but the Templar held true as it forced her to deal with reality. “Dal, please. I need you to listen.” Rylen’s other hand grabbed her by the opposite cheek as she tried to turn away once more, but now found her face cradled within his unsteady hands.

“Please, Dal. Just listen.” He pleaded. She felt the fight draining out of her as reality pushed all the oxygen out of her body. “Barris was hurt in an attack weeks ago. A deep cut on his arm became badly infected. The Templar brought him to the healer’s area of Skyhold, but… he will not survive, Dal. He will pass soon. Say goodbye while you can.”

Josephine exited while he was speaking, leaving only those who had lost so much more than they had gained in the room, as they stared at Dal with empathy in their eyes.

“Is… is he awake?” Idalya asked as she saw her own sorrow reflected in Rylen’s eyes. He shook his head. Her eyes closed as the tears burned the center of hers.

“He hasn’t been conscious for days.” Rylen answered as Dal felt the burning of another emotion spreading like wild fire through her veins.

“I will murder, Evelyn- all of this is her fault.” The Warden’s body shook as the words oozed across her lips full of anger and wrath.

Rylen chuckled a dark laugh as he tried to keep the Warden’s attention.

“This is where your day will get a lot stranger, Doll- the weird route the Inquisition traveled back
to Skyhold? The Inquisitor’s orders to find help for Barris and the other injured soldiers. She was the only reason he made it far as he has.”

Dal’s mouth fell open as she listened to his words. *Evelyn found help for Barris?* As the anger that sustaining her movement dissipated away, it left her with nothing as she leaned against Leliana’s leg with Rylen’s hands casing the sides of her tear-streaked face.

She turned her head toward Leliana. “Can I see him?” The Spymaster’s expression faltered as watched the grief roll over Idalya’s features.

“Evelyn was right- it’s not safe for you to be seen in Skyhold right now.” Leliana threw her hood on covering her distinctive auburn hair. “Rylen will escort you back to your room and I’ll send Harding to retrieve you to him the minute we can ensure your safety. Dal, I swear, we’ll move as fast as we can.” The Warden nodded against her leg as her tears increased in amount.

Idalya turned to look out at Cassandra and Cullen who remained silent on the far end of the War Table since Rylen barged in unannounced. Dal saw the same look of sorrow repeated in Cass’ features with understanding. The Commander’s expression was a changing flurry of emotions as he fought his instincts to keep his professional face, but Dal knew how close Cullen was to Barris and how difficult this must be for him.

“Rylen,” the Templar snapped his eyes up towards the Spymaster. “Take Dal to her room. Keep two guards, including a Templar are on duty at all times. Also I need Scout Harding and Sera summoned.” The Templar rose before helping the lost Warden to her feet.

The floor was shifting beneath Dal’s boots as she staggered to a standing position. Leliana tucked her loose hair beneath her hood until she looked no different from dozen’s of other scouts inside the fortress. For months she prepared herself for this moment, how she would handle the loss of the gentle Templar of whom she’d barely broached the surface of.

She imagined the screams that would rip from her body as her mind raced through her grief but instead found herself numb and empty from everything around her. Rylen placed a protective hand at the small of her back as he steered Dal towards the door to leave the War Room. Part of her felt like she should turn back and say something to the people that remained, but they stood inside a protected room while others fought their life or death battles for them.  

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Leliana watched the door close behind the Warden and Templar as they left the room, her jaw aching from the clench her teeth held. It tore her heart to watch Dal in so much pain. It seemed heartache followed the Warden on every turn leaving those who loved her to be helpless to stand by and watch.

She felt the eyes of the two warriors drilling holes through her back as she laid out a plan in her head. Evelyn’s list set off a domino effect of actions the minute she gained the paper, as Evelyn knew when she’d had Lilly close and bar the doors to the hall. There was so much to do and so little time until the Inquisition departed for Adamant.

“What will you do?” Cass’ thick Nevarran accent echoed inside her ears as she asked the question.

Leliana turned to face the woman as Cullen still stood to her side, his cheeks flaming with unchecked emotion.

“I’ll do what is needed, Cassandra. We have two hours till we meet with the Inquisitor and should
Cassandra straightened her shoulders as she left the room to check on their recruits and feud with Varric when she inevitably ran into him. Cullen remained unmoved as he stared across the room towards a blank wall.

“I’m sorry about Barris.” She murmured. His eyes met hers and she could see the emotion he was scared to face. “He’s a good man.”

“Far better than I.” Cullen mumbled, the scar on his lip twitching.

“Far better than most of us.” She added, and he smiled. He opened his lips to speak then hesitated as he looked away from her analyzing eyes.

“Is Ev in that much danger?” The question was so quiet it barely moved his mouth.

Leliana reached across the map to move a crimson colored figure with a deep red ribbon wrapped around it from a distant spot in Orlais to Skyhold before looking back up at the Commander. “She’s the Inquisitor- she’s always in danger. But yes, compiling this list could get her killed.”

The color disappeared from his face as the impact of her words took hold. He tightened his fists at his side as his feet carried him towards his soldiers- the only place that made sense to him.

“And no, I don’t know.” The Spymaster spoke as his hand wrapped around the door handle.

“You don’t know what?” He asked in confusion, turning back to face her.

“The answer to the question you won’t ask.” Cullen’s face contorted once more as he kept his emotions hidden from a woman skilled in the Game.

“And what is the question I won’t ask?” He asked in a flippant tone as the stress he was under shown through his stone exterior.

“You want to know what side she’s on… I don’t know, Cullen.” Without pause, Cullen opened the door and left the War Room, bowling over Sera and Scout Harding as they were trying to enter the room.

“Watch it, Cully-Wully!” The elf bleated at him as the two women entered the room and Scout Harding bit her lip to hide a chuckle at the massive gust of air that exited Cullen’s nostrils at being surrounded by rogues as he struggled to get around them with some shred of decency left. After the Commander finished storming off, they approached the Spymaster who summoned them.

While the women were distracted, Leliana reached down retrieve the misshapen slip of paper Josephine let fall from her shocked fingers earlier. She was glad Dal had not seen the names on the paper because of the eventual fate of all who read its contents. The girl had enough troubles on her mind without knowing the horror folded between her fingers.

“You called, boss?” Harding asked, standing at attention with her hands behind her back, while the elf perched herself up on the corner of the war table.

“Yes, I will show something to you both and then we will never speak of it again, but you will understand why I am showing you.” She reached out her hand passing the slip of paper into Harding thick fingers.

“What is this?” The dwarf asked in confusion before passing it up to Sera who read over the list of
names with narrowed eyes understanding why she’d been called.

“I believe this is a list of high-ranking members of the Venatori.” The Spymaster responded as Hardings jaw went slack.

“Well shite,” Sera crumbled the scrap of paper before throwing it onto the table and hopping down to the stone floor. “What are we supposed to do?”

“We need to know if any of these people have come to Skyhold with the Inquisitor. If so, they must be taken care of immediately.” Leliana told them frankly.

“And the others on the list?” Harding asked in shock.

“We… we will think of something.” There was no point in lying to the women she needed to trust her. If this information was true, it would require authority far higher than hers to deal with.

Her mind was torn, she wanted to work and reach out to every contact she had until she could confirm and reconfirm every name of this list, but she knew it was impossible with the Venatori watching their actions so closely. But the other side of her heart was pulling her across the fortress to where her best friend laid in tears as she grieved the loss that would come to her soon, of losing someone she loved yet again.

She couldn’t fail at her job again, for her to fail now meant certain death not only to Barris, but Idalya. If a Venatori agent found and could attack her, their whole fight against Corypheus would have been for nothing. All their sacrifices would have been empty ones.

Harding shook her head as she turned and exited the room to begin the search through the crowds that arrived with the Inquisitor. Sera studied the Spymaster with a raised brow.

“What?” Leliana asked, annoyed that the Sera stood and stared at her.

“How’s the Hero? I heard bout the Templar.” News had a way of traveling fast through spy networks.

“We have to complete this task before she can say goodbye. She needs our help.” A rare flash of an emotion resembling pain flashed on the elf’s face before she reverted to her normal cynical looking self.

“I’ll have an arrow in them before they knew what hit ‘em.” She swore as she headed out of the door determined to help the Hero find some sense of peace in this chaos.

Leliana watched the doors close behind Sera leaving her alone inside the War Room. She released a sigh as she tightened her eyes trying to block out the howl of emotions inside her soul so she could do her job as quickly as needed. There was only an hour and a half left until Evelyn would arrive. She did not know what to expect from the Inquisitor. One thing she could say about working for the woman is that she always kept her on her toes.

Picking up the crumpled piece of paper, she held it in her hand as she lamented the moment she took it from Evelyn’s ivory-skinned fingers. The list of names in the scrolling script would be burnt into her brain as long as she lived, but for how long that would continue to happen would depend on her next steps.

Evelyn led the Game through the front doors of Skyhold and the Inquisition would never be the same.
Turning to leave the room, she turned her head to look at the lapping fire within the mantle before she reached her hand out to throw the piece of paper into the embers and stood motionless as the paper unwound as the licking flames climbed across it. The names disappeared one by one as the charring paper consumed them until only the last name existed, the name written in a shakier and unsteady hand than the others: *Gaspard de Chalons.*
The Chapter Where the Servant Escorts Lady Evington

Chapter Summary

Evelyn has summoned the Lady Evington to a private meeting, but escorting Orlesian nobles through a crowded Skyhold turns out to be more difficult than expected.

Chapter Notes

Awesome news today! I have the next 25 chapters fully edited and ready to post and I've spent all week writing new chapters! I'm finally starting to see the end of the fic take shape and I'm so excited to for you readers to see what's coming!

Chapters will be posted on a routine schedule I haven't figured out since I received a lot of feedback over at my Tumblr that posts once a day or more often were too fast and readers were falling behind quickly.

An anxious servant ducked and dodged her way through the tremendous and giant crowds gathered in Skyhold’s courtyard. Someone built the crumbling fortress to house an army, but the addition of an additional army of Chevaliers and Orlesian nobles was more than the ancient building could hold. Chevaliers set about making themselves at home in the Inquisition’s base of operations by wiping the alcohol stores in Herald’s Rest tavern and helping themselves to any serving girl of a preferable age.

When she’d received her orders to fetch the Lady Evington and bring her to meet the Inquisitor, she’d tucked the pointed slopes of her ears beneath her curly blond hair pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. The more passable as a human she looked, the less likely to be touched by unwanted hands in the darkened halls of Skyhold she would be as she completed her task.

Unable to stand the overwhelming crowds, she slipped through a side door near the stables that lead toward the Templar tower. She sighed at being away from the mass of people congregating inside the courtyard. In the next hallway, she made a sharp turn and began the slow climb up the flights of stairs that would carry her to the top of the tower.

Lady Evington was receiving a tour of the grounds and amenities with the Inquisition’s Ambassador, Josephine Montilyet. It had been easy enough to track down the group since the Orlesians were prone to speak about every coming and going within the fortress. All a servant had to do was listen to learn just about anything about their traveling companions.

Her lungs wheezed as she made the turn up the final sets of stairs into the tower. She could have taken the long route around the battlements to avoid the treacherous climb on crumbling stairs, but it would have required her to travel back through the crowds of roaming hands and taken twice the time. Early in her time in the Inquisition, she learned that when you received a direct order from the Inquisitor you move as fast as possible. She had worked for worse people than Lady Trevelyan, but she could admit the woman had a fiery temper when she didn’t get her way.
“Let me tell you more about the history of this part of Skyhold.” Lady Montilyet’s voice carried down to the stairway. Her fine Antivan accent floating through the air like chords of music drifting on gusts of wind. With her exceptional hearing, she heard the unmistakable sound of a quiet sigh released from who she assumed was Lady Evington. She heard rumors of the Lady’s treatment of servants and those below her from multiple scouts and servants in the day since the Inquisitor arrived, so she wasn’t expecting anything more than a typical stuck-up noble from this waste of a woman.

Clearing the final steps, she entered the main room. A large circular area with work tables and study desks set up around the perimeter before a simple stairway led up to where the Templar slept. It was the middle of the day so most the Templar were training, other than fledgling recruits buried in piles of books. One tired and weary Templar stood over them, his eyes bloodshot and combined with the tattoos that reached around his jaws and down his chin combined to make a formidable first impression.

“Thank you for allowing us to impede on your time, Knight-Captain.” Lady Montilyet added as the Templar nodded before his exhausted eyes caught note of her traveling out of the darkened stairwell towards them and the smallest of smiles pulled at the corners of his lips.

His eyes drifted through her which caused an unfamiliar warming to spread across her skin. Many of the men outside put their hands all over her. There was something about the way the Templar registered her as a person first and possibly something enjoyable to look at had her blushing in confusion as the Templar smiled broader.

“Yes?” Her attention was caught by the confused Ambassador.

“Oh… I’m here to escort Lady Evington to the Inquisitor.”

The pompous old woman that must have been Lady Evington, grinned a smug look as she walked past the Ambassador and headed her way.

“It appears I have important business to discuss with the Inquisitor. Thank you for the tour, Lady Montilyet. Trevelyan has a quite the future ahead of her in Orlais with the keen eye for talent and opportunity she has.” The old cow mused as she made her way toward the servant.

The elf couldn’t help but recoil from the off-putting mask the woman wore that covered most of her face before erupting at the top with streams of jewels and delicate feathers showing the level of wealth the woman was accustomed to. The Ambassador bowed to the woman before she turned and resumed her conversation with the weary Templar.

“There are two paths, Madam.” The servant detailed. “One path is easier to walk but takes much longer. The other path is steep but will be over in just a minute.”

“There’s to be no delay. I must speak with Lady Trevelyan immediately.” The servant nodded and turned around to begin the descend the steep stairs with only minimal footing.

She wondered how the Templar climbed these stairs with their large, metal-encased heavy boots. After traveling this path multiple times, it surprised her to have not heard of a Templar tumbling down the curved pathway until they crumbled at the bottom against the jagged stones that stood as a warning to all who seek to pass. As they made the next turn in the spiral, the light dimmed as the windows from the upper floor were blocked from their angle.

Reaching to the side she pulled a tiny unlit torch from the side of the small lamp that hung from the stone wall to light the traveler’s path. The torch lit, and she slowed to walk beside the woman to
ensure the noble could see the stones crumbling beneath her feet.

She thought back to the smile on the Temple’s face as he’d seen her. It was rare that a wordless interaction in the fortress leads to anything that improved the quality of her day. Something in the man’s smile made her swoon if there was such a thing for who lived a life such as hers.

“Ohh!” Lady Evington cried, and the servant froze in horror as she realized in her daydreaming she had stepped on the train of the woman’s expensive and ornate gown. “You filthy animal!” She exclaimed. The woman’s hand traveled so quickly to slap across her face. The only indication it was coming was a slight flicker in the flame of the torch.

The bitch’s hand crashed across her cheek and eye which wept as the thin skin around the eye swelled with the force. By instinct, her hand protected the vulnerable side of her face as she tried not to glare at the woman with every bone in her body.

“You elves are worthless, what’s the point of even keeping you as servants if you can’t even walk straight. The Chantry should have murdered all your kind.” The woman spat before turning to continue her way down the curving flights of stairs.

“Speaking of people whose kind are unneeded…” The servant jumped in surprise as a voice drifted in gracefully from behind her. It was not the Ambassador, but a smooth and feminine one with a formal Orlesian accent twisted throughout. The owner of the words moved silently as they climbed the stairs below approaching them with speed.

“Excuse me?” Lady Evington braced her shoulders back as the owner of the voice turned the corner to approach them.

It was another elf. Brunette curly hair pulled back and secured against her head and tanned skin covered her exquisite features. From head to toe, she was clad in leather the color of pure onyx. In the shadows, she was invisible as she passed, except the glint of reflected flames off the two Silverite daggers strapped to her back. The silent elf observed her holding the side of her battered eye, her eyes taking in every detail in moments.

“How dare an elf speak to me like this!” The exasperated woman exclaimed, the sound echoing through the narrow stone path up into the home of Skyhold’s Templar. “I will make sure the Inquisitor knows of the deviant behavior of her servants! I have never been so offended in my life as I have been by the service in this crumbling dump of a castle!”

Lady Evington was shrieking, and the servant cringed as she moved away from the woman afraid another slap was on its way towards her already throbbing face. The noble stopped her screaming as the laughter echoed out of the thin frame of the other elf. She had one hand pressed against her chest as the other rested against her shapely hip.

“Tell the Inquisitor? Who do you think sent me to you?” An evil grin passed over the elf’s features as the blood drained from Lady Evington’s face as understanding became plastered to her features.

The noble instinctively backed away up the flight of stairs, refusing to remove her eyes from the elf who continued to press her way up the flight of stairs toward them.

“I… I can explain…” The Lady blurted out as she stumbled on a stair nearly falling backward.

“There’s little need to explain.” Stated the elf as her progress continued. “You traded an existence of being ignored for a chance at power. It’s a rather cliché story in Orlais, actually. The only unknown is whether you were working with Florianne or merely saw an opportunity in the vacuum
created by her death. Either way, you’re working for the Venatori and you’re already aware of how this will end.”

Lady Evington turned in horror to run but collided with the servant and they both tumbled to the ground. Both emitted a gasp of pain as the unforgiving stone steps dug into their sides. The woman turned, her nails digging into the dirt-covered steps as she tried to drag herself up the flight of stairs as the elf sidestepped her to a higher level.

“Please, I beg you. They sent me to observe, not to hurt anyone. Please… I beg you!”

The elf bent down so the two women were face to face as tears streamed down the terrified human’s face. Lady Evington’s end approached quickly, and the servant looked from one end of the stairway to another as she dared think if there was a path she could exit from without this assassin tracking her down to bring about her end. The assassin tilted her head as she looked thoughtfully at the struggling and desperate noble.

“Were you there when it happened? Did you see Florianne’s blade slide smoothly into Celene’s back? Did you smile with pride as the Empress tumbled through the sky like a wounded bird until her body shattered on the glittering stones below?”

The woman openly sobbed now as she reached out her thick quivering fingers toward the armor of the elf kneeling above her.

“The fragility of humans really is something, you know.” She murmured. Reaching behind her, the assassin pulled loose one of her silverite daggers which sparkled in the waning light in the stairwell. “So full of life one moment, but one quick movement of the blade and your life bleeds out around you like that’s where it always belonged. It spends your entire lifetime trying to escape back to the soil from which it came.” The elf leaned closer, filling the entire field of vision of the shaking woman.

“If you believe in the Maker, this is where you pray.” She whispered, as her boot pushed forward against the noble’s shoulder and Lady Evington fell backward in slow motion as the servant watched, a cascade of fabric and jewels as the woman’s arms swung wildly as she toppled down to the lower steps of the steep decline.

On the first hit, there was a terrifying crack as the woman’s scream was cut short as her body continued to topple over end until it crashed heavily at the bottom of the stairs- a disfigured and body mass unmoving as the streams of blood pooled around what formerly was the Lady Evington. The servant turned in fear as she looked at the assassin who had an empty look in her eyes as she stared at the woman’s body.

“Please, make it quick.” The servant whispered as she shut her eyes and she rocked back on forth on the stair. She ignorantly hoped that she would die alone many years from now in a bed surrounded by family but should have known her death would look like this. When you’re in the middle of a noble’s affairs, their Elven servants are nothing more than inconvenient with what they witness.

The girl jumped as a gentle hand rested against the side of her bruising face. She opened to see the assassin standing and looking down at her with such understanding and heartbreak in her eyes.

“I have no intention of harming you.” The elf stated as she sheathed her dagger behind her back. “Her other cohorts were quickly dispatched, but the Lady deserved a greater amount of torment than I granted her, as you’ve been witness to.” She motioned to the swollen shut eye of the servant as she cracked her knuckles. “Go to the healer’s area and find the Elven attendant, tell them Brial…"
sent you and you’ll be healed discretely.”

The servant nodded numbly as she realized the assassin, or Briala as she’d called herself, would spare her life despite watching the assassination of a noble within Skyhold. Elven servants were viewed as disposable as far as it concerned the Game, so it confused her why this assassin would let her live.

“Give me twenty seconds then scream bloody murder. Got it?” The servant nodded again as the elf in two steps vaulted herself up the side of the stone wall until she had a firm handhold on the window outlet high above their heads. Her bones appeared to be made of a more flexible substance as she squeezed through the window leaving the stairway empty except the servant and the bloody oozing mess at the bottom that used to be Lady Evington.

Waiting the required amount of time, a blood-curdling screech echoed out of the stairway that the servant didn’t even need to pretend for. Everything about what happened was vile and her stomach threatened to spill its contents as the elf gagged at the rising smell of blood within the chamber.

Within moments, the Ambassador and Templar rushed down the stairs with surprise in their eyes until they turned the corner and Lady Montilyet gasped throwing a hand over her mouth as the Templar steered the woman to look away from the carnage below them.

“Maker, what happened?” The Templar exclaimed as his tattooed jaw fell open and his hands braced her shoulders trying to stop the sound of the servant still screaming helplessly.

“The… the lady…” she tried to speak, but she shook uncontrollably as the shock set in. “She… her dress.” She shook her head trying to forget the sickening crack of the Lady’s neck breaking as her head crashed into the bottom stairs. “I tried… couldn’t grab her… fell.”

“You unfortunate thing.” The Ambassador slid a warm arm scented with a light perfume around the girl’s shoulders as she guided her away from the scene up toward the Templar’s area. “Rylen.” She ordered over her puffed golden shoulder, “I’m taking her to the healers for shock. Gather the Templar and have the area guarded until the area is cleansed and the Lady’s body brought forth to the Chantry. Send messages to the Inquisitor and Spymaster of the Lady’s accident.”

The servant continued shaking as the Ambassador steered her not into the main area of the Templar tower, but out the side door of the ramparts as she escorted the servant across to a stone stairway that lead into the upper courtyard.

“I’m sorry you had to be a witness to that.” Lady Montilyet whispered as she helped the elf down the flight of stairs. “Unfortunately, steps must be taken to ensure the safety of Skyhold and all those who live here. Do you understand?” The servant turned towards the woman in surprise, the Ambassador’s eyes kind as she waited to see the girl’s response.

“I… I understand.” The Ambassador nodded as she steered the girl towards the healer’s area.

“Thank you for your understanding. We need to get your eye healed before you testify before the Inquisitor about Lady Evington’s unfortunate fall in Skyhold, as I’m sure you understand.” The servant nodded again as they reached the entrance to the healer area. “Please check in with the Spymaster after you're finished. Thank you for your hard work and dedication to the Inquisition.” And in a blur of golden skirts, she was gone leaving the servant alone in front of the healer’s area.

Working for the Inquisition turned out to be a lot different than she had expected. She thought she had to keep her eyes discreetly turned working for the King and Queen of Ferelden, but the Inquisition required discretion on a level she’d seen before in her years as a traveling servant. With
a sigh, she opened the door and headed into the large room that smelled like death, hoping that maybe her day would get easier after how her afternoon transpired,

Knowing Skyhold’s luck her bad luck was only beginning.
The Chapter Where Idalya Says Goodbye

Chapter Summary

Idalya is left waiting in her room for Scout Harding to lead her to say goodbye to Barris.

Reflections of clouds moving across the darkening sky swirled across Idalya’s ceiling as she laid on her bed watching the designs move and break across the beams of the wall. Time had fallen apart by its seams. Every passing minute became a lifetime that swept the Warden away on its currents.

She waited for the inevitable rush of pain, but nothing arrived. An emptiness had instead leched its way through her veins like a sticky poison until it froze her in place watching the fading lights of the day.

The world continued outside her room like nothing catastrophic happened, but Dal knew better.

Lights weren’t just fading in the sky but inside the shell of her heart. Two guards stationed outside her room stood stoically, if they understood why they guarded her, they gave no sign to those who passed. She wanted to rise from bed and fight her way through every soldier in her way until she could see Barris with her own eyes. Until she saw him, she would not, could not, believe the infallible man had fallen due to a mere cut.

The world always reminded the Warden that it was a cruel and vicious place for any who sought happiness.

The longer she laid in place, the less idea she had about how much time had passed. She yearned to find herself on her knees praying to the Maker to let her sleep until Scout Harding came to tell her it was time. But what then? When Harding arrived, it was time for her to confront reality and everything that came with it. It tore her soul whether she wanted to fast forward time to be at Barris’ side or stay forever in this limbo where the Templar was neither alive nor dead, and she could stay in ignorance forever.

Servants brought her food soon after she’d arrived at her room, she assumed on Leliana’s orders since the tray filled with every sweet substance the kitchens could concoct on short notice. When even a tray of tiny cakes and sticky buns wasn’t enough to lure her to eat, she knew she was in trouble.

How could she survive after this?

After awakening, she had been so lost in the world. Barris provided a compass to steer herself along the path she wished to walk- the one of a true hero. She followed in his footsteps as she learned to make her own way through this new world and the thought of walking that path alone crushed her heart as each lingering moment passed.

Knock. Knock.

The Warden shut her eyes as she recognized the soft humming of the Spymaster’s most valued
scout on the other side of the door. It was time, but she wasn’t ready. She’d never be ready for what was about to happen and yet, it still needed to happen. If she let her fear keep her from saying goodbye to the man that helped her remember what hope felt like, she’d never forgive herself.

As she’d approached Denerim one last time to confront the Archdemon, her eyes scanned towards the Alienage knowing she should say goodbye to her mother. They stood so close and she walked by because she knew if she saw her mother, she couldn’t walk into the battle with the monster. At that moment her fear beat her bravery and she’d never seen her beloved mother again. The one with the kindest eyes she’d ever seen burned alive in the Alienage hours later with no sight of her daughter, the hero, in sight.

Her feet were unsteady as she rose. Harding waited outside the door knowing the Warden heard her inside. Dal took her time sliding her boots on, throwing the deep gray wool cloak over her head and shoulders to hide the messy mop of white hair on top of her head. She took a deep inhale before she opened the door to find the solemn-faced dwarf waiting. The women nodded as they regarded one another. There was no need for words, both understood what their orders were.

The last of the sun sunk below the snow-capped mountains as the elf and dwarf set off across Skyhold toward the healers’ area buried in the back of the smaller courtyard of the fortress. Skyhold was quieter than usual as they crossed the ramparts. There were two armies inside Skyhold, so there should have been people out and about than the Warden could see. Passing a hallway, a small group of Orlesian women cried and comforted one another, their masks removed as they whispered in the darkened corners of the stairway.

“What was that about?” Idalya mumbled as they continued at a casual pace to avoid suspicion.

“The scouts have been busy today,” Harding responded, her face hardening to the women as they continued down a flight of stairs into the edge of the courtyard they sought. Small groups of Orlesians huddled together as Templar and soldiers stood at attention at every corner.

As the door to the healers’ area became clearer, she recognized the two figures standing outside in conversation- Solas and Fiona. The former Warden looked exhausted as she spoke with Solas. During Idalya’s time in the Inquisition, the woman’s hair had grayed and her energy levels were fading. She assumed the woman was close to age fifty when they first met, but Fiona now passed for decades older than that. If she didn’t slow her pace, Dal assumed that the woman would join the Fade before the final confrontation with Corypheus.

The two mages turned as the door to the healer’s opened, and Dorian stepped out, heavy circles weighing under his eyes. The man shook his head towards his two colleagues and Dal saw Solas’ shoulders slump as a fist formed inside her throat. She sniffed as they approached and Solas’ shoulders whipped around in surprise, his brows raised, as he headed to her.

Idalya didn’t pull back as the man wrapped his arms around her pulling her close as she buried her face into the thick linen shirt the mage wore. She couldn’t cry now, or she’d never stop, but she needed this one moment to absorb the man’s strength before she headed inside. She leaned back to study the tired elf.

“How is he?” There wasn’t much change in Solas’ face which told her that at least the Barris still lived.

“Comfortable, but it won’t be long.” She swallowed harshly as she listened to his words. How could this have happened?

“I don’t understand.” She shook her head in denial. “How come you can’t just heal him or
“I’m sorry, Asha.” The elf spoke as he pushed her messy hair out of her face. “Magic can heal wounds and fresh injuries, but the Knight-Captain’s shoulder was infected for weeks without care while the infection wreaked havoc through his system. We can repair a stab wound, but we can’t reverse weeks of life-threatening damage. It’s more than a simple Elven mage can do.” The skin around his eyes crinkled as the sides of his lip twitched in irritation. As much as she hated that there was nothing they could do, Solas hated the predicament more.

“Can I see him?” Solas nodded and steered her with a warm hand against her shoulders towards the front door as Dorian and Fiona stepped back, their expressions somber as they watched the elves pass.

“We’ll have soldiers stationed outside. Take as long as you need.” Idalya frowned as Solas reached for the door.

“Why all the security?” she asked as the elf sighed that she caught on to whatever was happening inside Skyhold despite being distracted with the dying Templar.

”The Inquisitor and multiple dignitaries were attacked today within Skyhold.” Dal gasped as she turned towards the mage.

“Is Evelyn okay?” As much as she despised the woman, she knew how integral she was to the Inquisition’s final plans. Without Evelyn, Corypheus won without reaching the war.

“Bruised, but she’s a proficient rogue and stayed alive until backup arrived. She’s healed and is resting. The other nobles were not so lucky.”

She remembered the plan she’d been witness to a day ago and wondered if there was any connection between the deaths of the nobles and the people listed on Evelyn’s list. The advisers said Evelyn was in danger, but she’d never thought assassins would be brazen enough to attack the Inquisitor within Skyhold itself. If they weren’t safe here, there was nowhere they could relax.

“I need rest. If you need me, you know where to find me.” Before leaving, the mage leaned down and placed a gentle kiss at her temple as she stared helplessly towards the door.

She couldn’t be distracted by what was happening within Skyhold, her only focus could be on what was inside the building. A part of her hoped that she would open the door to find a smiling Barris sitting on a cot as everyone erupted in laughter. She would much rather hope for a cruel practical joke over the cruelty of reality.

Alone now, she placed her shaking hand around the handle as she pulled the door open. It was dimly lit with few candles burning as the smell of disinfectants burned at her nose. A young elf in healers’ robes was wiping up a counter when she saw Dal enter. With a curt bow, the girl showed herself out the door leaving her alone, save for a heavy sheet blocking her view of the other side of the room. There was a raspy breath in the distance as her hands shook. She was certain she could do this. She needed to be strong, right?

Barris laid on a large cot, his skin sallow and gray, as he struggled to breathe in his sleep. His shirt had been removed and heavy bandaging covered his sword arm with fresh streaks of blood pressing their way through the woven cloth. His cheeks were hallowed, and his collarbones protruded as the
Knight-Captain wasted away as the Templar had continued to fight their way toward Skyhold despite the fading health of their leader.

There was an empty chair to his side, and as her entire body trembled in fear, she seated herself without falling. There was no resemblance between this shell of a man and the one who months ago twirled her across the manicured lawns of the Winter Palace. She moved her hand to slide her shaking fingers between his and finally, the sob passed her lips as she felt how icy cold his skin was to the touch. *They were right*- he wouldn’t last much longer.

“I don’t know what to say.” She whispered as she watched the haggard rise and fall of the Templar’s chest. “I suppose it’s naïve of me to never prepare for this moment. I… I guess, I thought it would be the other way around. I never expected to outlive members of the Inquisition.” The truth was a painful one as she admitted it. She tightened her hand around his as she hoped wherever he was in the Fade, he knew she wouldn’t leave his side until it was over.

There were so many things she wanted, needed, to say, but instead, she sat quietly with her eyes closed as she appreciated having this moment to be by his side. This would be all she ever got, so she wanted to appreciate this one moment. Sliding her thumb across the top of his hand, it seemed to calm his violent breathing.

*How dare the Maker let this happen to him?*

Her dedication to her belief in the Maker quickly waned since she returned to Thedas and this wouldn’t help her come to terms with what she felt. After being dead for over a decade she felt she could say with certainty that there was no Maker and he was only a fantasy created to give those who survived peace in the face of grief.

Pulling her chair closer to the bed, she rested her head on top of his chilled bicep as she continued holding his hand. Her heat spread into his flesh as he warmed against her burning skin. She was always the freezing one, so for once she could be the one to offer someone her warmth. Using her free hand, she ran it over his forearm spreading precious heat into him to let him know she was here. It was such a small thing, yet it helped her as there was a way she could give him some minor comfort.

Without thinking too much about it, she rose in her chair removing her heavy wool cloak and crawled onto the side of the cot. She shivered as the bare skin of his chest and arms grazed against her own but settled in next to him before throwing the heavy cloak over them. Moving his uninjured arm around her, she burrowed her nose into the crook of his neck as tremors increased in her body as she wrapped her arm across his freezing torso.

The traditional smells of Templar were still heavy on his skin. The rich smell of leather mixed with the acidic smell of the steel. She wondered what became of his armor and weapons. It was a strange thought, but she considered asking for his sword to keep after the chapter was closed was appropriate, to have something to keep he'd kept close. She felt a surge of guilt as she buried her face deeper against his collarbones. Barris was still breathing and yet she was worried about a sword? *What was wrong with her?*

Was this what grief was like? Being able to focus on nothing but the most inane details as the world carried on around you? She had been too young when she’d lost her father to understand what happened, then she’d been too distracted by the knowledge of her own death to grieve the loss of her mother. Her team remained lucky as they’d traveled across Thedas to be untouched by Death’s long and spindling finger until it had been her turn. Maybe that was her fear for the handsome Templar that she knew where he was headed, and it wasn’t to the bosom of the Maker.
Barris was headed toward nothingness. He wouldn’t transform and ascend, but his flame would expire, and he would fade leaving a hole in the universe where he once belonged. *It wasn’t fair.* None of this was fair. The tears flowed as she pulled his uninjured arm tighter and closed her fingers around his. Her tears ran from her closed eyes and down the sides of her face where they dripped along his skin baptizing him in her grief and pain. She let them come as the sobs wracked her frame harder until she was also gasping from breath as she prayed to anything in the universe to help her. In her desperation, she would accept any intervention she knew would never come.

Her body became heavy as she released her grief, not lighter as she’d hoped. She’d been awake since the Inquisitor returned and its effects were taking its toll of her limbs. She tried to open her eyes, but her lids were made of heavy plate as she slid them open. A sigh escaped through her lips as she felt sleep overtake her. It felt right as she slipped toward the Fade. Maybe if she focused she could locate Barris in the Fade and say goodbye before he left for good.

She yawned as she cuddled closer to the Templar whose skin was now much warmer than he’d been when she entered. The thought crossed her mind that she didn’t know whether she wanted the man to live or have passed when she awoke. As much as she desperately needed him to survive, she couldn’t handle seeing him suffer in pain. Each breath of Barris’ was a labored task draining his life with each exhale.

Clearing her mind, she focused on the feel and smell of him next to her, trying to memorize every detail and sensation at that moment, but her weary body would not keep her awake long enough to remember it all.
The Chapter Where Cullen Eavesdrops

Chapter Summary

Evelyn is injured in a Venatori attack. Cullen struggles to balance the duties of his job, and what his heart still yearns for.

Chapter Notes

I hope everyone's enjoying the story. Drop some comments and let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Fasta Vass! Stay still woman!” Dorian exclaimed at an irritated Evelyn as he removed the clumsy bandage on her arm the soldiers wrapped over her injury that already had patterns of deep crimson seeping through.

Cullen scoffed from the corner. This was classic Evelyn. People ignoring her? Make a drunken scene or pick a fight. She’s in danger and needs help? Aloof and fighting attempts to heal her. She was the human equivalent to whiplash. Whatever direction they expected her to move, she always fought in the opposite. It was the lasting skills she learned from her dear father in her desperate attempts to survive.

At that moment, it was easier to focus on Evelyn’s flaws than focus on his real feelings of his former lover attacked within the home he guarded. He knew there was a chance of this happening when he heard the announcement the Inquisitor would return to Skyhold with her entourage in tow, but he never expected for her to be attacked within her own chambers and she’d only survived because the attack occurred when Evelyn was awake instead of during the cover of darkness when the woman drunken herself into a coma as she did every night since he’d known her.

His hand tightened around the pommel of his chilled sword as Dorian struggled to keep the ornery woman motionless as he healed her. She was worse at phrasing her feelings than he was. The insult of being attacked so deep within her own fortress had his boss on edge and Cullen sensed she was moments away from biting Dorian’s head off. Leliana’s plan to take out the names of the Evelyn’s provided list worked until the hidden Venatori agents on their list caught on to what was happening.

Cullen was pacing in front of the Inquisitor’s throne when the scream echoed from her quarters and his heart froze as his feet kicked into high gear. He raced up the flights of stairs, taking two steps at a time as he flew by the other soldiers until he kicked the door down to find a heavily bleeding Evelyn with a harlequin assassin lying dead beside her blood-coated leather boots. At her side, he found a deep laceration on her forearm straight to the bone she wretched from his grasp as she spit on the twisted body on the floor and used her undamaged arm to push her flowing mane of auburn hair out of her sweating face.

Dorian, tired of her antics, grabbed her stiffly by the wrist as Evelyn’s head whipped around to
glare daggers at the mage as he sealed the final layer of skin to heal and prevent infection. Pavus was lucky to be related to the Inquisitor at that moment since Cullen was certain that anyone else who would try to restrain Evelyn like that would have had a dagger straight through their chest cavity before they tightened their grip around her delicate wrist. With a dissatisfied grunt, Dorian dropped her arm as the skin regained its normal hue.

“Were you hit anywhere else?” He asked as he drained a glass of wine that Evelyn had left sitting on her desk as Cullen raised a curious eyebrow that he’d drink anything left out in her room after she’d been attacked by assassins.

“No, I’m fine.” She stated as she rose from her chair. “You can leave now.”

“Just as well, I have far more cooperative patients to help.” The mage gave him one of his trademark grins as he passed, but the smile reached nowhere near the exhausted man’s eyes. Dorian didn’t bother hesitating as his feet carried him to the flights of stairs, Cullen turned to follow on his heels before her voice halted him in his tracks.

“Commander, please remain.” Cullen saw the rise of Dorian’s brows from the side of his head as he took the first turn towards the main landing. What in the Maker’s name could she want with him?

He tried to stay focused as he made an about-face and headed back into the center of her quarters, where he stood as tall as possible with his shoulders pressed behind him. He would not let her see him stumble even while his heart broke in her presence.

“Inquisitor.” He focused over her shoulder out the balcony window to avoid any instance of eye contact. His eyes caught the saunter of her swaying hips as she approached until she was but a few paces away.

“Any indications of an uprising?” Her voice was so quiet it was nothing more than a simple vibration inside his ear.

“No, the assassin you faced has been the only attack from the Venatori. I believe Leliana and her scouts were quick and effective in their work. Skyhold, at this moment, is safe.” Her body relaxed as she sighed, and his eyes closed as he swallowed at the sounds of her heels echoing through the chamber as she returned to the desk.

“Yeah, Leliana and her scouts are a little too good.” She mumbled as she sat down, decanter already in hand as she poured herself a massive glass of wine that was a rich burgundy in shade. Cullen’s head tilted to the side as he watched the Orlesian noble melt away before his eyes into the Evelyn that most never met. Noting Cullen’s expression, she raised her forearm up where the flesh was bright pink under where her tunic was split by the sharpened blade.

“This was that Elven bitch’s handiwork.” His jaw fell open in shock as he took hold of Evelyn’s words. As Cullen’s face remained clouded with confusion, Evelyn rolled her eyes and shook her head in annoyance. “Celene’s friend, the one that returned with the Inquisition.”

“Briala?” How could this have happened? One of their own scouts was a spy, and she’d been under his nose this entire time. “I’ll have my men apprehend her to the dungeons, at once, Inquisitor.” He swallowed loudly as he realized he was directly watching her, which he had told himself he would not do.

“There’s no need, Commander. She committed no crime other than what she was instructed.” She tipped the glass back taking a hearty draught before exhaling.
His jaw gaped open wider. He still didn’t understand what was happening. Maker take all these women and their mind games. He’d had enough of being a pawn in their chess matches. Furious he was at being left out of the loop once again, but Evelyn barely remembered he was in the room as she gazed into the bottom of her glass like it held the key to her future.

“I wasn’t paying attention.” The words were quiet from her pursed lips when they came. “The assassin was here, and I didn’t sense it. Briala spotted them climbing through a window and followed. She cut them down before I knew both had entered my quarters.” She reached over to pour the rest of the already emptying decanter into her glass, which sloshed against the thin glass reflecting trails of glittering red tones onto the desk from the sunlight that poured in through the open balcony behind her.

“The Venatori executed a contingency plan and without the elf- they would have succeeded. We needed a better alibi with so many spies going down at once, so it was her idea to wound me and frame the situation to look like an assassin had visited me as well.” She shook her head bitterly as her hand ran over the sensitive skin on her arm. Magic may heal the injury beneath, but the body remembered the trauma and clung to it long after the mana stopped flowing from the mage’s hands. “It was such a good plan, I’m annoyed I didn’t think of it myself.” She scoffed.

Anger welled inside him at the knowledge that the elf harmed Evelyn severely even if done to protect her. It was his job to ensure her safety. He had failed, and a mere scout was the one to protect her when the moment arrived.

“She could have let me die because of what I did…” her voice trailed off into the silence in her quarters, since Cullen could not shape a coherent phrase in his head, much less speak it out loud. Being this close to her was too much for him, her feelings were no longer his responsibility, she made that clear at the Winter Palace and every day since with her silence. Why did he still care so much? Could there be a worse fate for a man than to pine forever for a woman he’d never be worthy of? His job was to protect her and keep her safe, which required him to care for her and her safety. So, while he was still Commander of the Inquisition’s armies, he’d never be free of her.

Maybe this wasn’t the job for him.

The door opening at the foot of the stairs caught his attention as he pulled his sword from his scabbard and turned to face whoever ascended the flights of stairs on light feet. Josephine’s elegant quaff appeared around the corner as she rushed up the flight of stairs with her writing board clutched in hand.

“Inquisitor… Commander.” Josie looked uncertain as she saw Cullen standing at attention in the room as she entered the main area and progressed towards Evelyn’s desk. “Sorry, for my delay, the chevaliers are feeling the need to interview anyone who needs to speak to you now.” Evelyn rolled her eyes as she knocked back the rest of her wine then frowned at the empty glass and the empty decanter still glittering in the warm light. “I need to ask you a few informal questions, if I may?” Evelyn nodded, and Cullen took that as his official exit.

“Inquisitor. Ambassador.” He spun so fast to leave the room, his boots slipped on the greasy surface of the stone floor where the assassin’s blood had been wiped hastily away an hour beforehand. He prayed to the Maker that neither women had seen the physical display that mirrored the chaos of emotions raging inside him as he’d been forced to stand and listen to the woman whom he craved harder than he’d ever craved lyrium.

As his boots finished the final steps of the first flight he breathed harder, his body no longer able to hide the symptoms of both forms of his withdrawal rearing their ugly heads as his twitching hand
grabbed hold of the banister and tried to steady his breathing.

“… yes, it appears so.” Evelyn’s voice floated down the stairwell, she sounded so tired- the way she did when she was in her own quarters. It was one of the few places she could be herself without retribution. So, having an assassin attack her at her most vulnerable must have hurt her far more than she’d ever let on.

“I apologize for being so improper, but I’d like to ask for a warning on the royal wedding, so the Inquisition will have adequate time to prepare.”

Cullen’s eyes shut as a burn traveled across their surface where the tears if he had any left, would form and flow. He needed to leave now. Why was he standing here? Nothing he would hear would cause him anything but pain, yet his feet remained planted as he tried to hold whatever semblance of composure he still had before having to face Evelyn’s second army outside the main doors.

“There will be no wedding.” Her answer destroyed the last of that elusive composure.

“Oh…” Josephine’s response hung in the air as it was obvious the woman was organizing her thoughts. “I apologize, Inquisitor, I misunderstood the nature of your relationship with the Emperor.”

His eyes reopened as looked up into the light at the top of the stairs as he prayed to every god that might exist beyond this world for one break in this world- just one respite in the constant barrage of shit he had taken in the last decade of his life. For everything he’d experienced, he’d never complained about his fortune or what happened to him. But even he could admit, he had horrendous luck. Evelyn was the first thing that gave him hope and jump-started the block of ice that had been his heart. He hadn’t liked the woman when they first met, yet from that moment she thawed out the man that once remembered how to feel.

“No, you didn’t misunderstand, but I repeat: there will be no wedding.” He sighed as his fears were confirmed- she was lost to him if she’d ever been his. “Marriage’s only purpose for nobles is to raise the station of another or solidify a partnership. I am of equal station to Gaspard, so a marriage would only seek to elevate my….

There will be no wedding.” Her last words escaped as a snarl as Cullen understood what Josephine did not.

She would not marry the Emperor because it would give her father an immense amount of power. The senior Trevelyan remained quiet in Evelyn’s time in the Inquisition because he knew if he came to claim her he’d have to fight his way through her army first. But being the father-in-law of the Emperor would give him the power to weasel his way back into Evelyn’s life and exert his control over the woman who’d escaped his clutches.

At one point in her life she wouldn’t have cared about his fate as she screamed his sins from the rafters, but now she had something to lose. While she could damn him for life, now she had built a life of her own, her father now held the same power. They lived in a silent balancing act while they waited for the other to act. If her father thought she would run out and enter the first marriage she could secure to escape him, he was wrong.

The women continued to speak from above, but Cullen with his broken spirit could not focus on anything other than the aching throb in his chest her words whispered back to life. For one moment his sadness lifted as he’d felt hope dare to show its face in the sunlight once more before the door slammed shut forever on reconciliation. He recognized he was pathetic, but after spending a decade not feeling, it forced him to feel everything more intensely than he remembered people could.

As his vision came back into focus from his burning eyes, he gathered his wits and opened the
bottom door to leave to the next flight of stairs. There were so many things that needed to be done. His army would depart from Skyhold in two weeks’ time to begin the long and daunting march to Adamant. There was also the matter of his new Knight-Captain and briefing her on the situation in Skyhold.

He tried arguing with Evelyn that he didn’t need a third Knight-Captain, but after seeing Barris he dropped the fight- she was right, he’d need a new second-in-command soon. As much of a pain-in-the-ass dealing with Marion Hawke in Kirkwall had been, she wasn’t as stubborn as her cousin Lilly. She was one of the Templar sent to assist and rebuild in Kirkwall after Meredith and Orsino’s antics brought the entire city weeping to its knees.

From the moment Lilly arrived from Kinloch, trivial things had been out of place, drills sabotaged, equipment and funds missing. No one had ever pinned anything on the girl with the long strawberry-blond hair, but Cullen knew in his gut it had been her. That she was related, if even distantly, to the irksome Champion of Kirkwall made every interaction with her painful.

Which is why he wasn’t surprised when in Rylen’s first week in Kirkwall, he’d fallen in love with the questionable Templar, who had broken his heart the minute an opportunity to leave the cesspool that was Kirkwall arose. He needed to find Rylen before the man poisoned himself to death with booze in the Herald’s Rest. Between the unexpected return of Lilly and the future loss of one of his best friends, he knew Rylen would fall apart at the bar until his legs could no longer handle the weight on his shoulders.

Exiting into the main hall, he found himself eye to eye with the silver sculpted mask of a chevalier. Cullen stood his ground unblinking until the man moved out of his way, so the Commander could pass. This was his fucking home, and he’d be damned if some other captain tried to tell him where he could venture.

Passing through the rotunda, he found it empty as he presumed both mages were off trying to help Barris. It was just as well, he wasn’t in the mood to answer questions the two men would have. The wind bit at his cheeks as he walked into the open air to make his way towards his tower. He needed one moment where he could feel safe from Evelyn and everything she reminded him of. The constant reminder of how unworthy his past had made him.

In the quiet of his tower, he released a massive sigh as he reached below his desk and pulled out a silver flask hidden in the back of a drawer from Rylen’s searching eyes. Popping the cap, he swigged back a large mouthful of the whiskey contained within. As the burning spread across his chest like the warm embrace of a lover, he closed his eyes once more as he allowed himself to remember how Evelyn looked standing alone in the room with him. What would have happened if he’d said something? Told her how much pain she caused to all, not just himself. He only knew how to be strong with her, not against her.

Staggering to his chair, he collapsed within as he sighed once again. His life sucked, and this entire day was going straight to shit. He shook his head. No, that’s not how we beat this. He needed rest, but once he regained his strength, he would follow one foot in front of another until the path led him from far from this dust-covered place where he wallowed in his happy memories with Ev.

She may no longer be with him, but Cullen could swear one vow- if Gaspard ever mistreated Evelyn Trevelyan he would remove the man’s head and mount it on a pike on the front lawn of the Winter Palace.

Chapter End Notes
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The Chapter Where Idalya Searches the Fade for Help

Chapter Summary

Unable to bear her grief, Idalya enters the Fade searching for answers.

Chapter Notes

Hope everyone is enjoying the story! <3

The Fade was jagged and misaligned as Idalya slipped through the layers of vastness to confront the reality she wanted nothing more than to escape from. She’d learned from her time training with her illusive teacher that much of what a mage experienced in the Fade was based on the emotional state and history of that person. Tonight, the other dimension resembled a battlefield more than a refuge with thick billowing clouds of emerald smoke churning around her mocking her with the color of Barris’ eyes.

Solas’ presence was there, but so distant from where she emerged. As her spirit awoke in the other world, her senses would hone on his location, drawing them together until she emerged, ready to train. But tonight, she found herself alone in the Fade, no different from the real world.

Once she asked her teacher if it was possible for a soul to disconnect fully from its body and travel the Fade without having to experience the body’s death on the other side. The look of horror and fear that passed the elf’s features made her drop the question and discuss the topic again.

Her hand reached up instinctively to press against the illusion of her beating heart. Even in the haven of the Fade, her chest ached with the pain of the man slipping away to join her in this insidious place. She looked around, no longer in wonder, but in disgust that this place would rob her of the chance to learn every intricate detail of the Templar’s life as she gained the chance to become a part. If the Maker was real, she had bones to pick with them.

Oh, the Maker… what a complicated and painful subject that was as of late. She once believed in Andraste and the Maker, spending her nights reading the Chant by candlelight with Leliana, as each footstep during the day carried her toward her fate. Now, just the mention of the word Maker left her ill as her stomach churned against the questions her heart dared not ask that would unmake everything she ever knew.

She believed even if there was no Maker, that something powerful existed even if no titles existed for such a creature. Corypheus was proof of this. Mages with a power beyond what the world knew walked the face of Thedas once. Where were they? Corypheus spoke of others like himself, and places once thought to only be bedtime stories for children like they were real and tangible.

She thought of her words by Barris’ bedside begging the Maker or anything else that existed in the universe for their help, that she would do whatever they bid to save the life of failing Templar. She knew Solas would disapprove since he’d insist the only beings who’d respond would be demons.
But what if a demon could help?

Shaking her head, she cleared the thought. Saving Barris didn’t help anyone’s cause if he needed to cut her down after turning into an abomination. But other examples existed that she’d heard of- one of the Champion’s companions had a living spirit of Justice inside him before Hawke had taken the liberties to separate his head from the rest of his person.

The wisps of green smoke churned more violently around her as her emotions grew more erratic and inconsistent. She needed strength, but the only emotions that heeded her call were anger, confusion, and grief which filled the surrounding plains with their uneasy and seething chaos. Why was every aspect of her life so painful and complicated? Every breath she drew was a miracle, but life was jarring and raked against her flesh until she could not feel any other sensation than the pain it imposed on those trying to survive.

Solas.

Her spirit cried out to the mage across the barren warpath, but she only felt his presence grow smaller as he moved away. Even her own teacher had deserted her when she needed him the most. The clouds grew thicker as her desperation became more palpable. She did not understand where she was in the Fade, but her emotions were dragging her under to drown beneath their impressive weight. Dropping to her knees, her hands covered her face as she sobbed tearless cries into her palms as she vainly tried to scream away the despair that resembled dying.

Solas, please.

Even as she begged with her whole heart, the mage refused to come to her side as the elf crumbled to the freezing imitation of a floor. Her body shivered as the cold sunk into the marrow of her bones which were farther away than she was now. She was sprawled as she gave up the fight to get up and keep walking. Maybe she could find Barris within the Fade and stay with him forever, leaving behind the state of pain and terror living within the Inquisition left her in every day.

Oh, my poor child.

Idalya’s eyes popped open in surprise at the voice. Wait... She listened but was uncertain whether the sound was real or a figment of her imagination. Trying to remember the details, she couldn’t describe the voice she heard with any words other than warmth and comfort. It was familiar, yet not. Pushing herself to a sitting position, she looked around on all sides. The Fade was still empty, but the thickness and churning of the foul emerald clouds diminished as she gained some modest ability to hold on to her emotions.

“Is someone there?” Her words evaporated into the vapor of clouds as it felt ridiculous to search for a hidden being within the endless sprawl of the Fade.

Shaking her head, she moved to her knees as she composed herself enough to rise and find her teacher before begging once more for his help. Solas would know a way, he had to. He swore to do whatever had to be done to help her succeed- she needed Barris alive and fighting in the world even if it wasn’t by her side. Solas would think of something; he had to.

Your mentor has abandoned you.

The words were quiet as she rose to her feet but stung within her reanimated chest. She couldn’t argue with the voice. Solas was hiding from her in the one place where he’d vowed he’d always guide her to safety. The man who took her under his wing like a father left her for the wolves when her emotions became too distraught. How could she find him when he didn’t want to be found?
Dal didn’t cringe this time as the words appeared in her head. Whoever or whatever this was, she didn’t sense harm. Solas instructed her to question everything, to never trust her first instinct within the Fade, so with a critical eye she sensed only a willing hand to help her in her moment of need.

Please, help me. She focused on the words, repeating them, as she tried to communicate with whatever offered their help. Desperation had taken its toll and she would shun nothing offering help. Her body jumped as she felt chilled fingers slip through her own, intertwining their thin spindly appendages with hers.

Breathing deeply, she closed her eyes, focusing on the details of her teacher. The smell of elfroot and fresh soil on his hands, the sound of his quiet chuckles at her barrage of terrible jokes, the tapping of the pads of his fingers on the surface of his desk as he was deep in his research- all those tiny elements a person imparted into the world that changed it around them one breath at a time.

Surprise vibrated through her as she felt the mage’s presence grow closer and her spirit reached out in his direction as it propelled her way through the Fade until she halted in front of the wall where the Fade was thicker than any other spot she’d ever experienced within her dreams. Solas was close, she could practically reach out and touch him if only she could see him. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward through the thick wall the Fade created, exiting into bright sunshine beaming down around her on lush rolling hills of greenery. The veil laid heavily on her as she stepped into this place like a shroud of mourning draped across her shoulders.

Solas sat ahead, his profile easy to identify in the distance, knees drawn to his chest as he stared out at a building on the horizon, unlike anything she’d ever seen. It was vast as it soared skyward breaking through the white billowing clouds. The rays of light reflected on the slick surface refracting shards of colors. It was more beautiful and terrifying than anything she’d ever known, she decided, as her feet carried her closer towards her teacher.

“You’ve become powerful to follow me here.” He uttered, his words apologetic, as he shook his head while watching the clouds pass overhead. Idalya frowned as she remembered the assistance she used to enter this place that also abandoned her as she’d entered her teacher’s realm.

“Why were you hiding from me? You knew I called for you!” She meant to approach this conversation more dignified, but his avoidance set the tone of their conversation as bitter.

“Yes.” He admitted as Dal approached, her scowl etched further into her skin. “Because I can’t help you. It requires more than an elven mage can give. You’ve had enough disappointments in your life, I didn’t want to contribute to it. So, I hid where few remembered the way.” Solas sighed as he slid a hand over the bald skin of his head in frustration. Being powerless was something the mage loathed.

Idalya’s former corpse of a heart stuttered as she listened to his words. If there was nothing Solas could do, then there was no way to save Barris. She poured all her hope into this one flicker of light within the darkness, but the mage had blown out the candle without hesitation as soon as she’d arrived leaving her alone in the dark.

“Oh, Maker, no.” She dropped to her knees again as her legs wavered, grief settling into her spine making her body heavier than her feet could handle. Her fingers trembled against her face as she restrained herself from clawing at her own flesh in her torment as her heart ripped in two. No one was deserving of a pain that cleaved you in the foundation of your soul.

His words are lies.
Her breath stopped as the voice whispered inside her brain. Through the cracks of her fingers, she saw no acknowledgment that Solas heard the words ricocheting through her mind. Narrowing her eyes at the mage from behind the protective wall of her hands, she thought over the words the voice had spoken. In this place, the voice was fuller and more feminine with an undercurrent of power tracing the fabric of the words like how Solas’ voice enhanced as he entered the Fade.

*Why would he lie?* She didn’t want to believe the voice, but the mage withheld crucial details about her from the Inquisition as they’d continued their training. Where would the mage draw the line to keep protecting her at all costs?

*He withholds power to protect himself.*

The words sickened her as they moved through her mind. They made no sense. Solas joined the Inquisition as a free apostate mage endangering himself every day since he’d decided to help. *Protect himself from what?* What was her teacher so afraid of?

The question.

The answer chilled her straight to the bone as they uttered it. *The question? What question?* The question only you would ask.

The Warden’s hands fell to her side as she stared at the man she trusted to protect her heart as he’d guided her through the grimmest time of her life. Did she believe the words of the person who guided her by the hand every night for months or a figment of her imagination that whispered her worst fears inside the darkest part of her brain desperate for another way to save the dwindling Templar?

“Would you lie to me?”

The mage’s posture tightened as he looked over his shoulder towards her. He rose to his feet from his position as he approached her. The conflict was easy to see on his features and body language. It was harder to hide your emotions inside the Fade as your emotional state changed your appearance within.

“Yes. I would lie to protect you.” His lips drawn together as he searched her eyes for her response.

She was uncertain what she was looking for to prove the voice wrong that whispered in her ear. Solas’ guarded his posture as he watched her, his face worried, his arms tucked to his chest. Sighing, she shut her eyes as she tried to clear her thoughts. *See, you try to manipulate me into not trusting him, Spirit, but I will not trust you. He has given me no reason not to trust him.*

The chuckle in the air was soft as it drifted around her like a warm breeze.

*Then ask him where you are, dear child.*

Idalya’s body stiffened at the ghostly woman’s words. Where were they? Her anger at Solas avoiding her distracted her from the fact they were in a place that felt different from anything else she’d ever experienced in the Fade. The air was thicker and felt more like reality, her boots heavier as they parted the lush grass with each step. Then there was that building- it was monstrous. What part of history had this belonged to that Solas stumbled upon?

“Where are we?” As the question crossed her lips, she knew the voice was correct. She didn’t trust him to tell her the truth no matter what she claimed. Solas’ expression faltered as she asked, but he reined his face under control as he reached out his hand to help her from the ground where all her
energy had left her with no escape.

“A place forgotten to time.” He answered with a hint of annoyance clouding the words as his hand lingered out in the air for her. *What kind of answer was that?*

“But what is that?” She motioned towards the massive building breaching the heavens above. Solas’ hand dropped to his side, his eyes widening in an emotion she swore was fear.

He swallowed as his brows furrowed. “You can see it?” Terror spread across his features and she couldn’t understand why. She nodded in confusion as she looked up at her mentor whose fingers were shaking. “We must leave this place… now.” His hand pushed out toward her, urging her to move with haste.

The Warden sat back on her heels as she watched the shaking set deeper into the man’s arms. Solas had never shown her anything other than true bravery, but he was afraid. He wanted her gone from this place, and quickly.

*See Child, he confirms what you knew all along- the mage lies.*

*But he does it to protect me! I would have died already if hadn’t been for him!* The voice was making far more sense than she wanted it to. He had walked through all her memories yet guarded her against the slightest glances into his own. What was he hiding?

*Ask yourself the question- is the mage keeping you alive, or is he keeping you from living?*

What was the voice insinuating? *Keeping me from living? What do you mean?* A warmth traveled over her shoulders, a pair of hands dragging along her the length of her skin as she felt the presence draw closer. A shiver ran along her spine as the presence settled close to the pointed tip of her ear.

*The mage was afraid of you from the moment your feet stepped upon the soil once more. He feared for not what you were, but what he sensed you could be.*

The hair stood on the back of her neck as the words fell on her. *And what could I be?* The thoughts shook her own mind as she thought them not wanting the answer but needing to know at the same time. That warm chuckle echoed through her body again as the voice mused.

*Greater than any who ’ve lived before, my child.*

Idalya shuddered as the words came out. Solas’ brows furrowed further as he watched her struggle with a decision she wouldn’t speak of.

*He would let your Templar die to keep you weak, keep you tame, to feel more powerful than you, to deny you who you could be. The mage has the power to save him but will let him die to keep his control over you.*

Anger flooded her body like water through a broken dam as she tried to keep it contained within her chest but was failing in her attempts. She was too broken, too divided by her struggling heart to have the will to fight back against the voice that spoke the secrets she’d always feared deep within her heart but could not phrase.

*What would you do to save your Templar?*

There was no hesitation in her thoughts. *Anything.*

*Understood, my child. Allow your teacher to guide you away from this cursed place.*
Dal’s hand shook as she reached out placing her quivering fingers between her teacher’s uneasy ones. He sighed and calmed as she reached out for him, her trust clear in her actions. The warm hands traveled down the length of her arms again and her eyes flicked down and were taken aback as she saw the faint outline of a pair of slender hands coasting along her skin until they settled over where her hand met with Solas’. Weathered hands showing many decades of age as they settled over their joined hands and Dal looked up in surprise at her teacher.

“There… there’s something here.” She struggled through the words as Solas’ eyes grew wider as a new-found terror took over any previous emotion the man had. Before she could speak, bright emerald light erupted from their joined hands as her magic spun violently inside her.

“Dal, what are you doing? Stop!” The mage gasped.

“I can’t…” And she couldn’t stop- she wasn’t the one in control.

In all this insanity, the power shifted to this unknown being who stood before them. The light grew brighter and more blinding between them as Solas’ tried to pull his arm away in vain, but was locked into his spot, unable to move. The light burned and when she couldn’t take its overwhelming nature, the magic forced its way up her arm to travel inside her as Solas screamed out, one leg buckling as he fell to his unbalanced knees.

Her teeth gritted together as the magic poured inside her, both the elves blinded by the light overpowering every sense they had. She filled with her mentor’s power, greater than she could have ever known until it felt like the light would explode through every inch of her skin. This was what dying felt like, the memory burnt into her flesh for eternity. This was how she remembered the spirit of the Archdemon roaring in deceived fury inside her chest.

She knew her hand still held Solas’ trembling one, but she could no longer feel or sense him other than a thin buzzing in the back of her ears she believed was the mage screaming in pain. Each time it felt like there was no more energy she could hold, more would force its way inside her, expanding forcefully what she knew her limits to be. There was a violent shudder in the air and she fell through the air until the side of her cheek slammed hard into the sun-warmed grass. The power continued to prowl within her, begging for an exit.

*Now you have the power to save your Templar. Never forget who would let him die and who helped you, child.*

A delicate hand ran along the exposed side of her face and Idalya sighed as she felt it push her out of the Fade. Her exit was far smoother than her entrance had been tonight, though she was certain the consequences could haunt her for many to come.
Idalya startled awake, lungs burning as heavy weight pressed against her chest. Her body shuddered as the cold through her bones reminded her that the warmth she’d experienced within the Fade was an illusion. The shuddering shook her deeply as she cleared the sleeping fog from her mind. Why was she so cold… with a frightening swing of clarity, she gasped as she turned to investigate the face of the man whose arms she had drifted off within. His skin was freezing, grayed and fading as the blood reduced circulation.

“No, no, no.” Her cries echoed in the small room, as she shot up, her hands on the sides of his stiffened face as she begged for any remaining sign of life. “Please, Maker, no… not now.” Grabbing his hand, she pressed shaking fingers to his wrist as she prayed for some sign. Her lips quivered as her eyes shut from the burning tears filling the brim.

Thud

A sob passed her lips as that tiny beat spoke into her fingers. It was so faint, she barely felt it, but it was there. Barris lived, he hadn’t crossed over to belong forever to the Fade. Her head collapsed on his chest and sobbed, her unsteady hand placed over his fragile heart as her tears bathed him in her despair.

A crack of electricity along her hand opened her eyes as she gasped as flowing lines of green energy built along her arm. It wasn’t a dream. Here was the power flowing inside her, she could feel it yearn to escape her ignorant frame as she kept it contained. She wasn’t a healer; her magic only manifested in the form of the elements as she’d learned to channel her anger into a productive form.

In the silence of the room, she could hear it whispering in a tongue long forgotten. The power through her limbs collected into the hand laid delicately over Barris’ chest until with one final inhale she pictured the magic flowing into the frail encasing of his spirit and the magic followed her lead. The glowing green light billowed out of her palm soaking the whole room in its aura.

She poured everything inside her into the man as she braced her boots against the stone floor. The magic surged through her fingers as she struggled for breath. She’d never understood while watching Solas heal others, just how much it took from himself to heal. An aching filled her limbs
as the magic emptied. *Was this enough?* She prayed she wasn’t doing more harm than good, but at the point, she found him, Barris had been only a few shaking breaths away from meeting his Maker.

As the magic emptied, she was blind to everything but the pulsing jade filling her sight as it pushed beyond her into the unmoving Templar. She felt her own spirit slipping on its hold, as the magic flew past her to head towards the exit path provided by her hand, as she needed to follow it and guide it further to heal him.

She was so tired. It had become such a chore to hold her head upright, so she replaced it on the chest of the Templar, sighing at the relaxing bliss of riding the last of the magic to its destination. So, in need of rest, yes, rest would be good. She needed to rest. The faintest of smiles appeared on her lips even as her ears vibrated with a sound far in the distance.

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Knight-Captain Rylen slammed the door of the healer’s area open and coughed as the mana flowing was so thick in the air that it was suffocating. He was exiting training from the courtyard to the main hall as he’d spotted a haggard Solas trying to run across the hall, holding his seizing arm, fear flooding his eyes.

“Solas, what’s wrong?” The two men hadn’t spoken since Solas used the Warden’s training to teach a lesson on tough love. But the fear in the mage’s eyes frightened him to the core as he knew there was only one answer to what could cause the elf so much pain—Dal.

“You must save her. Barris…” The mage gasped out.

Rylen hadn’t hesitated as his heavy boots continued toward the Healers. He wove his way through crowds of distraught Orlesians over the Venatori assassinations that stuck their traveling companions in the recent days.

As he entered the far courtyard, he sensed the magic. His pace escalated as he sprinted towards the room, one hand holding the pommel of his sword until his fingers tingled with incoming numbness. This was a densely packed area of Skyhold. If Dal lost control of magic in her fathomless grief, she could kill hundreds.

The light inside the healer’s area was blinding as he threw back the curtain on Barris’ side of the room, where Dal’s skin pulsed with an aching emerald light transferring through Barris’ flesh.

“Dal? Dal are you okay?” As he reached her side, he found her eyes open, but only a piercing light of pure green glowing with ferocity. Trying to move her, he found she was stiff as a rock and cool to the touch.

Ripping his heavy plated gloves off, he threw them callously to the side as he prepared himself for his next actions. With one hand, he gripped her by the shoulder, with the other he rested it on the top of the head as he inhaled before focusing his power on her.

The silence spell reached her, but diminished nothing clear to the naked eye, as the trails of electricity crackled up the length of her casting arm. Pulling from his stores, he pushed out a more powerful silence, striking the girl and causing her arm to quiver. Her lips moved rapidly, inaudible words tumbling past them that made no sense.

Reaching into the side of his armor, he pulled out a small leather-bound bundle he unwrapped to unveil the glowing sapphire bottle glowing brighter in anticipation to the mana churning through
the room. His thumb uncorked the bottle.

“Maker, forgive me because Dal certainly won’t.” He tipped the bottle back flooding his body with the delicious power of lyrium, his senses enhancing as the words the girl whispered became clear-Elven. She was speaking Elven so quickly the words were indistinguishable from one another.

Swinging his hand out over the elf’s head again, he sensed a presence behind her forcing him to step away with an unnamable emotion. Ignoring the demon drawn to the elf’s dangerous level of magic, with a forceful grunt, he pushed all the lyrium in his system to strike the girl and it shot out of him as Dal uttered an empty cry before falling limp at his feet. The room darkened as the glowing magic faded away, floating off her fingers where it spiraled elegantly before dissipating away forever into the air.

He could hear Solas’ struggling to breathe as the mage reached the door of the Healer’s area. He dragged himself inside and his eyes opened in alarm as he saw the elf splayed on the floor beside the Templar’s armored feet. A broken cry escaped the elf as he scrambled across the floor to pull the limp girl into his lap and his hands flew to her neck checking for a pulse before exhaling in exhausted relief.

“You stupid, stupid girl.” The elf cried as he held the sleeping Warden in his arms “You stupid, unthinking, selfish child.” Rylen considered turning away as the mage let his tears streak down his chiseled cheeks. He did not understand what just happened, also the extra dose of lyrium flowing through his veins made it harder to care about he should do at that moment.

“What happened?” The elf startled having forgotten that Rylen was still in the room. Solas ran a quivering hand to brush the Warden’s errant hairs from her face.

“I believe our friend enlisted the help of a spirit to help her.” Rylen’s breath caught as he remembered the presence he felt before silencing her.

“A demon? Is… is she an abomination?” Where the elf would normally roll his eyes in disgust at Rylen, he merely shook his head.

“No, she stole my power. But it wasn’t enough to help her with what she wanted to do. We’ll both rest and be fine in the morning, or whatever fine will be after today.” Even the mage looked like he didn’t believe his words.

A shuffling to the side of Rylen’s vision broke his focus on the mage. “Uh, Solas… you may want to reconsider that assessment.”

The mage looked up in confusion and followed Rylen’s eyes as his jaw went slack at the image before him. Knight-Captain Barris was sitting in his cot, stretching his neck and arm, the dark ebony tone of his complexion returned to his tightly muscled skin.

“Barris?” Rylen was in disbelief as his feet stepped numbly towards his best friend whose death he’d spent days grieving.

“Rylen? How did I get…” The Barris’ words faltered as he noticed the crying Solas holding the unconscious girl across his chest.

Barris was on his feet as he tried to move to her side, but Rylen caught him across the shoulders, his fingers slipped below the bloodied bandage draped across the Templar’s arm and pulled back. A hysterical laugh echoed out of Rylen as he found the inflamed and foul-smelling wound filled in-bright pink scars the only sign the fatal wound once existed.
Rylen realized his friend was staring at him like he’d lost his mind. “Brother, why don’t you have a seat while someone grabs the healers. Dal just got worked up. Things looked pretty… bad there for a while.”

Barris scoffed, his eyes still glued to the unconscious Warden. “I feel fine. I need to get back to work.” Rylen pursed his lips together at his always stubborn friend.

“Just the same, let’s have the healers clear you first before it wastes more of your time for Cullen just to order you back here to undergo the same evaluation. You know he will.” Barris grumbled, but Rylen knew his argument worked. Cullen was a hard ass, but he ensured his soldiers were equipped to fight and in proper health.

“You’re right.” He stated as he flopped back down on the cot still unable to look away from Dal. “It feels like I’ve been asleep for days and I need to move.”

A dark chuckle rose from Solas. “Well, he’s not wrong…” Rylen scowled at the mage behind Barris’ back.

“We’ll get Dal taken care of and I’ll make sure the healers come to inspect you before you report to Cullen- sound like a plan?” Barris nodded, his lips open as though he would speak, but thought against it as Solas rose unsteadily while holding the side of his ribs, displeasure clear on his features.

Rylen scooped the sleeping Warden gently knowing Barris’ eyes were glued to every movement he had with her unmoving body. As he exited the healer’s area, night had set over Skyhold and most of the meandering crowds had exited the corridors for the night.

“To her room?” The mage hobbled behind him trying to keep pace.

“No, rotunda.” He ground out. “Just in case,” Solas replied as worry rebuilt in Rylen’s gut.

Now that he was away from Barris, he allowed the tears he couldn’t let his brother in arms see fill his eyes as his boots proceeded confidently to not allow the struggling elf behind him to see his overwhelming emotions rise to the surface. Lyrium quelled emotions in the user to make them more pliable to the Chantry’s orders, but the depth of his emotions was now too much for the shaken Templar.

Just hours before he grieved the loss of his closest friend and now found him sitting awake and grumbling to go back to work, in his usual fashion. It quashed any doubts he’d had over the man in his reaction over Dal and his need to return to work. That was definitely Barris.

As he entered the candlelit rotunda, the Templar gazed down at the slumbering Warden. Deep circles flowed under her eyes, a yellow hue pressing through her brown skin. Taking care of herself was far lower on her priority list than it needed to be. Her role in the Inquisition was vital, and she needed to treat herself as being a precious part instead of just another cog in the great machine Evelyn ran or she’d destroy herself before it was her time to step forward.

Though his knowledge of magic was limited, he knew what the inexperienced Warden did tonight was dangerous to herself and others. Early in his time as a Templar, a mage under his supervision died when she’d allowed herself to push her mana completely into the patient she was tending, not yet understanding her limits. Dal was a few moments away from losing herself forever when Rylen arrived, yet despite the potentially fatal outcome that could have struck, he couldn’t fault the fiercely beating heart of the girl determined to save Barris, regardless of the cost. If only the Inquisition’s own leader had the same level of dedication.
When the reckless Warden awoke, he’d owe her a stiff drink, a strong hug, and a lifelong pledge of his loyalty after she almost lost herself to save his best friend.

Watching the sleeping girl, she reminded him of his dear Lilly- so strong, yet so afraid to allow their weakness to show through. Both were admirable leaders even if they leaned in opposite directions- Idalya swore to save every individual she could from a broken system, while Lilly strove to dismantle and destroy the broken system to save the people it controlled. As much as it would irk Cullen, Rylen couldn’t wait for the two women to become the closest of friends as their personalities were fated to be drawn together.

If Solas thought the Warden was a worrisome burden to hold on to now, he pitied the man for what his future would bring now that Lilly, Barris, and Evelyn were now around his reluctant child. Rylen had to admit, he was more than a little excited to watch the chaos.

Chapter End Notes

Follow me Tumblr: http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com
The Chapter Where Rylen Packs

Chapter Summary

Dorian journals and Rylen realizes the most important things you own aren't those that can be taken with you.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for everyone's patience! I'm currently packing my house for an out-of-state move, so chapters will be slowing down for the next few weeks. Thank you for the kind comments. <3

Page from Dorian Pavus’ journal:

Four days. Four days the Warden slumbered after the miracle that saved Knight-Captain Barris from his inevitable death march towards the Void back into the daily rotation of training at Skyhold. It’s telling what people have experienced in the Inquisition that people merely threw the Templar a second glance and went on their way like they weren’t witnessing something extraordinary. Instead, they prepared for the Inquisition’s departure towards the Warden fortress across an unforgiving desert.

Her presence has been elusive since she awoke at dawn. I do not blame her. If I could imbibe enough Antivan Red to place myself in a comatose state, I would join her to avoid the infighting consuming those who run this disaster of an organization. After my initial misgivings about the Warden’s arrival to Skyhold, I am loath to admit the elf has worn down my aversion.

The unlucky Warden fell asleep in a world where a constructed safety net was around her to keep her fragile mind from fracturing into pieces from Evelyn’s envious grip. She awoke this morning to a different Inquisition, that if I were a more honest man, I would admit Ev has constructed to hurt the Warden and her own Commander.

The first wave departs Skyhold tonight, containing the Inquisitor, her Orlesian travelers, and Templars she will march back to the great city where she will present the former Knight-Captain as Knight-Commander of the Templar Order to the Chantry. Evelyn is nothing if not an opportunist. A mighty warrior who cannot be taken down by Death’s own hand? She was salivating at the gums as she announced Barris would lead the Templar upon confirmation.

My cousin is far more intelligent than she allows others to see. She knows the whispers that pass through the barracks about the Inquisition and their mastery over death itself. First the Inquisitor survives the Conclave and Haven; the Hero of Ferelden, who’s believed to have died, shows up on Skyhold’s doorstep, and now a soldier whose pyre was already built, walks out of the healer’s area with little more than a scar where a festering and life-ending wound once laid. If you want to scare your opponents, take it from a necromancer, showing up with an army rumored to beat back death is quite the start.
Ev, even while retaining her quick thinking, no longer resembles the girl I remember. She has changed since the fall of Haven; I hear people whisper in the darkened corners of the Herald’s Rest. Though which of us haven’t changed since those early and innocent days of the Inquisition before the rising piles of Venatori and Red Templar bodies kept rising around us, their corrupted blood flooding the dirt underneath our feet. It’s been close to a year since I received word of the explosion in the south and my cousin’s miraculous survival. How she survived may be a mystery that is never solved.

I worry my cousin has gotten herself into a situation of which there is no escape in Emperor Gaspard. Evelyn knows how to maneuver her way around men, but I’m concerned that she’s misjudged the man somehow. Her fear of facing Corypheus propelled her into an alliance that could be the undoing of us all. Watching Gaspard, I sense a similar grab for power, not unlike Alexius. It has been long since I have written or uttered his name, and it appears not enough time has passed to think back on that betrayal yet.

I find myself regretful that the Templar leaves today to lead Griffon Keep. Knight-Captain Rylen, I’ll admit, fascinated and surprised me in a way many of his colleagues rarely do. Cullen brought together a group of Templars, who I dare say, respect mages far beyond what the Chantry ever taught them. Cullen, Barris, Rylen, even Ev’s new toy, Lilly, are made of more depth and empathy than most Circles combined. I will miss the Templar and our daily conversations. His dedication and sworn loyalty towards the Warden were what made me reevaluate my previous opinion of what I had considered an abomination.

The night the Warden’s magic roared to life, I covered, not for her, but for the wide-eyed Templar who was correct to fear for her life. My curiosity did not differ from a moth to a flame. The Knight-Captain, in brief moments, could make me forget about the all-encompassing loneliness I’ve struggled with since pushing Bull away. A reminder during the few moments of my sobriety that perhaps there were others that might understand the terror of closing your eyes at night.

It will not be the last time the girl cut from another time will be endangered. But with her dashing Templar gone, it will fall on people such as myself and Solas to keep her safe until her purpose is fulfilled.

Solas has remained out of sight since the Templar arose from an early grave. I sense his belief in the girl is shaken by what occurred, or maybe his belief in himself has been. He has sworn to protect the girl, yes, I can hear them talking in the rotunda. Yet, the girl’s life has been in preventable danger since she’s arrived that he could not account for.

I believe Solas has a greater plan for the Warden beyond the fight with Corypheus. Whether he has insidious intentions for the frightened girl, I do not know. But I am certain his intentions reach beyond the Inquisition and Evelyn would be wise to keep a close eye on both.

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Packing was always an eye-opening and introspective experience for Rylen.

Sitting on the corner of what would be someone’s else’s bed come morning, he stared at the simple knapsack now filled and waiting to be brought to the caravans awaiting the Inquisitor’s word before they would exit Skyhold the next day. His entire life fits within the bag, with room leftover. Outside of his armor, he owned nothing more than a few tunics, a pair of breeches, and a set of loose sleeping garments. What did it say about a man when his life equaled nothing more than this?

But his life contained more than this, didn’t it? In his time serving in Skyhold he’d made friends,
ones he’d venture to refer to as his family, but those couldn’t be shoved in the empty knapsack. They would stay here, continuing to prepare the long march to Adamant and whatever the world prepared for them in its aftermath.

The orders for him to leave were as much of a shock to him as Cullen. The Commander had everything prepared for the Knight-Captain to step into the role about to be vacated by Barris. But with Barris not only alive but promoting to Knight-Commander of the surviving order, Rylen’s skills were needed elsewhere.

Griffon Wing Keep was where he would lead. A former Warden outpost in the Western Approach near Adamant. While his brothers in arms would fight for their lives across the desert, Rylen would stand in the safety of the Keep waiting for word on the Inquisition’s survival.

The caravan set out tomorrow with the Inquisitor and her entourage. The Templars were to escort the Orlesian dignitaries home while Evelyn would accompany Bull and the Chargers to meet his contacts. Rylen cringed at the thought of Evelyn meeting with the Qunari. Diplomacy was not the woman’s strong point. He could not be the only person nervous over what deal she would consider offering the Qunari since she already had their organization on its knees to the Orlesian throne. The only bright point of the mission was that Bull was accompanying and helping with negotiations. If the woman was smart, she’d back off and allow Bull to control the discussion, but everyone knew she’d allow no such thing.

Dal had only awakened in the early rays of this day. She hadn’t returned to her work, and he wasn’t counting on seeing the Warden before his feet walked out the gates of Skyhold one last time. How would she fare with the Templar marching away? Cullen and Leliana were both so wrapped up in their own work that the struggling girl was pushed to the wayside leaving Solas to care for her. After watching the man’s outburst the night she healed Barris, he wasn’t certain Solas would be as willing to help the girl as before. Rylen had never been a mage, but he couldn’t imagine a scenario more horrific than another mage forcibly removing your magic, even if temporary.

The Warden awaited Barris’ return only to grieve his eventual loss, saved him, only to lose him again as a machination of Evelyn’s. Elevating his brother to Knight-Commander was a smart move, he had to admit, but Rylen suspected Evelyn’s motives were to hurt the fledgling Warden and her Commander, who would now be left without his trusted friend and instead have Lilly Hawke stationed by his side to guide his armies.

Oh, Lilly. There were a million things he wanted to say to the ornery woman, but his own streak of stubbornness prevented him from allowing emotions to move freely across his tongue. When the woman asked to be removed from Kirkwall to the Free Marches, she had reached inside his chest and crushed his armored heart.

Love hadn’t been in his plan for the Templar with the hair the color of sunrise when he’d first spied the hypnotic sway of her hips and the full lips he struggled to tear his eyes from. Lilly had fully known of her power over him, and he saw the subtle flush across the tops of her cheekbones and her habit to trail her fingers through the ends of her hair when they would speak. He fixated on the woman days after her reassignment in Kirkwall. The Chantry thought Lilly’s last name would earn her a greater sense of respect after her cousin disappeared to Starkhaven with her new husband after the battle for the city of chains.

When Cullen told him the Champion’s cousin would join, Rylen had rolled his eyes at his organization’s desperate efforts to sew the disjointed parts of the hobbled city back together. Lilly, even with her outstanding reputation from Ostwick, had proven to be not so dissimilar from her cousin in helping mages, much to Cullen’s utter annoyance. Cullen had spoken to him in private,
telling stories of how Marion Hawke pitted herself against Meredith to protect the city’s mages with her own mage lover before his betrayal persuaded her to treat mages as inferior.

Lilly had followed in similar if unorthodox, footsteps. She only apprehended mages that were a danger to themselves and others, often going out of her way, even against Cullen’s orders, to ensure the innocent were reunited or found a safe passage from the city. She was intelligent and never left proof of her actions no matter how hard Cullen had screamed and gritted his teeth together while ordering his Templar to discover how their suspects were escaping. It was common knowledge Lilly was helping, but no one found conclusive proof to charge her with insubordination.

She fascinated him from the moment he first spied her in the Hallows, but she barely acknowledged his existence - part of what hooked him. Lilly understood the thrill of the chase and enjoyed stringing along the helpless Templar even while he could sense she was dragging along in the same dirt as him.

It wasn’t until the two had a rare night scheduled off duty that Rylen discovered Lilly would be the end of him. Unable to sleep, he dressed in civilian clothes and slipped out of the Hallows to wander the dark and damp streets of Kirkwall. As he exited the stretching set of stairs descending out the front doors of the Templar stronghold, he noticed a form, draped under a massive deep gray woolen cloak, passing through the dark ahead. Curiosity got the better of him wondering who else would slip away from the Hallows in the middle of the night and followed the figure drifting through the hanging darkness.

The figure headed to the front doors of the Hanged Man, a notorious bar in Kirkwall where it was common to find Templar breaking up fights, capturing apostates, and drowning their own consciences on their nights off. The figure entered the building, the door barely making a noise on its massive hinges as Rylen reached a side window where he could view the overlay of the main floor.

His hooded figure approached a full table of patrons. In one fluid movement, they dispatched the cloak unveiling Lilly Hawke in her full glory. She was wearing a pair of tight leather britches and a matching leather corset with the Hawke family sigil intricately engraved on the bands of leather crossing the smooth curves of her back. Pulling the leather tie from her bun, she shook her head letting the cascade of sunlit strawberry hair tumble down the slopes of her shoulders.

He couldn’t remember seeing anything more beautiful in his life.

Even though she was in public, watching through a window felt like an invasion of privacy. He had only seen and interacted with her through the lens of being a Templar, so to see her stripped of the rules and regulations that encompassed so much of their life was startling to see her at home within her skin. Against his own instincts, he walked through the doors of the tavern, grabbing an ale, and taking a seat in a darkened corner of the bar where he could watch the auburn-haired woman speak to her group of friends.

Varric Tethras, he recognized- it was a name and face you learned the instant you arrived in Kirkwall. Seated with the dwarf was a waif elf with Dalish tattoos running the spans of her face in serious conversation with a dark-skinned woman, who appeared Rivani from her attire, or lack of, resting back against the shoulder of another elf with hair the color of moonlight and metallic tattoos across his face and limbs reflecting the flickering candlelight inside the tavern. While not a mage, the lyrium crooned to Rylen from the inlays of the elf’s skin.

He sat in silence in the corner for hours while she threw back tankards of ale and laughed with the group until the hours grew late and the soldiers and drunkards emptied the tavern. Lilly arose, reaching down to throw her cloak over her forearm as she disappeared down the hallway into the
heart of the building. His mind unwilling, Rylen’s boots followed her. As he turned down the long and dingy hallway, he found the path deserted; the Templar gone from view in the winding paths.

With a shake of his head, he turned to exit the hallway but instead found his weight thrown into the wall. He groaned as pain radiated out of the back of his head where it connected with the dense stone. Trying to lower his head, he found a dagger pressed against the thin skin of his neck.

“Why did you follow me?” There was a hint of Ferelden floating over her consonants in a Free Marches accent. Born and raised in Starkhaven, her words reminded him of home.

“I…” the Templar pressed her blade up higher into his flesh as Rylen tried to find his words. “I didn’t know I was following you… at first.” The blade remained pressed against him. “I needed to get out of the Hollows, I saw someone hidden under a cloak sneaking away and followed you to the Hanged Man then saw it was you through the window.”

“Why did you follow me inside? Are you a spy working for the Knight-Commander?”

If the blade wasn’t tucked against the underside of his jaw, he would have laughed, but Lilly did not have a face interested in being trifled with. “No. Have you met Cullen? He’s honorable to a fault, he’d never sink low enough to have you followed to catch you releasing mages.”

The tension against the blade decreased and Rylen could take a deep breath as his head lowered and he searched the Templar’s face. Her eyes were glittering emeralds set into her skull, lips rouged to the deepest crimson, as enticing as the finest wine sloshing within crystal.

“If you’re not doing the Knight-Commander’s dirty work, why did you follow me across Kirkwall and stare at me for the next three hours?” Rylen gulped against the blade still threatening him. He weighed his options but decided lying to the woman would not be in his best interests.

“I followed you into the Hanged Man because I’ve never wanted someone the way I want you.” He watched her face as she thought over his words. She had a better poker face than he excepted as he watched her unmoving. For being a Templar, she had more in common with rogues in her movement and how she approached problems.

After a lifetime, the woman pulled back her dagger, tucking it into the waistband of her leather breeches. “You’re a fucking idiot.” She proclaimed, matter-of-fact, as she wrapped her cloak over her shoulders, pulling the hood over her head to cover her glowing hair in the dim light. Turning to leave, her cloak billowed in circles behind her as Rylen’s heart hammered in his aching chest. Her scent and the booze running through his system weren’t helping him thinking straight.

His hand darted out grabbing her fingers as he pulled her back, chest slamming against him as her brilliant eyes opened in surprise. Trembling, his fingers ran over the slopes of her cheekbones as he felt like he could explode any moment. “You have no idea,” he whispered as he moved his lips against hers.

Her lips were warmer than the rest of her skin and smelled of ale. She stood stiffly against him, unmoving for a moment before she melted, her lips opening to draw him inside as her arms wrapped around his neck. He lifted and turned her against the wall as his tongue continued to drive inside her, meeting her own challenge, his leg rubbing her against the apex of her thighs. Her groans filled his ears and mouth and he would have grinned if his mouth hadn’t been so busy.

And that was how on the first night Rylen saw Templar Lilly Hawke outside of the Hollows, he fucked her, fully clothed, against a wall in a back hallway of the Hanged Man Tavern. Not the most romantic start of a relationship, he had to admit, but nothing that ever transpired between the two
stubborn warriors ever could have been explained as traditional nor romantic.

Cullen glared at him the next week as he could barely hide the joyous grin that kept creeping over his features. He was no stranger to the company of others, but none felt like caressing pure light like Lilly. The two Templar wouldn’t acknowledge one another by day but come night a smile would lift his lips at the quiet rap of her knuckles against the wooden door to his private room where they would spend the next hours discovering one another until Lilly collected her clothes and left without a word after they finished.

He didn’t understand her, but it didn’t bother him because he planned on spending every day learning one new thing about her. Part of his consideration in becoming a Templar was that marrying as the elder son of a Starkhaven noble family had been a guarantee, and, frankly, he wasn’t interested.

Lilly was the only person he’d ever met that made him reconsider the direction of his life. The thought of watching lines appear around her eyes, etching their way across her cheeks from years of constant smiles, the gray running from her temples down her flowing mane of hair, filled him with a contentment he never strove to find before.

The problem with that secret wish was neither had a career leading to a long and fulfilling life. Two weeks into their arrangement he watched Lilly take a dagger deep in her side from a frightened apostate in Darktown. In the following weeks, he’d been hit by more fireballs than any Templar would like to admit. There was an unspoken understanding each time Lilly slipped away it may be for the last. She continued aiding mages she deemed not a threat. After months of their routine, he found the thought that one day she would slip away for the last time, to be an unbearable one and told her such.

It went as badly as a declaration of love can go.

Lilly rolled her eyes before throwing her glass against the wall of the private room of the Hanged Man he acquired for the night. She hurled every insult in the book at him as he sat in stunned silence.

Could he have misinterpreted what was between them? No, there had to be something else… maybe someone else, but he didn’t believe her words as she’d stormed out of the building. He’d let her cool off then when she slipped into his room tomorrow night, he would apologize for putting her on the spot and figure out why she reacted the way she had.

He never got the chance. When he had reported for duty in the morning all it took was one glance from Cullen and he knew she was gone. In the middle of the night, she stormed into the Knight-Commander’s private sleeping chambers, scaring Cullen half to death as she demanded a reassignment immediately. She refused to leave until granted what she wanted, and Cullen didn’t have the energy to fight back with the woman who’d been a pain in his side since the day she’d arrived.

That night he went to the Hanged Man looking for her or any news, but overnight her friends had either magically forgotten who she was or couldn’t remember the last time they laid eyes on her. Instead, he continued day after day grieving the loss of his heart after Lilly vacated Kirkwall with it. When Cullen told him months later that he was leaving for the Inquisition, the decision to follow had been a simple one. The two brothers’ path had been a treacherous one to walk together, but Rylen would not undo it for the world.

A shifting noise in the stairwell caught his attention from inside his room. His heart ached from letting his fingers graze along the pain stitched up within his chest. Time had gotten away from
him while sitting in silence in the tower. Tonight, was his last night in Skyhold and he wouldn’t squander the time he had left with the family he had chosen on his own.
The Chapter Where Rylen Panics

Chapter Summary

Rylen joins the Inquisition's soldiers in the Heralds Rest for his final night in Skyhold to find that everyone has their own way of coping.

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK! My move is 100% over and I'm now a resident of Southern Idaho. That being said, this move was a difficult one for my family. I'm sorry for how long it's taken me to be ready physically and emotionally to sit down and write again, but it feels good to be doing something creative again.

Thank you all for your support over the time I was gone and hopefully with some daily practice, I can get back to normal writing/editing speed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Soldiers filled the Herald’s Rest, standing unarmored shoulder to shoulder as they said goodbye to the Templars they called close friends. The path ahead was not an easygoing one. Once dawn arrived, the Templar would march at Evelyn’s side as the Commander and his soldiers followed behind. Even in the best-case scenarios, he’d run with Cullen, they expected a forty percent casualty rate. For a fledgling army and organization, it meant even if they won the battle, it may cost them the war looming on the horizon.

Rylen’s brows arched as he spied Barris’ slumped form at a table nestled in the far corner of the tavern, the weight of the world heavy on his features. The comparison of the living Templar to the sinking corpse he’d said his farewells to clawed at the back of his mind. He wondered if Leliana struggled with her memories of Dal, between blinks of the woman’s keen eyes, Dal would transform from the vibrant warrior to the lifeless shell the rogue once transported to what should have been the Warden’s final resting place.

Barris was not a heavy drinker, but the almost empty glass in his hand and the other empty on the table with him told a different story. The future Knight-Commander carried many burdens tonight.

“Brother?” A pair of tipsy emerald eyes drifted up to meet him. “I see these aren’t your first two.” He chuckled taking the empty chair across the two-man table and motioning the bar wench, a woman well acquainted with him and his usual poisons. Barris stared aimlessly into the bottom of his glass of ale as Rylen regarded him. “I’m surprised to find you here, I thought your time would be occupied if you know what I mean.” The Templar sighed, his muscled chest sinking below the edge of the table propping him up.

“I was lost in my head,” he started. “I didn’t notice it right away, but people treated me… different. Something had happened.” He threw back the nearly empty tankard, emptying its contents. “I approached Solas to thank him for saving me… It took one look in his eyes and I understood she did something unspeakable to save me.”
"I don’t care what happened,” Rylen interrupted, reaching out a hand and squeezing his fingers over his dear friend’s. “You were dead, then you weren’t. Book open and shut. Whatever decision she made was the correct one.” It didn’t take a smart man to realize it filled Barris with an anger he didn’t know where to place.

Barris ripped his hand away with force while Rylen creased his brows. Dal and Barris were too similar for their own good- when they had their mind decided, it was impossible to steer them off course. He wouldn’t win this argument with his brother, so he changed the subject.

“Why aren’t you with the darling Warden?” The waitress arrived with a full tankard of ale for both men, a flutter of her lashes and a hint of a smile as Rylen’s eyes watched her hips sway methodically to the next table.

“I didn’t know what to say, so I stayed away.” Barris took another swig of the mediocre ale between words. “When I heard she was awake, I no longer cared about my confused state. When I arrived at her room, I found a mass of Orlesian guards stationed outside her door: ‘The Warden is not to be disturbed by order of the Inquisitor’s Advisers.’”

Rylen chuckled at Barris’ poor impression of an Orlesian accent. His Ferelden was showing.

“Do they think there’s still assassins in Skyhold?” The memory of the Orlesian’s broken and bloodied body at the bottom of the staircase remained fresh in his mind. The assassins within Skyhold struck and left the fortress reeling over the Inquisitor’s attack.

“No,” Barris growled, “but they continue to hide her like a child. She’s a person, not some tactic to be secreted away.”

“I agree, but that doesn’t mean our opinions mean anything when Evelyn’s calling the shots.” Rylen leaned more towards Cullen and Leliana for this display of the Inquisition’s tight grip over the Warden, but Ev was always an easy target for angry sentiments.

Barris leaned forward, his eyes glassy as the drink took a firm hold over him. “We should break her out.” It was barely dark, and tonight was already spiraling out of control.

“What has you two in such a tizzy?” Rylen’s breath screeched to a halt in his throat at Lilly’s voice behind them. He’d been far too caught up in Barris’ terrible plan to notice the telltale click of Lilly’s heels as she’d approached. They remained professional while on duty and ignored one another the minute armor was shed for the night.

“Do you hear yourself? You will be sworn in as Knight-Commander of the order in a fortnight. You can’t end up in the dungeons tonight, my friend. No matter how tempting it may be.” If it had been anyone but Barris, he would have encouraged this ridiculous plan every time. They needed Barris. That’s why he didn’t disagree with whatever Dal had done to save him, regardless of how frightening it might be. Even if her reasons were selfish, the end goal was the correct one.

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“Barris here is looking into getting into drunken debauchery as a hobby and he thought he could defer to your experience,” Rylen mumbled through his teeth as Lilly pulled an empty chair from the bar and sat an arm’s length from him.

“Hilarious, Rylen. I thought you’d be celebrating getting to leave this shit hole.” She put down two tankards of ale, one half empty with a line of foam slinking down the side. Her heavy plate replaced with a form-fitting set of deep crimson leather that left the creamy skin of her arms exposed and a thick dagger strapped to her back. It still confused him how she’d ended up as a Templar and not as a rogue.
He still couldn’t bring himself to look in her face. “I’ll admit after months of snow and ice, the sound of sun and sand is welcome, but I regret what I’m leaving behind.” The woman’s body stiffened in the chair beside him. “Don’t worry, Lilly, I’m not talking about you.” It was hard to suppress a grin knowing the glare affixed to her face.

Across the table, Barris’ head dipped with the weight of drink as it set into the muscles of his neck.

Lilly observed the Templar’ struggles. “Everyone’s a disaster today.”

Rylen turned to check the opposite corner of the tavern. The boisterous Chargers were quiet in their corner, Bull held two auburn-haired waitresses giggling within his monstrous lap.

“It’s far calmer than usual.” He noted as the rather glum Chargers drank their ale in silence while Bull was too invested in his distraction to pay them any heed.

“That’s because you missed Dorian screaming at the Qunari earlier- a barely coherent drunken rant not to trust Evelyn, it’s a trap, etc. Quite the unprofessional show.” Lilly watched as Barris’ head drew closer and closer to the top of the table until his forehead struck the bare wood with a solid thud. “The Inquisition does everything with class. No wonder you like it here.”

Rylen allowed himself to look at the woman who’d caused him a heartache unlike anything else he’d ever known. In their two years apart, a lifetime passed furiously around them, making strangers out of the reflection in the mirror. The thought two years ago of them sitting and having a civil conversation in public was unheard of, but that was now the least of his worries.

Lilly was still observing Barris as the man snored into the planks of the table, his grief and regret a testament to the sacrifices Templar were required to make every day. “Love is dangerous, Rylen.” Her words were quiet, a whisper passing over the field of her voluptuous lips to disappear into the sour air of the tavern. “I didn’t think he’d survive the ride to Skyhold, but he’s strong- far stronger than I gave him credit.” She shook her head as the memories passed before her eyes. “His Warden was all that was on his tongue as the fevers took him. He survived to see her one last time. Then returns only to be separated from the secretive Warden, who interestingly enough, turns out to be an unharrowed mage.”

Rylen swallowed, gravel lining his throat at her words.

Lilly recognized his anxiety. “Do not worry, her secret is safe from Evelyn. The Warden inspires that form of loyalty, I’ve noted. I fulfill a certain duty to the Inquisitor, but it does not entitle her to everything in my mind.”

“And what duty is that?” Rylen asked more sarcastically than he intended.

Cullen grew more suspicious of the strawberry-haired Templar the more time she spent secluded with Evelyn in Skyhold. He’d let his paranoia get the best of him in asking the staff how often the Inquisitor needed her bedroom sheets changed out of frantic curiosity over whether the two women were laying together.

The Templar raised a knowing brow at his question, it appeared she too had heard the rumors, and hopeful fantasies whispered through the barracks behind her back. “In simple terms: I am her friend. In not so simple terms: I still feel responsible for what Marion has become. If Marion had been able to confide in another, then her path may have led her in another direction.”

Marion. Rylen hated that the shadow of her cousin’s missteps would chase Lilly for many years to come. “So, you hope to sway the dragon from evil?” He asked incredulously as her brows lowered
“She is neither, Rylen. She is... more complicated than she appears.” Rylen rolled his eyes to the Templar’s annoyance.

Lilly took a large swig, grimacing at the quality of the brew. “You speak grandly of love, yet, here it is.” She motioned towards the drooling Templar filling the table. “Look at the despair Cullen suffers with. This is the result of love. Now his fate will be to die on the ramparts of Adamant with his heart filled with love.” She spat the final word before chugging the rest of her ale.

She rose from the table and Rylen’s eyes coasted down the soft curves of the Templar that hinted at the muscle at rest beneath. Her eyes were pointed away from his as she collected her empty steins from the sticky surface of the table. Hesitating, she stood motionless, her back facing Rylen as she deliberated her thoughts.

“At least it’s a fate I know you will not suffer.” Her words were quiet, hiding a truth she was loath to admit, as she left their table, her trademark heels clicking against the stone floors.

What in Thedas was she talking about? “Lilly, what have you done?” The rest of the tavern disappeared, melting away into the tapestry, as she continued, her steps awkward and forced, afraid of turning around as she clenched her hands on the bar. Rylen was unaware he’d risen and followed her, following her the way he always did. The need to reach out and drag his fingers against the exposed paths of skin felt like it would break him.

“I did what I had to. I couldn’t march into Adamant thinking you could die in this insane battle. This army will shatter against the walls of the fortress- the Inquisition will not withstand another Haven. The ideals the Inquisition stands for must persevere even if it doesn’t.” She turned her head over her shoulder to meet his eyes as the rims of hers darkened with emotion. “So now I’ve done the thing I swore I’d never do- attaching my reins to a losing cause.”

His hand reached out, his unworthy fingers dragging along the exposed skin of her bicep. She shuddered beneath his touch but didn’t pull away. “Lilly, don’t do this.” He could hear her words, but his mind had gone blank trying to comprehend what she was saying.

“I already did. He has his own way of coping,” she gestured back toward the still passed out Barris, “and I have mine.” Within a second, she was gone.

A gap opened in the crowd and she exited without a word, like every time before. Except for this time her exit reopened the gaping hole in his heart, he lied to himself about. If he kept telling himself he didn’t love her, maybe someday it would be true. If he thought he could find her, he’d search the grounds of Skyhold until the early morning rays of broke over the Frostbacks, but when a Hawke didn’t want to be found, there was no use trying.

A strangling grip on his throat trapped his breath as the tavern pressed in on all sides. The dozens of rowdy soldiers felt like thousands pawing at him. The ground was unsteady as he struggled to keep his balance. He needed out of the tavern into the cool and bleak air of the courtyard. Sealing his eyes, he pushed his way in the direction he knew the door to be, ignoring the cries of annoyance, as he forced his way to the exit until the solidness of the crowd buckled and he stumbled and fell out into the biting air. As the wooden door slammed shut behind him, he fell back against the wall of the tavern as his lungs struggled to open and bring back life-sustaining air into his chest. His head tilted back against the stone wall as he coughed against the force of his lungs reopening.

How did Lilly have this power over him? He pitied Cullen and how pathetic his actions concerning
Evelyn could be- but he was no better. Until now he hadn’t been forced to see Lilly’s face every day. Every person he saw wasn’t a reminder of everything he struggled to hold on to and lost. To lose Lilly in the state Cullen had been in would have destroyed him. Cullen wasn’t weak, the man was stronger than anyone understood, for surviving without his heart beating in his chest.

Thoughts were cascading through his mind he didn’t hear the footsteps across the stone pavement.

“I see I’m not the only one struggling tonight.”

Rylen’s eyes darted open in shock and he gasped at Dorian standing in front of him. The mage’s eyes swollen from previous tears and wearier than the Templar had ever seen him.

“That seems to be a common reaction tonight.” The mage mumbled, adjusting the leather straps across his shoulders as he brushed off the rejection Rylen’s reaction spurred in him.

Guilt welled up in Rylen’s chest for upsetting the mage. “I’m sorry, Dorian. I’m having a shitty night.”

“I should know better than to sneak up on you soldier types, I should count myself lucky that I wasn’t smited on instinct.” He played it off, but the mage also carried a heavy heart.

Dorian stepped back, and the light illuminated his reddened and swollen eyes, just like Lilly’s, filled with the same waves of regret and unspoken words. His heart broke for the mage and Lilly and their mutual inability to function as humans.

As Rylen closed his eyes to block this day from his thoughts. He still saw her hazel eyes full of sorrow as she said goodbye, the only way she knew how. She would destroy herself before ever bowing to weakness. They’d been carved from the same mold. Casts burning too hot for their surroundings, casting light in fractals around them until blinding in their pain and rage.

They were both so beautiful in their tragic frailty.

Seeing the mage still pointing his eyes away in embarrassment, Rylen moved forward sliding his hands along the sides of the man’s jaw with a delicate touch. Dorian’s storm gray eyes widened in horror expecting violence from the hands trained to take life from his kind. The two men, of similar heights, were eye to eye as Rylen leaned his forehead against the man’s burning skull. Drink roared through the mage’s veins as he sought to drown out the screaming demons inside himself.

“You’re so much like Lilly. You don’t have to hide, you don’t have to lie.” The muscles of Dorian’s jaw stiffened within his grasp. “Why do you force away the people who love you? Why are you so afraid?” Rylen felt the burning within his eyes as the tears forced their way out.

“I was so terrified to need something- to need him, that I pushed him away.” Dorian’s breathing was jagged as the words tumbled past his lips. “It made me sick how much I needed him. To give someone else so much power over you. I… I ran. I couldn’t tell him what I’d seen, what I knew…” The mage trembled against his touch, liquor pushing the man to his breaking point as he continued rambling. “I didn’t know how to cope with what they had done and he, Bull… he was the only thing that made sense, the only thing that hadn’t betrayed me. So, I pushed him away as hard as I could. I took away his opportunity to leave me.”

Rylen opened his eyes, pulling his head back to look into the mage’s storm-filled eyes. “What happened to you, Dorian?” he whispered. Something was haunting the mage, breaking him with every frantic beat of his heart.

Dorian pushed his lips up gently against Rylen’s as both men exhaled at the caress. He pulled back
slowly, his eyes lowered and building in a self-made sorrow while his teeth pulled at his bottom lip.

“Is it so wrong to need someone?” Rylen whispered as he pressed his lips against the wine-stained ones of the mage who sighed in response. Dorian’s tongue darted against the crease of his mouth. Rylen burned at the sensation, the need, roaring to life inside him as the pain swirling inside his chest lit like a toxic gas brought to flame. As he opened to the man, Dorian pushed them with force against the side wall of the tavern as he pressed the length of his body against Rylen’s.

Nothing about the way Dorian handled him was gentle as every part of Rylen reveled in the helplessness sensation Lilly made him feel turning into submission, he could freely offer Dorian. The combined fumes of wine and mana filling his space were as intoxicating as the soured taste of the man stroking inside him deeply with his tongue. Their breaths were short and labored as the air became thick around them, the scent of lyrium and sandalwood lifting from Dorian’s skin.

Dorian’s hands gripped against the tender flesh of his hips, bruising marks onto Rylen’s skin, as he groaned against the tight muscles of the mage’s body pressed against him. As he pulled his mouth away to request more from the man, the door of the Herald’s Rest swung open. Dorian stepped away, so each man’s back was against the wall, facing the other. The heavy wood of the door crashed into the wall as a group made their noisy exit from the tavern.

Rylen was unconcerned who it was and was focused on the disheveled and beautiful man standing before him. Dorian had a hand over the bottom half of his face like he was heavy in thought, but Rylen knew he was running the tips of his fingers across his swollen lips at the lack of sensation. He always chuckled at Dorian’s elaborate dress, but now understood- it was a challenge, a gauntlet laid out for who you dared to need to touch more of the mage. Each buckle of his outfit taunted Rylen from across the alley as the sounds grew louder.

“Rylen! Thank the Maker, can I get help? This fucker is heavy!”

Rylen struggled to break his connection with the storm raging in Dorian’s eyes as he turned to see one of the Templar recruits attempting to walk a very inebriated Barris back to the barracks. His panic had set in so completely that he had left his own brother to fend for himself in the tavern. He looked back at Dorian, with an apology written in his eyes that words were inadequate for. The mage nodded, a smile playing across his supple lips, as Rylen cursed his brother to the Void.

“Stop dragging him, you will dent his armor.” In an instant, the Knight-Captain replaced the terrified and aching man and he walked away as though the two men were doing nothing more concerning than discussing the weather.

As he slid Barris’ heavy arm over his neck, he fought the need to look back and see Dorian again, make sure it wasn’t some fantasy his mind had concocted to keep Lilly’s goodbye from destroying him. But he couldn’t. He needed to help Barris home and prepare to march out in only a few hours. S lost in the past he had been, he had forgotten he would leave Skyhold once and for all in the morning. Away from Dorian, away from Lilly, away from Cullen and Dal, and away from the home he had made here.

“Brother, wake up.” He urged as Barris struggled with consciousness.

“I don’t want to.” Barris slurred as his steps became steadier as they crossed the courtyard.

“Tough shit. You thought you owed me for the cheap shot that broke my nose? That favor just got tripled, my friend.” He told the man with no humor in his voice. Barris would pay off this favor many times over.
The Templar tower and its many flights of stairs loomed ahead, there was no way he could get Barris up the stairs without suffering the same plight as the Orlesian who had cascaded down them. Pivoting, he dragged Barris towards a set of stone steps that lead to the ramparts.

“Sorry, brother, there’s no way I’m getting you home in one piece, I’ll find someplace for you to sleep this off before we make our grand exit in the morn.” Barris’ weak head bobbed, which Rylen took as an acknowledgment of his words, but was more likely his neck struggling to stay upright. The two men continued walking in silence into the dark as the quiet point of the night set over Skyhold.

Chapter End Notes

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The Chapter Where a Complication Arises

Chapter Summary

Evelyn and her Templars are leaving Skyhold but not before sharing something that may make the coming battle impossible to win.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Inquisitor Trevelyan-

Consider this a courtesy between women who lead- Ferelden, with its King at the helm, marches to convene at Adamant Fortress.

We will see you in the Western Approach.

-Queen Anora Therin of Ferelden

The guardsmen’s heavy boots echoed down the corridor, long before the nosy Orlesians who watched her like a rabbit caught in a snare, arrived outside her chambers.

"We're collecting the Warden prisoner for the Inquisitor." Their accents were nails clawing against a stone. She’d dressed early expecting the exit of the Inquisitor and her Templars. Across Orlais they would march until Barris was recognized as Knight-Commander. The Templar Order would rise again from the ashes.

Following the assassin’s attacks, she’d become nothing more than a captured Grey Warden withholding information on the coming battle. No one looked twice at a criminal Warden locked away for negotiations. Evelyn’s plan was depressing in its efficiency. Leaving her grimy and despondent as the passing Orlesians stared at the passing filth.

The guards entered without knocking, their finery of golden arms, a mockery of everything the Inquisition stood. They clenched her upper arms, lugging her towards the Commander’s tower. Her comrades stood aghast at her treatment. The Emperor’s cretins dragged her across the battlements toward Evelyn’s next machination. Just a few remaining hours with the Inquisitor and she’d find further ways to demean Idalya.

The guardsman forced their way into the office through a side door, dragging her in. Fingers biting sharp into her flesh as her eyes adjusted to the dimmer light within. The sharp *twang* of steel echoed inside the chamber as Cullen and Rylen pulling their swords from their scabbards in unbridled fury.

“That will be *enough.*” Evelyn’s hollow voice stopped the men in their tracks, their grips loosening on her aching arms.

They pushed her forward. Cassandra caught the elf before she lost her balance and the Orlesians had another laugh at her expense.
Dal whispered thanks but kept her eyes down as the rising shame spread across her visage. She was a child growing up in the Alienage the last time she’d been treated with such venom. There may be plenty of excuses for their behavior, but she knew it was because she was an elf. No one demeans another this way without thinking they were a lesser species.

“Commander, are all preparations complete?” Disgust filled Evelyn’s voice over the entire process of preparing for war, oblivious to the elf’s awkward embarrassment.

Cullen attempted to clear the gravel from his throat as all eyes tracked towards him. “Yes, Inquisitor. I require final notes on siege tactics, but we are as ready as we’ll ever be.

Dal lifted her eyes to see the Commander. His posture slumped, as he struggled to force it upright, armor growing heavier by the word on his thinning frame. She couldn’t address his boss the way he suffered through. Weeks after Halamshiral, she would have quit. Yet, months later, here he was fighting and leading the way for their men.

Her eyes adjusted to the flickering candlelight of the Commander’s office kept dim to minimize his frequent headaches. Members of the Inquisition packed the chamber to hear the Inquisitor’s last address to those who carried the weight of the coming battle.

Cassandra stood at Idalya’s side, her body posture hostile, her attention better spent on a broken fingernail on her sword hand. Knight-Captains Rylen and Lilly stood to her other. Their shoulders facing away from the other as though the other’s existence was grating.

Bull rested his mighty shoulders back against the far stone wall, his arms hugged against his wide chest. Leliana and Josephine stood to Evelyn’s side, the Spymaster analyzing notes on the Ambassador’s clipboard. Behind them, Blackwall and the frail Fiona represented the Warden interests. Neither looked like they wanted any part of this conversation.

Someone shifted in the dim light to the side of Blackwall and Dal stifled her gasp as she found the frame of Delrin Barris. His eyes focused on Evelyn as he listened, his jaw clenched, the tendons tight along the stretch of his jaw.

Upon awaking she inquired if she’d had visitors. She’d hidden her disappointment poorly when discovering that Leliana and Varric were her only guests. Barris was preparing to become Knight-Commander, but her heart longed for a simple thank you from the man she’d done everything for to pull back from the endless abyss. After the loss of her mentor and most likely more from the deal she made within the billowing clouds of the Fade. Yet, the man avoided her while she’d fought to the surface alone.

The annoyance festered like a physical wound, itching and clawing in her skin.

“Good. I want this battle over.” Evelyn spat, causing Dal to jump since she’d forgotten the Inquisitor was in the room in her surprise over Barris.

Ev turned towards the guards still looming behind the Warden. “Head to the caravans and ensure my belongs have been properly transferred.” She ordered as the men stared with blank expressions.

“Ma’am, we are to guard you for your time in Skyhold.”

Evelyn’s brows lowered until fury brewed behind her pale olive eyes as she clenched the corner of Cullen’s desk between her thin and scarred fingers. “Did you just question my order, Knight? Your Emperor sent you to carry out my demands and I am ordering you to go inspect my belongings, NOW!” The room echoed with her booming voice and the men wavered. “I swear, I will report you
to Gaspard the minute we return to Halamshiral.” That was the only threat needed for the men to sprint from the central door of the office towards the Rotunda.

The Inquisitor’s body remained frozen, her head tilted down towards the grainy path of the wooden desk until the guard’s boots became distant enough that Dal’s ears could no longer trace their path.

“Finally,” Evelyn muttered as she pulled a rolled parchment from the side of her jacket and rolled it across the desk to Cullen, who caught the paper within his unsteady hand and opened with haste. The Commander’s brows rose until they rested just under his hairline.

“The rumors are true,” he mumbled, “Ferelden marches towards Adamant, but for what end?”

_Ferelden marches towards Adamant? What in the Void was happening?_

“That’s what I need you to discover in the coming weeks, I need to know if they’re standing _with_ or _against_ us. Our plans crumble to grains of sand if we have to battle an army before we reach the gates of the fortress.” Irritation clear in Ev’s voice as she her Commander.

Dal’s eyes shut bombarded with memories of the last time she fought by the side of the Ferelden army. _Burning buildings, blood coating the street, surrounded by screams on all sides._ Of the memories not scattered to the haze why had these remained when others disappeared within the smoke-filled crevices of the Fade.

She gasped as a cool hand slid its fingers between hers, her horror subsiding at Leliana’s telltale grip. The same memories flooded their nightmares, memories burnt into the core of who they stood now. That was why these memories remained even when nothing else remained- she would never forget those moments, no matter how long she spent trying.

Nor should she.

_Hundreds lost their lives in the bloody streets of Denerim. They deserved their final moments remembered as a reminder of the destruction true evil caused. She wondered how many of those who’d lived through Haven would remember it the same. Memories replaying through their mind for the rest of their bloodied days._

_Would she have to fight her own country?_

That outcome paralyzed her. If she survived, she dreamed of returning to Ferelden. Making a home of her own until the Calling reached its corrupted fingers for her. If she stood, sword in hand, as Ferelden’s coat of arms roared across the battlefield towards her, that dream would dissolve away. The same as every dream she’d had before it. The fairy tales read to her as a child were lies- happy endings didn’t exist for heroes. Those stories were missing the pages where heroes relived their most horrific memories, alone, every night.

She looked up helplessly towards Leliana and found the same emotions reflected in the bard’s eyes before morphing back into the Spymaster of the Inquisition. The rogue removed her hand from Dal’s, returning to Josephine with silent slippered steps while Evelyn was still conversed with the Templars with varying degrees of disbelief on their faces.

Cullen and Barris were Ferelden to the bone, and the new Knight-Captain’s accent held definite traces of Ferelden in her flattened consonants. With her Free Marches birthright, Evelyn had no incentive to work with Ferelden other than preventing their interference with her goals. Even if they marched to assist their plan, Evelyn’s alliance with Orlais caused more complications than
This was a total disaster.

The billowing sound of the army’s horn echoed through the ancient stones of Skyhold signaling their departure. Evelyn looked up from the Commander’s desk, her eyes hazy as she peered toward the snow-capped horizon. This could be the last time the woman stood in Skyhold. The Inquisitor wasn't the sentimental type, but she struck Dal as someone who wanted to remain alive and that future was very much in doubt.

“Inquisitor.” Josephine half-bowed to her leader as she exited to lead the Inquisitor’s goodbye party. The Spymaster gave a curt nod and followed on Josephine’s heels.

“Ma’am.” Blackwall pardoned himself as he helped the frail Fiona make unsteady steps from the tower.

Bull stood, rolling his scarred and sore shoulders as he exited. “I’ll meet you at the gate.”

Dal wondered if he’d speak to Dorian. She knew the men were close before the Winter Palace. While troubled together, they were miserable apart. Who knew what would happen on Bull’s mission with Evelyn? A warrior’s fate was a fickle thing, she hoped he’d say farewell to the mage even for his own sake.

There was a firm grip on her arm. Dal looked down to Cassandra’s hand squeezing her forearm in recognition of what was happening. The Seeker had the foresight to see what Dal had not— she would now watch Barris march away to his actual death this time. A shudder ran through the Warden’s body as a chill rippled along the path of her bones. Cassandra gave a nod of acknowledgment to Cullen before shaking Rylen’s hand once last time and exiting to find the other advisers.

Her Templar hadn’t met her eyes since she’d entered the room. His jaw clenched tighter as he remained silent through Ev’s revelations about Ferelden. She was comforted they weren’t alone because she had no idea what to say. Something bothered him, and she could only presume she was the cause. His heart pounded erratically inside the tightening cage of his armor.

The horn blew its sorrowful melody once again, the sound reverberating in her soul.

“Templar.” Evelyn sighed pushing her shoulders back as the mantle of Evelyn Trevelyan; leader of the Inquisition, draped over her like a mourning shawl. She turned on her heels and headed toward the battlements, her Templar following in silence.

Barris and Lilly passed, their faces weighted with the reality of what was happening. Rylen offered Idalya a soft smile as he passed, and the beginning of tears formed as her devoted friend made his final exit from the fortress. Cullen, beside her, sorted through a massive stack of paperwork that was easier to focus on than his brothers leaving for war.

“Inquisitor?” Evelyn’s halted at Cullen’s voice. Her head turned over her shoulder, pale olive eyes glistening and full of hesitation as the rays of light streamed through the adjacent door in front of her. “May I have a quick word with Ser Barris about trebuchet adjustments before he leaves?”

The woman’s face fell in embarrassment the Commander missed while buried in his missives. Whatever caused the Commander and Inquisitor to fail, Dal felt this exchange was more telling than Cullen intended.

With a roll of her eyes and a subtle shake of her head, the woman left into the light with Lilly and
Rylen close behind, while Barris returned with caution. His eyes remained averted as he stood in front of his Commander’s desk. The Knight-Captain looked confused as Cullen finished sorting through the final papers in his pile.

Dal’s ear picked up the sound of the incoming soldiers long before the other two men. She lamented being dragged back to the cell she used to call her room before the Inquisitor arrived home.

The two guards burst into the office, looks of surprise clear as they only found the Knight-Captain, Commander, and Warden, remaining from the group that started. The larger of the guards narrowed his eyes at Dal and she shrunk smaller knowing she’d have to endure this bullshit until Evelyn departed. She knew fighting back or her typical sarcasm would get her thrown in the freezing cells yet again, or worse.

“Where have you been?” The Commander interrupted her spastic thoughts as he yelled at the two guards who looked as confused as Barris.

“We’re here to return the rabbit back to her cage.” The gruffer of the men uttered, his filthy Orlesian accent making her skin crawl. She could hear the heartbeats of the two Templars to her side thundering as rage flooded their senses.

“Forget the elf!” Cullen yelled, his voice booming, “the Inquisitor is looking for you imbeciles. She stormed off when you never returned. You better find her before she finds you slacking off.” The guards gaped at each other in continued confusion. “NOW!” Cullen’s roar stung her sensitive ears, but its effect was immediate- the men ran out the battlement door, their fear palpable.

If she wasn’t overwhelmed with processing everything, she would have laughed, and laughed hard at how foolish the men would look as they searched desperately to find the Inquisitor who couldn’t care less where the fuck they were if they weren’t in her hair.

Cullen scooped his papers together, bundling them under his arm right arm, as he stepped out from behind his desk. He rested his hand on Barris’ shoulder, giving it a reaffirming squeeze before walking out of the room towards the Rotunda, the opposite direction of Evelyn and her frantic guards.

Dal swallowed louder than she’d hoped as all other sound disappeared other than the pounding of both of their hearts filling the space of the room with their erratic rhythms. She allowed her eyes to drift up the length of his armored torso, terrified at what she’d find. As they drifted past his jaw, she found the emeralds of his eyes locked with hers, a complex swirl of emotions traveling through the bands of the deepest green.

She panicked. Hundreds of times she’d imagined this scenario, but in none of them had she been so terrified of speaking a word. His breaths were short and shallow as he stared at her, unmoving and silent. She had to do something.

“Hi.” For fuck's sake, Dal.

A brief smile flashed over his lips. “Hi.” Oh, the sound of his voice. She had forgotten the mesmerizing timbre of his words, his voice luring her in despite her many defenses.

The reality of him now standing mere feet away pressed in from all sides. So many months existing without the thing that made her feel safe, to not fear herself, and now he was right in front of her. Alive and strong, not the skeleton she’d sobbed and grieved over. This man showed no signs of weakness.
There were so many things to say.

“It’s nice… to see you.” The tears loosened from her eyes before she could finish the sentence. The tension from his features melting away at her emotions pouring over.

“Oh, Dal…” He sighed as he crossed the few feet separating them as he so gently reached one armored arm around the small of her back as his free hand tilted her quivering jaw up as his lips descended on hers.

The moment they made contact, his lips slotting perfectly with hers, she felt fire explode through her veins, her heart beating so quick the world spun blurring everything but them. Her body shuddered, and he pulled back, a light smile on his lips as his thumb wiped away the tears still falling from the corners of her eyes.

“Looks like I came through on that promise.” He mused as he looked at her features in blind wonder, not understanding how the Maker could have deemed him worthy for what he held in his arms.

The inches between them were too much as she rested her head against the quivering steel of his breastplate. His plate-lined arms wrapped around her shoulders as she cursed the unforgiving nature of armor.

Her emotions were a hurricane swirling inside her as memories of his ashen and decaying form on the healer’s cot singed her eyes. A sob hiccupped through her throat, her grief swelling as his safety allowed her fear to pour from her like a stream emptying into the ocean.

“You were lost.” She whispered against the steel. “Your life slipped away as you came home. I couldn’t let you…” words failed as her understanding of what she almost lost crashed over, waves dragging her under.

The heat of his breath was intense against the top of her head as he held her tight against him, keeping her afloat.

“What did you do, Dal?”

Every muscle in her body tensed at his question, locking in crisis. The question she’d feared since awaking the previous morning. How could she stand with pride and tell him what she’d done? To give herself magic that broke the laws of nature.

His hands massaged the aching muscles of her back as he waited for her to respond. “Dal, please, I need you to tell me.”

But she couldn’t.

She pulled away. Tears channeled their way down her cheeks as she saw the misery in his eyes. He knew. She’d feared that some part of him remembered or understood the unnatural force that funneled unbridled life back into his veins.

“Whatever it was- you shouldn’t have done it.” His hands trembled. Fists opening and closing no different from Cullen fighting his withdrawals.

“Shouldn’t have done it? You’d rather be dead? No, no…” she pointed a shaking finger at him, shaking her head, as she backed away, “you do not understand what you’re saying. You can never understand. I will never apologize for saving you!” She gritted out in disbelief.
“I do understand, Dal. I… I care about you enough that I won’t let you put yourself in harm’s way to protect me.” She couldn’t understand the emotions passing over his face, his spirit turbulent as he explained his meaning to her.

She laughed harshly, bitterness creeping now through the veins where relief had just run its course. “We are soldiers, Barris! It’s our job to protect one another!”

“Not the way you saved me!” He roared back, and she gasped as shame flooded through her. “You’re not just a soldier, Dal.” His voice was now flat, drained of emotion. “Your importance here is greater than some Templar.”

“You’re not just a Templar to me.” A sob pierced the end of her words, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. He flinched but kept himself distanced as he tried to believe the words he was speaking.

He hesitated, sorrow filling his eyes. “I know… that’s why I could never forgive myself if something happened to you because of me.” Stepping away his jaw tightened as he steadied himself and his shaking frame.

“What does that mean?” She knew but would make him pierce her with words deeper than a dagger.

Clearing his throat, he stared beyond her in the office, unwilling to make contact. “It means the Inquisition needs its Warden savior and all of this is for naught if you... My duty is protecting all those out there that would lie down their lives for our cause. I cannot let you extend yourself and allow us to lose everything. You are our hope, our light in the darkness. My feelings matter not when the safety of the Inquisition is in danger."

Her head spun as a jolt of pain split through her heart. She was dying again. She had to be to hurt this much. "I’m sorry this was never to be. Goodbye, Dal."

His armor clanked across the room echoing like a hammer rammed against tempered blade as he escaped. Her cries increased into her palms as she slunk down the desk until she was sobbing into her knees, her arms wrapped around her chest as she held on for life itself.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your lovely comments and support! <3
Chapter Summary

The Templars leave Skyhold for possibly the last time. Barris is left with a choice as the clock winds down.

Chapter Notes

IT HAPPENED! DRAGON AGE 4 IS OFFICIAL! *writes furiously*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

All of Skyhold gathered in the courtyard, their cheers deafening as the Templar formed ranks behind the Inquisitor’s triumphant platform for her adoring fans. Rylen’s eyes shifted to the empty spot in the front of the Templars where their new Knight-Commander would stand. A smile pulled at the corners of his lips at his two friends finding a moment of peace.

Cullen could be tone deaf to what happened around him, Maker, being involved with Evelyn was a prime example, but there were times Rylen could see the kind and caring man who existed before the first draught of lyrium touched his tongue.

Let them put the world down off their shoulders before the insanity began. If them being together before had been difficult, it would now be impossible between Barris becoming Knight-Commander and the Inquisition’s death march toward Adamant. Barris was the face for an organization rebuilding, finding its foothold in a world that viewed it as broken and archaic - a responsibility he hadn’t asked for.

He heard the heavy crunching of Barris armor over the stones before he came into view. Something was wrong. As miserable and inebriated as his friend looked last night, it was nothing compared to the misery ripping Barris open like an open wound for all the world to see. His leader took his place, shoulders quivering as the weight of his armor collapsed him.

“What happened?” Rylen questioned. Whispering wasn’t needed with the celebrating crowd surrounding them.

“I made the worst mistake of my life,” Barris uttered, defeat oozing from his words.

Rylen sighed as the corner of his eye caught the flicker of fire from the top of the battlements where Lilly stood high overhead, her auburn hair blowing in the spring breeze, watching their exit.

“Why are people so afraid of being happy?” Rylen mumbled as he memorized every detail of the Templar he’d never see again.

“I’m not afraid of being happy,” Barris snapped over his shoulder, “I’m afraid of something terrible happening to her because of me.”
Rylen’s brows rose to his hairline. “Are you serious, right now? What just happened, Del? Whatever just happened, happened because of you! Are you taking relationship advice from Evelyn? Maker, Barris… you’re a fucking idiot.” He felt guilty after the words tumbled out. Barris beat himself up enough he didn’t need Rylen’s help.

Looking back up where Lilly had stood on the battlements, he found them empty. Something snapped inside him, as he walked forward so his mouth was near Barris’ ear. “Go to her! Fix this!”

“I can’t.” Barris gritted out as the front gates opened. “I don’t have a choice.”

“You always have a fucking choice, Del. Fucking quit, go find her, and run away from this Void forsaken place. Don’t stop running until the Inquisition is far behind you then spend the rest of your lives just loving one another.” Barris’ shoulders rose- he was listening. Maybe he could save his friends from him and Lilly’s fate where duty was given precedence over what their hearts desired.

“Okay.” It was one word, but it shocked Rylen into delighted silence. Barris turned to face him, tears pricking in his eyes. “You’re right. I will do it.” A rare grin appeared across his features.

Rylen let out a whooping laugh, lunging forward to hug his brother, happy that his friends might find happiness in this dire world. “Go, my brother, find her. Send Doll my love.” The two men who fought side by side clutched one another by the shoulder as the weight of the moment set in.

“Inquisition.” Evelyn’s voice boomed over the crowd from her platform, he suspected from help from Dorian, who had not appeared at his cousin’s farewell. The Inquisitor was dressed in her armor, looking every bit her expected role. “Today we start our next chapter. Every step they have underestimated us, yet here we stand to fight another day!” The crowd cheered so Rylen couldn’t hear himself think.

“This path has not been simple. I cannot stand here and tell you that the fight we march towards is easy but winning is not why we fight- we fight because we have to because it’s the right thing to do!”

The crowd erupted as Rylen’s jaw hit the floor. Who the fuck stole Evelyn and replaced her with this person? Even Evelyn looked overwhelmed as the words spilled past her lips. She was so cold to those who followed her, so for them to hear her really speak had connected them in a way Rylen had never expected to see.

“We’ve had so many losses to this point, but those sacrifices will not be in vain! The Inquisition will keep fighting until we can say no one will live in fear of Corypheus, his Templar, nor mages again!” Rylen saw Barris’ shoulders slump with the realization that these people would die without Dal. She was the only person who could defeat Corypheus.

“Here stand some of the greatest warriors Thedas has produced, along with the Chantry’s mighty Templars and their soon-to-be new Knight-Commander, Ser Barris.” The Templars clapped their armored hands to recognize the man they were proud to lead them. “We will fight, we will be your champions!” Evelyn lifted her mark to the sky, a piercing green funnel of light ripped from her hand piercing the clouds floating above as the crowd cheered and hugged one another in jubilation as they felt their first shards of hope in a long time.

Turning behind him, he saw Varric and Sera propped up against one another, their faces painted with the same facade of horror prevalent on anyone who’d ever been forced to work with the woman who just whipped the once frightened crowd into a frenzy. His eyes traveled back to his brother only to find the joy from moments ago, gone, replaced by the solemn sense of duty that
occupied him since his, not casual, brush with death.

Rylen shrugged not knowing what to say to make this moment better for his friend. “Hey, it was a nice thought, right?” Barris uttered a half laugh as he shook his head while looking towards the Commander’s tower. Barris had dedicated his entire life to the Templar, so for him to consider throwing it all away showed just a measure of how much he cared about the Warden, even if he didn’t know how to show it.

“I’ll find a way to make this right,” Barris whispered as the Inquisitor and her Templars exited the fortress.

*****

Knight-Captain Rylen

I owe you an apology for the events that transpired before your departure from Skyhold. I used you for the purpose of distracting myself from the root of my pain, and for that, I’m am sorry.

Over our time working together, I have found you to be a decent man who cares and protects those around you despite the drivel and absurdity taught by the Chantry. From the moment I arrived in Haven, you treated me like a man and didn’t eye me with suspicion despite my connection to Evelyn.

As disappointing as Evelyn’s reassignment must be, many of us in the Inquisition are glad to see you not make this march. It gives us faith that quality people will remain in this world should we fail.

-Dorian Pavus

*****

Dorian-

I need no apology. My only regret that night was in our interruption. Maybe another lifetime?

I appreciate that you took the time to write me. At this point in my life, other than Templar, I have few friends remaining. A man can always use people in his life who help him see the world through different eyes and open their mind wider than they thought possible.

-Rylen

P.S. Can you keep an eye on the Warden for me? Anyone who puts themselves last as often as she is a magnet for trouble.

*****

Bull-

I wanted to apologize for my outburst before your departure. My apprehension for the coming battle plus multiple bottles of Antivan red left me in a rather foul place.

Safe travels on an unforgiving road.

-Dorian

*****
Dor-

You were correct to trust your instincts. I’ll arrive at Skyhold soon.

-Bull

*****

The tips of her tingling fingers drifted across the edge of the wood paneling of the Commander’s desk. Anything to keep her grounded so her feet didn’t float away as she attempted to disappear from the world, heartbeat erratic in her chest. She closed her eyes trying to draw breath as she processed his words. How could something fall apart so quickly? She cared for him and he cared for her, what else was needed in this insane world?

But it hadn’t been enough.

She stood uncertain, staggering, feeling foolish for letting her fragile heart shatter once more. The crowd roaring outside made her cringe as she ignored their purpose. They were an enthusiastic audience to cheer on her grief and suffering- one final parting gift from Evelyn Trevelyan.

Her heart pounded in the vessel of her throat at the armor clanging up the steps towards Cullen’s office, another of Evelyn’s guard sent to keep her within their sights. Yes, the guards kept her alive while assassins crept silently through the halls of the fortress, but the men had not shown her kindness. Trapped inside her room; a canary in a gilded cage as the world passed out of Evelyn’s sight- the way the volatile woman preferred.

She gritted her teeth as the heavy armor approached the door with no pause. The heavy door slammed open and she flinched, casting her eyes away from the soldier, should they think she was once again being indignant. The guards, when she had awoken from her mystical and troubled sleep, informed her Evelyn had ordered them to ensure she lived, but other than that they were free to keep themselves entertained as they saw fit.

Only one guard had been daring enough to put a misguided finger on the Warden before she’d promptly broken it, the other guard striking her so hard across the cheekbones her ears rung for hours afterward even with her supernatural healing. She plotted all the ways Leliana would have the men murdered, daggers slicing unneeded bits away, whenever her friend found her way away from her work to check on her friend- which she never had. The assassins within Skyhold captured the full attention of the fortress and everyone forgot the slumbering Warden in her pretty cage.

“Dal…” Her heart broke at the soft timbered voice as she questioned her sanity.

Lifting her eyes, a sob escaped her throat at the vision in front of her of a heavily panting Barris, catching his labored breath in the doorway, fingers gripping the ancient wood. She opened her mouth to speak, but he was in front of her before she had even registered his movement.

“I couldn’t leave you.” The pain in his voice matched the tint of his eyes. “I… I’ve cared for you since the moment my eyes spotted you, far more than a man in my position should care for something other than his sworn allegiance. Come with me?”

Her eyes opened in surprise at his confession. He wanted her. He wanted her to come with him. Could she? Just walk out of Skyhold and accompany the Templar? They would end up in the same place in weeks, why not stay with a Templar she knew in case her budding magic got the best of her or she collapsed in a lost memory.

“Okay.” It was one word, but it lit up Barris’ face with a joy she had never seen. “I’m not sure
how Cullen and Leliana will react, but yes, I’ll go with you. I need to grab my stuff.”

Reaching out, he slid his hand into hers. She looked down, a cautious smile working its way across her features as she stared at the overlaying shades of brown. Yes, this was right. This was where she was supposed to be. The Commander was a pushover with her, she’d just lay on the thickest layer of stubbornness she had, to match his own, until Cullen agreed to allow her to leave. This could work.

“I’ll slow Rylen down to give you time to catch up.” Barris rotated his shoulders to leave but turned back, his eyes unsure of his allowances, before swooping down to place a gentle kiss at the corner of her temple. His lips burned against her skin, their imprint lasting long after the Templar removed them from her chilled flesh.

“Thank you.” She was always filled with too many words that stumbled out faster than she could control, yet, whenever in his presence they were stricken from her mouth, foreign and awkward shapes clawing the length of her throat as she struggled to communicate her jumbled thoughts.

“Please, don’t thank me.” Barris’ eyes were pained as he watched her. “I caused you pain with my fear, and for that, I am sorry. Starting now, I will make it right.” She believed him. There was no question in his voice, and she believed every word as though gospel from the Maker himself.

“Come, we need to leave.”

Idalya stepped forward in the Templar’s footsteps when she froze, her eyes gaping open in fear, her trembling hands spasmed open at her sides.

“Dal? What’s wrong?” Barris’ voice became a whisper as her vision clouded, the world growing hazy around her. “Dal, can you hear me?” She could hear him but couldn’t tell where she was. One second she was in the room, yet in another she was far from here, green lush hills rolling around her.

Foolish Templar.

The voice rushed around them filling the Commander’s office as a pair of thin hands wrapped around her throat, their power tightening.

“Who are you? Leave her alone!”

A sword being drawn, but was another world, another place where she no longer was.

You think you can take her from me? Do you think she belongs to you, you simple man? You think you get to live and keep the girl too? What do you think was the price of your great miracle? Magic always has a price, it always has a price!

The no-longer comforting voice of the woman held a sinister edge as it roared past her ears as Idalya became desperate to draw breath against her tightening throat.

“Bar… ris.” The sound escaped her as she tried to locate him in the fading and disappearing world. If he was still here, she could no longer find him. “Barris, please…”

“Barris? Ser Barris?”

Delrin Barris lurched forward gasping for breath as he exited the Fade. His heart pounded, a war drum inside his ears, as he cast his eyes around the sparse bedroom of the empty Val Royeaux Circle. The recruit sent to retrieve him, looked away as the Knight-Captain found his bearings.
The dream felt so real. He could still remember the smell of oranges lingering in her satin hair the color of moonlight as he’d leaned down to kiss her head. Since his bout with almost with joining the Fade, his dreams had changed. Brighter, yet darker, their resemblance to waking day startling in its complexity. If he didn’t wake, he would not have been able to tell the difference.

Dal once told him of her fears of descending into the Fade, not knowing what nightmare her dreams had created for her. Is this what she saw when she closed her lavender eyes? Worlds of horror beyond his imagination? What he wouldn’t give to speak to her and hear he wasn’t losing his sanity without her. His mind dragging her into his dreams each night, tainting and corrupting his feelings for the Warden with fear while waiting for the next massacre the Fade prepared to unfold.

His eyes widened as he realized the recruit still stood in his room trying to make himself appear as small as possible. The boy retracting inside his armor like a startled turtle. Barris continued watching the reddening recruit until the boy looked up, surprised that Barris was sitting on his cot staring at his anxiety on full display.

“The Inquisitor, err, asked for you. She wants an early start before the procession. At least I think that’s what she screamed at me.” The boy looked rattled remembering his interaction with Evelyn. Barris shook his head at the recruit as he struggled his way to his feet, his feet certain in the direction he should head, but his heart pulled him over the mountains to where the Warden’s heart lay.

“Thank you, Recruit.” Barris acknowledged knowing how rough people’s brief interactions with the hardened woman could be, no matter how minor.

“You’re welcome.” The boy held his fist against his breast in a sign of respect for his sworn elder. “And congratulations. It’s not every day you become Knight-Commander.” The recruit tripped over his own misaligned armor as he turned to exit the room.

Barris smiled as memories of himself at that age spilled over into his present.

He’d been a gawky teenager still filling out to the edges of his bones when he’d left home to join the Chantry. His mind focused on the image of the Hero burned into his mind as he’d watched her fearless as she made the crossing into Kinloch, unknowing what she’d find in the hallowed bricks of the tower. He’d joined because he’d wanted to make a dead girl proud, showing respect for her sacrifice the only way he’d known how.

His eyes clenched tight as his last images of Dal in real life played again. The pain blossoming in her eyes and heart caused by his foolishness. He would never forget the heartbreak on her crumbling features for the remainder of his life. He wished she could be here today to watch him accept the honor he never dreamed possible.

What look would her features hold as he told her that all of this had been because of her? Would the risen girl be proud in what she inspired, or would her eyes fill with the hurt that her feats had destroyed yet another chance at happiness?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the kind comments!
The Chapter Where Bull Has Suspicions

Chapter Summary

Idalya attempts to find a new "normal" and nearly loses her head when the Iron Bull comes charging back to Skyhold with a purpose.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The flat end of the dagger swung through the still air impacting Idalya’s exposed shoulder over her massive sword thrust in front of her.

“Fuck!” Dal grimaced, her two-handed steel dropping to the ground, as the grinning Templar wiggled her sculpted auburn brows at the agitated Warden.

Lilly tucked her daggers into their back sheaths while shaking her head at the other woman, noting with concern the Warden’s precious weapon left to sit covered in dirt on the ground. “You’re off your game today. How are we supposed to keep you alive when you can’t block a simple parry?”

The Warden threw her head back with a frustrated grunt. Ten days. Ten days since the Inquisitor set off for Val Royeaux, her specialty army at her heels. Ten days since Barris simultaneously healed and destroyed her heart within the callused confines of his hands. He reciprocated her feelings, but due to that connection, he walked away, exiting her life forever.

She wasn’t sure how much time passed sobbing on the freezing stone floor of the tower that day. As the cheers diminished, she ran out of tears, the heat dissipating from her fingers and toes and away from her body. Once empty, she’d sat numb, blind to everything. Shutting down her heart and mind to face the world felt familiar. Drying her face, she left the office, heading down to the training dummies and grabbed the weighted sword propped up against the Seeker’s.

Over and over, strike after strike, she swung her sword taking down one imaginary opponent at a time until her arms were as numb as her heart. Her limbs buckling under the weight of the metal. Returning to her room, she’d collapsed in bed, sleeping harder than she could remember. Only briefly she’d tried to locate her mentor in the Fade’s safety, but he covered his path from her, and every night since.

Each morning she rose and trained harder than before with her soldiers, ensuring they prepared their muscles for the beating they would take at Adamant and so she could sleep in a near coma each night and avoid the Fade altogether in her exhaustion. Warden’s had endurance stronger than all these men, battling with the pure fury that only those who sensed they were close to their ends possessed.

The Warden’s weapons would slice through their ranks, cleaving their men into discarded pieces. Blackwall, Fiona, and herself took turns training but kept their eyes hidden from one another, unwilling to confront the reality that the men would march toward in hours. Many soldiers would never return to Skyhold. They’d burn on pyres built shakily onto the surface of the endless desert if even afforded that luxury.
A scout’s horn blew in the distance to signal arrivals through the gate. Travelers were common at Skyhold but fell off with the Inquisitor and her Orlesian compatriot’s departure from the fortress. Traders were expected to set up shop after the army took leave, preparing for what of the Inquisition would return after the battle.

“You’re done for the day. Get some rest. We have a long day tomorrow.” Dal rolled her eyes at the Templar and kicked an errant pile of dirt towards the woman who frowned in dismay at the Warden’s tantrum.

Dal turned from Lilly and hobbled towards the water station. Her thoughts were jumbled since hearing the cheers ignite in the courtyard at the announcement of Barris’ promotion to Knight-Commander. There wasn’t a doubt the Chantry wouldn’t accept him with the blessing of the Orlesian-supported Inquisitor. It was stupid to hope he’d turn down the Chantry and return for her. These men needed him to lead if they were to survive. She **needed** him to lead with confidence if she would survive.

Her arm stung from the blow in the joint of her shoulder. A throbbing, twisting pain not unlike the one in her heart. Lilly didn’t pull punches in training, which she appreciated since Rylen hadn’t held back either, but Dal despised visiting healers after every round of sparring with the Templar. She was certain this match would require yet another visit for whatever damage the auburn-haired woman caused. When she finished washing her face from the barrel of water, she found Lilly gone, not even hearing the woman exit the training ring, she’d been so lost in her grimacing.

Across the courtyard, she spotted a pair of mighty horns passing above the crowd of soldiers congregated toward the gates. Bull and the Chargers would head straight to Adamant with Evelyn and not return to Skyhold first. The remaining army would set forth towards the fortress in the morning- this was cutting the timeline close, even for Bull, who somehow showed up the exact place he intended when expected.

With his massive frame, Bull cleared the soldiers heading toward the training area. His skull pointed forward with determination, an unreadable emotion written across his face. When his speed didn’t decrease, Dal backed up subconsciously across the ring as the Qunari cleared the stone stairwell and headed straight in her direction. The hair on her neck rose in apprehension at the narrowed eyes of the Qunari set for a collision course with her.

Without pause, the man stepped over the training railing that only registered to his hips as he approached. With the edge of his dirtied boot, he kicked the handle of her abandoned sword to her, the grip bouncing off the front of her weathered boots.

“Pick up the weapon. I don’t fight defenseless people.” The subtle edge of humor that coated Bull’s usual words was missing. Dal’s jaw went slack in confusion.

“What?” She blurted out as she saw his thick arm reach behind him, freeing his battle ax from its guarded position against his spine. The blades were as wide as the width of her shoulders. They had sparred many times in the ring, but she had never seen him lift a weapon in anger at anyone in the Inquisition before.

“Pick up the weapon!” He ordered as he rotated his shoulders, limbering himself up to strike.

**Fuck.**

She grabbed her sword from her feet, shoulder screaming in pain from the torn ligaments Lilly separated from their home. Before she could plant her feet, Bull swung his mighty ax over his head toward her. Unable to roll away, she was left to absorb the blow. Managing, just in time, to get the
sword up, Bull’s ax slammed into the steel, the crash echoing through the fortress. The reverberation ripping through her body as she crashed her teeth together to keep from screaming in torment.

“Who are you!?” The Qunari demanded as he swung overhead again. Unable to sustain another blow like the prior, she dove clumsily out of the way. Her forearm struck the dirt as she scrambled to her feet, just in time to slide under a horizontal slice of the enormous blade whirling by, sharp enough to slice lengths of her hair in half. “Who sent you? No more lies!”

She couldn’t focus on his words. At her height, there was no easy exit from this ring where Bull couldn’t follow or hit her with his significant advantage of reach. Many times, she’d joked that being a member of the Inquisition would kill her again, but she never imagined her end brought about by a man she fought beside.

“Did you know it was a setup? Why didn’t you warn me?” She could hear his fists tightening on the grips of his ax. Nothing good came from fighting back, but she was running out of options to escape this ring with all her limbs attached.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Idalya screeched back at the man, which incensed him more as he swung again in her direction, clipping the edge of her armor as she rolled away.

“No more lies!” The Qunari growled as he charged towards her.

There was no escape. She braced herself with a cry.

A moment before contact there was a flash of light and Bull glanced off her with a howl of frustration. In shock, Dal looked down to see a pale blue light hovering over the expanses of her skin illuminating the sky buzzing around her.

“Bull, stop.” Dal gasped in relief as Dorian’s measured voice oozed out, coated thickly with the magic he was protecting her with.

“Dor- drop the barrier. She is not what she appears.” Bull’s anger was already fading as he was pleading with his former lover.

“She is a terrified girl you attacked with no warning.” The sapphire mana swirled around the lengths of his body moving faster over the length of his staff, the buzz filled her ears, furious wasps protecting a nest.

*Did you know it was a setup?* Bull’s words echoed through her mind, bouncing violently inside her skull as his meaning became clearer on each repetition. She stepped forward toward the fuming man.

“Bull… where are the Chargers?” She whispered, desperate for an answer that wasn’t the one she now presumed. A look of hurt crossed his face as he looked back at Dorian begging him with sullen eyes to drop the barrier before being forced to attack.

“It was a trap.” he mumbled still looking at Dorian, whose own face had lost its expression. “Evelyn sold us out. Told my contacts I was Tal-Vashoth, that I had gone gray and abandoned my mission to gain their trust. Said I was disclosing information not meant for the Inquisition.”

Dal felt Dorian’s magic flicker as Bull recounted what happened on his accompaniment mission with Evelyn. “What does that have to do with me?”

Bull’s eyes of anger looked toward her small frame.
“Venatori were attacking the dreadnaughts from the beach and the Chargers were being overwhelmed. My loyalty was torn until I saw that smile on Evelyn’s face and knew what happened. She sold us out to save her own skin.” He shook his mighty head. “That’s when it happened. They informed the Inquisitor that not one member of the Inquisition was to be harmed on the Arishok’s orders from the Hero of Ferelden. The Qunari ran down to eliminate the rest of the Venatori.” Bull’s ax fell limply to his side. “I don’t know who you are to give orders to the Arishok, but you’ve been lying to all of us.”

“No, I swear, I haven’t been lying!” Dal begged. “When Sten sent his gifts, I sent a message to him asking, as a favor, that the Inquisition be protected. I swear on Andraste herself, I am telling the truth!”

“If that’s true, what did you do to him?” Bull pointed a wavering hand towards Dorian, whose face paled in the glowing light.

“Dorian? I have done nothing to him.” She looked towards Dorian in confusion, but the mage’s jaw tightened as he stared down the Qunari.

“No, more lies. He wasn’t like this before you.” His words disappeared into the air as the man deflated.

“Bull,” Dorian’s voice was controlled in a way she’d never heard before, “I am a grown man. Nothing was done to me. But…” the mage turned and looked at her with his storm-gray eyes, “it’s not her fault. She’s nothing more than a frightened girl pulled into a time where she doesn’t belong.” He looked back at his former lover. “You’re the one with the spy training, look at her and tell me that everything she’s shown us is nothing more than lies.”

Dal shut her eyes as she could feel the Qunari’s gaze piercing through her like the thin blade of a dagger. Yes, she was missing gaps of her memory, but nothing as large as Bull was claiming she was responsible for. Dorian was a mess since she’d arrived, there’s no way it could involve her.

“I don’t understand,” Bull admitted in defeat as he looked back to Dorian.

“When the Qunari arrived here, they referred to her as the kadan of the Arishok, maybe that wasn’t an embellishment. It appears this may be stupid luck that a decade ago, your fearless leader fell horns over feet for a spitfire Elven Warden.” Dorian shook his head with the absurdity of it all.

“Oh, it was nothing like that, we were just friends and he didn’t have horns.” Dal corrected as both men now rose incredulous brows at her.

“Fuck, Evelyn…” Dorian mumbled, running a frustrated hand over his forehead.

“Did you know this would happen?” Bull whispered, his eyes lowered in shame for his uncalled-for attack on the innocent Warden recognizing Dorian’s words as the truth.

“No, but I’m more than well acquainted with her dislike of middlemen. She prefers to be in direct control of her fate. I’m certain it will not please her with this not working out as she’d planned.” Dorian’s body language tensed as Dal felt an electric current building around the ring. “Lilly, I swear on the Black Divine, if you smite me, I’ll poison every drop of ale in the fortress.”

A bitter laugh rang out behind Idalya and Lilly walked forward resting her forearms on the wooden beams of the ring. “Lovers quarrel?” She instigated, the smell of ale heavy on her breath even though it was only the middle of the afternoon on their last day at Skyhold.

“Oh, fuck off,” Dorian responded, unwilling to look at the Knight-Captain that had proven herself a
poor substitute for Rylen. “I was simply inviting Bull and the Warden to the Herald’s Rest for celebratory drinks, though it appears you already beat us there. Did you save us a table?”

He returned his staff to his back, the barrier floating around Dal flickering away with a sigh. With a disinterested shrug, Lilly headed back towards the bar without a word for once, while the three remained behind.

“I’m sorry, Dal, that was… not me.” Bull responded quietly.

“I understand.” She led a team once, she knew how protective leaders could become of those under their wing. “Are they okay?”

“Banged up and bruised, but they’ll arrive back before nightfall… thanks to you- thank you, Warden. All your drinks are on me… basically forever.”

“Well, this was all worth it then.” She joked, cringing as she tried to move her shoulder. “I need to see a healer before thinking of booze.”

Dorian guided her by the still functioning shoulder. “I think I can take care of that, follow me. Quality healing with drinks on hand, I should look at opening my own bar with healing incorporated after all this insanity has passed. I’ll be the richest man in Minrathous.”

She tried to laugh, but it only caused a sharp shooting pain to explode through the side of her chest through to her fingers. “Come on, kid, you’re a mess.” The mage mocked as he steered her towards the bar to drown her sorrows in Skyhold one last time.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the kind comments! So excited to get the story back on track. <3
The Chapter Where the Inquisition Hits the Road

Chapter Summary

Dorian observes while Dal tries to lay down her burdens as the Inquisition draws close to Adamant.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Page from Dorian Pavus’ journal-

The rest of the Inquisition’s army left Skyhold to less fanfare than Evelyn and the Templars received. The civilians bought the image Ev sold to them, but its shiny newness had decayed, reality settling in by the time Cullen began the death march we must complete.

The road has been somber this time as we travel west across Orlais. I look forward to a climate more like home as we move further from the Frostbacks, shivering and goose fleshed is not a great look for one as stylish as myself.

I’ve learned people show who they are on the road. Strip away the amenities someplace like Skyhold offers and you discover what composes someone. Our mighty Commander grew irritable after a few days traveling, his desk job making him softer than remembered, but after a few nights of marching was part of the regular army that set up camp for the night.

Leliana and her scouts kept to themselves, eying every random movement around us with suspicion. I try to avoid rogues, save Varric, since I find their twitchiness to be unpalatable. Mages in Trevinter are secretive enough, the less hidden clubs a place has, the better. I write this as Lady Vivienne and Solas both stare at me in disdain from across the campsite.

Our lovely Ambassador is an agitated mess as the act of traveling cut into her paperwork time. Blackwall, her humble knight of Grey, attempted to calm his Antivan beauty and now slept outdoors after offering his unsolicited advice one too many times. For everyone’s safety, he keeps a close eye on Sera to ensure the elf doesn’t decide to prank the stressed-out woman to boost morale.

Just yesterday, Cullen fell victim to Sera’s morale-boosting after she sewed part of his surcoat to his bracers so any orders he gave appeared far more grandiose than the Commander ever intended. His army allowed this to continue for most of the day before Idalya spotted him, walked over, and cut the threads without his notice while glowering a warning at the chuckling soldiers.

Things between Bull and I have been more manageable after the incident upon his arrival to Skyhold. I’m not at the point where I’d feel comfortable discussing what happened between us, but we can have civil conversations around the Chargers and alone that don’t deteriorate into finger pointing and name calling, which is more than I expected. Though the noticeable lack of excess alcohol available could also be a huge factor in the improvement of our interpersonal skills.

I find myself impressed with the Elven Warden. For being cooped up in Skyhold for her second life, she is a seasoned traveler who pulls more than her share of the weight. Her skills as a campfire cook are not as horrendous as I’d suspected from someone of Ferelden birth, though Blackwall
usually wrangles the duty away since he finds cooking for the camp relaxing.

There is a helplessness in the lost Warden that’s gnawed and festered within me since her run-in with Bull. I’ve tried to follow Rylen’s request to protect her, but her sadness draws me in and spirals down in a way I’ve never encountered. I’ve hidden my true self from people for enough of my life to recognize a poorly fitted mask in seconds. She pretends to be more prepared and accepting of what’s coming than she is.

As we cleared the last of the Orlesian forests and the humidity lifted from the air, the rock formations lining the worn path leading us to the massive desert of the Approach transfixed her. She slowed her steps to fall into tempo with mine in silence for hours before asking of Trevinter and if it resembled this area.

I found it a strange request but obliged the curious girl. I told her about Minrathous and the incredible cities spread across Trevinter. I left out the fact Elven slaves built them, but as I watched her eyes glaze over as her imagination transported her across the seas, I found myself unable to taint yet another place for the girl with reality.

She was quiet as I spoke to her about the numerous places I’d seen in my travels until a gasp pierced the air around us and I looked at her curiously. The massive rock formations on our sides eroded away revealing the expanse of desert that reached the horizon ahead. Her boots moved with hesitation as they made their first steps of many into the desert. After a dozen paces, her knees wavered as she dropped to them in the sand, trails of loose rocks lifting with the wind behind her.

I approached slowly, unsure what was happening. When I reached her, I found her with tears welling in her eyes as she ran her fingers through the sand, letting it slide out between the spaces between her quivering fingers.

It’s so beautiful.

Her words were soft, yet they echoed through the desert like an explosion in my ears.

I would have never seen this, never felt the sand through my fingers. I would never have known how much I missed. She’d whispered into the wind.

That is the unfortunate part of martyrs, isn’t it? When you sacrifice everything, you ensure the world keeps turning but no one ever thinks of what you gave up. She was just a child when she made a sacrifice, I’m not sure I’d be willing to make.

Born, raised, and died in Ferelden without stepping foot into another land.

I diverted my eyes because her emotion was a raw and exposed vein I could not handle. Over the last few months, I’ve developed a quality case of alcoholism to avoid the level of feelings the girl at my feet was experiencing. I had to leave, lest I get drawn in and be forced to confront my lingering emotions from that fateful night.

Vivienne is glaring at me again. I’d like to tell her not to have such unpleasant expression on your face for the fear they might get stuck there, but it’s too late for the dear woman. Maybe there is someone where in camp to dig up a quality bottle of wine…

*****

Her back was on fire. A half day of hauling supplies weighted her body down until her muscles cried out for rest. The problem with fighting an army across a desert is that wheels became useless the closer they were. Your supplies are what you can carry on your back. They kept caravans light
to keep them from sinking into the deepening layers of sand that reached as far as she could see.

As a Warden, she had supernatural strength unlike those around her, so she and Blackwall carried the weight of two men each to lighten other’s loads. But after a full day of marching, it left her cramping and doubled over in her tent at night as she waited for her increased healing to do its work.

The further they marched the more horrific breaching the walls of the Warden’s fortress became. It was one thing to launch a war on the ground, and another to do it surrounded by sand. It intrigued her to see the Ferelden army when they encountered them to see how the other Fereldeners coped with the sand she still struggled to walk through.

Sometimes she wished she was a heavier packer. Her entire pack contained only four linen tunics thrown into the bottom before making room for her armor. To travel in Ferelden that would have been adequate with access to streams to rinse her clothes out frequently. Alas, she had been unaware of the rank smell that fused with clothing while hiking through an arid land. More than once, she contemplated asking any mage, even Solas, if they could summon hot water to wash away the smell that clung to her clothing as of late. Pulling the least offensive of the group out, she threw it over her head with a scowl as she exited to find dinner.

The camp was quieter than usual for an early evening as the soldiers would arrive at Adamant in one more sleep. Varric had taken over cooking responsibilities for the night to keep his mind occupied and it filled the camp with a rich smell of Free Marches stew more appealing than she’d suspected. Her stomach growled in appreciation as the first bowls of the thick broth were consumed. Leliana was already halfway through hers as Dal sat down beside her careful not to spill.

“How is it?” She asked settling in next to her oldest friend.

“Better than I had expected, but honestly, my expectations were low.” The rogue admitted as she greedily ate the stew, barely stopping between bites to breathe.

“One more day.” Dal used her spoon to swirl the vegetables around in her bowl as she thought over how many meals she may have left in her life.

“Yes, we’re close enough now that my ravens return in hours. Though it means an uptick in communications with Evelyn.” Leliana paused, staring into her soup bowl. “Ferelden has arrived at Adamant.” Her voice was hollow and worried.

Dal swallowed her spoonful loudly, the sound echoing. “Do we know if they’re with us or against us?” It was the question she feared. Would taking down the corrupt Wardens also require fighting her homeland? Could she fight against her brothers in arms and the land of her birth and look herself in the eye ever again?

An empty laugh left Leliana’s body, “So far they are a neutral party. They claim their involvement is concern over the Inquisition’s motives concerning the Wardens. Though their neutrality has not prevented incidents between the Inquisitor and King so far.” The rogue shook her head as she stared at the rest of her stew in annoyance.

Evelyn picking fights with other leaders wasn’t a total surprise yet choosing to engage in arguments with a potential ally in front of another army you were about to fight might go down in the history of Thedas as one of the worst military moves of all time. Cullen wasn’t eating with the rest of the crew, so she presumed he’d already heard the same news and was destroying his makeshift desk in his anger at Evelyn’s failed attempts to manage his job.
Across the camp, she spied Solas and Briala sitting together engaged in conversation as they picked at their food, a general look of disgust on both faces at what Varric considered dinner. Over the march, she spotted the two making conversation more frequently, her curiosity about his journeys through the ancient realms of the elves easily baiting Solas into hours-long diatribes of the visions he’d experienced.

Idalya’d be a liar if she didn’t admit the dagger stabbing her heart to see the two elves engaged in light banter. The Fade was lonely and crippling without his guiding hand, but she was happy for him to find a student interested in his journeys instead of rolling their eyes at his instruction like her.

She turned back to Leliana. “Why would Evelyn do something so… dumb?” She’d tried to come up with any other word, but it seemed to be the only one that fit the scenario properly.

The Spymaster set down her empty bowl on the sand between her feet. “Evelyn likes to know her boundaries with people, and as I feared, the King is failing her traps.” Her hand rose to her face as she pinched the bridge of her nose. “The Queen is a far more level-headed leader, but her husband’s volatile personality puts her at a disadvantage in these negotiations.”

**What had happened to Ferelden in her decade removed from time?** “Why is he allowed to take part? Leave the Queen in charge and prevent a second war from escalating out of Evelyn’s shitty alliances, seems straightforward.”

Leliana swallowed a chuckle as it began and drew her composure back before turning back to Dal. “I, wholeheartedly, agree, except it’s hard to discourage the King from being involved when he, himself, is a Warden.”

“What? How?” Dal’s jaw bounced off the rough surface of the sand as she realized the impact of her friend’s words.

“He hasn’t actively been a Warden for many years now, much to Weissheapt’s annoyance. No longer did he feel loyalty to the creed he had sworn himself to and walked away. To serve Ferelden? Maybe. Honestly, he’s done a poor job this whole time. He’s unfortunately no longer the man he once was.” She stirred her soup lost to the outside world. “Without the Queen, the whole kingdom would have been thrown into chaos many times since the Blight. She’s the only reason Ferelden has come closer to be the country it once was prior.”

Dal wasn’t listening to most of Leliana’s words. *Someone had left the order successfully.* Not that she didn’t believe in the order’s values; she did with her whole heart, but she had completed hers. Everything through the death portion of her pledge was completed and yet, here she sat.

When trying to gauge the depth of her feelings for Barris she toyed with walking away from the order. They didn’t know she was alive and maybe it was for the best. Run away, fade into obscurity and the forgotten tales of history and spend her last years peacefully until the Calling came singing its sweet song for her.

“Are you okay?” Leliana looked hesitant as she watched Dal’s features for something the Warden was unsure of.

“I think? The thought of fighting against my own brothers in two days is weighing on my soul. If I had lived, I would have heard the false calling, and I would be in that fortress with them.”

“No.” Leliana cut her off promptly. “As stubborn as you are, your friends are more so. We would have kept you safe.” A flash of pain reflected across the woman’s face as she remembered
watching the elf tumble through the sky on a scorched battlefield a lifetime ago. Both would always be on that field, forever trapped with the consequences of their decisions that fateful day. “A lot has happened in the time you were gone. After the battle, we should sit down and discuss what has changed in your absence, I think you are ready.”

The Spymaster rose to her feet solemnly. The woman had many hours of work to complete before resting her head. In some ways, soldiers had it easy. The weight of success or failure didn’t rest on their shoulders but on those standing behind them who constructed every detail of the plans, trying to predict the moves and motivations of hypothetical combatants.

Noise picked up on the far side of the camp where Bull, Varric, and the Chargers were hosting cards. Laughing and boisterous crowds were easily distracted from the coming day. Moving closer to the aura of sound, she took an empty seat next to Dorian, who sat away from the group growing louder with each subsequent minute but was lost in his own thoughts. In his lap was a leather-bound journal in which he’d made notes over the past few weeks. He closed the book quickly as she lowered herself onto the lopsided rock bench and she felt guilty for intruding.

“Planning on joining the gang in their rambunctious round of cards?” Dorian’s normally sarcastic tone was present, but an undercurrent of sadness ran through his words.

“Nah,” she watched the players across the fire, melting shapes through the licking paths of flames. “I’m still dry from losing out to you guys before we left Skyhold. Do you know if we get paid at this job?”

Dorian chuckled, tucking away his ink and quill. “If we do, it’s not nearly enough.”

“Unfortunate.” She mumbled, her brain scrambling to coax any words out of her throat that wasn’t about dying in two days’ time.

“Hey Kitty, you gonna join in?” Varric yelled across the fire, a sizable amount of coin posed in front of the devilish rogue.

“I’m still broke, you weaselly dwarf!” She hollered back to applause from the Chargers and many of the soldiers she trained herself. Varric winked with a cheeky grin before playing a card on the fabric table laid out.

“I’ll cover ya, Hero,” Sera called from the back, “but it’ll cost ya!” A whooping sound and cheers rose from the crowd from whatever crude gesture Sera made to the appreciative soldiers.

“That’s a terrible idea! Never, ever, ever, make deals with Sera.” From Bull’s tone, an interesting story was attached to that response as Sera cackled in the background and Krem hid his blushing face in his hands.

“Oh, come on, Hero! I could make you a very happy woman!” Dal chuckled at Sera’s plea as she rose to make her way to edge of the massive card game.

“Sorry, Sera, I don’t think you’re my type.” She offered with an exaggerated frown as she arrived at the group.

Sera shrugged, elbowing Lilly to her side, who rolled her eyes but refocused on her cards determined the elf cheated. “Can’t fault a girl for trying. Who is your type, Hero?” Sera meant her words innocently, well, as innocently as she did anything, but Dal’s heart crumbled as a pair of emerald eyes, ebony skin, and a voice like velvet traveled through her memories.

“I’m not sure, it’s been a while,” she mumbled to clear thoughts of the Templar from her barely
held together mind. Beside her foot, Varric reached out playing a pair of ladies from his hand. Reaching a hand out she slightly teased her fingers through the top of the dwarf’s hair. “What do you say, Varric? You fancy elves?” She asked in her most over the top seductive voice. The crowd erupted in hysterics as the dwarf’s body language stiffened, a desperate choking sound escaping his throat.

She burst out in laughter, grasping her friend by the shoulder. “I’m so sorry, Varric, that was unbecoming of me. Please, forgive me!”

Varric exhaled from holding his breath the entire interaction. “Oh, Kitty, you frightened me to death there. I need to remember you’re a better bluffer than you let on next time we gamble.”

Bull leaned back watching the exchange with an analytical eye. “I’d wager that I’m her type.” Sera cackled again, her voice disappearing into the wide expanses of sand, as the crowd quieted, invested in the Warden’s response.

“You’re four times her size! You’d crush her, you beast!” Sera roared, as she slapped Bull on the massive shoulder. Dal had no idea where Sera located booze in the camp, but she wanted to know where she’d found it.

Things were friendly between her and Bull since their confrontation. She assured him that she understood the need to protect those who looked to you for strength. She remembered what it was like to have one of your leaders abandon you to battle, Evelyn was no Loghain, but it didn’t excuse her actions either.

“It’s not like that,” Bull clarified, piquing even Dal’s interest, “she’s a puzzle missing pieces. It’s less about the physical, though I’m sure that would be electric.” An unexpected fire burned through her core at his words. “She needs an anchor to keep her grounded and someone who can lift her up. Someone who anticipates her needs before she can sense them.” Her heart pounded as she felt the sets of expectant eyes on her.

“And you think this person, is you?” She asked as playfully as her anxiety would allow.

“It could be.” He answered with confidence. “Not in the way you wanted, but in the way, you needed.” His face broke out into a wide grin and she couldn’t help but laugh, offering a half bow at his win in the round of verbal jousting.

Shaking her head with a defeated smile on her face, she excused herself from the card game as she returned across the camp to her tent. She should check on Cullen or Cassandra on the adviser’s side of the camp but couldn’t add their stress to her own. She had enough guilt on her shoulders to last a lifetime without helping them with theirs. All the advisers had signed up for their positions, they forced her into hers. For once she’d be selfish and just deal with her own suffering and dread over the coming battle.

Approaching her tent, the last rays of lights ceased from the sky and a hollow cough echoed off to the south. Intrigued, she investigated who had been more introverted than herself tonight. Growing closer, a heavy and pungent smell filled the air until through the haze she could spy Blackwall, carved pipe in hand.

“Ah, caught me red-handed, my Lady.” The man chuckled, his cheeks rosy and worn eyes bloodshot. She shook her head in mocked judgment as she came and flopped down on the empty spot behind the hefty warrior.

“Please, don’t call me a lady it always feels so insulting.” She admitted the bitter truth to the other
Warden. Between being an elf, dark-skinned, poor, and a Warden, the title Lady was used by the condescending that even now it felt like a judgment upon who she was.

“Ay, that I understand. Forgive me, Hero.” He offered her a tilt of his head as she rose a brow at him. He inhaled from the pipe and blew the heavy cloud of smoke into the air covering the mass number of stars until it dissipated away.

“Now you’re just being a jerk.” She ribbed back, leaning back against the crate Blackwall dragged out and up the dunes of sand to sit in privacy, which she’d violated.

“I apologize, Dal, I’m not myself right now.” Chuckling, he offered the pipe to Dal at his side as she stared at it in growing curiosity. *Fuck it.* She would die on the sword of a Warden in two days. Why did it matter?

“Or maybe you’re more yourself than usual,” she offered.

Blackwall’s laugh quieted as she lifted the wooden pipe to her lips, the musky odor strong amongst the burning leaves packed inside. With a deep inhale, the smoke pulled into her lungs, burning a scorching path down her throat and up her nose as her eyes opened wide in surprise, her throat reflexively spasmed causing her to cough up clouds of billowing smoke that puffed around her like a broken drake. He reached out to remove the shaking pipe from her hands as she leaned forward to cough violently between her knees.

“I should’ve warned ya that the first time is the worst, but now it’s over.” He patted her on the back with a light laugh as she got oxygen back and functioning in her lungs.

“Thanks for the warning.” She croaked as Blackwall laughed harder, falling back against the crate as he wiped the tears building in his eyes.

She leaned back against the crate next to him, trying to get her breathing normal as her heart fluttered in her chest, the burn of the smoke still pushing at the edges of her lungs. As the sun descended below the horizon, the sky above exploded in more stars than she’d ever known could exist.

The Dalish had names and histories her mother told her as a young child, but she had forgotten them to time. She wished things weren’t so uncomfortable between her and her former mentor; she wished she could ask him to reveal the shapes hidden in the sky to her.

Blackwall took another deep drag off the end of the pipe, the embers illuminating the world around them for a flicker before fading away. She watched the path of the smoke he exhaled as it spread out over the sky making the world hazy and blurry, no different from visions in the Fade.

“Why aren’t you with Josephine?” In Blackwall’s boots, there’s nothing that could have kept her away from any form of comfort she could locate in their final days.

The Warden sighed hard as he handed the pipe over into Dal’s inexperienced hands. “Josie hasn’t been sleeping. She never stops writing. Letters to every potential ally the Inquisition has earned in its time, begging for any help they can offer. If we fail, she’ll blame herself for not providing the resources we needed to prevail.”

Dal inhaled, better prepared for the burning this time as she exhaled the smoke into a solid stream as she bathed the stars. He was right- the first time was the worst. “That’s not how war works.”

“Aye,” the man agreed, taking another puff, “but she knows not of these things. I wish she had not come along on this trek. Haven was her first experience being surrounded by death and it changed
her. I don’t want what she sees here to further darken her mind.”

It was not a funny statement, yet at Blackwall’s issuance, laughter started from her gut and she couldn’t hold it back, no matter how hard she tried. Her laugh barked out past the hand she stuffed in her mouth to keep the sound insulated.

“Something funny, Hero?” Blackwall asked, an exaggerated expression on his face, though his eyes were kind as he watched the other Warden relax for the first time in weeks.

She couldn’t remember the last time she laughed when her heart wasn’t seized by despair— it was a good feeling. The stars above her flickered, some larger than she’d remembered, others tiny pinpoints of light. She felt safe showing her vulnerability to Blackwall since he understood how complicated her emotions were. Becoming a Warden wasn’t a vow you took lightly. Once your vows and Joining were complete, death as a Warden was inevitable. You just prayed to the Maker that your death would be a quick one and you took your opponents with you.

“Did you know the King of Ferelden is a former Warden?” She lolled her head over toward the overly bearded man.

“Former.” The man huffed as he stared up at the infinite sky overhead. “But yes, I heard. He’s not much of a Warden, nor a King from the rumors going around.” He offered the pipe to Dal who she shook her head, as she curled up against the crate enjoying a moment with no burdens. “What has the world come to? The Inquisitor is a self-serving woman vital to our survival, the Emperor of Orlais gained his title through murder, and the King of Ferelden is an overgrown child allowed to govern an entire country unchecked.”

She considered his words as her brain tried to push unwanted thoughts through to the surface she hastily brushed away, like flies from a horse. “What can we do to fix it?”

Blackwall packed away the pipe in its leather holder, which he tucked into the side of his breastplate, a shining griffin staring back at her and taunting. “Here’s where the extra years I have on you, come in handy. We can’t do anything, only they can fix whatever bullshit they’ve dragged us into. We try to keep our heads down when they place the blame.” The weathered Warden rose, his bones creaking as he pressed a tired hand to his back as he straightened his posture.

He patted the hidden pocket inside his armor. “Thank you for the honor, Hero. Do you need help to get back to camp? It’s not safe to pass out alone this far away.”

Dal sighed looking again at the flickering lights in the sky. “Thank you, but I don’t think I could sleep if I tried.” She admitted, knowing the man would understand.

With a grumble, the man took uneven steps down the dune, his heavy frame leaving giant holes in the sand filling in behind him as he reached the main camp below.

The haziness in the sky became thicker to her eyes the longer she lay propped against the abandoned crate. Trails of warm air from the desert drifted across her exposed limbs like fingers dragging in a lover’s caress. With a deep sigh, her shoulders relaxed as a shiver ran down the length of her spine, warming around the circle of her hips, a fire flickering to life in her core that pulsed with the beats of her heart.

Her dark lashes fluttered shut against her sable skin as she dared to allow herself to think of the last time she saw Barris. Since that fateful day, she tried to block out any thought of the Templar who didn’t want her, working herself to exhaustion so her mind was too tired to seek him in the Fade.
She couldn’t remember ever feeling passion the way she had when his lips finally touched hers. All-consuming and destructive, the fire scorched the lengths of her limbs as she’d silently begged the Maker for all of him. What would have happened if he hadn’t stopped them with his interruption of conscience? Would he have taken her there right on Cullen’s desk? Armor discarded haphazardly to the floor as he drove into her…

*I can’t do this.*

Dal sat up, her eyes wide as pain gripped her heart again. She could pretend she was fine, that it didn’t faze that the Templar walked away, but it was a lie. It hurt in ways she’d never known she could ache. This was why she couldn’t let herself dare to let her mind wander into what could have been. It was painful. It would always be too painful and now she was only a day away from marching into the same camp as him.

Her heart beat wildly in a cadence with her entire body throbbing and swaying in the rhythm of its labored beats. At every blink of her eyes, images of the Templar’s emerald eyes assaulted her, shining and reaching for her. The grief she refused to acknowledge had ruined her moment of relaxation. The anguish she’d let fester until her soul decayed and rotted as she still denied its existence. Using the crate as leverage, she rose to her feet, swaying in the warm breeze as part of the wind itself.

She was careful with placing her boots as she descended the dune. Being an elf, she was more agile reaching camp than the beleaguered Warden had been. The camp was quieter than when she left, Varric and Bull’s card game dissolving as the soldiers settled for the long march ahead. Walking the outskirts of the barracks, a light smile coasted over her lips, her elf ears picking up the heavy breathing and soft moans of soldiers in their tents finding one last night of comfort however they could before reality pressed them all into the ground.

Near the edge of the barracks nestled next to the communal area, she paused, the warm breeze still swirling around her exposed limbs. Leliana sat alone facing the fire, a bundle of folded parchment in her heads, lost in thought as she watched the flames dance against the sky. As great as her need was to comfort and tell her they would find a way, she needed one night to herself. One night to make her own decisions. One night without the judgment of her friends she would deal with at Adamant.

Turning around, she walked from the campfire and her tent on the other side near the advisor’s area as she teetered perilously over the terrain towards the south side of the camp.

After a lifetime in her altered state, she paused outside of a canvas tent larger than the others in the row. She waited listening for an additional heartbeat or set of lungs, hearing none, she knocked quietly against the wooden reinforcement before pulling the flap aside and ducking into the tent twice the size of her modest one.

It was dark inside, but she knew her eyes reflected the dim light back to its occupant. Bull was bare from the waist up, having shed his battle ax harness, propped on one massive forearm, his bicep bulged with thick veins running across the gray skin, as he watched her every movement without speaking.

“Okay.” One word. That was her permission, finally giving in to an emotion running rampant over every sane thought. He narrowed his eyes as he watched her fidget, the heels of her boots grinding into the ground below her. “You claimed you could give me what I needed. So, I’m saying, *okay, let’s do this.*”

*Chapter End Notes*
Thank you for reading and kind comments and suggestions! Next chapter will be up soon.

http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com
The Chapter Where Idalya Gets What She Needs

Chapter Summary

The Iron Bull told Dal he could give her what she really needed and she's ready to take him up on that offer.

Chapter Notes

Hey readers, hope everyone is enjoying the story now that updates are popping up frequently!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bull sat unmoving; watching, measuring her response. Idalya reached with twitching fingers, releasing the ties of her shirt, pulling them loose. Her shirt slid open against her electric skin, the edges of her cleavage visible above her breast band. It exposed her, but in a way that didn’t leave her weak nor unstable for once.

If all those other soldiers could find comfort without judgment, so could she.

His silence was unnerving as she waited for his approval. “Do you… want me?” It felt like a stupid question, but sometimes the only answer that could comfort someone was the most obvious one.

Bull chuckled lightly as he rose to his feet, closing the distance to the uncertain Warden. His bared chest was twice her width and heavily muscled in more angles than she’d previously observed.

“Dal,” he reached up to push an errant strand of hair out of her eyes struggling to focus. “Any man with eyes and a beating heart would want to touch you.”

She exhaled, relief flooding through her in response. “Oh, that’s good.” She reached down removing her shirt from the waistband of her leather breeches, pulling it over the curves of her waist. Bull’s hands, large and burning with incredible warmth, stopped hers in place.

He nodded toward his cot in the corner. “Come, sit down.”

She nodded and followed his directions, sitting on the furthest corner of the cot facing into the middle of the tent. “Your tent is large.” Did I say that? Her mind had already made its way to the blurt out whatever the first thing you think part of her inebriation.

“The Commander got tired of replacing tents when my horns would rip through the top,” Bull lit a small reading candle on the far side of the tent. “It was easier just to have one made for my girth.”

The man chuckled as he returned and sat on the edge of the cot, its foundation creaking under his heft.

“That makes sense,” Dal muttered, her eyes straight forward, unable to look at the man beside her. They remained in silence for a slow ticking lifetime that were only a few pregnant seconds refusing
to progress forward.

Bull moved back in his corner of the cot. “Lay down, Dal.”

She sucked in a breath, shoulders tensing as she eased her way backward on the cot, finding her head resting in the massive lap of the Qunari. *Maybe she hadn’t thought through all the semantics of this pairing…* This might progress too fast for her, *maybe*, but she had barged into the tent and demanded this, so she’d be damned if she didn’t try. Plus, she’d had little experience since returning so any intimacy would feel like jumping off a cliff.

Bull reached beneath her head, freeing the leather cord from her hair as his thick-fingered hands pulled the long flowing mane free over the rising hills of his thighs. No one had touched her hair but Leliana and Barris and her body stiffened at his touch, eyes fluttering shut adjusting to the feel of his fingers running through the lengths of moonlight trapped in the strands.

“Are you okay?” He asked honestly, her eyes opening in surprise.

“What do you mean? Of course, I am.” She lied, knowing her lies would be no use against the skills of a Qunari spy.

“Why do you lie?” Bull asked, massaging his fingers into the base of her neck and scalp working a subtle moan from her lips.

She worked through a list of excuses before giving up. “Because heroes don’t have bad days.”

“Is that so?” He mused, pressing his fingers deeper into the flesh of her neck as she sighed, feeling the tightness relax.

“That’s how it feels, at least.” She admitted. “You lead, so you understand. If we show weakness, it breeds doubt into those who follow us.”

Bull swirled the edges of her hair around his fingers examining it in the flicking candlelight. “The Chargers have seen me at my worst many times, yet still follow my commands. Do you question the abilities of your leaders when they show weakness?” She shook her head, her hair swaying across the legs of the massive man.

“No, at least I don’t think so.” She thought hard about those who had taught and guided her: her father, mother, Duncan, Solas… “No, I don’t.”

“Why do you hold yourself to higher standards than your own leaders? You deserve to make your own mistakes and to forgive others for theirs. You’re drowning, Dal, in self-imposed misery. Let yourself swim and pull your head above the surface.” She sighed at the continued massage of her scalp.

“I suppose you’re right, I don’t know why I’m like this.” Holding herself to standards she’d never expect from others was a constant in her life she could trace all the way to dirt-covered streets of the Alienage. She closed her eyes enjoying the feeling of his fingers breathing life into her skull. “This is nothing like I expected.” She admitted.

“Yeah? What were you expecting?” He asked with a playful tone.

“Well, you know…” Shrugging was the only response she had.

“Dal,” Bull said seriously, pausing the movements of his fingers which left a dull ache across her scalp, “if you can’t say something’s name, you shouldn’t be doing it.”
“Fine. Sex…” she mumbled like an indignant child in disbelief that this conversation was happening.

“I told you around the campfire that I’d give you what you needed not what you wanted.” He resumed the movement of his fingers producing a happy hum from the back of her throat.

“Okay, Mister Spy Man, tell me what it is I desperately need then.” She slurred out. The effect of Blackwall’s herb and Bull’s fingers making her into a shapeless being, bones melting away until nothing remained but tingling sensations.

“What you need is to find a safe place to fall to pieces where you won’t be afraid of losing them. That’s what you need.” She huffed below him, her eyes closed to hide the truth of his words. She thought Barris could be that place, but she misplaced her trust in the handsome Templar.

“That sounds nice, but I assure you, I’m fine. Really.” She kept lying but couldn’t stop herself. The lie was all she had left. She wasn’t certain who she’d be when the curtain fell away revealing what was left behind her mask.

Bull’s hands stopped moving and after a few seconds, she opened her eyes hesitantly, unsurprised by the look of consternation on the Qunari’s face as he looked down. “Dal, stop lying. You forget the Qunari have as good of hearing and even better sense of smell than elves. I left Skyhold with Barris on the march to Val Royeaux. I heard him speaking to Rylen, he was heartbroken, and your distinct smell was all over his armor.”

She bit her lower lip, looking away, his eyes filled with too many questions. “I don’t want to talk about it.” She contemplated whether she could bolt out of the tent without making a scene.

Bull used a free hand to gently tilt her chin back in his direction, forcing her to look up. “That’s the problem, Dal. You tell no one what’s going on, you keep it inside until it drives you mad.” Her lips quivered as the beginning of tears formed in her eyes.

“I… I cared for him and he said he felt the same way, but he cared for me so much that he couldn’t be with me. What do you do? Beg someone to love you? Beg them not to walk away?” A fist pressed against her lips as sobs worked their way up her throat. “What was I supposed to do, Bull? How do you live without your own heart?”

She shut her eyes unable to look at the pain her words inadvertently brought forth in Bull’s. He shifted beneath her, and she was so focused on her crying, she barely registered being lifted through the air until pulled tight against the man’s chest, her salty tears coating his breast. He held her against him, rocking back and forth, letting her sob within the safe confines of his arms.

She joked with Rylen that the day she really cried she’d never be able to stop. There appeared to be truth in the statement.

She finally cried for losing her mother in the fires of Denerim, losing her own life killing the Archdemon, losing her scattered memories on her return to this dire world. The loss of the elven servants in the Palace no one remembered whose spilled blood filled an entire room, and she cried for losing the Templar she thought would be enough to make her forget all those other things.

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She could smell the sun rising on the breeze carried across the desert as she stirred from her slumber. Reaching limbs out, she stretched contentedly, until realizing how large the bed she’d slept in was. Opening her eyes, she adjusted to the growing light. Wrapped in blankets like a
cocoon, she spotted Bull sitting cross-legged, dressed in his battle harness, on the other side of the tent, buried in a stack of parchment with Cullen’s blockish script written in all the margins. *The final attack plans.* Today they would march into camp at Adamant and she dreaded every step. She cleared her throat to gain the man’s attention.

He smiled as his eyes met hers across the room. “Ah, good morning, Dal. I was about to wake you. The crew will start breakfast in an hour. Gives you time to get back to your tent and get prepared to head out.” His eyes carried the knowledge of what marching toward the camp would mean.

“Thank you… for listening last night.” She motioned towards the cot. “I could have shared.”

Bull chuckled, a warm sound filling the tent, as he stood up with a groan, not dissimilar to Blackwall. “There are plenty of willing beds here without having to steal from you. I suspected you needed all the rest you could find.”

“That was accurate.” She stretched again, her back sighing in relief from the first night of non-fitful sleep she’d had in months. “Thank you again, though. You’re a much better friend than I deserve.”

“I enjoy helping others.” He admitted as he clicked his battle-ax in place behind his back. “Tell no one, it’ll ruin my reputation.”

Dal laughed as she attempted to find her way out of the mess of blankets Bull wrapped her after she’d sobbed herself to sleep. She finally broke free to find her clothes from last night sweat-soaked and stuck to her body from the warming temperature over the course of the night. Bathing would be the least of her responsibilities to smell like a regular person today. Once standing, she approached the Qunari, who seems taller and wider in sobriety. Judging the distance, she jumped briefly in the air, planting a soft kiss on the jawline of the man who smiled down before motioning towards the exit.

“Thank you again,” she said ducking out into the open-air lightening across the horizon as the brilliant sun broke its slumber.

The camp was still quiet with only a few messengers dashing back and forth on light feet delivering strategy plans to the Inquisition’s advisors. Dal took her time wandering across the desolate camp, allowing the dry air to pluck the moisture from her tunic. The sun’s rays reached all corners, illuminating everything in its golden light. A few nervous soldiers unable to sleep, bowed their heads in respect as she crossed their paths. They needed no words in exchange, they all understood why they were awake.

Arriving at her tent, she heard the woman breathing inside, worry tinged the sound. She peeked inside the flap, Leliana sat inside, a pack of banded letters still within her grasp, she stared at with a conflicted expression. Dal cleared her throat as she entered, Leliana looking up in surprise before her eyes narrowed at the elf.

“Idalya Mahariel!” She snarled. “Where have you been? Do you know how worried I’ve been?”

Her dearest friend sounded so much like her late mother she couldn’t help but laugh as she took a seat on the cot and dug through her bag for the next least offensive tunic she owned. “Did I slip by your spies again?” Dal asked, her laughter natural as picked out a plain cream, sleeveless tunic that only smelled like someone had worn it for weeks.

“No… yes, I do not appreciate you giving the protection I put in place for you the boot. Just because you’re aware of them, doesn’t mean it’s bad.” The tops of Leliana’s cheeks reddened in anger at the elf now confirmed safe.
Dal shrugged while pulling the still sweaty tunic off over her head, grimacing from the musty smell rising from her unwashed breast band. “Maybe next time put someone on guard who doesn’t breathe as loudly as Harding. I love the girl, but she’s almost as loud as a human.”

The Spymaster rolled her eyes in irritation.

“Where were you? I nearly sent the army tent to tent until we discovered your whereabouts. I came back to speak to you and your tent empty. Our threats are no joke, Dal. There are many that would view capturing you as more valuable than Evelyn.”

She felt sympathy as she watched worry paint its way across her friend’s face. “I was with Bull,” Leliana cocked a shaped brow at the girl as she distracted her from her former anger. Dal thought back over Bull’s words to her last night. “… having sex.”

“Oh.” The Spymaster’s mouth formed the word that tumbled past it in surprise.

It was a lie, but Dal knew the truth would hurt her friend worse than the lie. Leliana had not been there for her since she’d returned from the dead. She desperately needed the friendship she’d once had with this woman only to find that the innocent Chantry girl no longer existed.

“I was unaware of the two of you,” Leliana mumbled numbly, a flurry of emotions happening behind her eyes as she placed the bundle of letters, she still held tightly in her grip into her side pocket.

“It’s not like that.” She felt guilty for lying to one of her only friends. “Just some distraction.” She watched the flush of anger fade away, leaving the rogue washed and tired. “What were those?” She nodded towards the pack of letters Leliana had tucked away for safekeeping.

Leliana stood, her hands straightening the fabric of her linen coat. “Just correspondence from Evelyn, nothing to concern yourself over.” The Spymaster made her way to the exit. “We leave in two hours, please see Madam de Fer before we depart.”

It had taken the advisers all of two seconds to realize Dal’s hair could be a dead giveaway to anyone who might recognize her at Adamant. They would place a glamor over her hair to change it to a natural hue while around the other armies. She could pass in anonymity, keeping her safe outside of combat.

Leliana left without her response and Dal waited until the sounds of the woman’s slippers disappeared in the growing noise outside as the army broke its slumber.

What a strange predicament. In her experience, most people lied about not having sex with someone, not the other way around. Though she was certain if she needed to come up with a lie people would believe on that subject, it would involve Bull.

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Leliana flipped back the edge of the adviser’s tent, the heavy linen ricocheting against the edge of the support as she stormed in, fists clenched, and released a growl of frustration. Josephine looked up briefly from her paperwork before her eyes passed back onto her board.

“I assume that means you’ve located our missing Warden?” the Ambassador rolled up another note, pressing her crimson Inquisition seal of wax deep onto the parchment before popping it into a tube to attach to yet another raven.

“Do you ever have days where you’re glad you were never a parent?” Leliana huffed throwing her
hood back as she pulled at the buttons at her neck in irritation.

“I would be a good mother,” Josie scoffed from the beginnings of her next message as Leliana turned over her shoulder to glare at her friend.

“I don’t know how to impress how important her safety is to the Inquisition. She’s never had much value for herself.” The Spymaster tilted her head back and sighed, her eyes closed as she gathered her thoughts. The threat of the looming fight clawed fiercely at the back of her mind as she thought about the danger she was pushing Dal into. She deserved to know the truth, about everything, but what would be the consequence?

The retrieval of a simple memory could send her staggering to the ground in convulsions, what would the knowledge of her life do to the fragile warden? She was an unharrowed mage whose magic was just coming into being. Setting her off at the camp could have dire consequences should Evelyn or Alistair discover that she had not only returned from the dead but had brought magic with her.

And then there was Alistair. In all this time, she had not prepared how to explain herself to the man’s fury should he discover what happened to his beloved Warden. Ferelden could be a strong ally against Corypheus, but should he discover that his love lived, all bets would be off.

“What did she say when you gave her the letters?” Her thoughts were cut off by Josie’s inquiry.

“I didn’t.” She stated plainly as Josephine looked up at her in disapproval. She was right- she would make a good mother someday.

“**She spent last night with Bull.**”

Josephine nodded in understanding. “She still deserves to know. It’s her choice to make, not yours.”

“I am aware, Josie, but she’s been through enough pain in her life already. I’d just like to protect her from it, even once!” Her heart was pounding. She knew she was making the wrong decisions for Dal, but she couldn’t make herself make the correct ones.

The flap of the tent opened, the brightening day reaching its needy fingers inside as Scout Harding entered, a parchment gripped between her gloved fingers.

“Here’s another one,” Harding handed the letter over before escorting herself out of the tent since if she lingered too long, she’d end up with more tasks dumped on her.

Leliana sighed looking down at the letter addressed to **Lady Mahariel c/o The Inquisition.** She didn’t have to turn in Josie’s direction to know the woman’s expression. Every single day since Barris departed from Skyhold a letter arrived for Dal and every day Leliana intercepted them, determined to not let the man unburden his conscience on the grieving girl.

She hadn’t approved of Dal becoming involved with the Templar but permitted it if it gave Dal a reason to rise and fight- something she was severely lacking after arriving back without most of her memory. But he had now become only the most recent in a line of those who’d caused the Warden pain. First, she grieved over his dying body, to then be shocked at his disclosure and exit.

*He regretted it,* but he was Knight-Commander now and had more important things to focus on than an elf whose sand was quickly running through her hourglass.

Leliana failed all those years ago to protect Dal from what Thedas threw at them and she’d be damned if she let it happen again. Pulling the hidden dagger from her sleeve, she broke the blue seal of Templar arms.
My Lady-

Every day I have written you since leaving Skyhold and each day has passed without response which has brought me to one of two conclusions: either you are not receiving my letters (Hello, Spymaster) or you want nothing to do with me and I’m not getting the hint.

I can’t make a presumption over which option it is, so I’ll assume it is the latter and will not burden you with my heavy apologies, but if it’s not, I’ll wait to see you in person and then I shall know if I’ve truly destroyed what we could have had between us.

Farewell,

Knight-Commander Delrin Barris

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you think! What do you think will happen? Adamant is going to change a lot of things, what would you like to see?
The Inquisition arrives at Adamant to discover that Evelyn's nondisclosures have left them at a distinct disadvantage.

Evelyn had some explaining to do.

Dal chose a tent deep in the barracks of their soldiers. It was comforting to be surrounded by that many pairs of boots in movement at once, lost in the background sounds happening around her. She was instructed to stay inconspicuous until the battle, so she had walked through her small corner of the camp in full armor with veiling helm on, letting her mind wander over the coming battle. The far side of the Inquisition camp was off limits where it intersected their Orlesian allies. They had set up a massive tent, an aggregate for the many countries underneath the massive Orlesian banner, casting its oppressive shadow over the camp where the leaders of southern Thedas and the Inquisition’s advisers met for hours.

Evelyn had withheld the information, for some unknown reason, that Orlais and Starkhaven marched across the arid desert in solidarity with the Inquisition, leaving her advisers in the dark for the tactical planning required. Dal had seen Cullen’s elaborately crafted plans- a mapped out assault taking every one of their soldiers into account. As overjoyed as he would be to find at least two more armies prepared to assist, it also meant it nullified their entire plan. Night after night he
poured his heart and soul into the execution of the battle, and within minutes of walking into camp, he was back to square one.

Her hair was loose below her helm and as the breeze would flow through the strands, they would pick up in the wind catching her attention at the foreign strands that felt separate from her own body. She nearly cried when Vivienne showed her the results of her spell. The long jet-black strands were temporary, she’d stated before showing the elf her reflection, but Dal underestimated the impact of watching her glowing strands swallow the night itself. Every time she’d watched the surrounding light be drawn by the strands that were the same color as her father’s pale mop of hair. Her hair now seemed to push away any light around it emptying the air of its essence, the epitome of darkness. She hated it.

The magic would fade away on its own in around a week or until Vivienne broke the spell. She explained that she’d learned the trick within the Circle and used it to cover her own graying hair over the years as part of the Orlesian court, where the typical signs of aging were a weakness for women involved in the Game. Dal hadn’t ever thought of what she’d look like as an old woman. Would her skin wrinkle? Her hair darkening to the color of steel as gray took the place of her glowing white? Was it even worth wasting the time to consider when it was unlikely she’d live through the next two nights?

She wished Blackwall was around to talk about her growing apprehension. She’d never fought against another Warden outside of sparring and the realization that within a day she’d be cutting through them weighed on her. Unfortunately for the haggard Warden, he was Evelyn’s representative for the Grey Wardens, so he was stuck in negotiations with her and the advisers which she was certain Blackwall must love. Being inactive wasn’t typically her choice, but when given the choice of being stuck in a tent with Evelyn or taking time to relax, suddenly relaxing wasn’t half bad.

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“This is ridiculous.” Cullen’s voice boomed inside the tent. The Spymaster’s shoulders tensed as she controlled her own outbursts from the tantrums of her Commander. Barris watched the chaos from safety across the tables from the group of angry children.

The arguments continued for hours and yet no cohesive plan existed between the four armies. Cullen was right—they would begin the attack in less than a day and there was no plan prepared as all the leaders could not agree on whose responsibilities belonged to whom. The Inquisition trained day after day for this specific battle, yet the Emperor wanted Orlais to lead the charge towards the fortress as the trebuchets broke down the ancient stone walls.

As great as an opportunity as it was to allow Gaspard to crash his army against the gates and save the lives of their soldiers, Cullen put his heavy boots down out of shear spite of Gaspard and Evelyn as he glared across the tent at the two sitting together. The Emperor hovering over the Inquisitor like flies over a pile of shit.

“Knight-Commander,” a heavily accented and whining voice caught Barris’ attention as he turned towards the table to his left.

“That is no longer my title,” Cullen growled, an accusatory finger pointed at the man who uttered the title, and Barris understood the affront to the Commander- Sebastian Vael, the King of Starkhaven.

Barris had been in the King’s presence for only two minutes before he’d decided there was nothing redeemable about the man. He’d heard Varric’s drunken tales of his time traveling with the future
King and Queen of Starkhaven but being stuck in camp with the man made it perfectly clear why he was so disliked in his own kingdom.

The man was a braggart and Chantry zealot, who thought his every decision was divine intervention from the Maker. They had not invited him to the battle yet showed up with his own army to drag his stubborn Queen home, who ignored his letters. The Champion refused to leave without a scene until they dealt the Wardens, something she directly felt responsible for after freeing Corypheus.

“Who goes first is less of a priority than making sure we know the layout of the fortress. The Warden’s will not let us walk in and take their home. We must understand where they are likely to set up their resistance.” The human mustache sitting to the side of the Queen remarked, the man’s name was Ser Stroud, and he had the most ridiculous facial hair Barris had ever seen on a warrior in his life.

Stroud was so Orlesian that every comment from the man’s overly furry mouth made the Fereldeners at the table roll their eyes, but that was their typical response to anything Orlesian. His mere existence would have drawn eye rolls from the dog lords as the Warden referred to them all earlier. His ornate Warden armor glinted in the tent's candlelight drawing all eyes to him and his terrible face whether they wanted to.

Barris wondered if the Wardens they would face resembled Stroud in their demeanor. Blackwall and Dal were so humble and focused on their missions, yet there was something about Stroud’s mannerisms and interactions at the table that told Barris that the man’s intentions were not pure in helping the Champion.

He’d seen it too many times in the Order; Templar willing to let others take the heavy swings and cut down that which threatened the Chantry yet take the credit and praise when doled out. Yes, the Warden betrayed his brothers to discover what the Wardens in the Western Approach were up to, but Barris couldn’t avoid the nagging feeling that the man was patiently biding his time for the dust to clear to find himself at the top of the Warden hierarchy when their numbers were cleansed.

“I agree with the Warden,” the Champion replied. “I believe we should let the Herald of Andraste chose our path, the Maker himself brought her to us to stop these Wardens and their descent into madness. The Maker will guide her in the correct direction.” Her King nodded enthusiastically in approval as Evelyn grimaced.

Before the members of the Inquisition could chuckle at the ludicrous statement, a peal of laughter broke loose from the Ferelden side of the table. Barris sighed heavily at this home being represented as flagrantly as it had been since their arrival.

“Do you find something I’ve said to be humorous, King Alistair?” the Champion questioned, her eyes narrowed sharply towards the king of her former home.

It relieved Barris that the King made a scene before Cullen had time to. It’s one thing for an opposing leader to make comments about Evelyn, but they were her ambassadors here to represent the best interests of the Inquisition. Typically, pissing off the Inquisitor was not in their best interests or any part of their agenda. As much as Evelyn might infuriate the Commander, Barris had no question the man would defend her until his dying breath.

Another round of laughter erupted from the heavily bearded man as he tried to push himself to a straighter position in his chair after having slouched the whole meeting. His loose hair flopped into his face making his expression difficult to decipher. “Honestly, all of this has been funny.” The man admitted with a shrug, flipping his long blond locks behind his head, as his Queen’s body
tightened in her discomfort.

“Alistair, stop.” She whispered, the corner of her mouth barely moving as though she’d had far too much experience trying to quell the man and his terrible instincts, especially when drunk, which the King had been the entire meeting.

“Oh, come on, Anora!” He less turned his head as it fell toward his Queen. “If there is a Maker, he has far less control than you give him credit for, and if she is the Herald of Andraste,” he slurred while motioning towards a very irritated Evelyn, “I’d question his decision making pouring his essence into a vessel that looks like that. Though, Chantry boys for centuries will have divine inspiration late at night.”

The Queen sighed loudly as Gaspard rose out of his chair, sword drawn within moments. Barris’ eyes flipped toward Cullen, whose entire body was tense and unmoving, he could feel the man’s anger wafting off him, but years of Templar training allowed himself to remain still.

“I do not care if you are a King, I will gut you like the coward you are for the disrespect you have shown my woman today.” Barris’ hand tightened over the handle of his sword as he watched the Emperor’s body language closely, prepared to defend his King if needed.

Alistair, to his credit, showed no change in his behavior, as he leaned back in his chair, his arms braced behind his head leaving his chest open to the huffing Emperor. “Last time I checked, Lady Trevelyan belongs to no one at this table.” A smug smile spread across King Alistair’s face as he instead made eye contact with Evelyn, who apparently approved at his remark, at Gaspard’s side as the Chevalier shoved his sword back hastily into his scabbard.

“That is your only warning, Alistair. Another sign of disrespect towards any of my allies and I’ll consider it an act of war against Orlais.” Gaspard may have been wearing a mask, but his expression beneath the metal veil was a clear one to interpret- Just give me an excuse to burn your country to the ground, I dare you. Barris’ eyes darted across the room at Knight-Captain Lilly as she gripped her hands tightly around the base of her daggers, watching the altercation, her eyes full of venom towards the Emperor.

Alistair’s method of dealing with the leaders the last week was wearing them down until they were just as unfocused at their jobs as he was. Earlier in the week, Evelyn had him jumping through hoops at her command as she’d subtly dropped hints about his previous time as a Warden and his utter failure to govern as successfully as his father which caused the King to storm out of meetings in a huff. Over the course of the week, he’d refused to continue playing her game and found himself able to frustrate others with his lack of care over the battle occurring in two days.

He claimed Ferelden was here to oversee the Inquisition wasn’t attacking the Wardens needlessly, but after hearing testimony from Hawke and her Warden over what they discovered about the Warden’s goals, Alistair hadn’t changed his tactics and instead was now holding up any chance of a cohesive plan and embarrassing his Queen. Barris wasn’t sure why the King dragged the entire Ferelden army across Thedas, but it wasn’t for the Wardens.

“Let’s adjourn our meeting until later. I believe all of us could use a rest.” Josephine cut in, one of the few neutral voices in the room.

Quiet mumbling broke across the group as people rose in frustration to leave. Barris kept the corner of his eyes glued to a purple hooded cloak to his far right and just out of his corner of vision. The Spymaster was his intended target and why he volunteered Lilly and himself to guard this insane meeting. Yes, his roaming bands of Templar had found packs of Venetori making their way towards their camp and these were the leaders of Southern Thedas, but frankly, it was the only way
to ensure he ended up in the same place as the Spymaster who had managed to just slip out from
his grasp the whole day. He was certain she was responsible for the lack of response from Idalya
concerning his letters. From everything he knew about the Warden, he was certain that if his
affection was not wanted that his Lady would have written and informed him of such after his first
letter.

In one rapid movement, the rogue was up and moving toward the front of the tent, aware that the
Templar was close on her heels. She exited the tent, turning into the small alley behind the tent and
was already two lengths away before he exited.

“Spymaster, STOP!” His voice echoed across the side of the camp and the rogue froze, unwilling
to make a scene within earshot of the leaders in the tent in broad daylight. Barris hastily caught up
to her, the woman glaring with a raised brow, arms crossed against her chest as she waited.

Barris had prepared a speech in his head all week as they awaited the rest of the army to join them
at the camp where he would explain why it was important that he know, but all of that flew out the
window in his impatience. “Did you keep them from her?” The Spymaster considered her options
before replying.

“Yes, but it’s for her own good. You were never worthy of her.” She snarled at him and he was
taken aback. He hadn’t expected the woman to be honest the first time. This changed his game
plan.

“Trust me, I completely agree, but who are you to decide what’s for her own good? It seems like
you’ve made enough decisions for her, it’s time for her to make her own.” Anger was flowing
through his veins at her words. “If you keep treating her like this, you will lose her forever.” He
spat at the Spymaster in his frustration. He’d spent this life in Templar Order, he understood what
it meant to have choice stripped away from you, it was a crime Dal would struggle to forgive.

She narrowed her sapphire eyes back. “Oh, I’m aware. I just don’t think to bother her is appropriate
since she's moved on…” She shrugged, her coat lifting with her shoulders, the hint of a lopsided
smirk gracing the plump of her lips.

Oh, Maker, no. “What are you talking about?” Please, be more of her lies.

The Spymaster straightened the front of her cloak, confident in her victory. “She spent all last
night with Bull. You can verify that with him if you think I’m lying.”

Fuck this woman straight into the Void.

The urge to reach out and shake the woman was great, but that’s not the man he was, nor the man
he’d ever want to be. He turned away unable to create a coherent thought. “This is all your fault.”
He mumbled as he walked away, his legs numb as he tried to comprehend her words.

“No, Barris. This is all your fault.” Her voice followed him down the path until he reentered the
camp unsure about everything in the world.

*****

The Knight-Commander, head lowered to shut out the rest of the world, stormed past the massive
Orlesian tent. Cullen ducked out of his line of the sight as Barris crossed him. He would never
think of himself as the stealthy type, especially when put against the observation skills of a man
like the Templar, but the man’s heartbreak made everything around him invisible, a feeling Cullen
remembered and still struggled with. Being locked inside your mind as your grief ran wild was a
not a place he would wish on his worst enemy. *Except for Gaspard, fuck that guy.*

Barris had been writing Dal and Leliana was withholding them for her own selfish reasons? Cullen understood some of her requests for protecting Dal. He had seen the results himself of what damage the girl’s memories inflicted on her, but Barris was a good man. That fact he knew without a doubt. If he somehow caused Dal pain, he knew it happened by accident because he’d seen how the Templar looked the Warden, seen how he protected her and her burgeoning magic within Skyhold. He threatened his entire career for her, and she risked her life to save him in return.

Never had he seen the two warriors show anything but respect and care for one another.

Cullen did not know if what Leliana had said was the truth since he was unlikely to believe most things the woman told him, but he would find out what was going on.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and drop a comment to let me know what you think!

Follow me on Tumblr: http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com

I had some people suggesting I start posting chapter updates notifications to Twitter since Tumblr will most likely flag this story. I’ll do some more investigating in my time off!
The Chapter Where Dal Can't Sleep

Chapter Summary

It's the night before battle and Idalya cannot sleep. What harm is there in taking an anonymous stroll through the Inquisition camp at night?

Chapter Notes

I LOVE YOU ALL. No, seriously.

I'm currently outlining and doing some major writing work on chapters 82-86, yeah you read that right. I am so excited for the story to progress there to share them with you! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dog-lord,

Do not trust Evelyn Trevely-an- she is more in control of the situation than she appears. The Inquisition has a weapon that could destroy your kingdom in the wrong hands. Do not grow complacent in their company.

-M

*****

One halla, two halla, three halla...

“Ugh, fuck this.”

Opening her eyes, Dal stared at the roof of her tent yet one more time. To her displeasure, the structure remained identical from her previous attempts at tracing the intriguing patterns in the linen hung overhead. It was impossible to settle herself and find elusive sleep.

She’d found plenty of free-flowing booze available through her supplier, Dorian, who immediately ransacked the Orlesian stores upon arrival to camp, hilariously sneaking across the camp with bundles of wine packed tight against his body. As much as it tempted her, Dal didn’t trust herself to drink enough for sleep but enough to ruin any chance of battling at her best tomorrow. Adding booze to a cluster fuck of unspoken feelings never turned out to be effective for her.

Sitting up inside the tent, her long midnight-black tresses flowed over her shoulders. She sighed running her fingers along the ebony strands. Vivienne was right, the color was more flattering and natural with her skin tone, but it felt like a lie to pretend to be someone she wasn’t, even if it kept her and others safe. It was a slight to her father, who proudly shared his unique trait with her.

The camp was silent as soldiers attempted to gain sleep before the possibility of remaining awake for the coming days. Battles never went according to plan. Opponents never moved the way you
predicted. The coming battle could last days or mere hours. They prepared for all outcomes.

Just as she’d settled, she’d received word by messenger that she’d lead the final waves of soldiers toward the looming fortress. The softening of the Warden’s defenses began at dusk, as the Inquisition’s borrowed trebuchets would pummel the ancient stone walls, hoping to find a weakness and make quick work of her now corrupted order. She doubted it would be that simple, but that was their initial plan. They would follow it hoping to get lucky and launch a projectile that could take down a substantial portion of the wall in one swift shot.

She was done. She’d be no use to her soldiers if she was dead on her feet from exhaustion. She strapped on each piece of her Inquisition armor expecting Leliana to jump out of the shadows at any moment scolding her like to fussing mother to stay in her tent until battle. Securing her armor, she looked reluctantly at the Inquisition-issue helm. She hated helms, always had. The hair should be enough to throw people off, right? With a grumble, she reached out plunking the helm over her head, leaving her raven locks loose below.

Before exiting, Dal listened into the surrounding night to discover who Leliana had left to keep watch on her. Scout Harding’s telltale heavy exhales were absent from her field of hearing. Either Leliana had smartened up and put an elf on duty, or finally stopped treating Dal as a child. Who was she kidding? She put an elf on watch.

There was no point of sneaking away, so Dal exited and began her walk cautiously around camp. One hesitant step in front of another, preparing for chastisement. No one appeared as she wandered far from her cage through the sprawling camp larger than anything she’d ever seen in either of her lives. The Inquisition barracks on its own was massive before adding three additional armies on top. Their allies were here to assist, but they made it clear to the soldiers that this was an Inquisition affair.

Leliana banned her massive elven great sword at home, instead giving her a well-weighted steel broadsword. A far more logical pick to take into the close capacity fighting in the fortress, but Dal still didn’t like it. The weight of her new sword would allow her to wield a shield if she wished but fighting upright and absorbing blows was not her style. All those years ago, it was her unusual fighting style that caught Duncan’s attention in the Alienage. She moved with the speed and complexity of a rogue while swinging a warrior’s weapon.

Growing up in an Alienage, she’d had no real training in the art of sword work but had a knack for watching the Ferelden soldiers train and mimicking the moves to the best of her ability, with only sticks to swing in place. In those back alleys, she developed a unique style of her own.

The Inquisition’s soldiers and Templar both benefited from her abilities in training. Most warriors were predictable in their patterns and movements, cookie cutter shapes of each other, but not her. Resourceful and fast, constantly using her environment to her advantage to make up for what she lacked in size and that was before being given incredible strength from the corruption hammering through her veins.

Every step she made was under the watchful eyes of one the Leliana’s scout’s, but it was such a pleasant night with a warm stream of air floating along the gentle breeze, that even her unseen company couldn’t bother her compared to everything she would face. If she wouldn’t die in this desert tomorrow, she’d have enjoyed coming to spend the time to explore the Western Approach. There were so many places she’d never travel to. Just stepping foot into the desert had been so overwhelming. So many things she hadn’t realized she’d missed in her first life. So many things she never knew she could feel.
It was obvious the Inquisition’s reckoning hour was upon them when even Varric, Bull, and the Chargers had packed away their card games and were asleep. The one time she was thrilled to sit around the fire and learn their elaborate rules for distraction and they had packed it in out of respect for the other soldiers gaining their strength. The massive fire pit in the center had burnt down to embers popping and fizzling in the dying timber within the circle of stones.

With a sigh, she sat down on a log positioned around the dying fire. The fresh air helped her feel less anxious, but still wasn’t helping her remember to sleep. Being stuck in her small corner of the camp all day had been torture when trying to avoid being stuck with her thoughts for too long. Barris was on the far side of camp watching over the Inquisitor, but for her, it might as well have been an entire country separating the two.

They planned the battle where she’d never have to lay eyes on him until the end and if the early waves were successful, they may not even need her to charge into the fortress. She doubted they’d find such fortune, but there were a lot more soldiers in this camp than they ever dared to dream of during their planning stages. These weren’t desperate farmers with pitchforks, but men trained to be the elite amongst their countrymen.

As painful as it was to acknowledge, part of her desperately wanted to see the Templar, ensuring he was safe before he led the first wave into the battle and to his destruction. Why had her heart chosen a warrior, a man who lived and died with steel in his hands? She’d seen enough to know how brief a warrior’s life can be, regardless of skill.

Many of these men, asleep in the tents she’d walked past, would be cut down within hours never to return home to their loved ones again. What would happen if she survived the coming battle, yet the Templar did not? She clamped her eyes shut, silencing the voice of doubt that whispered to her soul endlessly if she let it. She couldn’t focus on what could be lost in the coming battle or she’d lose whatever sanity she’d gained the past few months.

A flicker of mana in the distance froze her in place as her eyes darted out into the empty desert, her boot sliding out automatically to push sand over the dying fire to silence. The dim fire flickered out, leaving darkness as she used her sensitive hearing to place a sound with the magic she’d felt moving through the dunes.

It wasn’t strong, but the spell lingered in the night as she felt its aura gaining strength as the seconds passed, possibly a barrier or cloaking spell, something sustained inching closer to the camp. Silently, she removed her sword from her scabbard, making her way to her feet with the lightest of movements like only an elf could. There was a mage drawing near, but she couldn’t place any spot for the intruder other than sense their mana drawing closer.

Traveling through Ferelden, they’d been attacked in the dead of night many times. As logical as it seemed to yell out and awaken those around you. Tired and disoriented soldiers without armor or weapons, were an easy mark for an assassin depending on the cover of chaos to make their attack.

A feeling of nausea and malaise settled over her body as her blood howled beneath the surface of her skin, boiling within her veins, in a familiar, yet long-forgotten way. If a Venatori agent hoped to cause havoc, it was up to her to take them down.

Inching closer toward the mana, she felt the magic swirl as the spell powered up then disappeared. She’d spent enough time was Solas to recognize the spell before it dissipated- the mage was Fade stepping. Grinding her boots into the sand she braced down, her sword out in the defensive stance as she identified the mage’s movement towards her.

The mage’s force struck her head on, unseating her feet until she stumbled backward, kicking sand
in the air that settled in the folds of the cloaked mage as they drove towards her. She swung her sword out, hearing a short yelp before the streams of crimson appeared on the surrounding sand. Standing up, she drove her sword straight out towards where the droplets collected.

She only found an empty space before a line of fire streaked across her flank. The mage’s dagger finding an opening between the plates of her armor. On instinct, she kicked hard in the direction, moving her opponent as far from her injured body as possible. She was successful; the mage releasing a grunt before tumbling backward into the smoldering ashes of the fire she thought to extinguish before heading into battle.

Dal tried to jump to her feet as the mage’s robe smoked from the embers touching the fabric. Her head spun as she tried to focus on the mage, finding it impossible as nausea grew to where she was tempted to double over and vomit the rest of her final meal to the ground.

She knew the mage was on his feet and moving toward her. There was little to defend herself with except the sword plunged into the sand to keep her upright. She felt the wind shift as the mage pulled back to stab forward. Using her sword to deflect, she threw the steel up in front of her face in desperation as she lost her balance and hoped the mage would miss.

The clang echoed through her ears, but her eyes opened in surprise when there was no contact with her sword. A thick band of steel blocked the strike and its momentum pushed the mage back. The soldier was tall and wide across the shoulders, not unlike Cullen, a hooded cloak covering from head to toe. The sand-covered and smoldering mage was visible, his cloaking spell rendered ineffective.

The mage struck out with his daggered hand, which the warrior deflected away with his sword with ease, before thrusting forward into the abdomen of the assassin who collapsed around the unforgiving metal, their life force running along the blade. The warrior pulled their sword from its claimed victory, his boot pushing the mage backward into the smoldering ashes of the fire as they choked for precious disappearing air.

“All hail… Corypheus.” The gravelly voice of the dying mage made her neck hairs stand as they took their final breath, a shudder of death staking its claim.

“That was creepy.” The warrior stated while standing over the body of the mage whose mortal coil they had just severed.

Dal’s heart was beating out of control. As she tried to look toward the warrior, the colors of the night were bleeding in her mind, not unlike the effect of Blackwall’s herbs. Blinking slowly, she tried to decipher if she was asleep or awake. In the distance, sounds grew closer as the camp startled awake in the fight’s commotion.

The warrior turned towards her, from underneath his hood he wore a massive golden helm in the shape of an animal’s face she couldn’t focus on, his eyes glowing an ethereal blue in the night behind his visor. “I’m surprised to find a Warden fighting for the Inquisition. I sensed you and assumed you were a spy.” He admitted with a shrug. “At least I was half right.”

“About which part?” Dal ground out, inside her helm which echoed annoyingly, as she attempted to use her sword to rise to her feet. She needed to return to her tent before Leliana discovered she’d been out, much less fighting the night before the most important battle the Inquisition had fought. Now if only the world would stop spinning and the blood in her body would stop screaming a vile song that deafened her ears.

The warrior laughed bitterly as he wiped the mage’s blood from the sword onto his cloak, before
replacing it into its sheath. “Either way, it’s good to know there’s Warden’s fighting on the correct side, unlike the pretend Warden you guys insist on parading around…” The man shook his head in confusion as he looked closer at Dal. “You’re not looking so great…” He tilted his head to the side as he analyzed her, locks of dirty rust-colored blond hair falling out of his hood.

“You’re quite the observant, motherfucker, aren’t you?” She was faking strength as she tried to decide how to get out here before being stuck in the middle of the camp’s attention, the exact thing she was instructed not to do.

Typically, open rudeness made people uncomfortable and made them want to exit, an easy tactic used to get rid of people, but this warrior had no sense of shame.

“I can guarantee you, no one has ever accused me of such a thing.” He muttered as he moved to reach out and help the staggering elf.

Immediately on the defensive, she used the last of her strength to back away from the unknown man; her mind a mess of emotions and visions making no sense. The speed of the spinning world increased viciously as she heard Leliana’s voice moving towards her.

That’s it- she was fucked.

She reached back her shaking hand, pressing it to her burning flank. Pulling it towards her face she found it covered with blood, a sickly-sweet smell sitting within the crimson pooling in her hand.

Fuck, it was a mage, of course, they would poison their blade.

Her vision completely blurred, images scattered all over her vision, and she’d lost any perception of where the other warrior had gone. She attempted to open her eyes to focus on anything, but she knew she was losing consciousness. The frantic drum of her heart carrying the poison deeper through her system with each hammering thud.

The Maker was a cruel bastard.

All this preparation and she’d die in the camp, having never lifted her sword to fight to the Wardens. She took one last step forward, unsure where she was attempting to go.

“Well, shit…” she mumbled before encased and enfolded in the weightlessness of falling.

Chapter End Notes

Some shit is about to go down in Adamant. Are you ready?
The Chapter Where Leliana Confronts The Intruder

Chapter Summary

Leliana justs wants to plan and go to sleep before the battle, but an assassin's attack in the cover of darkness may make that dream impossible.

Chapter Notes

Not sure if we'll have any updates this weekend, if not, see you on Monday! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Once the army reaches the front walls, move to the back of the fortress while the Wardens’ attention is drawn and we may find a weakness to exploit. The faster we breach their defenses, the more people we save.” The Spymaster swiped the dangling auburn locks out of her face as she placed the yellow tokens on the far corners of the fortress map as she addressed the room of scouts.

The scouts weren’t soldiers in the strictest sense but had enough training amongst them to turn the tide of the battle if they infiltrated behind the distracted Wardens. Unlike the soldiers of Inquisition, who’d increased their initial numbers after Haven, Leliana lost many of hers as the Red Templars swept across the mountains. The scouts sacrificed themselves to delay the intruding army. She lost many, but her remaining group was more dedicated to their cause than she could ever ask.

Harding was a quality leader in the field, able to drive scouting parties and established camps flawlessly. The Ferelden-born dwarf, the only child of humble farmers, had been invaluable to the Inquisition’s success. They won many battles and allies from the woman’s quick thinking and communication. She was also an expert shot with her bow only added to her list of beneficial skills.

Briala sat in silence in the corner. Her eyes observing every detail through the slats of her golden mask. Leliana brought her into the Inquisition hoping to secure secrets from the Orlesian throne. Celene, to her credit, kept most of her sins hidden from her lover. It was unsure if the Empresses motive was keeping witnesses minimal, or avoiding the look of judgment in her elven lover’s eyes. Now they’d never know.

She’d brought an unspoken drive and commitment to her work, educating the younger scouts on Orlais, it’s hierarchy, and how to master the Game. Upon her arrival, Leliana watched the woman like a hawk, assuming her acceptance as a ruse to get even with Evelyn, but the elf showed greater understanding and acceptance of the Game and its deadly parameters, fully committing herself to the cause of destroying Corypheus. The elves could never regain their rights if Corypheus burned Orlais to cinders.

The flap of the tent opened, a pair of pointed ears and a mop of cropped blond hair poked through the slat.
“Yes, Charter?” The Spymaster already knew the answer, much to her annoyance. Dal could never stay still even if her life depended on it.

“She’s on the move- main area,” Charter responded with a weary smile.

She’d owe the scout after the battle. Dal sidestepped every other scout she’d had at her disposal, so she’d had to put Charter, one of her only elves, on duty to supervise the shift Warden. Her orders were to come straight to Leliana if Dal entered an area beyond her barracks.

“Thank you, Harding will catch you up.” Charter nodded before entering the tent and plopping into a seat next to the curious dwarf.

Leliana left the tent briskly heading toward Charter’s suggestion. The camp was still except the sound of her boots crunching into the packed down sand. *How difficult was it to stay in one place?* Dal’s hair was disguised, but if they discovered her identity, their enemies would wage war on their camp before dawn.

She *loathed* bringing Dal to Adamant. She was their strongest warrior and potentially their only ally the Wardens would trust. The name *Idalya Mahariel* still carried immense power and weight, especially with Ferelden and the Wardens.

A clash of metal echoed from the center of camp and without faltering, she sprinted toward the origin of the sound. Soldiers popped their heads out of their tents as she soared by.

“To arms!” She yelled to those that could hear as she ran. She was close now, heart pounding in her chest as she gasped for breath more in anxiety in what she’d find than the exertion.

The smell of burning flesh reached her senses as she turned the corner, both daggers out, yearning to contact whoever infiltrated their camp brazenly. Across the smoldering campfire were a downed man in heavy robes smoking on top of its embers. There stood a large cloaked man stood with his back towards the Spymaster, ornate sword held out to his side.

A female Inquisition soldier with long black tresses and a stream of blood flowing freely from her side staggered forward a lopsided step before Dal’s muffled voice carried out of the helm, *Well, shit...* Time slowed to a standstill as she watched the Warden fall freely through the air, landing face-first onto the sand as Leliana gasped.

The rogue didn’t hesitate as she dove forward, anger fueling every step. She pressed the sharp edge of her dagger against the cloaked man’s throat from behind. She didn’t know who sent this spy, but she would revel in torturing the information from him over the coming hours. The man awkwardly gulped against her blade, his entire booze-scented body stiffening as she pressed up, puncturing the skin over his hammering pulse. Keeping the pressure on the blade, she reached up pulling the cloak off the man’s head and gasped again as a golden mabari helm left its cover.

She ripped her blade away uncaring if it did further damage as her other hand returned the man’s hood, covering the helm. “*What the fuck are you doing over here?”* She growled through clenched teeth at the man who chuckled uncomfortably as he pressed a worn hand to the cut on his throat with an annoyed grimace. Meeting the man’s glowing cobalt eyes, she mouthed as she motioned to the incoming voices- *Not a word.*

Reality set into her bones as she processed how everything had fallen apart so abruptly.

A line of soldiers ran up, partially armored, weapons not even drawn in their defense. Whatever was unveiled here, she needed to keep her cool or the Inquisition’s battle may be over before it
“The Warden needs to be taken to the Healer immediately. Summon Solas, Dorian, and Vivienne now. The assassin poisoned her. Bring the dead man’s dagger with you for Solas to examine,” she directed.

The smell of the poison clouded the air had Leliana drawn closer to the scene. Bards trained for years to identify minute traces of poison within their reach. She knew Dal would survive. Idalya and Alistair were poisoned multiple times traveling through Ferelden- Wardens were harder to kill than you’d suspect.

The soldiers moved without hesitation, looks of concern on their paled faces handling the Warden injured within their own camp before battle, but the men did their job in silence and Dal carried off within seconds. It killed Leliana to not leave with her best friend, but she had her hands full with the idiot King of Ferelden standing in front of her.

“Follow me.” She whispered to the infuriating man, the only level she could maintain with him, otherwise she’d scream in her fury until he ended up impaled on a dagger.

Alistair followed numbly, his footsteps uneven as he struggled to fit his sword back in his sheath as the Spymaster rolled her eyes. She was glad Dal didn’t remember him. She couldn’t bear the embarrassment and disappointment that would stricken her face were she to learn of how he squandered the precious gift she gave him and Ferelden. In the following years after the fight with the Archdemon, it become accepted by all who knew the fallen girl that they lost the wrong Warden that fateful day.

The King at least knew her well enough to not speak a word as he followed behind, his head lowered like a scolded child. Away from peering eyes in the camp’s requisition area, the Spymaster turned on the imbecile King.

“What were you thinking?” She snarled. “Sneaking into the Inquisition camp after the Emperor’s threats this morning? Gaspard won’t hesitate to treat this as an act of war against Evelyn. You’re dumb, Alistair, but you’re not this stupid. Why are you here?”

Alistair kicked absently at the sand as he refused to meet her eyes. His own still glowing from the fresh draught of lyrium he consumed before sneaking into camp. “I sensed a Warden over here. Assumed it was a spy from Adamant. Turns out I had good timing.” His eyes twitched as he spoke—lies. Luckily for her, he was never a quality liar and had tells a bard could read from a mile away.

“Bullshit. You wouldn’t have sensed the Warden until you were already in camp. Got another excuse you’d like to try?”

The King crossed his arms across his chest in defiance while shaking his head.

“No, that’s the only one I prepared.” He replied flippantly.

Leliana ground her teeth together to keep herself from lashing out at the irresponsible man. He hadn’t put together that she was risking her own neck to get him out of their camp unseen. If Evelyn on her own was unforgiving, the combo of the Inquisitor plus Emperor were unlikely to believe any words she’d speak in either of their defenses.

“Get back to your camp now.” She growled, stomping in her frustration as she turned her back. There were a million things that needed to be completed before the Inquisition’s battle horns would bellow into the night signaling war. Alistair was interfering with the camp’s progress. “We should
just send you into Adamant by yourself, within minutes all the Wardens will be dead or unconscious under your watch.” She spat over her shoulder.

It was a hateful thing to say, but she didn’t care. After a decade of his antics, she was over people giving the man a free pass to behave a like a child.

The King huffed violently as he thundered toward her. She turned to face the furious King, dagger out in hand as a challenge to the man to rethink any decision he made.

“You want to know why I’m here? I’ll show you why I’m here.” He hissed through his helm as he reached into the side of his cloak to pull a sheet of parchment he shoved into her naked hand.

“What is it?” She asked with an annoyed brow lifted while staring down at the unrolled parchment.

“Read it!” he said provocingly, as he gestured towards the note.

With a thorough eye roll, she unrolled the parchment and as her eyes caught the spidery script it took all her years in the Game to keep her face neutral as she read over the witch’s traitorous words.

_Fucking Morrigan._

If she survived this coming battle, she’d find that witch and burn her at the stake herself. She should have known it was too risky for Morrigan to live with the information of Idalya’s new life and not dangle it over the dim-witted King’s head.

No wonder Alistair snuck into the Inquisition camp in the dead of night. Morrigan was known for her cruelty, but this was another level. Being in Evelyn and Gaspard’s daily presence had hardened the witch further than Leliana thought possible.

“And?” Leliana asked in her most bored voice.

Alistair sputtered in frustration, throwing his heavy hood off and lifting the mabari helm from his head. His long hair and full beard sweat soaked and pressed against his head as he pointed at the note in her hand.

“What does it mean? What’s the _weapon_ it speaks of?” He demanded, louder than he should have. Leliana scowled, and he immediately lowered his voice, sobering with the realization he could still cause war by being seen on the wrong side of the camp. “Is this true?”


“Maybe?” Alistair asked incredulously “You don’t know what your boss is doing?”

She shook her head. “Sometimes. I really thought Evelyn was as selfish and incompetent as you for a long time.” Alistair frowned. “But she has moments where I’m… _not sure_. Whatever she’s doing, she’s playing a very dangerous game. Gaspard is a far greater threat than any of us presumed. He is not to be trusted. Make no deals with him, Alistair.” She hoped her warning would be listened to, as she balanced the truth with the lies she’d be required to tell, but Alistair wasn’t dependable when it came to taking quality advice.

His face fell in concentration as he listened to her words. Age had not been kind to the once handsome man she could see. Heavy bags set under his eyes reached down his swollen cheeks, streaks of gray flowed through his dirty blond hair and through patches of his lopsided and unkempt beard. After the loss of the Warden, Leliana devoted herself entirely to work, she’d lost
herself in the Chantry and its goals to improve the world. It was obvious standing in front of the King that the only thing he’d lost himself in was the wine stores of his kingdom.

“And what’s the weapon?” He pointed at the note frantically, the glow of his eyes diminishing as his system metabolized the lyrium pumping through it.

As much as she might want to tell him the truth, this wasn’t the time or place for life-altering information. “The weapon is the unwavering trust you still place in a woman who would happily watch your kingdom burn, Alistair.” The man’s face fell with the embarrassment he should be feeling for dragging an army across a continent.

“I don’t understand.” He mumbled as he took the note from her hands, she noted the shaking tremor of his fingers as he tucked the note away behind his breastplate.

“Morrigan not only works for the Orlesian court, but she despises you. She, like a lot of people, still blames you for what happened to Dal. I just never imagined her anger reaching this limit.” Alistair looked defeated as he looked down to the ground at the Warden’s name, his shoulders slumping as the years of grief settled back into their usual positions.

Leliana had not realized until that moment how angry she remained toward the beleaguered Warden. The end of the first night they sat in the Chantry with their private vigil, the walls started closing in on her, her lungs struggling to open. She was unable to tear her eyes from the Idalya’s lifeless body laid still on the marble slab within the dusty and small Chantry. Rising numb, she stumbled out the front door and found herself gasping for breath as the world slipped away in front of her as she clung desperately to the weathered door frame.

In the distance, Morrigan paced, hands balled at her sides sparking with magic begging to be released. The woman’s hawk-like face contorted with anger she was unable to hold within.

She’d approached the mage, a rare moment of sympathy for the woman’s grief coming over her. Morrigan bitterly confessed the offer she’d made to both Wardens that they turned down. A dark ritual she said would have guaranteed Idalya’s survival.

When the witch explained it to Dal, the Warden’s face remained blank, her heart missing from her body, as she explained that she and Alistair were no longer together and she would not burden him by asking him to be part and sire a bastard knowing how that curse had effected his own life.

In her frustration, Morrigan went straight to Alistair explaining that the ritual would protect both Warden’s from the Archdemon’s powers, but he told her it wasn’t needed as he’d already made his decision. The witch couldn’t have cared less if the rocks-for-brains Warden burnt to a crisp, but Idalya had become something precious to the woman- a devoted friend. She begged Alistair, tears lining her eyes from the inevitable outcome clear to her that the man would remain blind to until it was too late.

Neither of them needed to die, but Alistair denied Morrigan her chance to be a hero.

The two Wardens instead argued through the night until Dal lied to the trusting man that she would let him take the final blow. Alistair believed her, thinking he’d finally won a victory against the stubborn girl who had broken his heart. The fool believed she’d allow him to find peace.

Two Wardens. Two warriors determined to die, but only one had gotten their wish.

Morrigan confided her anger in private, but Leliana had made no such pact to keep her offer secret. After they’d buried their precious Warden, the rogue told all of Dal companions that their new
King allowed her to die in his stubbornness— all of them had never spoken to or acknowledged the man again. Ten years later and everyone still suffered from the consequences of Alistair’s self-destruction.

“I really am the idiot King,” he spoke quietly as he pushed his soaked hair out of his haggard face. “You may be,” Leliana agreed, “but it doesn’t mean you can’t help. We need your army, Alistair. You’ve seen the corruption that has overtaken the Wardens. I know you must be hearing the false calling too. We must stop this and the Inquisition will need every man in this camp to accomplish it. Regardless of our differences of opinion, sometimes we need to stand together because it’s the right thing to do. It’s what Dal would want us to do. You know that.”

She was channeling what she thought Idalya would say to the man. Alistair might wave off everything else advised to him, but he always listened to Dal. Her orders had been infallible to him and he’d never second guessed her instincts, until they took her away from him forever.

Grief weighed heavily in the man’s features, but she could see something churning behind the hazel eyes drained of lyrium. “You’re right. I will speak to Anora. Ferelden will stand with the Inquisition to defeat the Wardens and then we will leave.” It had taken unexpected treason under the cover of darkness, but she’d managed to secure an additional army the night before the battle.

“Thank you, Alistair. Send word to the Commander, he will be proud to fight at the side of his countrymen and King.” Alistair chuckled as he stiffly fitted the hefty golden mabari back over his head.

“I doubt that, that man hates me.” He joked and for one moment Leliana could see the trusting boy that once existed underneath the aged shell of a man he’d become.

Leliana pulled her own hood far over her face as she prepared to check on the poisoned Warden. “Don’t take it personally, he hates a lot of people these days,” she admitted.

Every limb in her body was exhausted. Sleep along the road had been in short bursts as she planned the coming battle. Now with the relief that they’d have another army, her body finally felt like she could rest, if even for just a few short hours.

“Do you still think of her?” Alistair’s wavering voice froze her in her tracks as she left. Sometimes the truth was more painful than a lie. “I feel like I see her in everything still, and yes,” she answered his unspoken question, “it’s excruciating. Some wounds never heal.” It was the truth and it hurt to the core of her being to admit.

She may have had a living and breathing Dal to care for, but it would never heal the void in her heart where the Warden had been ripped out a decade ago.

The control and manipulation she’d heaped on Dal since her return, she thought was to protect her, but that was a lie. It was vain attempts of an old woman to protect the fragile girl from the pain that came with living and she’d still managed to fail as the elf had her heart shattered again.

She couldn’t stand near the King and his grief anymore. Any longer and the urge to tell him everything about the fallen woman at his feet who no longer remembered him would be too great. After checking on Dal, she would inform Josie of their newest additions to their arsenal before getting some rest.

“Good night, Alistair, get some sleep. I will meet you in battle tomorrow. Maybe if we’re lucky, we’ll both run into Morrigan and she’ll accidentally run into the pointy end of a dagger.” She
smiled widely showing as many of her teeth as possible as the King was taken aback.

He shook his head at the Spymaster. “You’ve grown terrifying over the years.”

*He had no idea.*

Leliana laughed quietly as she passed the King to head towards the healers. “Look in the mirror.” She didn’t wait for his response because she no longer cared. Too long her body had gone without real rest and the battle looming on the horizon was now demanding it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your kind comments and support.

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The Chapter Where the Hawke Sings

Chapter Summary

Leliana makes an obnoxious discovery, Solas is protective, and Marion sings for the Maker's protection.

Chapter Notes

Chapter up earlier than normal due to all the lovely comments from you folks. <3

Leliana’s feet dragged, exhaustion hanging from every limb when she finally entered her tent. The sweet melody her cot sang to her bones tumbled through her ears as her body pleaded for rest. Flipping back the heavy linen flap she froze finding herself eye to eye with Cullen, hands stuffed with her clothes, cheeks burning a luminescent crimson at his discovery.

“What are you doing, Cullen?” Her voice was flat, lacking in emotion after everything she’d experienced tonight. She was in no mood for his childish games, nor did she have the energy to manipulate the man in her present state.

Cullen inhaled deeply, his face still ablaze as he tried to invent an excuse that wouldn’t get him stabbed with the bard’s daggers. “I was searching your belongings.” He blurted out.

Unimpressed by his answer, she walked further into her tent, loosening the cords on her amethyst cloak growing oppressive in its weight. “As I could see. Could you so kindly tell me why you could search my tent without my permission?” She caught Cullen’s eyes as they darted towards the flap in the tent. The Commander might be strong, but she was far faster than he’d ever hope to be.

“I overheard you and Barris.”

The woman sighed as she removed her cloak and sat down on the cot, the deep purple fabric draped over her arm hung at her side.

“And?” Irritation replaced exhaustion in her limbs the longer she dealt with Cullen. At this rate, she’d die before finding sleep again.

“Dal deserves to know.” He stated as he subconsciously leaned toward the exit. Most of her interactions with the unstable man usually resulted in a roll of her eyes, but she appreciated him being forthright.

She waved off his idea with a flick of her wrist. “You understand nothing happening here, Cullen. Everything I’ve done is to protect her. Trust me on this.”

You could appreciate someone’s honesty and still be annoyed at addressing it.

“I spoke to Bull. He told me she spent the entire night in his tent sobbing over Barris.” The
desperate man stepped forward, his hands open to indicate he meant her no harm. “Leliana,” his voice wavered as he struggled to keep emotion contained, “there’s a chance she may die tomorrow. Give her the opportunity to end it on her own terms. If she loves him, let her tell him, but if she doesn’t it’s still her choice. Don’t let her walk into that battle thinking he doesn’t care.”

His words were loaded ones as he’d confronted his own feelings about marching into battle at Evelyn’s side. The fact he’d had the bravery to search through her belongings showed his level of seriousness concerning the matter.

_Dal lied to her about Bull._

It wasn’t a complete surprise that a soldier would try to find comfort before the coming battle, but Dal always put others before herself, her self-care was nonexistent when there was always some larger battle to fight.

“Why didn’t you go to her? Instead, I find you looting through my unmentionables in the middle of the night.” Cullen’s crimson turned another shade darker.

“I… it wasn’t my intention, but I could not locate the letters. I wanted her to believe me and not think it was some empty promise. We have let her down enough, I wanted her to have the real thing.” His hand absentmindedly dragged through his dismayed curls making him look eerily like the frightened boy she once found in a blood-soaked tower.

With a sigh of defeat, Leliana reached inside into the pocket of her cloak pulling the bundle of letters out. “I believe these are what you’re looking for.” She held them out in an unsure hand as she wondered what she was doing. Earlier she’d been so sure that keeping them away from Dal was the correct decision and that she would give them to her depending on the outcome of the battle.

If Dal received these letters now, and the Templar died inside Adamant, she’d never forgive them for their interference. Cullen stood back eyeing her generosity with suspicion. “Take them. From here on out, the responsibility is yours and the consequences.” Unlike Cullen, she accepted her role and would make the hard choices, regardless of how her favor would fall in other’s eyes.

Cullen swallowed as he closed the distance and taking the parchment from her wavering hand, his expression conflicted. He met her eyes, his own hazel one’s bloodshot and weary, “You’re making the right decision.” He tucked the bundle beneath his breastplate ensuring their safety.

“Are you so sure you are?” She responded as the man turned to exit. Cullen did not meet her eyes again as he proceeded out of the tent in silence.

Briefly, she considered getting up to resume work but days with no sleep were pulling her down with more intent each moment she remained awake. Having the bundle gone from her pocket did much to lighten the load she’d been carrying across her faltering shoulders.

Whatever happened now, this part of Dal’s history was no longer her responsibility.

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Even in the tent’s chaos, the elf rolled his eyes at the hammering footsteps of heavy plate as they fastened towards him.

“You’re not needed here, Knight-Commander,” Solas mumbled to the Templar as he forced his way past the group of huddled mages discussing supplies for the coming day.
“Is she all right?” Barris looked half dead on his feet, armor crooked in his rush to travel from the Orlesian camp at the Evelyn’s side to the Inquisition’s healers. His eyes were glassy and wild as he stared at the slumbering and bloodied Warden resting behind the elf summoned in the dead of night to heal her.

The mage’s eyes flicked up at the Templar as he weighed how much of an argument he felt like engaging in with the dim-witted Chantry token. “She will be fine. It appears Wardens are far more resilient than expected- an ominous symbol for the coming day. It’s difficult to poison something that’s already tainted.”

Their assassin had been sophisticated in their planning, coating their blade in three unique, yet lethal, poisons. Had they sliced any other person here, the casualties would have stacked up quickly as they worked their way through the camp. As much as Solas loathed the Wardens as an organization, immunity against deadly poison was a fascinating effect of the taint he’d have to research further.

He wondered what other properties the darkspawn blood pumping within her veins were undiscovered. Maybe it was the darkspawn blood responsible for her magic that grew more powerful by the day. He’d never heard of a Warden gaining magical abilities, but the Wardens weren’t keen on sharing most of the information they owned.

The Templar stood in silence, words stuck in his throat, in being near her. His eyes softened with emotion as he watched her like a hunter staring down its kill until the mage cleared his throat, bringing him back harshly into the real world still passing around them.

“You can leave now and no, I won’t be telling her you stopped by,” Solas muttered as he stared at the carefully inlaid runes on the assassin’s dagger. They were intricate spells, crafted with the immense power they could draw.

It impressed him that the Warden had taken down the mage on her own. The smell of ash was heavy in her armor when she arrived and the soldiers who’d brought her said the dead man had smoldered. *Did she use her powers on the man who’d threatened camp?* He couldn’t hold back the swell of an insidious pride that blossomed within him at the thought.

“Is she well?” The Templar was more stubborn than he remembered.

“I don’t know.” He replied shortly looking over the sharp edge of the blade at the man.

Barris looked confused, his eyes thoughtful, as he looked back at the sleeping form of the Warden. “I thought you looked out for her.”

Sensing Solas’ irritation, most of the healers disappeared from the tent while he’d been absorbed in his research on the blade.

“I did.” He responded miffed to have this conversation with the Knight-Commander of all people. “I helped without question in the Fade and in all that time I gave her one rule never to be broken and she betrayed it, nearly killing me, for you.” All color and expression drained from Barris’ face. “For you- a Chantry-possessed, lyrium addict, that doesn’t deserve to be in her presence.”

Barris clamped his jaw as he turned to leave deciding that it wasn’t worth wasting his energy arguing with the elf when Dal didn’t even want to see him. “What was it?”

Solas raised a brow at the insolent Templar.

“The rule she broke.”
The mage placed the dagger down heavily as he gritted his teeth together. “I’ll paraphrase for your simpler mind, but it boils down to: *don’t make deals with spirits.* Now, will you leave?”

His statement helped only his petty need to punish the man that caused the closest thing he’d ever had to a child to drain him of his mana, an act that would have painfully murdered another mage. So drained of his energy he’d crawled from his rotunda in tears and desperation, terrified of what had become of her.

Solas paid the Templar no heed as he’d stormed off. His eyes floated to where the Warden was fast asleep after Dorian let her rest as possible before the coming battle, casting a spell over the struggling girl as the mages healed the poison spreading through her.

Weeks had passed without a single word uttered between them. It was draining separating himself from the one person who made him feel linked to the world again. It had been so easy to travel alone through time until she’d come along. A strike of lightning that hammered its way through his chest, she’d dug her way into his heart one poor joke after another until his own travels through the Fade felt empty and dulled without her incessant chatter.

Even though he treated the Templar with disdain, he understood why the man arrived when he’d discovered her injury. He had done the same when the soldier arrived at his tent explaining the Warden desperately needed healers. Without hesitation, he had gone to her, desperate to help before he understood that she would be safe.

It was a reaction he couldn’t control even knowing he needed to put distance between him and the Warden for her own good. He made himself a promise that if he couldn’t tell her the truth, he would walk away. But he hadn’t honored that agreement and kept his lies contained within himself as he sensed the girl’s suspicion growing as the days passed by.

He would need to decide, and he’d need to do it soon.

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“*Maker, my enemies are abundant. Many are those who rise up against me. But my faith sustains me; I shall not fear the legion, Should they set themselves against me.*”

Marion’s hymn of Trials reverberated throughout the tent, filling her follower’s hearts with hope, as her voice called for the Maker’s guiding hand to lead their humble and unworthy steps towards victory in his name. Prayer had always been her compass in a corrupted and vile world that sought to destroy the innocent. Now their enemies were the Grey Wardens and their demon army standing against them, but they were the chosen of the Maker and he would not let them fail against those that would debase the teaching of the Chantry.

Her voice was a gift from the Maker himself her mother always said. A gift that could change the world and lead others to the Maker’s side. If only she could sing for the Wardens telling them of the glory missing in their lives. Explain that she knew the emptiness existing inside, its dark tendrils crawling along their limbs to control every movement because it happened to her too.

She had lost sight of the ethereal light that was the glory of her Maker as she’d tumbled deeper into the darkness, daring to reach for happiness in the caverns of Darktown. The longer she’d belonged to Kirkwall, the longer she was absent from the eye of the Maker as she let her faith be squandered for the sinful touch of a mage who’d whispered in the darkness as his hands crested over her skin, that the Maker was an illusion created to comfort those who feared for their ends.

They had not feared. They were unrelenting and untouchable the way only the young can be.
Marion was young no longer. The last of her youth dying as she’d cried to the Maker for the forgiveness only he could grant as the flames poured from the Chantry scorching the sky.

Sebastian took a knee at her side, a worn family copy of the Chant clutched between his fingers, head tilted towards the sky in devotion. She hadn’t requested her husband’s presence in standing against the Wardens, but he retrieved her after she’d ignored one request after another to do her sacred duty and return to serve their people.

After losing both of their families, she thought Sebastian would understand why she couldn’t leave, why the responsibility of destroying Corypheus rested on her shoulders as a Hawke. The blood of her father trapped the monster within the Warden prison until Marion in her naivety set him loose upon the world. The magister should have remained lost to time in his dungeon and due to her actions, so many more innocent lives had been lost as Corypheus made his approach to rule Thedas.

“Maker, though the darkness comes upon me, I shall embrace the Light. I shall weather the storm. I shall endure. What you have created, no one can tear asunder. Though all before me is shadow, Yet shall the Maker be my guide. I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond. For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.”

Sebastian rose to his feet, a warm smile gracing his lips that didn’t carry to the chilled eyes of her husband.

“Beautiful, my Queen. The Maker surely has blessed your path.” He acknowledged to the crowd of trusted lieutenants and captains from Starkhaven that circled around the royal couple nodding in agreement with enthusiasm.

The fact the Queen was more revered in his own kingdom was not lost on the King. He truly loved and cared for the Champion he’d fought beside as the streets burned in Kirkwall, who’d later take his hand in marriage, but couldn’t rein in the suspicion and doubt the woman cast to him as he fought to bring the Maker’s word to all who would listen. The path for them to reach this point had been a difficult one, laden with one pitfall after another as Marion freely handed her trust to the dangerous apostate who’d attempted to destroy everything they’d held dear.

He’d known she carried the grace of the Maker the first moment he saw her, words caught in the throat, as he met with the sapphires of her eyes glittering brilliantly across the Chanty. Without hesitation, she’d agreed to help him reclaim his throne for nothing in return, a value unheard of in a place like Kirkwall, and in return he’d made her his Queen, his own Champion of Starkhaven.

His love transcended everything he’d ever understood even if he couldn’t control the jealousy that developed after his citizen’s opened their hearts to the sullen and broken woman who appeared on Vael’s arm as their Queen. While she’d been a bird of prey in Kirkwall, swooping down upon those who sought to hurt the innocent, in Starkhaven many found the woman a wounded songbird they feared would be crushed in the King’s palm mid-melody.

Marion sat at his side, signaling toward the darkened corner of the tent until her guard stepped out, a small-statured Templar holding the Queen’s shining crown in their hands as they approached, elaborate emblems of Starkhaven hammered onto their breast. With careful hands, they replaced her crown on top of her head, as the Templar bowed down on a knee to her, their head lowered deeply in respect.

“Ser Arvale, pray with me.” Everyone’s eyes were held to the Queen as the Templar removed their helm, a fountain of flowing black hair tumbling out over her sepia skin and glittering silver armor. Sebastian watched the woman with the striking Rivani features take his wife’s hands as they
whispered in prayer together, their eyes closed as they prayed for the Maker’s security for the coming battle.

“For there is no darkness in the Maker’s Light.” Sebastian projected out to the gathered group of his soldiers echoing Marion’s final verse. His head upturned towards the ceiling, eyes closed in reflection. “There is no darkness in the Maker’s light. That’s what the Warden’s across this desert do not understand. All they know is darkness. They were born in the darkness, lived their lives in it, and now they’ll die in it.” The soldiers nodded in agreement. “We will walk into the darkness, but we will not be part of it!” The men whooped in response to his words. The King opened his eyes as he looked over the crowd of people taken with him as he spoke, feeding off their energy.

“We do not belong in the darkness because the Maker walks beside us. We are his chosen. His will lights the paths of his true believers as they walk towards their fate.” The soldiers were eating out of his hand as he approached them, leaning forward awaiting his next words. “The Maker gives, but he also asks of us. We are his army to strike against the corruption brewing inside that fortress.”

“An army once stood in the Maker’s light, Andraste at its lead, as she prepared to free Thedas from the nefarious grip of the Trevinter Imperium. My Queen sings of Trials, Andraste’s very words as she stood at the edge of the world. She looked to her Maker for guidance through the darkness that spread out endlessly in front of her and prayed for the strength to rise above into the light from those that sought to strike her down.” He looked down at his wife staring up at him, cobalt eyes echoing the enrapture of those around them. Sebastian reached out a hand trailing his fingers along the edge of Marion’s jaw, her ebony hair wavering gently in the desert breeze floating through the tent.

“Andraste was indeed the Maker’s bride and led by his almighty command, but that didn’t stop Maferath from growing suspicious and jealous over the allies his wife joined with to destroy Trevinter. Andraste had been born a slave. She came from nothing, so she had seen nothing wrong with elevating elves at her side when she should have been focusing on her rightful place at the side of the Maker.” Marion’s dazzling eyes faded as he felt her withdraw against his touch.

He should feel shame in how he reveled in his wife’s fear he felt bubbling behind the false facade she showed those that followed her. His wife had disobeyed, forcing his hand to march across the desert to stand beside her as she dared to declare war against the Grey Wardens. After dealing with Marion and her insistence that Corypheus was her responsibility, he could understand how Maferath could betray his own wife for the sake of power.

In the Chantry, they had taken a sacred oath to forever uphold the values of their Maker, yet Marion rebelled. Against the wishes of her husband she and her Warden, stood as Andraste and Shartan, against the unstoppable tide of corruption Corypheus unleashed upon Thedas. They should be home preparing for the incoming war, not meeting it in the middle of the desert towards its source.

Sebastian loved Marion Hawke more than he could ever conceive words for but wouldn’t hesitate to strike her down if she stood in the way of the Maker’s plan to bring about his kingdom.

“In his jealousy, he gave Andraste to Trevinter unknowing that her death would undo everything he’d ever held dear in his heart. As she burned, Andraste showed her enemies the depths of cowardice men held within their hearts and in that fire, the Maker illuminated her with the light of all lights- the light that lit her way into his kingdom. It is that light which guides our steps as we travel to end this corruption!”

The men cheered around him. Marion remained motionless, her expression blank as she watched
him. The Templar was less neutral in her glares at the King as she regarded the Lady she was sworn to protect.

“Go forth towards the rising sun as the Maker bathes us in his precious light.” He closed his eyes, his head upturned once more listening heavily for the spirit of the Maker to fill him with direction and wisdom for the coming battle. “But my faith sustains me; I shall not fear the legion, Should they set themselves against me.' Remember these words today as we bring the Maker’s reach into the darkness itself. We will remember his words, and he will be victorious on our side!” They were cheering around him, but he could barely hear them over the feeling of the Maker filling him with the path he would walk in the coming battle.

A lazy smile drifted over his lips, as he felt himself fill with the Maker’s wisdom, his arms outstretched as the soldiers filed out the tent silently not to disturb their royalty in prayer. The dawn was here, at last, spreading its light around them, sunning their faces with its warmth. Another reminder that the darkness always has an end.

Chapter End Notes

I'm glad so many of you are enjoying this story! Writing fanfic can sometimes be a morally defeating hobby, so thank you all for the awesome feedback. It keeps me focused and excited to produce new material.

Follow me on Tumblr: http://kmandergirl.tumblr.com
The Chapter Where Anora Breaks

Chapter Summary

The only fear worse for Anora than Alistair missing is his admission once found.

Chapter Notes

Hello, lovelies!

I'm still chugging away writing the post-Adamant chapters ready to go and can't wait to share them with everyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Smash.

The glass shattered in the King’s grip showering the tent floor in glittering shards. It startled Anora buried deep in the battle plans for tonight. Sighing, she turned to her husband desperate for some revelation on how to unburden his heart.

He’d driven her to insanity earlier when he’d disappeared. Anora was frantic and close to calling for a search party when Alistair appeared like a ghost out of the darkness, shaken worse than she’d seen him in years. Ferelden will march to war was all he would speak. For the last hour, it had taken a steady stream of drinks to restore balance to his twisted senses.

She’d had such hopes something had broken through to him as they’d traveled across Thedas to the arid desert far from home. He’d shown more direction and ambition than the past decade combined as they marched to confront the Inquisition’s assault on the Wardens. Her hopes were dashed upon arrival when confronted with the Warden’s corruption. Their choice was clear- they must stop the Wardens. She watched her burgeoning hope disintegrate away as the Alistair from the last decade clawed his way out of the frame of the man, she hoped he could become.

A week of meetings and attempts to plan and Alistair embarrassed her in them all. He’d always allowed her to rule without interference other than an interjected quip here and there, but in the negotiations with the Inquisition, he’d shown a level of disregard and arrogance she hadn’t expected. At the beginning of the week, he’d shown up drunk to the negotiations. Now he no longer bothered to hide his vice and brought decanters to the meetings while ignoring the judging stares Anora could not disregard.

“You need to talk.” She studied him as the King groaned, shoulders slumping further as he slid back in his chair.

“That an order?” The disdain dripping from his sarcasm was clear, but Anora hid the repulsion his tone summoned within her as each day her husband sounded more like the father she tried to forget.

“No, merely a request from wife to husband. I don’t know what’s happened, Alistair, and I’ll never
know while you exclude me.” It was tempting to approach the man, to shake sense into the body he betrayed with poison. “Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

“I went into the Inquisition camp.” He confessed without pride.

“What?” Ten years of marriage dealing with his juvenile behavior and she’d never raised her voice at the man- until now. "Alistair- how could you?” She was despondent, tears forming at the edges of her eyes. “Did you not hear Gaspard this morning? He’d bring a war to our home, slaughtering our countrymen as though it was some deserved bounty for Orlais!”

Her head fell into her hands, tears flowing freely in her embarrassment, her golden hair drifting over her shoulders like a shimmering halo. In all their years, she’d never cried in front of her husband, suffering alone in her silence through the heartaches she’d suffered over the years. She was Queen and required to put aside her own emotions for the sake of their country. If only her own husband had the same priorities. She'd sacrificed everything for the good of Ferelden and her husband would put them at war with a country itching to relieve them of their throne for decades.

The echo of sobs into her shaking hands hid the sound of Alistair moving across the tent until Anora startled at his warm fingers resting on her forearms. She jumped back scared at the sensation of touch from the man on his knees begging for her forgiveness for the years of disappointment he’d granted her. He recoiled at her fear, instead, resting his hands on the arms of the chair.

“Anora, I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” He pleaded, his heart breaking at her response. Their entire marriage he’d taken for granted that she’d been the strong one until he’d been the one to break her.

“No, you weren’t.” She ground out, wiping the foolish tears from her eyes. “What were you doing?”

“I thought I was helping but as usual, I fucked it up.” He admitted as she looked up in horror to meet his darkened hazel eyes.

“Maker, what happened?” He looked away at her question, embarrassment clinging tightly to his flesh.

He sat down on his heels as he looked up at her more vulnerable than she could ever remember. “I sensed a Warden in their camp and when I got close to investigate, I discovered a Warden mid-fight with a Venatori spy who’d infiltrated their camp. I ran in to help, but it was too late. They’d poisoned the Warden before I arrived.”

“Were you seen?” Anora held her breath as she awaited his words.

“Only by Leliana who promptly kicked my ass out of their camp after securing my word we’d march into battle.”

“Thank the Maker.” She whispered relieved her husband had come to the correct place even if had taken the worst circumstances she could imagine. “The Wardens are out of control. Fighting is the right decision.”

“Not always.” He muttered, his eyes glazing over as he watched the past unfold again, a look she was too acquainted with. “It was the first time I’d fought beside a Warden since…” His drying hair moved around his shoulders as he shook his head unable to finish the sentence as though saying her name out loud would force him to grieve her loss once more. “The Warden reminded me so much of her- how she fought, the stubbornness. I hadn’t thought about how difficult all of this would be.
My memories would haunt me once I arrived here.”

It tore Anora as she watched the man crumble on the floor. So many invisible lines drawn over the years between them. They could spend decades together and those no longer in this world would overshadow their marriage.

Reaching out, she placed her uncertain hands on his, as he looked up into her eyes questioning.

“Reminders are all we have left once they’re gone.” Her lips barely moved as she whispered. “It’s been so many years, but just when I think it’s getting easier, I’ll glimpse you down the hall and all my mind will see is Cailan before I remember he’s gone. It doesn’t get easier, it’s just easier to hide.”

Alistair pulled his arms back from the chair, his hands falling loosely at his sides as the familiar mantle of grief returned to his shoulders. “You deserve so much more than I’m able to give you, Anora.”

The Queen turned and really examined her husband, on his knees begging for an absolution she could never grant. “You deserve so much more than you’ve given yourself, Alistair.”

With a soft smile, she rose from her seat exhausted with the chaos this early morning had brought. She needed to be at her best, she would rise in hours to prepare a march into war and Ferelden needed at least one leader that could lay aside their grief to inspire.

“I want to do something for you.” She froze facing her bed on the far side of the royal tent. Alistair was still unmoved from the floor. “After we’re home, we’ll find someone who can give you the child you’ve always wanted with all your heart and then I’ll step down.”

“Alistair- stop…”

“No, Anora, I’m serious. We’ll tell the counsel Warden’s cannot be trusted after Adamant and that I’m taking time away from the Kingdom, or that I’m on Warden business. There’s more than enough distrust of Wardens in our countrymen to convince them my exit is the correct decision.” Anora’s back still faced him as she listened to his ramblings. “Maker, I’m not even certain the Calling I hear incessantly in my brain is even a false one. This country has always been yours, Anora, I’m just giving to you what’s always been rightfully yours.”

“I…” she was uncertain how to respond.

“Don’t answer now, we’ll discuss it if… when we return to Denerim.” Anora’s heart froze at the word if.

She knew Alistair would never command their army to march into war without leading it himself. Over the last years, his sword skills suffered as he’d allowed himself to get pulled deeper into the bottom of the decanter. Ten years ago, she married a warrior shaped by the bloody blade of combat. The man behind her was a mere shadow of the man who fought valiantly to save Denerim from the clutches of an Archdemon.

When Alistair was in these moods there was no point arguing with him, lest he drags you down into his despair with him. “We will speak of it again once we’re home. Sleep, Alistair, you have a long day ahead of you.”

Her back remained turned towards her husband as she disappeared behind the screen set up to afford the queen some sense of privacy to change in the presence of her husband, a man nearly a stranger to her. She stood motionless as she heard him groan, rising to his feet and shuffling to his
side of the tent before collapsing onto his cot without even removing his boots.

The idea of *if they returned to Denerim* was looming in her mind, pushing against the edges and tearing its way to the surface until it was all she could picture. Many times, she had told those that followed them that doing what’s right required sacrifices. The Wardens were out of control and must be stopped before they handed a demon army to Corypheus, but she was wasn’t certain if she was prepared to sacrifice her husband to save Thedas.

*****

Ducking a pointed head below beneath the linen walls of the tent, the crow popped out into the warm breeze of the coming dawn shaking its messed-up tail feathers once free of the heavy fabric. The Ferelden camp had yet to stir. Soldiers were on surveillance but curiously left their royals poorly guarded to eavesdroppers.

The bird lifted into the air, wings flapping with harnessed power within its limbs. Soaring above the camp it felt the first rays of light break over the horizon, warming the oil-slick coating of its feathers before the human’s weak eyes below could see the coming day.

Descending on the wind, the crow drifted through the rows of golden banners trimmed with navy, before settling beside a crimson tent with golden trim. Using its beak, the bird lifted the edge and shoved its head beneath, scooting its tiny body under the fabric and ruffling more feathers in annoyance.

The amethyst glow grew and pulsed around the animal’s form until blinding, its body stretching and lengthening until their limbs stopped at normal shape and placement.

Morrigan shuddered. A chill running the length of her spine at the loss insulating down against goose-pimpled flesh. Grabbing her Orlesian wardrobe, she hummed an old tune from her childhood while tugging the bunching layers of dress fabric over her head.

It may have been the eve of war, but the Witch of the Wilds only focused on one target. One more deserving of punishment than the Wardens holed up in the fortress. Ten years she’d restrained herself until Leliana’s dying confession at her feet shattered her self-control. Turning the knife in the King’s back was easier than she ever expected.

She knew Dal would disapprove when she discovered the petty vengeance her friend administered on the fool Warden, but while the girl existed as a fraction of herself, she couldn't hold Morrigan accountable. It was a fact she would exploit to her advantage as long as she could.

*****

*Songbirds chirped in the distance singing a welcoming song greeting the sun as it broke across the sky. Dal’s long lashes opened, fluttering against her ruddy cheeks. Her swirled eyes narrowed to the streams of piercing light. She stared at the patches of azure peeking through the massive canopy of above.*

*She sighed at man’s presence beside her. So many nights passed where she’d traversed the Fade alone, now feeling the pulsing aura of the mage made tears prick and she drew herself together before speaking.*

*“Did I die?” she asked only half-kidding while lying flat in the lush grass, clouds passing overhead like travelers drifting on a long path. Her last memory was of being poisoned, it was a legitimate concern.*
“No.” Solas responded with a warm chuckle that caused her heart to ache in longing, “though only you would be poisoned within camp.”

The Warden stuck out her tongue in defiance toward the elf’s general direction. “I’ve got skills. What can I say?”

“That’s one way to interpret the situation” He noted quietly.

The air was tense, pressure building before a storm, from all the unspoken words between teacher and student. She hadn’t understood the consequences of accepting the spirit’s deal within the Fade, but she knew she hadn’t cared.

Draining Solas’ mana could have killed him. He trusted her and drew her under his wing. But when the time came to listen to the most fundamental of his teachings, she disobeyed every rule he’d set in stone to save the dying Templar.

Weeks passed, and she still couldn’t apologize. She was truly sorry he had been hurt, but she didn’t regret saving Barris. Regardless of what happened between them later- the world was better with the new Knight-Commander as part of it.

“It’s good to know I’m not dead, at least.” She mumbled uncertain what she should say after weeks of silence. “Why are you here?” Direct was the proper route; he appreciated honesty, so she wouldn’t disrespect him with lies or manipulations of truth in his arena.

“The truth? I was worried.” He admitted. “Summoned in the middle of the night because you’d been gravely injured. Fear lessens anger and clears your vision.”

Dal swallowed loudly, her throat dry even within the intangible spectrum of the Fade. After she’d hurt him, she prepared for the anger from her teacher. Instead, an aching silence followed as she’d lost the two most important people in her life from her reckless decision. Even now, she struggled for the bravery to look the man in the face and apologize for the pain she caused.

“I’m sorry you were hurt.” The words were quiet, but she knew he could hear her. “I’m not sorry about what I did, but I’m sorry you were hurt. I would never intentionally cause you harm.”

“Good. I hate to think I nearly died over an action you wished you hadn’t made. If you’re going to do something- stand by the decision... and its consequences.” His tone was sarcastic, yet she heard no malice behind the words. She had missed his company far more than she cared to admit.

Pushing her back off the ground, she sat up as the forest unfolded around them.

“Where are we? It’s quite beautiful.” He sat cross-legged, hands folded gently into his lap, watching the memory of a breeze push through the layers of trembling leaves overhead.

“This is part of the Brecilian Forest. I traveled through these woods as a Warden to find allies in the Dalish clan living here.” She turned her waist to face him. “I’ve never felt like more of an outsider than I did in these woods. Beautiful, but filled with realities I wasn’t expecting.”

It was a harsh admission loaded with truth.

Her mother was Dalish, part of that clan. They stared and ostracized her, treating Leliana with more respect than the elven leader asking for their help. Any inclination she had to grow closer to her elven roots died within the suspicions of this forest.

“Thank you for coming to check on me. I’m sure you didn’t want to, but I appreciate it.” Even in
her attempts to be truthful, she still pushed him away, guarding herself.

Solas turned to face her, his cobalt eyes shining like empty ponds. “Don’t put words in others’ mouths.” He chastised. “I told you I was here because I was concerned. Nothing more, nothing less.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sorry.” She lowered her eyes, unable to keep contact with his in her discomfort. As good as it felt to be by his side, she was uncertain whether things could ever be as they were before she’d broken his trust.

The two elves sat quietly, passing time in the shimmering memory of the forest, as Dal tried to form thoughts that wouldn’t disappoint him. “Are you training Briala? She seems to have a lot of interest in learning about elven history.” She could feel Solas’ raised brow even if she wasn’t watching.

He chuckled, the sound echoing around them. “Are you jealous?” she rolled her eyes at the ground but couldn’t deny his accusation.

“Jealous? I’m just glad you have the student you always deserved.” She lied. “I’ve never been a great one.” That was truthful.

“Idalya.” With a sigh, she looked over at the man who had an expression filled with nothing but concern and kindness. “She is not my student, merely a woman with an interest in the past, and…” his voice faltered for a moment, “you were more of a student than a teacher like myself deserved. Never devalue yourself, Asha, the world is too willing to do it for you.”

Dal huffed at his comment looking away. “Vivienne told me something similar in the Winter Palace. It’s advice I haven’t taken since I deal deeper blows to myself than any enemy I’ve ever faced.”

Her voice shook as she finished the words. She would not let him see her weak anymore. He had done whatever was needed to make her strong against their enemies and she had disappointed him with her weakness. She would strive to do better.

Solas’ head faced out into the depths of the forest his eyes keenly taking in the details around them. Maybe someday when the world wasn’t on the brink of ending, she could take her teacher there. Show him where her mother was raised, and where she learned not to put much faith into her elven heritage when the Dalish refused to place their faith in her.

She looked at the distance between where she and her teacher sat. The physical space mimicking the invisible barrier existing amongst them. Without a word, she slid along the grass until she was by the side of her teacher. The man’s body language stiffened, but he didn’t move away from the Warden now sitting adjacent. Inhaling carefully, she leaned her head over placing it on the mage’s thin shoulder as she watched the leaves quivering on the branches ahead, waiting for the signal he’d give her to move.

It didn’t come.

“I’ve missed you.” The Warden whispered into the morning.

Solas sighed softly. “As have I, Asha.”

She couldn’t help the grin that lazily drifted across her features. Moments of feeling content were so rare in the Inquisition. Solas’ shoulders relaxed as he laid his pointed ear against the top of her head.
“Did you burn the spy?” The mage asked unable to bury his curiosity. She shook her head.

“No, there was another soldier who kicked them into the fire. That much I remember. It hadn’t dawned on me to use my magic in the fight. Old habits die hard. Are you disappointed?” she tilted her eyes up towards his.

“Only in that you weren’t afforded the opportunity to try, but it’s one less thing we need to lie about in camp. Hiding your magic would be no easy feat here.” He was right. Every remaining Templar in Southern Thedas stood within a five-minute walk.

“Solas, can I ask a question?” The mage’s eyes narrowed but nodded carefully to indicate she could proceed.

“What does ‘Asha’ mean? I know a little elven, but don’t know what it means or why you call me that.” It had been a question she’d wanted to ask for months as they journeyed the Fade together. It surprised her when the elf laughed, a warm sound filling the empty gaps in her bones.

“It’s time for a confession of my own.” He started, his shoulders tense beneath her head as they watched the sun reach its peak in the sky above. “’Asha’ in elven can mean girl or young woman…” His confession was far less impressive than she expected. “But how I use it as your title is a showing of respect and… affection you could say.” The mage was the one to swallow harshly now, his head still resting on hers. “It means ‘daughter’.”

The wind whistled through the woods as the two sat in silence, a smile of contentment graced the Warden’s lips and threatened to appear on the mage’s.

“Do you… want me to stop calling you that?” Solas asked cautiously as the Warden remained silent.

“No, I like it.” She responded. “Wait, does that mean I call you Dad?” The giggle escaped her throat before she realized it was on its way.

“That sounds terrible, how about you use ‘Solas’ and we call it fair?” He shook his head, his ear rubbing against her hair as she laughed again, her heart feeling lighter than it felt in a long time.

“If you insist, but if you ever decide you’d like me to call you another name, just let me know.” She wrapped her chilled hands around his bicep, hugging herself tightly to him as she missed the falling of his expression at her words. “Is the hour late?”

“It will be time to awaken soon. Your soldiers need you.” The Warden was silent considering what this day could bring. So long they had prepared and in hours, she’d stand weapon in hand as she marched towards the Warden’s fortress.

She sighed, her chest dropping with the effort, as she thought of the assassin ending up in the fire, her mind trying to forget the all too familiar smell of flesh charring forever seared in her memory.

“I’m not sure I’m prepared to take a life. Death no longer means the same thing it once did. Knowing what I know now, how can I end another’s life?” The thought had run through her head for weeks now, but only now could she brave what the answer’s outcome would be. When faced with the reality of battle, her sword could fall from her hands in horror.

Solas pressed his head heavier against hers in reassurance. “I have no easy answers for you except sometimes people are tasked to do horrendous things to fix the world. Our task is to stop the Wardens regardless of the cost. Tomorrow, something else will be required of us.” The elf paused as he considered his response to the girl. “Saving the world justifies any means necessary. Never
forget that, Dal. The time will come in this war where you’ll be required to choose between the world and everything else you hold dear; make the decision you know is right.” His voice was heavy with an emotion she’d never heard.

Until this moment she’d never considered that this could be the last time she’d spend alone with the elf. Her constant companion through the Fade, the hand guiding her through the fractured pieces of her mind and helping her discover the power hidden inside herself.

“I won’t be condescending by telling you to be careful, but the sentiment still rings true.”

“And I won’t ask you to return because I do not doubt that you will. You are stronger than you realize, Asha.”

There was little time left before she’d wake and face the harsh reality of war, but for now, she was content to watch the magical forest with Solas’ company.

Whatever this day would bring, she was certain to end it with a broken heart.

Chapter End Notes

I've received a few requests for some one-shots from Once & Again since I usually like to gift some around the holidays, that's how Burning in the Flames came about. If you're looking for some Evelyn/Cullen backstory, go check it out.

If there are scenes you're dying to see or AU's of the AU. There's also that *cough* Dal/Barris/Rylen threesome smut one-shot I never finished in my dropbox somewhere *cough*

LET ME KNOW, I'll see what I can do! <3
The Chapter Where Idalya Discovers the Damage Done

Chapter Summary

Idalya awakens to discover that she has more complications lingering before battle than just her broken armor.

Chapter Notes

Unexpected chapter posted today! I apologize for any format issues, I was flying through editing to get it posted.

I posted a supplemental series yesterday of O&A B-sides. I was discussing with someone on Tumblr that some of my scenes have multiple variations before I finally settle on the proper tone. People inquired to what some of those outtakes looked like so they're posted now, including the entire Morrigan at Adamant half-chapter I ended up cutting. I obviously won't be posting chapters there with spoilers for upcoming arcs for this story, but I always find the process interesting to see how things *might* have deviated. Check it out in the Idalya Mahariel Stories series link above.

Updates will, unfortunately, slow down with the upcoming holidays. My daughter is on holiday for school for two weeks and writing with a five-year-old in your lap is, well, impossible. I'm also flying home for Xmas and will be leaving my laptop home since my flight i had electronics stolen from me.

My goal is to get three more chapters out this week before the break for you guys. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s official: my armor’s ruined.” Dal groaned, collapsing on her bedding already frustrated with the day’s progression.

She awoke alone on the healer’s cot, chill lodged in her bones, as the sun pierced the horizon. She’d collected her mismatched gear before trekking back to her own tent to see the damage her body sustained in the darkness. The only reminder imprinted on her skin from the assassin’s attempt on her life was a slim rose-tinted scar, swollen to the touch, running the length of her flank.

She sensed no impediment to her movement. Her armor, unfortunately, was another story.

The mage’s knife expertly cut through the protections of leather and steel, making it worthless for battle. A blacksmith could mend the damage, but they were hours from combat with no accessible forge. Sizing new armor was towards the bottom of her priorities, but well-fitting equipment meant the difference between life and death in this environment. She’d have to make time for it.

Out of her satchel, she pulled out a small piece of blank parchment and inkwell as she penned a note to the Commander to remedy the situation.
Cullen-

*I destroyed my breastplate in the attack, will need a replacement immediately.*

-**THE Warden**

She wasn’t certain why the emphasis on her title felt necessary, but hoped it got her the needed equipment faster. It didn’t garner you respect to give orders while barely dressed for command. Pulling the cleanest tunic she had over her head, she hopped to her feet and leaned her head through the flap of the tent. As she suspected there was a guard positioned close to the exit keeping watch.

*"Psst. Hey you."* The guard looked around in confusion before approaching. *"Take this to the Commander. I’ll be with my men when you arrive."* Stiffly the guard nodded before heading north towards the direction of the massive tent shared during the daylight by the Inquisition’s advisers.

She took her time lacing her boots, methodically pulling each length of the leather cord to ensure proper tension as she flexed the muscles of her feet inside their confines. It was a minor detail but helped her focus to feel more in control of the astronomical whirlwind passing by her. Exiting the tent, she staggered as the full light of the sun reached its peak in the sky beamed down, rays burning against the exposed skin of her shoulders. The heat alone would claim as many victims as blades in the coming battle.

It was a humid summer night fighting through the streets of Denerim, driving back Darkspawn bent on destruction from the Archdemon perched atop Fort Drakon. Sweat poured the length of her body within her metal cage with each swing of her sword.

The irony of her next battle being in the same conditions across the world was not lost on the elf even if she tried to keep the thoughts as far from her mind.

Pride flowed through her veins to see her men up and outfitted so early in the preparations. Rylen jokingly chose her training squad months ago from what originally struck her as castoffs, but she’d discovered soldiers pure of heart that were undersized or had technical skills but lacked overall speed. She’d taken to the soldiers who’d she’d worked into the ground every night in training. Every morning they’d arrived back, early, and ready to be trained into the ground again.

As they spotted her approaching, the men fell in ranks, weapons held still to their sides as the warrior’s careful eyes examined all pieces of armor to ensure proper form. These checks rarely unveiled a mistake but were a distraction from the coming battle, most likely the first and last one they’d ever experience.

These soldiers were youth with a few months of sword training facing off against the honed weapons of the Grey Wardens, some with decades of experience cutting down the vilest creatures roaming the face of Thedas. There was no way this battle ended in anything but a bloodbath. Every foot the Inquisition hoped to gain within the fortress would be a battle of life or death.

Reaching the end of the line of sullen soldiers, she smiled a genuine grin at her men who had yet to disappoint. *Don’t focus on how many will die- just don’t.*

*“Everything looks great. We head out at the fifth call of the warhorn. Stay in the area for the next few hours. I would recommend writing letters home if you have the time and skill.”* She felt underdressed in just her tunic covering her breast band, but hopefully, Cullen would remedy that insecurity soon.

*“Hey, Warden.”* Dal heard Scout Harding’s telltale heavy breaths for some time before the dwarf
reached her side.

“What do I owe the honor, Harding?” The dwarf squinted towards the fortress in the distance as the sun set her light auburn strands of hair on fire making the scout a beacon people could not tear their gazes from.

The girl ran her pudgy fingers across her tight bun aware of the eyes glued to her shining hue. “The Spymaster sent your new equipment to the Commander’s tent. You are to retrieve it at your discretion.” Finally.

It impressed her that Leliana had equipment ready for her. Either she realized Dal’s predicament last night while the Warden slumbered, or her friend knew her sizes better she knew them herself. It wouldn’t be surprising for Leliana to know every detail she wore, but she was surprised the Spymaster found the time to step away from her duties on the eve of battle.

“Thanks, I’ll head right over.” Harding nodded while eying the soldiers and their expressions suspiciously, throwing her weighted hood over her irked head she proceeded back to do Leliana’s bidding in these final hours.

Dal’s soldiers scattered at her dismissal, their feet carrying them toward any direction but that of the mighty fortress looming above, daring them to ignore its presence in the distance. In the past, the time before a battle had been an important time for her to spend with her friends and those close to her. Now she found her heart yearning for peace; to isolate herself away from anyone else who would give her heart cause to shatter as the fight ahead drove her anxiety into overdrive.

The grinding of her boots on the compacted sand rang through her ears as she approached the Commander’s tent as a casual pace. Her midnight tresses were braided out of her face, the long braid swaying against her lower back. It was difficult to ignore the confused looks from soldiers at her change of appearance. If she survived this fight, she couldn’t wait for Vivienne to remove the spell from her hair and see the color she’d taken for granted returned.

Without most of her memory, she’d clung to the few things she could undeniably remember about herself. Losing the color unable to be hidden since her youngest days bothered her straight to her soul.

Her feet stopped outside the massive tent belonging to the Commander as her ears scanned inside. She heard one erratic heartbeat and the stench of soured wine leaking through the slat of the entrance burning her nostrils: Cullen was alone except the empty bottles of wine he’d consumed in desperation throughout the night to keep the tremors at bay.

She understood chasing serenity at the bottom the glass that never could be found, but the need existing just the same. Oh, how she wanted to drown her aching emptiness in the bottom of a decanter to forget and lay down the weight across her shoulders threatening to break her at any moment. She would find no lasting peace in the vessel while Adamant loomed in the distance.

Clearing her throat, she parted the heavy leather flaps and entered not prepared for the visual her dear friend made. Cullen’s eyes were reddened, deep rings of crimson lining his irises. Still out of his armor, seated behind his makeshift desk, he poured over a disheveled pile of parchments making sure they missed no final detail.

“Oh, Dal, I’ve been expecting you.” His voice sounded light, yet his eyes betrayed any attempts his words made to hide the impending disaster they would experience.

There was no point asking how he was doing at this stage. How they felt mattered not when they
would ask their men to break against the walls of the fortress. “Thank you for getting my armor prepared.” Her eyes drifted to the empty part of the tent where an Inquisition-branded chest laid.

“Thank Leliana, not I,” he corrected. “She meant it as a gift, unknowing you would need it before the battle.” The Commander muttered as his fingers traced below the words on his parchments as the elf raised a brow in confusion, her eyes narrowed at the crate standing alone in the room.

Approaching the chest, she crouched in front as her unsure fingers pulled the handle on the clasp, pushing the heavy lid to unveil its contents. Air left her lungs in a _whoosh_ as her wavering knees fell to the ground. She arrived expecting a breastplate pierced together from leftover parts but instead stared at a glistening set of Warden armor.

_Maker, it’s beautiful._

Cullen’s chuckle caught her attention as she looked up to find the gaunt man smiling down at her as he leaned back in his chair. She hadn’t realized the words escaped her lips, but she didn’t care. It _was_ beautiful in a way that only she could appreciate.

This was her armor Leliana repaired in secret to unveil to the world, no differently than she had with Idalya herself. Her fingers trailed over the engraved griffin on the breastplate cool to her fingertips even in the rising arid sun on the desert.

“Silverite,” Cullen answered, already knowing the question digging its way through her mind. “Leliana had the scorched steel replaced with silverite.” Dal’s fingers continued drifting over the length of the armor until she gasped as the light reflected off the scaling of the embedded chain mail. “And those were Leliana’s idea: the scales of the Archdemon you defeated. Frankly, I’m almost concerned about what else she’s saved from all those years ago.”

She laughed while moving the scales with her fingertips and fracturing the light drifting around her hands. “She has a hard time letting go.”

The ex-Templar rose from his chair, approaching her on tired feet until he was standing over the chest she marveled over. “I have to admit, that character fault of our Spymaster hasn’t turned out all that bad for us.” When Dal looked up to meet the haggard hazel eyes of the Commander, she found warmth had crept through his exhaustion.

“I suppose you’re right, being alive is infinitely better than nothing at all.” The warmth in Cullen’s eyes faded as he attempted to hide his revulsion at her words.

After everything he’d seen and experienced, he still believed all of this was for a reason, a divine purpose that kept him fighting when he felt like giving up.

She wished she could still blindly believe the way he did.

He cleared his throat, motioning down to the armor. “May I assist?”

Her first instinct was to tell him that Leliana always helped her suit up, but Leliana’s scouts were already making their way around the field of battle. Her friend had more lives to worry about than hers.

“I would appreciate that.” Her throat was dry as the words leached out. Once she was in this armor, it was the beginning of the end. She was walking forward to her own death again.

Rising to her feet, she stepped to the side and turned her back toward the Commander as he removed the pieces of armor from the chest delicately. Starting with her greaves, Cullen worked
his way from the bottom attaching the pieces almost effortlessly.

It surprised her a man that couldn’t keep his hands from shaking in fits of withdrawal, could move fingers so deftly and nimbly for armor- yet another contradiction that was the life of Cullen Rutherford. She sighed as he finished strapping her pauldrons on, her griffins settling into place over her shoulders. Cullen walked around to examine her.

“It suits you.” There was emotion heavy in his words. He was fighting memories of the last time he’d seen her wearing this armor.

She should have words of encouragement, some words to say goodbye if it turned out to be the last time they ever spoke, but she found her mind blank with a paralyzing fear forcing its way along her limbs.

“Thank you, Cullen, for everything you’ve done. You’ve shown a kindness I’m not sure I’ve always deserved.” The Commander’s jaw went slack at her words as his eyes left hers and drifted back towards his desk.

“Dal, don’t.” Cullen had absorbed Evelyn’s superstitious habits for battle and saying goodbye meant she didn’t intend to return, but she’d never been one to listen to superstitions.

“It’s been an honor, Commander.” With a tightened waist, she bowed her head to the Commander who’d marched an army across the world to fight a literal army of demons keen to terrorize all who crossed their paths.

She broke eyes from the man fighting an internal war within himself. She needed to exit the tent, to breathe air not heavy with regret and unspoken words.

“Wait!”

She turned to face Cullen, curiosity getting the best of her at his outburst and unusual tone. He stomped behind his desk, muttering incoherently as he reached underneath and stood up holding a bundled set of letters in his hands.

“I believe these are yours.” His voice was unsteady, regretting the words as quickly as they’d left this throat. “I’m so sorry.” He whispered as he extended his hand, holding the bundle out.

Dal’s eye narrowed at the familiarity of the stack. They were Leliana’s letters she’d been holding by the fire. *Why would Cullen say they were hers?* Her feet guided her as she reached out taking the bundle within quivering fingers.

The rough parchment scratched against the tips of her fingers as she looked down at the stack, each letter inscribed the same: *Lady Idalya*. Her teeth bit down into her lower lip, eyes watering at the penmanship she knew better than her own. The elegant and curved lettering growing more desperate as the letters progressed.

*How could her friend have done this to her?*

Cullen sloppily grabbed the piles of parchment on his desk, heading out the exit before pausing. He cleared his throat awkwardly, “I know it doesn’t change the outcome, but I believe she did what she thought best. Sometimes we do… *horrific* things to protect those we love. Take your time.”

She didn’t hear the Commander leave as her feet went numb with the weight of what she held. All these weeks she’d heard nothing from the Templar who’d run away in fear and she’d allowed herself to believe the worst in everything around her. Her legs crumbled as she fell to her knees,
clutching the letters to her chest, unable to stomach opening and reading the contents she knew would change everything she thought she understood.

Was it too late? Should she open them?

No matter the contents of these letters, she would most likely march to her death at the end of a Warden’s sword. She would betray every oath she’d taken to the Warden’s and would fight at the command of those who withheld the truth from someone already wounded by the memories they couldn’t remember.

Unwinding the tightly wrapped chord, she unbundled the letters and pulled out the first one, bile rising in her throat at the broken Templar seal of the deepest blue against the back. Her fingers shook as she clumsily opened the letter.

Dal-

We’ve arrived at our first camp and all that’s prevented me from running back in the direction we came is Rylen, who reminded me that my chance to desert already passed and our men are depending on me.

What have I done, Dal?

I swore I would die before I caused you pain and yet all I can see is your face when I left. There so much I needed to say, and so much fear to say it.

If Leliana allows you to receive this, please, come. We are at the first camp east of Skyhold. I can explain what happened if I only have the time.

Please, tell me I haven’t destroyed everything.

-Barris.

The letter fell loosely through the air as her hands fell empty at her sides. He really cared. The dark and twisted tendrils within her soul whispered falsehoods to the back of her mind that she’d been a game, mere entertainment, for the Templar and once she’d risked herself to save him, he’d realized he’d crossed the line. She’d told herself he’d lied about his feelings to spare hers, in her feeble attempts to move on with her life. She allowed her own fear to override what she knew to be true; both cared about one another.

But now it was too late. The chances of both surviving this battle were impossible.

Clasping her hands over her face, tears wracked her frame as she sobbed into her rough palms. Crying for everything she’d lost, everything that had been erased from time, and everything she now knew, could never be.

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She wasn’t certain how much time passed since she’d sat on the yellowed dirt floor of Cullen’s tent, the pile of letters set delicately on her crossed legs. Her eyes poured carefully over every word scrawled onto the parchment.

I believe I died before you saved me, and it’s frightened me more than anything I’d ever known.

Barris poured his soul into these letters in a way she’d never gotten to hear from his own lips. Her tears had long ceased, running empty in her sorrow and broken heart, as she read about his
experience coming to terms with what happened to him before she’d intervened and his fears in what she might have done to save him.

The feelings of pure horror after she returned were emotions she’d never forget. She understood why he pushed himself away- she would have done the same if he’d risked himself the same way for her.

*I’m afraid of the darkness coming to claim me, every attempt to sleep ends in terrors that it’ll be the last time I close my eyes.*

So many hours she’d laid awake in her own bed frightened by the thought of sleep and how similar it was to the death she now understood intimately. He confessed he was frightened she’d become an abomination from whatever deal she agreed to restore him. She was loath to admit; she hadn’t considered the thought herself. Some part of her was a mage that meant she must have the ability to become an abomination if she’d accepted help from the wrong demon.

*From the first moment I saw you all those years ago outside Kinloch, I’ve wanted nothing else, but you. You may not have been a mage yet, but at that moment you cast a spell over me. I hadn’t known such beauty, power and compassion could coexist together inside in a soul, but since that day it’s only been you. Even after you were gone, every pounding of my heart belonged to you, my lady.*

A sigh escaped her lungs, hands dropping into her lap as she reread over the final letter. Part of her understood why the Spymaster kept the distraction away from her- a woman tasked with an extraordinary and impossible mission- but a much larger part was furious at her friend for daring to decide her fate for her. Maybe this was Leliana’s revenge for Dal walking into the direct path of a dragon without consulting her all those years ago.

Closing her eyes, her head tilted back against the heavy spike holding the corner of the tent up. The time grew late, she sensed, soon she’d have to will herself out to her men as the first waves marched for battle. The camp grew quiet as the soldiers filed out into their lines, one company at a time moving toward their destinies.

She clasped her eyes tighter, breath coming in noisy pants, as she searched for the will to get up and fight. The soldiers she’d trained side by side with depended on her to even the ranks to give them any chance of surviving the day. They needed her.

“Commander?” the deep satin voice startled her back into reality, as she had heard no one approach.

She didn’t believe her own grieving eyes as she focused to see the Knight-Commander himself standing in the tent’s entryway, the same look of shock echoed on his face at the vision sitting on the floor of Cullen’s office.

“My Lady,” he whispered, frozen in place as his eyes widened in recognition of his letters, as she rose from the floor effortlessly, the crushing weight across her shoulders disappearing.

A lopsided smile drifted over the deep-blush of her lips. “I’m not a Lady, Barris.” She stated, his face falling, as she took an unquestioning step towards him. “But I never said, I wasn’t yours.”

Running the last few paces, she ran into the Templar’ arms as he lifted her off the ground to hold her tighter against him, a quiet sob breaking from his throat as his plate-lined arms crushed her smaller frame inside her armor.
“Dal, I…” he tried to whisper, but she shushed him, trying to memorize every detail of the moment.

“It’s okay, I know.” His letters confessed the darkest thoughts within his soul, but Barris shook his head as he lowered her softly to the ground like she was precious instead of a honed weapon about to do what it did best. Keeping his hands on her forearms he stepped back to look down at her, a chill running through her body from the loss of his warmth even in the middle of a desert.

“No, you don’t.” He whispered while searching her eyes. “Idalya, I love you. I have from the moment I saw you outside Kinloch, until not believing my eyes in Skyhold, and to now. You have made me a better man, pushed me to achieve more, to help those who were the most desperate. You might not believe in the Maker anymore, but I do, because he brought you back to me.”

Reaching up, his thumbs wiped the tears flowing over her cheeks she hadn’t felt start. She had been unaware someone could feel so many emotions in a single moment until you were bursting at the seams, ready to explode. She stood letting his words wash over her, washing away the doubt and fear she’d allowed to crush her all these months since returning to the living.

“Please, say something.” He muttered, and she couldn’t help but laugh as her tears continued to fall.

“Sorry, got lost in the moment.” She admitted with a grin as his panic subsided. “And I love you, Delrin Barris. You stubborn, frustrating, devilishly handsome, and downright infuriating man.” She punched his breastplate gently as he laughed while pressing a kiss to the top of her forehead before pulling her back into his arms.

“At least we had the right timing for something.” He whispered into the top of her hair as she clung tightly to him, afraid to let him go.

“What happens now?” She asked muffled against his chest, the sound echoing in her sensitive ears and as though a response, the deep and massive bellow of a horn rang out across the camp, as Idalya clinched her face in pain against him.

Barris tightened his arms around her, holding the shaking girl steady, as he stared blankly out in the distance as fear etched its way back into his features. “Now, my love, we try to survive.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for comments and feedback!

So far I’ve received requests for some Origin's based one-shots and Templar smut, keep on sending your suggestions in and I'll see what I can knock out and gift for Xmas!
The Chapter Where Idalya Finds an Old Friend

Chapter Summary

The warhorns are playing and the Inquisition marches to war. Idalya says goodbye before finds something she thought lost forever.

Chapter Notes

Surprise! It's ANOTHER chapter! I have a problem...

I'm sending a stack of chapters out to beta and hopefully will be able to get cracking on those the first week of January (yes, I know. /sadface) But you guys should see at least or two more chapters of O&A before Xmas break starts.

In the meantime, there's a ton of other stories in the Idalya Mahariel series link above this, so of them are super relevant canon to O&A.

Also, something new popping up I'll be talking about at the end! Make sure to author subscribe to make sure you don't miss anything when it's posted, I guarantee you it will be worth it!

***TRIGGER WARNING ANNOUNCEMENT***

The warning tags are honest for this fic and by the end of this chapter, we are in active battle. The battle for Adamant Fortress and its fall out are incredibly graphic content. If you've made it this far you have an idea of what this story offers regarding violence, sex, language, PTSD, addiction, content, etc, adamant and the Fade dial it up to 11. I'd say that nearly every chapter until the Inquisition departs could be considered NSFW. They're horrific and painful, and some of the best writing I've ever done. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her fingers clung to the edges of Barris’ armor. The echo of the war horn reverberated through her bones, terror replacing any fleeting sense of comfort she found in the confines of her Templar’s arms. Barris pulled her impossibly tight against him as the tremors worked their way through her body.

This was the moment she used all her energy to avoid. Now it was here. She was paralyzed; overwhelmed at the cascade of torment ripping at her with jagged claws. She would have to walk out of this tent and confront the fears she’d been unable to admit out loud to herself nor anyone else.

“It’s okay,” Barris whispered, his lips dragging atop her intricately woven braids, to calm the Warden unraveling in his arms. The strands of her hair were soft as they brushed across his chin, his mind desperate to remember the sweet citrus smell infused into every inch of her being if this was the last time he would ever hold her.
Her tears ran into the crevices of his armor as she pressed her cheek against the unforgiving steel covering his thundering heart screaming into the void of this injustice of fate.

“I don’t want to die again.” The words were faint as they exited her lips. They struck deep, piercing his soul deeper than the wound that nearly took his life. He, too, knew the fear running through her veins. The fear of facing an enemy that could decimate their numbers, leaving them begging for mercy; of the empty darkness that followed as the light faded from your eyes.

“Then don’t.” He tilted her face toward his with quivering fingers. The rims of her eyes were swollen, a crimson hue spread across the abyss of her swirling gray and amethyst. The overwhelming fear in her eyes melted away as she held his gaze, taken aback by the glance of his destiny that shown out of her depths at his unworthy touch.

If harm befell either of them, he would haunt the Wardens until the end of time.

“I love you.” She whispered, his heart soaring at the sound. She loved him. Idalya—the most incredible person he had ever known and somehow, she chose him—a broken soldier too lost in his own dogma to realize it.

“And I, you.” He felt invincible. Any lingering doubts or questions that might have swayed him from the Warden felt so insignificant now. If each of their respective deaths hadn’t been enough to keep the two soldiers apart, what chance did a fortress of Wardens have?

Lowering his chin, he placed a gentle kiss on the crown of her head, her ebony skin like silk as his lips coasted the surface, his eyes drifting curiously over the black tresses adorning her head. How desperately he wanted to stay, to hide her from everything outside this tent bent on destroying the life he wanted to build balancing on a sword’s edge. Before he talked himself into staying, he stepped back from the woman he desired more than anything else in this corrupt and failing world.

“I need to go.” The Templar needed him, staying here forever wasn’t an option, no matter how much he desired it.

Nodding solemnly, she reached out her bare hand towards him and he completed the distance between them without hesitation, slipping her cool fingers between his own as the Templar looked down squeezing her hand in understanding of her silent question. Following a deep and exhausting breath, he turned, guiding her outside the tent toward the fate refusing to alter its course.

The camp was barren as the soldiers joined their somber ranks. Their first set of soldiers would march in minutes and his line, at the Inquisitor’s side, would be soon to follow. The warriors walked hand in hand in silence as they crossed the camp with a purpose.

Barris could close his eyes and imagine them within the safety of Skyhold, two lovers walking through the gardens at dawn. But this was no garden, this was war. Flowers and herbs replaced by swords and armor, sand discolored with leeching pools of blood.

There were so many things he wanted, needed, to tell her about the depths of his feelings, but there wasn’t time. There would never be time, so they would have to make do with silence. Words weren’t enough as they came upon the army, just the constant battle of fire and ice where their hands joined.

*****

The murmurs of the soldiers grew louder in Dal’s ears as they approached the clearing where the army converged. Sound pressed in on all sides choking the breath from her frame. The pounding
hearts of hundreds of frightened men were deafening.

Fear laced the air as they saw the torches surrounding the Inquisition’s advisers on bent knee forming a circle, their head bowed in prayer as Cullen filled the deepening night with the words of his beloved Maker.

“Though all before me is shadow,
Yet shall the Maker be my guide.
I shall not be left to wander the drifting roads of the Beyond.
For there is no darkness in the Maker's Light
And nothing that He has wrought shall be lost.

I am not alone. Even
As I stumble on the path
With my eyes closed, yet I see
The Light is here.

A heavy wave of clouds formed in the distance, thickly veiling the walls of Adamant as the Venatori disappeared like waifs in a fog as it hid the fortress from view.

Draw your last breath, my friends.
Cross the Veil and the Fade and all the stars in the sky.
Rest at the Maker's right hand,
And be Forgiven.”

She wanted to believe his words, to be swept up in the fervor that used to propel her forward to do what was right and needed. Every night she traversed the plains of the Fade and found no evidence of reasoning in favor of the Maker existing, and yet, she wanted, needed, that belief at this moment. As she and Barris drew closer, the Seeker’s eyes floated up, a thin smile drifted over the perimeter of her lips as she observed the two warriors joined by hand as they entered the circle of prayer.

Barris knelt at Cullen’s side, his head bowed deeply as his words joined his brother’s in unison.

“Maker, though I am but one, I have called in your name.
And those who come to serve will know your glory.
I remembered for them.
They will see what can be gained,
And though we are few against the wind, we are yours.

Though I am flesh, Your Light is ever present,
And those I have called, they remember,
And they shall endure.
I shall sing with them the Chant, and all will know,
We are Yours, and none shall stand before us.”

Their words tore at her soul and she clenched her eyes as she dropped to her knees beside Barris, his fingers still interlocked with hers as the storm passed above them charging towards the fortress. We are few against the wind. It was true. They might outnumber their opponents three to one, but the Wardens trained to find victory in impossible situations.

She’d barely finished her training by the time she lost Duncan and brought down an Archdemon on her own because she had to. What destruction could the Wardens cause with a demon army at their bidding?
The Wardens were not forgiven for the sins they committed, but Corypheus drove the Wardens to desperation by the false calling leading them to find a solution to the Blights should it should require all Wardens to make their final march to the Deep Roads. If this was to be the end of the Wardens, they would ensure Thedas was protected from darkspawn, once and for all.

They were weapons molded and manipulated to believe in the agenda of villains and now she would march forth to cut them down upon the shining edge of her blade without mercy.

“Dal?” Her eyes flickered open unaware that time had passed, and prayers reached their end. Barris watched her, concern clear in his features no matter how he attempted to hide it.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled, unsure what else to say. So many would die in the following hours and the thought of saying goodbye to them all crippled her thoughts.

“I have…” his words faltered as he watched her, his eyes frantically trying to remember every detail.

“I know. It’s time.”

He nodded numbly in confirmation, his head bobbing loosely on his shoulders, as she tried to not open her mouth and scream over the violence of her undead heart snapping in two. In a kind world, both would die quickly in this battle and never know of the other’s suffering, but Thedas had never been kind and they would suffer grief beyond their imagination before someone raised the final weary flag over a crimson-stained battlefield.

Barris rose to his feet, pulling the Warden to her shaky legs and into his arms one last time. She wanted to cry and cling to the Templar and scream at the Inquisition to tumble into the Void, but the soldier inside gripped her breaking heart in its fist holding her together for her men whose lives depended on her clear head.

Instead, she reached her weary arms around as much of the heavy plate as her shorter stature would allow and held tightly to the man that reminded her happiness could exist in a chaotic world, even if briefly.

“I love you.” He spoke once more into the unending rows of her braids.

“And I love you.” She responded, her voice surprising her in its confidence.

“No matter where fate takes us, from here to the Void, I will always find you.” She felt the beginning of burning tears prick her eyes at his whisper but pulled herself together in time to hear the second horn sound out, echoing across the desert.

A war cry erupted from the rows of waiting soldiers as Evelyn made her way to the front, a set a silver-coated chevalier escorting the Herald. The jaws of the soldiers’ fell as the Inquisitor entered their view. Her typical leather and steel accented rogue’s wear replaced by elaborate chiseled silver armor replicated after the images of Andraste shown in every Chantry across Thedas. Her auburn hair trailed loosely down her back, the tendrils whipping around in the arid desert breeze the storm pushed toward them. The flicking torchlight down her path set the maroon in her hair on fire, making her a stained-glass window come to life, the holy Chant as moving flesh.

Barris pulled away from Dal. It was his time to stand at the Inquisitor’s side as her Knight-Commander, her barricade against the waves crashing over them. Over his shoulder, Idalya saw Blackwall and Dorian deep in conversation as they caught up to Evelyn.

A flicker of emerald light off a crystallized staff behind them caught her attention as Solas came
into view, his weapon gripped in his fist as Dal’s heart caught in her throat, a new terror filling her. The rest of the Templar order followed behind the apostate, making ranks to protect the Inquisitor’s path from Venatori as she sliced her way to the front gates of Adamant.

As her surprised eyes met Solas’ still azure pools, she found the elf’s eyes full of sorrow and regret of all that would remain unsaid between the mentor and his student. All this time they fought, pushing each other away, and she had swallowed her emotions instead of going to the man to make amends for what her ignorance almost cost him and now it came to this: Solas, the unapologetic apostate, walking proudly into battle surrounded by Templar was the most frightening reality she could imagine, and it was happening before her eyes.

Pulling her hand with urgency, Barris turned her face to meet his. “I promise I’ll keep him safe. No harm will come to your mentor on my watch.” She tried to smile in appreciation that he understood her fear, but her lips quivered unable to form a cohesive expression.

And with those words, Barris left. He replaced his massive helm as his heavy boots clawed their way through the compacted dunes of sand. In his full armor, he looked larger than life, his place at the Herald’s side. Dal turned away unable to watch.

To survive today, she needed to shut off the connection between her heart and head. Her men were at the other end of the field waiting for her instructions. By the time they reached Adamant, everyone she knew and cared for could be dead. Her boots picked up speed carrying her away from the beginning waves of moving soldiers before forced to listen to lies pour from the vile Inquisitor’s lips again. In the distance behind her, she heard hundreds of sets of boots set forward in unison as the march to breach Adamant was set in motion.

She passed by the Commander and Spymaster in silence as both restrained themselves from saying anything to the Warden filled with conflict. Her fury at Leliana quickly faded after finding the Templar she thought she’d lost forever but didn’t mean she was ready to spill her frustrations to her best friend over withholding the letters.

Cullen, as much as she cared for him as a friend, could not be trusted in any scenario where Evelyn was in danger. She did not doubt for a minute he would sacrifice everyone standing in this desert to save his precious Herald. Evelyn wasn’t worth the sand she stood on, but that wouldn’t stop their Commander from doing whatever it took to ensure she survived tonight.

She stomped through the desert for a lifetime until reaching her men standing toward the end of the waves, looking around hesitantly as they awaited their leader. As she came into view, her men stood at attention, their eyes directed forward and away from the shaking Warden in her glittering uniform as she fell into line by their side.

*****

Time stood frozen while silence pressed her into the ground. Her lips moved as she ran over the plans in her head, willing time to progress forward so her purgatory would end. The third, four, and then fifth horns eventually blared across the field alerting the separate armies to begin their march. Adamant was surrounded by soldiers of all banners converging in front of the fortress, locked in battle. No received no urgent messages through the ranks, so she could only assume the Inquisitor, Champion, and Kings in the battle had not fallen trying to enter the fortress.

From the far left a trebuchet fired a massive boulder, a mighty arm soaring through the air, vibrating the sand below their boots, hurtling through the air towards Adamant. It was a true shot as the moving stone struck the least defended wall on the Eastern side of the fortress. The boom echoed far enough to ring in her ears. She gasped as she heard the sound that followed- a deafening
crack, and the side wall of Adamant crumbled to the ground as cheers rose in all directions.

_They had done it. They had breached the impenetrable fortress._

The warhorn blared again across the field, except this time the note held as the surrounding soldiers held up their swords in celebration. _This was happening- they were calling everyone in at once._ The thundering beats of their boots moving in motion caused Dal to grind her teeth in discomfort as the soldiers trekked down the dunes towards the fortress. As Adamant became clear through the thinning fog, the armies blended together, banner colors sprinkled across the battlefield like wildflowers in a field as all on their side fought with the same purpose.

Ahead she could see the barren plains of bodies. The first engagement of battle the soldiers ran through, blinding themselves to their own possible outcome when a violent wave of nausea ran across her abdomen causing her to double over. The Warden’s feet faltered, tripping over the body of an Inquisition soldier. His empty eyes staring towards the thundering sky. Trying to steady herself, she tried to raise her shoulders, but the acid pushed its way up her limbs, wrapping around her heart, poisoning her lungs as she drew breath.

_What was happening to her?_ The acid pulled her from the line of moving soldiers, toward a pile of bodies pushed to the wayside of the incoming army.

Breaking ranks, she stumbled clumsily to the bodies, her eyes glued to the mass of flesh leaking together that were recently breathing, living vessels. The need to dry heave pressed against the back of her throat, fighting against her sensibility in the time of insanity.

Her feet moved forward until her boots reached the edge of the corpse, the acid rushing through her system had compulsively drawn her to. The body was darkly armored and discolored by unimaginable amounts of blood. Understanding her compulsion was insane, she used to the edge of her boot to roll the body over and gasped as it stiffly moved, unveiling the glittering Silverite griffin emblazoned on his chest resembling her own.

 Dal clutched at her breast as she stumbled backward, her heart crying out in recognition of the feeling wreaking havoc within her body- _the taint_. It drew her to the Warden because the taint would always call her to the corruption of darkspawn. It was the same sickness that came over her when she’d fought the mage in camp- her body recognizing that which was like her. All this time she’d questioned and feared her purpose was gone, yet the corruption remained pumping wildly through her veins. Her corruption would call out to her enemies, drawing them closer to her.

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_How could she have questioned who she was?_

_Idalya’s eyes snapped open in horror._

_Blackwall._

Chapter End Notes

The will of the people has won and I'm writing smut one-shot/mini-story, a LOT of it actually, and you guys should see the first chapter (yeah, of course even my smut turned into multiple chapters *shrug*) as early as tomorrow!

_Happy hump day, yall! <3_
The Chapter Where Idalya Confronts the Traitor

Chapter Summary

Idalya confront the false Warden

Chapter Notes

No idea how it happened but my Scrivener file completely deleted a chapter, but I found it in the trash and here it is. Sorry for the chapters being renumbered.

The instinct, the need, to run was stronger than any emotion Dal had ever felt. She couldn’t remember giving her legs the command to run, but soldiers were flying past her, blurring before she realized it. *This battle was a trap*. Evelyn marched confidently into Adamant with a traitor at her side, a traitor who stood beside the Warden, swearing to protect them against their enemies.

Putting aside her many grating characteristics, the Inquisitor was the one chosen to wield the mark. Without her, there was no defeating Corypheus. Every scenario Dal had died to prevent would descend on the world unleashing a terror Thedas could never prepare for.

*What had she been thinking keeping this secret?*

Entrusting her secrets to her already distrustful and suspicious elven mentor had not been the brightest idea. If Blackwall struck Ev down, then she would be to blame. Any suspicions in the Inquisition about the grizzly Warden faded into dust with her continued silence. She was, *had been*, the Hero of Ferelden. If she put her faith in the haggard man, then so did others.

The fortress grew massive, an intimidating structure that threatened to swallow the churning battle below, as she continued pushing her body. She set a crushing pace leaping over piles of bodies discarded like weapons thrown aside after sparring. Her eyes were locked forward towards her goal, ears closed off from the cries of pain and anguish echoing on all sides. The taint flared within her as she sped past the fighting Wardens, its dark curling tendrils reaching out towards the familiar then recoiling back as their voices were cut short by slicing blade. No matter what fatality count the Inquisition expected before leaving Skyhold, the ground now held the quivering bodies of four armies bleeding out into the barren desert and bathing the dusty sand in a sea of flowing crimson.

A hulking, silver breastplate looked out a pile ahead of her. The Templar insignia emblazoned on the front glimmered like a beacon, conjuring a panicked fear of loss in the back of her mind. She was drawn to it, unable to steer herself away, even knowing that more important matters called for her attention. She couldn’t walk away, not without being sure of who lay below the useless metal.

Frantically she reached between the corpses removing the Templar’s lifeless arm loose from its confines and pulled his glove free, revealing gray toned flesh emptied of vital life that had been once been a fresh shade of cream. Before she could breathe a sigh of relief that it wasn’t *her* Templar’s hand she held, the taint grew restless inside her, excited to feel another’s reaching for
her own.

In one graceful movement, her sword was unsheathed and thrust through the midsection of the Warden that tried to flank her. The blade entered the man’s chest cavity, finding the true home it longed for all these missing years, piercing his organs with little strength of her own. Blood gurgled past his lips in spurts, his hazel eyes open in surprise at her inhuman speed as she pulled the soiled blade from his body. She watched numbly as the man crumpled backward onto a crushed group of Inquisition bodies that were trampled in the chaos of a thousand pairs of weathered boots daring to enter the fortress.

She had done what she was unsure she could ever do again- take a life. There had been no time to weight the choice. Instinct took over to quiet the doubts that would inevitably cause her to fail. When the moment had arrived, her body remembered how to kill. She had done it, and it had been easy.

Her ears felt a vibration. She ducked as the impending dagger flew past her head, striking into the side of an Inquisition soldier behind her. Using the pile of bodies in front of her as a ramp, she launched herself into the air, her sword leading into the rogue who had thrown the errant dagger. The Warden tried to reach for another blade, probably doused in poison, until she turned her steel within her fists, stopping his heart. She didn’t linger to stare at her kill this time as she sprinted again toward the massive hole the Inquisition cleaved into the side of the fortress. There had been no signals sent to those fighting, no victor decided, so there was still time to save Evelyn if she could make it there in time.

Suddenly a force grabbed her forearm, her momentum almost throwing her backward. Turning, with her sword in motion, she aimed to kill the offender as revenge for the shock. The rows of glittering, metal jaws, dripping with trails of blood from fresh kills, penetrated her surprise just in time. She stayed her blade before the killing stroke, recognizing the Commander at the last second.

“Dal, your orders!” he cursed as he plunged his blade forward into a combatant behind her.

So jarred she was from her singular focus that the Warden could barely piece words together. “Blackwall... traitor. Inquisitor....”

Cullen’s hazel eyes widened behind his helm, not unlike the Warden she ran through with her sword when he realized his life was slipping away down the steel.

“Dal, go!” His shout echoed across their corner of the battlefield.

She didn’t ask for clarification, or for permission. She simply ran as fast as her legs would allow, darting around enemies and fellow soldiers alike, all of them blurring into one distraction she couldn’t afford to acknowledge. Pushing forward she had one goal repeating through her pounding skull: save the Inquisitor, no matter the cost.

The battle had moved within the fortress so Evelyn could be located anywhere within its walls. Long into the nights, Idalya remained awake studying the maps, the Commander provided, by flickering candlelight. They were pieced together from ancient and crumbling journals in the Inquisition’s library. Wardens were nothing if not secretive and Dal’s confidence was crumbling faster per second as her mind attempted to place the rogue in the endless mazes of the fortress.

Reaching the breach in the wall, she spotted a dwarven Warden, battle-ax raised above their head, ready to bring it down into the spine of a Ferelden soldier who was barely old enough to be considered a man. Dal wretched her dagger from the side of her boot and threw in one overly-practiced motion. The dwarf’s mouth gaped open as the silverite impaled into the curve of his neck
cutting life from his form. It left him unable to turn his head to face his killer before slumping over beside the prone soldier who looked at her with a mixture of relief speckled with terror.

With one quivering hand, she pulled the boy to his feet and removed her dagger from the dwarf’s throat with the other. The soldier was covered with a good amount of blood, and shaking uncontrollably, but little of it appeared to belong to him so he was faring better than a lot of other soldiers on the field. The frightened boy opened to his mouth to speak, but his eyes expanded wide at something behind her.

Dal could feel the Warden approaching, her corruption recognizing and beaconing theirs, teasing it to close the distance. Idalya tightened her grip on her dagger in one hand and her sword in the other as she steadied her breath, preparing to turn and attack the Warden who already knew they had been sensed.

“Your Highness.” The frightened soldier spoke, his Ferelden accent heavy in this speech as his words wavered. He brought a shaking blood-coated fist against his chest in salute of his leader.

She turned in confusion to find a man approaching with shoulders as broad as the Commander’s. He was draped in golden armor, the sigil of Ferelden emblazoned on the breastplate and surrounded by streams of dripping blood. Atop his head sat a mighty helm in the shape of a mabari, his face covered beneath the snarl of the jaws. The finery of the suit was like a massive sign above his head, screaming “royalty”, the flank of soldiers in Ferelden banners further proving his importance and his nation of origin.

This was her King.

Everything from the man’s stature to his measured and controlled movements screamed Templar to her, but he was also a Warden. The smell of alcohol permeating off the man confirmed it. Only a Warden would show up drunk to this battle. The man’s proximity was causing nausea to rise heavily in her throat again, and the taint screaming through her veins causing a buzzing inside her head making it difficult to focus on what was happening around her as she was unable to look at the King of Ferelden clearly without the world tipping on its axis.

Which was for the best since she’d have been unable to hide the distain she had for the man letting his opportunity for change run through his fingers.

Evelyn. You can’t let yourself get distracted. She’d have more time in the future to berate the idiot King if she could secure their victory today.

A boom echoed in the surrounding area as an enormous rift opened overhead towards the front of the fortress. The smell of heavy atmosphere and swirling mana made it hard to breathe, as her lungs struggled to draw the poisoned air in, but a relief from sickening combination of rum and the taint flowing out the King’s pores. A rift meant more demons pouring onto the battlefield than they were already struggling to manage, a rift only the Inquisitor could close.

There’s no time for this.

The Warden mumbled as she deftly climbed the broken edge of the former western wall of Adamant ignoring the scene behind her. No matter how fascinated she might be by the Warden King, his Kingdom would mean nothing if Corypheus succeeded today.

The further she got from the broad Warden, the easier she could breathe and the acid spitting within her veins calmed into a constant vibrating hum from the other Wardens nearby. She didn’t look back at her countrymen as she made the climb up the jagged wall to the ramparts. Though she
might have a surge of nostalgic emotion at the thought of Ferelden, it was no longer her home, hadn’t been since her broken bones landed at the Archdemon’s feet.

Her eyes scanned across the center of the fortress until they caught a group of silver-clad soldiers engaged with a group of Venetori mages on the far east side. Step by step she made her way across the walls, cutting most the travel through the ancient stoned maze out as she traveled towards the Templar, knowing the Inquisitor would be close.

As she advanced overhead, a Templar was caught with his shield down which the mages quickly exploited directing a fast-flying fireball to the side of his helm. The panic-stricken soldier plummeted to the ground screaming while attempting to stifle the mystical fire, the flames scorching their tender flesh beneath the melting steel. The sides were now even and the Templar completely emptied of lyrium. They held their swords and shields drawn to the level of their eyes. With careful steps they attempted to close the distance to the mages gaining the advantage as the battle progressed.

Dal worked her way around the perimeter of the wall until she positioned herself overhead behind the mages. With weapons in hand and a quick intake of breath, she dropped off the wall, landing silently behind the two mages, barely disturbing the compacted sand underneath her feet. It took only a second for her to dispatch the mages from this world: one dagger to slit the throat of the first mage and a sword blade punctured through the neck of the other. The two mages fell limply to the floor and the smaller Templar turned to check on the condition of their fallen comrade.

The other limped towards her, shaking their heavily-helmed head. “You insane woman,” she heard Barris mutter as he approached. If she hadn’t been in such a rush, she would have grinned at his befuddlement over her surprise arrival.

“Where’s Evelyn?” She yelled, her ears deafened by the pounding adrenalin in her system. Her eyes dropped to the ground loathe to lock sights with the weary and exhausted man. War was not the place to encounter the person whom you loved more than anything else in this maddened world.

The Inquisitor must be close.

“She and Hawke chased after Warden-Commander Clarel and Erimond.” He pointed toward a heavy set of wooden doors set deep in the walls of the fortress behind her.

Her feet set off automatically. She could hear him yelling her name in the growing distance, but she couldn’t stop. Knowing he was alive was enough to keep her going, for now. She flung the doors open to find Evelyn and Hawke dispatching a group of demons between them, the two rogues spinning delicate circles around their prey, a choreographed ballet of destruction. Solas, Dorian, and a bald Warden she presumed to be the Warden-Commander of Orlais, fought off a mage clothed in elaborate Trevinter robes the color of fresh cream. She heard a clang of steel and saw Blackwall fiercely defending their position in the corner from a pride demon towering over him.

Listening, she studied the man honestly. No, he had never partaken the Joining, cursing himself forever to the darkness that her and her brothers could never escape. Pulling her sword, she jumped into battle, helping Blackwall overtake the demon once its attention was divided between the two soldiers. For not being a Warden, Blackwall fought as hard and reckless as one.

The demon dispelled, the man lurched forward, hands perched on his knees as he tried to catch his breath. “Aye Hero, I’ve never been happier to see you!” The man gasped out as she stared down in disdain. He had lied to her and put everyone she knew and loved in danger. “We should go help the
Inquis…” Blackwall was cut off from finishing his statement by the blade she pressed against his throat, a choked sound echoing from him.

“Hero, what are you doing?” The warrior stared in disbelief as she pressed her blade tighter against the bristle-covered hair of his neck.

“Gordon Blackwall… if that even is your name,” Blackwall’s face fell as Dal began to speak, “I declare you as a liar and traitor to the Inquisition.” A pair of heeled boots approached from Dal’s side as Evelyn reached the altercation occurring behind the mage battle.

“What is this?” the Inquisitor demanded. Evelyn’s silver armor was covered in crimson and rust-colored stains, heavy amounts of fresh blood dripping from the dangling strands of her auburn hair.

“The man we’ve known as Blackwall is a traitor to our cause. He is a liar and an assassin sent to kill you.” Idalya announced, her throat dry and aching at this unexpected outcome.

“I can explain!” Blackwall gasped against the added pressure against his throat, the flesh opening against Dal’s quivering blade.

The true Warden spat at his feet. “He doesn’t even attempt to deny it. Tell me your real name!”

Blackwall sighed as he looked into the confused faces of his companions. “My name… is Thom Rainier. I was an army captain in Orlais.”

Hawke approached from behind, wiping her blades off on the leather of her breeches, her long ebony hair covering her blood-streaked face. “As in the criminal and murderer, Thom Rainier? Evelyn, you do quite the vetting for your crew.” The Champion’s lips twitched in a poorly repressed smirk as Evelyn rolled her eyes, uninterested in her fellow rogue’s opinion as she approached.

“Who sent you to kill the Inquisitor?” Idalya pushed, her blade causing a steady stream of blood to run from the shaking warrior’s neck. Behind her, the three mages appeared to have their target nearly contained.

“No one, I swear, my Lady!” Blackwall, no, not anymore, Rainier begged. “I came to the Inquisition to make amends…”

But the false Warden’s excuse was cut short as a deafening sound broke through the air, shaking Idalya to her core: the mighty scream that had haunted her nightmares for decades.

*The Archdemon.*
The Chapter Where the Templars Make a Vow

Chapter Summary

Barris and Lilly fight their way through fortress after a massive rift opens and threatens to end the Inquisition's assault on the Wardens.

Chapter Notes

I have no self-control, so here's another chapter! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sound splitting the air was ungodly in its volume as it echoed through the stones of the fortress. Delrin Barris had fought his way towards the massive wooden gates where he’d just watched his love sprint through when the entrance of the dragon into battle plunged his heart into terror.

This was what she had trained for.

They hadn’t known when the Archdemon would make its next appearance, but why not now? They had done the impossible: breach the impenetrable walls of the ancient fort, found more allies than they thought could be won, were turning the tide of battle when, of course, the Archdemon would arrive as victory was just within their desperate grasp.

Lilly Hawke raced by as he stood stunned, a dagger flying by his ear into the bloodied Warden making his silent approach behind them. That brought Barris ricocheting back into reality. He threw Lilly an earned nod before sprinting to the door the auburn-haired Templar was pulling open with all her might. The creaking hinges finally gave, swinging open to a sight that froze his heart on the spot.

A cobalt streak of fire singed the stones across the platform, the Inquisition diving out of the way as the flying demon made its impact felt.

Evelyn and Idayla were first to their feet as the dragon gained altitude for another pass in the desert air. Anything not constructed of stone burned with destructive flame, an image torn from the Void itself as the fire licked around the stunned warriors. All eyes moved to the Warden as she studied the sky watching her fate circle above.

This was the moment she had trained for but how dare it arrive so early. He’d just found and opened his heart to her, only to have this monstrosity come barreling down upon them right when victory was almost theirs. There was no retreat; the Inquisition, Ferelden, Orlais, and Starkhaven had their entire armies in this fight, and the mage Solas and Dorian were still entangled with had a fucking Archdemon at his beck and call.

Barris’ feet were stuck in their position as his heart sung out in pain at what he would be forced to witness. The Inquisition survived the dragon’s first attack by covering their home in unending
rivers of snow. There was no such exploit to use here.

The sounds of swords clanging grew louder behind the panicking Templar as the fighting outside the walls spilled into the hallways of the fortress. Within the confines of the stone barriers, they found the Venatori mages holed up and prepared for their assault. Every room they progressed through held more traps and mages than the last. He’d already watched more Templar fall than he ever thought he would see in battle. He could still envision the terror in their eyes as life slipped from their bodies. They had whispered words to their Maker, begging he find their hearts pure and burning brightly with their faith.

A flickering emerald light flashed around them and Barris turned. A massive rift forming above the entrance of the fortress. The thick, putrid smell of demons filled his nostrils as the monsters funneled out of the hole and into reality. Screams of soldiers echoed down the corridor as the demons clawed their way through their ranks.

“Lilly!” he called out to the Templar, forcing her way through the crowds toward where the Venatori mage was still cornered by their own magic casters and the Templar’s cousin. The woman looked back, irritation clear on her features. “The rift!” He pointed overhead at the glowing magic hurting his eyes. “We can’t lose the center of the fortress!”

There was nothing they could do about a dragon circling overhead, but they could protect their own on the ground.

He didn’t wait for Lilly’s response before he turned, sprinting toward where screaming pierced the air before being cut short, replaced by the empty sounds of gurgling as blood filled the soldiers’ throats. Turning a corner, Barris found the corridor splattered with gore on all sides, piles the bodies formed as the demons shredded through their lines. Ahead, a rage demon feasted on the flesh of a Starkhaven soldier, the boy’s eyes frozen, mouth gaping open as death stiffened his limbs while being consumed.

Barris ran forward, boots echoing on the stones as he thrust his blade into the back of the demon, its scream deafening as it pitched forward, pulling the Templar with it. Another demon turned the corner and screeched before jumping past him at something moving beyond his shoulders. That demon let out a pained scream of its own as he heard Lilly grunt, swinging her daggers through the beast and cutting its ties to this world. The demon dropped to the ground as Barris drove his sword once again into his own combatant. There was no scream this time as the demon relinquished its hold on life, still at last.

There was no time to pause as the two Templar turned into the courtyard. Soldiers on all sides were battling against more demons as they continued to depart from the rift. The Commander’s red lion armor easily identifiable in the center as he cut through the lines of Fade creatures. Barris and Lilly fought their way through the slithering beasts until they were at Cullen’s back, their blades slicing down anything that sought to lurk upon the Commander’s blind side.

“Men, formations!” The Commander rang out across the room. Any soldiers not currently being devoured turned their backs toward the Commander and made their backward approach to the safety of the Templars in the center. Their months of training paid off - the soldiers returned to the circle and then expanded, as one, a solid wall impenetrable to the roaring demons.

Like this, they fought until a mighty boom echoed through the land, tossing many of their weary soldiers to the ground in their exhaustion, as stones crumbled from the jagged sides of the fortress. Barris searched the sky, unable to locate the dragon in the sky. Had it attacked? Or just taken ground in its own exhaustion?
Barris’ legs moved of their own volition. He wove his way around the demons, acidic mucus dripping from their jowls as they snarled in his direction. Trying to move quickly, he only fought what was required as he tried to return to the platform where he had last seen the Inquisitor, Champion, and his beloved Warden.

The smell of freshly rotting flesh and emptied bowels were nauseating as the Knight-Commander worked his way toward the massive wooden doors. As his hands enclosed over the rusted bronze handle, a sickeningly heavy wave of magic flowed past the doors, causing him to double over and wretch. The sound that followed caused his heart to drop out of his body, an explosion that shook the stones around him as his numb hands struggled with the stiff door.

Heavy boots approached behind him as the Templar threw his shoulder into the crease of the door, the heavy hinges groaning as it was thrown open, unveiling his greatest fear — the area where the Inquisitor and her companions had just stood was gone, the platform missing as the edges of stones burned in the night.

Barris’ weary feet stumbled out into the empty platform. All of them were gone. A loud screech split the night above him as the dragon swooped over the battlefield behind him, punctuating the loss with vicious clarity.

Maker, they had lost all, yet the dragon survived.

“What happened here?” Cullen’s voice behind him should have startled him, but nothing could penetrate the emptiness stretching through his limbs as his mind frantically whispered that he should follow the Warden off the edge of the platform, into the void itself.

“They’re gone.” Barris was unable to clear his thoughts of the image of the Warden’s face. An ache in his limbs grew exponentially as he imagined the fear etched across her features as she fell to her unneeded death. Twice now the Maker had taken her from him, this time wrenching her away from within his own arms.

“Who?” Cullen screamed, grabbing him by the shoulders and turning them to face his friend, blood smeared across the visage of the lion he wore on his helm.

“All of them!” Barris cried, and Cullen’s mouth faded behind the helm, his arms falling loosely to his sides.

“No, no, nooooo…” Cullen pleaded as he looked back out across the now empty place where Evelyn had just stood.

“The Inquisitor, Champion, Blackwall, Dorian, Solas… and Dal,” his voice faltered at speaking her name, “they were fighting Erimond when he summoned the dragon… they’re gone, Cullen. All of them. We’ve lost.” Barris couldn’t believe this could be over so soon, just when hope had appeared on the horizon.

They had taken the fortress, survived the attack on Haven, only to lose it all. He knew he’d lose the Warden again someday, he’d assumed to her returned memory, but the Maker had a cruel sense of humor to take her now. Only Dal could defeat the Archdemon, and only Evelyn could close the rifts - Thedas was doomed as the two women tumbled to their bloody deaths.

A cry of anguish echoed behind him as Lilly entered through the open wooden doors to see the destruction the dragon left behind. “Goddamn it, Marion!” The Templar screamed as she walked past her Knight-Commander to stare at the jagged remainder of the platform, her hands pressed tightly against her helm. “What were you thinking fighting a fucking dragon?! You should have
stayed home in your fucking castle, huddled with your copies of the Chant, you fucking idiot.” She dropped to her knees of her armor, staring helplessly out across the barren sky.

“It’s truly over.” Cullen’s icy words crept from his body. “But we won’t go down without a fight. We will stand and fight until there is no life left in our limbs.” His voice was hollow, a minor reflection of that man he’d been minutes ago.

“Fuck that,” Lilly responded, turning her head to glare at her Commander. “I’m going to murder every last Warden. I will burn this fucking fortress to the ground until it’s smoldering ashes before I let the demons take it.”

Barris looked at his dear friend, recognizing the same look on the man’s features he knew existed on his own. Both men lost their reason for fighting in one effortless swoop of the dragon’s magic. All they had left was the fight for today, to destroy as many of the demons as they could before the sun set on the Inquisition.

As news of the Inquisitor’s and Champion’s passing spread through the ranks, the Kings and Emperor would make their retreats, leaving the remaining shambles of their people to fight off the relentless hoard of demons that kept coming out of the rift. Nothing short of a miracle would help them survive the night.

No Maker could save them now, nor did Barris want him to.

_Fuck Adamant Fortress, fuck the Grey Wardens and fuck the Maker._

Turning back to the entrance of the fortress courtyard, the three warriors drew their swords in unison, prepared to destroy everything that had the grave misfortune to cross their paths.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the kind comments and feedback, when I feel like quitting or that my story isn't good enough, or that my skills suck, etc, it does a lot to know people are enjoying the story and that I need to tell my lizard brain to STFU.

For those of you who don't user subscribe to me, SMUT IS POSTED. XMAS HAS COME EARLY. It's called "The Tournament Arrangement" and you can find it in my stories or in the Idalya Mahariel Series link above. I'm working on both projects equally right now, so I'll try to have a chapter of smut up tomorrow. ;)
Chapter Summary

Idalya discovers herself in the Fade, but finds it different than how she's ever experienced it.

Chapter Notes

Merry xmas, O&A readers! This will be my last update before holiday vacation. If I don't get a chance to post before New Year, I just wanted to tell you guys how much it's meant to me that people have hung with the story and have enjoyed it. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She was falling. The sky was infinite. She was infinite. Stars and hinges of reality flexed and opened around her as she relaxed into her fate. Her death at the hands of the demon was more peaceful this time as the clouds whipped past her, the air cool and moist against her skin.

If there was a Maker, she hoped he wouldn’t turn her away from his side again.

“Oof.” A moan was pushed from Dal’s lungs as she impacted the ground, rocks digging into her arms and sides. Her head ached from the shock to her abdomen, balance spinning as she laid still on the chilled ground trying to find her bearings.

Lifting her head, her breath caught in her throat where her broken helm pressed into the flesh of her neck. Shaking fingers struggled to find an edge, any break in the metal to tear it apart. Finally, finding purchase in a jagged dip in the armor, she pushed inside the break until she could release the pressure from her windpipe. Pulling it over her head, she discarded the helm in frustration. Her neck throbbed from the blossoming bruises already taking the place of the damaged metal as she caught her breath.

With a groan, she pulled her head up to check her surroundings and her jaw gaped at the vision. The world around her was broken. The land, the sky, the air itself. There was no doubt she was in the Fade, yet not. She no longer belonged as part of the emerald billowing clouds that parted and flowed around her skin instead of through it. The world around was disjointed, a fractured representation of the world it carried echoes of. She was a living, breathing creature, alive in the Fade.

What was the last thing she remembered?

They were fighting the Archdemon in Adamant when it descended to the ground, attacking Clarel and ripping the Warden-Commander apart. The misguided Warden had fought for the right side when the end came. As the dragon lifted off in the air, it struck the ancient stones keeping them afloat with a hurtling, sapphire fireball. She heard the cracks forming on the stone bridge, but there was no ability for them to run. The bridge collapsed in one gigantic hunk, sending the warriors descending through the abyss.
There had been no time to think over the regrets in her life or live some cliché of memories flying before her eyes. She tried to clutch to the edge of the collapsing rocks only to have those crumble beneath the pads of her fingers, dropping her down into the gorge resting behind the fortress.

She felt the magic explode out of Evelyn before she saw it. The rift opened in mid-air below them an instant before she exploded through the mystical gateway. The cold shocked her bones with such force she lost consciousness before slamming face-first into the unforgiving ground below.

She had traveled through the Fade many times before, but this was different, harsher than she’d ever experienced. It still had the misty overlay of a dream, but now holds the distorted reality that often accompanied her nightmares.

“Fasta Vass!” The hiss from behind her scared her enough that she stifled a scream within her aching throat. She was so distracted by her own situation she hadn’t realized the others could have followed her here.

“Dorian, are you okay?” She called over to the mage, desperate to focus on anything that wasn’t her current predicament as she pulled herself onto her unstable legs.

“I’m in the fucking Fade, what do you think, Dal?” Dorian sat up, his lungs heaving to draw enough breath to think clearly. Fresh trails of blood dripped over the front of his robes where his chin connected with the rocky terrain they occupied.

The Warden stumbled to him, her fingers twitching with the need to be helpful to anyone or anything, even if it was nothing more than sensible medical care. Her own boots weighed tons as she made her way toward the bewildered and probably concussed mage. Her suspicions were confirmed on reaching him. A laceration ran down the length of his cheek to the bottom of his chin. His pupils blown wildly, unable to focus at the same point.

“Does your magic work in here? You have a serious head injury.” She wasn’t certain mages could heal themselves. In all her training, she’d shown no disposition toward healing, so Solas had focused their efforts in areas that would make the quickest impact. Dorian held out the palm of his hand, showing her the fizzles that were the remnants of his magic.

Solas. Did he fall with her and Dorian? If he had, he’d be somewhere in this chaos and could heal Dorian. Pulling her remaining dagger from her boot, she cut a strip of fabric from Dorian’s dirtied robes to wrap around his head, tying it tightly to keep the massive cut closed as he winced at her.

“We have to find the others.” Dorian nodded numbly in response and reached out for Dal’s hand for aid before she’d offered the help. Injured Dorian was far more amenable to help than the typically stubborn mage. The color faded from his sun-kissed skin as he rose to his feet, and she knew it was imperative she found Solas with haste.

Looping her arm under his muscular shoulder, she propped the much heavier man up as they walked toward the direction that felt correct in her gut. She’d traversed the Fade enough to know to follow her instincts and to question everything. In a place where the rules of reality didn’t apply, it was best to only trust herself with a grain of salt. If she felt that lugging the incapacitated mage to the left was the correct plan, then she would follow her instinct.

Massive boulders floated through the mists, suspended in the air as she sidestepped them. The smell of mana was heavy on the breeze and swirled around in thick clouds as they walked in an infinite line. In the distance, she spotted a glowing light reflected off more floating stones moving against the dark background. It was a woman… in Chantry robes?
Dal shook her head to clear the cobwebs the fall placed in her disjointed mind. *Fuck, this day was getting stranger by the minute.* Behind the light, she saw a group of figures following the floating woman. The luminescence of the being shone off the silver armor of one figure, reflecting the deep auburn of her hair. *Evelyn.*

Somehow, the Inquisitor survived an impossible situation, and they’d have to escape another one. If Evelyn could punch a hole into the Fade for them to escape their deaths, there must be a way for her to repeat it to get them out.

“*Hey!*” Dal screamed across the broken plain as she dragged Dorian more than supporting him. She could sense that time didn’t move at the same rate as reality, but however much had passed, it was enough that Dorian’s condition was deteriorating. He hadn’t spoken since she’d brought him to his feet and was now reliant on the Warden to progress forward.

None of her companions paid her any heed as they followed the glowing light. As they grew smaller in the distance, she could not gain ground with Dorian wilting at her side. She grew desperate as her own muscles cried out in protest of her pace. It was imperative to close the growing space between them before she lost Evelyn and their companions. Tracking in the Fade could be impossible and if she lost their path, she and Dorian may remain lost to them forever.

A flash of brilliant emerald from the party gripped her heart—Solas. She’d always recognize that staff, regardless of where she was in the Fade. He had survived, but he couldn’t hear her, nor knew to look. Her legs faltered as Dorian lost his footing and ability to stand even with assistance. Tears flowed freely over her cheeks as she watched her party disappear into the distance.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, letting her mana awaken the way her mentor had shown her so many times in their training. In her mind, she reached out towards him, the way she’d contacted him during their nightly travels together.

*Solas. Please, hear me. Solas, please!*

The last figure ahead stumbled, turning back towards her call. An audible sob escaped her throat as she felt the incoming *pop* of Solas’ mana as he fade-walked to her in one movement, traveling the entire length of the plain in seconds.

He caught Dorian in mid-air as her body gave out from dragging the man across the landscape. She landed hard on her knees, metal crunching in the lopsided joints of her bent armor. Her head was thrown back, panting for air from the exertion as the smell of Solas’ healing filled her nostrils, an earthy aroma like gardening on a summer’s day she always associated with her teacher. Dorian’s jagged breathing calmed as Solas worked the man over.

“Thank the Maker we found you when we did.” Dal found it difficult to catch her breath in this place which she was certain no living being should breach. She could feel the irritated raise of his brow as he healed the other mage. “Err, god? Goddesses? I honestly have no idea what you pray to.” It was true. He loaned her book after book about their shared heritage, but she’d only ever skimmed the pages out of boredom. She’d never heard him extol or curse the name of any crusty elven relics.

“Because you never asked.” Solas’ mouth was flat as he refused to let the girl distract him from his work. He was also right. He inquired about her faith, her beliefs, her morals, but she never extended the courtesy to understand the man who dedicated so much time to her success and survival.

“Fair point.” She needed to back out of this conversation as fast as she could but promised herself
that she would ask those questions when they had time. “Who was the glowing Chantry sister up there?”

“What?” Dorian squeaked as Solas magically stitched the two halves of his cheek back together. “You must have hit your head even harder than I did, child”

Solas finished the last section of Dorian’s cheek, which now had a thin, pink line running the length, not unlike the scar she’d received in camp from the assassin’s dagger. “That would be the Divine Justinia come to guide Evelyn.”

“Fuck me,” Dal and Dorian looked at each other in surprise as their shock spilled out in unison.

“Language, Asha.” Solas chided as he rose to his feet, the beginnings of a smirk pulling at the corners of his lips. “There’s no need for an existential crisis. It is nothing more than a Spirit of Wisdom, assuming a form Evelyn would trust.” Reaching over his shoulder, he pulled down his menacing staff, its emerald pulsing with excitement to explore the unknown world around them.

“We are outsiders in the Fade. As I’ve shown you, Dal, spirits can manipulate you not only with lies but with the truth. Trust nothing here, no matter how much you desire or fear it.” The elf proceeded forward without Dal and Dorian but was polite enough not to fade-walk so the two could keep pace from behind.

Dorian sighed as the glowing apparition of Justinia became visible in the distance. “Why do I have a feeling that my cousin is in far greater danger than she knows?”

“Because that’s her constant state of being?” Dal offered, ignoring Dorian’s dramatic eye roll. “You never know, maybe literally falling into the Fade is the wake-up call she needs.”

The barking laugh that erupted from Dorian scared her for the second time since arriving in the Fade. “You obviously don’t know Evelyn Trevelyan well enough. She’ll never second guess her actions until she feels the inevitable slice of the blade across her throat.” He shook his head and stretched his stiff jaw. “There’s stubborn, and then there’s Trevelyans.”

Justinia’s glowing figure grew brighter as they gained on the slow-moving group. The stones of the ground were uneven and barely weighted into place while they ascended a slick hill. Their companions turned a corner into a stone cavern that swallowed the eerie light around its maw. It resembled the Dwarven relics buried beneath most of Thedas, and she found it fitting they found dead cities in the place where only spirits should walk.

Solas halted as he turned the corner, Dal, and Dorian slamming into the back of the stiff elf. She peered around the man’s slim frame to see their companions standing frozen, staring at the flickering image of Justinia. The spirit of wisdom watched the newcomers carefully as they entered the cavern.

Blackwall’s hulking shoulders caught Dal’s attention, and rage flooded through her limbs once more at his treachery. She had foiled his plan just in time for the Archdemon to strike, leaving them to fall for infinity. Angrily, she pushed past Solas and stomped over towards the false Warden, having little interest in the spirit’s opinion of her barging in on whatever was happening.

“How dare you!” Her anger exploded as she approached him. He’d been her friend, her teacher, and like another father when she’d felt lost in the endless pain of this world.

If he could lie to her face, who else could be?

Since joining the Inquisition, she’d clung to the things, the people, that made sense in this new
world. If she could be wrong about Blackwall, who else could she be wrong about? How many other traitors were in her midst ready to sacrifice her again to keep their cover? Evelyn’s betrayal in Orlais wasn’t a surprise. Nobles would always crush those they deemed *subhuman* to elevate themselves.

Blackwall was like her. Their fighting styles similar, and she thought they strove for the same set of ideals. If a man so sympathetic to her struggles could be a traitor- anyone else could be. Who else had she called a friend that would throw her to the wolves to save their skin?

“When do you think you are, walking with them like you belong? You don’t belong with us!”

Grabbing hold of his gauntlet, she ripped the man around, so that he was facing her, and gasped. A thick, grassy-colored mist covered Blackwall’s eyes, his jaw wide open in a perfect O of terror.

Before Dal could blink her eyes, something whipped her forward in space, her vision suddenly filled with fog as the world spun out of control. She was falling again, and once more she found the sky was infinite.

If only she could still feel like she was infinite, too.

Chapter End Notes

There’s a second chapter posted on the Dal/Barris smut fic. Also, check out some of the other stories in the Idalya Mahariel series. I would recommend checking out Burning in the Flames, the Once and Again prequel fic, that covers the attack on Haven. Some parts of that story are relevant to upcoming chapters.

Also, if there’s any other Dragon Fics you’re loving currently, or if you’d like to plug your own fics, drop it in the comments and I’ll give them a read!

Merry Xmas everybody! I’ll see you in 2019!
Chapter Summary

Thom Rainier has spent his life running from haunted memories, now they've come to claim him.

Chapter Notes

Happy New Years Day everyone! Hope everyone had wonderful holidays.

I won't have a ton of time available for writing this week as my five-year-old is on winter break from school and would much rather I write adventures with her than fan fiction lol.

I've missed you guys and I'm excited to dive back in next week. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Fuck. Where are we now?”

The Hero’s voice shook Blackwall out of the comforting fog blanketing his mind. The fog was safe. In the fog he hid from his fears; whether hazy smoke from his pipe or the fog blanketing his mind from a night of heavy drink, the fog would hide the truth.

Horror groaned from the weathered man’s bones at the appearance of the confused Warden. Mouth agape, eyes stretched open unnaturally. Golden lions adorned her chest where silver griffons once resided. Orlesian Imperial sapphire draped her sides, embroidered silk billowing around her hips.

They were in the place he could never forget. Never return to. The flowing hills of brilliant jade pasture continued farther in the distance than he could measure with his failing vision. The homestead would be nestled in the central valley. He didn’t need to confirm its existence. It was the image he saw every time he closed his eyes.

His last clear memory of what he assumed was the present was following the form of Divine Justinia through unknown paths of the Fade before her ominous warning that the Nightmare approached. He’d been so arrogant, scoffing at the spirit’s warning. What could frighten any man worse than his own memories?

Of course, it would bring them here. The place where forgiveness could never be found.

Idalya shoved his breastplate. The impact vibrated deep into the cavity of his chest, one remaining hollow after all these years.

“Snap out of it, Blackwall!”

But he couldn’t. He snapped, but it was not out of his icy stillness. He broke, but it was through the numbness flooding through his veins. He froze exactly as he stood that fateful day. Stone poured
inside his armor, a witness to his mistakes forever.

When would the screaming begin? Cries that pierced the morning, echoing infinitely in the empty chambers of his heart. The unending screaming, he feared would never stop, until it had. A silence louder than anything he’d ever experienced.

“Why are they always screaming?” How long would he have to hear the screams once they started?

The Warden stepped away. Brow furrowed, panicking as her violet eyes darted across the plateau. Was she afraid now that she knew the truth or was she more scared of his nightmares breathed living?

“The only thing about to be screaming is me, Blackwall. I don’t know where we are, but we need to leave.” She stepped forward, gripping his forearms within her bony fingers. The steel of his bracers groaned under her power.

The pressure grounded him. Reminded him why he needed to fight. Her touch mended the crack chiseled into his mind breaking his hold on his own sanity. He was back. Rooted into the ground that threatened to rise up and drag him into its depths. He might belong in a loam-filled grave, but Idalya did not. He’d be forced to keep his wits about him.

“We can’t go to the house. They’ll be waiting. Escape from this cursed place, Dal. I won’t let you pay for my mistakes.”

Amethyst eyes widened in shock. Her pupils dilated as the adrenalin coursed through tainted veins as the Warden stared over his shoulder. Something was coming. Something was always waiting for him in the darkness.

Reaching into the pit of his memories, he retrieved the man he’d longed to be- Gordon Blackwall. Thom Rainer was a coward deserving of death, but as Blackwall, he’d helped. The shield sustaining the blows meant for his companions. Rainer let the weakest die as he’d listened to the symphony of death from above. Blackwall fought an Archdemon to protect Thedas from its violence.

He may have been born as Thom Rainer, but now he was Blackwall.

Pulling his cutlass from its scabbard, he turned to face the nightmares approaching. His eyes could only spot one in the distance, but the Warden’s alerted stance told him more approached under the cover of the darkness spooling around them.

He felt no fear, but a burning fury rise in his throat as the first soldier cleared the embankment, its decayed legs faltering on uneven steps. A viscous fluid ran under the hobbling soldier’s helm, dripping thickly over their breastplate. It coated the symbol of Orlais in gore, then further onto the ground where it melted into the night.

“You gave the orders!” The demon shrieked, a sound like steel dragging against jagged stone, as more soldiers clambered behind him. The undead Orlesian army stumbled toward the warriors, their swords ready in hand.

“We cannot fight them.” His voice cracked with the weight of his guilt, but he ignored it as he glanced at the young hero. The Warden nodded in acknowledgment, her head numb and loose on its pedestal. “Turn and run. I’ll greet my old friends while you escape.” If his pitiful excuse of a life could save Idalya, it was a sacrifice he’d make without hesitation.
She huffed air out of her nostrils like an angered stallion, loose pieces of her enchanted ebony hair flying back from her face. “I won’t leave you here.”

_Stupid girl. If you knew, you would._

He knew her worlds were the truth. A lifetime ago she’d been ready to drive her blade through his heart to silence its traitorous beating. Now they rested in the Fade- a familiar place for her. She felt he deserved to serve for his crimes, but the fate staggering toward them on crumbling legs was worse than she’d ever sentence anyone to.

The outcome of Thedas rested in her callused palms, yet she’d die here with him. Drowning together in his guilt as it pulled him under its crashing waves.

_That was what real heroes do._

He was unworthy of her heroism, but now was not the time to discuss it.

“YOU GAVE THE ORDERS” The army howled in unison as it marched closer, rocking on unsteady feet like drunken sailors at sea.

She would not run. She would not back away. Blackwall would have to face his fears for the Warden to leave this nightmare alive.

“How was I to know what would happen?” He roared at the walking corpses because it was all he had left. “The noble paid us to kill a man. How was I to know the family would be inside? How was I supposed to know?”

He should have known but hadn’t cared enough to check. He’d allowed his arrogance to progress forward without checking their information and his men had slaughtered not only their mark but the man’s family he’d traveled with.

Their screams blanketed the summer morning with death like an unnatural winter. Their needless deaths all for a flimsy bag of coin. A velvet-lined bag Thom Rainer stole as he ran from his men while the Orlesian army descended. Vengeance coated their tongues with bile at the horrors doled because of Rainer’s depraved orders. Like a startled mutt, he’d tucked his tail and fled, leaving his pack behind to be devoured by the Empress’ cruel brand of justice.

“You left us!” The demons cried in unison as they closed the distance, harmonizing with his own echoes of guilt. Their skeletal fingers, stripped of flesh, reached toward the man that evaded them in life and the beyond.

“I was a coward.” _He had been._

He harbored no false pretenses regarding the man he was. Thom Rainer earned his death sentence that day along with his men. Greedy men that would separate a man from his mortal coil for a few measly coins. All of them deserved to die.

Dropping his sword, he moved closer as relief flooded his system. He blocked the panicked screams of the Warden behind him. If they held his life in their decrepit hands, maybe they would leave Dal be. That feeble hope was enough for him.

The only weapon that the brittle and broken man had left to wield was the __truth._

Raising his blood-soaked hands, he approached them. Fear escaped his limbs with every step he took towards the monsters awaiting him every time he closed his eyes. “My name is Thom Rainer.
I gave the order that ended that family’s life then ran in fear. I accept the consequences of my actions.”

He exhaled. Truly exhaled and relaxed for the first time since the day he listened to the screams that would vibrate forever in the Fade. Fate had come to take Thom Rainer but would find Gordon Blackwall instead. He could pay for the crimes of a coward but stand as a hero at the end. Without fear, without doubt.

This time when he closed his eyes, the monsters were gone. His was a debt paid. Their blood visages replaced by Josie’s glowing face, her smile blinding his weary eyes in the ever-present darkness. *Oh, how he loved that woman with every fiber of his being.* The oasis in the desert of his life. He’d been unable to speak the last time he’d seen her, his throat full of rocks and glass threatening to slice any word that dared pass. How do you say goodbye to the only thing that’s given your life meaning?

He hadn’t deserved to touch her greatness, but he could make her proud of the man he chose to be when it counted.

The smell of rot filled his nose and mouth as the harbingers arrived to stake their claim. Blackwall focused on the unmarred image of Josie as the creatures took hold of him forcing his tired body to the ground.

Only the Warden’s scream painted the night.

*****

“Holy fucking, Maker!” Dal’s legs collapsed beneath her as the fantasy dissolved from her confused mind. A wave of nausea threatening to breach her clamped throat.

Touching Blackwall sucked her into the vision. She didn’t know if it was real, but it felt real. His nightmares had come for him. The dead stalked them, claiming Blackwall for their own before it disappeared, and she’d stood once again in front of the deceiver, her hands still gripping his shoulders.

Blackwall’s eyes darted around them, expecting his soldiers to be waiting just behind. His grip loosened on the pommel of his sword. They were gone. The nightmare was over.

“What happened? Why did it end?” *Was this place the illusion?* She couldn’t trust anything in front of her, no matter how tangible it felt.

“I accepted my crimes. I wasn’t afraid anymore.” It shook the false Warden as he took in his companions who remained stiffened statues. Dorian had joined their crew, the same effervescent fog hovering before their clouded eyes in the murky cavern.

“All of this is bullshit.” Dal enunciated her curse so harshly her tongue clicked off the roof her mouth. The image of Justinia frowned in disapproval at her choice of language.

She’d never felt comfortable traversing the Fade with Solas, and this experience cemented it- she hated it here. History deserved to stay dead and buried in the past where it belonged. She was tired of its symbolism and its eternal need to make a point. She was tired of exhuming the forgotten and unneeded every night.

Mostly, she was just *tired.*

She accepted Blackwall’s outstretched hand, a peace offering as they figured out how the *fuck* to
get out of this place. Blackwall would pay for his crimes, but Idalya was no executioner she’d realized watching the skeleton army come for the man determined to save her, regardless of cost. It was not her place to pass judgment on the man who fought beside them. Her fury of betrayal bloomed from the seeds of doubt she’d planted in herself at losing the taint. The man who helped her to her feet was a deceiver, but so was she. She’d questioned her abilities and never offered the information.

The two warriors were the same.

In the same heartbeat, both turned to look at the spirit of wisdom that spoke half-truths with Justinia’s features.

“You’re Wisdom.” Her words were awed, eyes downcast in veneration. “Tell us how to help them.”

A wide grin appeared across Justinia’s thin lips. Dal had learned enough from Solas to know to appeal to the spirit’s basest motivation. Wisdom wanted to be respected, to be elevated in regard. So, she’d revere the spirit. Make it feel superior until she could free her friends.

Speaking of her egg-headed teacher, where was he? He’d entered the cavern at her side but was now the member of their team absent from the thrall of the fog. Wherever the man had been taken, she prayed he was safe.

*****

“Who do you think you are, walking with them like you belong? You don’t belong with us!”

Dal’s screech echoed through the cavern as the incensed Warden stomped toward the focus of her fury. Solas was usually quick to admonish the girl’s irritation, but he remained introspective in the distance watching her grab the warrior by the shoulders.

Blackwall’s omission she’d taken as a personal betrayal. Better to allow her anger at this man and his deceptions than for her to turn it on himself- a man holding more secrets against his chest than the lying Warden could ever create in his thick mind.

A vibration of power throbbed across the cavern from her contact with Blackwall. His eyes wrapped in the teal haze, shielding his vision from reality. The pulse rang out around them like a stone thrown into a pond. Deep in the tips of his fingers, he felt the final throb of power release in the room before the scene melted away in front of him.

The chilled cavern was replaced with the viridian mossy fields of Elvhenan damp between his bare toes. The domain focused to one point, the columned tower the color of fresh ink erupting into the azure sky. A sigil to the greatness his people once held within their hands.

This was a trick. A falsehood presented by the Nightmare to bury him further in illusion. He found himself pleased at the details the spirit pulled from the farthest reaches of his mind. It was a memory holding him tightly in reunion while simultaneously tightening its grasp around his neck.

Home.

Once, Idalya followed him into pieces of the Fade inaccessible to all but those who walked these steps before the fall of the world as they’d known it. The place struck fear into the heart of the trusting girl, even without understanding its purpose. It was in that vision she had stolen his mana. Left him paralyzed and perspiring alone on the floor of the Fade at the whim of whatever spirit she’d found to do her bidding. She was much smarter than he’d ever admitted to.
Power shifted in the distance and he could see the shimmer in the Fade as the Nightmare stepped forth into the vision, costumed from neck to booted toe in crimson leather sewn tightly around the curves of her skin. Her blanched hair sculpted into tusks that reached for the sky behind her.

*Mythal.*

It was an illusion. *Yet…*

The tangle of emotions inside him fought one another vying for dominance. She had been his greatest friend, his mother, and he had disappointed her. When she’d needed him, he’d been too weak to save her. His brethren slaughtered her, shattering her essence into pieces across the cosmos. The *Evanuris* celebrated their victory across *Elvhenan*, evoking a fire within him he hadn’t known he held.

In the name of justice, he struck out. Attacking an enemy not prepared for battle. He won easily, but it was an empty victory as he enacted the veil, forever sealing them away to stew on their fates. He could have killed them. Disintegrating their spirits as they’d cruelly done to his closest friend, but he’d viewed himself as superior to his brothers. Instead, he’d granted them millennia to dwell on their defeat.

He’d been a child then. As impulsive as the girl he now considered his ward. Anger too willing to spill over the surface, like a meal pot left hanging over the fire. Time had taught him to question his emotions, to consider before striking. He’d been naïve to think he was in control of his wants and needs when he’d awoken from his slumber.

The girl who refused to stay dead chipped away at the monument in his soul that represented everything he thought he knew about himself. For the first time since he’d sealed away the *Evanuris*, he’d been grounded. Tied to someone other than *Mythal*, the mother who guided him, all of them, to greatness. Now faced with the mirage of the woman who had once been *everything* to him, he mused that his thoughts were instead preoccupied instead with the status of his *Asha*.

The spirit sauntered towards him, her hips a hypnotic dance of power as her violet-toned magic swirled around her limbs. “My dearest friend…” Her voice was aged and smoky, like a fine whiskey.

“No.” His simple command startled the demon as it measured what it had inferred about him from combing through his mind.

Her golden feline eyes narrowed. “Do you dare…”

Thrusting a hand forward, he signaled his demand for silence. Before the Inquisition, this conjuring would have brought him to his knees. Guilt shattering him from within the glass house residing in his heart. Idalya had already drawn him out of that box. Forced him to feel happiness tinged with regret. Joy feathered by fear.

She gave him something to create, to mold, to strengthen. Most importantly, she had given him something to *lose*. Something that could be lost forever unless he could find a way out of here.

Pulling his staff from his back, the gem atop hummed in eagerness, sensing his impatience.

“In the words of Idalya Mahariel: *I don’t have time for this shit.*”

He drove his staff into the softened soil and the Nightmare demon howled in pain as lightning ricocheted in all directions. The illusion flickered, an erratic ebb of electricity piercing it before the false vision dissolved away leaving him back in the cavern where he began.
The spirit of wisdom wearing Justinia’s face nodded approvingly as he shook the final cobwebs of
Mythal’s image from his mind. Idalya was frozen, her hands still gripping at Blackwall’s
shoulders. The emerald band of fog now reached the circumference of both their heads.
He did not fear the Warden’s safety fighting the Nightmare demon’s illusions. Though he could
never admit it to the girl with her fragile trust, he’d been a party to the demon’s attempts to break
her hold on sanity in dreams. By opening a rift into the Fade, Evelyn unwittingly brought the
Nightmare demon the prize he’d been hunting for some time.
Solas knew she had the strength to resist the demon’s lures. To face the fears that dared not be
whispered by daylight. Facing nightmares was what the poor girl had learned to do best, through
trials numbering far greater than she had earned.
The rest of their companions? They had delivered a buffet of terror to the demon to feast upon at
will.
Wisdom looked smug as it predicted his next move.
“The Nightmare- where is it?”
She hovered above him, the light from her form dancing against the wall. “Might I inquire to what
purpose you would wield this knowledge, ancient one?”
“I will kill it.” He flicked an imaginary speck from his shoulder, sniffing in a way that inferred his
distaste for a game of questions.
The spirit’s face, shimmering with satisfaction, spoke of a grin that could not be seen. Without
delay, Justinia pointed toward her right, a pathway in the walls of the farce of dwarven ruins
appearing at her behest. Solas grumbled under his breath as he set off in that direction. His staff’s
glow fitful as he approached the demon’s lair to tear it limb from limb for daring to think it could
control Dal, the daughter he hadn’t known he needed.
She didn’t need his protection but jumping head-first into the fight for her was what parents do.
A smirk coasted the edge of his thin lips. For a day that began marred by war, Solas was feeling far
more optimistic about its ending.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the kind comments and suggestions. It made my Xmas seeing how
much everyone is enjoying the story.
There should be a Dal/Barris smut chapter update later this week.
Also, I can begin to start teasing the side project I've been working on for months. It's
titled "Once More... With Feeling" an AU of this story based around the question of
"How does this world state change if the Dark Ritual was completed?" It's a hilarious
tale that gives me a chance to flex some of my less depressing writing muscles. ;)


The Chapter Where Dorian Faces the Future

Chapter Summary

What fate could the Nightmare show Dorian that could be worse than the one his father destined for him?

Chapter Notes

Hello readers....

Funny, well, not so funny story: while on holiday on vacation in Seattle, I got sick. Very sick. I returned home only to catch another illness from my daughter's school. This has lead to many urgent care trips and more sleep in two weeks than I've had in entire quarters combined.

I tell you this minor story for a reason- in the middle of this garbage illness, I decided to post this chapter for everyone. In my drug haze, I managed to get the chapter formatted and posted... or so I thought! Turns out ten days ago, I saved this as a draft and it's just been sitting there while I was minorly salty that no one viewed or commented on it lol (As gut-wrenching as it is, this is one of my most favorite chapters I've ever written)

On that note...

I REALLY WASN’T KIDDING ABOUT BEING AWARE OF THE TRIGGER WARNINGS FOR THIS STORY. The next 8-10 chapters are a literally rollercoaster of ups and downs.

If you have concerns about being triggered, pop a comment down below or at my Tumblr and I can give you more details

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Wake up.

You ’re safe now.

Streaming beams of sun blinded Dorian’s eyes as he completed the endeavor to open them. With a groan he wrenched the silken sheet over his face, hiding from the unwanted reality on the other side of the thin fabric. A shudder ran through his limbs despite the warm tidal breezes, bringing the scent of a rotting fish market and stale wine from an opened window nearby.

The body caging his like a lounging cat was massive. More slab of rock than a living person. Muscle honed and carved with each repetitious swing of his battle-ax. “You were having the nightmare again.” The purr of Bull’s words into the curve of his ear sent an arrow of longing into Dorian’s heart.
His hands reached out desperate to locate the source of the words. He had no shame over the sigh that escaped his pursed lips as his fingertips gripped the living stone they craved. *It was all a dream.*

It was the same nightmare that haunted every step of the mage’s nightly jaunts through the Fade. His time in the Inquisition had been brief in terms of military service, but the horrors he’d experienced stained him, pouring through his fashionable robes to be soaked in by flesh. Forcing him to bear the emotional scars of the entire institution for life. Every night Bull was there to bring him out of the trauma and back into the comfort of his arms the width of tree stalks.

A tiny echoing pounding outside their room grew louder, approaching with haste down the tiled floors of the hall. *Boom… boom.* Bull chuckled, burrowing his generous head into the crook of Dorian’s shoulder. His heat enveloped the smaller man with a blazing fire that scorched the mage from his shuttered eyes to the curled tips of his toes. “The beasts are awake,” Bull whispered. Dorian could hear his husband’s grin dripping from the adoration in the words.

Without pause, the bedroom door exploded open and the tiny booming steps continued like a heard of indoor druffalo, flanking their targets from both sides of the bed.

“Daddy! Papa!” Their chorus of tiny voices echoed in the modest room. They could have afforded a larger house in Trevinter, an obtuse mansion in Minrathous formerly owned, left cold and dust filled, by generations of failed magisters with spiraling staircases and marble laid floors. When decision time had come, Dorian found Bull’s hulking frame filling half the rooms gave him comfort when it felt like the rest of the world was collapsing in on itself. Which happened more often than he was comfortable admitting.

*Ooofff*

A heavy weight landed on Dorian’s midsection followed by a high shrieking giggle as he gasped for breath from the unprovoked attack. Bull roared in laughter next to him, the bedframe shaking with the exertion.

Pulling the sheet down off his face, he gasped at the pair of storm-colored eyes boring into his, a hair’s width separating their similarly structured noses.

A gap-toothed grin filled his vision. “Hi, Daddy.” His son garbled at him like he’d been discovered with his mouth stuffed full of treats stolen from the kitchen again. His ebony hair fanned across his tanned skin and shielded his eyes like a shaggy dog.

“Felix, what have we told you about rising before dawn?” Dorian’s tone was stern, but his eyes adoring as he breathed in every detail of his child. Felix was the mirror image of Dorian’s youth—raven hair, eyes the color of churning clouds, legs lanky, and the art of finding trouble mastered by early adolescence.

His reprimand was interrupted by a yelp like a helpless puppy, as Bull grabbed the skipping girl and rolled the scrappy, kicking child between her fathers.

“Leeet me gooooo,” the toddler fought against her imprisonment with no fear of the strength coiling inside the bicep of the Qunari parent that held her. Her defiance was misplaced as she erupted in giggles as Dorian and Bull covered the girl’s golden curls with kisses.

Mae may have been his daughter in blood, but she was Bull’s kindred spirit. Shorter, and broader set than her brother, she’d been born with clenched fists and a fire crackling to life in the depths of her soul. Felix’s curiosity with his burgeoning magic may have found him in frequent trouble with
the servants of their home, but Mae met her first day ready for battle.

His lover feigned a fake defeat as the girl pushed her way to freedom, taking her rightful throne as Queen of their home. Dorian smiled watching the fearless girl sit balanced atop Bull’s hip as proud as though she’d scaled the Anderfels themselves.

Mae’s eyes narrowed as Felix took off running from their parents’ bedroom, the toddler motivated to act as she jumped down taking after her brother, her chubby and dimpled legs pumping from the exertion.

A moan crawled its way up the curve of Dorian’s yearning throat as Bull pressed his chafed and scarred lips against his pulse point. The mage’s heart thundered against the gesture encouraging the mouth to roam at will. *Boom... boom*

“The children are awake, the sun is shining, and the Venatori are no more,” Bull whispered against the tanned slope of Dorian’s neck, the sheared hair of his nape standing on end at the tremors of lust running the length of his arched spine. “What would you like to do today, Love?

A panic spread through the passage of his vertebra replacing the desire that threatened to cloud his vision like a storm rolling thickly across the sea. His fingers pinched into the flesh of Bull’s shoulder, as the man’s eyes softened in empathy as Dorian’s recurring terrors stole him away again. “Please, don’t leave.” He pleaded.

Bull was patient. Bull was kind. Bull would always understand.

Without hesitation, he wrapped his muscular arm around Dorian’s trembling waist, keeping his hold taunt on his mage. “I’ll never leave you.”

Bull’s affirmation should have been enough to quiet the demon raging in Dorian’s chest, its claws slicing through any semblance of self-control he had remaining.

*I’ll never leave you.*

The hollowed repetition in his head would drive any sane man to the brink of his fortitude. He said he’d never leave, but... he had, hadn’t he? The words were a spell, a curse, as reality threatened to shatter his fragile hold on happiness a mirror crushed within under the power of his grasp.


His fingers were twitching in uncontrollable and regret-filled emotion as he reached up to rest his fingers against the heat of Bull’s cheek. Dragging his thumb under the curve of his lover’s lip, he sighed, his fear escaping into the breeze that swept around them. “*My beautiful traitor,*” he whispered as realization etched its way across Bull’s features. “I remember.”

*I remember.*

It was a dream, a foolish illusion, but what a sweet one it had been.

The ornate walls buckled, paint peeling off to curl on the ground as the image decayed, terror claiming its victory. His memory restructuring the horror he had been desperate to escape from. His lover and beloved children were gone. Another set of ashes and dust relegated to the back of his mind where all his broken hopes belonged.

The acidic and rusty smell of blood grew stronger as he felt the last of his illusion melted away, his eyes closed against the reality he refused to face. His wrists ached against his restraints cutting off
circulation to his arms behind his back. Pulling at the chains they clanged against their source. *Boom... boom.*

“Wake up, Dorian.” The drawl of his father’s voice sent a streak of pain ripping up Dorian’s spine where pleasure had once swirled. “You’re safe now.”

So safe he was that he was held against his will, his father’s lackeys preparing the spell that would strip him of who he was. So much magic in one room. So much needed just to change one part of him.

“This is one war you can’t win by forcing your will down other’s throats, Father.” But did he believe that? His father had been able to will his wishes into being regarding everything but Dorian. “People will come to rescue me.” Bull, Evelyn, his friends. He had fought for them, they would do the same for him. He was growing desperate the longer he refused to open his eyes. “Evelyn will not let this stand.”

Bitter laughter echoed out of his father’s throat and Dorian opened his eyes in irritation. His father was older than he remembered. Steel-colored streaks flowing through his ebony locks. He turned to someone behind him. The stone cell would have been a comfortable size if Dorian wasn’t chained to the wall.

“Finish up, his mind is already breaking.” He turned back to his disappointment of a son, his frustration palpable. “Evelyn is dead and I’m sure you remember why that beast won’t be here to save you.” Victory was crystal clear in the man’s menacing grin. He may not have broken Dorian yet, but he was still succeeding where his previous attempts failed.

Ice settled in Dorian’s veins at the words. Was that what the image of his pretend family had been? The last firings of a brain that magic kept trying to overwrite.

If Evelyn was dead- their mission had failed. Bull would always save him, he had promised him in the dead of night, with roaming fingers and relentless mouths.

_My beautiful traitor._

His words, from the fantasy, sat fitfully on the tip of his tongue as he digested their meaning. Bitter and fear-tinged words that caused his heart to ache with a familiar pang of grief.

He wasn’t coming.

The memory choked him, a fist tightening around his throat so words could not dare exit.

_Evelyn standing over Bull. Bloodied shoulder driven to the painted tile covering the floor, by her merciless boot. The Qunari’s ax held in her grip, fresh and dried stains of crimson nestled into a patchwork pattern on its blade. Bull’s moss and stone toned eyes were more peaceful than Dorian had been prepared for as they met his frightened one. Fires burned behind Evelyn’s. Acceptance dripped from sweat trailing across the crevices of his back as the Inquisitor lifted the ax in the air._

_“The sentence for treason is death. May the Maker have no mercy on your soul.”_

_He’d been frozen in place to watch the inevitable play out. The candlelight cast its light off the moving steel; the sharped blade gave no resistance as it met its destination._

_Boom._

_Silence in the room as his bewildered colleagues had looked on. He had willed his eyes, begged_
them, to close. Anything but watch the head of his former lover roll across the formerly immaculate floors. A crimson flood pooling around their boots with the life force of the man who had once touched him so tenderly. The heavy and lopsided head rolled towards the direction of his settling horns, down the room before flopping in an awkward fashion over the step in the center of the pavilion, a boulder dropping into the dirt. Still at least. His final journey at an end.

...boom.

Dorian opened his eyes to his father. There would be no escape this time. But there was one thing his father could not strip from him- he could disappear, a star streaking through the infinite sky, on his own terms. “Your magisters are garbage.”

His father’s eyes narrowed, lips a tightened line of fury. His hand cracked across Dorian’s cheek, snapping his neck back, crashing his skull back into the stone wall behind him. The pain exploded behind his weary eyes, streaks of carmine painting his vision. Without healing, it was a blow that would worsen until fatal.

“You never understood discipline.” His father towered over him. Shoulders heaving with his rage. “Always coddled, Dorian, like a whimpering baby. No wonder you grew to be less than a man.”

These were just words. No words could hurt him more than the things he’d been witness to. All that he’d loved earning violent deaths at the hands of those he’d trusted. What other outcome had he been naive to expect after what the Spymaster had done in the cover of darkness that fateful night?

That was how blood magic worked. Each transgression a rolling snowball that absorbed power before triggering the incoming avalanche. Power begets power. Darkness begets darkness. Their silence secured their destruction.

Fuck this.

“I will not be… changed.” He growled between his grinding teeth.

His eyes defiant toward the monster who would never accept him for the man he was meant to be. Father’s career and reputation had been marred by his deviance, his refusal to follow the rules. Dorian would ensure his father never found respite from his insubordination.

Leaning as far forward as his chain would allow, Dorian bit down into the fleshy edge of his cheeks as he forced all his pressure backward into the stone wall behind him. His skull’s momentum meeting the base of his bone with destructive energy. Both arms fell limply to his sides, his hands sprawled unnaturally on the ground. All sensation disconnected from the impact.

If he’d expected horror written on his father’s features, he would have been the one disappointed for once. With an exaggerated eye roll, his father walked away. A lazy smile of satisfaction spilled across Dorian’s mouth as he panted pained breaths. This might be his end, but at least he wouldn’t be forced to live a lie for the rest of his tragic life.

One more would be enough.

He pushed his torso forward. With one last breath, he threw his head backward. His body shattering against the wall forcing his neck to a violent angle. Crack. Relief flooded from the point of impact as darkness flooded through the limbs of his body replacing the grief that marked too many years of his life.
Love you all and hope everyone is having a better 2019 than I am ;) I am on the mend, and have company coming this week that will give me extra writing time than usual.

Please don't threaten me with pitchforks in the comments for this chapter. <3
The Chapter Where Evelyn is Left With her Decisions

Chapter Summary

Evelyn is the Nightmare's newest target while her companions try to discover the rules of the Nightmare's tricks.

Chapter Notes

*STILL IN HEAVY TRIGGER WARNING MODE HERE*

NOTE: This chapter makes strong references to Burning in the Flames, so I highly recommend giving those couple chapters a read, if you haven't already. :)

Hello dear readers! Sorry for my unbelievably slow updates. My former illnesses have still taken a major toll on my health and energy levels, so my ability to focus has been dramatically impacted. My goal is to post once a week, probably Mon/Tues that way I'm not beating myself up if I can't write/edit an hour+ a day.

After spending some critical time analyzing my outlines I've had for years. I'm considering ending O&A after the very end of Adamant and it's consequences, which will bring us roughly to 100 chapters or so, and start Act 3 and Trespasser as a separate story. Originally the dark stuff continued further into the next act, but some arcs are wrapping up faster than expected, so I'd like the tones to stay more consistent with each story. I started laying out the outlines for the first 20 chapters of that fic and holy crap am I excited to bring that story to you guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her missing toes itched in the confines of the scarlet, satin heels strapped to her feet. Evelyn sat on the velvet-covered chaise, unnecessary tassels the color of burnt copper hanging from the pleated stitching. A painting of flowers hung on the wall facing her. The flowers were delicate, rendered with a gentle hand. The longer she squinted at the still life, the more she found words hidden amongst the flowers. Relax. Brows set into a deep V over her eyes, she straightened the hem of her ruby skirts, and she waited.

She had no doubts the building was of Orlesian craftsmanship; its eagerness and ornate decoration made that clear. After months spent stuck there as a cog in the gears of the game, she had grown knowledgeable regarding the distinct style of Orlais - screaming for attention with subtlety. Dancing her way through the fields of twirling masks, she had found her place. A liar amongst liars.

She knew others questioned her alliance with the Emperor, her choice to remain in Orlais. Closely vested to her chest, she kept the secret that hiding amongst liars was easier for her than having to walk, frequently stumbling, on the razor-lined steps of her truth at Skyhold.

The door to her right opened. The opener moved silently on the plush carpet, the same off-white as
curdling cream, their bulk filling the frame. Their shoulders still touched each edge of the carved wood even without their blanket of armor. He styled his towheaded curls with looser waves than the uptight Commander would let any other outside her company see. Yet another secret between them.

His chin dipped down, bright hazel eyes scanning a piece of parchment between the calluses of his fingers, built from decades of daily training, expertly honing every Maker-given muscle on the man’s body. He looked healthy. Stronger than the last time she saw him with his under-eye circle’s path etched so deeply into his face they looked ready to drip away like crushed berries in the fist of a child.

“Evelyn?” He looked behind her, searching.

Evelyn following his gaze only to find the rest of the hall empty as it had remained since her arrival. She huffed as she approached. Her skirts twitched in mirrored irritation, her taffeta growling in displeasure as the layers of fabric gripped against one another in a constant battle.

“Yes?” Even in full heels, the tip of her nose barely reached the sloping curve of his chin.

A grin. A shining, toothy grin pulled the corners of his lips up at her answer.

Evelyn yearned for a Cullen she’d never met, a Cullen before the lyrium had taken hold. A Cullen not hunted by nightmares and demons. A Cullen whose heart she’d never ripped out, for reasons he’d never understand. Closing the distance between them in the Winter Palace, stabbing her bloody dagger into the flesh of his unarmored abdomen would have been a kinder parting than the one she’d offered. Knowing him, he wished he’d died that day too.

The nobles whispered rumors in the darkened corners of the Winter Palace of her blemished past. The unholy things her father had forced her to do, under the cover of darkness, in the name of responsibility. She knew the kindest thing would be to push her Commander away, get him away from the only path she saw forward that kept them all alive to fight another day.

Gaspard was a filthy warmonger, a child launching a tantrum like an invasion and soiling himself about what they owed him instead of taking it for himself. But his army had the strength to force Thedas to its collective knee. It had been easy to manipulate the Emperor to swear to her cause. Too easy. She’d been prepared to threaten Gaspard, to blackmail if necessary. Drag the dull edge of her blade across his flesh until he relented. Yet at their first meeting face-to-face, he’d offered the alliance without prompting. That wasn’t all.

_He offered her everything._

The other Cullen motioned behind him. An office. Dozens of candles filled the hanging sconces, the flickering light casting dancing shadows in a ring around the room. “Evelyn, Welcome to the Good Place.”

Head tilted in curiosity, she followed his guide, unsure why she trusted this image of Cullen without question. The chairs inside were simpler. Canvas and stained wood the color of fresh ash. She took the closest chair while the other Cullen; the chair facing her.

The desk was organized into clean piles of paperwork; the language scribbled in glyphs she did not recognize. Parchments rolled carefully and held by a leather cord. This was not Cullen. The man’s living space was pristine, but his desk was an unholy mess - missives in all directions, thrown without regard as he tried to organize the fifty thoughts running through head.

Not-Cullen met her eyes, his hazel joyful in the bouncing light. His grin still relaxed on his face,
like it was the most comfortable position for a man who was a shining example of crippling self-doubt. “I’m sure you have a lot of questions.”

That’s an understatement.

“Tell me the last thing you remember.”

Her eyes traced a caressing line down the muscles of Not-Cullen’s forearm as the man flipped through a folder of notes. *I could think of many things I could have you work.*

“What’s the ‘good place’? She forced her eyes back to the man’s carefully rendered face before she drowned in the flood from between her legs at just the thought of those callused fingers drifting against her flushed skin.

He laughed as he shut the folder with resolve. “Sorry, a bit of an inside joke. I couldn’t help myself.” He shrugged, his grin still mocking her with its absurdity as he held the thick folder between his hands. “We have a lot to cover today, so we should stay focused.” A line formed between his brows as he studied the file. This materialization was so close to the real thing she could almost taste the saltiness from the tiny drops of perspiration that lined the edges of his neck.

“What’s the last thing you remember before coming here?” Reaching into a hidden drawer, Not-Cullen pulled a curved and simple pen and ink well that he set forth in front of him to diligently note her responses.

The corner of Evelyn’s lips turned down, annoyed with his persistence. “Why do you care so much about what I remember? It’s none of your business.” She was bound to answer to no man, much less some impostor created to spark an inner flame in her chest that had long extinguished to ashes.

Not-Cullen blew a stream of air from his nostrils attempting to mask his growing frustration with the woman in front of him. “Miss Trevelyan, I would appreciate if you could answer the question: what is the last thing you remember?”

At this current rate of success, she’d have the man ripping out clumps of his straw hair. “Am I distracting you from your work?” Her dark-auburn lashes fluttered in mocked dismay.

“Yes.” An angry red patch glowed across the man’s neck as he tried to focus on his purpose.

This is where she excelled. Turn around the conversation. Pepper him with her own questions until he forgot his goal. Find out where she is. Escape. She was prepared for anything he threw at her.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, but Evelyn- you’re dead.”

Okay, anything but *that*.

“Wait.” She searched her brain for a pertinent piece of information somehow out of her grasp. “I don’t remember that. I think I’d remember dying.”

“Wake up, Evelyn. You’re running out of time.”

*Her laughter rang out in the forest. The sound that echoed back a hollow reflection of her voice.*

“How can I run out of time in a place where time is frozen? Just look around us!”

The wolf sighed, at least she thought it did, as it looked around for something else it searched for.

“Time is not as you perceive it. You are frozen, but time around you is passing faster than you
realize. We must go. I can only stay with you for so long in this place.”

Her eyes narrowed at the beast as she rolled his words through her head. A yawn interrupted her train of thought as she covered her mouth with both hands. She was exhausted.

“Maybe we can discuss this later? I’m very tired. I should rest.”

“Evelyn, no!” The wolf cried out, but she was already settling back onto the pillow-soft bed of snow that cushioned against her body as she rolled to her side. A lazy smile floated across her lips as her body relaxed. She had earned her rest.

Not-Cullen nodded in understanding. “Let’s go back. What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I…” why couldn’t she remember? It felt like she’d been lounging in the hallway for years. “No, I was in the Fade.” Wardens. Demons. Dragon. Falling. Rift. “Yes, I fell into the Fade and I was met by Divine Justinia, who said she had a challenge…”

“You don’t question seeing a Divine in the Fade, but don’t believe you could be dead?” Non-Cullen interrupted, rubbing a frustrated hand against the back of his neck. Some details here had been nailed perfectly. “I can see I have my work cut out for me today.” He mumbled, analyzing her so thoroughly that it drew a blush of the faintest pink across her chest, exposed by the plunging neckline of her formal dress.

“Okay. When you say it like that, yeah,” she admitted, “there’s a decent chance I may be… dead.” She was backed into a corner. When cornered, her basest instincts took the reigns as she focused on nothing but survival. “Who, or what, are you?”

“I am the Intermediary.” Pride dripped off his words as she listened, mouth open, brow raised. They stared at each other in silence. The moment pregnant as neither spoke. “You don’t know what that is, do you?”

“No.”

“Dammit.” Not-Cullen rolled his eyes.

Her sickening sense of nostalgia was unneeded right now. She needed to keep telling her traitor brain that. Survival was all she could afford to focus on.

“Then inform me.” She could play this game. Playing games was what she did best.

Not-Cullen looked reluctant, weighing her change in tone. The ploy worked as he opened the folder again, a small portrait of her as a youth smiling from the top parchment. “My job is to weigh the actions of your life: decide the fate of your eternal soul based on how you lived your days.”

Shit.

****

Blackwall held the vomiting Dorian by the shoulders as the mage did his best impression of a broken waterfall. Foaming bile slid over the length of his chin, dotting the dirtied robes underneath.

Dal had finally secured a firm answer on Solas’ whereabouts from the elusive spirit wearing Justinia’s face. The spirit could really be obtuse when they were enjoying the attention of mortals. A scream was quick to escape her chest, as Dorian collapsed out of his nightmare behind them, his
palms striking the stone and echoed in the confines of the cavern. His chest heaved with his imagined exertion from wherever he traveled from.

Then the uncontrollable vomiting started.

She’d been glad of her forgotten need to eat before battle as the mage emptied the lining of his stomach in the Fade. She and the false Warden traced the tiny details in the walls of the cavern with their eyes as they tried to give the mage some sense of privacy in the beyond. After minutes filled with the sound of retching, nothing left for his system to extricate, Dorian stilled. His breathing no longer pained or forced. Blackwall pulled the man to his feet and steadied his drinking buddy in their familiar pattern as the man regained his bearings.

They looked so exhausted: eyes sunken, lips swollen and chapped, cheeks gaunt and paled. The scars of what they had seen hidden in their eyes rather than cracked across their skin. From their appearance, they were far less successful in this battle than they had been in the real one.

The change in Dorian came quickly as his flesh regained its sandy hue. He flew towards Evelyn and Marion, determination radiating from him. Blackwall tightened an arm around the still-recovering man’s waist, stilling him against the confines of his armor. Dorian kicked his boots towards the man’s knees and drove his elbows into the ribs of his captor, grunting in frustration as his weakened limbs were held stationary.

“We have to get them out of there!” He still fought against the confines of Blackwall’s arms. “Wake them!” His fire refused to extinguish.

Dal had not even considered helping the two emotional energy vacuums in charge of this mission. She couldn’t think of two people more deserving of having to spend quality time with their greatest fears. Solas had charged off to kill the Nightmare demon on his own, and he would need their help. Why would she waste precious time to rescue them from a mission when she could guarantee that neither would do it for her?

“Please, Dal, she can’t stay in there!” The mage was frantic.

She knew Dorian’s plea was accurate. Her chances of her exiting this nightmare were nonexistent without Evelyn. But the urge to fuck the auburn-haired turncoat over, just once, was so great it caused her to salivate like a fresh-baked tray of pastries had been set before her. It was almost enough to convince her not to help. Almost.

If she could fight to save Blackwall, a man she had planned to run through with a sword, twisting the blade until she ended his light with her last minutes alive, she could save anyone. She could even save Evelyn. Probably.

“Okay. How do I do this?” Touch? She had touched, more like throttled, Blackwall just before being pulled into his vision.

Someone had removed Evelyn’s gloves. Her hands bared to the moist cavern air, curved nails full of soil and packed blood. Dal slid her deep copper fingers into the Inquisitor’s marked hand. Her hand was warm. Too warm, like a kindled fire kept just simmering below the surface of her flesh. A humming pressed through the mark into her hand. Soft, melodic, like a lullaby.

It felt faster last time.

She waited, but nothing changed. No being pulled through the Fade. No visions. Nothing. Touch wasn’t working. Her anger had been a tangible being in the pit of her stomach when she’d grabbed
Blackwall, twisting him around to face her accusations. Maybe the nightmare had let her in, sensing she could torture him further.

Gripping Evelyn’s hand tighter, her fingers pressing into the skin of the woman’s knuckles, she dug deep within herself to find the anger she’d stuffed down to channel into training. “You’re a poor leader,” she began, letting the anger come to a boil in her chest.

“Without the mark, everyone in the Inquisition would have let you die long ago. You’re a beacon of shit, Evelyn.” She needed more. “I fully believe the Conclave exploded because you were in it. Corypheus and his army descended on Haven because of you. You fight Wardens in the desert and an Archdemon rises to kill you. I was ripped out of the Void, forced to be tied to that dragon for eternity because of your incompetence!”

She shuttered her eyes, blocking the unwanted light, as she waited for the hand to pull her through the layers of the nightmare. Nothing happened.

Peeking an eye open, she glanced at her companions. Both sets of shoulders slumped, their mouths hung open, brows uneven. She’d gone too far, hadn’t she?

“So, sorry about that… that was awkward.”

Blackwall cleared his throat and Dorian pushed his way out the false Warden’s grip. Wiping off his robes in annoyance as he shook his head at her sad attempts to rescue their leader.

*****

Empress. Gaspard wanted her to be the fucking Empress of Orlais.

She’d turned him down.

The man disgusted her. No different from any of her repeat visitors over the years.

Besides, she had the beginning of an authentic life in Skyhold. A future not controlled by her father. A life of her choosing. Peers and subjects who respected her leadership. Companions she trusted that were becoming friends. With Dorian and Cullen, she’d found something she hadn’t known she desperately needed - family.

“Then it says here that you paid the fee for the Templar that murdered both your brothers?” Not-Cullen looked up from his detailed folder at the woman now slumped over in her canvas chair. Strands of her flaming maroon hair flowed over the arm to sway lightly in the breeze above the carpet.

“Is there any context written for these entries?” her mumble barely rose her chest as she felt eternity becoming heavier on her shoulders, pressing her into the ground.

Not-Cullen continued to grin at her - she hated it now. She’d slice the man’s lips from his face to never have to see that smirk again. “Not at all.” He replied cheerfully before flipping to the next page of parchment, the crisp paper flipped over unveiling another expanse of symbols she couldn’t read.

First, it was Redcliffe. Then it was Haven. Corypheus crushed any hope she held for a future between those events. Now, it wasn’t a question of if this war would kill her, but when. She’d volunteered to set off the final trebuchet because she had prayed death would take her that night. She’d already spent her life with a monster breathing down her neck - no more. Maker, let it happen no more.
But she’d survived. Everything had been different since that day. She’d led their people someplace they could call home - Skyhold. Inside its ancient stones, she’d lost herself as often as she could within Cullen’s arms. Long days spent buried in training followed by longer nights of him buried inside her. It’s the closest she’d ever felt to being happy. The Maker had given her a shitty hand to start, but he had made all of it worth it if it got her here.

“That concludes the first chapter that concerned murders, next we’ll read over your sins of the flesh…”

“I’m Done.” The words hadn’t been planned, but as they entered the world, with emphasis, she knew they were right. She didn’t need to be told what human filth she was. She knew better than anyone else.

“You’re foregoing the rest of your case for your sentence?” Non-Cullen looked confused, but the hesitant raise of his brows told her he was intrigued. She could read men as clear as the written page, even in the afterlife.

The energy it took to sit up in the chair felt like hooks cleaving into the skin of her back, dragging her upright. “I don’t need you to judge me - I know who I am.” Her voice was low, threatening.

“Were.” The Not-Cullen corrected, “Who you were”. She frowned at his response. Even the real Commander wasn’t this much of an asshole.

One meeting had dropped every illusion of happiness she dared to wish for. Something agitated Cullen the entire check-in. Nose flared and huffing like a provoked bull. He’d just finished calling Josephine’s plans for Orlais childish when she’d called it over for the day. Better to let him go take his anger out on a training dummy than the gentle Ambassador.

After escorting Leliana and Josephine away, she returned to find Cullen head down on the war table, fists pressing against his forehead. A pained cry muffled into the map of Thedas. Her vindictive brothers were Templars. She was no stranger to the symptoms of lyrium withdrawal.

She’d left without him knowing what she’d seen. She held his secret. Now she would wait to see how long it would take him to trust her.

Not-Cullen closed her file promptly, a tightened fist resting on top. “It’s unorthodox, but sure, why not?” That grin again. She’d dealt with a demonic version of Cullen, puppeted by an Envy demon. It had slit its throat, opening a crimson geyser that gathered at frayed edges of her boots to garner emotion - to scan her for weakness. Her flinch hadn’t registered. This version grinned, incessantly, and it was breaking her inside with every shift of its dubious lips.

The closed file was placed in a drawer, hidden from her view. “Evelyn Katherine Trevelyan, you have led a life of corrupted sin and savage murder, turning your back on the Maker you swore your faith to. Your sentence will involve the destruction of your soul in the void, for infinity.”

Her blood turned to gurgling molasses within her veins. “No, wait… it’s more complicated than a piece of paper.”

“What is?” Not-Cullen rose from his chair, pleased with the conclusion to their meeting.

“A human life!” She roared back, fists balled at her sides. “Those bullet points don’t tell you the story of my life. I only did what was required to survive! Yes, I admit I had a rough start, but I’ve changed.” Not-Cullen’s incredulous brow mocked her. “Fine, I’m changing.” Her heart thundered through her throat and chest. This can’t be all.
“If you’re not pleased with your results…”

“I am not pleased with the results,” she hissed back.

“There’s an appeals process that will omit written documentation for a weigh-in, to see if there’s more between the lines, as your people like to say.”

“Yes!” Finally, a way that her decisions in the Inquisition could show that she wasn’t the raving cunt slicing her way through Thedas that his folder decided she was. “Why wasn’t that offered hours ago when we started?”

The hefty shoulders of Not-Cullen shrugged, causing the shadows still dancing through the room to pirouette around his perimeter to reach their goal. “Maybe I enjoyed your company.” He admitted, pulling a pristine silver-cast set of scales from a bottom drawer and setting it delicately on the top of his desk. “It’s rare you encounter something with so little respect for death itself. I found it to be familiar. Intriguing, even.”

The candlelight, now distracted by the shining object in the room's center, sent its flickering lights to reflect off the metal sheen. She couldn’t remove her eyes from the scales as she fumbled her way to her slippered feet as Non-Cullen approached around the desk, more confidence in the creature’s steps than her Cullen would ever possess.

“I want you to have it.”

In her opened palm sat a circular piece of silver, any distinguishing details long since rubbed away by worrying fingers. Her shoulders grew stiff as she stared at the small object that gained mass every second it remained in her grip.

“What is this? P… payment?” She couldn’t breathe. How could he have known? How could she have been so naïve?

Cullen crinkled his forehead in confusion, his head tilted as he tried to determine her meaning. “Payment? No.”

Her heart resumed its booming cadence as he shook his head.

“For luck. My brother gave it to me on the day I left for Templar training. It was the only thing he had in his pocket.” He smiled. Apples of his cheeks raised, teeth exposed as he looked fondly at the coin. One of the rare smiles of contentment she’d seen on his face. “Kinloch. Kirkwall. Haven. Yet, here I stand. Maybe there’s luck in it. If so, I want you to have it.”

“I can’t.” She pushed her weighted palm back into his midsection. “What do you want from me?” The same words she’d blubbered out the first night she felt his hands on her flesh, just after the fall of Haven. The question whose answer still terrified her.

That was a lifetime ago.

He easily trapped her by the wrists, his amber eyes kind as he watched her question the motivation of his gesture. “I want you to return home safely... That is all.”

A flush across his cheeks and neck betrayed his calm exterior. Using his hands, he closed her reluctant one around the coin, the metal tether that would lead her home. To him, if she chose.

One scale to measure a life, to tell her some preordained value.
“How does this work? How do you weigh my life?” The tension coiled tight inside her. Fear festering in her lungs and a less-wanted tension building in her core from Not-Cullen’s closing proximity.

The Intermediary waved a hand across the path of her eyes, words woven into the tapestry of his whisper. Evelyn’s muscles locked. Her body rigid like a statue. Catching sight of the dagger that rested in his hand, her olive eyes widened.

The impostor smirked once more. “By weighing your heart, of course.”

Evelyn’s scream echoed in the office as the demon’s dagger pierced her chest, the double-sided blade sliding through her flesh until meeting the resistance between her ribs.

Fire streaked across her chest from the plunge of the knife. She was paralyzed, unable to move to save herself, but every minute movement within her body was cruelly amplified. Her scream was silent, her pain unable to be translated, as Not-Cullen cut ruthlessly, sawing his way through the shield of her ribs, and cutting along her sternum. After an eternity of pain, he wrenched away the rectangular piece of ribs and cartilage encased around her heart. He threw it haphazardly to the side as his brilliant golden eyes met hers, fluttering to retain consciousness.

Between the blinding flashes of pain, she could feel his careful fingers caressing along the outer ventricles of the organ. His blade separating her veins and arteries from their connection in her body while he cradled her hardened ruby in his hands.

Her chin fell forward, collapsing against her sternum as she stared down in disbelief, in time to see his gore covered hands leave her chest cavity. His prize nestled within his palms. The straps of her crimson dress fell lazily down her shoulders, the layers of hanging fabric now heavy with the over-saturation of her blood. The simple sensation overriding her nerves was too much.

Her mouth opened, and a hollowed scream worked its way out of her mouth and through the hole in the cavity of her chest. The emptiness inside was crushing her, or the structure of her body was caving inwards. Trails of escaping tendrils of blood pushed their way past her lips, spilling across the top of her cleavage, covering it with smears of her incoming death.

Not-Cullen’s steps were careful as he approached the scales. With delicate hands, he set down the culmination of twenty-seven years onto the shimmering plate. Its weight pulled down the arm of the scale until it rested flat against the grayed wood of the desk. Her heart throbbed on the silver plate, no rhythm to the erratic beats that squeezed more streams of crimson from the detached organ, pooling into the dish.

Her eyes drifted up hazily as she tried to focus on the life-altering decision being made. The outline of the demon’s shoulders filled her view. He was bent at the waist over his test, lost in his focus. Maybe this version wasn’t that different - he’d already forgotten about her for his work when she needed him.

A heart for a heart. It seemed only fair.

*Days passed into weeks, weeks into months.*

*Cullen used every excuse and misdirection at his disposal to avoid confessing the truth. She relied more and more on finding the bottom of the decanter before sleep would come as she ’d lie awake listening to his rattled breathing as he slept fitfully through nightmares. At one point she believed he considered making up an affair in desperation to cover for his constant, bone-crippling exhaustion.*
The next day Cassandra had come to her.

Fucking Cassandra.

After the Seeker left her quarters, she cried, shattering every object in her room that mocked her, for the first of many times over knowing the truth: Cullen had quit lyrium and it was killing him. She confronted him that night. He admitted his lies, sobbed out his sorrow of deceiving her. He would do anything to regain her trust, except the one thing she asked of him. He told her he’d die before taking lyrium again.

If she could have choked on the irony, she would have. Instead, all that left her was a gentle sigh, her lungs hissing as air escaped through perforated holes. This Cullen had been gentler handling her heart than she’d been with the real one. She’d crushed Cullen’s heart within her grasp for all Orlais to see.

As the entire world spun out of control, her fragile grip on sanity melted away.

After the night of his confession, it became impossible for her to push the paranoid voices away in her mind. She’d seen the future in Redcliffe. All this fighting and death, only to give way to more years of fighting until there were no more to die. The Inquisition was doomed. She needed to derail the path they were on if they stood any chance to survive the coming tide.

She responded to Gaspard.

Even traveling to Orlais, she begged Cullen to save himself. As he’d entered her, she’d pleaded with him, lips locked against his ear, whispering not to leave her, so they could remain interlocked forever. That she was only whole as they fused together.

If she could change his path, then they, together, could change the future.

Cullen refused. He was angry, spiteful as he questioned her plans for the Winter Palace. She could forgive the defensiveness, but she couldn’t forgive the slow-motion suicide.

She’d had vital things taken from her, lost things that would destroy others. Yet, she’d remained standing. She could not watch Cullen die. Watch the madness take him as every muscle in his body screamed for the sweet song of the tiny crystal vial. Watch as the unchained violence grew in his heart as the poison disappeared day by day from his system until it left him cold, all life sucked from his corpse.

She respected his decision to continue his path, but he couldn’t force her to take part.

The contract to solidify the partnership of the Inquisition and Orlais took less than ten minutes. Ten minutes to sign away her life and freedom. She’d be tied to Orlais until death. Cullen would have the army he craved and needed to beat Corypheus, the variable minions, but at the cost of her. She couldn’t help but feel her years as a whore for her father, were just practice for one day saving the world.

*****

She was roused awake by Not-Cullen, his hand wearing a glove of drying blood as his fingers caressed the line of her jaw. A mix of expressions tested his features. His eyes darkened, pupils were blown wide by the force of blood pumping harder through his system.

“I’m sorry, Evelyn.” He motioned behind him. After her eyes could focus, she saw her heart still sitting on the lower tray, but now the other arm held a glass lion, carved like a children’s toy, lifted
high in the air. *How ironic.* “I have to admit, I didn’t expect a different outcome. But I will miss your spirit.”

Not-Cullen approached until his chest was touching hers, the bloody edges of her dress sticking against the leather of his breeches, absorbed into the cotton of his shirt. His lips followed the slope of her hair until they rested just above her ear, like the fluttering wings of a moth.

*Her heart thundered in her chest. Too many brandies screaming through her veins. Lightning fired through her limbs from the explosion Cullen set off in her soul and cunt. His skillful tongue peaking her beyond anything she ’d ever felt.*

Taking her twitching fingers between his, he ’d pressed her palm against his erratic and needy heart which roared through his flesh into hers.

“Know my heart,” the amber of his eyes glowed through the moonlit office. “Take from me a life of sorrow. Lift me from a world of pain. Judge me worthy, Evelyn… Touch me with fire that I be cleansed.”

That was the moment. The moment her heart had broken.

*In hours they would depart for the Winter Palace and she would sign away any life she could have chosen for herself. For months she kept his secret locked away inside herself as it clawed apart the fabric of her fears. Now she had her own.*

*She should tell him now. Let him talk her out of this insane plan. Telling him might change his mind about taking lyrium. Make him want to survive the coming years to spend with her.*

*But she couldn ’t. She loved him too much to step in the way of what he wanted.*

“The best part of pulling the details from your mind,” her captor whispered, the longer hairs of his beginning beard scratching against her skin. At that moment her displaced heart cried out for the real Cullen, begged that somewhere he could feel her calling, that he’d rip a hole in the Fade itself to save her. “… is that I get to see all the titillating things you’d filed away in the back. You were quite the filthy little whore, weren’t you?”

His words shut her down. Turned off any semblance of emotion as she retreated within herself, back where it was safe. She had already survived having her heart turned off for years, pushing away her hurt and anger. How much worse could it really be to have your heart be taken away?

He lifted his fingers to graze them over the border of her missing heart, her personal sinkhole. It felt like fire exploding in her body as each finger dragged against the tug of her ribs. The only sound she could make was a low groan caught in the pool of blood filling her mouth.

Leaning back, Not-Cullen’s dark eyes bored into hers, cupping her jaw with hands still dripping from trails of life exiting her form. She knows he’s Death, but with that face, who wouldn’t consider trying their luck? She allowed her eyes to re-shutter. The energy needed to keep them open wasn’t worth it. Being obliterated by the void would prove less painful than trying to survive in the real world.

*If there was any destiny she deserved, it was this one* ****

Evelyn’s knees buckled, a faulty foundation, as she awoke. The Warden caught her within the iron bar of her arms, breaking her momentum before her face could meet the stone floor of the Fade, up
close and personal.

Every sense in her body fired at full capacity as the elf let go of her hold, setting her carefully on the ground. The beating of her heart a thundering boom that echoed through her chest and pounded through her ears like a mighty drum.

Dorian was too close, his hands painful on her shoulders as he examined her. She wanted to push him away. Push anyone away that would touch her without her consent, but she knew his touch was out of love. A need to see she was okay. If the Nightmare could pull such a vivid illusion from her mind, she couldn’t image what it would create for Dorian.

“So, looks like I owe Pavus that bottle of wine - he was right. I just needed to make eye contact.” The abomination shrugged, pushing her fake locks of black hair out of her face as she spoke to Blackwall, yet another questionable member of the Inquisition. Idalya avoided eye contact with her, and that was just fine as far as it concerned her.

She’d given up to the Nightmare when the Warden appeared in her vision.

Not-Cullen had given her one last violence-inducing grin before she’d seen the Warden’s hands frame the edges of the demon’s head. Crack. One twist and she’d broken the neck of the beast. His hazel eyes rolling back into its skull as it fell dumbly to her feet. Unveiling the monster standing behind him, her violaceous eyes glowing menacingly in the flickering candlelight. Evelyn had grown used to one monster from her past, she’d panicked at what this new one had in store.

The girl’s eyes had softened, her grays pushing out the amethyst. “They can’t hurt you anymore.”

The level of understanding from the lowly elf would have made her nauseated before, now it terrified her. If this was the demon’s new tactic, she’d much rather have Not-Cullen and his handy knife skills back.

“We’re still in the Fade. This is a trap from a Nightmare Demon. You need to break its hold over you.” Her face hardened as her mission became clear. “Conquer your fear, so we can go fuck it up already.” That was definitely the Warden, not some demon incarnation.

She’d been able to rationalize that it was all a dream. That Cullen was far away, still battling in the deserts of Adamant. The illusion had melted away. The feeling of her heart introduced to her body, zapping all oxygen from her lungs.

She and the Warden didn’t agree on many things, but that demon needing to be fucked up? She’d do so with pleasure.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for everyone's comments and support. I have the best readers ever... seriously.
The Chantry stood, as imposing and fear-inducing as she remembered. A lump stuck in the collective throat of the citizens of the City of Chains. Dwarven-crafted marble columns stretched high above to greet the arched ceiling. Banners of the golden sun enveloped in Andraste’s cleansing fire hung proudly on all sides. Foreshadowing the incineration that would destroy all she had ever known.

“If all lands under the sun raise their voices in the Chant, then the Maker’s eye will turn back to his Children.”

Marion’s fists were clasped, fingers interwoven. Her sable hair bowed in prayer, the Chant moving her lips but refraining from sound.

Faded spots were left in the cedar kneeler, grooves worn from decades of the faithful begging for the Maker’s forgiveness and Light. Her royal armor gone to the Void, her limbs were fitted in broken-in and weather-proofed leathers. This wasn’t the Queen, this was the Champion. The voice that whispered vile truths in the back of her mind as she struggled to find peace.

Traitor. Fraud. Coward.

She prayed hard and without fear of the unknown. So much clouded her mind like a heavy shroud draped over her eyes that she knew not what she prayed for. All she could do was pray that her pleas to the beyond would be answered. The Maker guiding her aching and exhausted limbs to the correct path. The true path.

How long had she strayed from the Maker’s path? How long had she been secluded in the darkness, His light removed from her world? Since the explosion in the Chantry, she had been driven to follow the Chant of Light, each word directing her closer to the place where forgiveness for her heart could be found. But each step taken had steered her further from that place of peace.

Peace could never be found by those who once whispered of revolution.
"Remember the fire. You must pass
Through it alone to be forged anew.
Look! Look upon the Light so you
May lead others here through the darkness,
Blade of the Faith!"

The Blade of Faith - the Maker’s burning flame consuming steel; a symbol of righteousness and justice. She was that blade. Her song floating on the winds of Starkhaven to bring Andraste’s followers back to the Chantry, to repent for their sins as she combusted eternally under the Maker’s gaze.

“Is that not what we did? Cleansing the corrupt so that they could be saved?”

There.

Marion Hawke was in the Fade and had most likely died. There was no scenario that existed where he wouldn’t be there to guide her into the beyond.

She clenched her lids tight, lips reciting the Chant at lightning speeds as she ignored the only, yet last voice she wanted to hear.

Please, Maker, hear my cries. I can’t do this anymore.

“Marion?”

She slid her head forward until it rested on her forearms. Her woven fingers shaking with so much fear that her knuckles knocked against the pew in front of her. Tat-tat-tat-tat. A frantic cadence matching the pounding in her chest.

“It’s always so dark where you hide. Why can’t I find you in the darkness?” His voice was the finest satin, seamless with the chill of ice woven between the threads. “I’m so happy you’re finally here, Marion.” Anders cleared his throat, the sound forced and hollow as he struggled to push air past a tightness along his neck.

Anger. Yes, just when she desperately needed it.

The Maker did provide for his flock.

“Fuck. You. Anders.” His name ended in a hiss through her teeth as she spoke his name aloud for this first time since...

These were not the words of a faithful Andrastian. No matter what Sebastian claimed, there were no actions that could balance Marion’s karmic scales for what had been lost in ignorance of her lover’s actions.

“That’s my girl.” His purr sent waves of surprised elation through her spine. Lightning striking a tree lost in seasonal slumber, stirring its branches to life.

How had she forgotten the hunger that could hang in his words? The burning need that dripped like honey from his whispers in the darkness, his fingers begging for entrance against the confines of her armor. He’d spoken of passion, of lust, of the necessity of needing to fuse and become one with her. Images that would have brought flushed cheeks and a following shame to any self-respecting Chantry Sister.

But then the flames had come, igniting the hanging threads of her life like kindling.
“Don’t patronize me.” Anger was a gift given by the Maker, himself. “You used me, Anders. I never would have helped you blow up the Chantry.”

*Please, anger. Do not fail me now, I could not bear it.*

“But you did, Marion. Somewhere deep inside you knew that you were in control from the beginning. You fought Meredith and her Templars of your own volition.” He coughed again, a trapped sound that echoed between the wooden pews. “Never once did I lie to you. I told you I would do whatever it took to free the mages, and you were there. Each step towards liberation, I took beside yours. I never forced you to be complicit.”

"Look to My work," said the Voice of Creation. "See what My children in arrogance wrought." Her words were questioning and unsure as she prayed.

*Maker, take me away from this place before I lose myself.*

“There’s no use praying to the Maker because he abandoned us long ago.”

Having seen the truth in his words, Marion crumbled, her face sliding into her hands as tears set free from their prison dripped down the length of her trembling arms.

The Maker had abandoned all of them. What cruelty the Fade was. Locked in this limbo between her dreams and nightmares, forced to relive that which she longed for but feared.

A soft retching noise escaped Anders’ throat as he moved closer, his elbows resting on top of the pew behind her, encompassing the width of her shoulders.

She longed for his touch. Fingers and palms which she yearned to warm against her flesh instead of Sebastian’s that chilled her to the bone, making the air weep with regret. If the real Anders had ever known the way her future husband would mishandle her in those following years, he would have cut the manipulative man to shreds using the rustiest blade him and Varric could get their hands on.

He took his time moving his hands, giving her time to stop him, as he embraced her from behind. A hiccupping sob shuddered her frame as she leaned back, giving herself to the dream as she nestled into his shoulder. It had been her place of retreat when the demands of Kirkwall threatened to drag her below the surface of its tumultuous waves.

“How I’ve missed you, my love.” His fingers traced circular patterns across her prominent collarbones, her skin blushing against his touch. “Anger is so fleeting and so fragilely human.”

*Gates once bright golden forever shut.
Heav’n filled with silence, then did I know all
And cross’d my heart with unbearable shame*

There was a time when all she’d had was him. Then the world exploded and all she’d had was her prayers. Now, in the Fade, both felt so far away that all she had remaining was her crippling and constant emptiness.

Anders scoffed, his powerful hands turning her until she faced him in the pew behind her. She’d feared to see him. To see what horror her dreams conjured. In that aspect he was underwhelming, but to her heart, he was *perfect.*

Not the gaunt and tortured Anders he was as he lost his internal war against Justice, but powerful, confident, *cocky.* This was the mage she met on the streets on Kirkwall, inspiring her to set in
motion the explosives that began the Templar/Mage war.

His hair was loose over his shoulders, strands of hay swaying playfully in the breeze. Familiar teal and golden robes were elegant in their tailoring. A closed, high collar protecting the throat he still struggled to clear as he faced her. Amber eyes full of so many emotions silenced her, her hands trapped over her gaping mouth as she took all of him in. How simple she was to think her mind could remember such splendor accurately.

He shook his head at her, the love radiating from his eyes making it difficult for her to breathe. “Let go of your shame, Marion. Your self-hatred is a poison you pour into your own veins. Free yourself of your fear and shame. None of them understand, not like I do.”

*It wasn’t a lie.*

She’d never felt more alive within the host of her body as she had by his side. Sebastian had never been gentle with her, with his constant pushing for improvement and change. Anders had loved her for the broken woman she was when she met him. He’d accepted her without conditions, without limitations. He’d loved her *for* her imperfections, not the image of what he’d hoped to mold her into.

“All of this is a lie.” She was so tired of fighting. So many apologies, so many unending wrongs to right.

“Would you prefer the truth? I’ll give you whatever you want, even the truth if that’s what you desire.” He flicked his fingers to the side and the hanging tapestries began to smolder. Tendrils of smoke crawling the length of woven linen until sparks of ember burst into flame.

All around them the fire consumed as the two sat watching the world burn.

*Not much different than their first life together.*

He pressed his quivering fingers against her cheek, wiping away her errant tears. Her heart thundered within her chest as his delicate touch breathed life back into her hibernating soul.

*But it wasn’t that easy, was it…*

*And as the black clouds came upon them, they looked on what pride had wrought,*

*And despaired.*

The Makers words she’d spoken as his sentence had been decided. Pride had ended all for both.

“‘Come to me, child, and I shall embrace you. In my arms lies Eternity.’ Like Andraste, be one with the flames and you will be cleansed anew, Marion”

*I’ll leave this… murderer for you to deal with. He’s your companion. Do as you see fit.*

Meredith’s words were etched into her soul to be forever repeated at her greatest times of weakness. For years she’d fought every step against the Knight-Commander and her faulty grip on reality, but when faced with the destruction she was responsible for, she found herself on the same side as the woman who ruled over Kirkwall with an iron fist, and red lyrium sword.

Marion’s fury had made her righteous at that moment. A tool, a weapon of justice forged by the melting flames of the crumbling Chantry.

*You have to pay for what you’ve done.*
I know … For what it’s worth, I’m glad it’s you.

The ax felt so heavy in her sweating palms like the forged iron held the weight of the decision she was forced to make. Her companion’s eyes drilled holes through her as she begged for the strength to carry through with what must be done.

Maker, I don’t want him to die, but I don’t know how he’s supposed to live.

The full tally of lives lost wouldn’t be completed until the sun rose above the crimson-soaked streets of Kirkwall.

There had been no resistance as the swinging blade made its downward descent. Thud. Her heart skipped a beat at the vibration along the wooden handle gripped between her shaking hands. What have I done?

As her momentum started to carry the blade, she knew she had made the wrong decision. Fuck the rest of the world. All the world had ever done was take from her. Anders was the first thing it had given back before forcing her to extinguish his flame.

Her lips quivering, she reached out towards his high collar, her eyes unable to look elsewhere. Anders struggled to clear his throat again, her failures still haunting him across the Fade. Even if this was an illusion, she never wanted to leave. She was not certain she could exist without him again. If walking through the flames would prove the depths of her guilt and longing for the man - she’d do it. She would be cleansed so they could begin again, bare-faced children of the Maker.

Click-clack. Click-clack.

Staccato beats drew closer to her, their echo absorbed into the towering flames, as someone approached

“Take your hands off her.”

Marion and Anders were shaken out of the beauty of the burning cathedral by Evelyn Trevelyan, standing a stride away. Still adorned in her Andrastian armor. Her hip cocked to a severe angle, dagger flipped nonchalantly in her right hand. The blade reflected the churning flames around them as it rotated in the air back into the safety of her palm. Her auburn locks were free and no long stained by blood as she narrowed her olive eyes at Marion’s bucket list of regrets.

“I said back off, asshole,” Evelyn added with emphasis

She was the creation of nightmares.

Anders rolled his eyes as he looked over at the Inquisitor.

“Speaking of leadership failures, here we have the Herald of Andraste.” There was acid in his voice now, the demon’s corruption stuffed into every syllable. “I thought I had you entertained, Evelyn.”

In a move only another rogue could visualize, Evelyn’s dagger flipped through the air before she grabbed it and thrust into the material covering Anders’ still hawking throat. “I’m over this bullshit. Marion, we need to go, this demon won’t murder itself.”

She couldn’t be the Queen or Champion anymore.

“I can’t. They’ll never understand.” Her failures were too clearly marked on her skin to ever hide
them again. Her voice felt far away as though her own soul had already started crawling away from whatever she had become.

**Who was she, this woman ready to throw everything away to any demon that gave her one second of comfort?**

“Who the fuck cares if they understand? *I understand.* I understand the pain, the anger, the fear that crushes you every morning as you open your eyes to meet the day.” Evelyn pressed the point of her dagger higher into the delicate skin of the demon, his honeyed eyes tearing her flesh away to the bone with his despising glare as she smirked back.

“You’re done? *I get it,* but you need to get up.” She extended her hand to Hawke, her orders clear. “After we exit this place, you want to leave? I’ll help you. Drop your daggers and walk away and I’ll make sure your cunt of a husband can never follow you.”

**Now she had her attention.**

Freedom was the only thing she yearned for, the need so great it would push her tumbling into the arms of a demon.

She took Evelyn’s hand.

Anders reached out to grab her wrist, but stiffened as the dagger pressed to his throat was forced higher, his head tilted backward by her arms that didn’t waver as Marion rose to her feet. The flames had consumed the tapestries, streams of billowing bergamot reaching into the sky, and had moved to the dried wooden beams of the Chantry. The building wouldn’t hold for much longer.

Evelyn gestured towards the dagger gripped within her fist. “Kill the demon, free its hold on you.”

“I…” Marion faltered. Her cerulean eyes now tied to Anders’ amber. *How could she kill him again? Her Anders: the only person to ever show her the true meaning of love.*

*“Hawke. Kill the fucking demon already.”* Not even nightmares in the Fade could tame Evelyn.

Grabbing Marion’s hand, she wrapped it around the leather-wrapped handle of the blade as Anders’ throat retched again, a vacuous sound echoing through his chest.

In self-preservation mode, Anders had lost all sign of the demon that had flared at Evelyn’s appearance and his soulful and lost eyes were open wide round ovals reflecting the flames of their life together. She released the force against his neck. Anders gasped for breath as oxygen refilled his system after the rogue’s dagger had been cutting off circulation through his body.

“I was wrong.” The dagger struck the stone floor below, *clang,* as Marion’s muscles rejected the weapon held to her lover’s throat.

Evelyn’s armored chest puffed with annoyance as she stared the beleaguered woman down. “We don’t have time for this.”

Her warning was lost as it reached Marion. The Maker had shown her the path. Violence could never resurrect Anders, but she could honor the life he had lived through love.

The quivering of her fingers was gone, her doubt incinerated in the climbing flames. Bending over the back of her pew, she moved her lips towards his, the soft curve of his lower lip begging for her attention as she ignored the scoff of the Inquisitor behind her.
“I will love you, always.” There was no uncertainly living inside her as she pressed her warmed lips against his.

Slotting her upper lip between his to gain entrance, she shuddered as Anders opened to her, his skin cold like marble, a stench of decay sailing across his breath. She couldn’t control the recoil in her body. Her mammalian instinct to retreat from his unnatural form.

Hurt was written in amber of Anders’ eyes as she pulled away, her own wide as she processed the reality of what her mage had become. “What’s wrong?” His pleading tore at her soul, fracturing the grip she maintained in this world.

“I can’t…” Standing, she backed into her pew, fighting the need to sprint away from whatever this was.

Anger replaced sorrow on the demon’s face as she flinched away. “Do I disgust you?”

“No shit.” Evelyn mocked under her breath as she picked up her dagger from the floor of the burning Chantry, tucking it safely into her holster.

“Answer me, Marion!” Anders roared across the pews.

The Champion backed out of the aisle, her hands clasped against her chest as the air became harder and harder to draw. She couldn’t answer him. This was not Anders, but a likeness of his corpse sent to remind her of the horrors Marion Hawke had borne into this world.

A horrid noise echoed from the throat of the demon as it rose to his feet. “This is so like you Marion to run away when forced to deal with the consequences of your actions. No more. Look at the results of your great wisdom.”

Anders tore at the latched fabric held high around his neck, until the fabric gave way unveiling the horror beneath.

Evelyn’s gasp of disgust emanated from her side as the cause of Anders retching was revealed.

The severed flesh of his neck was unhealed, just held aligned by the stiff fabric. Marion’s mouth filled with saliva trying to gag her, her eyes watering, as the ripely sweet smell wafting from the wound followed by traces of sulfur choked her. What remained of the various tendons and muscles were atrophied, layers upon layers of rotting materials full of maggots consuming what remained like the fire destroying the burning Chantry around them, its teeth ripping apart the foundations of the building with zeal.

This was the work of the Champion. This was Marion Hawke’s legacy.

Anders had treated her with more respect and care than anyone else in her life, opening her eyes to a world she hadn’t known could exist. He had shown her the worst a place like Kirkwall could inflict on those that were helpless, but he’d given his love to her without conditions, treating her like she was a precious creature that had come to redeem his life.

This had been his reward for that devotion.

“I’m so… sorry.” Words could never heal these wounds, nor the ones that cleaved her soul in two as the ax separated Anders mind from the rest of his limp form.

The demon opened its mouth to speak, but only a hiss of air passed through the gaping flesh of his neck, maggots falling into the folds of his robes as the air pushed them from their trough.
Maker, protect me from these lies.

At the end of her patience, Evelyn’s empty hand snapped forward as she pushed Anders’ forehead. A simple push. That was all it took to dislodge the head from its pedestal. Marion’s eyes shut as his head slid backward dropping onto the pew beside him. Thunk.

A blood-curdling scream deafened her, bulging her eardrums. Her mind swooned as she realized the sound was being expelled through her lips. Evelyn gripped her around the shoulders, bringing Marion close against her idolatrous armor. They didn’t speak as the Inquisitor held her, grounding her in a home that she had burned to dusty ashes too many times.

“It’s time,” Evelyn whispered into her tangled hair the color of fresh ink. She leaned back to analyze Marion, the olive of her eyes carrying the weight and sadness of the Inquisition once more. “I uphold my vows - I’ll get you away from him after this.” Her words were heavy with emotions that Marion couldn’t begin to decipher as her as the pieces of her mind slid apart like the demon’s dismembered body. Maybe the woman was more like Andraste than she liked.

“What happens after we leave this place?” There would be no more for her after this. She knew that now. The Inquisition would have its victory, then the Champion would disappear, left to spend eternity watching the curved arc of the ax falling down.

She would help Evelyn escape this vile place, but after that, the Champion of Kirkwall was done. No more apologies. No more guilt.

Maker, be damned. She would find her freedom at last.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for everyone’s continued support. I adore all of you.
The Chapter Where Solas Suffers From Pride

Chapter Summary

Solas has decided to end the Nightmare demon, but even the most curious can miss what's right in front of them all along.

Chapter Notes

Weekly Update!

One more chapter and we're out of the Fade! We can do this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His staff spiraled through the air, catching the light like a falling star. The base emitted a loud *thomp* as pulses of energy burst forth from the crystal fixed atop, seeking the Nightmare Demon.

The aspect of the demon hissed through its pointed teeth as it recoiled, pain jetting up its side from the direct hit to its flank.

Solas grinned at the beast, a toothy and cocky smile dripping with the power funneling through his veins. Beads of sweat formed across his brow as his mana pushed another wave of energy towards the demon. A sinister sense of satisfaction blossomed inside him as he taunted the helpless monster

*This felt good.*

Months since he reached out, stretching his wings, allowing his magic to creep out of the places inside it hid for his safekeeping. His hidden magic was who he was.

A cruel chuckle echoed out of his throat as the Aspect tried to flee, afraid of unleashed power attacking it without mercy. He was toying with it, dragging the battle on. A baker stretching a dough, molding it into its final shape. As gluttonous as the demon became feasting off the fear of the Wardens and their war above them, it was still no match to the power of the *Évanuris.*

The demon was filled with fear of its own, a fear that weakened the beast instead of strengthening it.

“*Na din'an sahlin!*” He mocked, as the creature fled in any direction that offered sanctuary. It would find none today.

His true power coursing through his veins was intoxicating, a drug swept away from him by the tides of time as he’d slumbered.

His heart pounded in his ears. His chest heaving with the exertion of testing the limits of his regained strength. Too long since he’d snuck away from the Inquisition in the dead of night to examine his progress, but he’d been busy guiding the young elf through the paths of the Fade until her skills there surpassed his own.
When awaking from his slumber, his power was depleted beyond what he expected. A helpless child lost in a strange world he’d created. His own orb of power turned its eyes away from him while time continued above ground. Speeding forward with ignorance of everything he’d caused his people to lose. Ignorant of who they should have been, ignorant of those they’d chosen to worship or villanize.

After awakening, he'd gone to the Dalish to bring them the truth. To bring knowledge of the kingdom lost to the eroding sands of time.

They hadn't known.

They’d mocked him, ostracized him. He was not one of the Dalish. His truth containing the power to crumble every falsehood holding up the fragile corners of their existence.

It was one reason he was drawn to the Warden. Both lived between the two worlds: the one requiring the ultimate sacrifice and the world that remained afterwards. They belonged in neither.

The Aspect moved forward to put him on the defensive. It was a bold action, but a failure just the same. His rift magic grew out of the floor, the energy shaped into the form of a massive fist, striking into the back of the demon. Its wail was a pathetic cry into the moist air.

*He should kill it now. Tear apart the monster that chose Idalya Mahariel as its target.*

A shimmer ran across the ragged back of the demon as it cowered in the corner from his approach. The glowing light illuminated lines along his back.

The Aspect turned to face him, its teeth bared, fear diminishing from its bulging eyes as it focused over his shoulder at a point in the distance.

“Solas?”

*No, no, no.*

The girl’s scream echoed through disjointed plains of the Fade as she approached. Her mana ebbed, calling out to his. Fear etched into each hammering footstep, pounding into the dusty ground as she sprinted across the Fade to save him.

“*Tel garas solasan!*” The Nightmare hissed, its power restored as the Inquisition drew closer, fear draped over them, a heavy mantle they could not lift. *Come not from a prideful place.*

The demon was right. He’d let his pride blind him from what was important - getting Dal and Evelyn out of this place.

“Solas?” Her cries were closer this time.

Voices of the Inquisitor’s companions were a hubbub around her. His *friends* had freed themselves from the demon’s clutches as he’d battered the beast.

He’d become a monster no different than the one he’d lashed.

*Bam. Bam. Bam. Bam.*

Her armored boots hammered across the plain as the Warden dashed towards her mentor. She slid in front of him, her chest panting for breath as her sword was out, ready to engage the Aspect, which regained the life it lost due to his recklessness.
Maybe her impulsiveness was rubbing off on him.

Dal glanced over her shoulder to verify that he was okay. The relief in her spiraling violet eyes broke his dusty heart as she sighed, seeing him unharmed. Across her lips, the softest smile brightened her features. Hope making itself known to his naive warrior.

She thought she saved him.

What she didn’t know is that she’d saved a much more broken man months ago, when in the Fade she’d begged him to help her find her way.

“Hi.” She whispered back to him through her tangled ebony ponytail, turning to face the demon.

“Indeed.” He responded with amusement, watching her grip tighten on the pommel.

“Never chase after a demon by yourself. Were you trying to get yourself killed?” She spoke over her shoulder to him.

His face fell as she chided him. This was the cruel definition of irony.

A cacophony of sounds emerged from the entrance as the rest of the Inquisition appeared - their faces paled and gaunt. The Aspect grew larger, more vibrant, with each incoming step the simple mortals made towards him. Their limbs were dragging, as they raised their weapons exhausted before the fight began.

The Nightmare would be fueled for the rest of this battle.

The demon released a guttural bellow that pushed against them in every direction. Grinding the sides of its pointed teeth at its weakened opponents, its glare menacing.

Evelyn’s daggers were off her back, her auburn hair flowing around her shoulders as she strode to the Warden’s side. His futile attempts to tackle the demon forgotten by their benevolent leader.

“This ends now.” An electric shimmer ran across the expanses of her skin as Pavus cast a weak barrier over those on the front lines.

The second she’d sensed the barrier, Evelyn took off, her movements quick but calculated as she tested the demon. Sliding to its side, she ducked an incoming swing of the demon’s arachnid appendages. Her daggers sliced over the side of the demon’s leg, the monster not responding if injured.

The demon’s next try to strike proved successful, contacting Evelyn’s waist, swatting the Inquisitor away like nothing more than a gnat. Her barrier blinked before breaking as she rolled across the uneven terrain.

“Stupid girl,” the demon’s voice was smooth, velvet-lined sky alive in its words. “Who do you think you are to confront me?”

Evelyn’s hollow olive eyes widened as she looked up at the demon in horror, recognition paralyzing her body.

I need to end this fight before these delicate creatures make the Nightmare invincible.

The Inquisitor, now drained of any fire, pushed herself up as she struggled to get to her feet.

“That’s my girl. You know your rightful place - on your knees.” A maniacal laugh exited the
demon as shame flooded the woman’s features, her father’s mimicked voice a blow far deeper than the tentacles inflicted.

Solas pried through the Fade on every member of the Inquisition to find the weakest links. The members that Corypheus could exploit for his own gain. Most of those he identified now stood in front of the magister’s own henchman of fear.

Evelyn lived at the top of the list. Her father’s abuses and business dealings marking her through every point of the Fade she’d touched. The same father that at this minute had hired spies resting in places she’d thought she’d found sanctuary.

A bolt of lightning cut through the acid-tinted sky to strike into the head of the Aspect as it screeched, Dorian running to his cousin’s side to drag the flailing woman back to safety.

The rest of the party sprang into action. Blackwall charged shield-first into the demon, the impact deafening as the crystal on Solas’ staff sprung to life, even if it was a duller glow as he channeled his power back inside himself. Idalya was at his side, the two warriors taunting the creature to draw its attention towards themselves.

Hawke unleashed a volley of cuts across the back of the Aspect as it swung for the Wardens. The demon leaned its head back and screeched in pain as the rogue kept her attacked focused. Rage burned in eyes that peered out of her halo of ink-black hair, the soft hum of Chantry hymns vibrating the back of her throat.

Groans broke out around them as the demon summoned an army of undead. Dressed in Orlesian suits of armor, their decaying flesh stripped from their bones.

“No again,” Blackwall muttered through his teeth as his attention turned from the demon to the incoming dead on their hobbled feet, leaving Dal to block the blows from the demon’s appendages.

“I assume these are yours, Blackwall?” Dorian gasped while swinging his staff in a full arc to slice through the dead with the sharpened blade affixed to the bottom of his weapon.

“Aye,” the gruff warrior scoffed as he drove his sword into the incoming crowd of soldiers, their armor splintering with the impact.

Sending out waves of rejuvenation across the battlefield, Solas turned to encase the dead behind him in magical stone before shattering the corpses with a flip of his wrist.

“No offense, Dal,” Dorian shouted to the Warden being pummeled as she fought the demon in melee range. “But if I have to fight an Archdemon in here next, I will haunt you from the Fade forever.”

The Aspect struck a pointed claw into Dal’s shoulder before throwing her back into the center of the circle formed by her fighting teammates. She gasped as her dragon scale and sapphire armor crashed into the ground, the impact pushing reserves of air from her over-taxed lungs.

Her pain ripped holes inside of him as he watched her struggle to her feet. He knew she was stronger than he gave her credit for, but his first instinct was always to shield her from the nightmares, to hide her away from the world that so needed her.

She took the second while the beast attacked the others to gain her breath. Eyeing the still open wounds that Hawke sliced into the demon’s flesh before leaving to the fight the horde of the dead. Using her sword pushed into the ground, she used its leverage to pull herself to her feet as she prepared another strike.
“Guess today is your lucky day, Dorian,” her blade cut a rambling corpse in half that forced its way past Blackwall’s line, as the mage scoffed in the distance. “The demon never came after me.”

His staff wavering in surprise, Solas took a blow by a group of the disintegrating infantry. A cut opened across the top of his cheekbone as he landed on his knee. The laceration burned against his eye, blood filling into the bottom of his lid, bathing his vision in crimson.

_Something was wrong._

The demon made the mistake of coming for him. His greatest failure pulled from his mind, rebuilding the lost home not seen in its full glory for millennia. With Corypheus’ power behind it, it knew where to plunge the knife into his soul, where to strike his mind to inflict the most exquisite damage to feed.

_But it ignored Dal …_

…or had it?

He pulsed a wave of energy around him, pushing the dead away as he regained his footing. His staff winding around him as rift energy poured out of the crystal, smashing the rotted limbs of his foes.

“Idalya, get out of here! It’s a trap…” his words stuttered to a close as his unstained eye saw the spirit of wisdom entering the battle.

The visage of Justinia gone, replaced with the face of an angel: wine-colored hair, smooth oval face holding her Alamari features, her silver armor more demure and logical than Evelyn’s garish imitation. Her hazel-green eyes watched him, the corner of her mouth upturned in a knowing smile as she approached Idalya, the Warden still focused on the demon in front of her.

He’d seen glimpses of the _Bride of the Maker_ in the Fade, but most of her tales were hidden to the decay to time, their imprint in the Fade melting away as the woman’s history turned to legends and heresy. Wisdom now recreated her, ripped from their memories, and filled him with a sense of dread unknown to him.

Andraste’s steps were silent as she reached Dal, her shoulder bleeding in crimson streams down the length of her Warden armor.

He wanted to call out, to scream to the girl to run. Frozen. Every inch of his body frozen. The dead struck at him as he watched the spirit approach the only mortal that connected him to this corrupted world.

_“Hello, Hero.”_ Her voice was steel, strength carried in each syllable as she spoke to Dal, a mother addressing her child.

Idalya turned, her jaw opened in awe, her eyes filling with understanding, the vision having a purpose he could not glean. The spirit taking a form she trusted without question.

Solas saw her muscles relax, tears welling in her eyes as she stared at her lost faith standing in front of her.

“I’m so sorry. I failed you.” The pain in her whisper burned deeper inside him than the blows the corpses dealt.

The spirit shook its head, her hair shaking with the motion. “Do not apologize, my child, we failed
Andraste wasn’t peering in his direction, but he knew the connotation of her comment just the same. He failed her time and time again. Even now, as he stood frozen in time, unable to help her. But it wasn’t just him; everything and everyone remained frozen around the girl who had triumphed over death.

The spirit placed her hand against the girl’s tearful cheek. “Fen’Harel ma ghilana.” Andraste mused, her smile now set wide against her face, as she mocked the girl for having him for a guide.

*He underestimated the damage this place inflicted on those trapped within.*

At the Spirit’s call, Dal’s mana ebbed and moved against the force touching her, an amethyst glow that spread across Andraste’s illuminated fingers. “Fascinating.” She tilted Idalya’s face up to meet hers.

“They have kept you weak, kept you caged. Allowed the Nightmare to grow strong and gluttonous as it feasted upon your fears each night. Every move you make based on fear pushed upon you. It will persist no longer.”

The Warden’s lids shut, pushing her final tears from her eyes, as her head remained tilted upwards in reverence.

“Melana en athim las Mythal’enaste.” *Now let humility grant Mythal’s favor.*

An explosion erupted in Solas’ chest at the spirit’s whisper.

*He was so blind. What a trusting fool he ’d been.*

Andraste turned her face to see him, the golden hue spreading across her irises, Mythal’s grin spread across the woman’s thin lips.

“I sent you a weapon of divine force. Leave it to your sentimentality to love her.”

He screamed in his mind. A scream full of echoes of everything he’d lost. After Mythal’s murder, he’d broken the world. His anger spreading over the surface of Thedas, a blight upon their people.

He destroyed everything in her name, and now *this.* She made him believe he cared for this girl, who she sent into his safe-keeping.

Mythal chuckled, a warm sound that clanged inside the farthest reaches of his mind. “No, my friend,” she responded, reading his thoughts, “your feelings are your own. What danger is there in you caring for the girl if it keeps her alive for her purpose?”

She lifted her other hand to drift over and smooth the ebony hair of Idalya’s messy braids. Vivienne’s enchantment broke under her wave of magic. The Warden’s moonlit strands emerged from their slumber, her thick ponytail as blinding as the aura surrounding the spirit caressed her.

A softness came over Mythal as she observed the girl frozen beneath her fingertips. “So much they’ve taken from you,” she whispered, her hands resting at Idalya’s temples. “*Mother’s come to give it back.*”

A blinding light appeared beneath her palms that spread into the prone Warden.

*No!*
His mental screams deafened him as he watched the light glow through Idalya’s skin, her body lifting into the air as Mythal filled her with her magic.

Solas cursed her. Cursed the Inquisition. Cursed the Evanuris. Cursed everything he’d crush inside his fist when freed from this prison of his own creation.

The light blinded him. Idalya was swallowed by the light, as the power built around her. Mythal dissolved on the wind. Disappeared, as the Warden’s power grew, trembling inside her, craving a way out as he stood helpless to contain it.

The energy was snapping around her, sparks crackling in the still air.

He heard the discharge before the explosion registered. A solid beam of light exited Idalya’s body, striking the Aspect. The energy entered its form. Under his feet, the ground rumbled before the beast exploded into millions of stars, snapping reality back into moving time.

His mana struck out around him, breaking the undead apart as he ran for the Warden’s frame unmoving on the ground. Uncaring of who saw the real displays of his magic.

A sob broke from his chest as he found her eyes open: dazed, but relaxed. One hand pushed healing magic into her shoulder as the other pulled her to her feet. She appeared unharmed.

In the distance, a massive roar erupted, ending any false relief he might have clung to.

“Inquisitor, the Aspect is dead. We must escape before the Nightmare demon finds us.” He screamed towards Evelyn, who for once listened, and took off running in the direction the roar originated.

He felt it now. A rift humming in the distance, beckoning them back to their world.

“Rift ahead!” He fell behind with the lagging Warden on his arm.

She’d remained silent since Mythal filled her with the glowing tendrils of her magic. He had to banish the thought from his mind, lest the demon grow more powerful in the infinite bounds of his fear.

There it was.

The circular rift was ahead. It’s pulsing jade magic calling to him. Like reaching for like. His body yearned for power, as Evelyn raised her marked hand, his power erupting from it to stretch the expanse of the rift further, to create a door for home.

The fleeing group fell to their hands and knees, Idalya separating from him as she landed hard on her abdomen, by the impact of the Nightmare demon landing in its full form. A spider the height of twenty men. Each venom-filled fang the size of a bronto.

Through the rift, Evelyn unlocked their salvation. But first, they’d have to contend with the Nightmare blocking it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for everyone's continued support!
What do you think will happen once they're out of the Fade? How in Thedas will they get out? What will happen afterward?

So many questions, so much editing to do! Love you all. I hope to have some side projects updated and posted by the beginning of March for you guys.
The Chapter Where the Inquisition Finds a Way Out

Chapter Summary

The Nightmare Demon is all that stands between the Inquisition and their path out of the Fade. What will their exit cost?

Chapter Notes

Progress Update: The rough drafts for nearly all final chapters of Adamant are complete, but one has been throwing me for a loop and required over five full rewrites (over 25k words) that were all scrapped. I think I finally have the tone in place that I was looking for so I'm going to start digging in here soon and do some heavy editing.

There's an important question at the bottom. Make sure to answer, please!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The demon opened its vulgar jaws and a thunderous crack echoed through the dank cavern signaling their doom. Evelyn’s exposed and agitated rift snapped in the distance. The air filled with whiffs of sulfur and churning mana.

Marion gripped her dagger in palm, a comforting friend while gauging the size of the creature. She wasn’t certain how the Aspect had been defeated before fleeing toward the exit. The members of the Inquisition had lobbed ineffective attacks at the demon’s flank before the monster and Warden fell limply to the floor. An explosion of magic changing the pressure in the cavern and causing aching in her ears.

The Warden now stood beside her. Weapon drawn, an involuntary quiver in her sword arm. Something was wrong with the girl since the Aspect fell. Her ebony hair had disappeared, replaced with strands that captured the moonlight. Her eyes are empty of the burning fire held within. It was a mood Marion identified with.

The nightmare bellowed again in the distance its fangs dripping with thick strings of saliva. The soldiers weighed their choices- fight the demon or run for safety.

Evelyn sprinted towards the crackling portal, her agile legs kicking up dirt behind her steps, but the demon was faster than its monstrous appendages implied. Its thickly haired legs blocked her path to salvation. The Inquisitor stumbled backward, Dorian catching her by her falling shoulders as she plummeted in reverse.

There would be no passing the creature while they were the focus of its attention.

“We must divert the demon, I’ll stay. Run for the rift while it's distracted.” This wasn’t how Marion Hawke thought she would pay the consequences for her father’s actions all those years ago, but the words felt right as they exited her lips. The darkspawn pouring over Lothering. The burning fires of Kirkwall. The slice of the blade through Anders' neck. Maybe these traumas brought her to
this exact moment. This divine moment where she could stop struggling to balance the scales.

She saw the conflict swirling in Evelyn’s eyes as she understood her motivation. Corypheus was once Marion’s responsibility, but that task now laid squarely on Evelyn’s shoulders, its oppressive weight freezing the muscles in her marked arm.

The Warden cleared her throat, stepping in front of Marion, anger rippling through her thin frame. “This asshole is mine.”

*****

Dal’s arms quivered in excitement as she imagined tearing each limb from the body of the screaming demon, her body jubilant at remembering its purpose. She was a weapon, no different from those she’d slain in battle. A weapon honed for one specific reason — to destroy the monsters lurking in the darkest parts of Thedas.

Her life was a nightmare, and she was done submitting to its fear. She’d proved she could battle the Nightmare and survive its tricks. Her mind was a cascading jumble of thoughts leaking through her head. Images she couldn’t see or understand reassembling themselves after the spirit’s visage of Andraste freed the dividers of light separating the factions of herself.

The demon stomped again, the ground rattling as the emerald clouds parted around its force. One death to save them all. It was an agreement she signed once in ignorance of its consequences. This time she understood the cost, she welcomed the silence of eternity. She would distract the monster and when her companions exited, she would unleash her magic on the demon, scorching it to ashes as she channeled her unlimited rage through the vessel of her hands.

*She would show the Nightmare the true meaning of fear.*

Her anger controlled her, filling the crevices of her mind so thoroughly that her senses were shut off as she focused single-mindedly on the physical manifestation of her fears. So distracted she didn’t hear the boots approach from behind.

“I’m sorry, Hero.”

Stars burst in her vision as pain exploded across the back of her skull. She was falling. A weightless journey as her body craved to return to the earth that once gave it life. She tried to cry out as the world blackened around her as it reminded her how similar to sleep that death could be.

*****

Dorian’s jaw gaped open as Blackwall struck Idalya in the back of the head with the pommel of his sword. The Warden crumpled to the ground like a collapsing building until she laid still on the ground.

He turned to those standing in shock behind the display. “Take her and go. It’s time for Thom Rainer to face the consequences of his cowardice.”

Solas sighed in relief as he rushed forward to pull the unconscious girl to her feet, his eyes never leaving the demon blocking their way. The mage struggled to stand with the dense weight of the Warden. Dorian closed the distance to wrap the girl’s other arm around his neck and carry her the way she’d dragged his dying ass across the Fade not long ago.

Blackwall removed his dirt-smudged helm and threw it to the side. The ethereal light of the Fade highlighted his features as he stared toward fate.
Looking for Evelyn, Dorian found her watching the developments in silence as she prioritized her own safety over others, dried strands of blood coating her formerly pristine silver armor. She was in charge. She could order Blackwall to stand down, to stay by their side as they found a way around the hulking beast. So what if the rift closed, couldn’t she open another one? She remained frozen, her eyes affixed in fear to the demon growing stronger with every beat of her heart.

Shaking his head, Blackwall met his eyes, grief measurable in the man’s irises. “Tell Josie…” he faltered at the thought of Josephine, her smile a sanctuary in a turbulent storm. “I don’t know what to tell her,” he admitted. “I’ve never been good with goodbyes. Make something up for me, you’re better with words.”

Grief lodged in Dorian’s throat at the thought of Bull fighting in Adamant. What final words would he have for his former-lover? The only home he’d found away from Trevinter. He nodded at Blackwall, ensuring his final wish would be granted.

With a devilish grin, Blackwall screamed as he pummeled toward the beast, an echoing *boom* startling the monster as the Warden collided full-force with the spider’s leg farthest from the rift.

The Nightmare unleashed a painful cry as it turned its hulking body toward the Warden that dared attack him.

The distraction worked better than Dorian expected. Evelyn and Hawke sprinted forwards the open rift, while he and Solas carried the sinking elf as fast as their muscles would allow. The Inquisitor and Champion exited through the pulsing screen of the portal and disappeared as the surface stilled.

A monstrous roar filled the surrounding air until it was hard to breathe as he heard Blackwall’s sword ricocheting against the demon’s insect-like flesh. He couldn’t look back. The man had made his decision and they would respect it, but Dorian saw no harm in giving him any advantage possible. He cast a barrier in the Warden’s direction as the two mages reached the portal now shaking violently as a glowing emerald illumination grew brighter from the other side.

*No. Evelyn, no.*

Dorian summoned a strength he didn’t remember having, grunting as he dragged the two elves to the edge of the rift and through without stopping. The emerald light blinded him. His vision came into focus painfully as the courtyard of Adamant rendered in all its disgusting glory. Just as the rift behind them snapped shut sealing Blackwall forever in the land where the living didn’t belong.

As his energy emptied in relief, he stared at Evelyn standing ahead in the distance. Her features pale and yellowed, her fading hand still raised and quivering in the air as the emerald magic curled back into her palm. She’d closed the rift without care of who else escaped.

*Fuck you, Ev.*

A triumphant cheer erupted from the Inquisition soldiers as the final demons were overtaken in the courtyard, their victory secured. They had done the fucking impossible. They’d marched across a desert and destroyed the Warden’s demon army.

Both mages faltered on their next steps, the weight of the injured Warden much heavier outside the altered reality of the Fade. A group of young soldiers ran forward to grab the girl from their grasp as Dorian contemplated face-planting into the dirt in sheer exhaustion. Solas somehow remained on his feet instructing the soldiers where to take Idalya for healing, issuing commands to the bewildered soldiers like he was the commander, instead of an apostate in way over his head.
Soldiers were hugging and shaking hands in celebration of their victory. The differing uniforms blending together as they fought and shared in their jubilation as one. A line of surrendered Wardens stood against the far wall of the courtyard. Their regret palpable, unknowing that one who’d desired to be like them had saved them all.

He needed a drink

Once in camp, he was raiding the Orlesian wine stores. There weren’t enough bottles to drown out the misery of what he’d experienced in the Fade. But even wine didn’t offer the same comfort it afforded as Dorian feared what waited for him once he closed his eyes.

Stepping forward, a shudder ran the length of his spine from across the plains of existence as his barrier broke in another world. He clenched his eyes as his magic faded away. The warrior left vulnerable and abandoned in the other dimension.

Thom Rainer had been a coward, but Gordon Blackwall sacrificed himself without fear ensuring Thedas would have a chance. Evelyn and Idalya survived, and they had contained the Wardens. It was a victory they would write that about for generations, without a note of its losses.

A group of Orlesian masked servants bustled Evelyn out of the courtyard to scrub away the remnant vile bits of Warden stuck to her armor considered unsavory in the Game. Behind him, Marion Hawke climbed the broken fountain in the courtyard until she stood above the crowd, a maddened look to her bird-like features.

“This is a blessed day! We are the Maker’s chosen to bring his light to all reaches of Thedas!” Her voice carried on the desert air, echoing through the silent stone hallways of the fortress lined with gore.

The packs of soldiers froze until a set of chuckles echoed from the back of the courtyard which grew contagious over the crowd as the Champion professed her divine beliefs to men who’d just seen some shit go down.

“Why are you laughing? The Maker’s guiding hand is with us right now. Can’t you feel his holy touch?” Marion was enraged as the crowd mocked her.

“Why don’t you tell him to remove his finger from your arse and maybe you won’t feel his touch so strongly,” Sera yelled over the echoing hum while tucking her final quivers away, as the crowd erupted into cheers and whoops.

Red-faced and defeated, the Champion jumped down from her ill-fated pedestal as Lilly Hawke stomped red-faced and with fury-filled eyes toward her with purpose.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Marion?” The Templar screamed reaching the embarrassed rogue. “A fucking archdemon! What were you thinking? Were you even thinking?”

Marion’s shoulders slumped as her cousin ripped tore her a new asshole in front of the groups of soldiers still chuckling at her failed sermon. From behind them, her King approached.

Dorian’s eyes narrowed when instead of embracing his wife after her survival, he grabbed the woman forcefully by her bicep and dragged her away from the scene she’d caused. The soldiers returned to the work at hand not noticing his silent brutality or not caring. Lilly stood rigid, fist clasped at her sides as she contemplated the consequences of challenging Starkhaven’s king.

With downturned and sullen eyes, Marion followed her husband’s orders without a fight. Sebastian had followed her across countries due to her disobedience. With the battle over, the King seemed
keen to remind the woman who leads their kingdom.

Wine was calling Dorian home. As tempting as it was to raid the camps, he had work to do first. He had to find Josephine and tell her the sacrifice her love made for them. He didn’t think of himself as the first person he’d nominate to deliver life-shattering news, but Blackwall trusted him to deliver the news of his fate and he would not let the Warden down.

Chapter End Notes

As most people have guessed, O&A wasn't intended to be as many chapters as it's become. Though not surprising that an honest look into PTSD's effects on characters would get wordy.

There are about five chapters remaining to wrap up the fallout of Adamant and close out this act before the final one starts.

Here's my question: Should the next act be part of this story, or start a new one? Act 3 has a natural time jump and a new story would contain act 3 + Trespasser, instead of Trespasser being is own separate sequel. My Scrivener file for O&A is massive currently and takes minutes to open and close. I'll have to start a new file for Act 3 anyway, so I wanted to pose the question if you'd like new chapters to be in a new story or keep adding to this behemoth.

Thanks for your feedback!
The energetic chaos of battle had transferred its frenzy into camp. Every face laced with panic while sprinting between tents. Barris’ focus was single-minded as he wove through the endless lines of frantic messengers.

He’d escorted Evelyn to the safety of her tent in the Orlesian base, tasking Lilly to keep the Inquisitor safe from any lingering assassin looking to re-balance the results of the fight. Barris bolted once his duty was transferred. His body fleeing to where his heart remained since the final rift snapped shut ensuring their victory.

The fear that clutched him watching Dorian and Solas drag the Warden from the Fade still poisoned his mind, even if the relief in the apostate’s eyes told him she’d survived. He needed to see her eyes open, hear her voice again, see the smile that made the rest of the world makes sense. Anything to calm the terror festering within his weary soul.

Not all that toppled into the Fade were as lucky.

Warden Blackwall had been lost, an excruciating loss for those who traveled at the Inquisitor’s side. A quiet man who’d fought harder than any in their ranks. He’d made the ultimate sacrifice to ensure the Inquisition’s survival. A choice Barris hoped others would make in the same position. There would be celebrations for the grizzled Warden but now was not the time. Now they were focused on those still breathing.

Reaching the edge of the medics area, Barris’ metal-encased boots stalled. The smell of blood and thick swirling mana coated the air before the cries and moans of the wounded became audible. Healer cots spanned across the horizon, large portions of their camp converted to an emergency hospital as the Inquisition’s healers moved deftly from cot to cot identifying who they had the resources to save.
The waves of dying soldiers were unending before him. He spied crimson-coated Templar armor in the distance and his heart mourned. His body had sustained burns and bruises through the battle. Neither his training nor luck, had failed him. He was alive while so many of their men were not.

*The coming days would be solemn ones as their full losses became clear.*

The triage was abuzz with activity as he maneuvered his way through the beds. A dozen yards in, his shoulders fell in desperation. His armor was too wide to move through the stationary cots. His selfish presence only drew attention away from those suffering for their cause.

Dal would find him when her eyes finally opened. She’d leave the infirmary and come to his side and together they could finally look beyond this battle at the thing they’d feared to discuss—*a future.*

He waded his way out of the sea of injured and he froze, his ears hearing *elven* mumbled between the healers’ inquiries. Searching, he spotted Solas staggering amongst the cots as his wavering steps took him from the wounded. His skin was grayed, mana dangerously low from mending blows. Dark circles blossomed below his frantic bloodshot eyes.

The elf’s appearance made his fear cascade brighter into a tightly wound inferno.

“*Solas!*” He stumbled away as Barris tried to draw his attention.

The Templar wove through the darting messengers as he gained on the hobbling mage.

“*Solas?*” He grabbed the man’s shoulder.

The mage turned in rage. Verdant fire storming behind his eyes. It extinguished quickly as exhaustion ran its inevitable course.

“It’s *you.*” the mage slurred. They’d need to find a bottle of lyrium for the man immediately. He’d poured too much of himself into healing.

“Is she…” He couldn’t say the words.

*Please, don’t let this be because of her.*

“Is she *what?*” The mage hissed and Barris stepped back in understanding that he’d missed something vital. Solas rubbed the skin of his forehead in frustration and lack of energy. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath steadying himself. “She lives.”

*Thank the Maker.*

So much fear clouded his horizon that he felt the sky open and light break through to the earth.

“Resting.” The elf continued speaking more to himself than Barris. “Her skull suffered damage, but I repaired it. When she awakens, she’ll be confused and disoriented but she *should* be herself.”

Barris restrained himself from lifting the elf in the air and jumping for joy. The next person to lay a hand on Solas would lose it by the mage’s earlier reaction. So blind in his jubilation, he missed the tortured expression on man’s face, the uncertainty oozing off him concerning his ward.

“He cracked her skull, *but I fixed it,*” Solas mumbled again, his mind far from where he stood.

*“Who hurt her?”* Anger blossomed out his fear at the thought of anyone harming the Warden. He yearned for something to strike, something to unleash the horrors he’d just seen upon.
“Blackwall.”

The Templar’s blood ran cold as the name was uttered. If the man wasn’t already dead, Barris would have found him in camp and murdered him. His bare hands choking the life from the grizzled man until blood vessels exploded across the expanse of his eyes.

“I froze…” the elf paled further as the memories became fresh wounds, “she would have fought the Nightmare on her own and I would have died with her. That really would have ruined her plan, you know?”

Barris didn’t know. He had no idea what the elf was speaking about.

“But no, Blackwall stopped her the only way he knew how. I would have used words and she would have died. But not Blackwall.” A vile laugh exited the mage’s frame and Barris took a step back starting to worry that the stress of the battle might have broken the man’s mind.

The mage’s stores were violently depleted. He needed rest or risked death. Reaching into a side pouch within his armor, Barris pulled his remaining half bottle of lyrium. He shoved it into the elf’s hands as he stepped closer.

“Solas, I need to get you somewhere to rest. Dal will never forgive me if I leave you out here like this. You’re going to kill yourself. Where is your tent?”

He understood the dire state of the man when he didn’t fight the help, and his hand briefly motioned toward the direction of the remaining Inquisition barracks.

His last words before battle to her had been a promise to protect her teacher. He’d been unable to protect them from what they sustained in the Fade, but he could keep the elf safe until his love awoke.

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Josephine Montilyet, the Antivan goddess, was beautiful even as she cried.

Dorian sat in silence beside the crumbling woman as her unending tears cascaded into the folded square of silk pressed against her founts of sadness. Her body fighting the reality that Blackwall would never return.

The second he’d knocked on the support beam before entering the tent without permission, she’d understood his purpose. Teeth pressed into her quivering bottom lip as her emotions spilled over. Her unstable tension snapping as her worst fears came to fruition. So many men had been lost that no one in the Inquisition had the luxury to not know a close name or face that wouldn’t return to Skyhold.

He imagined what he’d want to hear if Bull had been lost in the fortress. There were no words that could balm the wound that would puncture his soul. As it was, he hadn’t seen Bull since Evelyn snapped the portal shut behind him, sealing Blackwall into the Fade forever. He imagined the Qunari survived the battle or a solemn messenger of his own would have sought him out.

His face spoke volumes as both sat in silence together. Intensely feeling while unable to draw words. He couldn’t speak of the man’s sacrifice, nor that they’d have no body to burn on the pyre already being constructed in the flat plain of the desert.

Blackwall, with his final request, picked him to deliver the news to Josephine that her life had been irrevocably changed and Dorian sat in silence, holding the weeping Ambassador’s hand, unable to
piece the most minor of sentences together.

Her tears finally slowed. Josephine reached out and pressed her other tear-strewn hand atop his and squeezed. Thanking him for his support or whatever this was. He hoped his attempt didn’t disappoint Blackwall and that just being there was what the Ambassador needed in the beginning moments of her grief.

Dorian didn’t need to be told that it was time to leave. He rose from the chair beside the stricken woman as he wound his way from the tent. Blackwall might be missing from Josephine’s life, but her stack of work remained. Their allies had saved the Inquisition from complete ruin tonight. It was her job to thank them and begin the process of returning the demanded favors for their assistance. No one in Thedas gave without expecting in return.

The air was somehow heavier outside the tent. Reality thick and bitter tasting. His first instinct was to head to the wounded and help those in need. He’d been turned away on his first attempt, Solas ratting him out for his head injury while tumbling into the Fade. He’d been instructed to rest and return in the morning, forced to watch Solas carry the unconscious Warden across the makeshift hospital, her arms dangling limply in the crushed armor at her sides.

The camp was one constant buzzing echo. It vibrated through him, causing his chest to ache in exhaustion. Sleep called to him to recharge, to heal the wounds none could see. What would appear when his eyes shuttered? The Nightmare showed Dorian his greatest fears, made him experience losing what should break him, yet here he stood. Alive and stumbling without purpose.

He wandered past his tent, unable to stomach remaining alone for the passing hours. A destination wasn’t planned as he meandered lost through the stretches of barracks, uninjured soldiers limping past him into the protections of their cots.

His body froze in front of the massive tent at the end of the line, understanding it was the only place he could have gone. The only place that could offer comfort and absolution. No more walls, no more guards. No more denying what he needed.

At the flap of the tent, Dorian knocked on the support beam, grimacing at the echoing thud from each rap of his knuckles. The silence following was empty and consuming as he waited, his heart fluttering rapidly.

The flap flew open and Bull stood bathed in dim light, concern etching his features at Dorian’s arrival.

“Can I come in?” The mage almost laughed at the discovery that his voice still worked.

Bull carefully watched his expression, reading the story every minor adjustment of his features told the former spy. “Are you sure?” He was unconvinced by something he observed.

“More than anything.” It was freeing to speak the truth. “I’m so sorry… about everything.” He closed his eyes and took a deep breath steadying the nerves screaming at him to stop, to protect himself from allowing someone to see the real him and all the jagged edges he contained. “I miss you.”

The Qunari was convinced as he pulled Dorian to him, wrapping him tight in the cage of his arms, as the mage sighed against his bare chest. His shoulders shivered in the warmth as Bull protected him.

“Oh, Dor,” Bull sighed, running his calloused hands along the length of his mage’s spine. “What
happened in the Fade?"

Secrets had been killing him one day at a time, but no more.

Dorian pulled back, looking up into the face of the man who’d he’d missed like an organ forcibly removed from his body. “Inside I experienced my greatest joy and my greatest sorrow, and they both involved you.”

A smile spread across Bull’s thin gray lips as he analyzed every inch of him. Maybe they would find a way to survive this war and make that dream of the Trevinter house with filled with the ocean breeze and the sounds of their barreling children a reality someday.

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Solas stormed into his tent, waving off the Templar’s assistance, his mind a screaming cacophony of commotion.

He needed to pack his belongings and leave with haste and run as far as his legs would carry him before stopping. Mythal’s hand had guided them this entire time and he’d again been another pawn in her machinations.

From the first moment he’d spied the Warden, he knew Leliana and Fiona couldn’t access the level of power required to rip her vital spark out of the nothingness beyond the Fade. But Mythal could. Maybe the Warden had no memories of the Fade because the goddess kept her tucked away for a rainy day.

Why hadn’t he questioned further? How had he grown complacent in the face of something unseen to him in his millennia of life? If Mythal could pull the Warden out of time to walk again unharmed, what else could she bring kicking and screaming into this world?

Idalya.

The thought of the girl he’d opened his ice-encrusted heart to accept as his child gutted him. His knees shook as he took the final unsteady steps to his cot, collapsing in defeat. He needed to run but couldn’t.

Leaving her behind was not an option, no matter the identity of the master pulling her strings. She was innocent, unaware she was part of a prophecy or plan existing in stone long before her common birth. He would not allow her to stumble through the goddess’ plans alone.

His face fell into his hands, overwhelmed with the magnitude of his discoveries.

Corypheus was given his orb to unlock its power, to do the busy work he’d been too weak to complete upon waking. The Magister split his power into an unnatural beast, a corrupted resurrected Archdemon powered by red lyrium that poisoned all it touched.

To balance the scales, Mythal brought forth the Warden, but she’d come through incomplete and reassembled. Empty of her memories, her magic grew exponentially until she was unaware that her powers rivaled the other mages of Skyhold. Why had Mythal given her the magic? To what end was she destined to need it? Or was Idalya merely practice for the goddess? A means to an intrusive end that allowed her to test a hypothesis.

The fabric of reality shifted. The veil stretching and gaping as a presence entered the tent. If she had the gall to come to him in this world after her garish display involving Idalya in the Fade, he could not be held responsible for his actions…
“The broken tapestry is patched together, each needle looping through the edges until pulled taut. Two becoming one. She’ll walk without the fog now. Should I… do you think she’d be happier in the fog?”

Solas’ blood ran cold through his veins at the spirit’s words. A voice reaching across another time as the severity of the situation became grimmer. His hands lowered to his sides, arms growing numb as the boy became visible even in the missing light. Straw-colored hair, empty blue eyes, and his patchwork brimmed hat hanging low over his face.

What had been happening all this time?

“Cole,” his voice croaked out, nearly a sob, in his growing terror, “where have you been?”

The boy frowned knowing the next question coming from the elf, awaiting his anger.

Solas’ brows lowered, his eyes narrowing as the weight of boy’s appearance was felt, “…and why couldn’t I remember you?”

*****

The Fade was splintered, sharp, as she was pulled through. Colors swirling and soaring before exploding. It was too much. All of it rushing past then orbiting around her form. Bathing her skin in a rioting prism of vibrant tones.

They pulsed, growing stronger, their speeds increasing as it overwhelmed her. In the distance, she saw a cloud of turbulent colors churning as it reached for her. She didn’t understand, but feared, so she ran.

As fast as her elven legs would carry her, she sprinted across the Fade, pivoting and jumping over empty gaps now overfilling with color as she launched past. The clouds continued to speed toward her.

Fear pumped through from the unknown as she sprinted ahead. She was coming to the end… of something. An invisible barrier, stopping her from running into the emptiness, from escaping what was coming for her.

There was nowhere else to go, nowhere to hide, no place to escape. She covered her eyes as a blood-curdling scream escaped her lungs.

Dal’s eyes snapped open.

The linen tent lining filling her field of vision as she stared at the ceiling in a large open barrier. A strong scent of antiseptic reached her nostrils as she scrunched her face. Healers. She’d been injured. The early smell of infection floated on the breeze around her as her stomach heaved in the understanding of its whispered impending doom.

Lifting an awakening arm, she sighed finding her brown skin intact, the cascading rainbow of attacking colors left behind in her dreams. She closed her eyes as she exhaled.

What the fuck was that and where the fuck was she?

The camp was loud as the injured groaned and begged for relief that wouldn’t be found. She searched her mind for what happened but could only remember the searing flames of the dragon
and those fighting around her.

She heard the tell-tale *crunch* and *clink* of armor as soldiers walked past away from the tents.

“...and now that the Wardens have been defeated, we shall celebrate our victory.”

Horror invaded every inch of her body as their vile accents slithered into her ears. *Orlesians. She’d been captured by Orlesians. She needed to get the fuck out of here.* She didn’t know how it happened, but there was no time.

Lifting her head, she analyzed her surroundings. There were healers in the distance administering help to those with the greatest chance of survival. The beds around her were empty or held dead men. Their uniforms unreadable through the thickened pools of blood coagulating across their chests.

Dal rolled off the cot without making a sound, crouching behind the shelter, scanning the darkness around the perimeter. She crept forward, peering outside at the lines of tents- a banner with an unknown symbol flapped in the breeze overhead: a white eye pierced by a dagger, its tendrils reaching out in all directions. Whoever these people were, they were aligned with Orlais and were enemies.

In the distance a massive building stood overhead, stone walls reaching toward the sky. Its presence bothered her, and she trusted her instincts when they told her to head in the opposite direction. She was without armor, dressed only in a sleeveless tunic and leather breeches. She was resourceful. She’d make do.

Silently, she snuck around the border edge of the line of cots. From a crouched positioned she cleared the line until she slid behind the first closed-wall tent into the shadows unseen by the soldiers traveling across the camp.

It was no task to travel along the back of the camp. It was empty with no guards stationed on duty following battle. She kept her face pointed down, ignoring the changing banners overhead as her nimble feet moved in silence across the hardened sand.

In the distance she could see where the camps ended, opening into rolling dunes that sprawled to the horizon. Once she safely slipped into those hills, she’d be out of their reach forever, and able to find shelter. Then she could breathe and figure out *what the fuck* was happening.

Her muscles froze. A nagging force in her mind directing her eyes over her shoulder, an instinct refusing to be denied. Her jaw gaped, eyes baffled at what they found: crimson mabari set against a golden crest. The banner curled and snapped in the desert winds, agitated like a caged beast.

*Home.*

She didn’t know where she was or what was happening, but she’d found her salvation.

Her boots moved toward the banner and its flowing camp stretching into the distance. Ferelden soldiers paced, speaking in hushed whispers of troop movements and caravans.

*They were preparing to leave this dreaded place and she was going with them.*

A lazy smile glanced her lips as she progressed through the shadows into the Ferelden camp. Whatever this nightmare was, it was over. She’d be safe here from the Orlesians. …*or would she?* She froze, kneeling behind the safety of a vacated tent.
She saw Loghain’s features clear in her mind. Remembered the vile filth he’d used to poison people’s mind with about her order. He’d accused them of being murders, kingslayers, as having taken a side in their civil war as the darkspawn used their ignorance to their advantage to flood over the unprotected fields of Ferelden. So many had supported the usurper. A patriotic man, a hero who’d declared war on his own country for selfish ends. She’d had to quell the urge to celebrate when they’d separated the traitorous man’s head from his shoulders.

They...

A wave of nausea struck Dal. She doubled over as her lungs were squeezed, unable to take a full breath. A rippling pain grew around her heart, tightening with each thundering pound of her heart. Her hands grasped her chest as the pressure increased, suffocating her system as it overwhelmed her senses.

Grimacing, she forced her way to her feet, her hands bracing against the tent support. One staggering step forward and her ears were deafened, a violent storm howling within. Her mind swooned as the sound grew louder until it grew to a massive crescendo.

Pop.

The world quieted once more as Idalya clutched the edge of the tent, her heart pulsing as she tried to understand what was happening.

Boom.

Her eyes widened as her heart beat. The muscle screaming from within her chest. But this time, not alone.

Boom. Boom.

It beat in perfect cadence with another.

She ran.

Instead of away from the unknown like her nightmare, this time she sprinted toward it. Soldiers hopped out of her way as she dashed through the thoroughfare with a single-minded focus. Allowing the taint to unfurl from within her, she reached in all directions letting it guide her to her destination. Tents and barracks flew by, but she kept running, unable to stop herself. She’d die before she’d slow her pace.

The darkness motioned her to turn and she followed, unquestioning of its wants. Her boots kicked up sand leaving a dusty trail behind. A massive tent grew in the distance and she knew that’s where she was headed. That’s where she’d find it. The heart reaching for hers. Drawing her to it.

She’d brought no weapons, and had no armor, and had no idea what she was heading for. But she had no other choice but to follow.

Her boots skidded to a stop as reached the front of the enormous tent towering above her. Without hesitation, she threw back the tent’s flap as she entered the flickering darkness, the gust extinguishing the only candle as she squinted into the darkness.

“Ali.”

“Ali, are you there?”
From the feedback I received, I think I'm going to end O&A here at the end of Adamant and start the next chapters as a new story, I'll make sure to keep everyone updated as I set up my new Scrivener file and get everything ready to go!

Leave a comment and let me know what you think is going to happen? This chapter was insanity, right?!
The Chapter Where Cullen Rutherford is Not a Smart Man

Chapter Summary

The Inquisition may have won the battle at Adamant, but their Commander is losing his battle to lyrium withdrawal. At his most desperate is it the man making the decisions or the disease?

Chapter Notes

*Sings a song* "ALL THE CONTENT WARNINGS! DON'T BE SURPRISED!"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hours following battle congealed together into a nebulous mass until Cullen was cocooned within a pile of parchments requiring his unbroken attention for days. Initial casualty counts were complete at thirty-five percent of their army. A third of his men. Cullen knew those numbers would rise over the coming days as each collapsed rock of the fortress was inspected while those in triage succumbed to festering wounds.

The list of the missing was almost the length of the casualties. It included most of Cullen’s lieutenants and Knight-Commander Barris. As difficult as having Rylen at Griffon Keep felt, Cullen was glad to have him far from here. The thought of losing one best friend filled his chest with a panicking fear but losing both would destroy him. Leliana’s scouts could no longer locate Idalya after she’d disappeared from the healers’. They presumed she was searching the Fortress for the missing Templar.

His mind was exhausted and failing him. Cullen longed for battles fought as a Templar; to fight with no reservations as lyrium dulled your sense of right and wrong. The faces of the Wardens he’d slaughtered lingered in his mind. A fighting Templar couldn’t afford a conscience. It was the curse of a Chantry-free life to live with your mistakes. For the first time in weeks, his lyrium cravings became unbearable as his energy stores depleted. Adrenalin fleeing from his system.

With a heavy sigh, he placed his palms on the makeshift desk, digging his boots into the sandy dirt floor. His head hung low as the withdrawal headache pounded in his temples, darkening the corners of his vision until just opening his eyes was a struggle.

The flap of the tent opened, and an exhausted courier with disheveled ginger hair stepped forward.

“Sir, I’m to collect your armor for cleaning.”

Cullen scoffed at the thought of prioritizing clean armor over his missing soldiers. He motioned with disdain to the back corner where his equipment was uncharacteristically abandoned.

The courier nodded, collecting Cullen’s blood-congealed armor piece by dripping piece, a disgusted expression on his face. With a grunt, the boy lifted the pile of steel and left. Cullen ignored his exit, hearing the boy apologize as he collided with another mass upon exit.
The flap reopened as someone entered. Cullen could smell her, lemon verbena and honey. A scent he once yearned for, but now only triggered anger.

“Cullen, I need to…” Her voice was smoke on the wind. A smoldering fire threatening to erupt.

“Get the fuck out, Evelyn.” He interrupted with a growl through bared teeth.

She was the last person he needed to deal with as his veins screamed and pleaded for the lyrium it wouldn’t find injected. He couldn’t care less about what she needed. All these months he’d suffered, and she’d never cared about what he needed.

If he caved to her games now, he’d never claw his way back to humanity.

Dorian and Solas had exited the rift carrying an unconscious Dal, barely making it through the rift before Evelyn sealed it shut with a sickening pop. Solas carried the hurt Hero to the healer’s tent where the elf remained hours later healing soldiers with what appeared an unlimited amount of mana.

Evelyn, escorted by handmaidens from battle, vacated the scene to bathe and change into clothing befitting the future Empress of Orlais, leaving the surrendered Orlesian Wardens in limboed confusion. He’d departed before she returned to deliver her grand speech, unwilling to listen to another series of her lies. He discovered later that Hawke attempted to speak to the harsh audience about the miracle the Maker bestowed upon their armies that day to abysmal results. That he would have enjoyed watching.

“That’s no way to greet your leader, Commander.” She pressed her shoulders back, pointing her chin up in defiance and she approached. There was a quiver to her voice, desperation she tried to rein in. She was shaken. He always sensed when she was unraveling to the pressures of her righteous expectations.

Cullen took a deep breath to calm the anger hammering through him, overtaking the need for lyrium. Now that the battle was over, his brewing fury from these months could come to a head.

Against his better judgment, he flicked his eyes in her direction and his breath staggered. She was beautiful. Her silver Andrastian armor stripped away and her skin now adorned with a deep emerald green dress, silver leaves woven into the fabric and matching cape. Hair off her shoulders, with metal leaves woven through her deep auburn braids.

It felt like weeks since he’d laid eyes on her instead of hours. She would always be more beautiful than anything he’d ever seen, but he knew better now than to fall for the charade. Her carefully crafted illusion.

“There you go using that word again: leader. I’m uncertain it means what you think it means.” What are you doing? Battling Evelyn in a battle of wits was one in which he’d end up disemboweled. Gutted by the speed of her mind.

A bitter laugh echoed out of her, a smoky sound that expanded the reservoir of pain remaining all this time. Why did every minor interaction reopen the wound of his improperly stitched heart?

“I’m the Inquisitor. That means this army is mine. I know it’s a hard concept to you, but titles are everything, my dear Cullen. Titles are more powerful than any sword you’ll ever swing.” Reaching his desk, she entered the aura of his lantern and stood, her curved hip jutted to the side as she watched him like a caged animal as she sighed, a shudder passing over her. She was really shaken. “That’s not what I’m here to discuss though.”
Cullen’s fists balled tightly at his sides at the gall of this woman to march in here and disrupt the work she couldn’t be bothered to be involved with. How dare she lecture him on the importance of titles? Hadn’t she already painfully taught that lesson?

Who did she think she was?

Josephine and Leliana were convinced the Inquisition needed to maintain the image of Evelyn’s involvement at Skyhold. If people knew the truth, they would lose support across their allies. Cullen couldn’t give a flipping fuck about the consequences of exposing her and Gaspard for their lies. The irony that he recommended siding with the Emperor filled the Commander with bitter resentment he had difficulty swallowing. Acid scorching the length of his throat as he attempted to push down his pride.

The longer Evelyn remained looking like an ancient goddess ripped from a children’s bedtime story the more rage flooded him as withdrawals funneled into a palpable emotion.

“Leave, Inquisitor, unless you have something pertinent to my work. Escort yourself out. I have no interest in arguing for nostalgia’s sake.” He saw the anger flood her eyes. Part of him reveled in it no matter how fruitless it was. Evelyn prided herself on being needed. Being brushed off was an insult she could not bear.

“You order me to leave?” Her fist slammed his desk as her eyes shot invisible daggers. “You seem to forget that you follow my orders, Commander!” Good, let her feel a fraction of the anger she has inflicted on me. “I could have you thrown in the cells of Skyhold for insubordination. Groveling on your hands and knees for your job back until thrown to the street- a disgraced Templar begging for the next hit of lyrium like Samson.” The words she spat were pure venom and Cullen filled with a burning rage he’d forgotten she ignited within him.

Round the desk, he headed for her. Evelyn never flinched as Cullen’s looming form dwarfed her minor frame. Her unfailing chin pointed toward him, almost hiding the quiver in her body.

“I will never grovel for anything from you, Evelyn.” His voice was low and dangerous from poorly veiled anger.

“You’re smarter than your Ambassador and Spymaster then. ‘Oh Inquisitor, please return, think of poor Cullen.’” Her impression of Josephine’s accent made Cullen ill. Withdrawal eager to empty the meager contents of his stomach. “They thought begging on your behalf would allow me to desert the Orlesian throne.”

Cullen’s eyebrows rose in surprise, he hadn’t known Josie and Leliana begged her to return to the Inquisition. There should be no surprise. He was always at the mercy of these women.

“No, I just know better than to beg for something given out freely to anyone with a title.”

The slap arrived so quick his eyes never registered the movement of her hand. His cheek vibrated radiating pain from its contact point. He was swinging low but didn’t care. He wanted to hurt her, the way she’d hurt him.

“Don’t you ever say that again.” It was a statement and a threat. She was shaking, breaths exiting in raspy patches.

“Sore subject, Ev? I thought a Free Marches whore would be a novelty among the Orlesian court.” This time he was ready for the swing and caught her wrist cruelly in midair, a growl escaping her plump lips stained the color of blood. This was going too far, but couldn’t stop himself, his
withdrawal from lyrium and her taking over.

Evelyn had so few insecurities he needed to fight dirty to level the playfield, but he had taken this beyond the point of no return. Nothing would be the same past this moment.

She’d whispered her truths in the darkness of how her father had passed her amongst his noble friends while still just a girl. Those vile men may not have taken her maidenhead, they took something far more valuable in its place- her innocence. The first moment his jealousy allowed, he threw that knowledge into her face knowing how deeply it would wound.

“Get your hands off of me, you filthy Ferelden dog.” She pulled her wrist back with force, but Cullen held firm refusing to let her retreat. Refusing to let her run away once again.

His anger and jealousy blinded him so deeply that she surprised him when her head reared back, and spit into his face. His rage flared, instincts running rampant as his body thundered with every beat of his heart. Using his size to his advantage, he flipped their positions and rammed her back into the edge of the desk harder than necessary. A whimper escaped through her pursed lips at the impact as her chest heaved with the effort.

Cullen remained frozen staring into the olive eyes widening in an emotion resembling fear laced with something far more dangerous for him while her spittle leaked down his burning cheek.

His veins pounded with a combination of fury, pain, and the power of being pressed against her. The smells of her soap and perfume were intoxicating. His body was aching and radiating in her presence. It was not the place for a smart man to stand, but Cullen Rutherford was not a smart man.

His free hand grabbed her harshly by the hip and wrenched her pelvis forward until her sex was pressed into his throbbing erection. Her long lashes fluttered as her eyes rolled upwards. She bit her teeth into her lower lip as she muffled any sound that dared betray her needs as her breathing came in staccato gasps.

Pressing her harder back into the desk, he placed his lips against her ear as he rolled his hips tightly against her. “But I thought you liked to lie down with the dogs, Evelyn” he whispered against the soft skin and she shuddered beneath his touch. The way his heart soared at her reaction only incensed the fury deeper in his chest. He had trusted her, loved her, put his faith in her and she destroyed it all. “Is that your secret, Ev? Not that you lay down with filthy dogs, but how badly you need it.” With that, her fear transformed into something far more dangerous he knew would kill him someday as a moan escaped through her now parted lips.

Dropping her wrist, Cullen moved his hands under her firm ass and hoisted her onto the edge of the desk as his mouth worked the flesh of her earlobe between his teeth, while he continued rubbing his confined cock along the apex of her thighs. Evelyn’s hands grabbed the edge of her velvet skirts to ruck them over her thighs as she groaned from the friction against her cunt, but Cullen pushed them away.

She made a sound of desperation while trying to steady herself. “Cullen, I need to talk to…”

“Shut your mouth, Evelyn, I don’t want to hear a fucking word out of you.” He emphasized his point with the clench of his teeth, making her utter a small cry as she rolled her hips back against his.

He needed to stop. If he made good decisions, he would sprint from this tent and never return. But it wasn’t good decisions that brought him to this moment.
She had hurt him worse than anyone he had ever trusted and didn’t deserve to get what she wanted, though their current wants were aligned even as his anger threatened to destroy everything around them as though on a pyre. Lowering his mouth to her neck, he bit the graceful slope as her mix of pain and pleasure spurred him on.

“Does he fuck you the way you like, Ev? Does he know all those spots that if touches just right will make you keen like a wounded animal?” He felt her stiffen, and he leaned back to look. Her eyes were wide as fear pooled back into her blown pupils. He rested his forehead against hers, legs leaning into her shaking thighs, a free hand pinching one of her hardened nipples through her dress as she released an echoing gasp into his features. “I bet he has no idea how dirty you need it, that he has no idea who the real Evelyn is.”

As his foot slipped from the pressure of his boot grinding into the dirt below his feet, he picked her up in the air throwing her legs around his waist and dropped to his knees, falling forward to the dirt floor as Evelyn landed on her back with a heavy thud. A cloud of dust lifting around her like the darkened halo of a demon.

Someone would expect a future Empress to be horrified at the state of a dress that cost more than he made in a month’s salary, but he knew the real Evelyn and when he met her eyes, they were full of need. He was right, Gaspard had no idea what to do with a woman like her.

Evelyn was broken like him. He had fallen in love with her because they had showed each other the cracks, but she destroyed it all for power. She gave it all up for the only thing he could never give her- a noble name.

Reaching down, he grabbed the hem of her skirt and pulled with both hands until the fabric gave and tore baring her up to her sopping wet small clothes. Evelyn’s skin flushed as she watched him unlace his breeches sloppily with one hand. He sighed as his prick sprang free and bobbed in the cold night air. She licked her lips hungrily and rolled her hips aching for friction. Moving over her, he watched the need building inside her.

*How many times had she let that Orlesian pig fuck her while pretending it was him inside her?*

“Do you want me, Ev?”

She began to speak, but Cullen’s hand was too fast, his finger pressed against her swollen lips, with a shake of his head.

“Not a word.” He reprimanded.

She met his eyes without fear as she nodded, desire running unchecked through her veins.

“Do you need what only I can give you?” A ripple of a smile flashed across her lips before she pressed them to the underside of his finger and sealed their agreement.

Again, she nodded, her pupils blown as his cock ached in memory of what awaited him. He was a lair. This was more about him and his inadequacies than it would ever be about her.

Never breaking her sight, Cullen ran his sweaty palm through the loosely packed dirt of the floor before grabbing her face with his dirt-smeared hand. Thumb digging in one cheek, his fingers pressed into the other leaving smudges along her face like ashes. Pressing her cheeks together so that her lips pursed, he leaned his own against hers.

“Let me show you how filthy we Ferelden dogs can get.” He whispered, and he felt a wave of heat emanate from her body, her eyes desperate for more. Leaning back from her lips, he still held her
face tightly as his other hand pulled her small clothes roughly to the side. With one thrust, he was deeply seated in her wetness. Her eyes widened at how he’d entered her, pursed lips opened into an O, but she melted against his touch as her cunt adjusted to how far she’d been spread.

The feeling of her squeezing him tightly made him crumble to tears. He’d lost the only thing that felt like home, but he’d never dare let her see how much she hurt him. His sorrow and rage fought deep within his heart and luckily rage won but for how much longer he didn’t know.

Sliding out slowly, he thundered back into her so hard her teeth clacked, and a deep moan worked its way out of the back of her throat. As her eyes closed and her lips opened, Cullen ran his dirt-covered thumb over her burgundy-painted lips, before slipping past the waiting invitation into her mouth. Her cunt throbbed around him as he slid his filthy finger over her soft tongue in small circles.

Opening her eyes, she met his in a challenge and as his thumb broached deeper into her, she wrapped her lips around it and sucked deeply as she caressed the underside with the length of her tongue as she cleaned the filth from him one lick at a time.

Now it was his turn to shudder, as she squeezed her cunt in rhythm with the movements of her tongue. Pulling his thumb from her mouth with a loud pop, he glared down at the siren below him who now had a grin spread across her dirt-strewn cheeks. His anger flared and her satisfaction was the fuel on the fire of his desperation.

His hands gripped her hips and flipped her over on her knees before his hand grabbed the dirt-covered braids of her hair and shoved her face down into the dirt. Evelyn coughed briefly from inhaling the dust into her lungs, but Cullen was already pulling her filthy skirts over her back to fully expose her.

She moaned loudly as he slid back inside her. She pushed back, challenging with each stroke, begging him silently as he slammed his cock into her repeatedly trying to block the image of Gaspard touching her the same way, of her moaning under the work of the disgusting man’s fingers, even as she cried his own name.

Tears welled in Cullen’s eyes, but he pushed through determined to see his anger released. He propelled his fear and hatred until he gripped her hips enough to bruise and her cheek scratched along the ground as she gasped and moaned his name with each hammering thrust.

Cullen felt her walls tighten and his anger roared one last time. He exploded.

The orgasm hit him like a wall of sensation. He pulled away and Evelyn released a cry at her emptiness. Pumping his hand along his sensitive cock he emptied the last of his thick ropes over her back and dress. His head fell, chin touching his chest as he gasped for breath. Air worked its way back through his limbs. The responsibilities on his shoulders lighter than they’d been since watching Gaspard wrap his controlling arms around her at Halamshiral.

He opened his eyes. Evelyn was still on her knees, face down in the dirt as tremors shook her frame. She finally sat up in silence and tried to set her dress to rites, wrapping the torn fabric tightly across her quivering body. Turning to Cullen, he paused momentarily as he watched the channels of tears rush through the plains of dirt of her face.

“Cullen...”

“I said I never wanted to hear you speak again. Goodbye.” He rose to his feet, tucking himself back within his breeches, his cock still aching for her when placed back in its confines. No more anger,
no desperation. He was empty of *everything*.

Evelyn’s face fell with an emotion he couldn’t read, but at this moment he couldn’t care. Wrapping her cape tightly around her shoulders, she exited the tent without a word as he’d commanded. Cullen moved back to put his palms down on the desk resuming the position he held until Evelyn decided to make some point she never made it to.

“*Fuck!*” he screamed, grabbing the edge of the desk and throwing it over, his piles of paperwork exploding in the air. Sighing, he reached down and grabbed the full bottle of brandy Varric preemptively dropped off at his tent prior to the fight a lifetime ago.

He couldn’t stay here. He’d already caved for her. It was only a matter of time before he loaded a syringe of lyrium to tap against his veins.

He exited the tent and headed toward the fortress to drink the memories of this day away hopefully forever.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I'm impulsive and couldn't wait a week to publish. *shrugs*
The Chapter Where Dal Sees the Truth

Chapter Summary

As the two parts of her memories collide, Dal understands why the truth doesn't always set you free.

Chapter Notes

*panics* No seriously. I'm panicking to post this chapter, I hope you all love it as much as I do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Ali?”

“Ali, we have to get out of here.”

This had to be a joke. It had to be, or he’d finally lost his mind. The whiskey filling the gaps of his sanity until only illusion remained. Her silhouette filled the entrance. Features hovering in the extinguished light from the warm desert gust of air as she’d whipped open the tent flap.

The taint recognized her. Spiraled and spurred inside his veins at the familiarity, reaching its creeping tendrils in desperation for her. Their hearts thundered in unison, two halves of a corrupted whole. No illusion could mimic that, could it?

Maker, what was happening?

Alistair backed away. Horror seeped through him at the revelation that wouldn’t disappear as he clenched his eyes. The sword in his fist was gripped too tight, his palm growing numb at the sustained pressure. A thick cloud in the sky shifted. Moonlight streamed over her shoulders illuminating the strands of ethereal hair he could never forget.

The sword dropped to the flattened sand with a dulled thud. To his side, he fumbled with the flint in his shaking hand. He scratched the rocks together with useless fingers until a spark struck the candle. Its weary light brightened the features of the face he’d seen in his nightmares every night for a decade.

“Dal?”

He stepped forward unable to help himself, his insanity let loose without restraint. Confusion flickered over her expression, brows furrowed over narrowed violet eyes as he grew visible in the unsteady illumination.

“What’s happening? Where are we?” Fear bathed her words, and his heart broke at the tortured sound.

How could he have forgotten her voice all this time?
Maker, I have lost my mind, but please don’t take this away.

In two strides he closed the distance, hands hovering above the bare arms exposed from her sleeveless tunic. The smell of battle enveloped her. Steel and sweat. Blood and gore. He’d heard rumors of the Nightmare demon the Inquisition fought, but never had he known an illusion could be so vibrant. How much you could yearn for its lies.

If he reached forward to find nothing there, it would break him forever. After a silent prayer to the Maker he no longer believed in, his hands lowered, and a sob escaped his throat as his fingers met the solid chilled smoothness of her skin as the frightened elf leaned away from his touch.

He ripped her into an embrace, uncaring if a demon had conjured this distraction. She stiffened in his unrelenting grip as he pressed a tear-strew cheek into her hair trying to forget the years that passed without her.

Pivoting her strength, she pulled back searching his face for an answer he couldn’t give. “We have to get out of here, there are Orlesians everywhere. I don’t know who’s captured us. We must go while there’s still time.”

He drew her back to him; her sloped ear resting against his chest. His shaking hands ran the length of the loose hair trailing down her back. “There’s no need to run. You’re safe, Dal. No one will harm you here.”

She was unchanged. Youth held in her skin and determination in her eyes long since faded from his own.

Did he survive the battle? He isn’t sure right now. If the reward for falling was his lost Warden, maybe death was worth it.

“I don’t know what’s going on. Where are we?” Her voice was muffled into his thick tunic as he clung to her like a shelter in a raging storm.

“I don’t care how it happened. I have you back.”

She pushed away, resistant to his emotional platitudes. Resolve etched in every youthful slope of her face.

“Ali, are you listening? Or-les-ians.” She threw her arm out, pointing at the world that somehow still existed outside the tent. “They’re everywhere in this camp calling the Grey Wardens the enemy.

“Dal, calm yourself. They’re our allies.” He chuckled at her misplaced anger. Always the serious one. The leader. Forever forced to make up for his gross lack of maturity.

Her almond eyes narrowed again, fury escalating from a simmer to a full boil.

Alistair opened his arms, a show of trust as he approached her. “I promise, no harm will come to you. I am the King of Ferelden; my men will protect us.”

Her jaw dropped. His words tumbled through her panicked mind shaking cobwebs loose as she strained to remember what’s just out of her reach.

“… how?”

There are so many pieces missing. He watched her struggle. She was unaware of what’s happened
or where she’d been.

“It… it doesn’t matter.” Maker. Let him have one moment unburdened with the guilt of what he allowed to happen. What wouldn’t he give to erase that day from time? To tell her whatever lie was necessary to ensure she never struck the final blow.

His weathered fingers slid along the smooth delicate line of her jaw as he tilted her face upwards, his callused thumb trailing the path of her swollen and cracked lips as his mouth descended on her, unable to stop himself.

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Alistair tilted her face up and kissed her greedily, catching her off guard.

The soured duo of whiskey and wine overwhelmed Dal as the King’s lips parted hers. His beard, sharp and wiry, clawed against her skin as his grip on her waist tightened. Tightly she was pulled against this man that’s Alistair, yet… not.

Closing her eyes, everything in her soul tells her that Alistair is the man whose fingers slide across her skin in reverence. But when opening her eyes, her mind couldn’t decipher the haggard and lost King clutching her like she’d dissolve away like sand through his fingers.

Something terrible had happened, and she wasn’t prepared to allow herself to explore it.

Pushing her disgust away, she closed her eyes and leaned into his kiss. Familiarity sparked in her heart as his tongue ran across hers, her body remembering the sensations that once filled her nights. An unknown hesitation filled his movements as heat ran through her limbs as the slamming portions of her soul spurred. A bear stretching, its eyes narrowed at the rising sun, as it meets Spring again.

_This was her home, but how long had she been away? Why did all this feel so…_

He fanned the burning tinder inside her as he explored her with fear-coated fascination. Pushing onto the tips of her boots, she pressed her mouth tighter against him and he read her cue and increased his intensity. Her mind spun, knees weakening as Alistair liquefied any structure to her frame as a painful _thud_ exploded from her cunt through her core. An explosion of need. An explosion of fear.

Any questions lingering, needing to be answered, at the tip of her tongue melted away as the lovers remembered the steps of a dance lost to them. A shuddering moan echoed from her throat into the cavern of their mouths, as Ali bent her spine back and kissed her like it was first and last time.

She pulled back as breathing grew necessary and pulses ran the length of her lower back as his lips trailed across and around the circumference of hers. His lungs heaved with exertion, but he refused to let go.

_“Take me to bed.”_ Words were never their strongest skill. But they had one way they communicated. How could words help when this was their language?

When her fear had crippled her, he’d been there. Joining with her. Becoming one against the forces coming for them. They’d fought like they’d fought in battle- _like the world was ending_. Because it had been. It was the only world she’d known.

He knew his role and followed orders, his iron hands hoisting her in the air with a struggling _grunt_. Her thighs gripped his softer-lined waist, trembling arms clutching around his neck, his fingers
carving paths into the hardened muscles of her hips.

His mouth remained upbroken from her, scratching lips tasting every inch of flesh along her jawline as he carried her across the tent. The hands clenching her ass tightened, holding her tight against his chest as he sat on the edge of the cot, her knees touching the bed, tightened legs straddling his.

Rocking her hips, she moaned as the apex of her thighs ran over the hardened bulge beneath his pants. A stuttering groan passed Alistair’s lips into her skin as his teeth nipped at the skin in the corner of her jaw. She gasped loudly; the sound echoing into the night, as his hands pulled her tighter to him, thrusting against her apex as her jeweled eyes rolled back into her head.

Something pushed at the corner of her mind. A thought she couldn’t bring forth. A memory scattered to the sands in her blinding passion. The jubilant friction he was building inside her dispelled any efforts to search for it.

“Oh, Dal.”

His fingers were fire as they climbed the muscles of her shoulders. Reaching the base of her scalp, they intertwined with her ethereal strands. He gripped the handful tightly, tilting her neck and arching her spine backward. His other hand was quick to release the laces of her tunic, parting the fabric to reveal the ebony skin running along her chest to her breast band.

Her teeth pressed into her lower lip, holding back the moan vibrating her throat as his lips worked a path down the length of her neck, his tongue dipping into the divots of her shoulders. She gasped as his thumb dragged across her nipple hardened through the tightened strip of fabric. Her hips bucked against his causing him to moan into her skin. She echoed the sentiment; her needs building as he held her prone and displayed to him.

Even as his fingers and lips pleasured her, a question formed in the void of her frantic mind, its answer yearning to be found. She needed… she needed what?

Her core ached painfully against the gentle rocking of his pelvis, his hardened cock dissolving any logic in her mind. The pressure in her bundled nerves heightening. She was close to an eruption. Electricity sparking through her legs and arms.

Yes. She needs this. She needs him. All of him.

His hand released its hold in her hair. Glittering spots appeared in front of her eyes as her head wretched forward. She guided her forehead against his, eyes closing as she let the sensations overtake her. His hands held her rocking hips in place as he moved harder against her, the seam of her leather breeches aching against her cunt. She was still fully clothed and about to come violently as all her fear and needs coiled inside her to spring and explode.

“Come for me, Dal.” He commanded, and she followed orders.

The jolt rose from her toes and exploded through her spine as she called out his name. It rang into the rafters of the tent, as he stilled below her at the sound. The clamp of his hands going slack at her sides. Her eyes were tightly closed as her head rolled back and rode the last of the waves of pleasure through her exhausted body.

Her mind was swirling unable to focus on any thought as she arched her shoulders back and moaned as aftershocks shook through her, compacting her vertebrae with the sensation.

Maker, she’d needed this.
A lazy smile drifted across her lips as she rolled her head forward, her forehead once again resting on his as her eyes remained closed. Maybe she could drift off like this. The Fade rushing to take her away.

With a quiet chuckle, she willed her heavy lids open to meet his eyes. Prepared for a pair of glowing hazel eyes, Dal startled as the emerald ovals surrounded by smooth onyx skin met her vision.

With a strangled cry, she jumped from his lap like she’d been burnt, landing forcefully on her back on the imported carpeted floor. She scrambled away, her mind spinning out of control. Through her fluttering lashes, she saw Alistair leap from the cot, but instead of closing on her, his shaking hand reached for the forgotten sword he’d left on the ground.

With a groan she rolled to her stomach, pulling her knees tight below her as the blossoming pain in the back of her mind increased, spreading across her shoulders and neck as she felt the visions pushing through. The explosions of colors finally cornering her from what she’d tried to flee, that which refused to be forgotten.

“No, no, no… no more of this.” It was too late. The visions surrounded her, their fingers digging through her soul as the halves of her life were sewn together in unending torment.

Fighting with Alistair in Denerim. The scorching heat of the Archdemon’s flames. Tumbling through the sky before hearing the crunch of her frame into the ground…

Leliana’s tear-filled eyes hovering above her. The numbing cold of Skyhold. Solas sliding gracefully through the Fade. Dead elves in a filling pool of blood. Barris’ gentle hands as he twirled her at the palace. Cullen sliding his quivering hands along her face as his withdrawal blinded him to reality. Rylen striking her down; the flames that escaped her palms in response. The terror in Evelyn’s eyes as she’d saved her from the demon. A pile of letters filling her lap as grief overwhelmed her system. The slice of blade through the Warden, murder a simple reflex to a honed weapon.

Her scream was muffled into the rough-woven carpet, nails scratching holes into the fabric as the waves of visions calmed. She gasped for breath, her chest about to explode. The joint palpitations of her and the other Warden’s heart deafening. She tried to steady herself and discover the mess her crippled mind had left behind.

She would have no such time to examine those broken pieces.

“What are you?”

Dal didn’t need her eyes to sense the sword aimed towards her. She could only imagine the image she made. She didn’t want to laugh, but it was the only emote she could access. A bitter laugh echoed inside the veil of tangled strands of hair tenting her head.

“What I am is broken, Ali.”

His sword lowered until the point rested against the ground, but his palm held firm in its grip. She confused him, but he still didn’t trust her. He wasn’t wrong.

“What… Dal, what happened to you?” He questioned, knowing the answer was more horrific than any he could imagine.

Emotions screamed through her limbs, a fire growing in intensity. Rage fighting its way out. “You want to know what’s happened?” she growled into the floor “I fucking died. Ten years of nothing.
No Fade, no Maker, no resolution. An eternity of nothing.”

Alistair stepped away, his hand still on the pommel of his sword unsure the creature in front of him was not a demon.

“You were dead. I laid you in my crypt. How…” He rambled, cheeks glowing crimson, eyes darting around the tent as his mind pieced the impossible together.

“Corypheus wanted a dragon and the Warden’s raised Urthemiel.” Alistair’s golden eyes grew wide at her words. “Our deaths are linked for all time. The Archdemon and Corypheus are one and the same. Only I can strike it down or Thedas is lost.”

The King was silent as he struggled with her explanation. “You’ve been brought back to life to die again?

Dal cruelly laughed at hearing the words spoken so bluntly for the first time. “I assume so.”

“Absolutely not.” His insecurity flared. Dal looked up, eyes narrowed at the King. He took orders from her, not the other way around. “You’re coming home to Ferelden. You will not fight this monster, not after I found you.”

“This isn’t your decision to make.” She spat back. Ten minutes together and they were already fighting like children. Some things never changed.

“Like hell it is! You will not fight Corypheus, Dal. I watched you die once, I’m not doing again. I’ll order you locked away if that’s what it takes.”

Dal rested back on her heels, anger pulsing. A far stronger emotion than the fear that’s been crippling her “That’s right, my King. How has that been going for you? Tell me how our precious home has flourished under your leadership.” She paused, running her tongue along her front teeth. “The ‘Idiot King’. I heard that fucking phrase so many times traveling here and I didn’t understand. I…” her voice faltered, “I gave everything so you could heal our home.” Her howl echoed in the tent, the vibration shaking inside her.

Shame overwhelmed Alistair’s aged features; tired eyes, unkempt beard, and bloated cheeks, as acid coated her words. Their hit was true as the man staggered backward, his feet an unsteady foundation.

“At least you married Anora. Maker only knows what would have happened to Ferelden without her.” Dal angrily wiped the escaping tears from her foolish sentimental eyes. “How is your lovely wife?”

“Dal, stop,” Alister warned, knowing where her path would lead. He dropped to his shaking knees in front of her. The smell of alcohol permeated everything around them, another vile reminder of his wasted potential. “All these years and you’ve been the only one in my heart. I love you more now than that fearful boy years ago.”

His confession turned her veins to a solid flame.

“No, Alistair, you fucking stop. You knew how our journey would end before it began. You waited until I loved you with my whole heart to tell me who your father was.” The boy still locked inside this broken shell of a man recoiled at her words. “I knew how things would end even before we discovered the price of killing the beast. You’re a fucking King, Ali. You had the power to stop all of it- the poor, the hungry, the Alienages. I died so Ferelden would have a better future and you’ve spent a decade spitting on it!”
Dal covered her face as the sobs shook her body. Once again, she was overwhelmed by the anger and hurt that his man summoned from the abyss inside her.

Alistair reached out a shaking and unsure hand toward her. Fury rippled through her as he approached. She pulled away to protect herself, letting his hand fall blankly into his lap. His face contorted in his confusion as his dusty mind sorted through the pieces of her shattered life thrown haphazardly to him.

“The Warden in the Inquisition camp… that was you. You’ve been with the Inquisition this whole time. You were the weapon,” he mumbled under his breath while shaking his head. “I’m going to fucking murder Trevelyan.”

Dal shook her head as Alistair sidestepped the truth as usual. “Evelyn’s not involved with the decision. She loathes my involvement. If her life didn’t depend on mine, I would have been locked in the dungeons long before now.”

Alistair clamped his jaw, for once reining in his emotions instead of bursting. “Do not trust her, Dal. She’ll use you as a pawn over Ferelden for Gaspard’s advantage.”

“That would require her to anything about me other than being a knife-eared Warden who couldn’t stay alive while killing a dragon.” Her former lover grimaced at her brash language. The words he would have slit a man’s throat for speaking in her direction.

“You should have been a wonderful king, what happened?” Her honesty speared his soul as he stared into her eyes, grieving as the pink fade away to solid gray.

He should run. Sprint away so he’d never be forced to answer this question. The question Anora was too reserved to demand. She’d demanded far too little from him over the passing years.

“I didn’t want to be king. Never did, still don’t. I was a Warden. What did I know about politics? Anora would have been better off without me.”

Dal shook her head. Even after all this time he still didn’t understand how the world worked. “Not for long. She was the daughter of a traitor, Ali. Eamon ensured the uprising against her began before you were even crowned. Answer me honestly, how long would it have been before Ferelden’s army would have been forced to defend the queen as a Landsmeet called for her pretty head displayed on a spike?”

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The visual turned Alistair’s blood cold. His heart ached at the thought of losing his wife. Of his own people turning against the woman who’d saved their country from ruin.

“Your blood and name gave her the safety to reign. Neither of you could rule alone. But together, Ferelden stood a chance.” The elf sat silent, her eyes lowered toward the ground unable to look at him.

He’d disappointed her. He deserved the wrath of her anger, but her infinite sadness broke him in a way he’d forgotten could exist. Her constant and overbearing sadness. The responsibilities she’d burdened herself with. You could be so close yet feel she was thousands of miles away.

“Trust me. I ran through every scenario. Any path that diverged from our fate parting. I swear, Alistair, if there’d been any other way, I would have found it.” Tears slid down the length of her cheeks as she closed her exhausted eyes. His fists tightened at his sides as he restrained himself from erasing them from her face.
He didn’t doubt her, he never could.

He’d hidden his heritage from the elven girl he’d fallen madly for. He knew her response. She instantly accepted the responsibility he’d spent his life running from.

Eamon chastised his tenderhearted nature growing up. Distracted by each shining smile or flowing pair of legs across Redcliff. He’d enlisted him in the Templar Order to harden him to the violent world he’d be thrust into. He never understood Eamon’s fear of weakness until he’d locked eyes with this woman in Ostagar so many years ago. From that moment, he’d have sacrificed everything for her. If he knew his infatuation would lead to her death, plummeting through the air like a wounded bird. He would have turned away, closing his heart to her forever.

The two lost lovers remained in silence as the elf wiped her unending tears away.

“What do we do now?” He couldn’t imagine rising and leaving this tent like his entire world hadn’t been upended and suspended into chaos.

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“I have my mission, but I don’t know outside that.” Her mission was all she had remaining. The only thing she recognized that seemed a part of herself. Even before she died, it was all she had, she’d made sure of it.

“Are… are you happy?”

The sobs that exploded into her hands surprised her. A question only he would have thought to ask. He never cared for duty or responsibility. “I thought I had a chance at happiness when I couldn’t remember, but now… I don’t know. I don’t know who I am. I love… loved someone.” This was excruciating. The act of living with both halves of her mind being nothing more than pain.

Alistair’s face fell at her admission, shoulders slumping as reality became too much to bear.

“He’s a kind and caring man, but his mission is greater than me. Once more duty will break my heart.” Her shaking hands covered her face as she spoke the words aloud. The truth she’d denied facing. Thedas depended on all of them at their finest. They would give the world no less.

“Barris.”

Dal’s face lifted slowly from her soaked palms, her brows narrowed in confusion. “Yes… How did you know that?” In her clusterfuck of a life, she couldn’t be too trusting anymore.

Alistair rubbed the back of his neck as a deep brush grew across his cheekbones. “You umm, said…” he cleared his throat as his eyes focused on a point on the floor. “That was the name you said during you know.” He gestured toward the forgotten bed in the corner.

“Sweet loving Maker.” Dal gasped, her hands now covering her gaping mouth in growing horror. Just when she thought this whole situation couldn’t be more uncomfortable, it got infinitely worse. “I am… I am so sorry, Ali. I…” She barely knew how to begin apologizing for everything that had happened between them. “I am so sorry all of that happened. I didn’t know what was happening.”

Alistair shrugged, his cheeks still burning crimson as a weathered man. “Up until that point, I thought it was going pretty well.”

A laugh escaped her despite the compounding shame. He chuckled softly, his soft hazel eyes meeting hers, a lopsided smirk settling over his lips as he watched her in fascination. She cleaned
her face with a cleaner edge of her tunic while focusing on the man she once knew better than herself and how unkind both he and time have been to him.

Leaning her head back, her eyes shut, and inhaled deeply. “I’m sorry… for everything, Ali. I swore I would never lie to you and I broke that oath.” She laughed as her shoulders fell. “I am not sorry that I took that blow from you… had you taken it, I would not curse this second existence on you even in my greatest rage.”

Tears escaped from Alistair’s eyes, running into the lengths of his beard, hearing her release him from the guilt and grief he’d clung to.

“If I can’t succeed, Corypheus will come for our people. You must prepare and defend them if the Red Templars enter our home.” Her words were solid even as her body shook, fear creeping back inside as her fleeting anger evaporated into the night. Yet another trusted companion vanishing into the darkness to leave her.

She doesn’t fight this time as he reached out to take her into his arms, lifting her into his lap. Sighing, her ear listened to the strumming of his corrupted heart in tune with her own, his head leaning on top of hers, holding tightly as the shaking overtook her.

Time elongated into a formless shape as the world came to the stop. She let her defenses fall as she accepted his comfort without conditions. It could have been minutes or hours she rested against him in silence.

“Tell me about your life, Ali.” He sleepily hummed against her head as her words roused him. It was a position they’d fallen asleep in many times when they were young.

“Well, I’ve spent a decade drowning my perceived sorrows. Wasting the opportunities I’d been granted. Anora has been a better wife and queen than I’ve deserved.”

“It can’t be like that anymore. Ferelden needs you.” It wasn’t her job to scold him, he was her King now. But he couldn’t squander his life anymore.

“I know. I told Anora if we returned to Denerim that I was stepping down.”

Ice passed over Dal’s chest at the thought Alistair lying unmoving amongst the piles of bodies remaining inside the fortress.

“You can’t do that. If you step down, you just confirm every doubt people have ever burdened you with. You have the strength to be a good King, but you need to believe in yourself first.”

His fingers traced the length of her hair as he sighed. “How am I supposed to do that without you? We made a good team. I’ve never been much on my own.”

Dal flinched against his chest, glad he could not see her expression. It was a fear she’d had as she stepped in front of the Archdemon. “You have a team, you just have a better partner now.” It hurt to speak the words, but she always excelled as pushing her feelings down for the best for others.

He chuckled softly; the movement vibrating against her. “As usual, you’re right.” Maker, how that stung. “I need to try harder for Ferelden… and Anora.”

“Do you love her?” Alistair remained still as she asked the question. Only the faster beating of his heart betraying his discomfort.

“She’s taken care of me all these years. Never judging the mess I’ve been. I… don’t know.” Ten
years had passed, and he’d never considered whether he loved the wife who’d dedicated her life keeping him and his country together. So much time had passed, yet Alistair remained the foolish Templar Warden who refused to grow up. The man that refused to be King, who refused to follow his duty.

It was time to leave; she was postponing the inevitable. The inescapable truth that death awaited her, a looming point on the horizon that moved closer with Adamant now belonging in history books.

She separated herself from the safety of his arms. Her skin chilling rapidly even in the desert air. “I need to go…”

“I know.”

She’d worried he’d make this harder, throwing an epic tantrum over her dedication to duty like he used to. Further rage at her acceptance of fate.

“I wish there was time.” Her voice broke as Alistair rose to his feet and pulled her into his arms.

Her life before the Archdemon was only part of her, but the love she’d felt toward this man had been so real, suffocating in its intensity. She’d died without hesitation to ensure he remained in this world. Even though it was only one piece of who she was, saying goodbye felt like tumbling through the sky once more.

She sighed in his embrace wishing that things in the world could be different and that this could be enough for her still. To remain safe in these arms while the rest of the world unraveled around them.

She placed her hands on his chest and leaned back to find his burning hazel eyes filling her vision. The need to feel safe too much, her fear gripping too tightly, as she pushed herself onto to the points of her toes and pressed her lips to his.

The world spiraled out of control, paths of destruction racing out of her no different from her magic bursting forth as she allowed her betrayer mind one brief flicker of the word that would destroy everything she’d worked for: maybe.

His arms become iron braced at her sides as his mouth opened to her and they kissed each other with an uncontrolled passion, their grief channeling through the connection as his tongue slid roughly against hers.

She wanted, needed, all of him as his heated hands traveled the length of her muscular frame. A reminder of life before terror filled her bones with the knowledge of what exists beyond their lives.

This is a lie. One that hurt more than heals.

She pulled back, resting her forehead against his as the warriors took labored breaths.

“I’m sorry.” Dal gasped. “Bad habits die hard. You can know something is a terrible idea and still have trouble accepting it.”

He nodded slowly against hers as his heart pounded deeply.

She patted his chest under her steel hands. “Also, you’re still married, your highness.”

He chuckled awkwardly as he leaned back, a blush of crimson running across his cheekbones.
“Yeah, this will be an unpleasant conversation with the wife.” His tangled hair caught between his fingers as he rubbed at the skin on his neck. Maybe the boy who’d hidden his birthright from her had matured more than she’d given him credit for.

Leaving his side, she hesitated at the flap of the tent knowing nothing would be the same once she stepped foot outside.

“Goodbye, Alistair.” She didn’t look behind, she couldn’t. Her mind saw him as he was before the battle for Denerim. Standing proudly as they prepared for the fight of their life. A fight that would change both in unexpected ways.

“After this is over Dal, come home.”

Her teeth dug into her lower lip as she willed her tears back inside. “I’m not sure I have a home anymore, Ali.”

“As long as I live you have a home with me. Ferelden could always use a better commander than I can offer.” He joked, his voice sounding more confident over the minutes. “You know the way home, follow it.”

Holding her last shreds of dignity together, she nodded and exited the tent without a look back. Stepping out into the clear night to take her first steps into the next part of her life as her silent tears of grief erupted.

Chapter End Notes

A note: This is far from the last we see of Alistair in this story even if this feels like a massive exit.

Thank you all for your continued excitement and support!

4 (maybe 5) chapters left until the sequel!
The Chapter Where Evelyn Negotiates

Chapter Summary

The impossible battle has been won, but Evelyn is still struggling following her interactions with the Nightmare Demon. Lilly gives her a suggestion that will change everything.

Chapter Notes

*Content warnings still in place until the end*

Welcome back, everyone! OMG, guys! 3 chapters left! I'M SO EXCITED!

Barris had nearly thrown Lilly into the Inquisitor’s tent after the fury of battle faded. As the last demon had fallen, she’d longed for a hot meal, steaming bath, and a bottle of wine pressed against her lips. Instead, the Knight-Commander, with the haunted look in his eyes, ordered her to stand guard over Evelyn until directed otherwise.

There were worse places to be posted. At least Ev would provide plenty of food and share her liquor if in a giving mood.

After verifying that the Inquisitor was inside, Barris had run, literally run. Fleeing across camp to whatever weighed on his mind, probably his accident-prone Warden. Lilly entered the Inquisitor’s sanctuary with a confused expression on her face. She’d have to follow up later.

Evelyn sat in silence staring into a propped up a looking glass unaware of the Templar’s entrance. Her blood soaked-armor was gone, hair cleansed and braided off her porcelain shoulders. Her men fought for their lives seeping away from blood loss and infection, while the emperor’s servants dressed her in emerald velvet. They dressed her every bit the role they expected her to play. I was not a role she looked proud to have.

“Ev?”

The Inquisitor jumped as Lilly’s voice ripped her from her meditation. Her olive eyes frantic as they scanned the tent.

“Lilly, I didn’t know you were here.” Her words sounded strange. Distant and lacking her usual confidence. Evelyn had taken her noble lessons to heart, unlike Lilly. It took a lot to unnerve her out of the Game.

“Sorry, to startle you.” Lilly started, understanding that something was off. “The Knight-Commander is concerned that remaining Venatori assassins lurk. I’m stationed with you until dawn arrives.”
Evelyn merely nodded as she watched the illusion in the mirror. Her eyes traced the patterns of her outline, reacquainting herself with the stranger contained within.

Lilly resisted asking what happened in the Fade. Evelyn had the misfortune of tumbling into the unknown with her jackass of a cousin. I really need to apologize for screaming at Marion. Living, breathing humans in the Fade at the mercy of a Nightmare Demon. She was glad she hadn’t fallen into the Void with them. What images would the beast have conjured to destroy her mind? She’d imagined the image of Rylen’s body speared with steel or ignited with magical flame enough that she thanked the Maker she’d only had to fight the demons in real life. Battling their minds wasn’t what Hawkes were known for.

Taking a cushioned seat in the corner, Lilly sighed, her armor dirtied and dense as her muscles emptied of energy and lyrium. She noticed the shake to the Inquisitor’s shoulders before the woman did. It traveled the length of her spine until her delicate arms trembled at her sides as she continued to stare in the mirror. Her pale olive eyes wide as her mind replayed what she wasn’t prepared to speak aloud.

Lilly spent enough time with Evelyn to know her comfort wasn’t necessary, much less wanted. She understood the shield the Inquisitor built around herself for survival. In her time as a Templar, Lilly created similar ones. A barrier of rage and distrust to push away anyone who could consider moving close enough to harm you.

Evelyn’s hands covered her face as her elbows collapsed on the makeshift table’s surface. Her breath was raspy as she forced her muscles under control.

The battle billed as suicidal had been won and enough of their forces survived to look towards Corypheus. They were living the best-case scenario they dared not mention. Alive to fight another day. Evelyn was proof that greater losses occurred beyond the battle in the fortress.

“I can’t do this anymore.”

Lilly’s eyes shut as Evelyn’s muffled words escaped through her quivering fingers. She was so much like Marion that it was a twisting dagger in her soul to meet the woman’s eyes.

“You must, and you will.” Lilly would be the voice she loathed. The one that told you to pull yourself up and keep going no matter the cost. What a load of bullshit. “They have asked so much of you, but no one thinks of what you need to survive.”

The image of Marion in Kirkwall as the burning Chantry illuminated her face was forever etched in Lilly’s mind.

“I don’t know what happened in the Fade and I won’t ask. But you can’t give all of yourself to a cause. At some point, you have nothing left. When you keep nothing for yourself, that’s what you become.” Lilly inspected the chipped and broken nails of her fingers finding any distraction to give Ev some privacy.

The tremors of the Inquisitor’s shoulders slowed as she absorbed Lilly’s lecture.

Who was she to give anyone life advice?

“I gave up everything I ever wanted for the Inquisition to not fail.” Evelyn’s hands lowered as her eyes became visible in the mirror, decaying olive and encroaching crimson, her soul soiling for all the see. “All I’d prayed for is my freedom… then I signed it away. A fucking contract, Lilly!”

The Templar’s eyes narrowed at her words. She hadn’t pretended to understand Evelyn’s
motivations for aligning herself with Gaspard. But her betrayal had provided the weapons that just allowed the Inquisition to find victory on the battlefield. The ends justified the means as their organization stood poised to take advantage of their adversaries.

Marion had allowed the cretin Sebastian to lead her into a life she hadn’t wanted after losing everything in the destruction of Kirkwall. The Prince of Starkhaven used her name and title to propel himself to the crown. His distrustful subjects embraced the broken woman presented as their queen. They recognized the defeat and empathy cowering in her eyes.

Gaspard’s detractors and critics alike had seen Evelyn’s violent power erupt from her palm in the Winter Palace, she honed skills in the Game as she’d moved through the crowd like it already belonged to her. Her deft steps had entranced them as she’d danced with Florianne across the floor, each question and answer a joust effortlessly mastered.

Gaspard latched on to the frightened woman when the stability of Thedas was in question. His goal wasn’t to defeat Corypheus but to be at the top of the pile when the smoke finally cleared from the chaos. He didn’t just want to rule Orlais, Gaspard’s goal was to rule everything.

“I don’t give a shit about fucking contracts, Ev,” the Templar spat. “Obviously. Just look at my time in Order. Fuck ‘em all. If you need something, go fucking get it.” She suspected the woman yearned for the safety of their rambling Commander.

Even imagining herself lost within the Fade, her first thought had been of Rylen. At least her soul was at ease knowing he was safe far from this battle, a solid foundation Evelyn was missing. Cullen was out there in the camp somewhere, a great unknown after the battle.

She understood the growing insanity of needing to verify with your own eyes and know those you cared about still lived. It’s why she’d run from Kirkwall, the growing terror taking root in the darkest parts of her mind that one morning she’d awaken to find Rylen gone, his light risen to the side of the Maker without her permission. It was a loss she could not sustain.

“Evelyn, go.”

The woman’s eyes met hers through the reflection in surprise, the idea that never crossed her mind in her self-sacrifice. “I… I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Shut up. Go to him and calm your mind with his continued and severely annoying existence. Maybe the two of you can string two friendly words toward the other.” She thought of her final conversation with Rylen in the Herald’s Rest. How it had broken her heart while reminding her why he needed to leave for the Western Approach. Apologizing to the idiot Commander would do much to lessen the woman’s guilt.

Evelyn’s expression dropped as she stopped playing games, the energy needs too great to maintain her pretend ignorance. “He doesn’t want to see me.”

“Maybe. But that’s not why you go.” She’d physically drag Evelyn to the Commander’s tent and toss her inside just so she wouldn’t end up as stubborn as Lilly if that’s what it took.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Start with the truth.” It wasn’t advice Lilly would ever take, but even she could acknowledge that it was correct.

In silence Evelyn rose, grabbing her velvet cape over her shoulders before ducking out of the tent. She appreciated that when the woman made her mind up; she focused on her objective.
Lilly leaned back on the cushioned sofa, proud of her intervention. As a Hawke, she might be doomed in finding happiness in her own life, but she could help others find it in their own.

*****

The rogue’s calves screamed for rest as she reached the entrance to her tent. Watching the final glow of the sinking sun below the horizon, Leliana contemplated the next moments of her life. The words she’d feared all these months, the ones she could not voice, the words she’d held back from fear of harm.

She’d known the second she’d seen Charter’s pale face as the elf sprinted towards her, that their rickety house of cards had fallen. The Spymaster hadn’t followed into the Ferelden camp, instead pushing her worries from her mind as she reassigned her agents to every corner of the world, scanning for any piece of information that could key them into Corypheus’ plans.

She’d been prepared to tell Idalya the truth- the complicated and earth-shattering truth of why Idalya had raced to the Archdemon to take the final blow. Not out of any noble gesture to save Ferelden through their King, but due to her inability to function without the person she’d become dependent on to exist. She’d believe that without Alistair she was, and had, nothing.

She would have told her how her companions and friends had failed her, how they had taken her for granted until it was too late and could no longer shower her with the love and admiration they felt that the girl greatly needed and only found in the arms of a man her equal in his stubbornness.

It was too late for everything unsaid. She accepted her fate and entered.

Dal sat motionless on Leliana’s disheveled cot; blankets were thrown to the floor; candles extinguished. In the dim light, the rogue found her curled into a fetal position. Her chin rested on the knees tucked against her chest, arms wrapped tightly around her shins. Dulled irises did not track her entrance, staring out into the darkness, as the Spymaster crossed the open area in silence. She began the labored process of releasing the row of buttons to remove her hooded jacket.

“You didn’t tell me.” Dal’s voice was empty of blame, just a statement. A simple statement crippling in its implications.

There would be no more lies between her and elf beside that which she deemed necessary. “No, I didn’t. You asked us not to contact your companions and granted your request.” Finally freed of her jacket, she draped her amethyst fabric over her chair as she rolled her neck in freedom. “Alistair made up so much of your previous life I feared the consequences of so many memories returning at once.” It was easier to tell the truth, even if edited.

“That’s what you wanted to discuss with me after the battle.” Again, there was no blame from the Warden’s voice. There was a considerate lack of any emotion resonating from her words.

“Amongst other things, yes.” She hadn’t known how to explain the girl’s former life and lost love to her, but it had been time. She deserved to understand why she’d died.

“There’s no need now.”

“You have all of your memories?” Leliana stumbled internally wondering how thorough the restoration to her mind had been.

“Amongst other things…” Dal mumbled.

The Spymaster stood in silence, her mind racing through all the paths created after the events of
today. There’d been no commotion from the Ferelden side of camp. Any fallout from Idalya’s presence in camp was simmering for the moment.

“Should the Inquisition prepare for war?” It was a fair question based on her experiences with the unpredictable Alistair Therin.

“Isn’t that all we do?” Dal’s eyes finally met hers and the rogue involuntarily stepped back struck by the emptiness lingering inside. “But as for Al…,” the Warden faltered. “The King. He’ll return to Ferelden and prepare for the prospect that I fail. He’ll be prepared when Evelyn and Gaspard come knocking.”

In the past, watching Dal cry had broken Leliana’s heart with a crippling sense of helplessness. Now observing the Warden operate without her heart hurt worse than she could remember from her time traveling through Ferelden with the overwhelmed elf.

The flaps of the tent flew open, starting Leliana as Josephine rushed into the safety of the tent. Her eyes shut tightly as the flap shuts behind her, clutching a leather bundle beneath an arm. Her breaths turn to gasps as she allows herself one moment to fall apart.

“Josie, stop working. Rest, please.” Leliana begged, but she knew it was no use. She couldn’t imagine the jumble of emotions erupting inside her friend.

“I can’t…” Josephine collapsed at her table; her legs unable to hold her upright. Her fingers shook while attempting to sort through the ever-growing piles of parchment. The work never ended, it took more and more until you had no more to give.

The tent remained silent beside Josie’s tortured breathing until her angry first slammed onto the desk, its boom echoing into the settling night, as a muffled cry exited the Ambassador.

Leliana turned her eyes away giving the grieving woman privacy. Dal’s eyes finally focused away from the darkness, drifting over to watch, her heart breaking in empathy.

“I am so sorry, Josephine.” Blackwall died to save her. She had no doubts about that. She sat in this tent because he wouldn’t let her make the sacrifice again. His unending guilt overshadowing hers as the beast threatened them from above.

Josie turned her head over her shoulder, eyes bloodshot, to meet Dal’s as her tears flowed freely over the expanses of her cheeks. “Thank you. I’m… I don’t know how I feel right now.”

“And that’s okay.” She’d never been good with loss. Beating Alistair to the final strike against the archdemon was just one example of her inability to cope. Josephine Montilyet was stronger than Idalya had ever been. “He saved us. There was no way out without him fighting the beast.” She paused contemplating her next words carefully. “He died a hero.”

Josie cried quietly into a napkin as the women remain in silence, no words able to carry the weight of the moment. As the moments passed, the Ambassador’s tears grew silent and cleaned her face with the remaining dry side of the fabric as she drew herself back together.

“Thank you, Idalya. I know how much that means coming from you.”

With awkward and uncooperative fingers, Josie unrolled the fabric bundle on her desk. Small trinkets chimed as they clinked and slid into one another. She grabbed something from the final fold of the roll and spread her arm behind her to hold it out to Dal.

Dal’s shoulders tensed. Clutched in the woman’s hand was Blackwall’s leather pouch. Soft
chocolate-brown leather scored with swirling designs of daisies, the flowers he’d picked and left anonymously on Josephine’s desk for months before she’d discovered her humble admirer. It contained the pipe and herbs that always traveled with him.

“Josephine, I can’t…”

“Take it. I know he’d want you to have it.” With one peek at the determination in the woman’s eyes, Dal knew there would be no argument she could win.

With shaking fingers, she reached out and slid them over the smooth leather. Her eyes closed as the strong smell of musk and wood shavings reached her nose. A scent reminiscent of the man who’d crafted it, she could feel him standing at her side. The emptiness of his loss when opening her eyes added more cracks to her fractured heart.

“Was it all a lie?” Blackwall appeared to the most stable of Evelyn’s companions. He was consistent and supportive when others had needed it. To think it all had been an act was too much for her reconcile.

Josie turned to her, a smile gracing her lips while her tears continued. She shook her head, warmth spreading through her features. “No, he was kinder and more caring than any man I’ve met before. He believed in our mission more than any in the Inquisition.”

The corner of Idalya’s eyes burned where any remaining tears would have risen, but she was empty. Empty of everything needed to function as an operational person.

A knock at the foundation beam startled Leliana back into reality. Her eyes narrowed at the unnecessary intrusion. She cleared the length of the tent before the other two women could react.

Opening the edge of the flap, she stuck just her head out to find an exacerbated soldier, red-faced and panicked.

“What’s the meaning of this?” She had no patience for anything that wasn’t her grieving and emotional friends at this moment.

“I’m… I’m sorry to intrude, Nightingale. The Warden has a visitor.” The soldier stepped aside and Leliana’s eyes widened as the visitor behind came into focus.

Fuck.

*****

Lilly’s lids grew heavy as she’d waited. Her inspirational talk had been so effective that she’d forgotten to ask Ev to request food. Fully drained of lyrium on an empty stomach meant Lilly had little energy left to remain awake. She nodded off a few times, unable to summon the strength to keep her head afloat. It wasn’t like her, but after battle, no one was who they thought they were.

A muffled sniffle awakened the dozing Templar. She straightened in her seat clumsily, her rusting armor scraping into place as she scrambled to look professional.

Evelyn was reseated at her table, shoulders slumped over. Face buried in her hands. Lilly’s eyes narrowed at the dirt coating the formerly pristine fabric of her now torn dress. Streaks of filth flowed over her arms, her braids grime-covered and disheveled.

Without permission, Lilly rose and walked to Evelyn’s side, her stomach twisting in apprehension. Only Lilly’s years of Order training kept her from gasping at the woman’s face as she lifted it from
her hands. Her cheekbone was scratched with grains of sand lying in the oozing wound. The clear outline of soiled fingerprints lined her cheeks, as tears paved paths through them.

“What happened?” She crouched at Evelyn’s side impressed at how calm she sounded. Through her years in the Circle, she’d had the misfortune of encountering women after experiencing the worst days of lives. Lilly had learned to keep control of her voice, so those women had one stable thing around them.

Evelyn ignored her question.

The Templar knew better than to reach out and touch the woman. The rogue’s daggers laid out before her on the table were a clear message as to their purpose and her skill.

Anger brewed deeply inside Lilly as she watched this woman ripped from her pedestal struggle to breathe. Had someone grabbed her on her way to see the Commander? She’d been in charge of her safety and this had happened while she’d snored unaware of what happened to her charge. Not just that, her friend.

Lilly stubbornness didn’t endear her to many, and she was fine with that. Evelyn had recognized a similar fire burning within both and trusted her, allowing the Templar behind her carefully crafted illustration of strength.

“Should I call for the guards? It’s hard to run from an army when you’re in the middle of the desert.”

The Inquisitor shook her head, her tears stalling as she ran out of things to grieve. She didn’t retract as Lilly wet cloth from the standing basin and removed the reminders from her skin. Drops of moisture combining with ill-fated tears. Evelyn never flinched even as the sand was cleansed from her wound. She stared at the reflection in the mirror, still trying to deduce the woman unknown to her.

Reaching into the pocket of her armor, the Templar withdrew her unneeded healing potion. Popping the cork with her teeth, she poured a spoon-sized amount of the oily concoction between her fingers before drawing her thumb across the wound near Evelyn’s eye. Her skin quickly absorbed the potion and did its job, piecing the scratches together as Lilly pressed the remainder of the bottle into Ev’s dirtied hands.

“Drink.”

Ev did as told and grimaced as the sour liquid coated her throat. Lilly examined her eye again and was pleased that there should be no visible mark within the hour. The scars inside were a different story…

“Should I call a healer? Madam Vivienne or Dorian for any other injuries.” It was her duty to protect her friend and she couldn’t even voice the words asking if someone had violated Ev. Fuck.

Ev chugged the final gulp of the healing potion before slamming the bottle onto the table. Somehow the glass didn’t shatter. “No, I’m fine.”

Lilly’s eyes rolled as she wiped the remnants of soot from the woman’s shoulders returning her skin to its porcelain sheen. In her frustration, she removed the pins from Ev’s hair, loosening the braids tightly wound against her head where it must be cutting circulation from her brain to cause this insanity.

She should call for Barris. One sniff of this and the uptight Knight-Commander would have every
tent emptied until he located whoever had the audacity to put their hands on their leader. Lilly couldn’t imagine his, or Cullen’s, wrath when they discovered she’d let Evelyn move through the camp unaccompanied.

Her hair was tangled, but Lilly grabbed a silver-handled brush and worked the knots out while combing away the powdered dust coating her tresses. “Would you like me to summon Cullen?” Maybe she’d find comfort in the dimwitted Commander.

“No!” Evelyn’s eyes widened as she almost shouted her response.

Lilly’s gut dropped even as rage gripped her. *She would murder that fucking coward of a prick.*

“Did he hurt you, Ev?” Lilly’s hands dropped to her sides as she watched the Inquisitor carefully.

Shame filled Ev’s eyes, an emotion Lilly was familiar with. “It’s not what you think.”

“Well, that’s great.” Her flippant tone was unnecessary, but she was furious at the situation and disappointed in another failure of her own. “Because it *looks* like my superior assaulted you.”

Evelyn’s brows narrowed; her lips straighten into a solid line. “That’s not what happened.”

Lilly stood in silence, her glare menacing.

“*Fine.*” Ev conceded, finally willing to speak, uninterested in fighting her only friend. “I reached the Commander’s tent, and he was… hostile. He accuses me of not speaking and when I show up to talk, he…” Her shoulders collapsed as she sighed loudly, her chest descending with the exhale.

“I got a clear look at him. *Withdrawal.* His hands were shaking, eyes bloodshot. I came to tell him… I don’t know what I would say, but instead, I got another reminder that he’s fucking *killing* himself. I was furious.” She rubbed the back of her hand against her forehead in frustration. “I threatened to have him thrown out of the Inquisition.”

Lilly sighed as she resumed brushing the particles from the woman’s auburn hair to keep her hands busy and away from the daggers strapped against her spine.

“Then he said…” her eyes lowered from Lilly’s, fingers picking at the edge of her cuticles, “he said something *unforgivable.* I never thought he could hurt me like that. We fought. I was certain he hated me for what I’d done and then… He was so close. Everything was so out of control after the Nightmare demon that when he put his hands on me, the world came into a narrow focus. *Maker,* I needed him so badly.” Evelyn lifted her pale eyes to meet Lilly’s in the reflection. “Between my deception and the lyrium… I’ve always felt safe with Cullen, but not tonight. I didn’t know that man.

“So, the answer to your question is: yes, he hurt me, but only what I deserved and begged for.”

Lilly’s bloodlust crested for the moment as she finished cleaning Ev’s hair. She was the last one to judge anyone else’s fucked up relationship. Her tumultuous relationship with Rylen was explosive and infuriating… and strangely also the healthiest one she’d ever been involved in. From the first time she threatened him with her shining dagger pressed against his throat in the Hanged Man, he was the only person who’d never lied to her. His ease at expressing emotions and needs were far beyond her development as a human.

“Even now, I miss him.” Evelyn’s whispered confession pained Lilly as she searched for suitable clothes to replace the torn and soiled dress.
“Who knows, maybe the fool with come to his sense and apologize.” She offered, finding a plainer dress with embroidery folded inside an open chest.

“He’ll never apologize, nor will I. I can’t. Cullen can never know I almost let the Inquisition fail because of how much I love…” Evelyn stalled. Her eyes aimed into in her hands, unable to meet the Templar’s.

Lilly approached with the dress, ignoring Evelyn’s last words out of respect for the rogue. “Up. You need to change before someone sees you like this.”

Evelyn rose too exhausted to fight back. Lilly cut the remaining velvet with a boot knife and the layers fluttered to the floor. Evelyn pulled the sapphire silk over her head as Lilly cocked an appreciative brow at the Inquisitor’s bared curves.

“You are… magnificent.” It was true. In their time traveling she’d never seen Evelyn without clothing and Lilly was just realizing her loss at that fact.

Evelyn rolled her eyes smoothing the slick cover over her stomach and hips. “You’re insufferable Lilly Hawke, but you’re not wrong.”

Lilly stepped away to the corner of the tent as voices approached. Her empty stomach grumbled at the whining undertone of Gaspard’s words giving instructions to his cavalier before entering.

“Ah, what a night!” The asshole exclaimed, his arms tucked behind his back, as Evelyn resumed her seat at her vanity, no remaining sign of her returning condition lingering. “I’m so sorry you had to miss it.”

***

Evelyn turned over her shoulder, brow raised at his statement. Just the vision of his golden mask filled her with unease.

The Emperor chuckled, the sound of wine thoroughly coating the syllables. He’d started his victory lap early tonight. “Since you disappeared, I took it upon myself to accept the surrender of the Wardens,” Did he know what happened? She wouldn’t put it past Gaspard to have her followed through her camp.

“… and sentence them for their crimes.”

Her body froze in horror at his words and their implications.

Thunk.

A piece of metal landed at her feet and her eyes narrowed at the blade chucked toward her. Her Inquisitor sword. Streaks of blood, pieces of hair and bone now glued to the dulled blade.

“We had over two hundred Warden prisoners…” she whispered.

“And now we have none.” Gaspard shrugged as he removed his tarnished and blood-splattered golden mask to unveil eyes lit with a ferocity she’d never seen in normally terrifying man.

The Warden’s had surrendered. They posed no threat to their armies, but Gaspard slaughtered them to send a message across the camp: if you’re not fully with us, you’re against us. He’d murdered hundreds of men to infuriate the Warden King of Ferelden.
“I feel like it’s time to celebrate our victory.” Her skin crawled as his rough and blood-stained fingers spread across her bare shoulders. It took all her self-control not to wrench away from his touch, the memory of Cullen’s skin against hers still fresh in her mind. Lilly’s gaze from the corner drilled through her as the Emperor cared not for Templar’s presence.

Gently she moved forward so his hands fell away. “I’m tired, Gaspard. The battle took a lot out of me. Tomorrow night.”

Gaspard’s fist clenched at the base of her neck, holding the fistful of hair tightly. “Need I remind you that your victory today was because of my men, my weapons, my resources?” He pulled harder against the bottom of her skull, the pain radiating into her eyes.

“Gaspard,” she gasped, “you’re hurting me.”

The vile pig shrugged, releasing her hair as the throbbing spread across her entire scalp. “What care I for your pain? You belong to me; I can do whatever I like to you. Have you forgotten our agreement?”

Evelyn cast her eyes down, her savior that had been there all along making itself known. “No… but maybe it’s time for some renegotiations”

Gaspard never saw the rogue move. Her hand darted for her dagger and struck behind her before he ever registered the shudder of her shoulder.

The Emperor opened his mouth to speak, but remained silent, his mouth falling open into a sinking O as his head tilted down to observe the grip protruding from his chest. His hand clumsily reached for the silverite Evelyn had plunged into him.

“Ah, ah, ah… I wouldn’t touch that if I were you. I punctured your lung. That dagger is the only thing keeping you alive.” She cleared her throat as she settled herself back onto her seat. “You will find it very hard to breathe and I also wouldn’t suggest speaking.”

Gaspard stumbled into a chair behind him as Evelyn sighed, releasing her now unnecessary tension. Lilly remained frozen observing the insanity unfolding in front of her.

“Thank you. I’ve been having a terrible night and I think I needed this.” Ev flipped the other dagger in her palm as she watched Gaspard struggle. “Lilly,” she addressed the Templar, “you have roughly… eh, fourteen minutes to summon Dorian, and only Dorian, before Gaspard drowns on his own juices. You’ll find him at Bull’s.” A soft smile graced her full lips before she turned back to Gaspard. “While I have you here wanted to cover some parts of our negotiation.”

Lilly exited the tent without a word knowing better to argue with a woman who’d clearly lost her mind.

Gaspard’s eyes widened as he watched Evelyn in horror.

“I will make you one deal, and one only. Do you understand?” Gaspard nodded numbly, his skin turning yellow as blood leaked into his armor. “I will stay in Orlais and maintain this farce for the rest of my life, but never again will you lay a finger on me without my permission.” Evelyn leaned closer so Gaspard could not avoid her piercing gaze.

“My body is mine, and mine alone. If you respect this rule, we will live in peace. But if you violate this new contract and ever put your greasy fingers on me without my consent? I will gut you in your sleep. You know I speak the truth when I tell you that no guards could keep you safe if I wanted you dead.”
Gaspard made no other noise but a soft gurgling as he nodded his agreement. His eyes were wide, panic dilating his pupils as the precious seconds ticked away.

Evelyn closed her eyes and sighed, a lazy smile reaching across her lips. Tension released across her body knowing that tonight she would sleep alone and untouched for the first time in months.

They had won a battle today, tomorrow they would begin the war.

Chapter End Notes

Can I tell you guys how cathartic writing the ending of this chapter was? Seriously. It was the best. I *might* be a terrible person.

On the plus side, I've got about 25k words in outlines prepared for the continuation story whose name I'll probably reveal in the next chapter or two.

3 chapters to go until the end! How could any more chaos possibly happen??? *evil laughs*
The Chapter Where Idalya Confronts her Visitor

Chapter Summary

Idalya's visitor gets an unexpected reaction from the grieving Warden; a King confronts his wife.

Chapter Notes

STILL ALL THE TRIGGER WARNINGS.

Do you see there's a total number of chapters listed now?!? *SQUEALS* I had to split this one since it's was inching over 8k words cause we ain't about that life anymore since I promised no more 12k chapters when I did this rewrite.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leliana’s first instinct was to tell the witch to fuck off. To instruct her to find some abandoned forest in Ferelden and become food for the scavengers. The tips of her fingers traced the path of the dagger clutched to her hip. It was tempting. Oh, it was so tempting.

“I’d say this was not the time, but is there any time when someone wants to see you Morrigan?” She cocked a feisty eyebrow at the woman while contemplating violence. All her years of training were being tested. The mage looked nervous or whatever feeling of unease the witch had the ability to feel. “Come in.”

It was no longer her job to protect Dal. If the elf stood any chance of learning to survive in this world, she’d have to face it head-on.

“Look, everyone, it’s Morrigan. Yay.” She announced in flat monotone syllables. She stepped to the far corner of the tent to stand by Josie’s side where the woman had returned to pristine condition in record time.

She spotted the tremor of the witch’s hands as they hung loosely at her sides, Idalya’s eyes carrying a type of anger Leliana had never seen rest inside as she sized up her friend.

Morrigan swallowed loudly then opened her mouth to speak, but Dal beat her to the punch.

“You put him in danger.” Her accusation caused a shudder to run the length of the Spymaster’s spine, recoiling from the acid dripping from her words.

“Yes,” Morrigan admitted, her voice hesitant while measuring this unexpected response from her friend.

“Tell me why,” Idalya growled through her ivory teeth, lips curled back to meet her brown skin. Her shoulders tensed as she remained on the cot, hands balling into fists.
The mage stepped back steadying herself, second-guessing this decision as the Warden spewed venom.

“He let you die.” The witch admitted with a hiss and Leliana cringed despite her training. It needed to be said, yet it surprised her it had been Morrigan to speak it after all these years.

“I chose to die, Morrigan, there’s a difference.”

“Not to me.” The witch mumbled.

At that moment Leliana’s eyes shuttered, the sentiment too real. She’d held her own fury regarding Ferelden’s King and his inability to save the one person he swore to love. It wasn’t until she’d held Idalya again that she realized how feeble her attempts to place it on Alistair had been. No one steered Idalya Mahariel from what she set her mind to. His only path remaining to save her was through betrayal and Alistair had loved her too much to even consider the plan.

“Where have you been?” The Warden’s eyes narrowed as she watched every movement of Morrigan’s, but exhaustion would not allow her to sustain her rage as her features softened.

“The Winter Palace. I was Celene’s magic adviser prior to her death. Gaspard saw value in my talents and kept me in my position. I suspect that choice will be disregarded once he learns of my former companions…”

“You work for Gaspard?” Dal cut her off, her guard immediately flaring.

“No.” She answered quickly. “Just trying to keep my enemies close.”

“How could you try to hurt Alistair, Morrigan? I trusted you.” Tears filled the mage’s eyes at Idalya’s words. “His death would cancel out everything I died for. That was how you’d honor me? Did you think my memories wouldn’t return and this behavior would go without consequence?”

For the first time in her life, Morrigan looked speechless. The Warden had stripped her bare for all to see. She had no logical response to why her behavior had been called for.

“You’re meddling in the lives of royalty. No matter how careful you are, there’s no way it doesn’t bite you in the ass eventually and get you killed.” Even in her righteous anger, she still cared for the Morrigan’s fate.

“I… know. It was the lashing out of an angry and spoiled child. I was never taught to accept feeling powerless growing up with Mother.”

At her statement, Dal involuntarily shuddered. Something deep inside of her unsettled at the mage’s words. Idalya rose from the cot, shaking her head as she tried to clear the static from her overflowing emotions in her mind. She headed for the exit of the tent.

“Idalya, where are you going?” Walking away from arguments was not like the girl. Leliana’s brows rose as she watched her friend wrap her arms tightly around her chest as she left.

“I can’t be here. I need space… from everything.”

The three women remained behind in silence, granting the Warden’s request.

****

An eerie silence fell over the Inquisition camp as Cullen stormed away from the guilt flooding him
as each minute that passed since his indiscretion with Evelyn. One hand bound tightly into a fist, the other gripped the neck of the liquor, his last remaining solace. Soldiers passed by in silence with downcast eyes. His body language showed outward hostility to anyone that dared interact with him.

The sand fell away and parted around his boots as he began the climb over broken stones of Adamant, his exhausted legs screaming at the exertion. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d rested longer than a few minutes. At each directional shift of the wind, her scent drifted around him. The tips of his fingers still tingling with the memory of drifting over her satin skin. The memory of fear laced in her eyes as he’d mistreated her haunted him as each step carried him further from camp.

The dulled moonlight reflected off a patch of silver in the distance and his boots stalled discovering a figure seated ahead on the edge of the former ramparts overlooking the empty expanse of desert. His eyes understood the shadowed outline of the armor before he registered it. He resumed his pace slowly, his body releasing tension as he recognized Barris’ form as he drew closer.

The Templar sat alone in the ramparts, a matching bottle to his own in hand he drank from. It was a relief to know the man was okay and not another undiscovered casualty from within the fortress. But it wasn’t like his friend to walk away from his responsibilities. It appeared Cullen wasn’t the only one escaping tonight.

“I didn’t expect to find you here.”

Barris didn’t acknowledge his presence as he took another long swig from his bottle.

“I needed to be away from the camp.” His answer was short, empty of the warmth the Templar spoke with.

“Would you like me to leave?” Cullen didn’t want to be alone. He shouldn’t be alone, but respected Barris enough to vacate if the man desired privacy.

“You can stay.” He continued looking across the desert as Cullen took a seat at his side. It was surprising to see the man alone in the ramparts after watching the Templar and Warden walk together before battle. In his place, Cullen wouldn’t be caught dead up here and would have spent it with the woman he’d nearly lost after being reunited.

“Where’s Dal?” Cullen tipped the bottle back and opened his lips as Barris’ shoulders slumped.

“Solas needed help, so I brought him to his tent. When leaving, I turned a corner and ran into Charter, knocking her from her feet. She was flustered and panicking. I helped her to her feet and apologized.” Barris took another drink, his swallow echoing into the darkness. “Her orders from Leliana were to keep an eye on Dal until we left the Western Approach since she’s prone to find trouble wherever she is. The Warden was resting at the Healer’s, so Charter took the chance to report to Harding. When she returned, Dal was gone.”

Cullen’s upper body straightened in alarm. The Warden hadn’t been reported missing. That information would have made it to him.

“Charter knew the Spymaster would have her head if she didn’t locate her. She scaled the rungs of the closest watch post. Luckily for her, her target has glowing white hair and was trying to sneak in the dark along the outside of the main tents. She breathed a sigh of relief, just in time for Dal to stagger on her feet then sprint across the camp, out of the Inquisition’s and straight into Ferelden’s.
Dal continued running until she entered the King’s tent.”

At the word Ferelden, Cullen forgot how to swallow and gagged on the mouthful of sour liquid filling his mouth nearly choking himself. Dal was in the Ferelden camp—this day just went from day to worse.

“Charter doesn’t have diplomatic clearance to enter another camp. I told her to head to the Spymaster and that I would make sure she was okay. It was easy enough to lie to the guards that I was there to set up the King’s protection. I had no idea what I would say when I got there, but I needed to know she was all right. When I reached the royal tent, I heard them inside.” The Templar took another drink and grimaced at the burning liquid scalding his throat. “They weren’t discrete.”

Cullen’s heart broke for his brother while also alarmed that Alistair knew of the secret, they’d been withholding from him all this time. “Dal’s memories have returned?”

“I believe so.” Barris sighed. “I told her I loved her before battle. For that one moment, I was the luckiest man in the world.” He ran a hand errantly over the beginning growth of a beard. “But I never held false notions about what our life would be like if her memory returned. She’s lost so much. I’m happy for her, I truly am.”

Barris hadn’t known of the Warden’s previous love.

He had not stood in a Circle tower years ago watching as the future King held the shaking Warden after the events of Kinloch, whispering he would keep her safe. She had leaned back and looked up at the other Warden like he was the only thing that made sense in the world after fighting their way through a tower of abominations.

He’d omitted the information of her past from both warriors. It seemed unnecessary as Idalya’s memory remained stagnant, its walls locked to her. To Cullen, there was no surprise where Idalya had run when her memory returned, as much as the truth broke his heart for the grieving man.

With the back of his hand, Barris wiped away his beginning tears. He cleared his throat. “What about you? Why are you out here in the middle of the night?”

Cullen took a deep swig of Varric’s pilfered booze, he’d have to remember to thank the dwarf later. “I fucked Evelyn then threw her out of my tent.”

Barris turned to Cullen with a skeptical face. “I’m feeling less empathetic for you right now.”

Cullen chuckled darkly while lifting the bottle to his lips, praying to numb his heart to the pain, the regret screaming at him to do something stupid. “It was the way I treated her, Barris. I love her still after everything, but I am such an angry man.” He knew that now. No treats someone they care about the way he just treated Ev.

“She had one weakness, and I used it against her to show her how I’ve felt all these months. She came to speak, and I acted like…” He’d treated her like those who’d hurt her all those years. He might as well as tossed coins to the ground after he’d finished and righted himself.

“… I was a monster.”

Even with both consenting, the act made his soul ache that he could mistreat and speak to her as he had yet cowered in fear at the thought of expressing affection to her. It took all his years of practiced restraint to keep from sprinting across the camp, dropping to her feet and pouring his feelings out to a woman who could order his execution. Better that then living the lie that he didn’t love her and that her actions hadn’t hurt them both deeply.
“You can make things right.” Barris’ words were slurring as the Templar passed the halfway point of his bottle.

Cullen shook his head, crushing the last remaining spark of hope in his heart. Men like him didn’t deserve redemption. ‘There’s no point. We’re better apart. She deserves happiness and if Gaspard gives her that…’ he paused, “then I won’t begrudge it. I proved tonight that I am a broken man, and… I have a lot of work to do. I’ve used Ev as a crutch through my withdrawals. She deserves so much more than I can give her.”

He’d decided to break the chains holding him to the Chantry because he couldn’t bear living without a conscience, to be numb to the world around him. To do what he did tonight proved that he still had a long way to go.

“How are your withdrawals?” Barris had never asked since it was obvious Cullen didn’t want to talk about it, but he’d brought up the topic himself and Barris was drunk. It was as good of a time to discuss it as any.

Cullen swigged from the bottom of his bottle, already catching up to the lightweight Templar. “You know, I think I will make it, but I have to work a lot harder to be a man again.” It’s the first time he’s said the words, but he believes them. He will throw down the Chantry’s chains.

“Hey, that’s something. Here’s to surviving.”

The two men’s bottles met, the night echoing the clink as they continued staring into the empty desert trying to find some deeper meaning in all the hurt the day had caused.

*****

The walls of a linen tent were thinner than Templar Adina Arvale was comfortable with.

Over the last hour, she’d stood to watch over Starkhaven’s royal tent listening in excruciating detail as King Sebastian voiced his displeasure over the Queen’s decisions. The many paths he disagreed with that had brought Starkhaven’s army across the world to the Western Approach.

It was a cooler night in the desert, a soft breeze hovering across the sand. The chill cooled the outside of her plate armor but left her skin to melt inside. An errant bead of sweat pooled at her hairline and her cheek twitched as it zigzagged across her sepia skin and down the length of her neck. She hoped the King would run out things to blame his Queen for soon and retire for his nightly prayer and meditation.

As soldiers passed, their heads would turn toward the direction of the dispute, but Adina glared through the visor of her helm until the men shrunk and left with haste. She’d do everything within her power to reserve some dignity for her Queen.

“Your duty is to obey the commands of your husband and Maker!” The King seethed from inside the tent. “Not gallivant with some heathen of a Warden.”

His voice echoed into the surrounding camp, the King not caring who overheard him fulfilling his husbandly duties, his holy obligation to the Maker to curb the sinful nature of the Champion he felt would always draw her to the darkness.

It had been awhile since Queen Marion had responded. She’d sat in silence absorbing the verbal lacerations her husband administered. There was a scuffle inside the tent, items falling to the floor before she heard a muffled gasp from her Queen.
“Did you spread your legs for the filth?” His voice was menacing as the Templar clenched her teeth together, locking her jaw to remain standing in a forced position. “I know how you are. You were street trash when I found you. I made you a Queen, and this is how you repay me?”

“No, no… my love. I l-love you. I would never… dishonor you.”

Adina heard only fear from the Queen as she forced the words out. She could hear the King’s hand wrapped tightly around her throat and remember her own mother trying to survive her father’s fits of rage when she was just a child.

The King was an unstable and insecure man threatened by any who would succeed beyond him. Queen Marion had allowed him to secure the throne, but he’d grown bitter over the years that his subjects revered the former Champion over any of his meager seeming accomplishments.

More items scattered to the floor, as a heavier weight met a solid mass.

“You will return home with me and you will obey. Do you understand?”

Adina heard no response from inside. The gloved hand tightened around the grip of her sword as she weighed the decision to enter and help the Queen. If her feet entered the tent without permission, her career and life were forfeit.

She may prevent the Queen from harm now, but what of the next time, and the time after that? Trying to stop a cruel and impotent man like the King only caused him to exert his control further. To harm more. To praise the lingering marks of his power as he trailed his fingers over the bruises.

“Answer me. Say it.” He raged.

A desperate inhale of breath exited the Queen as his hand slackened its hold around her throat. She gulped air desperately.

“Say it.” His voice was cold and hollow now. His fury exiting his body to float away in the air.

“I will obey.” With her statement the Queen’s submission was complete.

The King sighed, a gentle chuckle rocking his system. “See my love, how difficult was that?” His delicate words stroked more anger within the Templar, the man’s two-faced nature familiar to all who’d faced true monsters in their lives. He warmly laughed as he felt powerful once more. “Oh, my Queen, you manage to frustrate me so. Let’s try not to do that again, shall we?”

Adina shuttered her eyes, imagining the King taking Marion in his arms. Smoothing her disheveled onyx hair, straightening her collar to hide the rising markings against her neck, as we wiped the involuntary tears from her cobalt eyes.

These people inflicted pain, then soothed it away, making you regret causing their tempers to rise.

The Templar’s eyes opened as movement neared the exit to her side. Heavy linen flaps moved aside as the King exited, a slight smile to lips that came nowhere near reaching his dead eyes.

He cleared his throat. “Ser Arvale, follow. Our army sets forth in the morning and my Queen must beg forgiveness from her Maker.”

King Sebastian walked forward with haste. Adina swallowed, looking back over her shoulder at the flap of the tent now closed before also submitting to the King’s request and followed through the dim night.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry, this ends on a miserable note due to where the chapter was cut. Next chapter is 90% done, the final chapter is almost complete, which just leaves 91 for me to figure out. I'm hoping to have everything posted by Easter. Then I'll be taking a posting break while I try to get a few chapters ahead on the next fic. I've got the first 20-ish chapters done, which I think should be able to wrap up most of Inquisition, then I'll start looking at the Trespasser outline! SO EXCITED.

Thank you for everyone's support and excitement, and comments. <3
The Chapter Where Cullen and Barris Try to Forget

Chapter Summary

The two men drown their sorrows; Idalya tries to clear her conscience.

Chapter Notes

*Still in warning mode until the end of fic*

It's been a weird week. Between personal health and brain distractions, I've been struggling to come back and get chapter 91 cranked out. I have out of town company coming in so I'm hoping to have the final two chapters up by the end of next week.

As the night passed, the still blanket darkness filled with more lively sounds than the tipping back of bottles.

“… and then a barstool flew out of nowhere and hit me in the face!” Cullen exclaimed, his hands reenacting the furniture’s deadly assault. “When I awoke on the floor, my mouth was split open and I was covered vomit, that I pray to the Maker was mine.”

Barris held his side with one hand and cackled, his liquor nearly empty in the other. “That’s how you got that scar?” He sighed wiping a tear from the corner of his eye. “Never let Rylen know. He’ll lose all respect for you. He’ll consider your face far less handsome if only caused a stool.”

Tilting his bottle back, Cullen drained the final remaining drop of brandy and frowned as it was barely enough to coat his tongue. He’d have to find Varric or Dorian in camp at once. It would take two solid weeks of travel to return to Skyhold and the Commander had no intention of remaining sober for most of it if possible.

A throat cleared below the jagged wall’s edge. The former-Templar would have startled but lacked the ability to react that quickly.

Leaning over, Cullen looked down and swallow. It was Idalya. Her eyes were bloodshot, nails picking at the edge of her cuticles. Raised scratches ran the length of her wrist.

This was Leliana’s fear of the Warden regaining her memories. Dal’s mind had compartmentalized the wounds that cleaved her through life giving her a second chance to find happiness. Her life was now saturated with pain, drowning in the reality of a decision she made on the battlefield one fateful day. Every step reliving the shock of that life.

Cullen knew an exit when presented to him.

Rising to his unstable stems, Cullen wobbled just when standing, yet through pure determination, he slid down the ridged rocks until falling undignified onto his ass at the bottom. He expected
ringing laughter from the normally joyful Warden, but no sound met his ears. Idalya only vaguely
registered his tumble into the sand-filled dirt.

She wasn’t there for him.

Back on his feet, his head swooned, the alcohol having more control over his movements than he
did. With slow moving hands, Cullen rested them against the bare expanses of her shoulders,
before leaning down and resting a kiss against the girl’s temple. Her brown skin smelled of salt,
the remnants of her tears becoming part of the remaining pieces of the Warden. Her watering and
reddened eyes closed as her head tilted back, absorbing the last of his strength.

“Welcome back, Warden. I’m glad to see you safe.” It was an acknowledgment of her trip through
the Fade, but also of the woman that saved Cullen all those years ago and her return.

Her eyes were solemn as the Commander stepped back and offered a half bow before returning to
the camp where his work would carry him through the rest of the night.

*****

The two warriors remained in silence. Each unsaid word making the air grow heavier as they
waited.

Barris started the staggering process of movement from the battlements, his liquor-infused limbs
obeying at their own pace. “I should go…”

“Please, don’t.” Her plea was desperate as she peered up at him. Crimson spread across the entire
white of her eyes. Her brown skin sallow and paled.

Solas had mentioned she’d sustained a head injury. The changing color of her eyes signaled to him
that the traumatized mage may not have healed her internal wounds.

Frustration filled his body, but he couldn’t find it in his heart to be angry. He never could. Her
struggles were clear to see.

“Okay.” He wasn’t certain he could make down the rocky edge without a scene, anyway.

Her feet fidgeted, she looked like a cornered fawn ready to spring at the first sign of danger. “I
needed you to know…”

This time he stopped her. “I already know, there’s no need.” He’d save himself some dignity if it
was possible at this point.

She cringed, ivory teeth pressing into her bottom lip as she shook her head. Her eyes darting
frantically expecting hidden beasts to attack the minute she relaxed. They’d been out of the battle
for hours now.

“Do you love him?” The bottle of brandy had made him bold as he stood towering above her on the
rocky ledge.

He watched her heart break as she cast her eyes away from his, nails digging into the flesh of her
wrists again to ground herself. The only pain she could control.

“I won’t lie to you.” She swallowed hard as her eyes returned meeting his. “Yes, I love him.”

Barris’ face crumbled as he was the one unable to keep their connection, unable to keep his
thoughts composed. Anger. Sorrow. Joy. Fear. Love. Grief. So many emotions had consumed him today. They’d chewed him to pieces before spitting out the remainder of the man that sat before her. He met her eyes as his tears threatened to breach their way into the world.

“Then I’ll return the favor: I care about you, Dal, but I don’t have the strength right now for you to unburden your conscience.”

He couldn’t have his heart broken further. His eyes followed the border of Adamant, the memories of its horrors too fresh to open another wound in his heart. He didn’t need to know the details of what he’d heard to be gutted. He’d stood outside that tent long enough to feel his hopes and dreams shatter like glass tumbling to stone.

“I…” she started. “I understand.”

He could see how much pain this was causing her. She’d just had the two halves of her life painful rendered back together. He longed for the ability to comfort her, but he just couldn’t. His strength leached from his bones by each swing of the sword, as each body fell until he had nothing left to give.

With an exhausted groan, Barris rose to his feet as the world slowly swirled around him. Maybe after a rest, he’d find a perspective he didn’t have the heart to search for tonight. Taking a solid inhale, he slid his boots down the dusty terrain and landed far more gracefully than Cullen had managed.

At least he had that going for him.

The Warden seemed smaller, her shoulders rolled into her body, so Barris found continued towering above her. He wished he had a mastery of words to explain every complicated instinct flowing through him but all he could label them was tired.

He’d passed the Warden, heading toward the camp when he heard her voice like a gentle caress of the wind.

“I need your help.”

Of course, she did.

He turned to meet her gaze and his heart broke seeing her with clear eyes, the ambient light of the camp illuminating her features. Something terrified her. Her brows raised; pupils narrowed in her reddened eyes. Her body was in shock, unable to reconcile that battle had ended.

“I have nowhere I feel safe, and…” her voice staggered in the power of her confession. “I don’t trust myself to be alone.” Watching her now it was hard not to believe her words.

“Okay.” There was no energy to question her. He would take her words at face value and deal with the consequences later.

He continued walking and Idalya followed, her elven steps silent even as he sensed her acutely behind. No soldiers in camp paid any heed as they passed, everyone’s eyes lowered and unwilling to make eye contact. Each grieving in their own way.

At his Knight-Commander tent, he held back the flap and allowed her to enter. Inside was a thick bedroll with a fur throw, an armor stand, his travel bag, and a few crates fashioned into a workable desk for his stack of missives, which had doubled in size in his absence.
“Home, sweet, home.” He mumbled as the flap closed behind them.

He struggled to light the remaining wick of his only candle. The flint finally sparked in his drunk hands and the tent glowed with a dull flickering light from the dying wax.

Without a word, Idalya crossed to the far side near his armor stand, preparing to sit in the corner on the bare dirt.

“No, take the roll. I have work that needs to be finished.” He lied.

She nodded numb to the world, as Barris sat at his barely holding furniture and pretended to flip through the papers. He trained his eyes to focus on the parchment in front of him as his peripheral vision registered her removing her soiled clothes, as she stripped down to her smalls, and slipped below the worn fur wrap.

Barris sighed silently as she came to rest, the Templar portion of his mind the only thing holding him together. He needed out of his armor; they had caged him within the steel for most of the day. His tired fingers grasped the leather straps of his greaves.

“Would you like help?” Her voice was barely a whisper as he turned over his shoulder to find her sitting up on the roll, the fur pulled tight against her chin for modesty, her bare shoulders uncovered, tangled white hair framing her face. “I have difficulty getting in and out of armor alone.”

He gulped loudly, pinching the skin of his forearm in the strap as he pulled in the wrong direction. “I do better by myself,” he blurted out, unable to meet her eyes as she nodded and laid back down.

He needed separation.

He didn’t fault her for having her memory back, but the reality of just being friends hurt more than he’d expected. Her fingers deftly unbuckling the leather straps of his armor was more intimate than he could handle. Too great a stress of his control before he’d be unable to hold his tongue from the traitorous words already threatening to escape.

Idalya’s muffled cries were barely audible as the Templar removed his armor, piece by painstaking piece. Instinct and years of routine saving him as his fingers struggled with each buckle. He could have used help, but only from anyone but her. She’d grown quiet, having cried herself to sleep by the time the last piece left him. With the final piece hung on the stand, the cool breeze chilled the sweat-soaked linen against his skin.

He groaned in exhaustion as he reseated himself trying to focus on the words scribbled across the parchment. He didn’t want to work, but he could permit his flight instinct after he’d silently promised to look after her until the coming light. Requisitions. Troop movements. Casualty lists. Orders to the Storm Coast…

Wait, what was that?

He read thoroughly over the contents. The Templar’s lyrium supply was in danger from magical earthquakes wreaking havoc on the Storm Coast and the Inquisition was being summoned by the mining dwarves to determine its cause. If he’d had more energy, the thought of Evelyn traveling through dank Deep Road’s tunnels would have made his night.

The Warden’s soft snores were disrupted by an echoing clack as the woman’s teeth chattered together. Barris sighed as he rose, weighing the few options he had. Reaching her side, his callused hand touched her shoulder to stir her, but he hissed as his hand withdrew from her ice-cold skin.
Shock draining her of everything.

He pulled the length of fur up to the point of her chin as the sleeping Warden continued to shiver. With no will to fight, he laid beside her on top of the fur coverlet. His arm wrapped around her waist as he pulled her back against his chest and allowed his remaining heat to transfer to her.

Within minutes her tremors calmed and her, not so silent, snores resumed as Barris gave up any pretense of working. He held her close as his tear-filled eyes made of steel shuttered and her ashen hair wrapped around his neck as the candle gave out its last flicker and extinguished. Not unlike Barris’ heart.

Chapter End Notes

TWO CHAPTERS LEFT.

What do you guys think will happen? What will happen between the end of this fic and where the next picks up???

Thank you all for your eternal support. I’m so glad this odd story has resonated with so many of you over the years. <3
The Tales of the Champion

Chapter Summary

An excerpt from Tales From the Champion

Chapter Notes

*CONTENT WARNING, PLEASE BE AWARE OF TAGS*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

An excerpt from Tales of the Champion: Chapter ???

9:36 Dragon.

It was a mistake coming here.

The overly obtuse jawline known as Knight-Captain Cullen Rutherford sat alone, festering in misery along the bar of the Hanged Man Tavern. His brooding and plush lips sucking in the dying foam of his ale.

This was the last place he wanted to be, an establishment full of filth and debauchery. Few places in Kirkwall beyond Knight-Commander Meredith’s sight, this was one of them. The Templar planned on drinking himself to blindness before the night ended. If he’d considered himself more than half a man, he would have sought out female companionship for the long passing hours of the night.

It was a great plan, but as usual, there was one complication. She was always a complication.

Slam.

The Champion slammed her empty tankard to the wooden table, the hollow vessel echoing in his ringing ears, as her ensemble of heathens whooped in celebration. Cullen seethed and sunk further into his own drink; his back turned away from their excitement.

They had every reason to celebrate.

Meredith’s shaky hold on her sanity slipped more by the day. Despite accusations, He wasn’t blind to the woman’s madness. Through her descent, the Knight-Captain had supported his leader, digging deep through her messages to find the good intentions still residing within. It became more difficult each day to separate the Templar from her growing paranoia.

While investigating missing mages, Marion had discovered a coup to oust Meredith led by
Templar Thrask and Cullen’s former roommate, the mage sympathizer Raleigh Samson. By the time he’d arrived, the Champion and her crew were casually sitting around, the rogue Templars slain and left in an orderly pile for him. Marion vouched that Samson had confronted the Templars and saved the hostages. The hostages who’d somehow escaped in the chaos of battle.

Samson was meeting with Meredith to discuss his readmission to the Templars while Cullen sat inebriated in the Hanged Man, drowning his sorrows to lessen his self-deprecating thoughts of inadequacy.

The Knight-Captain rolled his eyes as the dashing Varric Tethras approached; luscious golden locks tied back from his chiseled features with a leather band. Wisps of auburn chest hair begging the Templar’s eyes to follow its hidden path as the dwarf perched on a stool to his right. “How’s it going, Curly?”

Cullen remained antisocial, mumbling into the tipping flood of ale into his mouth. Nothing the dwarf said could convince him to interact with the scoundrels. His broken pride could not allow it.

His teeth clenched together as the telltale clacks of Hawke’s boots followed close behind. The Champion leaned over the bar to this left. Cullen’s lips twitched involuntarily at the faint aroma of medicinal herbs and lyrium wafting from her. No doubt from where her skin had heatedly met Anders’ in the throes of passion. The Templar cringed as the image burned itself into his mind, newly reminding him of his eternal loneliness.

“In the tavern, we’re all friends, come join us!” A jolt shocked the length of his spine, as the woman placed a hand on his shoulder, her heat pressing through the thin linen protecting him from the intimacy, as he wrenched his arm away from her proximity. What was he thinking coming here out of armor?

Cullen sputtered. “We are not friends. I don’t even like you.” His reaction was too fast, too loud, and too angry to be convincing. It was his desperation that had responded. The man lost inside longing for nothing more than a human connection.

A grin spread across the Champion’s full rose lips as she read his defensive stance as easily as a line of the Chant. The Knight-Captain forced his eyes up from the lower perimeter of lips, back to her other conniving features. Heat kindled through his body, making way for shame that a woman who clearly despised him could reignite a burnt-out candle long since extinguished by each larger dose of lyrium.

“Oh, Cullen, you’re hurting my feelings.” She gasped in mock surprise, a thin-fingered hand bearing the scratches from her earlier slaughter of the rebel Templars, pressed to her breast. The motion drew his eyes to the line of her cleavage pressed high by the line of her corset over her linen shirt. “Moping in a bar isn’t allowed. Come on, tell me. What would make you feel better?” Her tone had slipped deeper, quieter, more seductive as she’d inched closer. Her deep blue eyes peeked out between the stray pieces of dagger-chopped ink hair masking her face. The smell of whiskey from her breath was staggering.

A loaded silence fell over the rowdy crowd of the Hanged Man as they watched the scene unfold in morbid curiosity. The tension hovering in the air until an undignified shatter rang out in the tavern and Cullen looked down in horror to realize his grip had collapsed the empty tankard in his hand. The glass breaking into glittering pieces across the length of the bar.

Cullen’s cheeks flushed crimson as the bar erupted in squealing laughter at his embarrassment. The Champion raised a questioning brow, her grin still taunting him as he pulled the broken pieces from his bleeding palm. Speaking to women had never been his strength, but verbal jousting
against one that constantly made him feel inferior was a level of shame wasn’t interested in repeating.

Marion moved aside as Cullen shook the loose shards from the linen sleeves of his shirt.

“Throw a few swings at her, it’ll make you feel better. It always cheers me up!” Isabella yelled from behind them.

Cullen turned in disapproval. The pirate was straddling Fenris’ lap, her bare toned legs wrapped around the back of the chair. Throwing back shots of a deep amber liquid one at a time, organized in a line down the table at her side. Her ample bosom was pressed into the warrior’s smiling face, who looked more content than he’d ever seen to the stoic man.

As if he thought he couldn’t feel more embarrassment, his cheeks brightened to a darker shade of crimson. “I…” he sputtered “I will not hit a woman!”

Marion laughed a throaty sound that caused the hair to stand on the back of his burning neck. She tapped her shot glass on the counter and the bartender immediately poured a splash of whiskey inside, while the woman’s eyes never left the tensed Templar beside her. Leaning over, her lips brushed gently over Cullen’s ear. “Let’s be honest, you barely see me as a person, much less a woman.”

There was that singeing image again; her bare skin traced over, but this time it was his hands he couldn’t stop imagining running the length of her.

Cullen narrowed eyes turned to meet her instigating ones. “That’s not true at all!”

The Champion shrugged as she leaned back, analyzing his response. “You fight female mages, am I right?” Her body language changed, a rogue’s stance replacing her comfortable posture. “Throwing a punch at me is far less offensive than using a sword on a frightened apostate. Do you only fight women that can’t fight back?”

Anders sighed loudly from their table and finished his drink. Tonight had descended into chaos faster than expected.

Cullen’s brows lowered in fury, his lips drawing back into a snarling growl.

“Ah, there’s the Templar I know and despise.” Marion knocked on the bar and whiskey was pouring before it reached the bar a second time. She threw it into the back of her throat before stepping away from him into the center of the tavern stretching her neck and shoulders.

The angered Templar returned to the remnants of his broken drink, dwelling in growing irritation and refusing to play her games any longer.

The forgotten dwarf to his left motioned to the bartender who placed a shot immediately in front of Cullen. “Ignore my inebriated friend. Let me be the voice of diplomacy. We’re not your enemies, Knight-Captain. I think you’ll find we have a lot of similar issues and concerns.”

“I’d recommend you keep your opinions out of this, dwarf.” Cullen sneered to Varric while taking the shot and shooting it back, his face grimacing and clenching as his throat threatened to send the liquid fire back out. His lightweight status with alcohol clear to all.

Varric’s face fell at the Templar’s threat. “Don’t say I didn’t try to help you.” He jumped down from his stool with a sigh and passed behind Cullen as the man turned to follow.
The Champion’s fist struck him dead on in the nose. Pain exploded through his face, spreading blackness and blinking lights across his vision as he landed back against the bar. Cullen spit out a mouthful of blood to the dirt floor as Marion staggered, a laugh echoing out of her chest before a bar patron struck her from the side at full speed and the tavern erupted in chaos.

Cullen blinked heavily to clear the blinking spot of his vision. He watched Marion head butt a bearded man as they swung and missed with a punch. Isabella crashed an empty bottle of wine over the head another running toward Hawke’s rear. Fenris kicked a table in front of a group of men trying to flank the Champion as Varric tossed stools toward others looking to gain an unfair advantage of their leader. Anders merely watched attentively, his back against the far wall as his love brawled a group of sloshed drunks.

Finally, able to focus without the world spinning away, Cullen stepped forth intending to intervene between the Champion and any Lowtown trash looking to make a name by sticking a dagger in the city’s hero. His eyes were glued to Marion’s outline, her lithe form still dodging incoming blows.

He was so distracted that he never saw the stool coming as it propelled through the air.

The chair struck him violently in the face and the Templar’s eyes rolled back into his head before crumbling to the floor. A deep gash opened on his top lip, bleeding across the bottom of his ape-like jaw.

“*Well, shit.*"

The tavern went silent as all eyes centered in horror on the dwarf. Varric’s arms lowered still holding the stool that had removed the Templar effectively from battle. The man now lying prone on the floor, his appendages splayed outward. Knight-Commander Meredith struck fear into all who crossed her path. An injury to one of her Knight-Captains would mean a harsh public punishment in the Gallows.

Marion’s drunken barking laugh was the only sound to cut through the silence. “Why did you do that, Varric? He was harmless!” The Champion pushed her way through the frozen crowd and peered down at the stretching pool of crimson reaching towards her boot as she clutched the railing of the bar for support.

Varric’s soft periwinkle eyes were wide as they met the Champion’s, liquor taking firm hold of his faculties before both he and Marion burst into laughter, bent at the waist as the waves of shuddering laughs overtook their systems.

The rogue pushed off the bar grabbing the dwarf into a bear hug. “I love you, Varric.” As his face pressed into the border of her cleavage, Varric diverted his eyes as the Champion rocked back and forth, now using him as her support.

“You’re not so bad yourself, Hawke.” He sighed in the woman’s embrace.

“I think we’ve overstayed our welcome.”

Varric nearly screamed and knocked Marion away in guilt at Anders’ silent approach. He sheepishly peered up to meet the mage’s eyes but found only warmth emanating from within the verdant circles. Anders’ gave him a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder as he turned over his own to speak to the stoic elf in the back.

“Fenris, can you give me a hand?”
Varric squawked while lifted off his feet and secured under the warrior’s arm like a sack of vegetables. Anders’ threw Marion over his shoulder in front and when she attempted to struggle her way out to head back to the bar, the mage landed a quick smack to her rear end, which caused her to roar out in laughter.

Her glowing sapphire eyes met Varric’s on their undignified exit. She reached out a sloppy hand, moving his disorderly hair from of his face.

“Thanks, Hawke, what would I do without you?” He asked sarcastically.

Her playful grin filled the empty spaces in the room. “Hopefully, you’ll never have to find out, Varric.”

“Varric?”

9:42 Dragon.

“Varric?”

Varric closed his book, delicately laying the quill aside from his shaking hand. He sighed hard, all oxygen exiting his body, as he gazed up to see Cassandra’s head leaning into the tent. Her features were paled, every form of exhaustion painted across each expression. The Seeker opened her mouth to speak, considering asking for permission to enter, before deciding to come inside.

“Seeker. I’m not sure if you’re the last or the only person I want to see.” Cassandra was the only one in the Inquisition who could fathom the depths of his pain, the complexity of his loss. She’s listened to his entire story, the embellishments, and the truth, as he’d told her the tales of the Champion.

In silence, she took a seat to his side on an empty crate. His brows rose in surprise as her right hand slid between his. Her golden Nevarran skin laced around his sun-tanned fingers as Varric watched. He didn’t have the energy for questions and squeezed her fingers in a wordless thank you as the two stared ahead unable to form words as they searched for meaning in all of this.

The body rested on the raised platform on the far side on the tent. Thick linens wrapped with care around the entire length, magical ice coating the pedestal’s base to chill the delicately held package above. An empty vessel that once held a spirit dearer to him than life itself. A spirit that had chosen during the night to remain forever into the Fade.

“I….” Cassandra struggled; her voice chaffed. “I am sorry for your loss Varric.”

“Me too, Seeker. Me too.” His throat as raw as his emotions.

The Starkhaven Templar had awoken him at early break of dawn. Her caramel eyes bloodshot and tear-filled, as she’d reached out and handed him the folded piece of parchment, his name embellished on top in penmanship he could never forget.

Varric,

Let the blade pass through the flesh,
Let my blood touch the ground,
Let my cries touch their hearts.
Let mine be the last sacrifice.

Love always,
-M

The words of Andraste written by her hand had broken Varric’s heart in a way Bianca could never touch. The Queen’s crumbling protector had led him across the camp to her tent as Starkhaven’s soldiers packed their camp, not meeting his eyes. Their quiet tears dripping into the unforgiving sands of the Western Approach.

Varric entered alone, a notebook pressed tightly beneath his arm as his eyes adjusted to the dim light inside. Her body had already been wrapped tightly in burial linens, to hide the harsh realities of death. They draped dark cloth the color of her hair over the floor to cover the crimson stains where her life had pooled before being absorbed into the sand. Part of her belonging forever to this unworthy desert.

He’d brought his notebook to read to her. She’d always loved hearing his stories. He wrote many of his early stories for her amusement; the laughter bouncing child-like in her sapphire eyes. He’d instead reached for the quill remaining at her desk. Probably the quill she’d written…

His fingers moved of their own volition, unable to accept the cold and unmoving corpse next to him as the friend who’d sworn to always be by his side. The memory had poured from him filling the pages and when he closed his eyes; she was alive again. Her smile clearer than any image he could recall. Her laugh filling the empty gaps in his heart that her departure had created.

He would remember her this way- how she lived. Not the consuming sadness that had taken her so long ago.

“The silence is deafening.” Varric croaked out and Cass’ hand tightened around his, his only lifeline now.

The Seeker stiffened on her chair, weighing a decision before she opened her lips to speak.

“As a young girl, my best friend died because of my mistake.” She cleared her throat as the words threatened to remain trapped. “My own brother was lost due to my stupidity. That grief burdened me until I thought I could not go on. Then when the Conclave exploded, I lost someone… someone dear. When I fought the demons outside, I wished to fall.” Cass grew silent as her confession hovered in the air.

Varric turned and analyzed her. Dark circles ringed her watering eyes, but she was still so beautiful. A Nevarran princess hardened by the outside world.

“Seeker, why are you telling me this right now?” He appreciated her attempt to break the silence, but they were already surrounded by so much death.

“I don’t know. I suppose because I understand,” her words faded, “and do not want you to hate her.”

“I never hated her.” Varric gasped, wiping the tears that finally fell from his eyes. “I loved Marion. I hated what I let her become. She needed us after Anders, and we all walked away.” His right hand balled into a fist as Cass watched him without judgment, holding his left as they remained linked together.

The dwarf gritted his teeth together as she shut his eyes to block the image of the body laid in front
of him. “The only person I hate is Sebastian Vael. I will make him pay for this.”

Cassandra squeezed his hand in reassurance. “Yes, we will.”

A sob wracked Varric’s frame as his head slumped against her firm arm. The dam of emotions broken, he sighed as the woman wrapped her arms around his frame, holding him like he would slip away and fuse into the bloodied sands.

“Seeker?” He mumbled against her breast; his eyes closed as grief made his limbs unmovable.

“Mm?” She hummed softly.

“Do you really believe in the Maker bosom and all of that?”

“Yes,” Cass answered without hesitation, her drifting over the expanse of his shoulders. “Someday at the end of this, we will lay down our sorrows and stand at the Maker’s side.”

Varric smiled against her breastplate. “Do you think she’s found Anders there?”

Cassandra’s body stiffened at his question. “That is more complicated, the mage…”

Varric cut her off. “Justice was a shit, but Anders… Anders was a good man. A kind man who wanted to heal the hurt he saw in the world. Justice prayed on his pain and fear.” Not unlike the man who’d taken advantage of Marion and separated her from everyone she cared about.

“Then yes, I imagine they have found each other in the Fade. I envy their peace.”

They remained in silence as the rogue absorbed the Seeker’s strength until he’d be ready to leave the tent and walk away from the man he once was. No matter how powerful the quill, Varric couldn’t rewrite the past, but he sure as hell could make sure Sebastian Vael’s future as King was a nightmare.

Chapter End Notes

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline- 1-800-273-8255

Dedicated to all of those, I never got to say goodbye to.

*****

One more chapter to go!

Also, I posted the first chapter of my side fic I’ve been working on for a while, Once More With Feeling, which is a funny AU of this story. Go check it out in the Idalya Mahariel stories link above.
The truth is revealed and an ultimatum is delivered.

YOU GUYS.
I'M SUPER EMOTIONAL RIGHT NOW.
I'LL CATCH UP WITH YOU GUYS AT THE END OF THE CHAPTER.

Solas.
Solas, where are you?

Please.

*Her pull is getting stronger. It takes the full capacity of his strength not to rush to her side, blinking across the Fade as she commands.*

*Who is leading who now?*

*The heat of the corrupted flame coats his skin even from a distance as her horrors fill the entire landscape of history, making it into a wasteland of devastation.*

I can’t do this alone.

*But she’s never been alone, has she? It’s the question he’s terrified to answer. The answer he fears to the core of his being.*

*His soul aches listening to her cries, the pleas for comfort he can’t resolve within himself, her sorrow storming across the magical planes.*

*He’s too suspicious by nature, too skeptical after having his trust broken too many times to put aside what he’s learned.*

*It breaks his heart as he wills himself out of the Fade to awaken, leaving Idalya behind with her inescapable sadness as the Archdemon’s roar violates everything across the barren plains of the Fade.*

*****

“Knight-Commander?”
Barris grunted at the messenger’s intrusion.

His sleep had been broken through the night, holding the sobbing Warden tightly as she continued fighting her demons. She’d cried desperately for Solas’ and Alistair’s help through her dreams before she’d collapsed in her utter exhaustion, her ability to keep surviving.

Now morning had located him and the radiating pain through the base of his skull. Booze abandoning him to face the reality of the growing dawn.

“Leave or I’ll gut you myself.” This was the voice of exhaustion.

He’d rather die than leave this bedroll. Leaving meant removing his arms from the now silent slumbering woman. He’d give up holding her for the first and final time.

“I’m-m…,” the messenger stuttered unsure how credible the Templar’s threats were, “I’m sorry for the intrusion, Knight-Commander, you’ve been summoned by the Commander. You are to reach him with haste.”

Barris groaned, leaning back against the bedroll, tangles of the Warden’s hair still wrapped around his throat- an apt metaphor. “Thank you, I’ll be there promptly.” He conceded.

The messenger stumbled out of his tent heading to the next victims of the Inquisition’s summons. If Cullen was making demands this early, it was an ill omen for the day.

With some sobriety, it was difficult to face the next stage of his life. Today he would discover some way to move on, he had to, before despair engulfed him fully. The Inquisition had been victorious in one battle, but now they would determine the course of the rest of the war.

He tugged his numb tingling bicep from beneath the girl’s heavy head. The Warden whimpered at the loss of heat, rolling from her side to her back seeking his shifting warmth. Her loose dirtied hair fanned her head creating a glittering halo that stung his eyes. In a different twist of fate, he’d have spent the night exploring every divot and crevice of skin his eyes crested over, as her chest slowly rose and fell in her difficulty won peace.

With a silent prayer to the Maker, Barris begged for Cullen’s demands to be quick and allow him time to return to the sleeping woman. For the time to discuss moving forward with the clarity that daylight brought.

But knowing the Commander, Barris wasn’t hopeful.

*****

Idalya gasped loudly into the bedroll awaking from her nightmare. Her pulse hammered through her veins as she calmed her breathing, knowing the beast couldn’t track her after their victory yesterday.

These visions, her unending connection, to the Archdemon had haunted her dreams across Ferelden as they’d prepared to battle the darkspawn. Alistair saw them but was unaffected. He never felt the same connection or the uncontrollable pull she had; never felt the true depths of terror she woke screaming from every morning on the road.

When Riordan told them the cost of defeating the beast, she’d known it was her- *it always had been*. Did Urthemiel sense she was its demise or was it another victim of destiny like her?

“Lady Mahariel?”
Idalya sighed as her lashes flickered away the morning light breaching the linen border of the tent. Her body remained so tense; she hadn’t heard the messenger approach.

“What?” She mumbled into the arm her cheek was propped on.

“You’ve been summoned by King Alistair, madam. He awaits your presence at the central tent.”

Defeat spread through her eyes which now lacked their mischievous sparkle. The eyes carrying the guilt and grief of two lives from her collapsing shoulders.

“What does he want?” Her heart sank as she scanned the room and found the tent empty. Barris and his armor gone; his supplies long since packed.

“I do not know, madam. I’m just a messenger.” The boy exited without a dismissal.

The Warden sighed as she moved upright, her head aching from the sharp blow it had sustained. It would be a race to see if the radiating pain from the blow withdrew before the crushing pain at the loss of the would-be Warden. She stretched her sore shoulders and arms trying to draw life into her.

She needed clothes. All she’d worn into her near coma was her band and smalls. A sigh exited her frame as she spied the folded pile of clothing at the foot of the bedroll: a large cream-colored tunic, her mostly cleansed breeches from battle, and a healing tonic nestled on top. Her wrists still ached from her self-inflicted wounds as her pain and desperation had grown too strong last night. It was all she could do to release it into the world, moving it outside of herself.

Dal lifted the coarse linen in her hands and brought it to her nose. Her eyes closed at the strong scent of Barris remaining in the fabric as she held it against her face. A sly smile of hope dared to flash across her tired and cracked lips.

_Maybe everything wasn’t lost._

****

His armor carried the weight of his emotions this morning. Every piece Barris buckled into place felt like sinking into the desert, slowly drowning with each step.

Cullen’s tent was a chaotic mess of messengers darting back and forth, cockroaches scattering in light. The frantic and still awake Commander had worked the entire night, just waiting for his soldiers to awaken to bombard them with a flurry of missives and commands.

“Morning, Commander,” Barris gave a casual salute as he entered.

Messengers parted around the Knight-Commander out of respect as they cleared from the area.

“ Took you long enough to get up,” Cullen snapped, flipping through the piles of parchment.

_Maker help me. It would be one of those days._

Just like Halamshiral, Cullen was a pit of rage striking around him due to his inability to communicate with the Inquisitor. The more Barris dealt with his friend, the more it appeared he and Evelyn’s problems rested in the man’s instability instead of her- the place where Cullen was always too quick to assign blame.

“Why have you summoned me?” The Templar’s tone was flat as he kept his opinions contained.
“Starkhaven’s gone, the Wardens are dead, and we need to have the Inquisition ready for travel soon.”

*What the fuck was happening? Okay, one thing at a time…*

“Our entire army left?” Starkhaven had brought hundreds of men across Thedas and somehow marched away in the middle of the night without him noticing.

“Most,” Cullen mumbled, his hands pausing their movement, as his bloodshot and haunted hazel eyes rose to meet Barris’. “The Champion is dead. King Vael abandoned the camp, took his forces, and left the Queen behind.” The Commander swallowed hard, leaning back in his makeshift chair. “I should say all of his forces minus one very furious Templar. She abandoned her post, chucked her helmet at Sebastian then barged in my tent demanding to join the Inquisition. I stationed her to Lysette. So, I apologize for the earful you’ll receive about *that* today.”

Barris staggered on his feet, the reality of Kirkwall’s Champion loss weighing down his lead shoulders even more. “The King did he…” His question remained unfinished, anger growing that his instincts had told him not to trust the vile man.

The Commander shook his head as he reached down and retrieved pieces of armor to strap on. “She left a note for Varric… and only Varric.”

“*Maker.*” His heart ached for the dwarf.

The more years you spent as the Templar, the more common it became to know men who’d taken their own lives as the toll from lyrium because a sword too heavy to bear.

“What happened to the Wardens?” They had peacefully surrendered at the end of the battle. They were valuable allies in the coming ones.

“*Gaspard.*”

The one-word answer shook him to his core as he remembered the sleeping Warden in his tent. If she hadn’t come to him, would she have been among the dead? Or died trying to stop the slaughter of her brethren?

“Commander?” Cullen narrowed his eyes as the messenger entered, a sealed parchment clutched in his hands. The young man practically threw the roll into the Commander’s waiting hands before retreating the way he entered.

At least Barris wasn’t the only one restraining the need to flee.

Breaking the crimson seal, Cullen’s cheeks paled as his exhausted eyes scanned the words.

“*Fuck!*” The former-Templar slammed an angry fist to his wavering desk as Barris dared to imagine what else could go wrong today. “*I knew this would happen,*” Cullen mumbled, a glowing blush replacing the pale expanses of skin on his face.

Barris raised an uncomfortable brow awaiting the man’s information with bated breath.

“Alistair has officially summoned Dal.” Barris' heart plummeted into his boots at the revelation. “I fucking knew there was no chance he’d leave without her once he knew. I’m so sorry, Barris.” This was information he didn’t want. It only there was a way to forget that your worst fear was occurring.
“But there must be…” Barris would not accept this. Dal was their only path to defeating Corypheus. All their losses were for naught if the Archdemon remained immortal.

With a sigh, Cullen shook his head sadly as he tightened the gauntlets across his forearms. “He is her King, and ours. We risk treason if we circumvent his will. We’ve already committed treason keeping Dal from him all these months. We must prepare ourselves to say goodbye for probably the last time.”

The Templar had no response as he tried to process everything happening. He’d be angrier if he didn’t fear for his own neck when the King discovered where his Warden slumbered last night. Alistair Therin didn’t strike him as the most level-headed of people.

The Commander’s eye roll was powerful enough to knock over a row of tents, as the flushing messenger poked his head into the tent once more.

“What now?” He growled at the boy before snatching the roll from his hands and shooing the frightened boy away.

He broke the seal and his shoulders slumped as he groaned. “And now I’m being summoned by Evelyn: the shit show never ends today.” His legs creaked as he rose, draping his surcoat over his shoulders even in the dry desert heat, withdrawals chilling his blood to ice. “Come with me, Barris. I’m sure she’ll be hunting for you next.”

With each step, Barris’ heart cracked further. He wanted to feel happy for Idalya. This is what she had been searching for all this time- her past. Alistair was the family and home that had disappeared from her life and now she’d have it back.

But, Maker, why did it have to hurt so fucking much?

*****

The sun was already cooking her skin through Barris’ tunic she’d knotted at the base of her spine to fit her smaller frame. The thought of marching across this desert for weeks did not thrill her one bit.

The Spymaster fell into silent step beside her as they passed the broken-down portions of the Inquisition camp. Soldier’s loading one cart after another that would need to be pulled through the desert.

“Where are you going?” Dal asked in irritation, already done with this day if Leliana had taken it upon herself to follow her from place to place.

The rogue pulled a rolled parchment from her jacket pocket and waved it in the air. “I have been summoned as well.” Of course, she already knew where she was heading, she was the Spymaster.

“How was your night last night?” the woman rose a knowing brow as Dal’s eyes narrowed.

“Oh, fuck you.” Idalya blurted as the central tent came into focus ahead.

“That’s the spirit,” Leliana mumbled with a quiet chuckle. “You really are back, aren’t you?”

Dal huffed a heated breath out her nostrils as they moved closer. “Do you know what I’m walking into?”

Leliana’s sarcastic smile faded from her lips, “I have an idea, but you’ll find out soon.”
The stationed Ferelden soldiers bowed deeply at Dal’s approach. She restrained herself from rolling her eyes, as they parted the linen flaps for the women to enter.

Straight ahead, the first thing Idalya spied was Alistair sitting as he read through a pile of parchment. His disheveled hair from last night had been combed and tied back, his misshapen beard trimmed to a more flattering length. She would have noticed these things if his very presence hadn’t fried her last remaining nerve of self-control.

“What the fuck is all this about, Alistair?” She barked at the King as she stormed towards her former lover, his summons crushed in her palm.

A quiet chuckle exited the weary King, who eyes overfilled with sadness met hers, as he turned to his side. “See, I told you this would be how she’d react. Next time believe me before she comes in with a flying dagger before asking questions.”

Dal’s eyes narrowed, seeing red. Anger was the only thing keeping her functioning from the all-encompassing grief filling her at the sound of Alistair’s voice. So many memories, so much pain compressing inside her until only fury remained to keep her moving.

“King Alistair summoned you because he did not believe you’d respond to mine.”

Dal turned to meet the smoky voice she’d not noticed in her focused vision.

Evelyn looked exhausted. Her skin a sallow tone, purple circles buried deep in her face. She wore a simple tunic and breeches, her riot of barrel curls tied back from her head. The Inquisitor looked more human than the elf had ever seen her.

The Warden’s fury fell flat at the truth the Inquisitor spoke.

“Apparently, he wasn’t wrong,” Evelyn noted bitterly

The Inquisitor stood beside Queen Anora, who Dal noted with animosity had grown more beautiful over the last decade. Ferelden’s Queen stared at Idalya like an apparition had materialized before her. Her mouth gaped into a wide circle as she wandered back on numb legs to Alistair who helped the shocked woman find a seat before her foundation collapsed beneath her.

It’s one thing to know your husband’s lover has risen from the grave, it’s quite another to see it in person.

Idalya stepped back to fall in line at Leliana’s side as a commotion of voices approached.

Josephine and Cullen threw open the tent, arguing in hushed whispers, animated hands flying around their heads, as they entered. Barris following close behind. The Templar’s eyes grew wide as he caught Dal within his sight, his cheeks leaching color as he stalled at her presence.

Dal couldn’t help the involuntary smile that alighted her lips even if his response wasn’t optimal. She didn’t miss the lowering of Alistair’s brows as he spied her reaction to the Templar’s entrance.

The Ambassador and Commander headed straight for Ferelden’s King with haste, the Spymaster begrudgingly following even if she had little interest in arguing.

“Knight-Commander- good timing, I was about to summon you.” Barris swallowed heavily as he approached Evelyn across the tent, turning his back to the Warden he’d stared at in horror.

The elf used her hearing to shamelessly eavesdrop on the Inquisitor and Templar as they spoke in
hushed whispers. *Something’s wrong with Lilly*. The Warden cringed as the Commander roared his displeasure at the advisers, and she could not hear Barris’ response. *Griffon Wing Keep* was all of Barris’ words she could understand through Cullen’s incessant bitching.

Alistair’s bitter laughter rang out in the tent at the advisers cutting off any remaining conversation between Evelyn and Barris. “Commander, you think *I* could force Dal to go *anywhere*? I couldn’t stop her from killing an Archdemon and I was twenty feet away! You either overestimate my power or greatly underestimate her stubbornness.”

A ripple of pain flashed through her limbs, her body remembering the impact of descending through the searing sky of fire once more.

The light in King’s eyes faded, as they met Dal’s across the tent. He’d memorized her every expression, unlike the Chant they had forced him to remember. She was the only book he’d ever read from cover to the end.

Evelyn rolled her eyes, stepping forward. “Cullen, stop your bickering. Let’s get this over with,” The Inquisitor cleared her throat as she avoided Idalya’s gaze. “The Orlesian Wardens are no more. Last night Gaspard sentenced those who surrendered as traitors and carried out their sentence.”

*This can’t be happening.*

The room flickered in Dal’s vision, her feet staggering. A firm hand at her side was the only thing keeping her on her feet as Alistair rushed across the tent to attend her.

Her grief compacted once more, her rage exploding as the King placed his hands on her arms. With her full, unguarded power, she pushed him away, unable to stomach his touch. Alistair was only saved from impacting with the ground by Cullen standing behind, who caught his ricocheting King by the shoulders.

“Did you know this would happen?” Idalya sobbed, an accusing finger pointed toward Alistair, but all present knew the question belonged to them.

Fatigue filled the Inquisitor’s expressions, her eyes devoid of feeling. If Dal was expecting an apology or explanation, she would find none from the stoic woman.

Dal stepped forward; her hands fist tightly now at her sides. “Fucking *answer me*. Could any of you have stopped this?”

Alistair’s jaw hung open, shocked by the fury she could not contain within. Before he could answer, Anora stepped out in front of him. The Queen’s blue eyes narrowed to furious slits at the Warden.

“We learned of the Warden’s fate this morning from the Inquisitor. It is…” the Anora faltered, aware that she must navigate her words because of the fragile man that was her husband. “Ferelden grieves what the Wardens have lost in Adamant, but we thank the Inquisitor for her open communication. It appears mutual enemies can bring together the most unlikely of allies.”

*To the fucking Void with all these fucks.*

Idalya turned to Evelyn who’d remained silent through her tantrum. “Charge Gaspard as a criminal. He is out of control. He slaughtered our *allies*!” She growled through her teeth at the Inquisitor. “You can never return to Orlais- *you’ll be next.*”

A vile grin passed over Dal’s lips as she turned to Ferelden’s Queen. “Hey Anora, why don’t you
give the Inquisitor a history lesson. How does a power-hungry man treat those he views as a hindrance?"

The onlookers gasped at her blatant reference to Loghain Mac Tir, but her goal was successful. Anora’s porcelain skin blushed a violent red until the Queen escaped out of the tent with Alistair following close behind. It was a wretched thing to say, but she couldn’t help but afflict her anger onto others.

“I am aware.” Evelyn snapped as her body posture became rigid. “I have no choice but to return.” The Inquisitor paused, steadying the breath that betrayed her fear. “But I don’t make this decision in ignorance of the price I will likely pay. I cannot leave him to his own devices. I am the Inquisition’s only shield against his madness.”

Cullen paled behind the advisers. His skin developing on a sickly pallor at her confession, bile rising in his throat.

The Inquisitor would remain under the Emperor’s controlling thumb for their safety. The only protection they had from what happened to the Wardens was Evelyn.

Their leader cleared her throat as she continued. “Earthquakes are ravaging the Storm Coast. Mining caves in the Deep Roads are collapsing daily and threatening our Templar’s supply of Lyrium. The dwarfs need help with whatever the fuck is happening down there.”

“I’ll go.” The silence was deafening as Idalya spoke up.

Leliana moved toward her, anger brewing, already prepared for this battle.

Dal held up a hand up silencing the Spymaster as she approached Evelyn. “That’s why I was summoned, wasn’t it? Yesterday you had resources who could scout the Deep Roads and fight darkspawn- now all you have is me.”

Her leader huffed with the accusation but did not deny the Warden’s claims.

“You can’t send non-Wardens soldiers to push back darkspawn- they’ll be corrupted and die before the end of the first skirmish. But Alistair told you all this, didn’t he? That’s why you summoned me. Gaspard took away all your options, so all you have left is me.”

She’s aware that everyone in the room is ready to fight her logic, but she wasn’t appealing to them. “I’ll do it, but if you don’t let me out of Skyhold- I quit. The next time the Archdemon rears its ugly head, you’re on your own, Inquisitor. I’ll sit back and watch as Corypheus and his dragon rend your flesh from the bone and I won’t lift a finger.”

She was bluffing hard while silently praying that Evelyn was having as bad of a day as she appeared to be.

Evelyn assessed her quietly as she weighed her options. Dal recognized a familiar look of escape in the woman’s eyes. An instinct to run buried deep behind her duties.

The Inquisitor nodded as the room gasped in shock. “Pick your companions.”

Idalya’s shoulders pressed back, her chin stabilized as the familiar pull responsibility soaked into her bones. “Bull, Sera, and Black…”, her voice stuttered as she almost spoke the lost Warden’s name. How many times had they begged her to leave Skyhold with them and unleash mayhem on their enemies?
“Bull, Sera, and Solas.” It was easier to include the mage and avoid the argument if the elf thought she could willingly leave without him accompanying her to the Void and back.

“Granted. You’ll leave directly for the Storm Coast today.” With one wave of Evelyn’s hand, it was done. Idalya would seek freedom outside the protective stones of Skyhold.

Evelyn turned back to the rest of the wide-eyed group. “The rest of you will escort the Champion to Skyhold before she’s brought home to Kirkwall.”


“Inquisitor, if I may…”

“You may not.” She retorted. “There are plenty of quality candidates for the Ambassador position in Orlais. If you can’t follow my orders, resign, and I’ll fill your position with someone who can.”

Josephine’s eyes lowered to the ground as Idalya swore she saw the briefest flash of pride in Cullen’s across the tent.

The Inquisitor had no parting words of inspiration as she turned and exited the domed tent.

Idalya felt their eyes drilling through her, but she couldn’t face them. Not now. She followed Evelyn out of the tent to pack her things; she needed out of here as fast as possible.

At the exit, her eyes finally locked with the pair she had tried to avoid, the pair she had no answers for- Barris.

I’m so sorry.

That was all she could whisper to the confused man as she passed. She had no ability to tell him she was torn between the two halves of her life and could only tie them back together away from everything familiar.

Last night, at her most desperate, she had clung to him because she knew he would protect her from what she couldn’t face. She wouldn’t have to confront the nightmares at his side, but they’d still exist. Whispering nightly that death was coming to reclaim her as each step brought her closer to the Archdemon.

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She was going to kill Idalya. All her work to keep the Warden protected, and she would march into the fucking Deep Roads.

“Are you okay?” Cullen was at her side, his eyes exhausted.

Leliana cringed at the lingering scent of booze exiting his pores.

She ground her teeth together as the man stood too close to her. “Always. What in the Void was that? Maker. What did Barris say to her last night?”

The Commander shrugged. “I think he gave her and Alistair his blessing.”

“He what?” The Spymaster blurted. She couldn’t help but laugh. Absolutely everything and nothing was hilarious about this situation. How were men always two steps behind?
“He followed her to Alistair’s tent last night.” Cullen motioned his hand out for the words he was too prude to speak even though the Spymaster was fully aware he’d fucked the Inquisitor last night *noisily* in his tent. “It was his attempt at being the bigger man.”

Leliana sighed as her shoulders slumped. She turned to face the idiotic man. “Did he bother to ask what *she* wanted?”

Cullen raised his brows, confusion painted across his chiseled features. “Her memories have returned. Alistair is now King” He stated the facts like the outcome was the most obvious one in the world. To him, it would be.

She rolled her eyes at his ignorance. “If you think titles are enough to sway a woman’s heart, then you and Barris both still have a lot to learn.”

Despondent, the Spymaster left Cullen behind as her words grew roots of doubt into the foundation of everything he thought he understood.

*****

The parchment gripped between his fingers, his eyes tracing the words a hundred times.

*Solas-*

*Ever see the Deep Roads? Guess where we’re going?*

*Get packed- we leave within the hour.*

-Dal

He’d hoped for the time to come to terms with what he’d discovered within the Fade, to put aside his resentment of Mythal and the girl she’d sent into his life. He hadn’t expected this. There would be no avoiding her and her barrage of constant badgering questions. She read him too well to hide the truth from her for long.

The fabric of the room shifted, reality leaking open through a split seam as the spirit entered.

“Yes. I like to help.” A smile peeked out beneath the boy’s straw-brimmed hat; his voice warm even as his empty eyes hid from him.

“I didn’t call for you.”

“But you did?” The spirits head tilted, curious to the man’s denial of his need.

Solas sighed, knowing his own soul was betraying his logic, his ability to think five steps ahead. His heart was breaking as he weighed his available options. “She needs more than *this*...”

“But you believe...”

“I’m fully aware of what I believe. But I can’t know… all of this, not until she’s safe.”

“So many truths are dangerous to her.”

Solas stopped himself, fearing to ask the boy further before he learned what he could not take back. His own omissions threaten her as they speak.

“Am I a danger to her?”
“You’re a danger to everyone, especially her.” It confused the boy, unsure why he’d ask a question to which he already knew the answer. “She’s one half of a whole, only when he shows you the missing piece will you be ready to take her from the Mother of all.”

A shudder ran the length of his spine at Cole’s words. He couldn’t question. He had so many questions that couldn’t be answered if he would save her from the destiny waiting for her to fail. Even if this was what Mythal wanted, he would not fail Idalya—not anymore.

“Let it be done.”

A kind smile passed Cole’s lips as he drew closer, his hands gentle as they traced the bare skin at his temples.

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“We’ve been on this mission for ten minutes and you’re already late.” Idalya chided as the mage approached.

Solas rolled his eyes as he approached the girl. She had taken a knee in the sand, retying her boots for the long march ahead. A sly smile pulled at the corner of her lips that reached nowhere near her eyes. He knew it would take time for her to find joy again, but he hoped this was the first step toward rewriting a future for the confused girl.

Bull sat on a flipped over crate, a carry sac filled with his weapons and spare clothes resting between his massive legs. Sera perched on one of the Qunari’s horns watching a far point in the desert with a tilted skull, like a featherless owl.

These weeks would feel like a lifetime to him. The things we do for those we love.

Idalya hopped to her feet, rotating her ankle and nodding in approval at its fit.

“We ready to do this?” She slung her own sac over her shoulders.

Solas approached until the tips of their shoulders almost met. “Is there anyone you’d like to say goodbye to?” He was aware both travel companions could hear them but appreciated that they looked the other way and ignored his question.

“I can’t.” She whispered; her voice raw. With a quick swipe, she removed the errant tear that had dared to escape. “The path I’m on leads to death—for me, for all of us if I don’t succeed. I have no choice but to walk it. Finding Alistair again only reminded me that it needs to be a path I take alone. If I go back and see him, I’m uncertain I can walk it at all.”

The mage reached out and slipped his cool fingers between her colder ones and squeezed. “Never alone.”

She peered up at him, a glowing smile on her lips that finally reached her watering eyes, the lavender inside coming to life as she gripped his hand tightly. As long as he drew air, he swore to fight any battle at her side. That she’d never find herself hopeless and alone ever again.

Turning to Iron Bull and Sera, her smile brightened further, a chaotic twinkle to her eyes. “Mayhem?”

“Mayhem!” The two shouted in unison in return as they loaded their gear onto their backs.

Idalya’s excited laugh echoed across the desert as the four took the first steps of the long march to
the other side of Thedas.

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End of Act 2

Chapter End Notes

ACT 2 IS DONE. I am so pumped right now.

Outline's for next fic with Act 3 and Trespasser are nearly complete and I'm ready to start mass writing. I like to be a few chapters ahead, so either do an author follow, or I'll put up a temporary chapter here with a link when the first update hits.

Also, in the meantime, check out some of the other fics with Dal and this universe. Burning in the Flames is a prequel for this story involving the fall of Haven, and Once More With Feeling! is a remix of this story based on a Tumblr meme.

Thank you all for reading and sharing this experience with me. I can't wait to share the next Act of this story with all of you. <3

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5/3/19 Author's note:

Again & After, the sequel to O&A, is up! Go check out chapter 1: https://archiveofourown.org/works/18697210/chapters/44343004
Chapter Summary

Once & Again sequel is posted!

Again & After:

https://archiveofourown.org/works/18697210/chapters/44343004

See you all on the flip side!

-Kmandergirl

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!