Heart-Eyes Emoji

by carouselfancy, Tijgertje

Summary

A few goofy texts sent to the wrong number, and Alistair quickly finds himself in too deep with an engaging stranger.

Notes

So, this is an idea that started out as a stupid “what-if” about Alistair’s probable abuse of emojis in the modern world, and turned into a giant, ridiculous, self-indulgent au in which there is no Blight, everybody gets to be happy, and Alistair Theirin’s life is not constantly threatened. I know wrong number au’s have been done before, but we’re doing it anyway and sorry in advance. :D
Chapter Summary

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Chapter Notes

Beautiful cover art by the lovely kay-jo-mackie!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Wednesday

(11:22) I just tried this Orlesian cheese and I’m pretty sure I saw the Makers face???? 🙄👌éstGOOD

(11:22) Is that treason

(11:22) Do you think I could get arrested for liking Orlesian cheese????

(11:35) Uh

(11:35) Who is this

(11:36) Shit is this not Cullen?

(11:40) No Cullen here
(11:41) But there is literally no excuse for eating Orlesian cheese I will tell you that for free

(11:41) You should return it to the garbage can you found it in

(11:43) Hey now there’s no need to go after the cheese

(11:44) It can’t help poor upbringing 😞

(11:47) I think I can see why Cullen gave you a fake number

(11:48) Oh ow 😍砉

(11:48) I’ll have you know that I am a dazzling conversationalist

(11:48) The living embodiment of sunglasses emoji 😎

(11:49) Although I do suspect that you’re right about the wrong number

(11:49) Very sad

(11:54) You’re a very strange person

(11:55) 😎😎😎

(12:22) Listen I’ve thought a lot about it and I’ve decided that the virtues of this Orlesian cheese negate the stinky taint of its birthright

(12:35) I assume you are now in possession of a shameful amount of it

(12:37) I cannot in good conscience leave good cheese behind. It is entirely against my nature, Fereldan or not

(12:37) Rebellious. Why are you texting me, a stranger, about cheese?

(12:38) Because I can’t leave you until you tell me that if you ever come across Orlesian cheese you won’t cruelly abandon it to a waste bin

(12:40) Nope, sorry. I may not understand stranger danger but I still have my dignity

(12:40) I will die a true Fereldan

(12:41) Well then I guess you’re stuck with me!!!!!!!

(12:45) Whatever you say cheese nutter

Thursday

(7:01) Good morning!!!!!!!

(7:02) WHAT THE FUCK
(7:02) I told you

(7:02) Why the FUCK are you texting me at 7am?????

(7:03) I just got up for work so I figured I’d get you up too 👍 🙈

(7:04) I’m calling the police

(12:54) I just saw a really cute dog 🐾🐾🐾🐾

(13:00) STOP TEXTING ME

(13:02) How cute?

(13:03) The cutest. He looked very happy

(13:05) Oh good then

(13:05) Congratulations I guess

(13:06) Since you like dogs so much

(13:06) If I send you a picture of mine will you stop texting me?

(13:07)

(13:10) Awww! What a good dog!!!! 👍👍👍

(13:10) Still going to text you though

(13:11) WHY
(13:44) What is your dog’s name? V important

(13:48) Hessarian

(13:48) Yes as in THAT Hessarian.

(13:49) Lol why did you name your dog after Andraste’s killer?

(13:51) I was a dumb teenager. I thought it would be funny.

(13:51) Wanted to annoy my parents.

(13:52) And now your poor dog is stuck with it. So cruel.

(13:52) Don’t judge me, cheese man.

(13:52) Cheese man? Is that the best you’ve got? And what makes you so sure I’m a man?

(13:53) Oh idk. I just assumed, since you seem so persistent in talking to somebody who told you to leave them alone. 😏

(13:53) That’s very hurtful.

(13:53) Good one, though.

(13:54) Is that my name then? Are you going to put me in your phone as Cheese Man?

(13:55) Oh, I’m putting you in my phone now?

(13:56) How else would you get my amazing updates about cheese and dogs?

(13:56) Are you really willing to risk missing an update about a cute dog?

(13:56) I was still hoping you’d get bored and stop.

(13:57) Not likely. I’ve got you in my phone as Dog Lord 🐶

(13:57) Dog Lord? And you had the audacity to make fun of Cheese Man?

(13:58) You have what looks like a pure-bred mabari and insulted me for liking something Orlesian

(13:58) That’s a certified dog lord if I’ve ever seen one.

(14:03)
(14:05) I can’t believe this

(14:05) This might be the best thing that’s ever happened to me

(14:06) Thought you might like that

Friday

(7:50) Gooooood morning, Ferelden's Finest! 😞 ☀️ 👏

(7:52) Please, Maker, never use that creepy sun emoji on me, I'm too tired to fight it

(7:53) ???

(7:53) Let me guess, hungover? Sun emoji too bright?

(7:54) I mean

(7:54) No, but I wish my problems were my fault


(7:56) 😞 😢

(7:56) Rough night then??

(7:56) Biggest understatement of the Age

(7:58) I'm about to head to work, anything I can do??

(7:58) I feel responsible somehow
(7:58) Hope my text didn't wake you 😔

(8:00) Believe me, phone's on silent

(8:00) Yet you reply so fast! I feel loved 😊

(8:09) Ok now I feel neglected

(8:10) You are pushing your luck

(8:12) How about an olive branch?

(8:14) I'm listening

(8:16) Your area code is the same as mine, so I assume you're in Denerim. You live anywhere near the shopping district?

(8:17) Are you really trying to get a feel for my location?? Knew I should have listened to my parents about stranger danger

(8:18) Listen!!! 😏😊

(8:18) If you go along the West Road you should be able to find a cafe

(8:18) All white outside, lovely little pots of roses around the entrance

(8:19) Name??

(8:20) ...Andrastea. Like... Andraste but with... Tea.

(8:20) An A for effort

(8:20) I didn't name the bloody place 😞👎

(8:21) Better to be seen in Andrastea than Kinloch Koffee or the Bannorn Brewery so

(8:21) Pick the lesser of the evils

(8:22) The point is that the coffee is 🍪☕️☕️

(8:24) Thank you. Honestly, I appreciate it

(8:24) They allow dogs?

(8:30) P sure they have biscuits behind the counter for good mabari

(8:31) Btw I do a mean rendition of Andraste's Mabari on karaoke nights if you can catch me

(8:34) Aren't you at work

(8:35) Are you sure you're not Cullen?
(14:30) All right, you weren’t lying. This coffee is pretty great

(14:36) You went! 😊😊😊 Glad you liked it

(14:37) Not my usual sort of place. I would never have checked it out without the recommendation

(14:38) Kinda makes me wonder how you found it 😊😊

(14:40) What can I say, I’m a sucker for a good pun. Or a terrible one, even.

(14:41) I thought the roses were pretty

(14:42) Don’t judge me, Dog Lord 😏

(14:43) I didn’t take you as a lover of floral arrangements! That’s so cute

(14:45) Cute, is it? Great

(14:46) Just don’t let it get out. I have a reputation to protect 😊

Saturday

(18:21) Not that I haven’t enjoyed the silence but

(18:21) I couldn’t help but notice you didn’t wake me up at an unholy hour today

(18:21) So I thought I’d see if you actually had been arrested for eating Orlesian cheese

(18:46) Ha so you missed me did you?

(18:47) Careful, Dog Lord or I’m gonna think you actually like getting my texts 😏

(18:48) Nothing so extreme, don’t worry

(18:48) Just confused that you didn’t bother me on a day when something as pesky as work can’t distract you

(18:50) Then I’ll have to be more diligent! You didn’t oversleep without me did you??

(18:53) Well, Maker forbid I sleep past 8 on a Saturday

(18:54) If you didn’t want to be woken up you’d keep your phone on silent

(18:55) I’m onto you 😏

Sunday

(9:01) Okay look this is torture

(9:01) I’ve been awake for an hour dreading your text
(9:02) Are you messing with me now??

(9:03) Maker’s breath I was trying to let you sleep in

(9:04) Now do you mind not waking me up on a Sunday morning? 😈 It’s very rude

(9:05) I’m going to find you, cheese man

(9:05) I’m going to find you, and I’m going to kill you

(12:25) So…

(12:25) You’re aware I live in Denerim

(12:26) Speaking to me again, are you?

(12:26) Good, you’re awake

(12:27) And at your beck and call, apparently 😊👍

(12:28) I assume you know this place pretty well

(12:28) Like the back of my hand

(12:28) 👇

(12:29) Okay, well do you know where the library is?

(12:30) Yes

(12:33) Is that you asking for directions or was this leading elsewhere?

(12:34) Directions! Obviously

(12:36) Obviously not obviously!!!

(12:36) Such sass today. Wonder if I should tell you 😞

(12:37) I’m not going to beg a stranger

(12:39) The Internet is full of maps

(12:39) I’m… lazy

(12:40) Too lazy to admit you’re fishing for another brilliant recommendation?? I haven’t let you down yet 😌😌😌

(12:42) Why are you this way?

(12:43) Selective breeding, perhaps

(12:44) Spoken like a true fellow Fereldan
Despite the penchant for Orlesian "delicacies".

You’re avoiding the question

I was thinking!! 😐

Unsure if you really want the local library tbh

Why?

Is something wrong with it?

It’s a bit

Chantry

I take it you consider this a bad thing?

Not necessarily maybe

I ~believe in the Maker~ just as much as the next Andrastian but

Your dog is named Hessarian

I’m not sure I follow…?

So you’re probably not the type to enjoy typical Chantry-approved fiction

Ooooh, it’s THAT kind of library

Yeeeah

Won’t lie, I am a fan of a good banned book

Truly? What kind of banned book are we talking? Like “Templar Tomfoolery: Saucy Little Tales from the Barracks” banned or “Canticles of Shartan” banned???

First off

Why are you able to rattle off that title so quickly

It’s… an interesting read. Don’t judge 😊▽

I’m not asking for torrid romance novels about glistening galloping abs if that’s your concern

I mean if you like that sort of thing

More power to you

Andraste’s ass, I haven’t offended you have I

Kidding. I was just deciding where to send you
(13:05) Any place promising?

(13:06) 😊😊😊

(13:06) Alright, you'll go to The Crossroads

(13:07) Ooh sounds cultured and spooky

(13:07) Yeah that's one way to describe it 😊

(13:08) You seem reluctant to recommend it

(13:08) 👌

(13:08) I don't go often tbh

(13:09) Maybe you'll enjoy it more than I do

(13:09) How would you rate it

(13:10) Do I look like Yelp?? 😞

(13:10) Come on

(13:11) I'm too biased

(13:11) Are you new here??

(13:12) You're more observant than I gave you credit for

(13:12) Ha ha. 😊

(13:12) You should explore, then. Take a chance!! Live a little 😎

(13:14) Don't take the pup though. I know she doesn't like dogs

(13:15) Who?

(13:15) The owner

(13:15) You'll know her when you see her

(13:16) She just LOOKS like she doesn't like dogs imo

(13:16) You're making me have doubts about coming to you

(13:17) Andraste's flaming sword just go! 😊:pointer:

(13:18) Pretty sure it's open

(13:19) On a Sunday?

(13:19) Time is an illusion
(13:22) Right

(13:23) Thanks again

(13:23) I’m sorry for hassling you btw

(13:24) 😏 np

(13:24) You’re joking, aren’t you? I mean in general

(13:25) I’m a stranger so I don’t blame you

(13:25) But tell me if you buy anything good!!!

(13:26) I’m not picking up saucy Templar erotica

(13:27) I wasn’t…???

(13:27) Why are you so afraid of Templar lovin 😞

The high chime of a text alert fills the small space of the car and the notification interrupts the GPS on her screen. A bark of laughter escapes her as Olivia reads the new message from her strange friend, shaking her head in amusement.

According to the map, she’s only a few turns away from the bookstore he’s recommended. She’s pleased to find that it’s actually quite close to where she lives. She’s surprised that she hasn’t found it before now. Then again, the streets of Denerim are so cluttered and winding, it’s a wonder she’s been able to find her way home the few times she has left since moving here.

It’s been almost three weeks, but she still finds Denerim to be too huge, too loud, and too crowded. She already misses the rolling, sheep-dotted countrysides and quiet towns of Highever. She especially misses the lack of smog-stained air and strangers swearing at her for little to no reason.

Her phone chimes at her again, and she is a little embarrassed by how fast her reaction is as she reaches to check it. The text she’s received is not from her strange new friend, though.

(13:31) You can’t avoid me forever, Pup.

She heaves a sigh and clicks the screen off without response. She’s lost count of how many texts Fergus has sent her now, and how many she’s ignored. The familiar press of guilt on her sternum makes her shift uncomfortably. She knows her brother is trying to help, and she knows he’s probably sick with worry at her silence. But his concerned messages are a reminder she does not want, and she has no words of consolation to give him.

The bold, script-like letters of The Crossroads appear ahead of her. As she pulls into the lot and parks, she feels the same odd thrill of excitement at the confirmation of its existence that she’d felt at finding Andrastea. It’s larger than she had expected a privately-owned bookstore to be. The facade has a rustic feel, with an enormous wooden door and industrial decor. The parking lot is far from empty, and there are several occupied tables outside the entrance. It’s an odd building, yet welcoming. She feels a rush of appreciation for her anonymous friend and pulls out her phone to snap a photo of the sign. Without a second thought, the photo is on its way to the “Cheese Man,” and he responds almost immediately.
(13:35) You made it!!! Try not to head straight to the Templar erotica section, people might judge. Gotta be casual. 😊

She laughs out loud again. Her hand instinctively darts out to her side as she shuts her car door behind her, searching for the comforting feel of Hessarian’s wide head. It swipes at air and she sighs, feeling a bit jittery. With an irritated shake of her head, she pushes down the discomfort and spurs herself onward.

The Crossroads is even larger on the inside. She’s surprised to discover that it is not just a bookstore, but sports large sections for music, vinyl records and DVDs as well. Perhaps because of this it is well-populated with people of varying races, all who seem to be in their late twenties or younger. They are spread out across the various sections, lounging on neatly arranged furniture.

“Welcome!” a friendly, disembodied voice calls out as the door groans closed behind her. She casts about a curious glance, but finds only an empty counter covered in stacks of books.

Within moments, a young redheaded woman sweeps aside a dark curtain behind the counter. She looks to be about Olivia’s age, perhaps a bit older, and she has a kind face and cheerful demeanor. Carefully stacked in her hands is a wobbling tower of books, which she places on the counter with a tiny grunt. Now unburdened, she turns to give her customer an inquisitive tilt of her head.

“Oh! You don’t look familiar. Most of our patrons are regulars, but I’ve never seen you here before, have I?” Her voice has a musical quality that Olivia finds comforting to listen to, and so she smiles in response. She tucks her hands awkwardly into the pockets of her jeans because she doesn’t know what else to do with them.

“I got a recommendation from a… friend,” she replies slowly, glancing around the store once more. How many times, she wonders, has he been in front of this counter—perhaps in this very spot? She looks back at the woman. “Are you the owner?” She doesn’t look quite as frightening as her friend had described.

The redhead gives her a bright grin and shakes her head. “I am Leliana, the manager. I take care of our customers so that Morrigan, the owner, doesn’t have to.” Her smile turns a bit sheepish, and she chuckles. “She’s more intellectual than sociable, I’m afraid, and tends to scare people off.” Leliana brushes a bit of dust off of her button-down shirt and begins to dissect the tower of books on the counter. Olivia can’t tell what sort of filing system she’s using, as none of the titles seem to correspond to one another, but she works with quick, confident movements as she talks. “Please take your time to browse and relax. We treat our store like a library, essentially, which is why there are so many couches. And if there’s anything you need help finding, please let me know!”

Olivia nods and thanks her before strolling into the nearest aisle. She’s not sure what she’s looking for. She only knows that spending her days flipping mindlessly through Netflix is not doing much for her productivity, nor for her peace of mind. At least here she might find something educational. Then she can tell Fergus that she isn’t wasting her time here without lying outright.

She drifts through the aisles, scanning the titles, but she finds herself more interested by the nature of The Crossroads. Her friend had mentioned banned books, but she hadn’t expected there to be a veritable trove of them. The store seems to carry everything, from the Canticle of Shartan to The Randy Dowager. There are academic tomes on elven history, dwarven Shaperate records - even a printed copy of the Tome of Koslun. She can’t help but stare in awe at them all, wondering how one person could get their hands on so many priceless treasures. They must have cost the owner a great deal of time, effort, and - judging by the price tags on some of the books - sovereigns to obtain.
A quiet but firm clearing of a throat startles her from where she is absently stroking the spine of a copy of *The Wilds of Thedas*. She looks up to find a pale woman raising a disdainful brow at her from around a tower of books in her arms to rival the one Leliana had been toting. Olivia blinks in surprise, to which the woman gives an impatient jerk of her head.

“You are rather in my way.” Her voice is a sharp, unforgiving drawl. Olivia thinks to herself that she absolutely does not seem like a dog person, and that this must be Morrigan, the owner.

With a quick apology, she steps to the side, and Morrigan glides around her. She plants the stack of books on a nearby table and begins sorting through them in much the same manner as Leliana had done. Olivia watches her curiously, and she notes the gentle touch of the woman’s long fingers against the spine of each book. She handles them as though they are infant children.

After a long moment, Morrigan’s head snaps up to her. Her eyes are a piercing, catlike yellow that Olivia finds disconcerting. “Is there something I can help you with?” she demands. More intellectual than sociable, indeed. Olivia gives her a sheepish smile.

“Sorry. I was just looking over some of your titles and some of these are really rare. Where did you get a copy of *Carmenum di Amatus*?”

The other woman gives her a sly, prideful smile from the side of her mouth, straightening to plant her hands on her hips. “It is an original.”

Olivia blinks at her. “You’re joking.” She looks back at the tome, lifting it from where it is on proud display on the shelf. Its pages are indeed old, and she feels a thrill run up her spine. “That’s unbelievable, where did you even find this?”

“I have very resourceful contacts,” Morrigan states, and leans over her stack of books again. “As well as a great desire to keep such treasures out of Chantry hands.”

“How much?”

She blanches, her eyes going wide with surprise. “I beg your pardon?”

Olivia runs a finger down the cover, entranced by the old book of poetry. She looks back to the other woman with a smile. “Is it for sale?”

“It… is.” Morrigan gives her a suspicious look, and then looks down at the book with great concern. “It runs at least seven hundred sovereigns.”

She is still tracing fond fingers through the pages, and stops to examine one with careful scrutiny. The owner seems to fidget in her silence, and Olivia finally looks up with a grin. “There are some annotations and translations here, from a scholar or a scribe, I assume. That has to put it at least at eight hundred, for originality and historical value.” She gives Morrigan the same superior smile she had received just moments ago and adds, “I’m good for it, I promise.”

The other woman squints at her, and scans her from head to toe with those unsettling golden eyes. She crosses her arms over her chest, then, and squares her shoulders. Despite her bolstered stance, she only reaches Olivia’s nose in height.

“[You are an appraiser,” she accuses. “Do you work for the Chantry?”](#)

Holding up her hands in supplication, Olivia takes a step back and gives a shiver of distaste. “Trust me, nothing so awful as that. My parents collected rare books and artifacts, and once I was old enough, I would help them at auctions. I’m just a history buff who has more money and free time
than she has sense.”

The dark-haired woman studies her for a long, quiet moment, and she feels the hair on her arms stand on end. Something about her predatory stance makes Olivia a bit uncomfortable. She rolls her shoulders and raises a brow in return. Finally, Morrigan gives her what almost looks like a genuine smile.

“Very well. Your offer for the book is fair, I would be a fool not to accept. But I have a proposition for you, in return.”

Olivia cocks her head, and she’d be lying if she said the prospect didn’t worry her.

“Those annotations were well-spotted. I could use someone with your eye. Would you, perhaps, be interested in coming to work for me? You may have noticed that the books are beginning to pile up faster than we can keep up with them.” She gestures to the tower of unsorted tomes on the table behind her. “I will be grateful for the help, and I can pay you well.”

A thrill of excitement hums up her spine, and she wonders if the other woman can see her ears perking. It’s not like she has anything better to do with her time, and it will probably ease Fergus’s mind to know she’s being a productive member of society.

Especially after she tells him she spent eight-hundred sovereigns on a book.

She smiles her first real smile in weeks, and clutches *Carmenum di Amatus* tightly to her chest. It seems to fortify her as she makes up her mind.

“That sounds amazing,” she answers honestly. Morrigan gives her another cat-like grin, and holds out a dusty hand to her.

“Very well. You may call me Morrigan.”

“Olivia Cousland.” Olivia reaches out to grasp her hand. Morrigan’s paper-like skin stands out in sharp contrast against the rich tawny of Olivia’s. Her grip is firm and unabashed, and Olivia meets her with full enthusiasm.

“Olivia.” Morrigan draws out the syllables of her name, as though she hopes to draw some kind of power from each one. “Can you return on Wednesday?”

(16:02) I have to hand it to you, Cheese Man. You’re 2 for 2 now.

(16:13) I would brag, but I’m more relieved you made it out alive. No run-ins with the witch?

(16:14) Are you talking about Morrigan?

(16:15) Oh no

(16:16) You’re on a first name basis

(16:17) That can’t possibly be good

(16:18) Ha. She wasn’t so bad. A bit… wary.

(16:19) That’s one way of putting it. 😊
(16:20) Did you at least find something good???

(16:21) A couple things, actually.

(16:21) All in all, an eventful day.

(16:23) Good then! Mr. Yelp strikes again 😎

Chapter End Notes

We both have tumblrs as well, so feel free to come watch this nonsense unfold, and send us questions or comments

carouselfancy
Tijgertje
Thanks to everyone who commented on the first chapter! We've been so excited at the positive response this has received so far! It definitely makes us feel better about how much love and work we're putting into this fic. It's gonna be a nice, long ride so we're happy to take a few victims along with us. >:)

You can also find us on Tumblr!

carouselfancy
Tijgertje

Feel free to follow us and come talk to us about the story! We'd absolutely love to hear some feedback. <3
Chapter 2's art is by the amazing Lissinator
Monday

The sun is blinding as he cracks open his eyes, and Alistair groans with the realization he is up before his alarm. He kicks off the duvet reluctantly and wiggles his sock-covered feet out over the edge. As 7 AM rolls onto his clock, it’s his text tone that chimes instead of the alarm as if on cue. He unlocks the phone, and the corners of his eyes and mouth crinkle with a smile.
(6:59) WAKE UP

(7:00) Did I catch you this time?

(7:00) I’m determined.

(7:01) Ohh no, too slow!! You, that is. Not me.

(7:01) Wide awake, got all my allotted beauty sleep 😙��

(7:01) Did you now?

(7:02) I am looking b-e-a-u-t-i-f-u-l, thanks 😊

He shuts off the display and launches himself out of bed. Cullen is nothing if not punctual, and Alistair would rather not start off his week being scolded. The month of Haring is unpredictable in its patterns, and he can’t wait to see it end. Alistair tugs a hoodie on over his suit jacket. Truly, he is the epitome of style. A quick finger-comb of his hair and he’s good to go; his messenger bag is looped around his shoulder when he sees Cullen pull up on his sidewalk. He would have left the house without his phone if not for the buzzy vibrations that nag him from his nightstand. He strokes it apologetically before starting in again on the texting.

(7:25) Leaving me high and dry again?

(7:26) I don’t even know why I’m this determined to text you at this hour

(7:29) Maybe you’ve fallen back asleep though

(7:30) Hah! You just saved my ass actually

(7:30) Heading out the door and maaaay have forgotten my phone

Cullen barely spares Alistair a second glance when he settles into the passenger seat, smudging his thumbs all over his phone. It’s a quiet drive downtown, save for the whirring of the car struggling to defrost the windshield and occasional taps of nails on glass.

Cullen has never been an entertaining driving companion. While Alistair has a tendency to fidget and fill silences, Cullen is serious and unflagging. He drives like a traffic school instructor, his eyes never leave the road in front of him and his hands never leave the ten-and-two position on the steering wheel. The silence is comfortable, familiar, and it isn’t long before they pull into their designated parking space at the precinct. They move in unison as they pull their bags from the car, stepping in sync up the staircase to the front doors with puffs of cold breath trailing behind them.

It’s toasty inside and Alistair brightens at the familiar faces sharing coffee, light conversation, and actual smiles around him. The atmosphere around here is one he loathes on most days. The cold colors of the walls and the sticky tiles war against the upbeat attitude he tries to bring in with him. An attitude he’s sure his coworkers find unbearable, though he hopes endearing.

Cullen is already seated at the desk next to his by the time Alistair has grabbed a cup of old coffee
from the break room and taken a couple hesitant sips.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Alistair points out. Cullen grunts and pushes his glasses up higher on his nose.

It’s that kind of day.

An hour into this routine and Alistair is already sneaking his phone out of the pocket of his hoodie, which is now slung over the back of his chair. As discreetly as he can manage, he taps out an S.O.S to his text friend.

**(8:45) Kill me. Please???? I’m bored, so so so bored.**

He’s staring at reports and nothing is jumping out at him. His inbox is covered in papers he can’t be arsed to flick through, because he knows they’re either beyond help or not urgent enough to attend to. Hushed whispers and the flutter of folders changing hands hover around him, and Alistair flips through a Rolodex to pass the time. He knows there are eyes on him, and he feels guilty for not pushing his pen, but the morning is unbearably slow. Perhaps the central heating is too high because the urge to doze is dragging his eyelids down.

Until a dog barks.

Cullen’s head snaps up, hard enough to displace his glasses. “Alistair,” he warns as he adjusts his frames, “If you’ve taken a dog from the K-9 unit again, so help me—”

Alistair splutters. “What? No!”

“Look,” Cullen replies. He presses his palms together and points them at Alistair, looking as though he is scrounging for patience. “I know you bonded with the new furry recruit down the hall. I get it, I do. I too wish I had a dog—”

“Untrue! All right, a little true, but she’s not here.”

“You don’t have to hide her under your desk like the last one, just hand me the leash and we’ll lead her back—”

“It’s my phone, I swear!” Alistair holds up his phone, and the ignored text barks again in corroboration.

Cullen squints. “Why on earth would your phone bark like that?”

“Because it’s a text tone. You’d know this if you upgraded from a flip phone or a PDA or whatever fossil you keep in those unnaturally large pockets of yours.” Alistair smirks as he glances back at his phone, hoping his text friend can feel the sacrifices he’s making for them just by snarking at the man across from him. “I chose the bark for this person. Suits them quite well.”

“Well, put away the phone for now,” Cullen replies with a roll of his eyes. He tries to be stern and stiff, but it’s hard to take him seriously when he’s hunched over like that. Alistair laughs through his nose at the thought of a hunchbacked Cullen working as diligent as ever – he’ll suffer through just about anything for the sake of his job. When he notices that Alistair is still staring, shoulders shaking just the barest amount at a joke he isn’t privy to, Cullen fixes him with another glare. “If you’re laughing at my appearance again, I’m going to give you extra paperwork.” He reaches for his glasses and clears his throat.

“You’re right, I apologize.” Alistair wishes he had stolen a dog from the K-9 unit again; it would
probably be more fun to hang out with than Cullen, anyway.

Another hour slogs by, arduous as the smaller hand on the overhead clock appears frozen in place. Alistair grows more fidgety by the minute, though he can’t place why today is any worse than the hundreds that have preceded it. He’s managed to finish reviewing a handful of search warrants and a few rounds of tedious data entry, but the true object of his interest is beyond reach. There are no open cases with any leads and he doesn’t want to resort to digging through cold cases just to keep himself occupied. Cullen appears to revel in the mundane, but Alistair feels his joints ache with complacency.

His phone barks again. His eyes meet Cullen’s, and they’re full of daggers.

“Doesn’t your phone turn off or vibrate instead?” he grumbles. He’s glaring over the top of his glasses, looking very much like a disapproving father.

“I don’t want to miss any texts,” Alistair admits. “They make work less boring.”

“Who is so important, anyway?”

“Hold on.”

(10:02) You’re going to get me in trouble!

(10:03) Is your phone not on silent?

(10:03) I was leaving you things to come back to!

“Who is that?” Cullen persists. He scans the room, but their coworkers are working as diligently as he had been. No one seems perturbed by the little barks, which baffles the both of them. “Who keeps talking to you?” Alistair tries not to be offended by the skepticism in his voice.

“It’s no one. In here, anyway,” he says with a sly grin.

“I will confiscate that phone from you.”

“Are you jealous? Maybe you shouldn’t have given me a wrong number in the first place.” Alistair claps his hand over his mouth in horror, but he can’t pick up the words and shove them back in.

Cullen narrows menacing eyes. “What.”

“That... wrong number you gave me,” Alistair admits reluctantly. “I talk to them on and off. They’re loads more friendly than you, so I don’t hold it against you for trying to shake me. They can see emojis at least.”

Cullen rubs at his temples, groaning as he sits back in his chair. “I just don’t want to have conversations via text outside of work,” he drones for what must be the hundredth time. Alistair rolls his eyes. “You know my phone is a work phone and nothing more.”

“Well, that’s why I like my friend here!” Alistair blinks. Friend? They were friends, right? He’d consult them about it later. “Don’t worry so much, Cullen. I promise I haven’t replaced you yet.”

Cullen opens his mouth to argue, but seems to think better of indulging his partner. Instead, he
Alistair’s thumbs freeze in the middle of tapping out a text, and he jerks the device to his chest. “No.”

“I only want to see who it is. I don’t remember the number I gave you.”

“You’re not running a background check on my friend.”

Cullen pushes his hand closer, insistent, and they are at an impasse.

“A name, perhaps?” Cullen wheedles. “How about a first name? You know I can’t do much with a first name, so humor me, Alistair.”

“That’s classified.” In all honesty he doesn’t know their name, age, gender—really anything, aside from the fact that they live in the area. These are all probably important criteria of things one should know about someone before they declare them a “friend,” but Alistair doesn’t want to impose. He’s been enjoying their chats, regardless. “They are simply the Dog Lord,” he adds, only a bit sheepish. “Or Dog Lady. Lord suits them though, I don’t judge.”

“All you’ve told me is they’re Fereldan.” Cullen clucks at him like a disapproving hen. “What sorts of things do you tell them when you’re idly gossiping at work with this stranger?” His stance hardens, and he looms over Alistair. But Alistair is simply amused.

“We talk about cheese. Riveting, isn’t it? Cheese and cute dogs.”

After a long, terse moment, Cullen finally retreats to his desk. Alistair smiles fondly after him. An unstoppable force meeting an immovable object—how often must he think that? They balance each other well. He’s always enjoyed their “good cop/bad cop” dynamic. “I thought it was you, honestly,” he says thoughtfully. “Having me on and playing a prank on me.”

Cullen looks up, eyebrows raised. “Oh?”

“But then I thought, ‘Oh, no, this can’t be the Cullen Rutherford I know. That man has never pranked anyone in his life.’”

“I have too pranked someone!” Cullen scowls.

Crossing his arms behind his head and leaning back in his chair, Alistair gives his partner a smug grin. “Name one prank you’ve ever pulled. Were you the one inside the bear suit at the captain’s promotion party?” He wiggles his eyebrows and wrinkles his nose. “Didn’t think so!” No one knows who was inside that suit, except for Alistair. He remembers how sweaty it was. He also remembers getting punched in his little bear nose.

“I don’t need to justify myself to you, Theirin.” Cullen huffs and fixes his glasses – they’ve gone askew again. “I was young once.”

“Once? Are we not the same age?” Alistair leans in and lowers his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Cullen, do you have something to tell me?”

A folder lands with an abrupt clap against Cullen’s desk. He spares it a brief glance, but ignores it to
lean in and gesture for Alistair’s attention. “There is, actually.” Alistair mimics him, and they teeter on the edge of their seats. Cullen’s eyes fall to his impeccably polished shoes and sweep the floor before they flutter back up to Alistair, full of urgent secrecy.

“Well?” The suspense gnaws at Alistair’s nerves.

Cullen lets him dangle in suspense for a long, suffocating moment, before he leans in even further and squints.

“Get back to work.”

Alistair groans loud enough that half the department turns to look at him, and it’s Cullen’s turn to laugh at him. The playing field is now even. Alistair dimly becomes aware of urgent murmurs growing in volume around them. A phone rings somewhere in the distance, and then a strained voice calls both their names. Alistair’s blood runs cold—the tone of the captain’s voice is familiar. Before they can see what she wants, however, dark hands land on Cullen’s desk with a dramatic slap. The medical examiner’s eyes are bright and intense as he flips his unfurling scarf over one shoulder. “We have to go. Now.”

Alistair can’t help the way he perks at the command. “Murder?”

Cullen shoots him a reproachful glare. “Don’t say that like you were hoping for it.”

“I wasn’t!” Still, he knows his gaze is almost hopeful as he looks up. “Dorian?”

The medical examiner laughs, but the sound is bitter. He’s still trying to adjust his coat to prepare himself against the weather. “I wanted to arrive at the same time as the two of you, so I’m tagging along. I presume that won’t be a problem.”

Cullen sags into his chair. “Please don’t get blood on the seats again.” His entreaty is so defeated that Alistair laughs.

“You wound me,” Dorian says, mocking offense. “That was Alistair, if memory serves.”

Alistair bristles, ready to protest, before he remembers that Dorian is right: it had indeed been him. He shrugs instead. They all stand up together and collect their things, trying to make haste, but Alistair can’t help feeling like he’s being shepherded onto some kind of morbid field trip. *Let’s go look at a body, this’ll be ever so fun.* He’s torn between gratitude for the break in monotony, or downright misery that it couldn’t have been something more enjoyable. Just once he wanted a nice case, without casualties. And maybe with ice cream. An overturned self-driving ice cream truck blocking the road! And only Denerim's finest can save the day by eating the stock to lighten the truck for the cranes to be able to lift it upright again... How come that never happens? Alistair’s stomach growls, a cruel reminder of his skipped breakfast.

Against his better judgment, he pulls out his phone as he, Cullen, and Dorian pile into a car together.

(11:34) Work is getting exciting!! I’m a bad person.

(11:34) You like Orlesian cheese. Tell me something I don’t know

(11:35) 😛 输入 😕 😐 😐
“Who in Thedas are you texting?” Dorian’s sharp voice cuts through Alistair’s rapid-fire tapping. Cullen groans, and Alistair protectively pulls the phone closer to his chest.

“Can we not discuss this right now?” Cullen barks from the front seat, replacing his eyeglasses with what Alistair refers to as his Super Serious Detective Aviators. They peel out of the parking lot and Alistair muses to himself that his partner would probably be quite useful in a car chase.

The place is already well roped off when they arrive, with officers stationed for crowd control. Bulbs are flashing to document the evidence and rubberneckers are being fielded away. After a handful of deep breaths, the three exit the vehicle.

An officer informs them that there is no witness for the discovery of the body, only an anonymous tip. Cullen and Alistair exchange a look of unspoken understanding, and Cullen branches off to question the civilians hovering around them while Alistair surveys the scene. Dorian is already assessing the body with meticulous precision when Alistair pulls his own gloves on and crouches beside the body. “Name?” Dorian asks.

Alistair shakes his head.

“No, of course not.” Dorian checks the victim’s hair and nails and gingerly rotates an arm to peer at the flesh on the inner forearm. Alistair studies Dorian’s movements, making mental and physical notes about the body. “You seem quite interested in the arms,” Alistair points out. “Do you have a cause of death? How long ago?”

Dorian huffs and sets the right arm down, then picks the left one up and gestures for Alistair to come closer, pointing at a mosaic of raised, pink lines. “Do you see these scars?” He sniffs, curling his lip. “If you can call them that, really.”

Alistair peers at the pale flesh. “Yes. They look… peculiar? How fresh is this body?”

Dorian stops to brush hair away from the victim’s face and reveals pointed ears with slices missing from the lobe and the helix. “This elf died five hours ago at most. That’s being generous, but it’s hard to tell, when the body is almost literally devoid of blood.”

“What?” Alistair’s head snaps up to give the medical examiner a sharp look. How? He had noticed the victim’s unnatural pallor and wondered if maybe the blood didn’t pool elsewhere, but as he looks again, he notices there is a clear lack of exit wounds. He motions for Dorian to turn the body over and they scan it in unison—as if Dorian’s shrewd eyes would have missed any important details. They prod the elf together for a few quiet minutes, but they find nothing. There is no excess skin beneath the fingernails, none that Dorian could scrape out. No signs of a struggle.

“Did they tell you where the body was found?” Dorian muses as he leans back on his heels. He shakes his head with distaste. “Dumpster, of all places. Who kills someone and thinks ‘Oh dear, I’ve no place to hide the body. I’ll put it in the bins outside and they’ll take it away for me! Foolproof!’” He grimaces in annoyance as he scrapes off a skin sample from the victim’s arm.

“Ameateurs,” Alistair tuts.

“Clearly, but have you looked at these scars?” His grey eyes bore into Alistair’s, deadly serious now. “This is blood magic, Alistair, and not done by someone who has the slightest idea what they’re doing. Wounds sealed improperly after exsanguination, probably to hide the mess they’ve made.” Dorian rummages through his bag while Alistair considers this with a furrowed brow. “Not to worry though, because amateurs always get caught. I would love to ask the killer why he thought this was a good idea; be sure to let me ask him when you drag him in.”
Alistair glances over his shoulder to his partner, who is questioning the owners of the buildings on either side of the bin. Something doesn’t add up to him, and it’s making his nose twitch.

He stands back up and searches the perimeter of the crime scene. The dumpster in which the victim was found had been picked apart not long before they arrived, but Alistair remains unsatisfied. He excuses himself and strolls into the next alley, and the next. None of the cans or dumpsters have been disturbed, and cursory scavenging yields no evidence. If this had been a hurried dump job, why would the killer waste time taking identification? His brow furrows as he contemplates this troubling development.

Alistair heads back to the scene to share his thoughts and concerns with Cullen. His partner’s stubbled face creases as he listens.

Scratching his neck, Alistair shrugs. “It’s a leap, I know, but if they made this mistake…”

Cullen narrows his eyes. “What are you implying?”

“If this is really blood magic,” Alistair starts, lowering his voice at the utterance of the taboo, “I’m thinking we’re not going to find any identification for that elf. We’ll be left with a dead end and a John Doe.”

Cullen grips his shoulder and all but drags him away from the crowd; they can’t talk about this in front of others. Denerim has a trafficking problem, they both know, but for a time it had seemed to die down. The re-emergence of cases like these are a bad omen; they tell a story of strained resources and inadequate security, and make cold fingers of dread clutch at Alistair’s gut. He and Cullen have a wordless argument off to the side, speaking in scowls and pointed looks, each trying to convince the other that this is not the time, but yes it is.

“I will support you if we find more evidence to back up your suspicions,” Cullen says, relenting at last. “But we’ll talk about this later. Not here.”

After what feels like hours of examining and questioning, they hit their wall and call it a day. Without identification and further evidence, they can only return to the precinct and wait for a more detailed analysis from Dorian. Alistair grimaces. Looking at dead bodies unsettles him in ways he can’t name, and he can never seem to desensitize himself to it.

They stop to collect Dorian but he’s on his phone, waving them away. “Go on without me,” he says, voice clipped. “I know someone who might be interested in the case—if she can stomach it, anyhow.” He gives Alistair a last, serious look. “I’ll let you know if there’s any truth to your little theory, but by the Old Gods, I hope you’re wrong.”

**Tuesday**

(17:56) Would it surprise or annoy you if I came crawling back for another recommendation?

(17:56) Or both

(18:01) Or neither

(18:01) 😊

(18:02) I think you just like being told you’re right
(18:02) You’d be the first to admit it

(18:02) Despite how often I am clearly right, yes

(18:03) Skeptical tbh

(18:03) Oh no, not you too!!

(18:04) Why is everyone so afraid of the truth 😞

(18:04) Open your eyes, Dog Lord ☹️.Accept my wisdom and quality recommendations

(18:05) I hate to repeat myself but why are you like this??

(18:05) If I tried to explain that, my phone bill would become a nightmare.

(18:06) Oh honestly.

(18:06) Do you do this often? Get utterly sidetracked when asking for help

(18:07) Do YOU often derail conversations to remind people how great you are?

(18:08) Wouldn’t have to if they would start noticing more often 😏

(18:10) Well ANYWAY

(18:10) Oh king of Denerim

(18:10) (since you desire recognition)

(18:11) Where might you suggest I get a bite to eat around here? The coffee was good and the books were as well

(18:11) You haven’t been eating since you moved here?? 😢

(18:12) Am I talking to a person or a spambot? A particularly sassy spambot

(18:12) I’ll take that as a compliment.

(18:13) Oh good, I meant it as one 😏

(18:13) And I HAVE been eating. I just thought someone more knowledgeable might have insight as to where I could find better food.

(18:14) Don’t tell me, you’re living off of convenience store rations.

(18:14) Mr. Orlesian Cheeses has no room to judge me. Only the Maker can judge me now.

(18:15) 😵藪

(18:15) If you’re going to start insulting the cheese again maybe you don’t deserve my recommendations!

(18:16) Perhaps not if you’re going to direct me someplace that serves cheese, cheese, and more
Are you also going to stipulate that this place serves no cheese at all? Because then you may just be out of luck

There’s a REASON it’s so high on the food pyramid 😊

Andraste’s granny-panties, tell me someplace to go already

The dinner rush is going to trample me

No need to worry about that

Druffy’s. It’s a cute little diner-style place just off the south side of the market district. Not well known, treats its customers well

Best known for their druffalo burgers but their real hidden gem is the ice cream 👍🍔🍦🙌

I would actually kill for a burger right about now

Seems a bit drastic, they’ll happily take your silvers

👏

😂😂😂 So rude!!!
(21:15) Dirt and worms!! Ah, a Dog Lord after my own heart

(21:15) I would just like to go on record as saying that calling a dessert “Dirt and Worms” is not necessarily the best way to entice

(21:16) And yet

(21:16) There you are

(21:16) With a cherry on top and everything 😏

(21:17) Yes well

(21:17) I’ve always had a soft spot for cherries

(21:19) 😝 I refuse to indulge such implications of iniquity

(21:19) I was raised a proper Andrastian. I know all my canticles and everything

(21:20) Are you telling me that only Andraste can have your cherry?

(21:22) Such blasphemy!!! 😱

(21:22) Did it take you 3 hours to get there??

(21:23) Like I was going to send you photos while I was eating

(21:24) I waited til I was home

(21:25) Oh. Then I take it I’ve made another successful recommendation?

(21:26) Yes all right. Another point for you, Cheese Man.

(21:26) Oh? Are we keeping score?

(21:27) What do I get when I win? 😊

(21:31) If you win

(21:32) Don’t get ahead of yourself

(21:33) We haven’t even established a competition yet and you’re calling me a loser 😧

(21:34) What can I say, I’m very competitive

(21:34) Side effect of spending more time at the gym than forming lasting bonds of friendship

(21:35) Can’t imagine that’ll be helped much with all that ice cream you just scarfed!!!

(21:36) Now Cheese Man I know you did not just call me fat

(21:37) WHAT NO

(21:37) I would never I only meant
(21:37) That you must work out a lot if you don’t have to worry about what you eat!!!!

(21:37) MAKER’S BREATH that’s not what I meant either!!!

(21:38) I’m going to shut up now

(21:39) Probably wise!!

(21:40) Sorry😢😢😢

(21:41) Don’t fret Cheese Man. I ran there and back so it’ll even out.

(21:45) And I’m not particularly worried about my weight

(21:45)

(21:56) Uhhhhhh

(21:56) No

(21:56) I suppose

(21:56) you aren’t😄

(22:00)💪😊
Wednesday

(8:36) ...Good morning?

(8:38) You’re late… You didn’t sleep in did you?

(8:43) Cheese Man?

(8:49) Sorry, I'm at work right now actually

(8:49) Oh good, I was hoping it wasn’t my fault, like I’m your alarm

(8:52) No

(8:53) Well alright

(9:20) I’m off to my own job then

(9:20) First day and all

(9:20) Exciting

(9:22) Good luck 👍

(9:23) Thanks…?

Olivia frowns down at her phone, her brow wrinkling with worry. The “thumbs up” emoji taunts her, a detached, expressionless sentiment that causes disappointment to curl in her stomach. This is silly, this sad feeling of abandonment toward someone she has only been talking to for a week, whose name and face she does not know. But having someone to talk to who doesn’t want to ask her about her feelings, or her goals, or her plans and responsibilities, has been nice. The thought that she may have done something to offend him only worsens the worry.

Or perhaps he has simply gotten bored with her. She won’t be surprised—she’s been expecting it, even. But the thought still makes her throat tighten.

She shakes her head at her silliness and sweeps her black bag from its hook by her door. It’s foolish to feel abandoned by some random stranger, and she’s going to make herself late for her first day of work if she keeps moping this way.
Hessarian gives her an excited, booming bark, jolting her out of her thoughts. She can only offer him an apologetic frown in response. She feels that same ineffable sadness grow even larger, and shakes her head at him. “Not today, mate.” His ears flatten against his head, which he butts against her thigh. She reaches out to stroke his nose. “I’m going to have to do this one on my own.”

There are days her mabari is more human than hound, and in this moment, his muzzle is wrinkled in what could only be described as a worried frown. Olivia tries to smile over her shoulder at the moping mabari as she makes her way to the front door. Any small reassurance she finds in the tilt of his furry face disappears with him as she locks the door.

The anxiety gives way tentatively to excitement. She’s starting a new job in Maker knows how many years. The drive is quicker now that she knows the way, and the storefront seems somehow larger, more consuming, with fewer cars in the vicinity. When Olivia reaches the doors, it is Leliana who ushers her inside.

“Morrigan thought it would be best if I trained you instead,” Leliana admits, and Olivia feels herself relax from tension she hadn’t realized was there. The peppiness and warmth of her new boss does not appear to be reserved for the general public, and for that she is grateful. Leliana leads her around on a quick tour, flitting from section to section, until they reach the area where Olivia will be stationed for the most part. Already, the desk and surrounding area is cluttered with books; loose pages covered in handwritten notes and prices are strewn across the workstation, Olivia steels herself.

“You don’t have to worry about our ‘system’ yet or how we deal with customers, but,” Leliana trails off, looking around the store, which is soon to open. “You would know the worth of these books, yes?” She spreads her arms and gestures to the stacks. “If you could go through them and mark their prices, then set them aside, I can have Morrigan double-check them. In time she won’t have to check, but you know.”

“I understand,” Olivia agrees.

Leliana heaves a sigh of relief. “Thank the Maker. We had a man working for us once, a more casual sort of appraiser, like you, but… He and Morrigan often differed in opinion on the worth of books. He thought we shouldn’t sell them but loan them instead, and she thought he was trying to swipe them. Take them to the Chantry, given their contents.”

“Am I allowed to ask what kind of books he was trying to make off with?” Olivia asks. She glances over to a fraying illustrated copy of *The Hunt of the Fell Wolf* and recognizes the desire to own everything, yet want to share the knowledge.

“Things relating to Arlathan,” Leliana says with a dismissive wave. “But Morrigan was as attached to those pieces as he was.” She gives Olivia a once-over. “This is probably terribly rude to admit to you, especially since you’ve only just started working here and I hate to speak ill of former employees, but honestly? I’m glad it’s you and not him. He made me wish we had a stricter dress code.” Olivia stares down at herself, self-conscious. “No, no! You’re fine, he just dressed in a particular fashion. No fashion. It’s not important!”

The two of them share a laugh until Leliana pauses to check a wall clock. She leaves Olivia with hasty apologies, disappearing behind rows of shelves. It’s only then that Olivia notices her location in the store; she’s not distracted by displays or suffocated by mass quantities of books, nor is she entirely cordoned off. The tranquil background music of the store soothes her worry as the first customers arrive moments after opening; they speak quietly as if in a library and the sound provides a subtle counterpoint to the music.
Every so often Leliana passes by, checking on Olivia’s progress and removing books with potential prices attached. It is not easy work but Olivia doesn’t consider it hard, either. Two hours into her first shift, she catches herself gritting her teeth and rubbing at her pants pocket. The phone inside has vibrated once (and for an email of all things) and she knows she shouldn’t feel as deflated as she does, and yet there it is. Has he nothing to say to her? She feels bogged down with misplaced guilt, wishing she could text him for answers, except she can’t be like him and text at work on a whim.

As if Olivia is emitting some kind of troubling aura, Leliana rounds a shelf and comes to the front of her desk. “Is everything alright?”

Olivia fidgets, then relents. “Yes, I think. Nothing here has presented too much of a challenge.”

“Oh, these aren’t the ones Morrigan’s been having particular trouble with,” Leliana laughs. “But aside from that, you check your phone often. Are you waiting for a call?”

Olivia gulps and now her guilt is no longer misplaced. First day at work and she’s already making bad impressions. “No, I—“

“If you need to step away to make a call, you are more than welcome to.”

“I didn’t want to be unprofessional.”

Leliana snorts. “You’ve spoken to Morrigan, no? I do not think our standards of professionalism are, well, standard. Please, Olivia, it’s fine if you use your phone. You’ve made a huge dent in the books we’ve given you.” She offers Olivia a smile, believable in its sincerity. “Breaks are allowed. Call them.”

Olivia waits until Leliana has left and slips her phone out of her pocket, doesn’t even bother to leave her seat.

(12:27) Are you ignoring me?

(12:27) Wow ok typing that out made me sound like a pre-teen who can’t handle rejection.

(12:27) Incredible.

(12:28) No? 😐

(12:28) Thought maybe the photo was abrupt. Or rude. The radio silence was uncharacteristic of you

(12:28) I feel it’s reasonable that I worry I’ve offended a stranger

(12:28) Offended?

(12:29) Oh Maker 😞

(12:29) It wasn’t offensive 😞

(12:29) Yet you went all quiet

(12:29) Bc work!

(12:30) Which, btw, you’re at aren’t you?
(12:30) You’re starting to sound like that Cullen guy

(12:30) 🤦‍♀️🤦‍♀️🤦‍♀️

(12:30) First of all how dare you

(12:30) 😳

(12:31) Haha, aw. There’s the Cheese Man I know 🧀

(12:31) The point is if I hadn’t ignored you for slandering good cheese, I don’t think I’d start now

(12:32) Regardless of “abrupt” photos or sudden revelations of gender

(12:32) Such a relief that your standards for acquaintances are easy to meet

(12:32) Yeah well

(12:32) I’m still going to keep you as Dog Lord in my phone

(12:33) You’ve got the shirt and it’s a gender neutral term of endearment

(12:33) Suits you! Plus it’s an excuse to use the cute dog emoji 🐶👍

(12:34) My little Fereldan heart swells

(12:34) Now I can actually get back to work 😊😊

(12:35) Were you waiting for me to text back 😊😊

(12:35) 🙋

“Your call went well, then?” Olivia’s head jerks up at the sound of Leliana’s voice, and she can feel her cheeks tinge pink. Leliana winks at her. “If that smile is anything to go by.”

Olivia touches a hand to her cheeks and sure enough, she’s grinning like a fool and hadn’t even realized it. She can’t help but chuckle at herself.

“Yes, everything is fine. I apologize for my distraction.” She reaches a hand up to touch a ringlet of black hair, twisting it between her fingers as she chews her lip. “I’m usually much more focused than this, I promise.”

Leliana’s musical laugh soothes her guilt. “Please! This isn’t some stuffy office. I hope you’ll become comfortable enough here that you don’t feel you need to cut yourself off from everything when you walk through the door.” Her grin turns mischievous. “Especially if there’s a person out there who makes you smile like that while at work.”

Leliana seems to take far too much satisfaction in the way Olivia chokes on her surprised laughter. “Maker, nothing so exciting as that, I assure you!” She shakes her head, glancing at her phone once again through the side of her eyes. Leliana’s perked eyebrow tells Olivia she is unconvinced. That makes two of them. She shakes that thought away almost as soon as it forms.
“I should get back to work,” she deflects with ease, gesturing at the stack of books to her left. “I think I’ve neglected these long enough.” Olivia pulls a book from the stack and buries herself into the text to hide the idiotic grin plastered to her face.

Leliana waves a hand dismissively and chuckles. “If you insist! I’ll check on you soon.” With a last suggestive smile, she flits off into the aisles and Olivia just shakes her head. It’s only her first day and she’s already feeling rather fond of her boss.

Without the looming worry over her text friend, she makes a steady pace through the rest of her stack of books, and it’s only now that she realizes just how much she hadn’t truly been paying attention. She makes a note to go back through her “finished” stack when she’s done with this one. Despite her distraction, she is genuinely enjoying her work. She’s always felt at home around books, around the smell of leather and paper and a hint of dust that signifies there is history to be found within the pages. And she’s particularly enjoyed the variety of the books she’s finding in the stack—she’s even come across a full anthology of *Hard in Hightown*, collector’s edition, signed by the author and everything. Morrigan truly leaves no book behind, and Olivia appreciates the variety that her new workplace has to offer.

She is on the penultimate book of her stack, distracted by an interesting passage about eluvians, when she’s interrupted by a rather loud, haughty voice echoing through the stacks nearby. Her ears perk in interest as a few key words catch her attention.

“You cannot simply write off a man’s entire works on a whim! Genitivi is diligent in his work and *Tales of the Destruction of Thedas* is well-researched!” Olivia doesn’t recognize the voice, but the accent is refined and cavalier, and she can’t help but raise a brow.

“Genitivi may have passion about his writings, but he is still a man of the Chantry.” Even without the context of her first meeting with Morrigan, Olivia would have recognized the way the woman’s voice spat out the word “Chantry” as though it were a swear. “You may be willing to trust his accounts of the Exalted Marches—truly, his views must seem quite revolutionary to a Tevinter—” Olivia hears an offended scoff from the other person “ - but his accounts suffer the blindness of a man loyal to a corrupt system!”

Olivia has fully abandoned the book in which she had previously been so absorbed in favor of listening to this somewhat over-dramatic argument unfold with earnest. She cranes her neck in a vain attempt to find the source of the voices, and finally gives in to her curiosity. The books won’t miss her if she stands for just a moment.

“You are always so eager to write off my experiences with Tevinter,” the male voice is arguing, “and I’ve yet to hear what makes you such an expert on Elven lore and history!”

As she peeks into the history section, Morrigan’s disdainful face comes into view—disdainful even for Morrigan, that is—and Olivia wonders if she should find this scene as amusing as she does. Her boss is leaning against a bookcase with a large tome clutched to her chest, nose high and eyes permanently rolling at every word her companion says. And in front of her, waving another large tome around with dramatic sweeps as he speaks, is a tall, dark-skinned man with impeccable hair and - Olivia snorts - perfectly applied eyeliner. If Morrigan hadn’t already mentioned that he was Tevinter, she would have known immediately by the ostentatious way he presented himself.

Morrigan seems entirely bored by this argument, as though they’ve had it many times before. Her boss waves her hand, and the action is carefully crafted to appear lazy, as though she can’t be bothered. “I’ve had extensive contact with Elven historians and sociologists, and you know very well I wrote an entire thesis on the fall of Elvhenan. Had you read it, perhaps you would be better informed, and we would not be having this argument for the hundredth time.”
The Tevinter man puffs up like an offended bird, and Olivia raises a brow again, now fully amused and invested in this argument. She leans against a nearby bookcase and crosses her arms, trying to stay inconspicuous.

“The fact that you are calling me biased as a Tevinter when you are trying to convince me that the writings of an Orlesian scholar are more accurate is honestly absurd - you do see that, don’t you? You cannot possibly think Senallen Tevarnier is less biased than Ferdinand Genitivi. As though Orlais has not expunged half of Elven history from its records over the last few centuries!”

Morrigan huffs in response. “Be that as it may, the writings of Tevarnier on the Elven gods are far more accurate than other accounts! According to my sources—“

“Her book is literally called *A Treaty on the Pagan and Heretical Customs of the Elven*!” the Tevinter exclaims in disbelief, and Olivia cannot help herself any longer. She laughs aloud, and the two arguing scholars round on her in annoyance.

“Olivia.” Morrigan’s tone turns slightly more even, as though she is working toward a professional air, and Olivia finds it all the more amusing. “Have you finished the stack of books I gave you? I have another for you to start on if you’re ready.”

With a shake of her head, Olivia pushes herself off the bookcase she’s been leaning against and takes a tentative step toward them. “I’m almost finished, so I’ll come find you when I am. I just heard the arguing and was curious.”

With an exaggerated roll of her eyes, Morrigan glances back at the Tevinter man. “Ah, of course. I suppose I should introduce you to Dorian Pavus. He is a regular here, although he seems to enjoy engaging in futile arguments with me more than actually reading our books.”

Dorian scoffs and shakes his head at her, before turned and reaching out a hand to Olivia. “A pleasure to meet you,” he says, and his tone has changed from annoyance to charming and blithe. Olivia grins at him and firmly grasps his proffered hand.

“Olivia Cousland,” she responds, and gives him a pleasant smile. “I’ve just been hired on to help appraise new acquisitions.”

Dorian gives a dramatic upward sweep of his hand and sighs as if relieved. “Thank the Maker! This place needs more friendly faces to counteract this harridan’s presence.” Olivia laughs all the harder at Morrigan’s deepening scowl.

“Anyway, I apologize for interrupting,” she says. “I was just intrigued by the argument. I’ll leave you to it.” She turns away from her new acquaintance, and as she rounds the bookshelf on her way back to her desk, she affects a demure smile and pauses to glance over her shoulder at them.

“Although if either of you are truly so concerned about getting an unbiased account of Elven history, I’m surprised you haven’t thought to go directly to the source. We carry the full works of Gisharel, and his accounts on the Exalted Marches and the Elven pantheon come from a Dalish perspective. Much more informative... if you ask me.”

As she glides back to her desk, she is followed by the sound of Dorian’s indignant spluttering, and she can’t help the satisfied grin that stretches her cheeks.
(14:55) So

(14:57) So…?

(14:58) You’re Fereldan, born and raised. You’ve got the most Fereldan dog breed known to
man. You… like books.

(14:58) Correct me if I’m wrong about any of those btw

(14:59) Yes, you’re right about those things. Are you starting my biography?

(15:00) That’s probably all one needs to know to do it huh 😊📝👍

(15:15) But seriously, what else is there?

(15:17) You ask a lot of questions, don’t you

(15:18) I think I’d get fired at work if I didn’t!

(15:19) You get paid to be nosy??

(15:19) 👣 👣 👣

(15:19) Yes

(15:19) Technically

(15:20) You’ve got your photo framed on the wall, don’t you

(15:21) Employee of the month

(15:21) Well that’s a bit juvenile isn’t it!!

(15:22) …I’d bet it’d be true if she did that though

(15:25) What about you, then? I know less of you than you know of me.

(15:26) You like filthy stinky cheese and are familiar with this city. Not much to go on.

(15:27) 😏

(15:28) Informative

(15:28) Wasn’t it, though? 🍪🍪🍪🍪🍪🍪ขนมผักตลก์ 🍪🍪🍪管理条例 😴

(15:30) Is this… your life story

(15:30) Yes

(15:31) Told entirely in emojis
Yes

Where does the elephant come in??

That was an embellishment to make it seem more exciting, tbh

And to make sure you were paying attention 😊

Well now I certainly feel like I know you

And by that I mean I think I know even less about you than I did before. Incredible.

It’s not my fault you’re not bilingual and/or speak the language of love, the language of emoji

I thought the language of love was Antivan

Who told you that???: 😞 A Crow?

It’s emoji and I will not let Wikipedia continue to lock me out of editing the language pages any longer

Did they really?

Can we talk about something else!!! 😞😞

So were you hospitalized as a child or something? Running your string of emojis through a translator doesn’t really tell me what this means

No

Ok…

You’re going to leave me hanging? This is more suspenseful than Hard in Hightown.

I got in trouble for using my phone at work 😞

Holy shit

Hahahahaha

I’m sorry.

You are not 😞

Only a little 😊😊

いただいて。

what

Multiple emojis!!!! Now you’re speaking my language 😊😊😊
(18:13) So

(18:13) First day at work? 🤔?

(18:21) It went very well thanks

(18:21) I even got the chance to show up my boss 😊

(18:21) 😷 You don’t do anything halfway, do you?

(18:22) Not usually

(18:22) She seemed pleased by it though??

(18:22) so hopefully I haven’t just put an expiration date on myself

(18:23) Ha! Well good luck then

(18:23) Does this mean you won’t be needing any more of my stellar recommendations? 😏

(18:23) Oh I’m sure I will at some point. There’s still so much of the city I haven’t explored

(18:24) I haven’t really gone out much. I’m usually too tired

(18:25) 😴 Does your neighbor keep you up that often?

(18:25) Not so much. But I come from a much quieter place

(18:27) Denerim is so loud at night.

(18:27) True, true.

(18:27) Any way I can help? Ease your blighted suffering? 😊

(18:28) It’s alright, Cheese Man. I appreciate the sentiment

(18:28) I’ll try to sleep earlier tonight

(18:28) Brilliant plan 👍

Friday

(23:45) This is misery

(23:45) 😞

(23:45) What??
(23:45) It’s damn near midnight and there’s the music. Again.

(23:46) Sorry, did I wake you?

(23:46) Aw, no. I was already up. Work keeps me up late

(23:46) Lately, anyhow

(23:46) 😏

(23:47) Ohh, sorry. But I

(23:47) You offered to help

(23:47) I’m not imposing am I?

(23:48) No!

(23:48) Like I said, I was up anyway

(23:48) How can I sleep when the noble, strong Dog Lord calls for aid? 💁‍♂️スタッフ

(23:49) How do you have the energy to be so weird even at this hour

(23:49) It’s a power I can’t shut off but must use responsibly

(23:49) Surely you understand 😊

(23:50) I’m starting to. I think.

(23:50) What do you do for a living? If it keeps you up so late

(23:50) What, and break our clause of anonymity?

(23:50) If I told you, I might have to kill you 😨

(23:51) Sooo some sort of melodramatic secret agent

(23:51) Cullen must be your reluctant hacker friend

(23:51) Roped into all your daring schemes that will never work but you pull them off with pomp and circumstance

(23:52) Y’know, I rather liiike your interpretation of my day job

(23:52) This is fun, tell me more stories

(23:52) Cullen would riot

(23:53) Aren’t you supposed to be the one helping me sleep?

(23:53) Oh! Right, sorry

(23:53) Denerim still too loud, huh
Like I said, I come from a pretty quiet place

Not the opposite of a city but enough to make me wonder why I thought I could take it

I’m just so exhausted

I don’t want it to affect me at work

But the city is loud and bright and my neighbour is similar in that regard tbh

Aaand I’m complaining

I’m listening!

You have blackout curtains, right?

No

Should I?

If it’s so bright, then obviously!

And a fan. Tell me you’ve got yourself a fan

It’s Haring, why in the Maker’s name would I have lugged a fan to Denerim

For the sound? By Andraste, you must’ve been sheltered. White noise is incredible

Two blocks east of the Crossroads has a store with home appliances of sorts

Be kind to yourself, get some fans and shades

Make noise you’d rather hear

Or beat your neighbour up. Let them know those galloping abs aren’t for show

I never should’ve said that

It made me laugh

Probably made you miss the templar erotica, too

Imagine the most wistful sighs

Are you imagining them?

I...guess?

Good. That’s me right now

Maker

Well my neighbour thought midnight was as good a time as any to stop blaring the jams
So thank you. Again. I’ll try to find that place when I have some time off work.

You show a lot of kindness to a stranger.

Stranger? I’ve told you my life story, haven’t I?

A watered down version. I’m tempted to believe the elephant part was real.

As long as you can make it fit with my tales of Fereldan espionage and nerdy hacker sidekick 😊

Are you really Fereldan? You sound a little Antivan or Rivaini.

That’s offensive and I’m offended.

But I could thank you too.

It was nice to think of stuff that wasn’t my job 😊

Oh. You’re welcome?

Wait, clause of anonymity?

You must be tired if you’re that delayed.

I am. Sue me.

I know someone who might if I suck up, so watch your tongue 😊

Deflected and threatened by a cheesemonger. You’re definitely Orlesian.

It all makes sense now.

 широко открытые пальцы

Go to bed or I’m suing for libel. You’re the worst to me!!

I’m sorry. I tease. Goodnight for real, I promise.

 широко открытые пальцы

Chapter End Notes

ok listen I know this hasn't updated in a while but I assure you all we are not dead and neither is the AU. We got a little sidetracked by life but now we're focused again and working hard! Thank you to everyone who has commented and supported us thus far, your comments have literally sustained us and we frequently wake up and scream in unison at every new comment we receive. We're so excited to have people who are enjoying this AU because we're so invested in it, so it's encouraging and uplifting when
you all tell us you want more!

Come find us at Tumblr and feel free to send us questions, comments, or even writing prompts if you want!!! We would love to hear from you.

carouselfancy
Tijgertje

The fic now has an OFFICIAL TUMBLR yay!! Follow for art, updates, questions, and all that good stuff. Come talk to us!!!
Chapter Notes

Holy cow, this update took forever and we're so sorry - but hey, at least it's a huge chunk, so hopefully it was worth the wait.

Also, I apologize in advance.

This chapter's gorgeous art is by the impeccable nippaaah!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
Saturday

(10:10) On my way to get those curtains and a fan

(10:10) 🍼ليمون

(11:00) My cart is full of things I didn’t even know I needed

(11:00) How have I lived alone like this

(11:01) There’s a mabari coffee mug
(11:01) I don’t need it
(11:10) I needed it

(18:47) 😁
(18:47) I imagine you live in a palace made of dog fur and dog-related furniture
(18:49) What kind of Fereldan would I be if I didn’t own a few dog related things
(18:49) “A few” 😏
(18:49) Don’t give me that look
(18:50) You have to have something dog related
(18:50) Or no
(18:50) You have lions
(18:51) I’ve ripped away the fancy Orlesian cloth hiding your dirty, cheesy secret
(18:52) 😩 😩
(18:52) Stop that!!
(18:52) I have dog things. Griffon things too.
(18:53) Aww
(18:53) I don’t have a photo on hand but I have a nice plush mabari
(18:54) His name is Barkspawn 😊
(18:54) This
(18:54) does not surprise me
(18:55) See I told you that you knew me well

Sunday

(9:36) Sleep well?
(9:38) You’re a genius
(9:38) Flattery? So early? This does not bode well for me
(9:39) There was music again but it wasn’t so bad this time
(9:39) The fan was genuinely helpful
(9:40) See? What did I tell you
(9:40) I am a bottomless well of good ideas. You’re free to continue drinking
(9:40) I mean. ANYWAY
(9:40) I had to learn this stuff the hard way tbh
(9:41) ?
(9:41) I had a roommate who I wanted to drown out with sound
(9:41) But it took time for me to discover better alternatives, like fans
(9:42) You shouldn’t have to suffer for months like I did
(9:42) You’re so considerate
(9:43) 😊😊😊
(9:43) I try. Is it working?
(9:43) Yes
(9:44) Now, since it is my day off and the bed's still warm, I think I’ll snuggle back in
(9:44) Busy day ahead of you
(9:45) wait what
(9:45) You know
(9:45) Ruling your dog fur kingdom, taking the subjects out for walks, barking commands
(9:45) Sweet dreams, Dog Lord 😴

Monday
(14:01) !!!
(14:05) ??
(14:05) !!!!!!
(14:09) I have work to do, I can’t play punctuation chicken with you
(14:10) Things are happening and I don’t know what but I am excited.
(14:10) Pray to the Maker it’s good news bc we need it around here
(14:11) Andraste, if ur listening…..
(14:13) I hear if you say her name three times in the mirror, an Orlesian inexplicably bursts into tears
Can you confirm

The news is unfolding!!

Nice deflection

I will sit on you and sing you the Fereldan anthem as I sue your pants off for slandering me like this

An interesting threat

See u in court

Stop!!

The phone display shuts off, but he keeps running a freckled thumb over the dark screen in an indirect caress for a long moment... Alistair gingerly deposits his phone into his bag before trailing hot on Cullen’s heels, listening to his partner’s usually gruff voice turn light as air, seasoned with hope. They are on their way to another crime scene, but this one is special, this one has even Cullen’s dour expression falling away. Another anonymous tip has been called in and if Alistair had not heard it straight from Captain Pentaghast’s mouth, he would not believe it. He still does not believe it, and he tests the theory, rumour, potential truth in his mouth on the way to the scene.

Alive, alive, alive.

It makes him giddy, fidgety even. He wishes he could text his friend again and tell her the news, though without context it means little. “Someone is alive!” the text would read and though he’s never heard her voice, he can “hear” the response he would earn: something playful, something like “Aren’t most people, Cheese Man?”

Alistair wishes that were true. There were two other elves in as many days and he can still recall the way his heart had dropped like a stone as he closed their eyes; the sight of Denerim’s identical alleyways still haunts him. There was no direct correlation between the victims, but he and Cullen know. They recognize the patterns of a sloppy serial killer, though neither of them is ready to go public about their findings. Pieces are still missing, after all.

The second Cullen puts the car into park at the scene, Alistair all but spills out of the passenger side door. “Wait!” Cullen calls out, fingers flipping through files in his bag, but Alistair doesn’t listen. He’s already gone, bounding towards yet another alley. A lump threatens to form in his throat, but he is quick to choke it down.

The elf sits alone, their limbs wrapped tight around their naked body in an impregnable barrier. A shock blanket lies discarded by their anxiously tapping feet, covered in the dust they’ve kicked up. When Alistair steps towards them, possibly with too much enthusiasm, they cower and turn their head, greasy hair swishing to reveal damaged ears. Alistair narrows his eyes, unsure of why this is something they all have in common, wonders if there is more. Always elves, always ears with slices removed – though never in precisely the same location – and that was it. Fat or thin, tall or short, pale or dark; this killer is not picky.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” Alistair ventures as he crouches down. He offers a hand, palm facing up,
then immediately retracts it when he sees the elf scowl over their arms. They are not a frightened, unpredictable dog that he can coax, and he bows his head at his mistake. Think, Alistair, think! He is more than aware that his forte is not in directly dealing with the people, but Cullen is off questioning anyone he can find and comforting everyone besides the victim. Alistair wonders if he is shying away, because Maker knows he would like to as the elf gives him another dirty look.

As if on cue, Cullen squats down beside him and they eye the elf together. “The arms?” Cullen asks, though it is obvious even if they aren’t visible. The calves are cut up, it stands to reason that their forearms are identical in their destruction. Their ankles and wrists are mottled with purples and reds, telltale abrasions that scream captivity. Alistair knows that beneath their unkempt nails they will find skin from where they scratched and flailed.

“Incredible shiner they’re sporting,” Alistair whispers to Cullen, though the elf’s ear twitches and their unobstructed eye start to shine with tears. He frowns.

“You may want to choose your words more carefully in front of the affected party, Alistair,” Cullen grumbles. He turns his glare away from Alistair and tries to soften it for the victim. “Could we see your arm? We won’t touch it, we promise.”

Though there is little room to do so, the elf finds a way to recoil further into themselves, broken skin against skin. A flash of scarred flesh on their arm is enough for Alistair and he immediately elbows Cullen in the ribs. “They have them.”

“Stop that,” Cullen snaps.

“Have the both of you considered ‘stopping that’, maybe?” Dorian ducks under a blockade, pocketing his phone as he steps into their space. The elf yelps and they all look to them in confusion. “Most noise they’ve made all day,” Dorian says, eyebrows raised.

Cullen’s nose wrinkles. “How long have you been here?”

“I would prefer it if we did not talk about this right in front of them as though they are not here.”

With hands clenched tight on both men’s biceps, Dorian steers them away from the victim and back to the street.

“Are you both vultures, circling over a fresh kill?” he asks as soon as the elf is out of earshot and they are outside the alley, though his tone is jocular and leaves Alistair’s head swimming. Cullen, on the other hand, cleans his glasses and grunts.

“I take it we missed something,” says Alistair.

“No, I—I apologize. That little elf kicked me square in the hip when I attempted to examine their cuts. Thank the Gods I have no interest in having children, because I was very close to losing my virility in one fell swoop. Don’t let their stringy, atrophied limbs fool you; they’re a feisty one.”

“The black eye said as much. Were you able to speak to them?”

“Ha! No.” Dorian laughs, but it is devoid of mirth. “They won’t talk to ‘shems’ though, I can tell you that much.”

Alistair squirms. He wishes Zevran was around instead of off undercover in another city or country or who knows where; if there was an elf that could get any man or woman to talk, it was Zevran Arainai. As it were, most of the people Alistair works with are human and oftentimes painfully Fereldan, a combination that doesn’t do them many favors, even in Denerim. “So… Is that it then?”
Alistair looks around the corner, just to see if the elf is still there. They are.

“What?” Cullen squints through his glasses at Alistair.

“We can’t move them… Can we?”

Dorian shrugs. “It’s your future children at stake. Or—oh, here she comes. All you needed was to wait.”

The click-clack of heels on concrete announce a new arrival to the scene. Both detectives twist around toward the noise; Dorian just affects his slicest smile and says nothing more. She stops before she’s too close to the group and her pink irises dart from face to face, her expression almost expectant.

Alistair meets those eyes and he knows them, feels himself taken back to a time he’s forgotten, albeit unintentionally. “Luana?” he asks, bemused.

“Alistair?”

As her pace quickens, she tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and in that movement her involvement in this case becomes apparent, her pointed ears jutting out. Cullen searches Alistair’s eyes for an explanation as to how he knows this supposed stranger’s name, and all Alistair offers is a shrug when Luana pushes herself into their space.

“Dorian didn’t tell me you were part of this,” she begins, sending the tiniest pout in Dorian’s direction.

“Yes, well, I rather liked the idea of a dear friend coming to help me out of the kindness of her heart and possibly because she likes to see me when she can,” Dorian huffs.

“As opposed to?”

“As opposed to the fact that she may be swept up by the opportunity to pet large puppies.”

His friend is still using the same bag she did a couple years ago to carry her important work documents, and her hands are clenching against the shoulder strap, visibly worn in the place where she is pulling at the imitation leather. Her hands are thinner than Alistair remembers, though her face remains round and cheerful, even behind the sheen of stress and exhaustion that shows through her eyes. Both Dorian and Luana turn to Alistair expectantly. He shakes himself out of his distracted reverie as Dorian clears his throat.

“Puppies?” Alistair looks around. “I heard puppies.”

“Of course you did.” Dorian smirks. Cullen groans under his breath, very nearly rolling his eyes.

“Are we talking about the Puppy Fiasco of 9:33? Luana wasn’t there, was she?” Alistair turns to her.

“Were you?”

Luana reaches up as high as she can with willowy arms, attempting to tuck a stray strand of Alistair’s hair behind his ear. He almost flinches at the sudden contact. “He means you, I think.” She looks at Dorian for confirmation. “You are very much a giant puppy.”

“Oh.” Alistair rubs his arm, bunching up his sleeve. “It takes one to know one, doesn’t it? You’re like an honorary little mabari.”
“Truly?” Luana scoots closer and stares up at him, eyes darting around to map his face. “From the biggest Ferelden I know—literally, even—that’s so sweet.” The two of them laugh together and he knows she is genuine when she holds onto him, straightening his rumpled sleeve.

“How are—” Alistair begins, until his phone interrupts their reunion with several barks. Sheepish and apologetic, he pulls his phone out to silence it, but Luana blinks and shows none of the annoyance his partner does at the noise.

“What was that?” she asks, echoing Cullen from days past, before his annoyance set in.

“Oh, that was—“

“His mini bark cannon,” Cullen says, sounding as crotchety as he looks. His hands are shoved deep into his pants pockets and he looks a hair’s breadth away from dashing off, back to the alley. Alistair bumps his shoulder against his partner’s, but the moment he tries to introduce them, his partner shuffles off towards the victim; he isn’t interested in pleasantries when there was a case to be taken care of. Alistair has nearly forgotten about the case.

“Shouldn’t keep him waiting, hm?” Luana whispers. “I heard there was an elf here.”

They all return to where the elf has perched themself beside a dumpster, quieter now than ever. Their eyes look empty, irises shaking, staring at the brick wall opposite them and seeing nothing. Cullen steps aside so Luana can get closer; everyone is bracing themselves, save for Luana who seems to swell with softness just by looking at her kin.

Alistair rubs his neck, urges himself internally to not pace and exacerbate the anxiety that surges between the five of them. His friend—acquaintance? one time coworker?—is a lawyer, nothing more, and he can’t fathom why she is here. There is no case to represent and he wants to vocalize his mounting concern, until she slips off a pair of elbow-length gloves and offers them to the victim beside her, an act of solidarity.

“There’s a shock blanket to your left,” Cullen states, trying to help. Luana pays him no mind, takes her time pulling the gloves over the victim’s hands. There are scars just as prevalent on Luana’s arms as on the victim’s, and Alistair feels Dorian’s attention snap to him as a bit more clarity sets in. The wrinkles in both Alistair’s and Cullen’s brows smooth out, erased and are replaced with electric tension, the intrinsic desire to dance around the subject though it is currently smacking them in the face.

The elves spend some minutes talking amongst themselves, ignoring the humans encroaching on their space and time. With a gentle, satisfied noise, Luana stands and takes the elf with her. Alistair hears her try to even her voice out as she tells the shaking body beside her: “Left foot, then right foot. We’ll protect you.”

When the victim is packed into the back of the waiting ambulance, Alistair finds Luana lingering at the doors, waiting for him. He peers over her head to try to steal a look inside, see if the elf is alright or if their condition is salvageable, but a paramedic’s back blocks his view. Luana pulls him aside and he watches as her tongue glides over her teeth and her fingers pick at the tips of her ears.

“Did you… learn anything?” Alistair asks.

Luana’s breath holds still in her chest for several beats, until she exhales and her whole body droops. “No, unfortunately. Nothing I couldn’t figure out by looking at them.”

“What did Dorian even tell you that made you show up?” Alistair stops, then adds, “If he didn’t tell
you about me.”

“I wouldn’t have come just for you!” Luana says with mock offense. “But it is nice to see a friendly face here in Denerim, even if we’ve not had the chance to become friends outside of work.”

“Fenris not friendly enough for you? I’m sure he’s capable of cracking a smile.”

“He smiles when we win over a particularly tough jury, but I’ve never seen him do it otherwise. I call those smiles ’spite grins’ anyway.” The discomfort in her eyes tells Alistair that by “tough” she means “elf-hating,” and it comes as no surprise, considering the vallaslin emblazoned on her cheeks and forehead.

Alistair leans back on his heels and drags a palm across his face. “It’s blood magic, isn’t it?”

“The smiles? Wh—oh.” Luana rubs her forearms. “‘Yes’ is and isn’t the answer you’d like to hear, huh.”

“I’d like someone unbiased to back me up on this. Cullen would agree with me, but he likes hard evidence and I don’t suppose you could give him that.”

“Cullen?”

It only occurs to Alistair then that he has not yet successfully introduced the two. The second he catches Cullen’s eye from where his partner is tucked against his car, he beckons him over with a frenzied wave. He looks down at Luana to see if she shares his excitement—somewhat-friends should know each other, after all—and for once he cannot read her expression. A cross between perplexion and amusement, perhaps.

Luana extends her hand to Cullen and he accepts it, though his drawn face has her visibly shrinking.

“Miss Lavellan, was it?”

“I… You’re Cullen?” Luana looks up to Alistair for confirmation. He feels some strange urge to pat the top of her head as she nods; he chalks it up to their height difference.

“Detective Rutherford, yes. Are you accompanying the victim to the hospital?” Cullen attempts to peer inside the ambulance, just as Alistair had, but the elf inside remains hidden.

“Yes. They need protection. I know admittedly very little about the other elves you’ve found but, well, if you’re legally allowed to, Alistair, I’d like if you told me more. You can text me anything you think I should know.”

Alistair nods and pretends he doesn’t see Cullen’s flinch at the words, You can text me.

“All I can tell you is that they should not be alive. Someone made a mistake. I… That’s hardly helpful, sorry.”

They exchange numbers; Luana watches with rapt fascination as Alistair gives her a personalized contact name, decked out with fitting emojis. After awkward goodbyes—should he hug her? He frets he is overthinking again—his small elven friend climbs into the back of the ambulance and Alistair glances at his phone screen for the time. Cullen, likewise, looks at his wristwatch.

“Are we done here?” Alistair knows he needs to decompress, and possibly Cullen more so than he. They are silent on the way to the precinct, only engaging in small talk when the ride shifts from work back to Alistair’s house. The car idles on the sidewalk; Alistair’s unbuckled himself but the doors
“Do you want to grab a drink?” Alistair asks. Cullen’s eyebrows fly so high, they nearly hit his hairline. “I mean, we can hang out outside of work. Might be fun. Might be bizarre to see you wearing something casual. Do you do casual?”

“I’m—I—“ Cullen splutters.

“We don’t have to!” Alistair feels a twinge of guilt, the special kind that burns his nose, and not in the fun way, the way blushing does. He hovers over the door handle, waits for a response. He recognizes that his guilt is born of losing touch with one of the only other people who acts as if his company is enjoyable, but Luana is back and he does not want Cullen to think he is an afterthought, a replacement for someone too busy for him. No one in Thedas needs a break more than Cullen Rutherford, but the longer he looks at him, the more he feels as though the answer is obvious.

“Maybe. What time?”

Did he hear that correctly? Alistair does a double-take as he almost opens the door and shows himself out, then checks his watch again. “A couple hours? Give or take. You don’t like to be late but this isn’t a date. We’ll go to a pub, it’ll be good. I know all the charming dives.”

“That’s an oxymoron if I’ve ever heard one.”

“You pick a bar, then.”

“I don’t know any. I don’t go to bars.”

“Never?”

Cullen squints.

“Allright, alright. How about the, uh,” Alistair digs through his phone for all the locations he’s made notes on. “The Pearl. I’ll meet you there.”

(16:01) Was the news good news?
(16:01) I have lived in utter suspense

(16:01) Can confirm my lawyer friend would sue you if I asked nicely enough 😏
(16:02) Did you make me wait two hours for that information
(16:02) I did not know you were waiting!! I could’ve told you sooner
(16:02) Are you… kidding me right now
(16:03) Yes 😏
(16:03) And the news was good!!! But it made me tired
(16:03) sooo tired
(16:05) I’m happy for you, even though you are kind of dead to me right now
(16:05) Aww, thanks 😊

(16:05) Tired though? Hm

(16:06) It’s complicated 😞

(16:07) It was good news about a bad thing. That is still bad. So it’s good bad news

(16:07) Does that… make sense??

(16:08) I guess

(16:08) Your work as Ferelden’s most beloved spy must weigh on you

(16:10) what

(16:11) OH

(16:11) Sorry, I had to feign confusion for a minute to throw them off my trail

(16:12) Them?

(16:12) Nvm idk why I play along with this

(16:12) Ok but look me in the eye and tell me you haven’t laughed at my great texts

(16:13) Mother didn’t raise me to be a liar. Anyway how could I do that

(16:14) 😛

(16:14) No.

(16:14) 😛

(16:14) 😛

(16:14) 😛

(16:14) 😛

(16:14) 😛

(16:15)
(16:16) I deserve that

Cullen stands him up.

Alistair lingers around the entrance of The Pearl, doors perpetually ajar so at least the bar’s music can accompany him while he waits for someone who isn’t going to show. The reluctance in his partner’s voice should’ve tipped him off that a sighting of the elusive Cullen Rutherford was as likely as both of Thedas’s moons going full in the same month. He scratches his nose and flips through his phone, his contacts, emails and the like to seem occupied while patrons brush by him.

He opts to try texting Luana, despite already knowing her answer.

To: Luana 🗳️

(18:34) What are you up to right now? Still haunting the hospital?

The wait for her reply is excruciating and awkward. The temperature is dropping, clouds are forming. Alistair wills his legs to move under an awning for shelter and grips his jacket tighter around his body, until his phone vibrates.

(18:40) Yes. I am not alone either..

(18:40) What? Are you okay? Do I need to send someone?

(18:40) I know everyone on patrol, I could have someone at the hospital in three minutes flat

(18:41) No !! I am safe, I assure you. :)

(18:41) Your partner is here though.

(18:41) what

(18:42) Except he won’t come into the room. There is an extra chair but he won’t take it. He looks like an irritable, vigilant hawk. Is he alright?
(18:42) Haha, yeah, that sounds like him. I’m more concerned about you than I am about him tbh

(18:42) Why is that?

(18:42) oh I

(18:42) I’m being sarcastic 😒

(18:43) How is the elf? I take it you’ve been keeping them company

(18:43) They’re good! Well not good but as good as someone in a hospital can be, given the circumstances.

(18:43) They don’t want to press charges against whoever’s done this to them, and they won’t say who. I don’t think it’s a matter of them not wanting to say who, I think they legitimately can’t form the words. I know blood magic but not this kind.

(18:44) Does Cullen know? Did you manage to say anything to him

(18:44) Yes, but he only made a noise. I think he’s mulling it over. Very inside his head. How long have you two been partners? Why am I only meeting him now this way??

(18:44) Okay but a better question is

(18:44) Can you see my emojis

(18:44) Can you USE emojis

(18:45) That’s a good question. I can see them but I can’t use them I don’t think. Where are they? I didn’t know they existed before you showed me. They are very cute!

(18:45) phew

(18:45) Are you… okay with my choice of emojis for you?

(18:45) Depends.

(18:45) ??

(18:46) You didn’t mean it in a bad way, did you? :(

(18:46) Never!! I’ve got someone with a dog emoji and you can be rabbit emoji. I know what I’d give Cullen but he gave me a wrong number so I can’t give him anything 😞

(18:46) What are you? I thought you would be the dog emoji thing.

(18:47) I’ll get back to you on that. I should go inside 😊

(18:47) I invited Cullen for drinks 🍺 but he’s where you are instead of hanging out with me. I can’t lurk outside forever

(18:47) Give him dirty looks for me please 🤷‍♀️
The energy within The Pearl is voracious. The air tastes and smells like someone’s been running a fog machine, the lights are low and sensual, and by the looks of the other patrons, Alistair feels simultaneously too casual and too overdressed. He has never seen this place as it stands now, only recollects infamous headlines of its shady past. Once a waterfront brothel, hugging the Amaranthine Ocean like a lover’s thighs, Alistair had barely joined the force when it was shut down for the first time. And then the second time. A cursory scan of the bar tells him so very little about what goes on in its darkest corners.

He doesn’t blame Cullen for choosing overtime over this place.

With no company to wait for, Alistair takes a seat at the bar and slings his jacket over his chair to stake his claim. It’s mostly empty despite the location, but everyone has come with someone, huddling around tables, dancing in packs for protection. Alistair watches men pester women and takes note of the way they clutch their purses or not entirely inconspicuous bulges in their pants pockets. Mace, or keychains with sharp edges. He turns his attention back towards the shelf behind the bartender and tries to order something over the din of drum and bass.

The Pearl has no right charging this many silvers for the bottom rung of dwarven beer. Alistair knows he’s going to be nursing this bottle for a while.

Stubborn in his resolution to have a good time and peel his mind off of work, he scouts for other loners. No one. Everyone is somehow engaging another body—even a towering qunari has found their place and garnered admirers. Alistair’s cheeks burn and he digs into his jacket to find his phone.

(19:02) I’m alone at a bar on a Monday night
(19:02) The cloistered sisters who took care of me are weeping
(19:02) And this beer tastes like a dwarf pissed in it and bottled it all by himself
(19:03) While I can appreciate such an enterprising, cheeky dwarf, who must’ve accidentally drank the bottle he emptied himself in and thought it a grand idea to sell it to poor thirsty souls like me
(19:03) I do not appreciate that I’m becoming as bitter as the aftertaste 😞 😞
(19:05) Honestly!! I can’t believe I’ve taken another swig of this. Yep, still tastes like
(19:05) well
(19:05) I don’t need to repeat myself at this point 😞
(19:07) So why is it you’re familiar with this particular flavour?
(19:07) I should’ve known that’s how you’d respond.
(19:07) You have such an obvious vendetta against the taste, I thought maybe it struck a chord. Inquiring minds have got to know

(19:07) Still alone?

(19:08) Yeah 😞

(19:08) No one has spoken to me once yet. Not even the bartender

(19:08) To be fair

(19:08) You must look like you’re very devoted to your phone

(19:08) Excellent point.

(19:09) Why don’t you talk to someone? Just because it’s Monday doesn’t mean pretty much every bar won’t be teeming with people

(19:09) True, true

(19:09) Aaaand now consider that I may not exactly be the best at talking with people? Many ladies here. Mostly on the arms of men. Not sure how to chat a guy up all friendly like without it being taken the wrong way so

(19:09) Not entirely sure who I’m meant to be talking to 😞

(19:10) Please, there’s bound to be someone. Find a cute girl and talk to her, buy her a drink maybe? I bet you’ve got your eyes on one now 😊

(19:10) Have you already forgotten the fact that I can only afford the worst beer this place has to offer

(19:10) I’m not convinced this beer is even on the menu

(19:10) I think the bartender thinks I’m rude and spiked my drink with something. Or this beer is expired

(19:11) Andraste’s ass, go talk to someone

(19:11) If I must, I’ll be your wingman 😊

Dog Lord is right. There has to be someone inside the bar that Alistair can hit it off with, he knows it. A woman appears at his left, come to collect a drink she’s ordered, and he swivels in his chair to face her. Eyes shining with cordiality, Alistair opens his mouth. “So, have you… ever licked a lamppost in winter?”

She stares at him, her own eyes large, cow-like. With a spin of her high heels, she snatches her drink and hops off, nearly careening into larger bodies on the dance floor. Only the smell of her perfume wafting in her wake as she flees gives Alistair proof that he has struck out.

He picks up his phone, the front facing camera comes on. There is nothing wrong with him, he
thinks. Alistair even brushed his hair before he left, so he's positive it wasn't a rogue cowlick that struck fear into her heart.

(19:15) I made eye contact with a girl

(19:17) And?

(19:17) Ok you're telling me about it so clearly that means it went up in flames

(19:17) Eye contact, really?

(19:17) It's a big deal!

(19:18) I loathe to ask what you consider first base to be if eye contact is such a “big deal”

(19:18) So is that it, eye contact.

(19:18) Don't tell me you tried to use your Orlesian cheese sales pitch on her

(19:18) How hopeless do you think I am??

(19:18) Cheese talk is for the first date 🧀 🍷

(19:19) Right. Noted

(19:19) Still avoiding the question

(19:19) I used a pick-up line, like any civilized Fereldan man would. I think. People still do those in this age, right

(19:20) There's no such thing as a civilized Fereldan man and Maker, no

(19:20) Next time? Don't say whatever it is you said

(19:20) 😞 Was it really that bad? You don't even know what I said 😞

(19:20) Whatever it was, strike it from your vocabulary. As your wingman I implore you to never use bad pick-up lines on a girl you like.

(19:20) I'll bbs so try again or something. Don't be too lost without me

(19:21) 😊👍

Alistair nurses his drink, lets his tongue slide across the roof of his mouth to try and dissipate the flavor that grows worse with every sip. He worries incessantly with every girl that brushes against his shoulder, decides that the paneling on the bar top is infinitely more interesting. There are notches in various spots, too uniform to be random, and—

“Excuse me,” a woman says, trying to lean past him to grab her drink.

Alistair apologizes. He turns to look at her and his eyes fall on her arms, both covered in art.
“Tattoos!”

The woman turns out to be the qunari whom everyone in the far corner of the bar is watching, waiting for. As if she’s forgotten what her arms look like, she lifts them slightly and admires them, wiggles her fingers. “That they are.” Her head ducks down, curling horns coming with them; she tries so hard to make it to Alistair’s ear. “I have more elsewhere, if you’re interested.”

“Of what?” Alistair asks. It’s only when he sees her cocked eyebrow and suggestive smirk that his face flushes. She probably has many tattoos. In many places. She has a very long body; he knows she would tower over him if he stood up and followed her, and that’s more room for tattoos. Alistair concludes that he does appreciate good art but is maybe, just maybe, not in the right state of mind to look at it. “Sorry,” he says, stomach churning as the qunari’s face falls.

“It’s fine.”

“Yeah, of course. Have a… nice night.”

She looks back at him a few times as she returns to her group, and Alistair continues to feel embarrassed. It is not the last time, and even with Dog Lord’s help, he can’t approach, well, anyone. There’s a whole open space for people to collect their drink but for some reason everyone gravitates around him and feels a bizarre need to shoot him looks of varying kinds for being in the way.

With each moment that passes, Alistair’s discomfort multiplies. He’s not sure what exactly he’s supposed to be doing, left on his own in a bar like this, and his solution is apparently to tap his fingers nervously against the glass in his hand. He becomes conscious of every movement he makes, as if he were some shady drug dealer trying not to attract suspicion. Is he looking around too much? Perhaps he should move from the bar and lurk against a wall somewhere so as not to attract attention—or would that make him look creepy?

Finally he settles on moving to the seat beside him, but letting his coat remain dangling on the back of his former chair. Maybe someone will buy the illusion that he is a man sitting at the bar, waiting for someone. Perhaps this way he won’t look so pathetic, sitting here fidgeting on his own. He doesn’t have high hopes for it.

He has only just settled into his new spot when his arm is bumped by a woman shouldering past him to reach the bar, calling out to the bartender sharply, “Three shots of tequila please!” He doesn’t catch her face underneath a cascade of black curls, and with a mildly irritated twitch of his nose, he turns back to his phone and drifts as far to the edge of his seat as he can to stay out of her way. He still hasn’t received any new texts from the Dog Lord, and he’s starting to wonder if he should just give up and call it a night.

When the bartender slides the three glasses of clear, pungent alcohol across the bar, Alistair’s nose wrinkles at the burn of the stuff in his nose. He chuckles and before he can stop himself, swivels his barstool toward her. “That’ll put some - “ His brain seems to stutter to a stop as he is met with a face full of prominent cleavage, and yet his idiot mouth continues on without a care, “—chest… on your chest…”

The burning flush of hot embarrassment across his cheeks is immediate, and he buries his face into his folded arms on the bar to hide it. He doesn’t want to see her face, to meet her eyes and know just how much of an idiot she thinks he is. She’s silent for a long moment before he hears a low, drawling, “… What?” Without raising his head from his arms, he lifts a hand in her direction and mumbles an apology into the counter.

The ensuing awkward silence stretches until it becomes agonizing. A tiny huff of exhaled breath
from her is the only sound between them for minutes, and finally, when he can no longer bear the tension, he gingerly lifts his head to look at her.

But she is gone, with only a crisp bill on the counter to indicate she was ever there at all, and Alistair heaves a groan of relief.

(19:53) **If embarrassing myself were a champion sporting event, I would be taking home gold medals every time**

(19:54) Seems to be a theme today. What awful thing have you done now?

(19:54) You really didn’t start talking about cheese did you? It’s a bona fide moodkiller, I can tell you from experience

(19:55) **Thanks so much for the words of encouragement. But no, no cheese**

(19:55) **If you’ll believe it, I have no trouble humiliating myself without it**

(19:55) **Maybe I should just go home**

(19:56) Why are you having so much trouble talking to women? You don’t seem to have this much trouble talking to me

(19:56) **That’s different. You’re not an attractive woman**

(19:56) 😅

(19:57) **Andraste’s right buttock that’s not what I meant!!!**

(19:58) I’m starting to understand the problem much better

(19:58) You are a mess

(19:58) **You’re only now starting to understand that?**

(19:59) The extent of it, that is. New rule: every time you want to talk, take a sip of your drink so you have time to filter your words first

(19:59) Perhaps that’ll do some damage control

(20:00) **That’s genius**

(20:00) **Not sure it’ll be enough to curb my penchant for self-destruction but worth a shot**

“Girlfriend stand you up, gorgeous?”

Alistair almost drops his phone in surprise and whirls around in his stool to meet the source of the sultry voice. He isn’t sure what he expected to find, but he is surprised nevertheless by a tall, dark-skinned woman leaning against the counter. She’s wearing a dress that shows so much skin his eyes do not know where to safely land. He decides to take the safest route available and settles them somewhere near her ear.
“No, I—I mean, I don’t—“ Alistair rubs at the back of his neck with an awkward cough. “I don’t have one.”

The woman raises a single eyebrow in response. “Sorry, boyfriend then.”

“What? No!”

She seems to find his over-enthusiastic response amusing and gives him a throaty chuckle. She flags the bartender down with ease, a feat Alistair has been trying and failing to accomplish for the last ten minutes.

“I’ll have a scotch on the rocks, and some decent Fereldan ale for my friend here.”

With catlike grace, she slides onto the stool beside his, props her chin up on a fist, and gives him what seems like a rather predatory smile.

“I didn’t mean to offend, sweet thing, but usually when a man in a bar is glued to his phone, it’s because he’s waiting for someone.”

He tugs his earlobe with a flustered smile and glances down at his phone, where his last text still sits without response. Its warmth against this palm seems to taunt him.

“I—“ He’s interrupted when the bartender slides a pint in front of him, and the Dog Lord’s words to him catch his eye. As smooth as he can, he lifts the glass to his lips and takes a long, drawn out swig. The Fereldan brew might as well be ambrosia after the cat piss he’s been drinking. “I was supposed to be meeting a friend here, but he bailed on me.” He shrugs and tries to appear nonchalant, as if he hadn’t just spent the last hour making an utter fool of himself.

The woman’s smile widens and she leans toward him, and the gold piercing below her bottom lip gleams as it catches the light. “Lucky me, then.” The row of gold bangles on her wrist clinks as she extends a hand to lift her glass of scotch.

Alistair feels rather like he’s lost the plot, though it’s certainly not a foreign feeling to him. He’s not quite sure if she’s flirting with him or making fun of him, and so he can only take another swig of his ale, casting a nervous glance toward her over the rim of his glass. The pause does not help him sound any more intelligent when he blurs, “Alistair,” as he lowers it again. He sighs in annoyance and shakes his head. “I’m Alistair,” he corrects, punctuating each word with a pointed pause.

She laughs, and the sound of it is pleasant. “I’m Isabela, and you don’t do this very often, do you?”

The chuckle that escapes him is a surprise, and he shrugs again. He makes a point of taking another swig of his ale before he responds. “I never have been much of a barfly. Unless you mean looking like an idiot, in which case I can assure you I am exceedingly skilled.” Isabela laughs again, and this time it isn’t at him. Alistair lets out the breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“So you don’t like bars, and you aren’t here with someone.” Isabela inches toward him, her head tilted in curiosity. “Yet instead of mingling with the crowd, you’re sitting alone chatting up your phone.” Her smile is sly. Alistair can’t help but feel as though her smokey eyes can see right through him, yet he does not look away from them—he feels safer looking there than anywhere near the copious amounts of cleavage that are threatening to spill from the neckline of her dress. “So I can’t help but wonder why you would choose the Pearl of all places, when you are the only person here not interested in some anonymous fling.”

She sounds so knowing that Alistair scoffs almost on instinct (even though she is entirely correct and perhaps he should have done more research into the Pearl before choosing it off the top of his list).
He takes an extra long sip of his ale.

“What makes you so certain I’m not interested in some anonymous fling?” he asks, trying to look nonchalant and, judging from the wry smile he receives in response, failing. Isabela reaches over to slide his glass of ale away from him.

“Those long, ‘Thinking about my response before I speak’ gulps you’re taking, for one. That trick is old hat, and it never seems to stop the really thick-headed ones.” She winks at him. Alistair threads a hand through his hair. “And for another, I can sense purity from miles away, and you have it in scores. It doesn’t take a lot of experience to see that you’re the overly-romantic, marrying sort. And I, sweet thing, have a lot of experience.”

In one large huff of air, Alistair’s anxiety seems to leave him. His head falls forward, limp, and he laughs before he quite knows why. When he looks back up at her, he can feel the corner of his mouth tilting into a grin.

“Have you ever considered becoming a detective?” he quips. “You’ve got a good eye.”

It’s Isabela’s turn to laugh. “And be on the wrong side of the bars? Where’s the fun?” She grins back at him over the rim of her whiskey glass. “Unlike you, I am exactly the sort to fit in at the Pearl.”

Alistair’s brow lifts. “So then why are you spending your time talking to me? If you don’t mind me asking, I mean.”

She shrugs. “You’re fit.” He blinks at her. She smiles, and winks, twisting on her stool so that she can lean her back against the bar. “Specifically, the kind of fit that you don’t find sitting alone in bars. The rich, footballer married to his girlfriend from university kind of fit. I was curious.”

He guffaws into his drink and chokes on the ale that burns in his throat. He has to use his sleeve to wipe at his face, laughing the whole time.

When he can breathe again, he rasps, “Well, that’s definitely one I haven’t heard.” He laughs again, unable to help himself. “It sounds better than ‘daft broke loner who couldn’t even get his coworker to have drinks with him.’”

She doesn’t seem fazed by his casual self-deprecation. She studies him with the same smug grin and indecipherable eyes. Alistair starts when the bar vibrates. His phone lights up, and his hand reaches for it on instinct. Isabela’s eyes follow his movement. The curiosity on her face gives him pause, and he pulls back.

“Is your coworker the one you were texting?” she asks innocently, though Alistair suspects that is not the right word for her in any context. He casts a sidelong glance to his phone, which gives an insistent buzz with its reminder alert.

“No, er... It’s just my friend. She is—well, she was trying to be my wingman.”

Isabela’s eyebrow arches, and her expression is one Alistair is familiar with. But she doesn’t say anything. Her eyes return to scanning the crowded bar, and she seems to find something of interest, because she straightens on her stool.

“I think my absence has been noticed,” she says cheerfully. “Thanks for the chat, big boy.” She downs the rest of her whiskey and stretches, long and languid, before hopping off of her bar stool and pulling a crumpled wad of bills from her pocket. She starts toward the crowded floor, but pauses, and Alistair watches her with curiosity. She turns to give him a last, lingering look, before tilting her head and gesturing toward the phone that still lay on the bar. “Perhaps next time you go out, you
should consider inviting your friend there, instead of your coworker.” She gives him a shrug and a wink. “Just a thought.”

Alistair doesn’t even have time to thank her for the drink before she is gone, another body in the crowd. He stares at the space where she stood, contemplative for a long moment, before a new alert from his phone breaks him from his train of thought.

(20:13) Are you surviving?
(20:20) Ooh no response
(20:20) I wonder if that means you’ve managed not to strike out with somebody?

He is just about to tap out a response when he hears a slurred but distinctively familiar voice call out, “Alistair?” He has to resist the urge togroan, and thinks as he turns in his seat that this night is turning out to be far more exciting than he would like.

“Well well! I must say, I never would have thought to find you in a place like this!” Dorian seems to have no trouble pushing through the milling crowd, and Alistair wonders at the fact that even when the medical examiner is noticeably drunk, he still moves with haughty grace. Dorian claps him on the shoulder too hard, and Alistair gives him a beleaguered smile.

“I can’t say I’m surprised to find you here, Dorian,” he drawls, and he receives a dramatic eyeroll in return.

“Well, I rather think you should be! This dive is not the sort of bar I prefer to frequent but I decided to be a little—“ Dorian staggers, and Alistair catches him with ease, “adventurous tonight!” His inebriation does not stop him from throwing his arms out with enthusiasm, and Alistair is certain that if he hadn’t been firmly grasping Dorian’s arm, the man would have fallen on his face. The sight is more than a little amusing.

Dorian seems oblivious to Alistair’s guiding hand as he launches himself at the bar and calls out for a drink Alistair does not recognize the name of. He guides his pliant coworker onto the stool beside him, removing his jacket with a snap of his wrist to make room. Dorian blathers on all the while about Fereldan ale and dancing, but Alistair has tuned him out. He has heard stories of Dorian’s rather legendary capacity for alcohol, but he has never seen the man drunk in person. Cullen is going to wish he’d shown up when Alistair tells him of this tomorrow.

“Are you here alone?” Alistair blinks and meets Dorian’s questioning eyes.

“Am I—oh. Well, I—I wasn’t supposed to be but—“ He scratches his neck and rolls his eyes as his annoyance with his partner returns. “Cullen.” He knows this is all the explanation he needs, and indeed, Dorian throws up his hands dramatically.

“Well,” he huffs, “there is your problem. You should have known better than to expect that old stick in the mud to do anything that might be misconstrued as ‘relaxing.’ I’m not sure he’d know what to do if you were to remove that enormous rod from his—“ Dorian cuts himself off when the bartender deposits three brightly-colored drinks in front of him, and Alistair is grateful for it. Dorian lights up and moves to throw his arm over Alistair’s shoulder, though he misses spectacularly and slaps him on the ear instead. “Do you know what! I’ve just had a grand thought. You should join me and my friends!” He catches Alistair’s mouth opening in protest and cuts him off. “No, listen! I have a friend
here who you should meet, I think you two would get along rather well, if you know what I mean.”

With an exaggerated groan, Alistair shakes his head and stands. “I’m sure your friend is very nice, Dorian, but I think I’ve had enough—”

“No, no, I insist! I just know you two will hit it off, you absolutely must meet her.” Alistair has no idea how the other man manages to be so forceful as he pushes him with three drinks in his hand, but he only just manages to grab hold of his phone before he is ushered through the crowd. He wonders idly what the point is in being so tall if he can’t manage to prevent being pushed around, but he supposes that’s his own doing. He somewhat registers Dorian’s overexcited slurring, something about a new employee and “just your type,” but he is distracted by the throng of bodies that jostles him with each step.

Finally, Dorian releases him and deposits his drinks onto a nearby table, and Alistair heaves a sigh. There is only one occupant at the table, a face he recognizes well.

Alistair quirks a brow at the woman at the table, and she stifles a giggle with her hand. “Hello, Leliana,” he says, unamused. The redhead lifts a hand in greeting and he rolls his eyes, folds his arms over his chest as he turns back to his coworker. “Pavus, you must be far gone if you—”

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Dorian scowls. “She must have left!” He glares at Leliana as if she has personally wronged him. She returns his ire with a sweet smile, and Alistair can’t help but chuckle. Dorian throws himself into his seat with a dramatic sweep, takes a long sip of his drink, and leans back with his arms crossed over his chest. “How very rude.”

Alistair has to laugh at the absurdity of it all. He shakes his head and pulls his coat over his shoulders, and he doesn’t think Dorian even notices when he slips back through the crowd, though he does catch Leliana’s knowing smile when he glances back over his shoulder.

The night air stings when it hits his skin. He quickens his pace toward the old black motorcycle, waiting patiently on the curb where he left it. He winces as a blast of icy wind hits his face, and knows his ride home is going to be unpleasant. Still, he can’t help but grin when he pulls out his phone and finds a last string of messages from the Dog Lord.

(20:41) Well, I’m glad your night has been more successful than mine
(20:41) Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do
(20:41) Which admittedly isn’t much
(20:42) Don’t be silly, wrap your willy 🌩
(20:42) I don’t know why I said that, I’m sorry
(20:43) Time for me to sleep 😴

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has given us so much great encouragement
through comments and messages on Tumblr, I do not exaggerate when I say that there are times when that's all that keeps us going when we get frustrated or lazy.

Please keep it up! We each have our own blogs, found here:

carouselfancy
Tijgertje

and we now have an official Heart-Eyes Emoji blog where you can find (or send????) art, as well as information about updates, and even a couple playlists!
Tuesday

She should have known.

Should have known better than to implicitly trust Dorian, especially when he came sauntering towards her, bearing an armful of colorful drinks whose names are too long to commit to memory. Olivia clings to this thought, gnashing through her mind as a tiny scratching sound has her prying her eyes open. Her first thought, beyond that, is that it is entirely unfair that she should have a hangover, one of such unholy proportions, and not have experienced the fun part of developing it. Her second thought is that she is going to kill Dorian Pavus.

The scritch-scratch sound subsides and for a moment it's almost as if Olivia’s headache seems bearable. That is, until she pokes her head out and the sun burns her eyes. With every pulse of her aching head, Olivia’s sulk deepens. It isn’t long ago that she had been bar-hopping and kicking back shooters as if she invented the practice. Fergus had once told her with begrudging admiration that she could put any sailor to shame with the way she swore and drank, and there was a time when she had taken that as the greatest of compliments.

Her mother had always hated it though, had wrung her hands with worry and chided her every time she had arrived home supported on the arm of a friend because she couldn’t stand on her own. Since the incident and the move she hasn’t touched the stuff much, and now it seems she is paying the price. She grumbles into her pillow, thinking again that this tradeoff for a more responsible lifestyle is rather vindictive.

She is only allowed to hide in her bed for a few more minutes before she is alerted by the return of the scratching of nails on hardwood floor. She hardly has any time to prepare herself before an enormous mass lands atop her with the impact of a battering ram. The breath leaves her lungs with a forceful “Huh!” and she groans.

“You big oaf!” She swings an arm out at him to push his face away, and is rewarded with a slobbery swipe of his lolling tongue against her arm. “Just because you like to get up at the arse-crack of dawn doesn’t mean you have to take me with you!”

Her mabari only responds to her with an insistent headbutt. When she finally unearths herself from the haven of her pillows to glare at him, she finds him sitting atop her, patient with a hint of a head tilt, and from his mouth dangles – her bag? She frowns at him, perplexed, and he gives her a soft, worried bark.

Realization blossoms, panic settles in like an unwelcome visitor. Olivia snatches her phone from the nightstand to check the time: 8:45. She had forgotten to set her alarm the night before.

“Andraste’s holy arsehole, I’m going to be late!” Oh, she hates Dorian. She is going to absolutely murder him the next time she sees him.

There is little hope in saving her from the state she’s in: unkempt curls, smudged eyeliner, rumpled clothes.

Olivia does her best despite the odds, and is greeted once more by the sun when she stumbles out the
front door. She checks her phone for the time. 8:59. Any chance she had of being on time has fluttered off into the wind. Knowing her only choice is to fake it 'til she makes it, she decides a pit stop to the drug store for her headache is her only option if she is to pretend like she is functional and her head doesn't feel like a thousand daggers making a thousand cuts.

If Dorian makes the mistake of setting one foot inside the Crossroads today, she is going to be sure to throw the heftiest, most indecipherable tome she can find straight at his head.

(9:10) I think I saw you earlier

(9:10) What???

(9:12) No wait I’m POSITIVE I saw you, wow

(9:12) wh

(9:12) and you didn’t even say hi?? Wait how did you even recognize me? what 😳

(9:13) I can’t believe this

(9:13) First of all, I would never wear my facial hair like that, who do you think I am

(9:13) I mean

(9:13) Orlesians are weird and have bad hair usually, I’ve accepted this. Why can’t you?

(9:14) I am Fereldan and I have a goatee. I worked very hard to grow what all my coworkers like to call “the strained efforts of a newly pubescent teenager who is afraid of an electric
razor”

(9:14) This doesn’t surprise me. Why doesn’t anything you tell me about yourself surprise me

(9:14) I didn’t realize I was so predictable

(9:14) And I’m still. not. Orlesian 😝

(9:15) Not with that measly chinstrap you aren’t

(9:15) It was still nice meeting you this morning

(9:15) Didn’t even give me the cheese talk. Color me surprised

(9:16) 🧀🧀🧀 Cheese fact: cheese is older than the written word!! People have literally been eating cheese before we could write down how to *make* cheese. 🧀🧀🧀

(9:16) Wait I take it back

(9:16) 🧀🧀🧀 Cheese fact: cheese is very good for your teeth!🧀🧀🧀

(9:16) How do I unsubscribe from this misery

(9:17) 🧀🧀🧀 Cheese fact: The stinkiest cheese is from Montsimmard!! But I would believe it if someone said it was from your fridge 🧀🧀🧀

(9:17) Are you trying to insult me with facts about cheese? That’s beyond cheesy

(9:17) I hate this

(9:17) There is no word in Common to describe how much I hate this so I’ll say this in ‘words’ you can understand

(9:18) 🦇⏰_SERIALihilicious 🕠

(9:18) 🧀🧀👍

(9:18) 😞

Olivia stumbles through the doors of the Crossroads twenty minutes late and already forming her excuses, but when she looks up to ply Leliana with her best set of puppy-dog eyes, she finds her coworker’s customary perch unmanned. The store is quiet, with only the first dregs of customers floating through the aisles. It’s still early, and they don’t often see much activity until lunchtime, but even so, it’s rare for the store to be so devoid of life as it is now.

With mounting hope, she slips into the manager office, footsteps careful and quiet. If she can avoid Morrigan, she may be able to pretend she is not as late as she actually is.

Without looking, she tosses her bag onto the office chair, which squeaks in alarm. Olivia blinks, and a bleary-eyed Leliana blinks back.
“You look terrible.” Leliana gingerly lowers the bag to the floor and offers a small smile over the rim of a styrofoam coffee cup, a smile of camaraderie.

Olivia returns a dry chuckle, and punches a quick series of numbers into the computer on the desk to clock herself in. “If it’s half as terrible as you do, I’ll take it as a compliment.” Leliana had knocked back twice as many drinks as she had the night before, and yet she looks impeccable as always—not a single red hair out of place. Olivia blows a wayward black curl away from her eye, to no avail. Her hair is unruly on a good day, and today is not. With a defeated sigh, she wrangles the tangled mess into a tight plait down her back, before glancing back up at Leliana. “I’m sorry for deserting last night, by the way,” she offers, hesitant.

Leliana quirks her head and stands. Her smile is knowing as she holds open the office door for Olivia to pass through. “Oh, don’t worry about that. I think Dorian was too busy rating the men in the bar to notice, anyway.” The store is still muted and empty, but she lowers her voice as she reaches to grab an old book off the top of a stack of new arrivals on her desk. Olivia does the same, and the two women sort the pile in an easy, comfortable rhythm.

“There was a time when a bar like the Pearl would have been exactly the sort of place I’d feel at home,” Olivia begins, shaking her head. She deposits a book into Leliana’s pile, pulls a different one into hers. “But it’s been a while now and I guess I’ve just… lost the taste for it.” She furrows her brow in thought.

“The Pearl is more of an… acquired taste,” Leliana says carefully, shooting Olivia a small smile. “Much like Dorian, I suppose. I can’t really blame you for not wanting to sit and gossip about attractive men and bad outfits with us. You don’t seem like the type.”

Olivia tips her head and grins. “For gossiping, or for attractive men?”

Leliana laughs. “Oh, either. I wouldn’t want to assume.”

“You’re right about the gossiping.” She shrugs. “As for the men, I think life is far too long to limit myself to only spending time with such a questionable group.”

As if on cue, she feels her phone vibrate, and it’s practically on instinct that she pulls it out to check it.

(9:30) You know that cheese that comes in a can and you have to shake and spray it out?

(9:30) Y’know, the liquid cheese

She doesn’t even have time to roll her eyes before she can feel Leliana watching her, and she shoves the phone back into her pockets as deep as it will go, returning to her stack of books.

She knows Leliana has stopped sorting, can feel the burn of her eyes on her skin, and she tries to pretend she is oblivious. But her Orlesian friend is persistent, and finally, with a sigh, Olivia places her book down.

“It’s not as interesting as you seem to think it is,” she says flatly. Leliana raises a brow.

“I didn’t say anything,” she replies, and Olivia rolls her shoulders, shakes her head. Leliana doesn’t press the subject, and Olivia doesn’t want to indulge her.
She is in the middle of trying to discreetly pull her phone back out from her pocket when she hears the clearing of a throat past the counter, and the hair on her arms stands on end. She abandons the phone in a hurry, but to no avail. She feels oddly like a scolded puppy under Morrigan’s reproachful gaze.

“You’re late.” Olivia sucks on her bottom lip and reaches up to scratch the back of her neck in embarrassment. She opens her mouth to respond, but Morrigan turns her face up and away. “I have new books for evaluation on your desk. Hopefully you’ll still have enough time to go through them before the end of your shift.”

With a last, impassive glance, Morrigan turns on her heel and disappears into the shelves.

“Well,” Olivia sighs, glancing back to Leliana. “I suppose it was too much to hope that she didn’t notice.”

Leliana hides a giggle behind her hand.

(9:45) Never say liquid cheese to me again

(9:45) Okay anyway

(9:45) Stay away from it

(9:45) Dare I ask why?

(9:46) There’s no cheese in it!! No REAL cheese!!

(9:46) 🧀🚫😆

(9:47) Maker give me strength

(9:47) Even I could’ve told you that

(9:47) You knew? 😧 and you didn’t even tell me

(9:48) To my credit, liquid cheese is not often a conversation topic. I don’t know why it is now either

(9:48) Go push pencils or hack a computer. Discover a foreign country’s juiciest secrets or whatever it is you do

(9:50) 😊 🎒 ✌️

(12:34) Hey, quick question

(12:34) How valuable do you think a book about the werewolves of Ferelden is?

(12:34) What? 😞

(12:34) Did you find a book about Dane? What is it called??

(12:35) Yeah see that’s what you’d think, and you’re almost right but
(12:35) In reality it is literally a trashy rehashing of The Saga of Dane, in which he literally flirts with werewolves and becomes one because he wants to “see what it’s like” and he ends up in love with one

(12:35) Love triangles ensue, I guess. Can you believe this? This is on the same level as burning a flag or something

(12:35) Again: what is it called

(12:36) No, that was not the point of this. No saucy werewolf erotica for you. I am at WORK.

(12:36) Why would you go through the trouble of telling me if you weren’t going to let me indulge in this mess? 😊

(12:36) I thought we were friends 😔

(12:36) Are we?

“You know you will never hear the end of it if Morrigan catches you texting again.” Olivia’s head jerks up to find Leliana leaning against her desk, arms crossed over her chest. She presses two fingers of one hand to her temples in exasperation.

“It was only for a moment,” she murmurs, casting a wary glance to where Morrigan is poring over a stack of books nearby. “I wasn’t — “

Leliana waves away her protests and leans in, a grin playing on her lips. “She likes making people think she’s an ice queen, but don’t let her fool you. Deep down, she’s a real softie.”

Olivia raises a brow, not bothering to hide her skepticism. “Really?”

“Well, no, but I’m pretty certain you could take her in a fight.”

She can’t help but laugh, and it’s the reaction Leliana is looking for. “That’s somehow reassuring, thank you.”

Without hesitation and with ulterior motives, Leliana eyes Olivia’s phone, sitting dark and innocuous on the desk now as though she had never touched it. Olivia knows the question before it’s asked; it’s the same question Leliana has been asking her since she started working at the Crossroads. Still, she lets her fire away.

“Are you going to tell me about your mysterious text friend yet?”

And for reasons she cannot quite comprehend, this time Olivia wants to. She thinks of the question that lay unanswered in her texts, and wonders how much weight is really carried in the word “friend” anymore. From his lack of response, she guesses he doesn’t know any better than she whether they truly are friends, and she feels disappointed by this. She was hoping he’d be better at gauging such things, as she can think of less than one handful of people she’s considered as such in her past. Perhaps he has just as little experience as she has, perhaps that is what leads people to start bizarre text friendships with strangers in the first place.

She flicks the corner of her phone with an absent-minded fingernail, and finds herself embedded in the strange sensation of wishing Fergus were here so she could ask him for advice—even if she isn’t
entirely sure what advice she’d be asking for in the first place.

“You can’t laugh.” Leliana places a delicate hand over her heart in mock offense, and Olivia points a long finger at her and glares. “I mean it! I hear the tiniest giggle from you and you get to live in suspense forever.”

“You have so little faith in me! I promise, not a peep.”

“I don’t know his name, or what he looks like, or what his job is. He loves cheese and dogs, in that order, may possibly be a spy for Orlais, and has had a potentially traumatic encounter with an elephant at some point in his life.”

Leliana motions to open her mouth, or perhaps try to articulate with her body language how she feels, and Olivia can sense the struggle. She feels it every time she begins a new text.

“That is…” Leliana trails off.

“Bizarre?”

“Interesting. I do not judge, but… why the secrecy? You’ve asked him his name, have you not?”

Olivia snorts. “Of course I... I haven’t. I never asked outright, no. Anyway, he has this absurd ‘clause of anonymity’ or whatever. At this point I think if I press, he’ll respond with twice as fantastical answers. Or worse.” Her voice deepens. “He’ll send more cheese facts.”

“Cheese facts?”

Olivia allows Leliana to be privy to the day’s texts, no more than that. She assumes that her superior would be a tad amused at the whole ordeal—she can’t deny that it is highly amusing—but it was not the end, no. An hour passes and their ringing laughter has since ceased bouncing off the shelves, when Leliana slides a thick cookbook beneath Olivia’s nose.

“Fondues and Fondon’ts: Fifty Ways to Prepare Cheese,” Olivia reads, each word harder to stomach than the last. “Really? I’m not going to price this.”

“Consider it a gift for your friend,” says Leliana. “You will meet him someday, no?”

The book is promptly tucked away inside a desk drawer as Leliana turns away. Her words encircle Olivia’s thoughts, distracting her for a moment, leaving her wanting to jokingly bring this up to Cheese Man. She can’t, though. It’s silly, the prospect, and the idea is shoved even farther from her than that nasty book of foul recipes.

(18:22) Hey, so

(18:22) 🧀🧀🧀 Cheese fact: I’m kind of sorry 🧀🧀🧀

(18:23) What? What for?

(18:23) I got the impression that I bothered you earlier and I was just fooling around

(18:23) So if you don’t want to do this anymore, you really can block my number after all

(18:24) Are you kidding me right now
(18:24) No! I’m serious, and I’m sorry

(18:24) Maker

(18:24) Just when I thought I had you figured out

(18:24) You continue to be ridiculous and you don’t need to be “”sorry”” or whatever

(18:25) Oh, ok

(18:25) The cheese facts didn’t bother you?

(18:25) No, they made me laugh

(18:26) Alright.

(20:01) Okay but are you sure they didn’t bother you?

(20:04) I literally said they made me laugh. Like two hours ago even

(20:04) Is that not believable?

(20:05) Your lack of emojis belies your words 😐

(20:06) cheese facts are super fun!!! woo yeah look at this 😂👍🏼❤️️

(20:06) 😐

(20:06) I take it it’s my turn to be sorry

(20:06) 😐

(20:06) Cheese Man, if I really didn’t want to read your fun facts and cryptic work mishaps, I would’ve stopped replying on day 1

(20:07) I think it’s a testament to how much we talk that Cheese Man is autocorrected to be a proper noun. A proper noun. That’s pretty significant, imo

(20:07) 😐 You’re right

(20:07) Look at us, our first misunderstanding

(20:09) Were you hoping we’d have one? Texting is awful, I legit can’t figure out how to interpret this

(20:09) Ideally no but that’s the nature of the beast, text over talk.

(20:09) I’m still relieved you’re not mad at me

(20:10) I’m still baffled you thought I would be mad

(20:10) I did tell you that your fridge was full of mold and/or is very smelly 😊
If those are the worst kinds of insults you can come up with, I doubt we'll have many problems in the future.

(20:11) 😏

Wednesday

(13:36) If a cop is attacking a cop, who do they call?? 🚓

(13:57) The answer is apparently no one

(15:21) I’ve been sat here for nearly two hours wondering how I could POSSIBLY respond to that

(15:21) Do I want to know?

(15:25) It was a misunderstanding

(15:25) Huh

(15:25) Maker only knows what you see on a daily basis. Besides 🙄

(15:26) So much 🙄🙄 😊

Thursday

(11:20) What was the name of Emperor Reville’s grandchild that escaped all his dastardly assassinations? Vivian? Valarian?

(11:20) Verene. She’s the “one little child that gets away.” What do you need random Orlesian trivia for?

(11:22) It came up at work and I knew I could rely on my trusty Orlesian friend to know!

(11:22) I’m feeling rather ambushed right now!! This does not prove anything

(11:22) You can’t fool me anymore, I knew you were! It’s okay, I still like you.

(11:23) Imagine my relief… 🌞

(11:25) So insistent that you’re not Orlesian and yet you’ve never told me where you actually were born. I find this very suspicious!

(11:25) I don’t suspect you’d believe me. But if you must know, I was born right here in Denerim, thank you very much.

(11:25) Where are YOU from? How do I know YOU aren’t Orlesian? You did say you just moved here.
I think I've provided more than enough proof that I'm not Orlesian, thanks.

I'm from Highever, actually.

Highever?

Is it true what they say about Highever and sheep? 🐐

NO

Hey, I had to ask. I would have had to seriously question our friendship.

So we ARE friends.

I mean

If you think so

I think so.

Otherwise I’ve been wasting my very best emojis.

Well, we can’t have that. 😏

If we’re officially friends now, does that mean I can’t make fun of your ridiculous stories anymore?

I would hate to limit your creativity. Plus I’m not sure what I would do if someone were to actually laugh at my jokes instead of making fun of them.

Yikes

Am I that bad?

Oh. Well, no 😐

I can stop if you want

No honestly it’s okay

Well for the record, I DO laugh at your jokes.

Okay you don’t have to lie to me

I do! I swear. I just don’t want your ego to get too big. 😞

Maker forbid

Can I ask you something?

That depends
(17:49) Does this question have anything to do with sheep?

(17:49) NO it’s a serious question.

(17:49) Oh? Sure

(17:50) Why did you leave Hihever?

(17:52) I’m sorry if I’m prying. I just wondered. You don’t seem to like it much here, and Denerim seems like a bit of a downgrade.

(17:58) You don’t have to answer. I guess I’m too curious for my own good.

(18:00) I couldn’t stay there

(18:00) Oh? You don’t have some arrest warrant out for you I should know about, do you?

(18:01) No

(18:02) There just wasn’t anything there for me anymore

(18:03) Oh

(18:03) I’m sorry

(18:03) I probably shouldn’t have asked

(18:04) It’s okay

(18:04) I haven’t talked about it much since I left though

(18:04) I’ve made this awkward, haven’t I?

(18:05) No, it’s okay. Maybe someday I’ll be able to give a better answer

(18:27) Why Denerim?

(18:27) What?

(18:27) Why did you decide to come to Denerim? Why not somewhere more quiet, like Amaranthine or Redcliffe?

(18:28) I wanted somewhere where I could disappear

(18:28) To be honest, I kind of just got into my car one day and started driving. Didn’t have a lot of stuff to take with me, so I just… went.

(18:29) I’m a little jealous. It sounds liberating

(18:30) Don’t be. I ended up with the worst neighbor in the entire world, approximately one friend, and a boss who may or may not practice blood magic in her off time.

(18:30) Do you miss it?
(18:30) Highever, I mean

(18:32) All the time

(18:32) I think I miss the horses the most

(18:33) Crawling through Denerim traffic at rush hour is not quite the same as galloping over highlands

(18:33) 😃💡

(18:33) ?

(18:35) Alright, so. Are you keen on another one of my Famous Recommendations™?

(18:35) I have a feeling I know where this is going. Go on.

(18:36) Okay, let’s see… You’re familiar with the West Road that winds into and through Denerim, yeah?

(18:36) I still visit Andrastea so I feel confident in saying yes

(18:36) 😊

(18:37) So you know that if you’re on the West Road, it’ll take you out of Denerim, past the gates. At some point there’s a fork, and then there’s a North Road

(18:37) Whoever founded Denerim and the surrounding area got real creative in the naming process

(18:37) Right?? Gotta give love to the “Market District” and “Palace District” while we’re at it.

(18:37) I went out for a run the other day and literally found a giant building that was called “Warehouse”

(18:37) I’ve seen that! Wait, you’re distracting me

(18:38) Shit, go on.

(18:38) Around the fork of the roads should be some pastures!! There are some small farms and parks that are outside of the city, though the area still falls under the city’s jurisdictions. I pity any mail carrier who has to deliver to them, tbh. The point is that they have horses. You can ride them 😊厩

(18:38) Can confirm that you are not allowed to ride any other animal while visiting though. 🐐storeId畜

(18:39) Is this how the elephant incident came to be?

(18:39) It’s a FARM not a circus

(18:39) Does it cost anything to ride or…? Do they do this out of the good of their hearts, for displaced highlanders like me
(18:39) It probably costs something. I wouldn’t be surprised if it did

(18:40) Of course. No one does anything out of the good of their hearts

(18:40) That’s not true and you know it.

(18:40) You still talk to me 😊

(18:42) 😊

(23:20) I’ve been thinking about something

(23:20) I know it’s late and for once it’s not my neighbour keeping me up

(23:20) I just can’t stop thinking about it

(23:22) I’ve never asked you for your name

(23:22) You have that weird made-up “clause of anonymity” but what are you hiding?

(23:22) Sorry. I’m… We’ve talked about this, how I seem to be throwing all this caution to the wind when it comes to stranger danger

(23:23) I still can’t help but think you somehow know me far better than I know you, and I can’t comprehend why that makes my skin feel itchy but it does

(23:25) Oh. Whoops. I don’t really have a super good justification for why you don’t know my name 😳

(23:25) So then why haven’t you told me? You had plenty of time to offer it during one of our first conversations. Like “hey btw my name is Rhys” or “just so you know I’m Korbin and I like cheese a lot.”

(23:26) 😳 It’s not that I didn’t want to. It’s not that I still don’t ever want to

(23:26) I thought maybe if you didn’t know my name, you wouldn’t be able to find out who I was. Maybe you’d find someone who knew me and you’d make assumptions, like everyone else does. Maybe that’s me being a touch paranoid

(23:26) Point is, I hoped you’d like me for who I was, not who I was supposed to be.

(23:29) I’m...sorry. I didn’t mean to push you. Did I wake you?

(23:29) A little late to be asking that, I know

(23:29) You did but I’m alright with that. I don’t keep my phone on silent for a reason

(23:30) Hm?

(23:33) Well...anyway. You can keep being Cheese Man for now, if that makes you feel better. 😞

(23:33) It does, actually.
(23:33) I think I’ll get the courage one of these days, but for now I’m not ready

(23:34) In a way it’s kind of exciting! I could be anyone! Before you say ‘the ruling emperor of Orlais’ I’m gonna have to stop you now 👌

(23:34) I’ll stop teasing you so much about the Orlesian thing, don’t worry. You deny it too much, no self-respecting Orlesian would deny their heritage so strongly and not feel a twinge of guilt.

(23:34) You are oh so kind, Dog Lord. Or are you the Sheep Lord? Should I be amending your contact name? 🐐🐑 or 🐐☠️ ???

(23:35) Funny story: I heard the House of Repose’s reach extends all the way to Ferelden. I also heard a rumour that the Crows have been spotted lurking in the outskirts of Denerim. So weird, huh?? Did you know that Red Jenny has some Friends here too…

(23:35) Dog Lord it is 😊

Saturday

(17:55)

![Horse](image)

(17:55) This is Lady Bella! The prettiest Amaranthine Charger in the stables 😊

(19:30) You found a place!

(19:30) 👍👍👍

(19:30) She actually reminds me a lot of my horse back home. Not half as unpredictable, thankfully.
I did. It’s called West Hill Farms in case you’re ever interested.

And what was your horse’s name? Andraste? Maferath?

Cathaire

SHUT UP

miş

I have to ask though… Do you have some kind of obsession with Andraste’s life? Do you identify with her? Dog Lord… Are you some kind of martyr?

No.

Was your mother’s name Brona, by any chance? Have you got a cat named Hector? Grow up with any Justinias?

I don’t deserve this. I know you’d disagree but I don’t deserve this

Sounds like something Andraste would say

In a shocking turn of events, I’m ignoring you. Thank you for asking about my day though, it was a total blast and I have every intention of going back

What all did you do?

Too late

miş

...So what else is there to do in Highever? What is it like there?

Pretty close to the Storm Coast, if I remember correctly. Or rather, if I can read a map correctly

It’s hard to explain to someone who’s never been, which I’m assuming you haven’t

Nope! I’ve barely ever traveled. It sounds like fun buuut I’m eternally strapped for cash. Go on though, I’m curious.

I guess the only way to explain what it’s like is to say it’s…. Kind of what Thedas used to be? It seems so untouched, if that makes any sense. Everywhere seems so evolved, but Highever retained that rustic feel. Barely anyone drives, people still live in the remnants of castles, whatever survived all the old Blights.

Did you live in a castle??

The crumbling remains of one, I guess. They’re not all that big anymore, entire sections and wings closed off because “safety hazards.” My parents were always fighting the damned thing to keep it standing.
(19:45) You really live up to your name, Dog Lord. This is the best news I’ve heard all day 😊

(19:45) Come off it. Let me eat my dinner without your judgment.

(20:30) Will you ever go back?

(20:30) It sounds nice there. It’s hard to imagine what anything was like before cars, smartphones, houses that are not literally crumbling beneath your feet

(20:30) Though I see my fair share of the latter every so often. Those Denerim back-alleys, always look up when snooping around in them.

(20:31) Life before the Fourth Blight sounds unreal. Back to my original point though

(20:34) Hm… 🤔 ask again later

(22:50) Honestly bless the fact that Haring is almost over. Bring on Wintermarch!!

(22:50) Wearing socks to bed isn’t enough 😁

(22:52) Are you telling me Mr. “I use fans in the literal dead of winter” doesn’t switch over to space heaters. They make noise too, you know. Just a fun fact, since you love those so much

(22:52) But then I'll overheat in my sleep

(22:52) ...then what is the problem here

(22:52) Buy more blankets

(22:53) Easier said than done. Not all of us have castle fortunes!

(22:53) Why did I ever think telling you that was a good idea? Where did I go wrong? Why do you do this

(23:00) Did you fall asleep?

(23:01) I hope you’re freezing, you ass.

(23:01) Are castles warm or cold? I bet your castle had deluxe heated floors, huh 😊

(23:01) Do you feel that

(23:02) Feel...what…

(23:02) Me trying to send hypothermia your way. I’m no mage but I’m doing my best

(23:02) Goodnight 😴 zZ 🧘‍♀️
Monday

(2:02) I have been tossing and turning all bloody night long. This is suffering, true suffering

(2:02) Not that I want you to suffer with me. Dammit, you don’t put your phone on silent

(2:02) And I’m still texting. My bad.

(2:04) Yeeeeess? 😃

(2:04) I’m so relieved and also so sorry that I woke you up

(2:04) Give me a second, my eyes need to adjust to how stupidly bright I’ve left my screen

(2:05) Alright, I’m less blind now

(2:05) At your command, Lord of Dogs

(2:05) I’m so sorry

(2:05) Don’t be, I told you I do this for a reason. Can I help? Neighbour problems? I know some people who could help with that. All depends on whether you’d rather your neighbour to get a stern talking-to or experience brute force

(2:06) It’s not that. They’ve been good about it lately. Guess they need sleep sometimes too

(2:06) I kept wanting to text you today but I didn’t have a good enough reason to, but being sleepless finally gave me a reason

(2:06) You need a reason to talk to me?? 😳 Stop the presses, I need to write in my journal about this

(2:07) Let me live, you big nerd

(2:07) 📖 Alright, I’ve got my journal. Here goes nothing

(2:08) 📖 Dear Diary (that is not actually a diary, it is a journal, but I write dear diary in case anyone is confused as to the nature of this nice notebook), 🐶🐱 admitted to missing my companionship. I am over the moon. Both moons. I can’t wait to tell 🐶 about this!! P.S. don’t forget: 🐶🐱

(2:08) I’m torn over whether or not I regret waking you up for this. You’re clearly sleep-deprived/delirious.

(2:08) Maker forbid you ever see my notes on this phone, then

(2:09) Maker forbid indeed.

(2:09) Maybe that’s something else that’s been bothering me. Hrm.

(2:09) Wait, before you divulge the inner machinations of your mind, the deepest darkest thoughts of the Lord of Dogs, the kinds of thoughts that only the lordiest of Dog Lords could think
(2:09) Am I allowed to wonder why you’ve never told me your name?

(2:10) That somehow ties into what I was going to bring up, but now I’m considering not bringing that up at all. Funny how that works, typing something out only to regret it instantly

(2:10) That’s no fair! You wake me up 5 hours before my alarm and you won’t tell me what’s bothering you

(2:10) There is already trouble in paradise, I won’t stand for this 😤

(2:10) How am I supposed to tell you if you won’t tell me?

(2:10) You could have bribed me by telling me your name first. I am shy, you know this

(2:10) I have a feeling that’s a lie. You’re not weaseling it out of me now, that’s for sure

(2:11) Which loops into what I’ve been thinking about

(2:11) What happens if we ever meet?

(2:11) ...what do you mean?

(2:11) I don’t know!! It’s stressing me out. I consider you a friend now but friends, I don’t know, hang out? Go for coffee or lunch? Are generally 30% less likely to be immensely secretive with each other?

(2:12) 😞 😞

(2:15) Let’s talk about something else

(2:15) How are you still not asleep?

(2:15) I don’t know. Tell me things. Be boring enough to lull me to sleep. No fancy espionage tales, but no copy-pasting canticles at me either

(2:15) As if I needed to copy-paste them

(2:16) I hung out with another friend recently. That sure was a thing. Not a bad thing, no, but it’s really odd, isn’t it? Hanging around people outside of work, knowing your company is enjoyable to some degree. Bizarre! 👏👏

(2:16) Oh? I take it it wasn’t Cullen

(2:16) No, his track record for enjoying my company is piss poor

(2:17) It’s 🐻

(2:17) Another person roped into the emoji scheme

(2:17) She thinks it’s a fun and expressive way to...express yourself. 😘

(2:17) Told her all about you

(2:18) The Lord of Dogs who lives in castles.
(2:18) Andraste’s ass, why

(2:18) I don’t have anything more interesting to talk about, thanks!! Nothing that’s not work related, which she knows all about anyway

(2:18) She likes you, which means I didn’t do a very good job of painting you as the person you truly are

(2:19) I am just as much of a delight as you are, thanks. 🧵

(2:19) 😐

(2:19) Anyway, we hung out, but half of what we talked about was work. Which is stressing me out and I wanted to get off that topic when I was talking to her but I didn’t know what else to mention, so I mentioned you

(2:20) I bet if you and I hung out, we’d talk about way more interesting things. Not that I didn’t like talking to her! But you know. We’re closer

(2:21) Maybe you’re right

(2:21) Maybe we should hang out sometime

(2:22) I’m clearly sleep-deprived and you’re sleeping!! Betrayal

(2:22) *I don’t hope you’re freezing, btw, because I’m a good nice young man, who has never been rude or uncouth in his life, despite not growing up in a deluxe heated castle

(2:22) Please stop me. I need to stop. Goodnight, Comte of Puppies. Marquis of Whelps. Lord of Dogs..what’s happening im so tired 😴

Despite how unfathomably exhausted she is the next morning, Olivia pushes herself through the Crossroads’ doors right on time. There is a persistent reminder in her head that she can’t keep doing this, that her performance and entire job are on the line if she doesn’t get more sleep. Too tired to dwell on that, she clocks in and tries to go to work. Today, she will take anything she can get that might dispel the waves of sleep dragging her eyelids down.

Her stack of books is comprised of the mostly mundane, and trying to fabricate prices for them seems impossible. Were she more awake, the prices would be lower—the books would be in the trash, honestly. The text on each page she skims is more accidentally mesmerizing than the last. Her eyes cross, her focus wanes, her head droops.

“Excuse me,” a customer asks her. Knuckles rap on the corner of her desk, giving her an opportunity to shake herself literally and figuratively out of her mental slumber. Have they been there long? She looks over her book at the freckled hand that rests against the wood grain before her, and resolves to seem busy.

“Is there something you need help looking for?” she asks, attempting nonchalance and ruining it with an enormous yawn. It is a question often rehearsed and repeated. She hopes to the Maker that they’ll say no; she writes on a sticky note and sticks it in the margin of the book she’s reading, praying it makes her work seem important. In reality, it’s just a doodle of her stick figure persona falling asleep.
in a puddle of her own drool, but it was an extremely important addition to the snoozefest that is *The Heir of Verchiel*.

There is an intake of breath and then, “Do you know where I could find Morrigan?”

Ah, easy enough. “She should be in her office.” Olivia points in the general direction of the door and hopes the customer understands. “Be careful, she’s not a happy camper this early in the work day.”

As they’re walking away, Olivia hears the sound of shuffling feet and groaning. “Oh, I know,” they say, defeat emanating from their voice. By the time she looks up to get a glimpse of Morrigan’s next victim (or past victim, perhaps), she only just catches a flash of broad shoulders disappearing into the obscure history section. She sees Morrigan’s door open and close with haste, and wonders what that all might have been about.

Chapter End Notes

Another huge thanks to everybody for all the feedback/sweet comments we’ve received! We really could not do this without all your kind & supportive words (no joke). Seriously, all of you guys are so so great ♥ You make our hearts do the blushy smiley emoji.

Chapter art by the incredibly devious Alli Ward!

Our personal blogs:
[carouselfancy](#)
[Tijgertje](#)

And also, our ~Official Fic Blog!~
For snippets, updates, and the art that doesn't make it into the fic B)
Morrigan

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Click.

Alistair shoves into Morrigan’s office and closes the door behind himself just as swiftly. She looks unperturbed, not a hair out of place, her fountain pen still in hand. Before entering, Alistair had hoped he could catch her off-guard. No such luck, however; her eyes narrow and she waits.

Sequestered in the back corner of The Crossroads, Morrigan’s office was the same as it was the last time Alistair paid a visit. Morrigan doesn’t seem to have changed in months, years; she has the same curio cabinets hugging her walls with bizarre odds and ends, and the lavish loveseat that bears no creases, even after all this time. Alistair hopes he still knows how to handle her.

There’s a routine to this that they have always followed. He has to speak first, to give Morrigan time to come up with something rude and scathing, something that bites to his core. Yet this time she does not seem to be following it. In the time that Alistair takes to come up with a way to broach the subject, Morrigan has already started speaking.

“To what do I owe the honor of having you clomp back through my office? I would very much like to strangle whatever or whomever it could be,” she drones, as though she has waited to use this line on him, should she ever see him again. She extends her arm and proffers the chair opposite her for him to use, though they both know he won’t accept it. Alistair takes to leaning against the door he came from. It gives him strange solace to be near an available exit when Morrigan’s presence threatens to swallow a room.

“Were you expecting me?” he asks.

“Gods, no. Expecting sounds dangerously like ‘welcoming.’”

“Maker forbid.”

“Indeed.”

Alistair digs into his pants pocket, rubs his fingers against the buttons on his phone. He wishes he could text Dog Lord for moral support. The thought of siccing the lord of dogs on Morrigan plays through his head, bolsters him in the most absurd ways. The second a smile creeps on his lips, Morrigan clears her throat

“Can I help you, Alistair?” She holds his gaze—his glare. His name sounds like a foul curse in her mouth.

“You can, actually.”

In her brief moment of surprise, Alistair crosses the room and lays out a series of photos before her. He takes his time straightening them out, letting her soak up the images. Lets her process them while he waits for a spark of recognition to flare up or a bead of sweat to roll down her nose. Anything, really.

“I knew this day would come.”
Alistair perks up. Heart racing, he leans over her desk, looming. “Yes?”

“The day that Denerim would show its true hand. ‘Twas not enough for you, was it, to have known mages register their identities here, only to have you come calling down the wrath of the law when but one of us slips up. Such arrogance you must possess to come into my store with the intent to frame me for your—” Morrigan slaps her pen down onto the photos, splotches of ink dripping from the tip. “Blood magic.”

“So it is blood magic.”

“Oh, do you plan to implicate me for simply recognizing it when I see it? I did not know having eyes was evidence. This is ridiculous, I’m—”

“Morrigan.”

“What?” Morrigan’s teeth lock.

The tension is thick, reviving memories of the way it used to be.

“That’s not quite what I’m here for,” Alistair admits. “Be nice if my job was that easy though. No, too obvious if you were the killer.”

Morrigan smiles, and she reminds Alistair of a fox who has proudly caught herself a hare. “I, for one, would never get caught.” She collects the photos in a prim pile and directs it back towards him. “So, you came all this way to have me look at gnarled corpses? Enlightening, the knowledge that the police force derives glee from… practices like this. Very kind of you.” Her vitriol is palpable, oozing.

Alistair rubs at his eye, fighting the urge to groan. She jumps from one conclusion to another, and he feels like he’s scrambling for purchase already.

“Why is she like this?” he asks himself for possibly the thousandth time in his life.

“I need… help.”

“That much is certain.”

“Your help, specifically.”

“Oh? You needed help with more than just identifying the obvious?” Morrigan pushes herself away from her desk to rummage inside one of its drawers. She retrieves a pair of glasses, sets them on top of the photos, and gestures to him. “You may find use in these, then.”

Alistair smacks his hand down on the photos. He startles himself with the sound and the force of the impact, but Morrigan remains amused, if anything. Infuriated, he takes the seat across from her. “Just tell me why anyone would do this. Please.”

“Use blood magic?”

“Yes.”

“Are you joking? Didn’t they teach this to you when you danced off to your police academy? They definitely did not teach you manners.”

“We’re not templars, Morrigan, they don’t teach those types of things anymore.” Alistair’s nostrils flare.

“Intimidation tactics on known mages, perhaps?”
“No.”

“Surprising.” Morrigan’s grin only grows wider as Alistair’s scowl deepens.

“Why won’t you just help me?”

“Because I know not what you’re asking. Provide me with questions and I will consider helping you, though I make no promises. I am not a seer, Alistair.”

Groping at his pants pocket for the strength to endure this conversation, Alistair presses on, voice growing hoarse the longer he speaks. “I shouldn’t be telling you this kind of information—”

“Yet you are about to anyway.”

“—but people are dying in Denerim. It’s rapid, Morrigan, the rate at which these death toals are climbing. It’s always elves and they’ve got these knicks in their ears and slashes on their limbs. They’re chucked in dumpsters. Maker, I’ve seen more alleyways than I knew Denerim even had. My partner believes me but I know he doesn’t want to. Not until there’s evidence and you’re the only person I know that would possibly do blood magic. I had hoped that you could tell me without a shadow of a doubt that there’s something deeper here.”

If he was not watching her, training his eyes on her for the slightest change in expression, he might have missed the way she softened. Morrigan’s eyebrows sag just a fraction, and her prideful smirk wavers. She picks at cuticles that look worn down with fingers stained with wax and ink. They are about the same age but she seems older in that minute, as though he is not the first to come begging, the first she must mollify.

“What has spurred your obsession with this? It is not an uncommon crime.”

“No, but it’s… It’s never so widespread.”

“You act as though serial killers are a rare breed.”

“But why? Why are they doing this? Why drain the blood and dump the bodies?”

“Alistair, I cannot speak for every mage with hate in his heart. Why do blood mages do anything? Some wish to commune with a spirit, others wish to save a life. Perhaps a Tevinter seeks an advantage to secure a spot in the Magisterium. Or perhaps there is an uneducated young mage out there having just unearthed a banned book, eager to try the forbidden spells his magi colleges deprive him of. The list is endless.”

Alistair sifts through the photos, looking for a better angle. He’s gone through the photos himself over and over, was sitting in the car in the parking lot poring over them. He was at these crime scenes, every last one of them, and they remain so fresh in his mind. “Why elves?”

“Who better to pick off than the slaves, the second-class that no one misses? How many missing persons reports do you have for Alienage elves or the nobility’s chattel?”

“None,” Alistair replies, sheepishly.

Morrigan lip curls. “And how many do you have for humans, the ones in the lowest class imaginable?”

Alistair ducks his head. “I don’t keep track of numbers.”
“Exactly. No one would miss them, or at least, someone like you might not. Perhaps your man is an ambitious Tevinter, as I suggested.” She stands and crosses her office to pluck a book from her personal shelves. It is calming, the sound of pages flipping and her nails underlining passages on paraffin paper. Finally Morrigan finds what she has been seeking and returns to her seat. “‘Tis curious, Alistair, that you have not considered how lax the laws are here for transporting slaves. Or rather, what is within them.”

Alistair chews his lip. “Just the blood?”

“Just the blood,” she confirms. “You may find yourself hunting an enemy who has yet to even set foot on your territory. You cannot catch him if he won’t.”

His breath leaves his chest as if he were punched square in the solar plexus. “It’s hopeless, then,” Alistair says as he stands. “Even if we catch his cronies, more will pop up, won’t they? Probably has an endless amount of Tevinter scapegoats.”

“Be that as it may,” Morrigan says, and it is then she does something that captures his attention. She leans in, fingers weaving together. The color in her eyes seems to extinguish and darken. “You do well to barb your traps with poison and take his men. He will think twice before biting through the bone to free himself. Either he will limp onto your grounds to find the meaning of this, or he will terrorize the people elsewhere.”

“Right, and how am I supposed to make sure he does the first thing and not the second thing? It’s not exactly ‘winning’ if he continues to kill people and I don’t know about it.”

“Oh? And ignorance isn’t bliss for you? You could’ve fooled me.”

“Ha ha. Thanks for, uh, pointing out what probably should’ve been more obvious to me in the first place.”

“It is hardly a challenge when you do nothing but give me fodder. Hurry along and take your information to your partner or your superior, someone who will actually do something about this. I shudder to think I left the Wilds only to fall prey to the incompetence of someone who lets serial killers run amuck whilst they badger the locals.”

Alistair doesn’t bother fighting back as he gathers his things and himself before leaving. He knows better than to slam her door when he’s safely on the other side—letting her feel like she’s won is unthinkable. At least there is something to consider now. The thought of a cloaked man, manipulating and scheming on the other side of Thedas is comical at best, and he knows he shouldn’t entertain those thoughts, those old prejudices. He slinks along the outer rim of the bookstore, avoiding contact with Leliana or anyone else he might know.

He tries to calm down as he sits inside Cullen’s car, borrowed for now. Morrigan’s routine of baiting him, riling him up and then insulting him never fails. Why can’t he resist buying in? It hardly matters now, he knows. There is the case to consider, so much to tell Cullen, new theories and plans to concoct. Maybe even questioning Dorian on how much he might know about Tevinter customs, at great risk of subjecting himself to one of his impassioned lectures.

Wishing for the afternoon off, Alistair tucks tail and heads back to the precinct.

(21:02) You were very silent today

(21:02) Get food poisoning?
(21:03) Why would I get food poisoning 😨
(21:03) Y’know, all that moldy cheese you eat?
(21:03) That is only a fraction of the cheeses I eat, and as if I would let good cheese go bad 😢
(21:04) I think you underestimate my dedication to cheese and how much I care about it and how I would do everything within my power to make sure it’s safe
(21:04) Whoa there
(21:04) Is this… even about cheese? This sounds like a very thinly veiled allusion to something that is Not Cheese.
(21:05) … Cheese Man?
(22:00) I have to go to bed now but obviously you can text me whenever.
(22:00) I have felt like the walking undead today with how tired I’ve been
(22:00) But uh
(22:00) I’m here for you.
(22:01) No one will ever be sick from your cheeses, I’m sure.
(22:04) Take care of yourself.

Wednesday
(13:14) It’s my lunch break right now so I have to be quick about this
(13:14) Quick because I have this killer ham and provolone on rye that is beckoning me and needs to be savoured
(13:14) But please text me, so I know that you’re okay and haven’t done anything particularly reckless.
(13:15) For all I know, you really ARE a spy and you’re on this ~dangerous~ mission. Those ‘cheeses’ you want to make safe are probably code for innocent people
(13:15) You’re no good to any of us dead!!!
(13:16) That’s what they say in the movies
(13:18) This sandwich is really good. There’s no cheese in the afterlife probably
(13:30) My break is over and yeah I’m pretty sure there’s no cheese in the afterlife so that’s an incentive to live. Hopefully.
(18:40) How can you say there’s no cheese in the afterlife? Why would the Maker forsake His children like that… 😘

(18:42) You live!

(18:42) And I’m gonna ream you for scaring me like that. Honestly, what in the Void were you thinking?

(18:42) Wait what is the problem??

(18:43) Are you serious

(18:43) I swear to the Maker

(18:43) I’m so used to you texting nearly every day and sure sometimes neither of us texts but it’s never after someone virtually STORMS out of a conversation

(18:43) How can you be so clueless?

(18:44) I’m sorry 😢

(18:44) Are you though? You worried me, Cheese Man. It is bizarrely concerning to text someone about a sandwich with cheese on it, cheese I bought fresh from some weird deli on the way to work, and actually be sad when there’s no response asking for photos

(18:44) I never thought that would be a problem in my life but it is now and I can’t believe I was worried.

(18:45) I don’t know what your name is, what you do for a living. What if you stopped texting me one day with no warning, just a cryptic message like that?

(18:45) I can’t even punch you for upsetting me. The injustice!!

(18:45) There are emojis for that. I deserve them.

(18:46) 🍪

(18:46) That’s it?

(18:46) 🍪酏Cookie

(18:46) And a 🍽️ for good measure.

(18:47) 😅

(18:47) I’m sorry. You must’ve had your reasons. You have to admit that was totally worrying though, right?

(18:47) It was. It’s been a long couple of days at work. I’m sleeping less and snapping at everyone.

(18:48) I was on the verge of snapping at you too and you’re the last person I want to alienate and lose right now.
(18:48) Tomorrow could you help me with something?

(18:48) Hmm… If I’m no longer mad at you, then yes.

(18:48) Excellent 😊

(20:01) So the sandwich was good, yeah?

(20:01) Worth every bite.

(22:05) Goodnight, Dog Lord 😊

(22:07) Goodnight, Cheese Man. Protect the little cheeses.

(22:07) And stay safe.

Thursday

(10:23) I have the day off finally!! 🙌 Are you available for assisting me in my quest?

(10:26) It’s a quest now? What level are you?

(10:26) Is my level of any actual importance? I think you’ll find I have what I need for this endeavor 😘

(10:27) No, stop right there. You’re going to need the valid Quest Item and I would strongly recommend being level 10-12. Remember, if you do this quest, you can’t participate in the other questline of similar importance

(10:27) 😳 wha

(10:27) Dog Lord, I’m serious. Are you busy?

(10:28) Technically yes, but it’s a slow day. Not everyone gets fancy “days off” when it’s the weekday. Ask away

(10:29) Okay, so, I need a book. You like books

(10:29) I’m so glad I have a friend who remembers the little things about me

(10:29) 😊 I wondered if you could find any books on, like, Tevinter law? And Fereldan law. Preferably together, how they mesh. Thedosian law?

(10:29) So you’re a lawyer!

(10:29) 😐

(10:29) But yes, I could find that. Not sure what I’m looking for though
(10:30) I need things about… transport laws. Hrm, how do I phrase this… Trading? What are legal and illegal exports? Things about slavery?

(10:30) This is some heavy shit for a Thursday morning. Am I allowed to ask why you need to know about slave trade?

(10:30) You’re TOTALLY a lawyer aren’t you

(10:30) Why would a spy need to be a lawyer as well? Or am I not Ferelden’s posterboy spy anymore 😏

(10:31) Do you live in a dog kennel or something? Secret agents need aliases and with aliases come alternate jobs. They can relate to each other, too, so you’re collecting info on the sly but no one suspects a thing.

(10:31) Wait, fuck

(10:31) Now I’m an accomplice. Are you doing illegal things that I need to know about? Please tell me so I can schedule my coffee break accordingly. I want to be caffeinated before I’m arrested.

(10:32) Are you actually looking up things in books or on the internet, or are you just fantasizing about what you wish I was 😏

(10:32) If only life could be that exciting. I’ll get back to you later. Maybe then you’ll stop dodging at least ONE of my questions.

(10:33) Too bad you change the subject before I get the opportunity to answer one of them 😏

(14:41) Amazing

(14:43) ?

(14:45)

(14:45) I found where you live! Incredible
You’ve given up helping me, haven’t you 😊

Excuse me, that is my passive-aggressive upside down smiling emoji

You don’t have a monopoly on which emojis I can and can’t use. I am the Emoji King and you are but an Emoji Subject. An Emoji Serf, if you will.

Are you my Emoji Feudal Lord? Pray tell, what emojis have been granted to my lowly title

I can’t believe I have to be the one to stop this conversation in its tracks

The end times are here

Did you actually give up though? 😅

You have a computer, don’t you?

I do, kind of 😊 But it has no internet. I don’t really like leaving the house just to use the internet at some public hotspot. Can’t be investigating my top-secret espionage case with watchful eyes around every corner 😞

Are you a 50 year old man that can’t wire up his router? Or are you afraid of the internet 😞

Anyway I was just picking up something for lunch before I go back to work. I haven’t given up, only taking a break. I do have to prioritize the thing I’m being paid for, you know

It’s a slow day though. I promise to keep snooping through the books to figure out what’s legal to ship from Ferelden to… the Imperium? Right?

Yeah

V suspicious, Cheese Man.

Love your little cheese shop home btw. You didn’t even deny it. I’m so close to figuring out your true identity, huh

😊

A LOT of things are legally able to be exported. There’s too many specifics. Like, the things you can ship via the post are wholly different than the things that you can ship via a freighter or on horseback. Don’t get me started on the things that make it over the Shining Sea.

Things that were strictly labeled as illegal range anywhere from halla hide to barley bread that doesn’t weigh the amount it should. Certain ores have to be inspected and they get quarantined for so long and then possessed that they might as well be illegal, they’re never going to get to where you send them if you do it yourself.

Can’t ship a qunari’s weight in ogre horns either, which is odd and I can’t believe that’s on a list I found but ok
(18:05) Anything about body parts?
(18:05) I am going to throttle you AGAIN

(18:05) Why!? 🤦

(18:06) If you didn’t beat around the bush like a nug chasing its tail, I could’ve easily told you that stuff HOURS ago

(18:06) Did you know it offhand?? You know more than I give you credit for…

(18:06) No, but that sort of thing is… really really easy to find. It’s not like you have to dig around the seedy underbelly of the internet to find that kind of thing out. Like, people write books you know. Weird people want to know the selling price of a kidney and what region it fetches the highest price in

(18:07) Which, btw, I can tell you for a fact is the Anderfels. Not Nevarra, despite the whole obsession with dead people. Don’t have a lot of people or hospitals up there in the Anderfels. A kidney is not easy to come by

(18:07) 1. You’re an arse, 2. It is cool

(18:08) I’m specifically wondering about blood though. Can you sell/ship that? You can’t sell bodies but blood, yeah?

(18:08) Obviously not bodies, that’s slavery

(18:08) Right

(18:09) I’ll text you when I get home though. I’ve been standing outside my car while texting you and I’m getting the stink eye from this little girl trying to pawn off her baby calico nugs in a box. I’m pretending to text “my boyfriend” to see if we can bring one home.

(18:09) I couldn’t bear to tell her no, she was so cute but those nugs look like hairless abominations. I have an amazing poker face, I can rob everyone blind in a game of Wicked Grace, but I don’t think I can fool that child into thinking I want to bring home her skinny pig-rabbits

(18:09) You really think they’re that bad? 😳

(18:09) And your “boyfriend?” 😅

(18:25) Blood can be exported if the conditions are met. Hospitals have an obligation to transport blood in “times of great need”, i.e. Blights, Exalted Marches. Permits aren’t needed then, the exporting of blood grows largely unchecked in those circumstances, etc etc

(18:25) You don’t know of any Blights or elven peoples being super oppressed do you? Moreso than usual

(18:26) 😃

(18:26) So it’s possible then. To sell it?
I mean, that sounds... sketchy. It’s not out of the realm of possibility though. More sinister things have happened in the history of Thedas.

(18:27) Doubtful 😞

I don’t know what you’re going through right now but the illegal sale of blood through some hypothetical Tevinter black market? On a scale of Duke Florian ridding Ferelden of all beauty products to Maferath betraying Andraste, this sounds like Divine Amara III roasting mages on an open bonfire.

(18:28) Is this the scale of Super Sinisterness?

(18:28) Yes.

(18:28) That’s pretty spot on 😊

(18:29) Happy to help 😎

(00:01) You up?

(00:03) Unfortunately

(00:03) What? Why unfortunately? Maker, did I wake you? 😞

(00:03) Nah. Couldn’t sleep. Not even because music or lights or whatever the excuse of the week is

(00:04) Tell me a story 📚📖

(00:04) What are you, my son? Why do I need to tell you a story

(00:04) Because a certain poor sod (hint: it’s me) does actually have work tomorrow and you’re quite the history buff, I’m discovering. Therefore you know lots of stories

(00:04) Are you daring to imply that history is boring enough to knock you out

(00:05) Because I know of some other things that could knock you out

(00:05) Is it...aaalcohol?

(00:05) 😐

(00:05) So does your home have wall to wall bookshelves? That seems pretty neat. Would explain why you don’t have any other necessities. Do you ever run out of toilet paper and think “oh this canticle could use an upgrade”

(00:06) MAKER how tired ARE you

(00:06) 😎

(00:06) That is not an answer

(00:09) Actually now that I think about it, I have a question for you
(00:09) Idk why this happens so often, you are such an awful mystery I hate this

(00:09) Anyway, how are you feeling? Don’t think I didn’t notice that your typing cadence or whatever has changed. I can’t tell if it’s less emojis and more words or more emojis but less words or idk

(00:10) Really? I hadn’t even noticed. Then again, I don’t have to talk to me. You lucky dog 😃👻

(00:10) It’s my job. I’m...rather unhappy with it at the moment, I think I can say that much about it, yes. Fortune does not seem to favour the Good and the Just, not in my line of work

(00:10) Get a new job?

(00:10) Wow, can’t believe I’d never thought of that. Guess I gotta head on over to Jobsville and pluck a nice new Job from the Job Tree 😝

(00:11) Er, sorry

(00:11) It’s okay, you meant well. But what I do is so important and it gives me purpose. It’s not often that anyone in Denerim actually feels fulfilled, I can tell you that much.

(00:11) I have visited the “weekly bazaar”, I believe you

(00:12) Aww, what! You got to go? Ugh!! 🤢

(00:13) I visited someone the other day. I’d say “old friend” but...no. Never in a million years. I hate that I even dragged my sorry arse into her workplace, and the both of us KNEW that I had to be pretty damn down on my luck to show my face there. I mean, I like it there but at the same time I don’t go into her OFFICE to chat her up.

(00:13) I’m gonna be sick at the thought. Where are the sick emojis

(00:13) So I’m all funky and out of sorts. I never thought there would come a day when the ghost emoji wouldn’t make me laugh

(00:14) Perish the thought. Why the ghost emoji?

(00:14) Have you seen this little man? ☹️ Who does he think he’s gonna scare, looking like that? Ghosts don’t even look like that.

(00:14) Are you implying you’ve had a run-in with a real ghost

(00:14) A spirit. “Ghost” sounds way spookier and way more exciting

(00:15) There’s a story here… 🕵️‍♂️

(00:16) Okay, so, a while ago, when I was still new to my job, I was sent on this little mission. I’m convinced it was hazing, but they tried to write it off like someone asked us to look into it. I was paired up with someone - let’s call him 👨‍💻 because that looks vaguely sexual and he would be proud to know that’s how I think of him
was excited as can be to be paired with me. He wasn’t new or anything and he didn’t know me all that well. He’s just very...sociable. The thought of being on a “stake-out” (which it was not) at 2 in the morning was “romantic, but in an alarming way.” He liked to remind me that his hand was available for holding in case of “jump scares, ominous music cues, and maybe if you just get lonely”

Did this dude have a crush on you??

has a crush on EVERYBODY. This is beside the point

So we get to this place and I’m thinking “Well great, this is fake. I’ve been set-up. It’s 2 AM, everyone’s lights are off, no one is home.” Obviously no one made this call. said we had a job to do though, so we knocked on the door. The second we knocked, the door creaked open just a crack. Coincidentally I felt like I needed to relieve myself.

calls out for whoever is home and no one responds. Of course no one responds, why would things ever be that easy? We go in even though we are Not Allowed to enter a stranger’s house but convinces me that we were obligated to get down to the bottom of things

And to the bottom of things we sure got. Literally. We had to go into a basement.

It was the teeniest tiniest basement ever, too! What’s the point of a basement you can’t even store things in? Maker only knows what the architects were thinking with this baby box of a basement. I’m uncomfortable in small enclosed spaces and I let know about this, he brushes it off because this is exciting or something idk

Then there’s more creaking!! I heard that front door creak again!! And then stairs! Creaking! I still have to relieve myself. Coincidentally.

Someone in a bloody SHEET comes down the stairs and I’m ready to murder. They too think ghosts should be dressed in sheets and this guy should be arrested for this kind of nonsense

But then HE gets spooked by something behind me. Turn around. It’s a spirit. A real live spirit. I mean, not live, because they’re dead. I don’t know, none of us stuck around to find out 😢

and I were standing beside our car, looking like a real sight. He claps me on the shoulder and says something along the lines of “We should do this type of thing more often, my friend” 😊

Long story short, it was the spirit making all the noise that made us check it out. It was All Soul’s Day and in retrospect, I should’ve known that, though that would’ve made me more suspicious. It’s fun to think about now though! I miss . Our careers went different directions and he does his own thing, occasionally visits and has his own baffling tall tales to tell. Brings me souvenirs, teases me about how he’s sure I wet myself when I saw a ghost
(00:21) Those kinds of things 😊

(00:21) And you say you do good things at your job? I’m glad you are protecting Denerim from those beyond the Veil 😊

(00:21) Or did you even do that? You did run out on it, presumably to go change your trousers.

(00:21) I can’t win with you, can I? 😜

(00:22) I don’t plan on letting you, no

(00:22) That was cute though, that story. You wanted me to tell you a story but you gave me one instead! Such a sweetheart.

(00:22) I’m surprised you’ve never seen a spirit. You do live in a large derelict castle

(00:23) It’s not derelict, you dink

(00:23) You said it was CRUMBLING. Your words, not mine!

(00:23) ...shut up? Go to bed.

(00:24) Good idea. I feel the sudden urge to escape this conversation while I still have a fraction of my dignity intact. 😞掴

(00:24) Debatable, but good night.

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**Friday**

(10:30) So, what, you’re a spy lawyer ghost-hunting cop? You said your careers went different ways, so do you still...do that or is he the cop and you’re the spy?

(10:32) Maybe I do all of those things, or none of those things. I’d rather not be a ghost hunter though. A run-in with a demon type thingy? I’ll pass, I can’t afford another pair of pants 😏

(11:04) One of my coworkers noticed the book about Ferelden’s trade routes and laws on my desk and asked me if I was “doing some light reading”

(11:04) Which leaves me wondering why you didn’t just Google things on your phone? To spare me the embarrassment of having to lie about how interested I Totally Am in figuring out where I can direct my tons of elfroot legally and for the best deal.

(11:05) I don’t think she believed me. Not after I spent 800 sovereigns on a book

(11:10) 800...eight...hundred...sovereigns

(11:10) Did I read that correctly?? Surely you meant 800 coppers. No book costs that much

(11:11) You would be surprised
ugh is that what you bought at the crossroads when i told you to go? of course morrigan made you pay 800 sovereigns for a book. she tried to make me pay 300 silvers for hard in hightown 3: the re-punchening. as if i had to reimburse her for the fact that her store carries that “fluff”

and to answer your question, i don’t use the internet on my phone very often. not if i can help it, anyhow

it uses a lot of data to look things up 😞

your plan’s that bad?

there hardly is a plan. plans and me don’t get along. if you think it’s a coincidence that i don’t send you photos of all the food i eat or the dogs i get to pet despite talking about how great all of it is, it’s just because i can’t afford to send them to you 😁

it’s not even that i don’t want you to know what i look like sometimes! well, partially untrue. a bit of me does not want you to know. at the same time it’s not like i could show you if i wanted.

you have a job, a place to live (i think). what do you spend your money on?

i spend my money on important things.

this is a deflection, isn’t it

i’m not lying to you.

i guess i’ll have to take your word for it, cheese man.

by the way, hard in hightown 3 isn’t even written by tethras himself. that’s just a knock-off, trying to make bank on the popularity of his other two books

you think i don’t know that?? 😊

that’s what makes morrigan’s outrageous pricing and deceit all the more unbelievable!

to call the re-punchening a book is an insult to varric tethras himself

nice to see you have such strong opinions about fine literature

as if you don’t read his work too 😏

😊

seeing as you can’t send photos of dogs or food or whatever you see on a daily basis, i think i’ll do the honours and send them
(15:24) Dog Lord...it costs data to receive them…

(15:24)

(15:24) Shit, I’m sorry!

(15:25) I did not consider that whatsoever. I’ll reimburse you or something like that, if I can figure out a way

(15:25) It’s fine! 😅 How will I ever live without those 5 coppers each photo costs me…

(15:26) So is that yours, then?

(15:26) Obviously 😊

(15:27) Wait, we’re talking about Hessarian right? Hessarian? A rescue dog? 😳

(15:27) I took Hessarian’s full title very literally and maybe a little ironically

(15:27) You’re terrible! Downright awful. I may be laughing as I text you but I still want you to know that you’re despicable

(15:28) Oh, you enjoy it. You’re the odd cheeky one here

(15:28) 😏

(15:28) I know you named him that when you rescued him to annoy your family, but how did you go about getting him? He’s a mabari 😏

(15:30) I thought you liked mabari?

(15:30) I do! They’re awful hard to come by in the city though. I’ve seen whole litters of them
scooped up and brought to the shelter. Fereldans love their dogs but mabari are…

(15:30) Going out of fashion?

(15:31) Bah! As if “fashion” mattered. I’ve seen those little Orlesian rats scurrying around. And I don’t mean nugs

(15:31) Once the wars end, people don’t need war dogs anymore :/ Unfortunate but at least it brought Hessarian into my life. I picked him up from a no-kill shelter when he was young. Rescuing a mabari war hound was like a rite of passage in my family, but even still, I don’t think I was at all ready for the responsibility. But he was smart. He knew what I needed. They’re so much more than dogs you can use at the front lines, even if it’s what they bred for

(15:32) They’re everywhere and they’re part of our culture, but some swotty pricks did “‘studies’” and concluded they’re “bred to be aggressive” and “can’t be trusted.” Now here we are, with loads of them in shelters. I had to take him, I have to bring their good name back

(15:32) 😊

(15:32) Truly a dog lord. 👶🏻 Give him pets for me, will you?

(15:33) I’m sure he will appreciate that. He begs for attention more than those cloistered sisters who go door to door

(15:33) You poor, poor thing. 😢🐶❤️

(22:09) Early bedtime tonight! You should sleep early too. We could be sleeping at the same time!

(22:09) Like a virtual slumber party. We can wear our onesies and gossip about boysssss until we count druffalo to fall asleep.

(22:14) You’re already asleep, aren’t you? 😞

(22:15) No, I just didn’t want to dignify that with a response

(22:15) Do you actually own a onesie

(22:15) The kind with a butt flap

(22:15) Do I look like the kind of grown man who needs a butt flap?

(22:15) I don’t know, do you?

(22:16) good NIGHT, Dog Lord, Patron Saint of the Mabari

(22:16) Goodnight, Cheese Man, Patron Saint of the Butt Flaps

(22:17) Ok first of all

(22:17) Nope! Goodnight!
Saturday

It is First Day. Denerim is abuzz with people on the street, shrugging off the old year and the cold, if only to greet relatives and be thankful. The cold still persists, though, and Alistair is loathe to put on a hoodie over his work clothes, the finest things he owns. He collects his phone and a packaged cake he’s purchased from his favorite bakery, and meets Cullen in his driveway.

“Thanks for agreeing to this,” Alistair says as he buckles himself in. His hold on the cake’s plastic lid grows increasingly protective once Cullen gets back on the road.

“I’m envious,” replies Cullen, “that you get to see him on the holidays.”

“What, no Skype call with the family? Mia seems the type to be all over that, from what I know about her. Which is… very little.”

Cullen nods, turns his blinker on as he merges into heavier traffic. “There will be one. Maker forbid there go a holiday where Mia does not track me down by some means. It’s grown more bearable now that there is no threat of imminent death for me.”

“How’s Luana?” Alistair broaches. “Did she go back home?” Wherever that was. He always assumed she has one, with the vallaslin and all.

“What? Of course not, she has work to do.” Cullen pays it no mind.

“On a holiday? You have no plans to see her?”

“Wherever that was. He always assumed she has one, with the vallaslin and all.

“What? Of course not, she has work to do.” A car honks at them. Cullen pays it no mind.

“On a holiday? You have no plans to see her?”

“After all, there are always people in need of legal counsel, even on a holiday. Actually, domestic violence is more likely to happen on a holiday like First Day, with families coming together like this—”

“Aaand we’re here! Thanks for the ride, I’ll call you!” Alistair bails out of the side door, eyes rolling, cake in hand. Cullen glowers as he shuts the door for him, leaving him in the parking lot. It’s crowded, even on the outskirts, and that warms Alistair’s heart, has him clutching the cake to his chest. Too frequently the hospice is devoid of visitors, and Alistair hurries to the entrance to become one of the many.

The throngs of people create a low murmur in the lobby; tearful grandchildren are wheeling the elderly out with relieved smiles on their faces, and the hum of portable machines follows the patients that have been allowed to wait for their own family. The nurses are expertly weaving around the sick and the healthy, tending to anyone who looks lost. A few stop by Alistair, but he waves them away. He wants to drink in a day where no one feels lonely or unloved, he wants to savor it while the day is young.

Wynne picks him out of the crowd and leads him down a wide hallway, newly carpeted in rich reds and golds. Fresh flowers tickle his nose no matter where he goes, and he’s thankful Wynne is too
preoccupied with getting him to the right room to talk. His allergies are wreaking havoc on him.

Finally, she says, “I don’t think he was expecting you this afternoon.”

“It’s a Saturday! I wouldn’t miss it, not even if I was conscripted.” Alistair is confident in that. If by some abominable turn of events the Archdemons all came back from the dead and the Blights were no longer a thing of the past, Alistair would fight conscription. He would return to this hospice for as long as it stood. Wynne opens the room, ripping him from his nightmarish train of thought.

“Alistair is here, and the boy’s brought you a cake,” Wynne announces.

“And it’s not even my birthday,” the man inside replies, putting down his book.

Duncan. Still alive, Alistair thinks. Adrenaline courses through his veins, as if his body was gearing up for the worst case scenario. He takes deep breaths and presents the cake to Duncan, widely grinning all the while. Wynne pulls up a chair for him by Duncan’s bedside as they situate the cake and book on a bedside table, and Alistair removes his hoodie.

For the first time since last First Day, Alistair feels content. For peace of mind, Wynne updates him on Duncan’s health since the last time he visited, despite it being a week ago. She reminds Alistair that if he needs anything, Duncan has a button to call her, and Alistair nods. They have done this for years now; it’s almost like a joke when she reminds him of things he has committed to memory. It never bothers him, hearing that he’s welcome here and Duncan’s condition is stable, what’s new in the hospice, if he could sign these forms right here please.

“Welcome to another year, old man. If only the cold could’ve been left on the other side of First Day, huh?” says Alistair. Before Wynne left them alone, he had asked for a lighter and plates, and he’s taking his time lighting the candles atop the cake.

“Oh, I wouldn’t know,” Duncan replies, a glint in his eye. “Am I to believe it’s really Wintemarch now? It certainly feels like Bloomingtide in here.”

“Such a privileged man, all swaddled in his Orlesian blankies with the thermostat blasting hot air. Back in my day—”

“Alistair, you are younger than I am.”

“Still! We didn’t have air conditioning or heating.”

“That wasn’t a product of your time,” laughs Duncan, because the memories are no longer raw and things are different now. Life is better, Alistair believes that sentiment with his whole heart. He can’t bring himself to tell Duncan about the case he’s working himself to the bone for, because Duncan should want for nothing while he lives in here, and he shouldn’t have to want for Alistair’s safety. Something he can’t call a nurse to come bring him. No, Duncan should be content and unaware of the life that he himself left behind.

They talk a little longer, until Alistair thrusts the cake into Duncan’s lap. Seeing the crow’s feet bunch up in the corners of his eyes, it feels as though it is Alistair’s birthday. “I know that look,” says Duncan as he slides a slice onto Alistair’s plate. “If you spend too much time reminiscing about what this reminds you of, you won’t get to enjoy this moment.”

“Sure I will,” Alistair replies around a bite of cake. “I will cherish each and every crumb of this moment at a later date. There’s no expiration date on reminiscing.”

“You will change your mind when you are the one ‘swaddled in blankies’ in a rest home.”
Duncan turns on his TV for some distraction while they eat, the volume down to almost a whisper. With such frequent visits, there are rarely new things to talk about. Most times they lapse into silence until Duncan gets exhausted, or they discuss books, of which Alistair has little time to read. Regardless, he tries, and swears he’ll get around to it.

The cake doesn’t have a large dent in it by the time they’re full. “Are you sure you don’t want more?” Alistair asks.

“No, no, I couldn’t, but thank you. Too much cream cheese frosting, it won’t sit well with my stomach,” Duncan assures him. Alistair tries to press and Duncan shuts him down. “They do feed me, Alistair, large portions too. I know three meals a day is a foreign concept but I’m not wasting away.”

Alistair bites his lip and rubs his shoulder. He can’t shake his fears, and voicing them makes him feel small, irrational. They both turn back to the television, when Alistair’s phone vibrates.

(16:49) Whatever you’ve got going on today, good luck with it!

(16:49) Don’t think I haven’t noticed, by the way

Do not disturb mode wasn’t on? The holiday festivities must have scrambled his priorities a bit. Alistair apologizes as he rectifies his mistake and tucks his phone away. Duncan, however, stares at him, concerned. “That wasn’t work, calling you away?”

“No, sir. Wouldn’t go, though. It was just the, uh, postman. Package waiting for me at the post office, needs my signature.” He waves his hand through the air. “Nothing important, must be too big to leave on the doorstep, though.”

“Oh? Is the post office offering a new service where they send texts directly to a private number?”

Alistair pauses. “... Yes?”

“You are deflecting again, aren’t you?”

Alistair sharply huffs out of his nose. “She says the same thing! She can’t even hear me and she knows when I’m telling tales out my arse. You people, never believing in me.”

Duncan chuckles. He sinks into his collected mass of fluffed pillows and looks… satisfied. “You aren’t a very hard person to read. Who is she? Have you met someone recently?”

Face growing hot, Alistair swivels to face the television screen. “I’ve never met her or anything. I meant to message my partner one day and I misdialed and she received the text, I guess.”

“Technology these days.”

“Right?”

A moment of silence, until Duncan asks another question. “So was it really ‘one day’ or has this been going on for a long time and you’ve been shying away from the subject?”

“I...” Alistair swallows. “...didn’t think it was important at the time. It was...” He calculates. “A little over three weeks ago.” Saying it loud gives it weight, makes time feel like a solid object, proven real
by timestamps and photographs.

“She must be important if you’re still messaging a stranger after that long. I hope you weren’t trying to send Detective Rutherford important information over your phone, though.”

He has to think about that one. “Is… texting about cheese important?”

“I should think so,” Duncan laughs, and he continues to laugh. Alistair chuckles alongside him, and he is overjoyed to know that he isn’t judged by someone for his new friend, though he knows he didn’t need to worry about Duncan’s opinion.

“Tell me about her,” Duncan asks when their laughter trickles into wiped away tears and sighing.

“Well.” Alistair perks up. “I don’t know her name, so I call her Dog Lord. On account of her mabari, that is. Oh! He’s a rescue dog, she’s sent me a photo. Let me pull it up for you.” Alistair quickly slides into his photo roll for the one snapshot of Hessarian he’s received. “I’m sure he’s a delight, he’s a mabari after all. I always wished you and I had gotten one, you know.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget your Satinalia wishlists.” Alistair glares at Duncan. “Sorry, continue.”

“I don’t know what she does for a living, but she’s obnoxiously smart about history. She makes fun of me by saying I must be Orlesian but she’s the one who knows so much about past Divines and dukes, so who knows.” Alistair continues to ramble about their conversations, with pauses for photographic evidence. He talks about their random bouts of late night talks, when one of them is more tired than the other but they carry on the conversation for the sake of company, for not feeling alone. The guessing game of his identity, the “clause of anonymity”, the suggestions for things to do in Denerim—“because she’s still a bit new here”—and how she is from a dingy old castle in Highever. “Just like you,” Alistair adds.

He talks for much longer than he anticipated, not realizing that he seems to know so much, yet so little about Dog Lord. It’s dark outside, from what he can see through Duncan’s curtains, and Duncan himself looks as wispy as they do, with heavy eyelids threatening to fall. Alistair grabs his hoodie before hugging Duncan and jokingly tucking him in, kissing his forehead. “Thanks for listening to me babble for a bit, that felt nice to get off my chest. See you next week,” he promises.

As he gets to the door, Duncan stops him. “When will you meet her?”

Alistair rocks on his heels while his palm sweats around the doorknob. The thermostat must be on too high, of course. His tongue glides over his teeth. He sifts through possible responses, some quippy, some pessimistic. Finally, he settles on one.

“Hopefully someday.”
Sorry for the long hiatus! We had some life complications - we hope the long chapter makes up for the wait :(.
If you've stuck around this long and are still reading, we love you so so much <3
And once again, thank you all for the super supportive comments and messages on our tumblrs!

You can find us at our tumblrs:
carouselfancy
tijgertje
And our fic blog!
The chapter art was done once more by our friend, the outstanding Alli Ward c:
History

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Tuesday**

(9:45) *You know Oren’s birthday is in two weeks.*

**Read** 9:52

**Wednesday**

(13:20) *He keeps asking me if Auntie Liv is going to be here for it.*

(13:20) *You’ve never missed a single birthday, Livvy. Don’t start now.*

(13:22) *He misses you.*

**Read** 13:22

**Thursday**

(16:11) *I can see your “Read” timestamps, you know.*

(16:11) *I guess I’ll have to take solace in that. It means you’re still alive, at least.*

**Read** 16:12

Olivia clicks the side button of her phone with a heavy sigh. She’s used to the odd, nagging text from her brother every now and then, but he has gotten increasingly persistent this last week. Guilt presses against her sternum and she slowly flips her phone around in her hand. It has been easy enough to avoid Fergus up until now, but the thought of her beloved nephew gives her pause. She can’t help but imagine the look in his precocious eyes—the same bright green as her own, as every Cousland—if Fergus has to tell him she isn’t going to be coming. The thought fills her with regret.

With a sudden, agitated movement she stands from her desk, pushing away the book she is supposed to be appraising. She is never going to get any work done at this rate, not between worrying about her family and being so close to closing. She pockets her phone with a dismissive swipe of her hand and makes her way toward Leliana’s desk.

It’s devoid of its usual towers of books, and instead, Leliana has started on closing duties: cataloging any used book arrivals from the day, writing out notes for herself for the next day’s tasks, and checking off lists of needed supplies. She can’t start counting the cash register until they have officially closed, but Olivia knows she likes to check off as many things as she can while they’re still open. She is nothing if not efficient, and Olivia has long since stopped wondering why Morrigan had decided to make Leliana her partner in the first place.
If she had been hoping for a distraction, she has come to the wrong place. Leliana acknowledges her presence with a pretty hum, but does not look up from her work. Olivia watches her in silence. Her hand still fiddles with her phone, its weight in her cardigan pocket unusually heavy.

Her friend—technically her boss—does not scold her for being idle. Olivia appreciates that about Leliana. Her easy nature, frequent smiles and whispered stories are always calming. She can already feel the tension leaking out of her fingers, and her grasp on her phone eases.

“Do you think Morrigan will notice if some vital parts for the copier went mysteriously missing?” Olivia blinks and glances over at her boss. Leliana is looking at her, the corners of her lips lifting in the barest intimation of a sly grin.

“Are you planning a massive copier heist?” Olivia asks, raising an inquisitive eyebrow. “I’m willing to help you, but you have to promise me I’ll get to wear a really cool outfit.”

Leliana giggles and shakes her head. “Nothing so dramatic! Although I’m glad to know I can count on you if stealing copy machines ever becomes a viable money option. I only ask because I’m hoping it would cause her to permanently replace it, and I won’t have to call the maintenance men out every week to fix it.” She jerks an accusing thumb over her shoulder, in the direction of the offending copier. A red light blinks wildly in response. “It’s becoming more costly than it’s worth—not to mention outdated—but you know Morrigan.” Leliana shrugs and heaves a long-suffering sigh. “Stubborn, stingy, and old-fashioned.”

“Don’t forget rude, unpleasant, and narrow-minded!” declares a haughty voice, and Olivia and Leliana turn to the front door of the Crossroads in surprise. Dorian sweeps into the building with his usual grace, smirking like a smug, fancy cat.

“Now, now, Dorian,” Leliana scolds, but she gives him an indulgent smile. Dorian only rolls his eyes in return and turns to Olivia.

“Ah, Liv! Just the person I wanted to see. I have something for you.” He carefully places the fine leather briefcase in his hand atop Leliana’s counter, and flips open the catches with a single flick of his wrists. Olivia half expects him to conjure pure gold from inside it from the way he presents his gift to her. Instead, he places a heavy object wrapped dark cloth into her hands, and she recognizes it instantly as a book. “I found this among my possessions from back home and thought it might be much more interesting to you. I’ve no use for it, and certainly no interest.”

His tone is so matter of fact that Olivia spares him a wry look. “Why Dorian, it’s so kind of you to think of me,” she deadpans. He waves away her arch remark with an impatient shake of his hand.

“Just open it, will you?” She can see the effort to remain impassive on his face, and finds herself truly glad that he had thought of her. She smiles and removes the cloth from the book.

“Exalted: A History of the Dales by Lord Ademar Garde-Haut, royal historian?” she reads aloud, and her grin widens with each word. “Oh, this is bound to be ripe with bias and lies. I can’t wait to tear it apart.” She looks back to him, and he is grinning as well, if Dr. Dorian Pavus can ever be accused of such a thing.

“Yes, I thought you would like that. How that can possibly be considered a ‘history’ book, I will never know.” He sniffs, full of disdain and Olivia laughs.

“Orlesians don’t keep records of history, Dorian,” she quips back. “They only keep tales of the great things they’ve done, and secrets.”
Leliana clicks her tongue, offended, but Olivia ignores her.

“Actually,” she remembers, and tucks her new book underneath her arm, “I have one for you as well, hang on.”

She trots back to her desk, where an innocuous tome sits patiently waiting for her where she left it earlier in her day. She exchanges the two books and rushes back to Dorian, full of excitement, and shoves it into his hands.

He examines the intricate leather binding with the shrewd, studious eye he applies to everything, and she can see the realization dawn on him as he takes in the ornate gold foil designs.

“This is from Tevinter,” he says with mild surprise. There is no title on the front cover, so he turns it in his hands to examine the spine. “Questioning the Chant by Magister Vibius Agorian? Oh, you *do* know me.”

Olivia laughs, pleased by the glint in his eyes as he carefully skims through the pages. “It passed through my appraisal pile today and I knew I had to pass it your way. It’s a fairly old copy, too—possibly as much as a century. Seriously collectible.”

“Indeed.” Dorian’s voice is softer than usual, and he is still examining the book in his hands with what looks like affection on his handsome face.

“I thought you were Andrastian, Dorian,” Leliana says, her voice filled with amusement. He scoffs.

“I am, but that doesn’t mean I can’t appreciate a good bit of Tevinter heresy, especially when it’s a priceless Tevinter artifact.”

“Well, not priceless,” Olivia interrupts. “I’ve actually got it set to about—“

“Liv.” Dorian cuts her off, and gives her a rare, genuine smile. “Thank you.”

She returns the smile, and this sarcasm- and cynicism-free moment of friendship is a first for them.

Dorian breaks it first, setting the book down on Leliana’s counter and closing up his briefcase. “Will you hold that for me? If I’m going to be wasting most of my pay on old books, I’d like to at least wait until I’ve wasted some of my pay on overpriced drinks at a bar first, and I have plans to do exactly that tomorrow night.” He heaves a dramatic sigh. “Two weeks after First Day and I’m already breaking my resolution to drink less.”

Olivia rolls her eyes. “I’m surprised you’ve made it this long, to be honest.”

He scoffs at her. “I haven’t! I drank nearly an entire bottle of wine by myself three days after First Day. I said ‘less’, not ‘none at all’.”

Leliana laughs. Olivia’s phone vibrates. She ignores it, but her fingers dance around the frame of it in her pocket.

Her nervous tic does not go unnoticed by Leliana, and a sly grin grows on her face that makes Olivia wary.

“That gives me an idea. Liv, why don’t you and I go out tomorrow night? I have a friend I can introduce you to, she’s really lovely and I think you two would get along great.”

Olivia groans. This is not the first time Leliana has tried to set her up, and she’s sure it won’t be the
last. Each attempt has been more subtle than the last, and she hasn’t had the heart to tell her no.

“If you’re looking for a set-up,” Dorian adds, “there’s a bloke I work with who could really use a date. A bit of an idiot, but he’s attractive enough. He’ll be with me tomorrow night, if you’d like to come.”

“Gee, Dorian, what a stellar recommendation,” Olivia grumps. “Somebody catch me, because I’m weak at the knees!”

He raises a brow and holds up his hands defensively. “Yes well, on second thought, perhaps it’s best I don’t meddle in your affairs.”

Feeling the weight of her phone, heavier in her pocket than ever, she sighs. “Look, I appreciate the thought, both of you. But I’m really not in a place to date right now. I don’t have enough of my shit together to try and fit another person in my life, and I’m okay with that.”

She pats Leliana on the hand, trying to ease the disappointment from her face, and thanks Dorian again for the book. When at last she manages to escape back to her desk to close up her station for the night, she finally checks her phone.

(16:46) okay I’m pretty sure that if I’m the first person to a stop sign at a four-way intersection I have the right of way 😆 so either Driver’s Education is not as good as it used to be or that teenaged girl was an assassin trying to make my death look like an accident

She laughs aloud, instantly cheered by the Cheese Man’s antics. With quick but scrupulous movements, she scoops up her purse and her new book and clears her desk for the next work day. When she is sure she has put everything in its place, she heads toward the door, rapid fingers typing out a response before she has hit the pavement outside the building, unaware of the smile adorning her face.

(17:01) You aren’t texting while driving are you? Because I’m not sure if that makes you any better?

(17:02) Of course not! I wouldn’t be able to anyway. I made it home safely but only barely. That’s not accounting for emotional trauma

(17:02) Do you think I could sue for that?

(17:02) You tell me, you’re the lawyer. 😊

(17:03) 👍

(17:03) Never mind there’s no point in arguing with you

(17:03) How was work? Any new sandwiches?

(17:04) It’s always sandwiches with you 😩

(17:04) Why don’t you ever ask me about any fun new history facts I’ve learned or whether my
coworker finally managed to annoy me into accepting her offer to set me up
(17:05) The answer is no, I’m still holding out and I will hold out until I die
(17:05) and none, because almost everything I did today was boring
(17:05) Boring because you faff about with history all day 😬
(17:06) shut UP
(17:06) Anyway how am I supposed to ask you about things that aren’t sandwiches when I don’t actually know what you do at your job! All I know is that it’s something nerdy and boring
(17:07) Only fair, Mr. Spy Lawyer Food Critic 😛
(17:08) Get that sarcastic upside down smiley out of here
(17:08) Also did you say your friend tried to set you up? 😞
(17:21) 😞 😞 😞
(17:21) And yes, she’s been sneakily trying to trap me for a week now
(17:21) Not sure what about this mess screams “Date me!!!” but I’ll be sure to stamp it out asap
(17:22) idk you seem perfectly date-able to me??
(17:22) I mean!! That is not what I meant 😞
(17:27) Must be my bright and shining optimism and my peppy smile 😎

(20:48) Why is it that when women go to the gym, it is culturally expected of them to wear some sort of attractive workout clothes and have their hair and makeup spot on
(20:48) Was there a memo sent out that I didn’t get? Why would I want to put on makeup if I’m going to sweat it off? 🤔
(20:49) And yet men will go the gym wearing their first pair of ratty sports shorts they find and some old sweat-stained college t-shirt 😁
(20:50) Are you upset about the injustice or just angry you don’t get to ogle men in yoga pants 😊
(20:51) I am a woman of a wide range of emotions Cheese Man
(20:51) Can I not be both?
(20:52) Afraid I can’t really sympathize on either count, sorry
(20:52) I personally only wear the finest sport shorts when I work out 💪
(20:53) Lmao does rapid texting count as exercise? 😏

(20:54) 🤦‍♂️ Excuse me but I’ll have you know that I work very hard on maintaining a certain physique and I’ll not have you demeaning that!!

(20:54) Sorry but you don’t exactly seem like a gym rat to me! And I know gym rats

(20:55) Just because I don’t brag about it as much as you doesn’t mean I don’t work at it! 😞

(20:55) Alright well I’m sure those reaches you do for your personal cheese plate are probably building up some bicep mass but

(20:56) I’m going to hang up on you

(20:56) What is the texting version of hanging up

(20:56) because I’m doing that right now 😳

(20:57) Don’t be mad Cheese Man I’m only joking 🙊

(20:57) If you hang up on me who will entertain me when there’s nothing on TV

(20:58) Nobody ever taught you how to do a proper apology did they 😞

(20:58) I’m sorry I called you a lazy stringy prat 😅

(20:59) Wow!! I think you had forgotten to mention the prat part!

(20:59) If you hang up on me I might actually start getting work done and being a productive member of society and then where would we be?

(21:00) Free of a public menace? 😏

(21:00) Well now that’s just uncalled for!

(21:01) Shut up and watch your fancy television ⏯️ What are you watching, How to Lose Friends and Alienate People?

(21:01) V funny!!!

(21:02) Are you telling me you also don’t have a TV? Cheese Man what kind of miserable life do you live???

(21:03) 😒 I have a tv, I just don’t have proper cable. Cable is expensive, Dog Lord. 😞 If I do watch television it’s public access television. Local news, Mother Hawser, Saturday morning cartoons, that kind of thing.

(21:03) Do you actually watch Mother Hawser? Learning lots of new things, are you?

(21:04) Do not insult Mother Hawser she was a very great woman!!! You’re never alone when you’re in Mother Hawser’s neighbourhood 😊 All those cute little puppets got me through a lot of tough times in my childhood
(21:04) I can’t argue with that

(21:05) So what ARE you watching? White collar crime drama? Animal documentaries? Awful dry history specials on some ancient political war?

(21:05) ………… A documentary about the Fifth Blight

(21:06) …..

(21:06) Actually, that does sound interesting

(21:06) Still, cable is wasted on the likes of you 😞

(21:06) How can you spend 8 hours a day geeking out about history or whatever it is you do just to go home and watch MORE history?

(21:07) Do you work for one of those history channels? Is that what you do?

(21:07) Ok to be fair I’m not really paying that close attention

(21:07) I’m too busy hearing notifications for your ranting

(21:08) And honestly how is this that much different than watching a movie? There are even video games about history like this!

(21:09) Because movies are fun and at least in video games I get to kill things

(21:10) Oh so you do know what video games are? I’m surprised, since I didn’t think there was electricity under that rock where you live 😅

(21:10) Oh very funny!!! Well then I'll just be here eating bugs if you come to your senses and realise that you're BORED 🍂 🍃 😳

Headlights in the dark, distant but growing. It’s been too long, and she tries not to look as worried as she feels. The headlights grow too bright, flooding her vision to stark white; she smells the stale scent of sterility, of illness. She hears a shrill beep, and it is repetitive, incessant. She wants so desperately to make it stop—and then it does, and she cries out. Feels the tears hot on her cheeks as she leaps from her chair—Olivia wakes with a start, confused about where she is.

She sits up, vision blurry and black curls running amok, and surveys the dark room around her. It’s silent but for the drone of an informative voice from her too-bright television and the soft, snuffling snores of the large mabari on the floor beside her couch. She reaches down to run her hand over his coarse fur, and reality snaps back into place.

How long has she been asleep? Her hand scrabbles across the couch, digging into the cushions in search of her phone. She finds it lodged in between the arm of the couch and the cushion that had served as her pillow, and the white light of her screen floods her when she clicks the button, reminding her all too much of her dream.

2:34. She’s not sure when she fell asleep, but it’s been hours. A red number 2 waits patiently beside the green message box at the bottom of her screen.
It’s been a few hours of silence so I’m going to assume you fell asleep. 😊 You’re never going to hear the end of this, Dog Lord.

Sleep well 😊

Olivia feels a strange stab of regret, but still finds herself smiling.

And then the thumping starts.

Loud, pounding beats and the sound of screeching guitar cause her head to pound painfully, and her head whirs toward the kitchen window she’d so foolishly left open. Hessarian’s head pops up from near her feet and he gives her a soft, low “boof” as though to sympathize with her annoyance.

She all but stomps to the open window, but as she is about to close it she catches a flash of denim, moving out of view in her neighbor’s window. Two side yards and a brick wall between the two houses, and she still has to hear this music almost daily as though she is at a live concert. She glares fiercely at the spot where the denim had been, silently wishing harm upon them.

She shoves the window closed with a decisive snap, but the music continues on.

“Bedtime, mate,” she murmurs to the broad head peeking at her from around the couch, and Hessarian bounds ahead of her into her dark bedroom. She doesn’t have to see him to know he has settled himself in her pillows, ready for their night wrestling match over a space on the bed. She always wins, but she is under no illusions—it is because he allows her to.

When she finally settles into her fluffy expanse of pillows and duvet, the thumping reemerges, and she can’t help the groan that escapes her. Not for the first time, she entertains the idea of calling the police and putting in a noise complaint. Not for the first time, she passively decides it isn’t worth the trouble. Perhaps one of these days she’ll confront her awful neighbor, but she has yet to muster the courage. Instead, she angrily shoves a pillow over her head to try and drown out the sound.

Unfortunately, this leaves her prey to her thoughts, and these have not been trustworthy lately. She cannot stop thinking about her brother, his determination to get an answer out of her; how worried he must be. She remembers the look on his face the day she left Highever, remembers checking her rearview mirror to find his head shrinking away in the distance. She doesn’t feel particularly good about her decisions, even two months later. And yet the thought of what she left behind is always worse.

The beats of music are quieter now and almost unrecognizable through the soft barrier over her face, and she scrunches her brow. On nights like these, it’s hard to feel confident in her decision.

She feels the comforting weight of Hessarian’s head touch onto her stomach, and with lazy hands she reaches to caress the soft nose that snuffles hot air onto her arm, calmed by the cadence of his breathing. The weight of her thoughts becomes heavy, pulling her consciousness like the waves of the sea, until it becomes blessedly hard to focus and she gives in to its sucking depths.
Friday

(9:00) Good morning!!! 😛 tàє

(9:03) 😞قاسمもあります！

(9:03) How can you possibly be all fussy when you must have gotten nearly 12 hours of sleep?

(9:03) There are retirees who stay up later than you did!

(9:04) ✌️
(9:04) I fell asleep on my couch and woke up at 3 am to the dulcet tones of my shitty neighbor’s music

(9:05) 😞 AGAIN? When are you finally going to bang on their door and tell them to piss off?

(9:05) Someday! Maybe

(9:05) Why can’t I just whine about it instead

(9:06) Call the police about it 😎 That’ll teach them a lesson

(9:06) I thought about it but I just can’t bring myself to do it. Police lights make me a little weird

(9:07) “Weird”? Like “quick hide the stash” kind of weird?

(9:07) You know I just realized, you could be a drug lord and I would never know

(9:07) Dog Lord the Drug Lord 😍

(9:07) Maybe that’s how you afford your fancy castle and 800-sovereign books

(9:08) I’m not a drug lord you prat

(9:08) I just

(9:08) Red and blue lights make me feel like I need to run

(9:08) I’m sure that didn’t help my argument

(9:09) Hmmm. 😞 Sooooooounds like a drug lord…..

(9:10) Shut up I’m not a drug lord

(9:10) You’re one to talk. Maybe all this “spy” talk is really you doing shakedowns for people who owe you scrap 😶

(9:11) “Owe me scrap?”

(9:11) 😏 😏 😏

(9:11) Now I know you’re not a drug lord

(9:12) Shut up and go to work! Peddling your crack or helping old ladies across the street or whatever it is you do

(9:12) Joke’s on you because I’m already at work 😃

(9:12) I’m sensing a story behind this fear of police that doesn’t have to do with being a drug lord

(9:13) I wouldn’t pin you for a troubled youth but maybe you ran with the wrong crowd

(9:14) You said you keep a lot of elfroot 😶 😶
(9:15) Don’t be so quick to assume Cheese Man

(9:15) I got taken home in a police car once

(9:17) There was a big party that some kid I knew was throwing. It got busted by a noise complaint and not all of us were quick enough to scatter. My parents were… not pleased with me 😠 I don’t think I’ve ever heard my mum so angry. I’m just glad the police didn’t catch me with booze…

(9:18) Boosted my street cred though

(9:18) Stop trying to use slang

(9:18) You're giving me second-hand embarrassment 😞

(9:19) I can’t believe the mighty Dog Lord, mabari champion and history nerd, got busted

(9:19) What other dirty little secrets have you been hiding from me??

(9:20) Do you have an offshore bank account, too? An Antivan alias? Is Dog Lord your REAL name??

(9:20) no

(9:20) 😬

(9:21) Oh right

(9:21) I still don’t see how that could make someone scared of cops

(9:21) You don’t seem particularly scarred by the incident

(9:23) I wasn’t

(9:23) Alright then Dog Lord, keep your secrets! I hope this situation with your neighbor gets better soon though 😏

(9:24) Are you at work yet?

(9:25) …..No

(9:25) I’ve just been sitting in bed texting 😸

(9:25) 😬 I’m flattered, but if you’re late I refuse to take responsibility!!!!

(9:26) Maybe I’ll send Hessarian in my stead

(9:26) I bet he would make a very cute guest greeter!!!

(9:26) Imagine him in a little doggie suit meeting guests at the door and guiding them around the building

(9:27) He seems very knowledgable! 😏
(9:28) What exactly is that you think I do for a living?

(9:28) My current guess is a museum guide

(9:28) Guess again, Cheese Man 😊

(9:29) Damn

(9:29) Hessarian WOULD make a very cute museum guide though. I’d like to imagine him wearing a fez 😌

(9:30) Why a fez specifically?

(9:30) I dunno seems more ⭐️ mysterious ⭐️

(9:30) Shit I actually have to start worrying about being late now

(9:32) Stay out of trouble Cheese Man

(9:32) You too Lord of Dogs in Tiny Fezzes

(12:21) I have been ruminating more on this fez thing

(12:21) Have you considered a top hat? 🧢

(12:21) You never know when Hessarian may need to go to a fancy party!

(12:35) I will think on this very seriously

(12:35) Thank you for your suggestion 🙌

(14:13) What about a wide-brimmed fedora in case he has to do some serious detective work? 🧤

(14:13) You definitely wouldn’t want him to be a shabby-looking detective. Can’t solve cases if he’s not looking his best!!

(14:13) He will have no problem with interrogating suspects. Mabari are very persuasive.

(14:14) He manages to convince me to give him my side of the bed every night…

(14:14) I’m starting to suspect that your dog lives better than I do

(14:14) Oh, I’ve got no doubt about that. Not a very hard feat to live better than you 😃

(14:15) Let me guess, you feed him lamb, Orlesian style 🐐 You do, don’t you?

(14:15) Only the fanciest of feasts for a mabari!

(14:15) Unbelievable. A dog eats better than I do. I might as well turn in my two weeks at
work and figure out how to make a living as some woman’s lap dog 😃

(14:15) What kind of CV do you suppose a rich lady wouldn’t pass on? ‘Very obedient’? Or does ‘can follow orders’ sound better? I’m a much better follower than a leader, I want to highlight all my mabari-like talents 📝

(14:16) How about… only drinks out of the toilet sometimes? Excellent at digging holes in the backyard?

(14:16) Is very quiet when the postman comes around?

(14:16) Capable of scaring intruders when need be? But your bark is worse than bite, so no one needs to fear.

(14:16) Can perform no less than 13 tricks? Potentially more. I don’t want to sell myself short 😃

(14:17) Do you jump on strangers and lick their faces? This is crucial.

(14:17) No, but I’ll leave that off my CV. You can never be sure what some Rich Ladies are into 😐

(14:18) I definitely am not into that. I can only speak for myself here but dogs should be keeping all 4 cute paws grounded, if they can help it.

(14:18) Was I asking you? 😳

(14:18) 😳

(14:18) No, and also this conversation has taken a weird turn. Please try to not pee on fire hydrants or something.

(16:22) Do you ever feel as though someone pities you? They give you those sidelong glances and they treat you like you’re a bit of a mess

(16:24) Yes. What’s brought this on

(16:24) I’ve been invited out by a coworker. Not as a date but… I think he looks at me and thinks I’m lonely, that I don’t have better things to do.

(16:24) Ok but do you

(16:24) Not the point!! I just feel as though the invitation isn’t genuine. Maker, if Cullen won’t go to the bar with me, then why would anyone else want to?

(16:25) To be fair, Cullen does sound like a stick in the mud.

(16:26) You’re probably right. Anyway, I don’t want to go 😳 Work’s not over and yet it’s all I can think about. He wants to go to a BAR, and we’re taking his car so this means I’m the designated driver, unless I want to have two drinks and wait for it to clear out of my system.
What if people flock to him and I’m left in the corner, looking like a fool, trying not to make eye contact? What if I start a bar fight? Dog Lord, I’ve never been in a bar fight - are you allowed to break chairs over peoples heads? 😐 😐

(16:28) Pros and cons, go

(16:28) What?

(16:28) List the pros and cons. Maybe I can help you formulate an excuse to get you out of going? Any time my parents had certain kinds of functions I didn’t really like, I would jot down a list. Enough cons and you can find a solid argument to get yourself out of what seems like an obligation

(16:29) Oooh, you’re good at this. Well, pros. Hm 😊 Free food? Maker knows I’m not paying for overpriced finger foods, not even the fried cheese sticks. But they DO have fried cheese sticks, so again, that’s a pro. Probably falls under the umbrella of the ‘free food’ con but it’s a very weighty pro. Potentially a game-changer.

(16:29) Understandable.

(16:30) Some cons would be… Well I’m only moderately suave on a good day, but today’s not a good day.

(16:30) Meaning…?

(16:30) I don’t think I could talk to anyone. And I know that’s why he’s inviting me out. That and to avoid liver failure. That’s another con, I’m worried about him and do not want to be calling an ambulance for the man

(16:31) Maybe you should go and make sure he doesn’t die? Be a good friend, look out for him

(16:31) 😘

(16:31) Wouldn’t you feel worse if you showed up to work on Monday and found out he got into an accident? Or did you forget your DD status

(16:32) Damn 😞 My phone’s not even fully charged, I’m going to be draining the battery while chaperoning a coworker

(16:32) What if you kept me company? Like last time! I even managed to talk to one whole woman for longer than two sentences

(16:34) You actually want that? Pff, I can’t believe I’ve led you to believe that I even know what I’m doing when it comes to chatting up ladies in bars.

(16:34) You must, because it works! Come on, Dog Lord 🐶 I come when you call. Just stick around your phone for a couple hours. I’ll…make it worth your while? Somehow?

(16:35) Is this a bribe? This sounds like a bribe. I don’t know if I’m up for the role of wingwoman today, honestly.

(16:35) Pretty please, with a cherry on top? Cheese on top? A dog biscuit, perhaps?
(16:36) Cheese Man… :/

(16:36) I wouldn’t ask if I wasn’t desperately in need, I swear. Keep me company, at least? I’ll avoid conversation, save for the ones I obviously have to have with my coworker so our work relationship isn’t complicated, and we can talk. I’ll people watch! That’ll be hilarious.

(16:37) Alright, alright. If you make an utter fool of yourself, you’re not allowed to spare any details. That’ll appease me 😏

(16:37) If I can do that much, then it’ll be a successful night 😊

(18:45) Walks into the bar

(18:45) First thing I see? People eating each others faces.

(18:45) Are we so evolved as a society that sheer cannibalism is permitted on public grounds?

(18:46) Are you jealous?

(18:46) Jealous? What’s there to be jealous of!? I like my face intact, thank you. My nose would not make for a good meal. Anyway, public snogging should be banned, along with the noises these people make

(18:47) Listen, I don’t know the guy but my Cullen-ometer is going off the charts 😕

(18:47) That’s a timer

(18:47) Yes, because it’s time for you to stop being a prat.

(18:48) 😞😞

(18:58) So… You doing anything?

(18:58) Are you going to ask me what I’m wearing?


(18:59) I’m starting to become skeptical you’re suave on a good day

(18:59) Well I did say this was Not a good day

(18:59) I meant I’ve never seen proof on any day and now I’m seeing evidence that you are the literal opposite and you should probably keep a foot in your mouth any time a cute girl walks up to you

(19:00) Good thing you’re only texting me 😎

(19:00) ⚠️

(19:01) C’mon, that was suave! I’ve redeemed myself!
Alrighty, wingman. Wingwoman? Wingperson? Wingdog? Time to flex your silver tongue because a lady is sauntering over to me. Looks promising.

She asked me for the time.

Presumably because I have a phone and her skirt has no pockets for a phone. She immediately headed for the exit so I think I was being a good samaritan? Not what I came out here for tonight but I’m always happy to help!

I’m going to pretend this was all because you did not tell me the ideal pick-up line that would’ve made her realise whatever is out there is unimportant, regardless of time.

“Time is an illusion?”

My own line! Used against me! Though it wasn’t a pick-up line when I said it 😁

My coworker suggested I try dancing. No one else in this bar is really dancing, I thiiink he’s having me on 😏

He bribed me with a small bowl of peanuts, said they were as salty as my attitude this evening, that “we’d get along greatly”

I haven’t the faintest of ideas what he’s talking about!!

What’s the point of a pub if there’s no pub quiz? It’s a Friday night, it’s bustling. I bet everyone could scrounge up a team if we worked together.

You could even slip me the answers, I bet. Any Thedosian history questions and I’d be golden 😏

What’s your area of expertise in a pub quiz then? What are you bringing to the table?

I’m not shabby at history either, but I’m not a huge fan of remembering bizarrely specific dates, like when old Duke Hates-Makeup kicked the bucket or when the Qunari decided cookies were permitted to be in their recipe books.

I like art history more, though I never get a chance to show it. I’ve got a nifty little shelf of statuettes from all over Ferelden. They’re all hand-carved and super old - they’re the best birthday gifts I’ve ever gotten 😏

I know a thing or two about boxing. And gardening 🌸🌿🌸! But quizzes don’t usually ask about who won the championships in 8:33 Blessed or the best flower to offer a stranger.

The answers are: some dwarf named Glassric, and starwort, btw.

I remember you mentioning how you fancied the roses outside Andrastea, never thought you
were into full blown flower language. Romantic 😊

(19:43) If we ever meet up in person, I’ll be sure to have us go to a bar and kick everyone’s asses in a pub quiz. Two man team, we’ll be winners

(19:43) What do people win anyway?

(19:44) Respect. The knowledge that we are comprised of 70% useless factoids and that no one else can compare to this incredible tag team duo

(19:44) And if we don’t win, we can prepare a bouquet of flowers that secretly means “fuck you” right?

(19:45) Well that’s not very good sportsmanship 😕

(19:45) I don’t know how I’d explain that to a florist, but if it made you laugh… 😃

(19:46) “Yes hello I need one of those flowers and three of those.” “what’s the occasion ma’am?” “we just lost a game and we want to tell the winners to fuck off.”

(19:46) Sounds more easily accomplished with a snarky greeting card but I like the way you think 😊👍

(20:02) You doing alright tonight?

(20:03) ...Yes?

(20:03) 😞 skeptical

(20:04) Aw my phone’s gonna die. I’m sorry if this all was annoying 😞

(20:04) It’s okay, it was a decent distraction. Sorry if I wasn’t much help this time :/

(20:06) Cheese Man?

(20:07) For someone who enjoys texting and being on their phone so much, I can’t believe you actually let it DIE

Olivia props her chin on her hand, staring through the side of her eyes at where her phone sits propped on her thigh, lifeless. She knows she won’t be receiving any more texts from him, and yet she finds herself still hopefully glancing in the direction of the phone. As if it is powered by wishful thinking.

Her mood has been turning dark over the course of the night, and now she feels restless. She had wanted a quiet night at home—to sit on her couch with a beer and read her new book and relax. But the book sits untouched on her coffee table, and her beer is now warm, almost full. She glances again at her silent phone and is instantly annoyed at herself for it.

“Prat,” she mutters aloud to her quiet, dark house, unsure if she is speaking of herself or her text friend. She brushes the phone off her thigh with a dismissive flick of her wrist and unfolds herself from her couch.
She enters her kitchen in a dejected shuffle. Where before she had wanted a quiet night in, now she wants to be anywhere but here. Her house is big, dark, and empty, still filled with unpacked boxes and almost clinically clean from disuse. The kitchen is the worst offender. The counters are barren, and if one were to look through the cabinets they would find only a few coffee mugs and a single plate. The only signs of life in the room are the empty takeout containers, as per suggestions from Cheese Man, and disposable cutlery piled in the trash bin. She can almost hear Fergus’s disapproving voice in her head if he knew that this is what she was pouring her trust fund into: delivery boy tips and absolute garbage.

With a sigh, Olivia opens her refrigerator, though she has lost all sign of her appetite. Half a six-pack of light beer, an almost empty jug of skim milk, a box of leftover pizza, and a few sport drinks. She wonders at her own incompetence.

Her movements are robotic as she reaches for a slice of cold pizza and closes the refrigerator door. Hessarian lifts his head to find her gaze from his position on the floor next to the couch, and she shrugs.

Chewing mechanically, she glances toward her window and wonders if the Cheese Man is still at the bar. He’s probably having better luck chatting up women now that he isn’t glued to his phone, and she imagines him, faceless but laughing, telling stories of espionage and sandwiches to some equally faceless woman. Olivia scowls at the thought.

She tries to remind herself that staying in tonight was her choice, and that she’d had the option to be out enjoying a drink with her friends, the same way her text friend is doing. Even still, she can’t help but feel, inexplicably, as though she has been left behind.

“To the Void with this,” she swears around a mouthful of pizza. Perhaps she’ll go running, just to work off this nervous energy. Hessarian tilts his head at her, as though reading her thoughts, and she finds a small smile just for him. Her beloved mabari, always up for an adventure.

She finishes off the pizza and ambles toward her bedroom, the one part of her house that actually looks lived-in. Her bag and her cardigan still lay across her unmade bed where she had thrown them after work, and she almost trips over a large black dumbbell on her way to her closet.

This is a routine she knows well, and it comforts her. She owns more fitness clothing than regular clothing at this point, and she wonders what Leliana would say if she knew Olivia put more time into coordinating a workout outfit than a proper outfit.

She has just finished changing and is pulling out a jacket for the freezing weather when she hears the distant buzz of her phone, and freezes. After a moment of silence, it buzzes again. Olivia races out of her room and all but dives over the back of her couch to grab at her phone with desperate, fumbling fingers, eyes scanning for a text.

When she finally pulls the screen to her face, her smile slowly melts away and her hopeful excitement turns to a cold wash of dread.
Olivia looks to Hessarian for comfort, for all the answers. He returns her gaze with sleepy eyes, hardly perturbed from her wasteful athletic stunt for the phone, but it’s not the answer she’s looking for. Finger hovering over the “Accept” button, she hesitates. One ring, two rings. It could go to voicemail, it wouldn’t be the first time, but Olivia takes the initiative. The call connects.

She doesn’t speak, unsure what she would say even if she wanted to. There is only a long, tense silence as she waits, brow furrowed, wondering if he is even aware she has picked up the phone at all. She hears him speak, but it’s muffled and distant, and all she can make out is the word “bed.” He is probably speaking to Oren, she guesses, and feels her eyes tighten at the thought.

“Livvy,” he says, finally, his voice heavy and quiet, as if relieved. Olivia’s stomach churns, processing the mixed emotions. She’s dodged Fergus for nearly two months now, deleted his texts before the guilt could consume her.

“Fergus,” she croaks. Olivia clears her throat.

“Didn’t think you could avoid me forever, did you, little sister?” He is trying to sound casual, humorous even, but it is forced. Worry colors his words, and he doesn’t have to say he misses her for her to know. “How have you been?”

“I’m… fine.” Olivia looks around the room, trying to find evidence to back her up.

“How’s Denerim? We haven’t visited in years, not since—”
“Since Dad was called by the banns, and we were holed up in that hotel for weeks. Yeah, I remember.”

“You’re not still in a hotel, are you? Haunting it for old times sake?”

Olivia rolls her eyes. “I’ve got a place, Fergus. I’m not living off room service and itsy-bitsy bottles of hotel fridge drinks.”

“That’s good to hear,” he replies in earnest. It’s unlikely that he checks her finances, but Olivia wouldn’t put it past him, for peace of mind.

“And Denerim’s fine, by the way.” Olivia begins to circle her house, mentally giving him a virtual tour. As she goes into her bedroom, her fingers graze her fan. “City’s cold. Loud, too. Traffic’s bloody awful, driving to work is a total mess on Mondays.”

“You have a job?” Fergus audibly perks up. “Livvy Cousland, businesswoman at large. Are you scaring all the clientele away?”

Olivia perches herself on the edge of her bed, wishes he was there so she could shove him to the floor. “I work at a bookstore, you arse.”

“Your crowd,” he hums.

“Fergus, why did you even call me?” Olivia blurs out. Hessarian pokes his head around the doorframe, ears flattened. “This isn’t about Denerim or where I live,” she says, straining to be softer.

“What about Hessarian?” he deflects. There is a sharpness to his tone that is distinctly Cousland. She purses her lips.

“He’s fine. He doesn’t seem to mind the city. I—“

“Good. I hope you aren’t spoiling him too much.”

It’s an old argument, one they have exhausted many times over, but she can’t help but bristle. “I do not spoil him! Just because I never wanted to use him for that stuffy hunting shite—“

There is a huff of air from his end of the line, and her indignation loses momentum. He’s laughing at her, and she shakes her head. “Arse.”

“True.”

Fergus goes silent for a long moment, and Olivia starts to feel unsure again. She knows he is finding a way to broach the topic of Oren’s birthday, of her coming home, and she gnaws at the dry skin of her lip, waiting.

She can hear the slight click of a mouse, the gentle tapping of a keyboard, but these are the only sounds from him for several very long moments. She doesn’t want to interrupt him if he’s taking care of work, but at the same time she feels a strong desire for this awkward phone call to be over.

“Fergus,” she starts, ready to make excuses. She needs sleep. The dog needs a walk. Her house is on fire.

“Liv.” The sound of his little sister wriggling her way out of something important is one they’re all familiar with, and he shuts it down before it can begin. “Please. It’s been weeks since I’ve spoken to you. I know you don’t want to talk to me, but you can’t just disappear off the face of the planet and
expect me to be okay with it. You aren’t a child but I’m still going to worry about you.”

He sounds beleaguered now, and Olivia feels a wash of guilt sweep through her. She has known her brother feels responsible for her leaving Highever, and that this is in no small part due to Olivia herself. She doesn’t regret leaving, per se, but she knows she could have been more diplomatic about it.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice is small and childlike and she resents herself for it.

“Don’t be. Just… don’t shut me out, all right?”

Olivia nods, until she remembers he can’t see her. Probably for the best. She mumbles an assurance, that she’ll try to be better, that she’ll respond to his texts and perhaps an occasional call. Anything to placate her brother, make him worry less.

“Good. Because Oren’s birthday party will be quite awkward if you aren’t speaking to me.”

She blinks. “What?”

“I went ahead and bought you a plane ticket. Oren’s birthday wouldn’t be the same without you, and it’s a little hard to iron out details with someone who won’t take your calls.” Olivia sputters, and he tutts. “Oh, don’t worry,” he assures. “It’s a round trip. First class. The twenty-first to the twenty-eighth.”

Any semblance of weakness is forgotten as she springs back to her feet, her mouth working open and closed like a fish as she searches for words. “You—!”

The smug bastard waits patiently for her to speak, and she can picture the awful grin on his face far too well. The thought of it only makes her more outraged.

“Fergus!” she exclaims, and looks to Hessarian as though he will offer her some sort of backup. “I can’t! I just said I have a job.”

“Ask for time off?” he suggests, as though it were that simple. This must be how Cheese Man feels; Olivia huffs and tucks that thought away.

“I can’t,” she says again, firmer this time. The hypothetical look on Morrigan’s face as she asks for time off—a whole week, even—gives her the resolve to deny him.

“Livvy.”

“Enjoy wasting your money,” she mutters harshly, and runs a hand through her messy bangs.

“Look, Olivia,” he explains. His stern tone reminds her strongly of their father. “We want you to be there. Use the ticket, or don’t. I just wanted it to be available for you. If you aren’t able to come, we won’t hold it against you.” She huffs out a long breath of irritation, and his pause is heavy. When he speaks again, his words are full of masterfully-applied sorrow, and she is reminded of their mother. “But just know that Oren would miss you greatly if you weren’t there.”

With a hiss, she pulls the phone away from her ear and glares at it, willing her anger to travel through the phone. She doesn’t respond to his guilt trip, only gets up to pace around the room, like a caged animal. Hessarian falls in line with her, and she reaches down to receive a comforting lick.

“Check your email,” says Fergus. “Ticket’s been forwarded. The twenty-first.”
Olivia slams her finger down on the red “End” button so hard her fingernail pops against the glass screen.

Frustration emanating from her in waves, she crumples to the floor amidst her stack of dumbbells, with Hessarian sitting on her feet. Fergus cannot fix this problem, not with plane tickets or birthdays, money or promises that it won’t be awkward, that it will get better. Curses are welling up behind her lips, but Olivia lets them die out. Only her dog is here and he deserves better than a repeat of her first day in Denerim.

Leaping up, she storms to her front door, jacket forgotten on her bed. Hessarian carries his leash in his mouth, following her closely as she stomps into her trainers and slams the door behind them. The streets are dusted with powdery snow, flecks that will melt with the heat of morning traffic, but Olivia doesn’t bother with warmer wear. There’s so much to consider: who will take her place at work? Who is going to house-sit? Who will take care of her dog?

With a shake of her head, she tries to ignore everything, as the snow packs under her shoes and Hessarian’s breath puffs out in front of her. She’s going home.

Chapter End Notes

This time there wasn't a two month wait between chapters! But again, a HUGE thank you to all of our readers, commenters, anyone who gives kudos and leaves messages on our Tumblr. We actually wrote a thank you note on our blog to those of you, because we're continuously moved by the response.

Chapter art by the stupendous Alli Ward!

If you want to find us at our personal blogs: Carouselfancy Tijgertje

And our fic blog for updates/additional art/all that kind of fun stuff c:
Saturday

(10:10) Enjoy me while you still have me, Cheese Man

(10:11) I...do? What? What’s happening?

(10:11) Are you leaving me? 😞

(10:12) If I’ve upset you, please let me know. I mean, I don’t know what I could’ve possibly done but I would stop doing that immediately

(10:13) Please respond

(10:14) Oh, shit, sorry. That did sound ominous. I’m going back to Highever and I don’t know how well my phone will get service there. The rain always cocks it up

(10:14) Going back?? Moving? 😧

(10:14) Thankfully no. My meddling prat of a brother bought me a plane ticket as a way to guilt me into visiting home, so I pretty much have no choice but to go

(10:15) Thank the Maker 😊 I was afraid you’d leave before we ever even met! That’s bound to happen someday, and I don’t want to hitchhike my way to the Storm Coast or something

(10:15) It’s dangerous for a face as pretty as mine, you know

(10:15) Don’t you have a car? Couldn’t you just drive to the coast? That sounds like the overly-dramatic conclusion to the third act of a chick flick. Drive to me in the pouring rain, Cheese Man, just to tell me I forgot my fan

(10:16) Maybe I would! You don’t know 😏

(10:16) “You forgot your fan and your deposit on the house! I brought you both, because I care that much”

(10:16) A wonder that you’d keep your deposit though, living with a dog

(10:17) He’s a very good dog, super tidy. Doesn’t muck up the carpets with muddy paws or roll around in the dirt. He’s too dignified to be a slob like that

(10:17) What does he do all day while you’re at work?? And are you taking him back to your derelict castle 🏰? Seems like a mighty unsafe place for a pup like him…

(10:18) He does...things. Sleeps, snuffles around the backyard, chews a bone. Sometimes I leave the tv on so he feels like he’s not alone, though I doubt he’s fooled. And no, I’m not taking him with me :/ He’s not a fan of flights, and I refuse to put him in with the cargo
(10:18) Sounds like someone...needs a house-sitter 😃

(10:18) I am NOT letting a stranger potentially abduct my dog. Or come into my house for that matter. Priorities.

(10:19) 😞 I wouldn’t! I just wanted to make sure he’s ok being alone for... how long?

(10:19) A week

(10:19) Such a long time for him, he’ll be lonely. If you can’t find anyone else, I bet we could arrange something 😊

(10:20) I’ll think about it, but don’t hold your breath.

(10:20) 🦵

(19:17) When are you heading back to Highever?

(19:20) Sometime on Friday. Probably in the afternoon, seeing as I am not a morning person, no matter how badly my brother wishes I were

(19:20) You’ll tell me when your plane lands, right? If the service permits

(19:21) As if I’m going to spare you from whiny texts about how I can’t take my water bottle through security because it’s “opened” or about how much I miss my dog and how some ponce tried to chat me up while filling out spreadsheets during the flight.

(19:21) 😕

(19:21) You doing alright, Cheese Man?

(19:23) Yeah!! Just thinking. Sometimes I do that, and it leads to all kinds of mental mischief. It's been a long day

(19:23) Planes are a relatively safe mode of transportation. I could pull up a list of facts about how safe air travel is, if that’d comfort you?

(19:23) Maker, I hadn’t even reached those kinds of morbid thoughts 😞

(19:24) The forecast is decent on the day of my arrival too. Light sprinkling, soggy boots, immediately wet hair. But probably no delays, so an all-around good time.

(19:24) It’s not about that 😆

(19:25) Is this about babysitting Hessarian? I know how much you like dogs, so clearly I can’t risk it 😇

(19:27) What’s gotten into you?
(21:22) I guess I realised I’d miss you

(21:23) I mean. You know. You said the service was bad! Bad service = less talking

(21:23) I’m so used to texting you copious amounts of times during the day. Not a fan of change, to be honest.

(21:24) Oh? 😊

(21:24) Don’t “oh” at me

(21:24) Ohhhh???

(21:25) Can’t believe I’m getting shamed for my emotions!! All one of them

(21:25) You are so awkward, Cheese Man, were you aware? You are allowed to say you enjoy my companionship. I’m not going to be disgusted and recoil at the notion that you like to talk to me.

(21:25) I’ll miss talking to you as frequently as well. Maker knows I’m going to be reflexively reaching for my phone any time I’m in some uncomfortable situation

(21:26) Which will probably be a lot of the time

(21:26) Is it weird to say that you rely on a person you’ve never met?

(21:26) No, never mind, that sounds terribly like dependency. Let me rephrase

(21:26) I do think I know what you mean though

(21:27) I didn’t think I could become friends with someone by pure and utter chance and then I get all those stirrings of stupid jealousy and whatnot when you know your friend (whom you’ve never met!!) is hanging out with other people and you wonder “do those people know that they get to hang out with my friend IN PERSON while I am here, forced to tippity-type at them from ages away and wait for them to give me the time of day”

(21:28) Sounds strangely rude of me to think I have a bit of priority in a stranger’s life like this but I want to pretend I do…

(21:28) Aw, Cheese Man 😊

(21:28) To be honest, this is more heartfelt than I know what to do with. I’m not sure how to respond but it’s mutual

(21:28) Quite frankly I am...unsure why I chose now to let these thoughts emerge but you leaving had me worried. Anyway

(21:29) Let’s talk about something else now 😊

(21:29) I’d love to but I think I should head to bed. I’m exhausted. Went into work on my day off to try to give my boss a heads up on the vacation that is not a vacation, in hopes that she’d pity me or something. She wasn’t pleased but she relented

(21:30) boss of the year! ☝️
(21:30) Yeah, until I get back. Then I’m going to be bogged down with work until the day I die or quit. Whichever happens first

(21:30) 😞 boss of the week! 🙊

(21:30) Well, goodnight! Sleep well! Don’t let the bed mabaris bite

(21:31) Haha, you too. My real concern is bed mabaris kicking

Sunday

(10:15) What kind of people chat a pretty lady up while doing spreadsheets?!

(10:17) You’re only just now reacting to that text? You’re waking up late, or at least your brain is.

(10:18) I’m plenty awake, just perplexed 😐

(10:18) I don’t know the answer, but if you figure it out, you know where to find me.

(10:30) So you fly first class? Not sure why I expected any less, like the great Dog Lord flying coach with the peasants 😂

(10:31) That is the most bizarrely antiquated notion I’ve heard come out of your...fingers.

(10:31) I bet you sit with all the banns. They do the spreadsheets! I’ve solved the mystery 😊

(10:32) I avoid the banns when I can. There’s the risk that I know them and I hate that I do. They’re largely comprised of stuffy old men who own way too much land and assume they know what’s best for it. I… am not talking politics with you right now. I’m trying to enjoy an omelette and toast, I don’t need it to come back up

(10:32) Does this excite you

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(10:33) How and WHY are you sending me this

(10:33) I’m connected to the wifi at a cafe 😎

(10:33) A good use of your time 😏
(10:34) A great use of my time 🤣 😅 🤣

(10:34) (Those are finger guns)

(12:30) So are arranged marriages still a hot ‘thing’ amongst the nobility? Keeping the bloodline pure?

(12:30) That’s got to be more “antiquated” than thinking you’re too good to sit with commoners, but I have to know.

(12:30) It is still a thing in general, not just with rich people, you know.

(12:31) They do it in the alienages, and they do it in Tevinter to ensure mage bloodlines. There’s no marriage in the Qun but only specific Qunari breed together. I could go on

(12:31) Alright, narrower question: did your mother ever try to marry you off to the fanciest gentleman?

(12:32) If she ever made any real effort, I didn’t notice. I think if she had any plans to do it, I would’ve undermined them. Don’t think I’ll be marrying for money any time soon

(12:32) Or spreadsheets?

(12:32) What?

(12:32) Did that spreadsheet not get you all hot and bothered

(12:33) I literally cannot say anything about my preferences one way or another without it becoming a gag, can I

(12:33) 😥

(12:33) In the event that I find a man or woman I think I’d like to date or something, you will be the literal last person I tell.

(12:34) What!!!

(12:34) No. Your advice will be “hit ‘em with the spreadsheets” I know that already

(12:35) 😅

(15:21) On second thought, I think I’ll need an arranged marriage. If I have no parents, can I just sign myself up for one someplace?

(15:21) That sounds like an interesting concept for a website 😊

(15:23) I’ve been at the gym for hours and the men here are atrocious. Don’t know if that’s a Denerim thing or specific to this gym, or my standards have changed since I ditched Highever.

(15:23) Higher or lower?
(15:24) Higher, maybe? Or they’re just different. Hold on, let me change. They’re giving me looks for leaving weights out while I text you and I really just want to go home.

(15:35) Alright, where was I?

**15:35** Denerim men are gross?

(15:35) Let me rephrase that. They’re probably just gross because they remind me of the kind of men I used to sleep with, and I’m realising I don’t want that anymore. I don’t want anything but if I did want something, it’s not THIS

**15:36** Content with the single life? 😁

(15:36) I guess. I’m so much of a mess, especially since moving here, I don’t need someone else’s baggage mixing with my own.

(15:37) I’ve checked out the bar scene and people at work and maybe I’m maturing or something, or I’m not who I used to be? Definitely not growing. Life is too much of a tumultuous mess.

**15:37** That IS pretty mature though!! Knowing you shouldn’t be with someone because you’re not in a place to juggle a romantic liaison 😊😊 So proud of my Dog Lord, she’s growing up… 😏👍

(15:38) Thank you, I suppose. Sorry for the sudden weird rant. A sweaty man hit on me and would not take no for an answer so I threatened him with a barbell. If you’re going to attempt flirting, maybe don’t do it when you smell like arse? Just a thought.

**15:38** 📝

(15:38) 😏

**15:38** A joke!! We all know I can’t flirt my way out of a paper bag. Maybe that was the real reason I’ve done nothing but struck out 😔

(15:39) I’m sure that’s the only reason.

**15:43** Do you think they make cologne that smells like cheese

(15:43) …

**15:44** That’d just make me hungry though. Nevermind.

(17:00) I have to tell you something but you have to promise you won’t laugh at me.

(17:02) Alright, but have you considered that I could lie to you since you can’t hear me?

**17:02** I have considered that, but I trust you. Somewhat.

**17:02** Anyway. Had some late lunch. Early supper? Do people still say supper?

(17:02) You are prolonging this
(17:03) I had some cheese and it was positively FOUL. I can’t believe I had to type these words and I’m immensely heartbroken about it, and honestly I’m considering rethinking my entire personality and maybe hiking up a mountain in Nevarra and becoming a holy man, disavowing all dairy products for betraying me 😞😞

(17:03) 😢

(17:04) I acknowledge my hatred of cheese in a can because pfff that’s not real! No one would ever believe that was made from milk!! So it gets a pass, it’s a whole different thing

(17:04) But this

(17:04) I feel like a fraud

(17:05) You are allowed to dislike some forms of your favourite food, Cheese Man. I mean, you’re still Cheese Man - a cheese man with preferences. See, you too have standards.

(17:05) Incredible

(17:05) Ok I hear you but: it was Orlesian cheese.

(17:05) Is this supposed to be a point of pride or a thing to make me gasp like “no! Not the ORLESIAN CHEESE”

(17:06) 🤦🏻‍♂️🤦🏻‍♂️😊😊

(17:06) Orlesian cheese is the reason we started talking. For me to hate it…..I have been living a lie

(17:06) Now I’m laughing at you

(17:07) Why would anyone make cheese look blue

(17:07) Cheese Man…..that cheese was moldy. I’m ELATED that you have seen the LIGHT ☀️

(17:07) Also, Cheese Man, first of his name, purveyor of cheese facts: cheese is sour milk.

(17:08) Don’t remind me…

(17:08) Not all Orlesian cheese is moldy blue, so it’s okay. I’m just happy you’re realising that Orlesians are disgusting. It’s been a big day for the both of us and altering our standards

(17:08) I already knew Orlesians were gross!! I just didn’t think they’d stoop this low 😞

(17:09) Funny you say that, because I’ve got some historical evidence that proves they’ve stooped lower…

(22:03) My last free weekend is coming to a close, and I’ve accomplished approximately nothing with the time I’ve had.

(22:05) What do you normally do with your free time?
(22:05) Feel...free? Unburdened?

(22:05) ????

(22:06) Quick: frolic, or pick daisies. Bake cookies for the local Griffon Scouts. Scale the Frostbacks. Adopt 50 puppies (and give one to me). Go to the observatory and buy a star with your millions of sovereigns and name it something funny, like “Cullen’s hopes and dreams” since they’re about to fall and burn up in the atmosphere because he’s coming back from brief paid vacation tomorrow

(22:06) There, a list of cool fun things you could do with the time you have left this week (because I know when you get off work and that’s plenty of time 🤣)

(22:06) Stars don’t fall and burn up in the atmosphere, those are meteors

(22:07) Where’s the ‘sticking tongue out and blowing spit at you because you’re being pedantic at me again when I wanna be helpful’

(22:07) Ok but you told me to go frolicking when I am almost positive I have never given the impression that I frolic

(22:08) 🌲 🌿 🌺 🐰 🌻 🌿 🌲

(22:08) This u?

(22:08) 🙅

(22:10) Maybe you’d have more time to “feel free” if you watched less documentaries about Blights and dead dukes and “the flora and fauna of Seheron”

(22:10) Listen, I watched a show yesterday about how dawnstone and summerstone jewellery is mined and made and I stand by my assertion that that was a good way to spend my time.

(22:10) Yet you still feel unfulfilled…

(22:11) I’m going to lean out my window and groan super loudly and hope you can hear me all the way across Denerim or wherever

(22:11) 👍?

(22:11) ugh you’re like the little brother I never wanted

(22:12) How would you know if I’m younger than you? Have you discovered my true identity… 😅国家安全

(22:12) No, and at this rate I don’t want to! Oh, speaking of your true identity and it being unveiled

(22:12) Go on

(22:13) Go...on??

(22:14) Goooo onnnnn?
(22:14) My coworker is going to house sit for me 😊

(22:14) **CRUELTY.** Will I never know the soft touch of a dog’s fur ever again… Will I never embrace a cute puppy again in my life but die with the knowledge that I absolutely deserve such gracious love…

(22:15) Didn’t you tell me a couple weeks ago that you petted a dog in the park while you were out running? Do I need to pull up some receipts for this

(22:15) 😅 Would you look at the time 😱

(22:15) Yeah?

(22:16) Bedtime 😴

(22:16) 😥

(22:16) 😛👋❤️

(22:17) Do not think that little heart absolves you from being a little shit

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**Monday**

From: **Luana 🌾 🕊️**

(8:00) Good morning! I don’t know if I’m allowed to text you for casual things, but I have a work-related reason for texting, so!

(8:01) Morning!! Wait, why wouldn’t you be allowed to text me? Are we not friends? This is my personal number, you’re allowed to talk to me

(8:01) Oh! Hrm, alright. Either way, I’ll get straight to the point! 😊

(8:01) I’m making a stop to the alienage in roughly an hour (I can give you a more specific time if it matters) and wondered if you and Cullen would be interested in joining? You don’t have to!

(8:02) Really? You can get us in??

(8:02) Yes!! As long as you’re with me, everything will be gold.

(8:02) Golden?

(8:02) Ooh, that too.

(8:03) Do we have to literally stay with you the entire time or will there be mobility? I’m interested in asking around but I also kinda don’t want to get thrown out for not having a warrant 😊 And then banned for life from another place

(8:03) If you want to talk to more people than my client (I doubt you want to talk to her..) then I will join you, if that’s okay. I’ll protect you, I don’t want you to get robbed! 😊
(8:03) 🎯

(8:05) *Wait, does Cullen have to come* 😐

(8:05) *Isn’t he also on the case with you? I don’t think he would like to be left out. Just a hunch, hm?*

(8:05) *I’ll ask him, then. No guarantees, though.*

(8:05) *Okay! 😊 I think I know his answer, though. He will say yes. Just a guess!*

Alistair looks up and over to his partner, across their desks, joined by a chessboard hogging the tiny space between the two. Cullen's nursing his "working overtime" headache with coffee, fresh from a new cup, clean save for a glossy smudge on the rim. Every three clicks of his mouse, he takes a bite of his 8-grain bagel, hums in approval, rinse and repeat.

"You want to head on over to the alienage in a bit?" Alistair asks.

"Do we have a reason to go?"

Alistair chews on this. There are no definitive leads, though there's a pile mounting on Alistair's desk, consuming his workspace and productivity. Missing persons reports, specifically elves—any the precinct received in the past month were delivered unceremoniously to Alistair's desk. "We can ask around, see if there's been suspicious activity behind closed doors. Someone's seen the killer, surely."

"And we have an in?" Cullen's eyes narrow and he works his jaw.

"Don't we always?"

Eyes flickering to the phone Alistair is holding, Cullen shrugs, relenting. "I'm in if the captain has no qualms."

(8:07) 😢 *He said yes. Not a hard yes, have to convince Cass, but if she says yes then so does he.*

(8:07) *Elven intuition strikes again!*

(8:07) *Right, because thaaat’s what it was*

(8:07) *Meet me at the gates around 9 o’clock, thank you!*

(8:08) *Shouldn’t I be the one thanking you? 😊*

(8:08) *No, no, you say “you’re welcome” 😊*

Without Captain Pentaghast’s approval, Cullen refuses to budge. Any meeting with her ranges from pulling teeth to startlingly casual, and the parameters for either extreme remain unknown to Alistair. He tidies his desk up, tossing take-out menus to the Antivan bistro down the block into a drawer and kicking his trash bin towards where his feet usually go.
On the way to the captain’s closed door, Detective Rainier stops him; he’s the closest to her office, the keenest to her moods. Kindred in their similar hardened shells with a gentle center. “Have a death wish today, Theirin?” Rainier asks, pulling at his beard. He grew it while undercover and has yet to shave it off. It distracts Alistair.

“How any more than usual.” Alistair tries to peek through the captain’s door, but as usual, the blinds are drawn down. “Something the matter? Did I pick a catastrophically bad time again?”

Rainier grunts. “The patented Pentaghast temper’s flaring up again. Overtime this weekend—she’s been fighting the higher-ups for days.”

“Oh?” Alistair lowers his voice. “What about?”

“You, actually.” Rainier leans back, a twinkle in his eye. Flashes of his “Blackwall” undercover persona break through his hardened wrinkles and cracks; the subtle mischievousness and baiting, possible lies wrapped in svelte words.

“Have I done something wrong?” The ‘again’ is implied. Alistair tries to shuffle past Rainier’s body blockade.

“There’s been mumbling—”

“As usual.”

“Lobbying to get you and your partner off the case. They’d like to pass it off onto Samson and Maddox, but she’s fighting for you, Theirin.”

Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat, he tries again to peer through the blinds, seeing as little as he saw before, but imagining what’s within the captain’s office. Crumpled up notes and treaties—” *let my precinct keep the case*”—with tangled phone cords, the lines all flashing red, her assistant swamped. Alistair dips his head with resignation, and Rainier apologizes with his eyes, darts them away as he sinks down and back into his chair. “The ball’s in your court, I guess.”

Alistair hurries back to his desk and claps his hand onto Cullen’s shoulder. His partner jumps, grits his teeth. “Samson and Maddox,” Alistair says and Cullen knows in a heartbeat the implications of those names being dragged out, the most urgent codewords. With long strides they knock on the captain’s door together and enter while Rainier watches, holding back laughter that would rock the precinct’s foundation.

“You can’t be serious.” Cullen immediately launches into his appeal, knowing that the vultures from the precinct across the city can’t take his case from under his nose. Can’t sneak into his jurisdiction or steal the hours he *didn’t* sleep for this case.

Cassandra Pentaghast is, naturally, bewildered. “What is the meaning of this?” She looks to Alistair for an explanation.

“Alright, so maybe I shouldn’t have led with ‘Samson and Maddox’ but it got you up and in here,” Alistair fumbles when Cullen turns on him. “Captain, we’d like to go to the alienage, but Cullen wants you to sign his permission slip.”

“What does this have to do with Detectives Samson and Maddox?” Cassandra asks, wheeling it back around.

“I am wondering the same thing,” says Cullen.
“I, well, Thom mentioned it? You ‘lobbying’ to let us keep our job? Super crazy fights with your superior, probably, just to win our honor?” Alistair rubs his neck, pulls his hand away to find it sticky with sweat.

Cassandra exhales, her shoulders falling like a house of cards. “Is that all? I think you misinterpret watercooler gossip.” She looks to the two chairs opposite her, the men take their seats. “It is true that they want to give your case away, that they think I am burdening you with a soon-to-be cold case, as they say. They deny the correlations between the deaths, and that elves disappearing is standard fare. We can’t find them all, it’s a waste of manpower and money, they say.”

Cullen’s knuckles flare white on the armrests of his chair. “That’s not true,” he grits out. “There’s something behind it.”

“And I believe you, both of you. My captain smells something foul in the underbelly of Denerim, but what else is new? I know his men nip at his heels for opportunity and praise.” Cassandra scowls, rubs her wedding ring in circles around the skin of her finger. “It is with some stubbornness that I keep you two working the case and little else.”

“Translation: ‘I actually like you and think you’re really great detectives who can do this,’” Alistair whispers.

She rolls her eyes but smiles all the same. “That is true as well. Maybe not in so many words, but yes.” She pauses. “And I would like to prove Lucius wrong.”

Alistair hates Superintendent Lucius Corin; he once told him to suck a nug in defense of Captain Pentaghast and was suspended for three days without pay. It was worth it, as far as he remembers, but those were dark times. He’s the most contentious man Alistair has ever had the displeasure to know, and while he normally enjoys being a pacifist within the office, he knows he’d fight Lucius if it wouldn’t turn him into a glorified meter maid from now until the next Age.

“And what was this about a ‘permission slip’?”

“Right.” Alistair brushes his pants, stands up, collects himself. “The alienage. We want to go.”

“Without a warrant?” Cassandra squints, long and hard. “I feel as though I might… hear about this later. I doubt I will like what I hear.”

“Alistair won’t rile up the locals again,” Cullen assures her.

“I’m not a child!”

“No, but you angered that entire mage sanctuary a few months ago and I’m still getting cards in the mail about how I’ve got to donate a tithe to the whole Circle by means of apology.”

“I was delivering a message, it’s not my fault the message was rude.”

“Alistair gropes at the chair behind him, but he forgot that he meant to bring the stack of files for the missing elves in with him. “There was a lull in the disappearances and murders, but they’ve kicked back up, and—surprise, surprise—the bodies we’ve found this time are identical to the ones we found last month. Not literally identical, I mean, that’d be crazy. Cloning? Oh, right, I’ll shut up.”

“No, go on. Not with that tangent, but continue.”
“Well, someone has to have seen something, right? No one’s come forward but I can’t blame them. Alienage elves are not known for talking to the police and coming out unscathed.”

“And you two want to go in? Alone?”

Cullen speaks up. “We know someone. That’s why you asked, isn’t it, Alistair?”

“You knew I was talking to her?” Alistair’s brows lift.

“Who are we talking about?” Cassandra huffs.

“We know a lawyer, she’s elven. She works at the alienage sometimes—I think. She goes there a lot, and she’s heading over there in,” Alistair checks his phone, “forty-five minutes? It’s the perfect opportunity to visit, take some statements, come out, and move on. Hopefully with some leads.”

Cassandra absorbs this info, stops to think on it. The silence worries Alistair, though his partner seems unaffected, his eyes shifting but his body stiff and focused. “I’ll allow it. Don’t do anything inappropriate or it’ll be my head, and this case will be passed onto someone else—and I am confident that it will be Samson and Maddox. There are lives at stake, do your job. Dismissed.”

As they leave their captain’s office, Alistair looks back at Rainier. He tips his flask at Alistair, offers a somber ‘told you so’ look. Alistair’s hands grow clammy by the minute.

Windows rolled down, the two of them cruise and weave through Denerim's streets. The Drakon River empties itself into the ocean while Alistair watches, the whitecaps and waves mesmerizing, distracting from the task at hand. Every pothole on the freeway jostles the folder in his lap, recalibrates his thoughts. A prick of sunlight strikes his eye and he rubs at it, little phosphenes of color reminding him, suddenly, of all the bruises on all the bodies he’s seen, ones he might see today, ones he will see in the future.

As Cullen drives farther south in the city, the sidewalks grow closer to their wheels. One-way streets and dead-ends plague the Poor Quarter, the supposed grid of the city more like reticulate veins that spread too far, doubled back over themselves, abandoned when it cost less to build than it did to maintain. The walls of the alienage are hard to miss, even from a distance—the ivied brick stands the test of time, never trimmed, a cornerstone of Denerim's attempts to oppress, an attempt that succeeds with flying colors.

Luana stands at the front gate, wavering in the whips of mid-winter winds. The tones of her clothes are muted, even her hair seems to lose sheen against the faded terracotta tone of the wall. “So glad you could make it,” she says when they meet her; her words sound as though they are coming from as far as Thedas's second moon. She takes a fumbled sip from her thermos as she adjusts her work satchel, a familiar stain on the lip of the cup. Alistair studies it as she takes quick jolts and sips of coffee, the stain growing more saturated. He ignores it for now.

“Lead the way, Miss Lavellan,” says Cullen with a shocking formality, though while Alistair narrows his eyes, Luana does not bat a lash. The lofty gates squeal open and the three of them are ushered through.

Stories of the alienage pervaded Alistair's childhood growing up—"be glad you're with the Sisters instead of behind the walls"—but seeing it now, he doesn't feel lucky. The love of the community bleeds out with their offerings to their wispy, reaching tree—"the vhenadahl," Luana mentions when Alistair gawps for too long—but the struggle is more apparent, suffocating. Hovels are stacked upon
huts, splintering ladders the only way to climb; dust kicks up with every step, clouds of it in their eyes. The elves take on different poses for Alistair and Cullen following their elven guide: some watch from behind skewed blinds, or stand stoic on their porches, unbent, ready for what a human visitor might entail.

"I think I’ve changed my mind about being here," Alistair says as he jogs a couple steps to meet up with Luana. "No one's going to talk to us, and I'm not daft enough to not notice."

She shares his nerves for a second, the color draining at their already lukewarm reception, but she blinks and her face morphs into a mask of serenity. “We’ll find the Elder, he’ll sort us out.”

The elves continue to shrink back the farther they go into the alienage, until the trio is back to the tree, where it bends over its lonely, dusty stage. An older elf, dressed in subdued colours, braids framing his face, bows to Luana from beside the stage. She comes forth, ears twitching, and bows back.

“Da’len, you are a sight for sore eyes. Who is the lucky one today?” he asks. Alistair fidgets, unsure if he is invited to the Elder’s conversation, his presence.

“Merrill called for me. She didn’t say who, though.”

“And who are your friends?” Alistair does not miss the wary pause that accompanies the word.

Cullen steps forward. “I’m Detective Rutherford, and this is my partner, Detective Theirin. We were interested in speaking to a few of your people—no one’s in any trouble, of course, but they may be in danger and we’d like to keep them safe.”

“I’m sure,” the elf replies, then bows when he realizes he’s been too curt. “You must understand why I find that hard to believe.”

“That’s why we want your permission for this,” Alistair broaches. He plants his feet firmly into the ground, wanting to feel as strong and reliable as the vhenadahl. “It’s classified, why we’re here, but,” he waves the folders, “your people are missing and that has to stop. Either we find them, or we stop more from being abducted. Because they are being abducted.”

Luana tugs at the Elder’s sleeves. “I’ve seen the bodies, Valendrian. These detectives don’t lie. Even Soris has gone missing,” she pleads.

Eventually Valendrian relents, his shoulders slouching as if he holds the weight of his lost people upon them. Perhaps he does. He asks that Luana escort them, that he should hear of no harassment, before he backs away to hide behind the tree. “Will he be okay?” Alistair asks. “No, nevermind. Stupid question.”

“Are any of the missing elves related to him? A personal stake in this could explain the behavior,” Cullen suggests.

“No, I—I don’t believe so,” Luana replies, after a thought. “But they’re all his people, so honestly he has a personal stake in it no matter what.”

The door-to-door approach that usually works when taking statements doesn’t seem to apply to the alienage. The first hovel they visit has already warned the neighboring one, and so on, and so on. Doors won’t open, though they know someone is within, either by the sound of television snow coming faintly through the broken windows or by simply looking through the missing door panels. The homes look otherwise abandoned, but there’s always chipped teacups on porch railings or toys that have rusted, save for the wheels. The three of them are forced to move in unpredictable patterns,
bouncing from one makeshift road to the next.

The first elf that gives them the time of day is an elderly woman, who Alistair suspects only talks to them because her unsteady gait can’t get her away fast enough. “I saw him,” she says when asked about any suspicious activity within the alienage. “Didn’t conceal himself, wore nothing but black, like the ‘Vints always did. Pointless gold flourishes. Took Amaris from her yard and that was it.”

“You saw it happen? You didn’t do anything about it?” Cullen questions between writing the information down.

“Do something? He was human, what was I supposed to do? I stop him and I get life in a cell, no one’s gonna pay my bail. My word against a ‘Vint’s.”

“Yes, well, thank you for your time, ma’am.” Cullen flips his notepad closed, clicks his pen.

The second elf they speak to, however, identifies a different man. “He had a knife, and pale skin—thought he was a ghost!” He gesticulates wildly, shaking, ready to explode like he’s been holding in a confession for all his young life. “And he—he held her up, dragged her away. My sister didn’t even put up a fight. Told Da but he shrugged. Said that’s her lot in life now.”

Alistair deflates. Another elf, another story. One man was red-headed—”thought he was a mage with his head on fire, scared me so bad I couldn’t even save my brother”—and then another had no hair at all. One man was incredibly short and stout—”the anger in his eyes, must’ve been from being smaller than an elf, but big enough to not be a dwarf, ay?”—while another man towered over his victims.

“Are they leading us on a wild goose chase?” Alistair snaps. “Is every story different because they don’t want to cooperate? I mean, I don’t blame them, but this helps no one.” He’s never felt like a more useless detective, more useless than when he was a beat cop cracking down on minor infractions.

“It’s got to be different people every time, right?” says Luana.

“We needed permission to come in, though,” Cullen reminds them.

“So they could trust you,” she replies. “The walls keep the elves in, but that doesn’t keep humans out.”

“That’s illegal! Can they do that?” Alistair turns to Cullen and lowers his voice. “Can they do that?” Cullen glowers.

“Technically it’s not illegal. The legal term is ‘frowned upon,’ I believe.” Luana puffs her chest out as they do a loop around a water fountain Alistair swears he’s seen five times now.

“That’s hardly a legal term,” says Cullen, grumbling.

“No, no, I believe her. She’s the lawyer. ‘Frowned upon’ sounds very official,” Alistair says, dipping a small head-nod to his small friend. “Although, can you imagine if all lawyer jargon was like that? ‘Your client committed a murder, and that here is a big no-no.’”

“‘The defendant can’t lie because they agreed it was an uncool thing to do,’” Luana continues.

“The judge swings his tiny, angry hammer. ‘Order in the court! Can’t we all just get along?’”
“Alright, but that’s happened once.”

“Enough from the both of you,” Cullen snaps, turning to face both of them. “Also, Pentaghast is calling me, so can we take five?” Before hearing an answer, he pulls his phone from his pocket and steps away, finger in his unoccupied ear.

“How does he always know who’s calling?” Luana wonders.

“It’s his work phone; even I don’t know his number. Did you know he intentionally gave me a wrong number so I couldn’t text him all willy-nilly? The nerve,” Alistair huffs. “Though,” he adds, “it helped me connect with one of my best friends, so I owe him one.”

Luana’s mouth gapes, a thread of a response ready to unspool, but she winds it back up and responds with a blithe smirk. A cat with a mouse in its paw. A rabbit with… a leaf of lettuce poking out? Alistair tries not to dwell on it, mind moving along with his legs as his partner starts to walk and talk on the phone.

“So your phone’s not for work?”

“Nope!” Alistair brandishes it, waves it like a badge of pride. “Pentaghast was on my ass about it, too, wanted me to have a ‘work’ phone and a ‘personal’ phone. And then she realized that I would’ve been using two phones for texting so she dropped that argument like a hot cake.”

Luana hums her disapproval. “What a waste of a fresh cake. And is it that important? To text while working, I mean.”

“I argue that it keeps me sane,” he replies, laughing. He knows he has to explain when her expression is mostly blank, a ghost of worry tugging her eyebrows down. “Well, you know, it’s hard. You see pictures of dead bodies, but I see the real dead bodies. Never get used to it, really. But when I’m able to pull myself out of the scenario, even for a little bit, I think I can bear it. Refocus. I know, I know, what kind of cop-slash-detective person can’t stomach a bit of viscera every now and then? Still, it is nice when it’s over and someone’s sent you a picture of a cute dog or something that made them think of you. Knowing anyone thinks of you when you’re not being useful to the force.”

Being so candid makes Alistair’s skin burn, though he knows his slight tan will do its job to cover any blush, should it manifest. Hand too full of phone to rub his neck discreetly, they push on in the alienage, trying to make sense of where they are while Cullen is still fixated on what is probably the least riveting phone call since phones were invented in Thedas. When he’s done, Cullen snaps his phone shut, tucks it away with no opening to ask what it was about or how it went.

Instead, Alistair chooses to be an ass. “Why do you let him have a flip phone?”

“What’s wrong with his phone? I’m jealous he can close it—I always end calls with my cheek and then my clients leave me harried voice mails. I feel so bad,” Luana sighs.

“My phone serves its purpose, it doesn’t need emoticons,” Cullen interjects.

“Or GPS,” Alistair adds.

“I don’t need it if I never get lost.”

“What are we calling what happened two weeks ago, when we were late to the drug bust?”

“I—” Cullen falters. “Am never late.”
“Change it to ‘rarely late.’”

Luana watches them volley retorts back and forth, head darting to try to keep up with the arguing humans. The locals of the alienage are visibly concerned, she spends her time gesturing and signing that everything is fine, they do that, even if she isn’t quite positive that this is all that normal for them.

“You are just jealous that my phone is good and your phone looks like it was made when Calenhad was in his prime.”

And then, a misstep. Alistair is waving his phone at Cullen, walking backwards, and his ankle gives out. The phone, his prop in the argument, skips like a stone over the dirt, into a puddle like it was a small homing projectile. His companions fall to his side to check on him, but Alistair’s scrambling to the scene of the crime, dunking his hand into the water—when did it last rain? why does Ferelden have to be so wet? why is it still Wintermarch?—until he fishes out his phone, wields it like a legendary weapon he’s separated from a thick rock.

He assesses the damage. Phone screen’s cracked, but that’s only the hundredth time it’s happened. He’s familiar with a shop a block from his house, does screen repairs for cheap, they’ve made him a stamp card, too. With a little hand wave, he motions to let his friends know it’s fine, it’s fine, it’s—the screen won’t turn on when he clicks the power button. “No, no, wait, no,” he pleads to the phone, eyes clamping shut.

“Water damage,” Luana gasps and cups her mouth closed, trying to keep the taboo words from Alistair’s ears.

It won’t turn on. It still hasn’t come on. No amount of hard resets or desperate mashing of all the buttons on every side will make the phone’s logo illuminate on the screen.

“At least my ‘garbage phone’ could withstand a tumble,” Cullen says.

In between pathetic wails, Alistair thinks: if the Maker were real, Cullen should be smote on the spot for that comment. Cullen lives. His phone does not.

Later that night, phoneless, aimless, Alistair sits on his couch, eating stir-fry takeout he couldn't even order to have delivered. He tried putting his phone in a plastic container of rice the second he stepped in the door, but there wasn't enough to make even a bed of it, and no moisture escaped the cracks or charging port. Between every bite of lukewarm noodle and soggy vegetable, his eyes fall to his phone.

How will I tell Dog Lord when she's leaving this week? Alistair's heart feels like a sinking stone. No stories of water bottles through security or flirtatious businessmen with their fancy accounting programs; she'll think he's ignoring her, finally moved on. He knows her phone number by heart, has seen it many times in his meager contacts list, but he can't call. A weird first chat that would be, he thinks around a chunk of over seasoned chicken. "Hi Dog Lord, my phone broke so I'm not avoiding you, but this is really weird so I'll talk to you in a few weeks bye!" he mocks himself.

Out of habit he checks his phone before he falls asleep. The screen doesn't light up at a mere click, doesn't display a "goodnight" notification. There's tossing and turning, the familiar depression in his old mattress not comforting. The scene plays out like a nightmare, overdramatic in every mental retelling. It's not that big of a deal, he tries to placate himself, but Alistair can't shake the feeling that, if this was the last time he was to ever speak with her, he never told her goodbye.
Tuesday

Alistair wakes up late with no alarm or "good morning" text. This is what the Void must feel like.

Out of habit, as though he can will it back to life by bringing it back to its old haunts, he takes his phone with him to work. Maybe someone's magic will work on technology, he begins to hope.

"Magic doesn't work like that," Cullen sternly reminds him for the umpteenth time. Magic doesn't work on the breakroom microwave, nor will it fill in all the fields in his paperwork, or make a clone of him to do his job while he’s trying to maintain his position as the precinct’s top hacky sack player.

“Aren’t you being a little overdramatic?” Cullen asks after an hour of listening to on-again-off-again moaning and groaning from across his desk.

“Was Andraste being ‘a little overdramatic’ when she grew sick because her sister died? Was Valtor being ‘a little overdramatic’ when he strapped Caridin to his Anvil? Was Reville being ‘a little overdramatic’ when he kept placing a ring of daggers around his bed and murdered children for whatever reason?” Alistair snarls. “The answer is ‘yes,’ so leave me alone and let me drown in my misery in peace.”

The hours that follow his tantrum are slow; countless times the coffee machine burps in the steady humdrum of the precinct, swamped with petty thefts and a growing throng of threatening mumbles within the holding cells. Cassandra monitors them frequently, but Alistair isn’t mentally present for response, instead wallowing in a single case of grand theft auto that his brain can’t wrap around. Luana visits with lunch boxes in tow, one for him, but it’s ignored as his fingers stab at his keyboard one by one, as if to set a record for the longest mundane case processed in Thedosian history.

During one of the captain’s rounds, the front doors burst open, heads turning with hands ready to reach for holsters.

“Lion, tiger, and bear emoji, oh my! I have missed you three so dearly.”

Cassandra hisses in disgust and makes an immediate break for her office. Cullen, unable to make a similar escape, sits stock still in his chair, pretends to be invested in the crumbs from his wheat toast. A pair of hands slide into place around Alistair’s head, rest over his eyes until all is dark, and it’s a sweet relief from fluorescent lights. “Guess who? You have three guesses, but the first two do not count.”

Prying the hands off his face, Alistair swivels around and breaks into his first smile in twenty-four hours. “Which emoji was I?” Alistair asks.

“You are tiger emoji, of course. Between the ‘fearfully imposing but hardly a threat’ lion, and ‘the dangerous, sexy’ bear, it’s only natural that you are the kitty cat.”

“Zevran Arainai,” Alistair breathes. “In the flesh. Good to have you back.”

“But not too much flesh,” Cullen interrupts.

“It’s still early in the afternoon, I could be persuaded to lose some layers in the line of fire.” A collective groan emits from the entire room, a barrage of crumpled up reports rain onto Zevran’s head. “See? The people demand it.”

Alistair takes inventory of his old friend, sees the new undercut he’s forced to sport along a reddened
line of stitches and a vicious metal tip coiled around his right ear. “What did Antiva do to you?” Alistair asks.

“This old thing?” Zevran flicks at his ear and the metal echoes against his nail. “The mission was a success, but what is espionage without intrigue, battle scars, and new, embarrassing back tattoos?”

Alistair blinks.

“It was either my head or my arm, and while I love my locks, my arms are more useful in the long run. The hair can only do so much seducing.”

“Or,” Alistair adds, “you could just dodge the bullet? I try to do that, personally. Works pretty well for me.”

“If I am to be honest, you could go for a bit of a trim.”

“I like my hair the way it is!” Alistair grasps at his hair, as if the argument could make it fall out in distress.

Zevran pulls up a chair, tells him to order from the bistro down the street, demanding that Alistair tell him everything that’s happened since he left. “Spare no detail,” Zevran insists. “Especially the juicy ones.” They exchange stories; Alistair had been promoted to detective, surpassing the beat cop position they shared a few years prior; Zevran “single-handedly” stopped a coup from happening; Duncan’s the same as always; Taliesen is still missing. They tour the precinct after they finish their lunch and there’s little for Alistair to show his friend by way of progress. “The printer almost took Mhairi’s ring finger once,” he says, as if that’s supposed to be interesting.

“‘Almost?’ A shame.”

When they finish their stroll around the precinct with minimal disruptions, they return to Alistair’s desk, where Cullen is still fixating on trying to process an elf for battery. “What is the lion fussing over?” Zevran wonders.

“She,” Cullen replies, pointing to one of the holding cells across the room,” won’t tell me her name.”

“Oh?” Alistair and Zevran chime in unison.

“Unless someone would really name their child Mai Balsitch. No? Of course not.” His defeat has him plummeting into a spiral of frustration and sarcasm, and to make matters worse, the internet is patchy. The pair give him a wide berth, even from the safety of Alistair’s desk.

Once the teeth grinding has settled, Zevran turns to Alistair. “This is all well and good, my friend, but surely you two are doing something more interesting, no?”

Shooting a glance at his partner, for confirmation, approval, consent, Alistair picks at his thumb. He keeps his voice flat to avoid inciting excitement. “There’s... something.”

“Oh, I love a good something. Do tell.” His voice takes on the husky twinge it always does when Zevran is excited.

Balling up his necktie, Alistair gulps. “There may be a serial killer? In Denerim? Small potatoes for you,” he trails off.

“Nonsense!” Zevran slaps his hands onto the desk, startling three nearby coworkers. “Tell me how I can be of service. It’s either this or witness protection in Gwaren.”
“You’re supposed to be in witness protection?”

“Ah-ah. Tell me more about your serial killer.”

Papers spill everywhere over the next hour. The nostalgia is blinding, the excitement in having an old friend, one who has a fresh perspective and can feel out patterns, clues, correlations, thrills Alistair beyond words. They joke in the evidence room, leaving opened boxes in their wake. When the internet ceases to avail any answers, they develop a cork board, complete with colorful strings between shadowy suspects, notes on features (tall, short, button nose, ginger, blond, favors knives, favors ropes) until the office is barren of supplies.

“So Cassandra is married now?” says Zevran, at a dead-end, ball of twine in hand. He tosses it to Alistair, who lets it hit with a fwump to his chest before juggling it.

“Yes,” he confirms, blushing at the memory of the ceremony. Alistair recalls going through a mountain of tissues by the reception’s end. “Antivan—maybe you know them?”

“Alistair,” Cullen warns from behind his stack of paperwork.

“I knew she liked me enough to chase the tails of similarly dashing Antivan gentlemen. Perhaps I do know him, who is this lucky man?”

“Ambassador Montilyet?” Alistair offers. His eyes go all around the room, to the potted pothos on Barris’s desk to the stack of overdue movies Rylen swears he’ll take home one of these days. He shares a furtive glance with Cullen, which leads to more skin shedding from his thumbs.

Zevran bites his lip. “I can’t tell who is the luckier lady, truly. I’d offer my congratulations and apologies for missing her in a dress—”

“She wore a suit.”

“—But I would like to keep one side of my head shaved, not both.” Zevran smooths his hand over his head, his stitches, feeling for lost hair like a phantom limb. “They tell me, ‘it is just hair, Zev, it grows back,’ but I will believe it when I’m able to brush through it again.”

The conversation moves on to potential plans for apprehending the killer—or killers, as the three of them decide. “It could be a smuggling ring,” Cullen suggests. “If all the witness statements are to be believed, we could be dealing with a cult or—or something to that degree.”

“And you know that they’re Tevinter? Or is this an assumption?” asks Zevran.

“The amounts of blood they’re taking, and the choice in victims? This screams Tevinter.” Alistair nods, sage-like, as if he’s spit wisdom no one else has considered.

“We know we shouldn’t narrow ourselves down with as little evidence as we have,” Cullen says, pushing aside his pens and papers. “But it’s something and we’re desperate.”

“Then I’ll do it.” Zevran pushes himself away in his rolling chair with a dramatic flourish. All eyes fall on him for what is likely the fifth time today. “I will go to the Imperium. It’s been so long since I’ve sampled its delicacies, perhaps too long. Alistair,” he looks down to his friend, eyes on the verge of watering with sincerity. “I’ll miss you, as one does.”

“Wait, wait, wait. You’re going? Right now?” Alistair’s body tenses. “I thought you just got back? What about Ferelden’s ‘delicacies’ or whatever the bloody Void that’s supposed to mean?”
“The sooner I go, the sooner I return home, villian in tow, as both fabled hero and filthy spy. Ferelden’s men and women will find me more desirable with grander tales to tell. Fancy that, a bit of truth to my stories.”

“While ‘The Duality of Zevran’ sounds riveting, couldn’t you stay one more night? Hang out someplace other than here? Bet The Pearl misses you.” Alistair means it in earnest, though he knows he’s loathe to drag even his own body through the doors of that bar again. Under special circumstances… But Zevran is marching to the captain’s office and Alistair is tearing through his desk drawers for paper, a pencil. “Your phone number?”

“Are you asking me on a date? This is how I truly know you’ve missed me—you can hardly resist me. I understand, tiger, but you will be a good army wife, yes?”

“What? No, shut up. I didn’t hear from you for years. Don’t be a stranger this time, please,” Alistair begs. Losing touch with two people in barely over a day, the thought sounds traumatizing to him. Zevran smirks, obliges him with a number and a doodle: a crow with a heart.

“Immortalize me with a good emoji, will you?”

“You’re that little box that looks like a sideways 69, actually.”

“Oh, you know me so well.”

Alistair hears that Cassandra shipped Zevran off that evening, and his heart sinks. Even with the phone number, there’s nothing he can do with it, and he’s half tempted to throw his phone at a wall or test the prowess of his blender. Dinner is a casserole of everything edible in his pantry. He sleeps on the couch in his clothes, in case the potential for being late bites him in the ass tomorrow morning.

The Void feels endless, enveloping.

Wednesday

“Can I buy you some ice cream or something? Cookie dough flavor?”

“No.”

“It’s your favorite.”

“No.”

“I’m worried about you, Alistair. Why don’t we go to lunch in a bit? It’s happy hour for Druffy’s shakes right now.”

Alistair’s watching out the windows, waiting for the sheets of drizzle to break, turn to cold sun. It feels to him like the world has but one color, one taste, and his senses dull to block it out. It’s quiet in his head, too, the sound of a housefly buzzing, a backdrop of monotony. When Luana shows up, he barely reacts, swats at her offerings of caramel shortbread and tea from her thermos.

“He’s not recovered?” he hears her whisper to Cullen when she leans deep into his ear.

“No, he doesn’t even want ice cream.”
“Not even co—”

“I’ve tried that.”

Luana perches herself atop Alistair’s desk, mindful as she nudges the chessboard away. “Can I make you anything? I can whip something up from scratch, have it here within the hour, if you’d like.” Her white heels dangle off her feet as she bounces her leg. He wishes they would go away, leave him alone; he can’t even verbalize why he’s so fussy because he knows Cullen finds it trivial without it being said, and Luana cares, sure, but caring doesn’t force his phone to hold a charge.

“If I can’t do that, I could be the bearer of questionably good-slash-bad news?” She reaches into her satchel and fishes out a few handwritten notes. “Our visit to the alienage had some results. When you left, anyway. I was there to see one of the self-appointed ‘keepers’ of the alienage, my friend Merrill, who takes care of that victim you two saved from the crime scene. Let them into her home and everything, steady diet of dandelion soup and water, loads of water.”

Alistair’s hairs all stand on end. “They identified the assailant.”

“Yes, but you’re probably not going to like it. Scratch that, you’re going to hate it. I’m sorry.”

Alistair scoots his chair into his desk, chest pressing against the edge; Cullen adjusts his glasses, opens the criminal database to cross-check the new information.

“They’re Tevinter,” she begins, the men hanging on her words. “Male, probably late twenties. And… He doesn’t particularly match anything any of the other elves have told you. I had your artist do a sketch of what he’d look like, so it’s something, but they struggled to offer me even the bare minimum of details.”

“It’s a lead?” Cullen says, his tone shaky, an imitation brand of hopefulness.

“It’s a bust,” Alistair replies in kind. He shoves his pencil jar forward, lets it knock onto Cullen’s desk. “Oh, but—thank you, Luana. For all your help. We’ll find this guy at least, bring someone to justice.”

She bows her head, deep and apologetic. Like she let the killer get away all by herself, like she let him loose in the first place. With promises of cakes brimming with frosting and better, more calming teas, she leaves, mumbles something about her own cases and Fenris’s insistence that she spend less time at the precinct. She touches Cullen’s hand, something chaste accompanied by a sobering look, and then she’s gone. Has she spent much time here? Alistair feels too lost in his own thoughts, regrets his negligence.

And Cullen keeps fixing him with concerned looks, like he’s a fragile package, handle with care. “Lunch?” Alistair says, trying to shoo away the strange, protective hen his partner’s been replaced with. He senses Luana was behind this transformation, but the justification eludes him. Slower than he likes, the two are out the door, umbrellas unfurling to shield them.

When they turn the corner to the parking lot, they see him. Wearing a shirt so tight that it would give a professional tailor an aneurysm, a belt embroidered with an unfamiliar cipher, slate grey like his skin—the qunari was lounging on the corner of their building, hands in pockets, thumbs fanned out. "Boys," he acknowledges, as though catching their eyes is by chance. Alistair is stuck mid-step, fixated by the horned man’s eyepatch, the detailed filigree enchanting.

“Keep moving,” Cullen urges, except Alistair is rooted to the spot. “Theirin.”

“Really?” the qunari calls, though only feet away, his voice booming as if amplified somehow.
“Haven’t even given me a chance this time. You’re learning.”

“Who is he?” Alistair tries to throw his whisper to his partner, which gives the qunari reason to bellow laughter.

“They call me—”


“The Iron Bull,” he corrects them. “The article’s important, it’s—ah, see, now you’re not even listening. C’mon, you there, Theirin. I know you’re interested.” He kicks off the corner, arms spread wide, and the holster at his side is unmistakable. Alistair knows better than to exaggerate, but for a moment he swears that The Iron Bull is twice his height with a few inches to spare. He checks his surroundings; broad daylight, busy street, he’s got his own piece on his person, the precinct is literally within running distance, windows open to hear shouts. He can stand to listen for a second or two, despite Cullen’s eyes pleading with him.

“For some inexplicable reason, we don’t consort with your types. I’ve never had the pleasure, so by all means, give me a few reasons.” Alistair straightens his shoulders, saunters a few steps forward. The Iron Bull, however, seems immune to forced machismo; he mimics Alistair’s motions, with the added bonus of his shirt buttons looking ready to become projectiles. “And also, happy hour is almost over at Druffy’s so if these reasons could be turned into a list with bullet points, that would be nice.”

“I like you, kid. Heart’s on your sleeve, easy to read, but a lot to go on. Your partner is about as bland as a bowl of unflavored oatmeal, I can smell his military PTSD from his desk.” The Iron Bull breathes deep from his nose, exhales hot and hard from his mouth. “I think I’ve got something you want. Scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours—we’ve both got a lot of itches to take care of.”

“I...really don’t follow, I’m sorry.”

“Oh Maker.” Cullen stomps through a puddle and tries to grab Alistair’s arm. “He’s got nothing, so stop accosting us and go spy on some cheating husband, or whatever it is you do.”

“Hey now, I don’t deal with divorces. That’s messy shit even I’m too good to step in. No, I’m here because I’ve got some missing people, helluva lot harder to track than your average unfaithful John Doe. Missing elves, maybe?” The Iron Bull scratches at his cheek. “My guess is that you want them found too, or it looks that way.”

Cullen is slapping his forehead, patience long lost. Alistair is glued to this mystery man, eyes aglow like a child’s on All Soul’s Day when their fortune is told, and it seems like the stars could align. Really, it’s always because the fortune teller is so, so vague, vague enough for anyone to project their desires, but this qunari is just not-vague enough, and Alistair’s tongue is tied in his mouth. “How did you know?” he splutters.

“What can I say? I’m a people person.”

“Or,” Cullen groans, “our windows are open in the afternoons and he’s an eavesdropper.”

“Is that true?” Alistair snaps.

“You train ‘em good, Rutherford. Next he’ll be able to heel.”

“I am literally right here and also not a dog, thanks.” Alistair huffs. “You were right, let’s go.”
“And who’s going to find these elves? They’re not the alienage flavor, sure, but live-in servant elves fetch a nice price.”

“We don’t do it for the money,” Alistair hisses. “We’re not trying to save them because it gives us some fancy holiday bonus. I—you—your kind live up to the watercooler rumors.”

“Cute, you guys complain about me while your thumbs are up your asses. The nobles’ll come bitching down your door any day now, just thought I’d give you a heads up and see if you were keen on teaming up to put the case to bed.”

“Not interested,” says Cullen, standing his ground.

“Not even if I’ve got some photos of a few dead bodies, limbs akimbo, blood magically nowhere to be found?”

“Not...interested?” Alistair echoes, less firmly.

“If you suddenly decide your interest is piqued, you’ll know where to find me. Floor B1, knock first if you want to keep your eyes where you like them.” With a half-hearted salute, The Iron Bull pushes past them with no resistance. From behind he seems somehow more intimidating and capable, with strides like a man who’s walking from a battleground in which he’s the victor, hands clenching around an imaginary weapon. His horns jut out so far and wide that pedestrians duck, despite all being too short to even accidentally knock into them—Alistair wonders if they’re built strong and sturdy like the qunari himself, weighty enough to do pull-ups on.

At his side is Cullen’s touch again, urging him back towards the parking lot. If they’re to make it to lunch, they have to be quick, and soon Alistair’s thoughts are back on more pressing matters, like what to eat and what to do with his broken phone and Dog Lord. As he’s buckling his seatbelt, a niggling thought resurfaces: floor B1. Of what building? The Iron Bull’s? Maker knows where he works, but the precinct has a basement, and that’s home to the…

Morgue.

“Dorian Pavus is deader than a week-old cadaver.”

This is the part where divine intervention deems that Alistair Theirin has suffered enough, he thinks. This is where Dog Lord swings the precinct doors wide open like a crescendo of action that culminates in her bumping into him, like the meet-cute of the Age or the best episode in a slice-of-life sitcom that everyone raves about for years to come. Instead this is actually where Alistair’s queen gets taken by one of Cullen’s rooks, and the match is set, because he was never good at strategy beyond “hit them hard, hit them fast, and barrel through all the traps.”

“Can’t you let me win for once?” Alistair whines as Cullen wipes down the board and pieces.

“And what will that teach you?”

“I don’t know, to not hate chess so much?”

As Cullen prattles on about the merits of good sportsmanship and how at least Alistair doesn’t cheat, like being honest about anything is something to be celebrated when it should be a given, Alistair is worlds away. He is still watching the whitecaps flow into the Amaranthine Ocean, he’s still palling around with Zevran, he’s still confronting The Iron Bull, still losing the match. He’s still eyeing Cullen’s phone, nestled between a pad of sticky notes and a box of spare staples.
He could use that phone.

“Can I borrow your phone?” Alistair blurts while Cullen is still mid-sentence about something, probably the greatest game of chess he’s ever won against his sister.


“My desk phone isn’t portable, and I don’t want to... have a phone call with my doctor about my irritable bowel syndrome in front of our coworkers.” Alistair pantomimes his sudden stomach ache, complete with gestures involving his pants and how they’ll be in the trash before long.

“Am I supposed to believe that? You haven’t gone to the bathroom since we got back from lunch; this is ridiculous.”

Change of plans. Alistair swipes at the phone, but Cullen is a step ahead of him, having already palmed it and clutching it close to his chest. Shoving his chair out of the way, Alistair up and bolts to Cullen’s side of their conjoined workspace, arms flailing, fingers prying. They wrestle, tussle, fight; everyone watches with a mixture of abject horror and amusement on their face, while Detective Rylen raids the break room for popcorn.

“Just let me borrow—” Alistair grumbles with a faceful of Cullen’s palm.

“Why does it matter so much to you?” Cullen says through pursed lips, his hands fumbling to fix his glasses and conceal the cell phone.

“If you texted me as often as she did, maybe talking to you would be enough for me,” Alistair snaps back. “Maybe if you talked to me at all.”

“Enough!” Captain Pentaghast booms over the din of the struggle and subsequent crowd chatter. The two detectives split apart at the sound of her voice, the sheer disappointment leaving them hanging their heads. Resentful silence bleeds between their desks; Cullen fares better, as he resumes taking notes, relaying information to passersby, but Alistair can’t get through a conversation without stammering, the embarrassment flushing his cheeks. Twenty minutes later—twenty minutes of a buried face—a light touch flutters on his shoulder, and in his face is the closed phone.

“Our communication may need some work,” Cullen admits, brushing a curl out of his frames. “But you don’t need to ruin yours with her.”

Alistair lights up, fingers and toes curling as he thrums with joy. “Thank you,” he breathes quietly, and when he meets Cullen’s stare, his partner looks away in a flash.

“Yes, well, we have work to do, so try to be quick about it. I found someone who may know that man in the sketch.”

Alistair picks at the tiny directional arrows on the phone while Cullen tries to busy his mind elsewhere. T9 phones, such a hassle, Alistair thinks, a new Divine will be elected before I finish a damn text. He opens up the messaging screen and sees nothing in the inbox—typical, it’s a “work” phone—but the outbox reads: (1)

To: Lua

Eluvia’s, 8PM? Sounds fancy, can’t wait. I’ll pick you up a half hour early so we meet the reservation, see you then :))

“Cullen Stanton Rutherford.” Alistair holds his forehead in one hand. “You manage to be
embarrassing in less than 140 characters, I’m impressed.”

“Oh, for crying out loud—use my damn phone and hand it back.”

“Two closed parentheses mouths? How’ve you not gotten down on your knee and asked me to be your best man at the wedding?”

“Text your dog friend already and let me finish my work. Insufferable…” Cullen trails off, and Alistair’s not sure he wants some of the things that are being mumbled to be repeated.

A hasty text is tapped out—lest the phone be ripped from his hands too soon—a message devoid of emojis, to highlight the dire straights he finds himself in (though he knows he couldn’t add any if he wanted, not with this archaic paperweight).

(17:22) Cheese Man here, only 140 characters so: phone's broken forever, very sad. Missing ur snark, hope ur well, don't miss me 2 much! bye :( 

The replies are almost instantaneous, as though maybe, just maybe, she too has waited for this.

(17:23) You’re not dead! Bless Andraste’s ass. Dead phone? I’d ask for details but you’re probably on some kind of burner phone.

(17:23) It’s Cullen’s “work” phone even tho he uses it to text his gf. Hypocritical liar

(17:24) He does not! I’m going to need details about this when you can

(17:24) Well, I’m glad to hear that you’re alive, though I pegged you as the kind of person that dies with their phone.

(17:24) I’m probably a ghost. This T9 keyboard is my penance for all the bad things I ever did while I lived


(17:25) Noon? I can bully Cullen into a few more minutes.

(17:26) Ah, yeah, I can arrange something by then. Don’t be late.

Arrange something? Alistair’s heart skips a beat, or at least he feels like it does, because the mysterious excitement gives him something akin to heartburn. He confirms it with Cullen, that it’ll be alright to use his phone again, he’ll pay him back for what he’s used or he can promise to stop teasing him, either one. “I’ll get back to you on that,” Alistair says, smirking. His mind races with the possibilities for what his friend has planned, though, and he can’t even fathom mocking Mr. Work Phone for now.

Thursday

(11:59) You know that post office on Dane? Go there, hurry, because I buried the key in the second planter to the left of the entrance and someone saw me do it.

(11:59) P.O. Box 930, you know what to do.
Alistair shoots a glance to Cullen. “Can I have the rest of the day off?” he asks, clutching the phone, almost hard enough to break it.

It’s small, a blink-and-you-miss-it smile, but it’s written on Cullen’s face as he nods and takes his phone back. Of course, he doesn’t have the authority to grant Alistair an entire day off but he’s bound to think up an excuse, Alistair trusts him to be good for that. Out the door he races, thinking that if he runs a couple blocks over, he’ll be fast enough to catch a glimpse of dark skin and something-something-something. He wouldn’t know her if she slapped him in the face, but he can’t help himself from hoping.

Past hindering crosswalk lights and honking cars, Alistair skids onto the post office’s property. There are multiple large, bulbous flower planters symmetrically placed along either side of the entrance, and he bounds over to the second one on his left. There’s a mound of overturned dirt, and with a bit of pawing at it, Alistair unearths a luminous little silver key. Not one to tarry when the case grows hot, he rushes inside to solve the mystery of what the key opens—aside from the obvious.

His fingers are bumbling, wriggling in the air as he enters the post office, greeted by a blast of warm air. There’s an entire subsection of the building devoted to boxes upon boxes, slotted in rows on the walls, labeled and numbered with such precision. He finds box number 2002 and hops backwards on his feet, until he finds 754, too far back. Scanning, fingers continue to dance at his side, he lays his eyes on it: P.O. Box 930. The key fits, as it should, and the little hatch swings open, unveiling a quaint package, hidden in a packing envelope. Alistair wastes no time ripping the sealed flap off, until he sees that “Cheese Man” is printed in lazy cursive, which impresses him nevertheless.

It’s real. His friend is real. She left this for him. He does hesitate in pulling the contents out, trying to quietly hum a soft ‘treasure acquired’ tune from a video game he used to play. There are two items inside: the first, a book. “Fondues and Fondon’ts: Fifty Ways to Prepare Cheese’?” he reads aloud, in an equally hushed voice. There’s a note on the inside cover, which he reads multiple times, to process and digest: A coworker gave me this book, as a joke I think, intended for you. I planned on giving it to you when we met, but I grew impatient after you dropped off the face of Thedas for a few days - DL

The other item in the package is in a sleek black box, and when he opens it, Alistair nearly drops it, almost sends it crashing to the floor. A new phone. Brand new, still with the protective film covering the screen, charger bundled up in its special cubby alongside it. It, too, has a note: It has the best warranty possible, but really, try not to break this one too. Text me?

He turns the box over, expects it to be a joke, an elaborate prank. His eyes dart this way and that, searching the faces of all the people in the post office, but no one looks like how he imagines her. No one watches him, either, hangs on his reaction like a lifeline; Alistair wonders if she’s outside, behind a tree, spying on him in his befuddlement. After he quickly locks the box, he takes flight outside, spins in dizzying circles to find Dog Lord, whoever she is, wherever she might be. But she’s long gone, waiting in the comfort of her home for a text he’s late in sending.

Alistair swallows a belly full of crisp winter air and begins the trek home, miles away; he wonders if this is how mages feel, with electricity dancing in his veins, ready to shoot out his fingertips but dying in the chambers of his heart instead.

(15:23) Guess who’s back in action? And not chained down by 140 characters or less? 🤗😎
←
(15:23) About bloody time. What took so long? And did you take the key?

(15:24) Well...about all that... I had to take my decrepit laptop and get it to sync with the phone to set it up. I have a lot of valuable pictures and app highscores I can’t afford to lose, you understand 😊

(15:24) Mr. “I barely have any data” confirmed to actually waste his allotted data on useless phone games. Probably the ones about matching colours and candies or gemstones, huh

(15:24) I’m a sophisticated mobile gaming aficionado, thanks.

(15:24) So you play the ones with shit-tons of microtransactions?

(15:25) Yes but I don’t BUY them. I stare forlornly at them, wishing I too could be bathing in virtual coins 😊

(15:26) Also, um, I wanted to thank you. Moreso for the book than the phone, because who knew I could prepare cheese in ways other than slicing it and eating pieces off of a paper towel

(15:26) It’s like a big book of life hacks for you, isn’t it?

(15:26) Ok but really, thank you. Because I was miserable without my phone. So miserable. When I texted you yesterday, Maker... I was fighting Cullen for a chance to steal his phone to tell you I was fine

(15:27) Because the last time I disappeared, we had that misunderstanding and I upset you and it was really stupid of me and I did contemplate calling but that’s not how I thought the first call should go. Not when I was still upset from having broken my phone

(15:27) How did it break anyway? Ever since you said it broke, I’ve been trying to guess how someone who holds their phone so near and dear could let a world-shattering event like that happen, haha

(15:27) I dropped it in water.

(15:28) Yeah? That’s all?

(15:28) After making fun of Cullen’s little work phone 😊

(15:28) Ohhh, Cheese Man. Irony really made you her bitch, didn’t she

(15:29) 😂 🙄 😂

(15:29) I can’t even thank you enough for this phone, I mean

(15:29) I’m still stunned I’m holding this thing. For starters it’s WAY bigger than my old one - - there’s ROOM for me to text with my thumbs! Room! Thumb room! This is what living in the lap of luxury must really be like, I’m spoiled for life.

(15:29) Get a case for the monster whenever you can, alright?

(15:30) I promise to cradle this little rectangle as if it were my child, Dog Lord. Maker, this is the best gift anyone’s ever given me
(15:30) You’re incredible, you know that? I bet you do this for loads of people, but still, you did it for me and I’m

(15:30) Speechless or something. Yeah. 😊

(15:31) Don’t mention it. I’m glad you weren’t being held hostage or something. I really needed to get rid of the book, obviously

(15:31) Oh, haha, I bet! 😅

(15:31) Maker, I was so scared I wouldn’t be able to wish you luck before your flight too. What if your plane had the worst turbulence ever because I didn’t say “have a safe flight”?? What if it was all my fault 😢

(15:32) Ughhhhh. I wish I could forget about the stupid flight, I’m fighting to make it the furthest thing from my mind. I have to run a couple quick errands but maybe leave me some texts to look at when I come home? I sort of… let my battery go down the drain waiting for you to text me and I didn’t want to be driving when you got yourself set up, so I need to leave it alone for an extended bit

(15:32) Or we’ll just talk later, I don’t mind either way. Promise me you’ll text me tonight at the very least, tell me what I’ve missed or something. Secret agent shenanigans, all that jazz.

(15:33) I can do that! I owe you that. I’ll figure out the perfect way to repay you or idk! 🧑‍🚀

(18:10) I’ve done it. I’ve figured it out. I’ve devised the ultimate way to repay you.

(18:10) Drumroll please. (If you’re there)

(18:21) Uh… *drumroll*?

(18:22)
(18:23) Is that your hand

(18:23) That’s my hand

(18:23) Your…gloved hand.

(18:23) Not all of us have photos of our chiseled abs lying about! 😏 Some of us have to make do with what we’ve got. And I just got back from the gym, can’t lift weights with sweaty hands 😄

(18:24) It wasn’t LYING about! I took it to prove a point!

(18:24) Well anyway, here is my hand. You’ve sent me a photo of yourself (kind of) and all those other photos of things you’ve seen that make you think of me, so even though I’m strapped for data, I thought I could return the favour

(18:25) I can’t buy you fancy phones and you’re probably so rich that you own everything you think you’d ever want, but you didn’t previously own this amazing photo of my hand (which, btw, this phone has a great camera hello). I think I’ll keep the key to the box for now too, just in case I find other things that I think you might need in your life. We could use it to exchange presents!

(18:26) Since we’re probably not at the point that we feel comfortable in meeting. You know. Yeah. I’m rambling again. 😊

(18:26) That sounds so bizarrely cute, I can get behind this. But really? Your hand? Were you some kind of hand model before whatever crap job you’ve got now?

(18:26) And again: a hand. Very scandalous! Next you’ll be dropping your kerchief and showing me an ankle, you naughty cheesemonger.
(18:27) My strong hands are much too scuffed and awkward to be something like models for...whatever hands model, thanks 😃

(18:27) In the Steel Age you’d be arrested for public indecency with hands like those 😳

(18:27) No!!! 😳

(18:28) I’ll stop, I’ll stop. For now.

(18:28) 😁

(21:21) I’m getting sleepy and I’m getting cranky about it. It’s ridiculously early, for starters, and I don’t want to sleep because sleep means tomorrow is coming. Not a fan, personally.

(21:23) It’s a vacation though! Vacations are probably fun when you have money, even though it’s home you’re going to. Wait nevermind, a castle spire might crush you, and then what? Hessarian, orphaned so young 🙁😢

(21:23) I’m going to ignore your obsession with stealing my dog again and change the subject

(21:23) Why don’t you tell me what happened why you were MIA? Think of it as a bedtime story.

(21:24) Ooh! There’s so much to tell, where do I start

(21:24) I can’t believe I let you go this long without tales of my daring deeds and mishaps. I would’ve written them down but I use my phone’s notepad and it was, obviously, broken

(21:24) So 😊 came back! You remember him, right?

(21:25) He’s an unforgettable character

(21:25) Well he came back and it was just like the good ol’ days, you know, making jokes, him flirting with me because he can I guess, doing our jobs 🙋‍♂️. He had to leave again, for Maker knows how long but it was really good to see him, know he’s alive, y’know? When I met him I hated his guts, couldn’t trust him, and you have to trust the people you work with or else everything falls apart. He was silver-tongued and I always suspected he sweet-talked his way into all the good jobs but no, he’s just an incredibly savvy guy

(21:26) And also he gave me a new nickname and I haven’t had anyone to tell for days!! Mostly because I’ve been moping too hard.

(21:26) You moped?

(21:26) The mopiest of mopes. Anyway, he came in and called me tiger emoji! 😈

(21:26) Cullen is 😈 and our boss is 🐻. I think Cullen is a lot less lazy than a lion, though, but the bear is fitting for the boss.

(21:27) Dare I ask why?
(21:27) Reasons.

(21:27) Gotcha. Lions, tigers, and bears, oh my

(21:27) Exactly!

(21:28) Do I call you Cheese Man or Tiger Emoji now? What is your preferred given name at this point in time? Tiger Emoji is pretty cute, I have to admit. Or maybe I’m too sleepy to know any better. Also bless the Maker, Andraste, and the Divine for making autocorrect a thing because I guarantee you I’m spelling every word wrong while I lay on my side, half awake.

(21:28) Go to bed! Oh, right. Flight stuff. Well, let’s see

(21:29) Oh! I met a qunari! Scary oxman, big horns

(21:29) Bit racist, don’t you think?

(21:29) Is it? I’m sorry, I won’t say that again. Well, he was a very big man and I’m pretty sure no one in all of Denerim sells a shirt that he could fit in

(21:30) I was prepped and ready to shield my eyes, the buttons on his top looked deadly. I wonder if people that buff need to register their arms as dangerous weapons 😁

(21:31) You’re so strange

(21:31) No you are

(21:32) Fuck I just replied to myself. I’m so tired.

(21:32) I know the visit is going to be worse than every Blight happening at once, with a cherry on top, but it’ll be ok Dog Lord!

(21:32) Not if my brother keeps the wet bar closed during my nephew’s birthday it won’t

(21:33) Fair point, fair point. 😊 I’m here for you though!

(21:33) Service = shitty, remember? If a text gets to you within ten minutes, I’ll start visiting the Chantry every weekend for blessing me like that.

(21:33) Maybe it won’t be so bad? We can snail mail if it’s really so awful. Very delayed, sure, but: 📧✈️ let the little buddy do his job, while the postal service is still functional

(21:34) I’ve just gotten you back and now this

(21:35) What?

(21:35) Got you the phone because I had to. It was for me just as much as it was for you

(21:35) Spacebar please.

(21:36) You’ll be back before you know it, and I’ll make sure we stay in touch, don’t worry. You’re exhausted! Get some sleep, because that flight won’t even be long enough for a cat nap 😴
(21:36) Yeah, you’re right. I should bed. Go to bed. Sorry. Maker’s beard, where’s the delete all text button? I write less stupid shit when I’m drunk

(21:37) Please 😊 When’s your flight?

(21:37) Afternoon? Time, illusion, etc.

(21:37) I’ll be awake for sure, I’ll keep my phone on while I work - sound and all. Text me when you wake up or when you’re going through security or I dunno, whenever you want? I’ll be on call like a first responder! I promise 😊

(21:39) K. Don’t stay up too late. Or do. I’m not your mum.

(21:39) Dog Lord

(21:39) Ok ok, goodnight tiger emoji. It’s.. good to have you back. Thanks for the cute hand

(21:40)👋

In the dark, on his back, Alistair flexes his hand over his heart, grasping at the cotton between it and more skin. It’s _autocorrect, she’s tired, _I’m _tired. No matter the excuse that he formulates, the room spins until it stills, then spins again. He peruses search engines and medical websites, asks them if he’s having a heart attack, why are the palpitations so prevalent, why are his teeth aching—besides all the grinding. Eventually it all subsides, because he’s a good detective, he’s not so naive.

She really, truly missed him too. For him, for now, that’s enough.

Chapter End Notes

We’re so sorry that there was this 3 month wait between chapters (all blame can be aimed at Emrys) but hopefully the longest chapter thus far somewhat makes up for it! 14k+ words, my hand is falling off.

As always, an enormous ‘thank you’ to the people who left comments while the fic was kind of in hiatus (we moved to another state!) and those of you who left messages on our fic blog to make sure we were still alive. We both still get ridiculously excited getting messages there or comments here, the feedback is what keeps us wanting to continue <3 We can’t thank everyone enough for your patience and continued support c:

No chapter art, hope the ~spreadsheet~ makes up for it :p

If you’d like to find us at our personal blogs:

Carouselfancy
Tijgertje

And our fic blog for updates, additional art, drabbles, and all sorts of other things!
Friday

(10:36) Gooooood morning sunshine!! 🌞✨👍

(10:36) Are you all packed and ready to go?

(10:36) Did you eat a balanced breakfast and drink enough water?

(10:37) Good morning Cheese Man! 😊 Your wakeup call game is lacking today. And to answer your questions: no, what do you think, never, and always.

(10:45) Weell I figured I should let you sleep in. Busy day and all.

(10:45) So you’re really not packed? Not even a little bit? 😞

(10:45) Just started, actually. I’ve been putting it off

(10:46) Have I mentioned how much I Do Not want to go on this trip?

(10:46) Once or twice!

(10:46) Okay well I really, really do not want to go on this trip

(10:46) I still don’t see what the big fuss is about. Vacation! Castles and knights to wait on you hand and foot.

(10:47) Seeing as you don’t know my brother, King Nob of Highever, I’ll let you know now that there will be no ‘waiting’ on hands or feet. It’s more like “Dog Lord, I stocked this pantry for your arrival, don’t be a lazy shit”

(10:47) Do you resemble that remark?

(10:47) I resent that remark 👌

(10:50) I should leave you be, so you can pack all your little woolen jumpers and socks. Many socks. The weeklong forecast for Highever says lots of rain with a smattering of thunder, so don’t forget your coat! ☂️☔️

(10:51) I literally lived there most of my life, I’m pretty sure I know what to pack and wear for this time of year.

(10:51) You’ve only packed underwear so far, haven’t you

(10:51) It’s important!

(10:52) 😄 😊
(10:55) There. I’ve packed the essentials.
(10:56) 😞屈 that’s one sock.
(10:56) Actually it’s two socks.
(10:56) Right. Ok. That’s much better. And how many pairs of… those? No, nevermind. Don’t tell me. 😞
(10:56) Maker’s balls you act as though you’ve never seen a pair of panties before.
(10:57) Not my FRIEND’S underwear, no 😝 Discretion! It exists!
(10:57) You can’t even type the word panties! It’s a picture of underwear, not a nude.
(11:01) So have you packed some jumpers yet, maybe some proper pants? A hat? 10 pairs of shoes you won’t wear?
(11:01) I only need one - a good pair of trainers so I can run away from my problems 😈
(11:02) 😔
(11:02) Oh fine I’m just going to finish my packing. You’re such a spoilsport.
(13:12) I’ve only just arrived at the airport and I already want to kill someone.
(13:12) Have I mentioned how much I hate airports?
(13:12) You have to arrive hours before you actually need to be there ~just in case~ even though you always end up just waiting

(13:12) Doing absolutely nothing unless you want to pay 1000 sovereigns for wifi and 20 silvers for a bloody burger

(13:13) It’s a carefully calculated system I tell you

(13:13) anyway my point is

(13:13) guess what I did

(13:16) Have I mentioned before that it is cosmically unjust that you were born into a rich family 😒

(13:16) Okay first of all don’t be rude

(13:16) And second of all shut up

(13:17) 😊

(13:17) What time do you board?

(13:17) 14:30 I think?

(13:18) Plenty of time to enjoy your overpriced burger, which probably has gold leaves instead of lettuce leaves 🍔 Caviar instead of.. Cheese? 🍔 🍴 😖

(13:18) You can exaggerate my wealth all you want but you and I both know that airports would never serve anything half-way edible.

(13:19) Thank you for the scathing review of Denerim International 🖕

(13:21) So how’s your new phone? Everything working as it should?

(13:21) I bought for it what I like to call the “Cheese Man warranty”


(13:22) Break it in half because I’m trying to close it like a flip phone for dramatic effect?

(13:22) Replaceable.

(13:23) 😊 It’s fine, though. Great, actually.

(13:23) I didn’t know it could record video in slow-mo! Not only is it physically bigger, but more room for apps! The app store is the only place I’ll ever need to shop 😊

(13:24) And I said it last night but I’ll say it again. Thank you. I can’t really think of words beyond that, but the sentiment is there. Breaking my phone a couple months ago wouldn’t have been the end of the world to me, I could’ve gotten a rubbish replacement from work. But those few days were so miserable for me and I just appreciate everything you’ve done
(13:25) It was, what, 2 days? So melodramatic 😏

(13:25) It was 3! The 3 longest days in recent history.

(13:25) You were busy though. I had to endure the mundane routine that is waking up, going to work, coming home and lounging with Hessarian.

(13:26) I was busy but I was still Miserable with a capital M 😓 Work’s hectic, but it’s quiet without the dog barks

(13:26) ?

(13:26) Your text tone is a dog bark 😢

(13:26) I see

(13:27) Same here though. Before you were persistent and texted me every day, I didn’t use my phone much

(13:27) I think I was the more miserable one though because

(13:27) Because…?

(13:28) Ooh a bomb-sniffing dog

(13:28) Such a nice hard-working young man. Very cute 😑👍

(13:28) The Lord of Dogs and Deflections can do better than that 😕

(13:29) Oh my plane is boarding early I gotta gooo

(13:34) I thought you’d gotten bored of me, since I was leaving

(13:35) 😐

(13:35) Anyway, I’m relieved you like your phone as much as you do, and that you’re back. Just as I’m about to leave 😐

(13:36) But you’ll come back! And I will be ready 👏

(13:36) Bet you think it’s no longer “cosmically unjust” that I have money 😏

(13:37) 😏 I guess I no longer need to submit my CV to a different rich lady for lap dog status 🐶

(13:37) Mmm I’m not convinced you’re all that obedient

(13:37) 😏 Says you 😐

(13:40) Ugh, my coworker is texting me and I haven’t even boarded the plane

(13:40) Your house on fire already? Give me your address, I’ll rescue Hessarian! 🛒
From: Leliana

(13:40) Liv I just have arrived at your home and i think somebody broke in
(13:40) because there is absolutely nothing here!!!!!
(13:41) Just boxes!
(13:43) Strange, they left pizza in your refrigerator
(13:43) What kind of burglar would do that Olivia
(13:44) I didn’t bother unpacking everything.
(13:44) Just the essentials
(13:44) Essentials! You have no food!
(13:44) Where is your dinnerware? You have one cup!
(13:45) I like that cup. It has sentimental value to me.
(13:45) It is a coffee mug shaped like a mabari.
(13:45) It’s cute!
(13:45) You’ve been in Denerim for two months now! How have you been living like this?
(13:46) Andraste’s ass, Leliana, it’s not as though I’m living in a dirty alley
(13:46) You may as well be! You are using a box as a coffee table.
(13:46) Do me a favor and don’t make any calls to Extreme Makeover: Home Edition just yet, okay? 😁
(13:46) Very funny Liv
(13:47) Will you still be so amused if I take your dog with me before you are back?
(13:47) Ha! As if he would go with you.
(13:47) We shall see. In the meantime I will just have to make sure you have some real food in this house for once.
(13:48) Oh no it looks like they’re making us board the plane sorry Leliana I have to go!

The flight to Highever is blissfully short, but Olivia manages to spend the entire time worrying
anyway. By the time she is stepping out of the jet bridge into the terminal, her fingernails are bitten down to the quick and her hair has been braided and unbraided more times than she can count. She tries not to slouch as she shuffles toward the gate, knowing that if Fergus saw her she would get a scolding, but with every inch forward, she shrinks further into herself. She grips her phone like a drowning woman, fires off a quick emoji of a landing airplane to Cheese Man because it makes her feel grounded, warm. She reads through texts he sent her while she was on the plane without service, and tries to distract herself by imagining what his words would sound like in his voice.

To her surprise, it is not Fergus who greets her, but Oriana, little Oren bouncing on his heels beside her. Olivia barely has time to take in the sight of him before he launches himself into her arms.

“Auntie Liv you’re finally here!” He voice rings high and clear above the tumult of voices around them and Olivia can’t help the exuberant smile that stretches across her face.

“I am?” She spins around in a circle, feigning confusion while her nephew giggles. “Well, so I am!” She releases a dramatic gasp and pulls away to stare at him incredulously. “But how did you get here?”

Oren giggles and points to Oriana, who waits nearby with a patient smile. “Mummy drove me!”

“Did she!” Olivia’s gaze drifts to find her sister-in-law’s blue eyes and she feels a little comforted by the familiar warmth she finds there. “How clever of her.”

“He absolutely insisted on being a member of your welcoming committee,” Oriana laughs. “How was your flight?” There is a familiar tinge of pity underneath Oriana’s sweet Antivan lilt, and Olivia physically turns away from it to let Oren back onto his own feet. She affects a grunt of feigned exertion for his benefit.

“Short.” Brisk, one-word answers to cut off potential conversation. “Baggage claim?”

Oriana nods, but her face falls almost imperceptibly. Olivia tries to ignore the guilt that bubbles up in her gut and instead turns to ask Oren about his planned birthday activities.

Oren regales Olivia with stories of primary school shenanigans for the entire duration of the car ride to the Cousland Estate. She gladly gives him her full attention, and is surprised to discover just how much she has missed her nephew in the months she’s been gone. He had been her best friend when she still lived in Highever. Before… well.

She is just starting to feel more positive toward this visit when Oriana pulls to a stop at the gate that bars unauthorized vehicles from entering the Cousland lands. Her heart jumps to her throat. Immediately, she feels ten years old, like she’s just been picked up from school by her parents. She used to climb over this gate when she snuck out of the house as a teenager. It was the last thing she saw when she drove away from Highever for good two months ago.

Or at least, what she thought was for good.

She takes the tie out of her braid and begins unraveling. Oriana taps in the gate code with ease, and the motor whirs to life as the mechanized black iron swings open in a slow, steady whine.

Despite her growing anxiety, Olivia takes in the scenery of her family’s estate with a smile. The glossy metal and asphalt of Denerim can’t compare to the rolling hills of Highever. She’s dreamt of these exact fields countless times since her move to the city, and even her dreams did not live up to the real thing. The sky is dull and overcast, but to her it may as well be pure blue. Oren taps her on
the shoulder with excited fingers to tell her about a new horse Fergus had bought, but Olivia is only half listening. The house appears in the distance and she feels a cold wash of dread settle over her.

It’s an old manor; sturdy, but drafty and crumbling, dating back centuries to castles of brick and stone. Large portions of it are covered in scaffolding and tarps in Fergus’s continued efforts to update the estate and pull the Cousland lands into the current Age. Valiant, if inevitably futile. In the last seven months, Fergus had become a whirlwind of proactive positivity, determined to honor their father’s legacy by trying to become the best Teyrn Highever has seen in centuries.

Olivia idly wonders if this endeavor continues to make him as insufferable as he had been when she had decided to leave.

As if summoned by her uncharitable thoughts, Fergus is standing on the steps to the house waiting for them when they pull up into the drive. He looks different, somehow. Taller? Grander. Like their father. He has traded his typical jeans and t-shirt look for a pressed suit. Olivia’s brow furrows deeply.

Oren launches himself with a whoop like a rocket onto his father’s back, and Fergus greets him similarly. Oriana chuckles to herself and glides in to hug him. Olivia hangs back and busies herself with her bag.

“Still annoyed with me?”

She jumps, surprised to find him standing behind her so soon. She makes a show of struggling with lifting her bag out of the back. “Fergus.”

“Please, you and I both know you could lift that bag and Oren over your head and still have a hand free.” Fergus takes a step back from her and shoves his hands into the pockets of his slacks, watching her warily and wise enough not to step in to help.

“It was stuck on the seatbelt,” she mutters, and she can practically hear Cheese Man in her head, scoring another poor deflection with a thumbs down emoji. She pulls the suitcase from the car with ease and sets it on the pavement with a flick of her arm and a click of the expanding handle. Freed of her distraction, she finally steps into his arms for a hug.

It’s loose and tepid, and she knows that’s her fault.

She had almost forgotten how bloody large this house was.

She knows it like the back of her hand, explored every nook, cranny and hiding place from the day she could walk. But today it seems bigger, longer, darker, and every step she takes is weighed by lead regret.

The halls that once felt familiar and safe now seem to loom over her. The hallways stretch and grow before her very eyes. She squeezes them closed, just for a moment, just to get her bearings.

Despite having left over two months before, she makes a beeline for her former bedroom. She knows Oriana will have enjoyed redecorating the room into a guest room once Olivia left, and she hopes seeing an old place made new will make this stay at least a little easier.

But her hopes of a new beginning are quashed as soon as she opens the door and finds a room that is both too familiar and not familiar enough at the same time.
With a sigh, she tosses her suitcase onto the bed, slips the bag on her shoulder to the floor, and surveys the room she left behind. Her furniture is exactly where she left it. White squares line the walls where she had pulled photos and posters down and packed them into boxes. All that is left are books and knick knacks she had deemed too unimportant to take with her when she left, lining shelves and the bookcase in the corner. Apparently they were important enough for someone to keep around. She didn’t have to wonder who.

With idle but affectionate fingers, she traces the spines of the books. Each title brings back a memory, and she can’t help but smile as she pulls *Tales of the Wardens* from the shelf. A gift from her father, two Satinalias ago. She had been too upset to pack it when she left. Now, she pulls it close to her chest.

Three soft taps on the door startle her out of her reverie, and she doesn’t even have time to speak before Fergus is gently pushing it open.

“I just wanted to let you know that dinner will be ready soon.” He pauses and his eyes drift to the book clutched in her arms. “I hope the room is okay.” He sounds hesitant and unsure, and she’s reminded of a younger Fergus, eager to please their father and afraid of failure.

She glances around, tilts her head in a fashion reminiscent of Hessarian. “Have you had someone cleaning this room?”

Fergus chuckles and scratches the back of his neck. “Just once or twice.”

Olivia shakes her head. “You didn’t move anything.” She makes a halfhearted gesture toward the room, the odd missing spots on the wall. “Why?”

“I didn’t want you to feel like you couldn’t come back.”

They fall into silence then, Fergus looking only a little sheepish and Olivia nudging at the area rug with the toe of her boot. She wonders if that’s true, or if he just didn’t want to finalize her departure. She knows better than to ask him.

Instead, she holds up *Tales of the Wardens* and wiggles it a bit. “Can you ship this to me after I leave? There are a few things I left behind that I think I’d like to have back in Denerim.”

Her brother finally smiles, a real smile, and claps her on the shoulder. “Of course.” She hands off the book to him, noting with appreciation the way he handles it as though it’s made of glass. He doesn’t prolong the moment; that’s never been his style. Instead he turns on his heel and marches into the hallway. “Don’t forget about dinner! Oren is insistent,” he calls over his shoulder. She doesn’t miss the cheeky grin in his tone.

(19:40) What a surprise, dinner was more awkward than a mage finding out they have powers by setting the family cat on fire

(19:41) Everything is as I left it, which on one hand is nice because I don’t have to get used to any surprises like “oh by the way, we turned your room into a giant ball pit” - but on the other hand, it’s awful because it feels like no time has passed

(19:41) I’m hiding in the bathroom sending these texts, because they tried to rope me into Family Game Night

(19:42) I want to get properly soused and I haven’t even been here half a day. Wet bar? Closed. Not
even my nephew’s birthday yet. Brother knows me, the little shit.

(19:42) And you’re going to get these in a deluge so I’m sorry. For the rants.

(19:49) My phone vibrated 5 times in succession and I thought maybe they’d found Andraste’s ashes or something 😨

(19:49) Try not to get too hammered if you can help it. I had an uncle-thing of sorts once, used to tell me the funniest stories of local men and the bad things that happened when they drank. I believe they were supposed to be cautionary tales

(19:50) But little me just wanted him to keep telling me about the part where the local drunk peed himself. Kids are easily amused! Anyway

(19:50) Stay sober for the little one, and I’ve got your back as well.

(19:57) Sorry, but I’m pretty sure her ashes are still in the Frostbacks. I know, I know, I’m doing ALL of this for the kid. I love the little bugger, but everything else?

(19:57) Can’t blame a woman for wanting to sneak away for a nip of whiskey or two

(19:57) I got out of game night by the way. Nephew was crestfallen, understandably, as I am the life of the party. They’ll survive a round of Varghests and Ladders without me

(19:58) Trivial Pursuit is more my thing anyway. I know this because the only copy in the entire house was stored in my room in my absence and I’m flipping through the cards

(20:06) That’s cheating! 😏😉 I like guessing games, process of elimination stuff. And also I Spy. No one ever seems to want to play that one though 😐

(20:06) What’s your room like? I’d say “childhood room” but you didn’t run away as a teenager. Guess not much changes in two months. Bet it’s full of books. Bet your bed is a book.

(20:07) Like a racecar or dragon bed, but a book

(20:12) Ha ha no. The bed has cubbies under it for books though.

(20:12) I took all the really important things, aside from the mini library, so all that’s left are little things I didn’t think I wanted. Framed photos turned the other way, ratty stuffed animals

(20:13) General mementos that you forget existed until you’re face to face with them again. And a t-shirt or two.

(20:14) Everything’s all prim and proper though, not the way I left it. They took the liberty of emptying my garbage and ridding my windowsills of the odd cup or dish

(20:14) There’s a flowerpot too, probably to make it feel like Something lives in here if it’s not me

(20:21) Sounds… depressing 😞

(20:28) A bit, yeah. This delayed communication is the real depressing thing, so I’m gonna pass out for now, blame it on the jet lag if anyone asks.
(20:28) Thank you for responding. Despite how stupid and bleak this was

(20:29) I’ll try to be more entertaining so tune in next time for another episode of: My Brother is a Bellend. Goodnight, Cheese Man

(20:37) Sweet dreams, Dog Lord. You deserve them more than anyone tonight 😊 😻

**Sunday**

“I think we should take the buttresses down from the conservatory, maybe reinforce the walls with plaster or concrete. It’ll give it a slightly more modern look, less of this ‘scary abandoned castle’ feel we have going right now.”

Fergus nods thoughtfully at the contractor, poring over a large blueprint of the Cousland Estate with such a serious look on his face that Olivia has to hide a smirk behind her hand. He had asked her to accompany him to this meeting because “it’s your home as well, you should have some say in these changes,” but so far all she has contributed are saucy quips from the old baroque chaise longue in the corner.

It’s not that she doesn’t care about the updates to the estate; quite the opposite, in fact. But Fergus seems to have hit his stride in the time she’s been gone, and while she’s never been afraid of picking up a hammer and doing some hard work, he has used so many technical terms for construction now that he he might as well be speaking Qunlat to her. Now all she can do is watch and listen, impressed.

“Liv.”

She blinks at him. “Hmm?”

Fergus is leaning against the workbench, arms crossed over his chest, a single dark brow raised in her direction. He looks so undeniably Cousland. “After Sunday roast I thought we could go down to the stables. You can take a look at them and tell me what needs to be fixed.”

Olivia resists the overwhelming urge to roll her eyes. “Fergus, I didn’t come here to play construction worker. If I’m going to the stables it’ll be to ride.”

He purses his lips in disapproval, and seeing the expression on his face sparks a bolt of irritation through her. “I thought you might have some interest in their upgrades, since they were always more yours than mine.” He sounds strained and clipped, as though he’s biting back two words for every one he actually speaks. She can guess at the ones that aren’t being said.

“This is your project, not mine.” She affects a shrug she doesn’t mean. “You’ve been around horses longer than I have, you know as well as I what a stable needs.” Her legs cross and uncross on the chaise longue, and he eyes her dirty combat boots with distaste. Her irritation flares again. She does not move them.

With a sigh, Fergus shakes his head, and she senses his defeat. He gestures to the door of the conservatory with his arm fully extended, and when it drops back to his side it hits his jeans with an audible whump. “Let’s take a break, shall we?” He’s speaking more to his contractor than to her, and she knows she’s been dismissed.

She doesn’t miss the doleful look he shoots her as he exits the room.
Deflating, Olivia buries a hand into her unruly black locks and pulls them back into a messy ponytail. Before she had left Highever, her arguments with her brother had increased to an almost unbearable quantity. Debates about what she should be doing with herself, arguments about the running of the estate, and occasionally even shouting matches about Olivia’s emotional distance. She had hoped, however vainly, that a few months away would douse the fires, at least a bit. No such luck. It seems to her as though her absence has only given him time to think up even more reasons to be annoyed with her, and half of them he isn’t saying aloud.

As if by instinct, she reaches into her jacket pocket for her phone.

(13:45) ☀️😢😢🐶🐱 🚑 🚑 🚑 🚑 🚑 🚑 🚑 🚑 🚑 🚑 🚑

(13:47) The story of my day

(13:49) I definitely should NOT have gone into the pet store adoption center to look at the dogs

(13:52) It only made me sad 😞

(13:52) Lo! The misery of a dogless existence!!

(13:56) One of them held his paw against the glass and it seemed so accusing

(13:57) Anyway I want to say that I hope your visit is looking up but I kinda secretly hope you’re as miserable as I am

(14:01) I hope you come back soon 😊

Olivia chuckles and sits up on the chaise, folding her legs underneath her. She wishes she had a face, or a voice, to put to his words, but all she has is the memory of a freckled hand, large and long-fingered and strong. She envisions it pressed against a glass partition, and not for the first time, feels a tiny prick of déjà vu.

It leaves her feeling frustrated, with no explanation as to why.

(16:03) I heard that they train the dogs to do that any time a stranger comes round so that they can get adopted 😊

(16:03) Your secret hopes have come true. Perhaps I have you to blame for the miserable time I’m having!

(16:03) My brother seems to have forgotten that he is my brother, and not my nanny. Nags me incessantly. I’m going to put horse dung in his shoes.

She begins to type out another response, almost letting her fingers formulate the words on their own, but she has to stop herself. *I miss you.* Now where did that come from? She frowns down at her phone, stares intently at the words as though the longer she looks the more she might understand.
their meaning. Her heart gives a harder-than-average thump before she shakes her head and deletes them entirely.

(16:04) Pray for me Cheese Man, that I survive this trip and make it back to Denerim in one piece.

“Liv?”

Her head jerks up from where she had studying her roast with intensity, and despite her efforts she meets her brother’s gaze, still fixated on her from across the long dining table. The sight of him at the head of the table, giving her that disapproving look, makes her stomach churn. She snaps her head to her sister instead.

“I’m sorry, Oriana—what was that?”

Oriana’s smile is strained, and Olivia feels a flash of guilt. She was so busy being caught up in her own head and having a silent battle of wills with Fergus that she hadn’t considered the toll that tension would take on Oriana. She imagines her sister would much rather focus on Oren and his birthday plans than Liv and Fergus’ unspoken annoyance.

“Fergus told me you found a job in Denerim. I was just wondering how you like it.”

She smiles, thinking of Morrigan’s dour look when she had asked for the week off, and the swell of pride she’d felt at the confirmation that she was needed. “Oh, it’s great. I think I may have finally found something I’m good at that doesn’t involve violence.” She hears Fergus chuckle, almost inaudible, and they share a small, secret grin. There had been more than a few times in the last twenty-five years that she had gotten herself into trouble—bar brawls, parties that got out of hand, and once, a street fight—and Fergus had been there every time to bail her out, so that their parents wouldn’t know. She was never sure whether he did it to spare her, or to spare them, but she had always been grateful.

Fergus looks to Oriana, and the moment of camaraderie is gone, swept away on the wind of his next words. “A bookstore, is what she told me when we spoke on the phone. A nice change, I say.”

Something about his wording hits a nerve for her, and she takes a deep breath to suppress the sharp response bubbling in her throat. Instead, she cuts roughly into her roast, her knife screeching against her plate, causing her to wince.

“The food is delicious,” she says instead, as kindly as she can muster around a mouthful of food. It’s true, but she makes a point not to mention the roll of discomfort she feels with every bite. It has been months since she’d eaten the extravagant meals she’d once been used to, and the Couslands still employ the finest personal chef money could buy. The mixed smells of the dishes set upon the table are warm and cloying. They remind her simultaneously of home, and of death.

Her brother is still frowning, and she meets his gaze with an unyielding one of her own. She wishes that for once she would be able to get away with anything without her brother always seeing right through her.

“Isn’t it?” Oriana asks, sounding excited. “We’ve just hired a new chef, Elodie, fresh out of culinary school, and I think she’s rather talented!”
Olivia’s brow furrows, and she shoots a questioning glance toward her brother. “Did something happen to Nan? Is she alright?”

He gives her a dismissive wave of the hand and smiles reassuringly. “She decided it was time to retire, and I certainly wasn’t going to deny her, not after she practically raised me.” He smiles, and it’s affectionate and reminiscent. “So we decided to hire someone who could bring some new life into our kitchens.”

She nods, but can’t quite find the words to respond. She’s hit with a strange feeling of otherness, its invasive fingers spreading across her heart and squeezing like a clenching fist. So much has changed, had started changing even before she left, but now her childhood home is Oren’s childhood home, and things have to change, as they always do.

As she looks out at her family, the tableau is a strange one. The dining table seems enormous and empty, even as Oren starts chattering excitedly about his birthday. His parents smile at him with utter affection, completely immersed in his grand plans, and it’s at that exact moment that Olivia is able to put a name to this strange, cold thing she feels.

Homesickness.

(19:00) I’ve survived the weekend. Just a little over four days to go. A little over 96 hours. I can do this.

(19:06) That bad, huh? 😞

(19:11) Sunday dinner is such an event in this home, you know? Even if you can’t make it to any dinner ANY of the other days of the week, you make it to Sunday dinner.

(19:12) Even my delinquent ass made it to every Sunday dinner, like I’d be put in the stocks and flogged if I didn’t show or something, if that tells you anything.

(19:13) But this is the first dinner I almost didn’t make it to.

(19:19) Aw, you didn’t enjoy your 20 course meals? 😞 Did a piece of ceiling fall into the table and ruin a good conversation about taxes?

(19:19) I kid, I kid

(19:20) I’m sorry, Dog Lord, that her Lordship has found her castle in a state of disarray upon her return 😞 Is there anything I can do?

(19:25) Listen, I wish we talked about taxes because then no one could blame me for trying to fall asleep on the black pudding, rendering it inedible. Which it already is. Which, btw, I could not pawn off onto my nephew to eat for me.

(19:26) The nerve of that child, the disrespect for his elders! I’m bringing Hessarian next time, he’d eat my bloody sausages.

(19:32) Maybe you’ve got bad cooks over there or broken taste buds, because… 😞

(19:39) You’re vile. Come eat the sausages for me, then.
(19:45) You’ve changed your mind about the lap dog? 🐶 I knew you’d come around eventually.

(19:50) 🙄 I’m no longer entertaining your fetish for this 🙄

(19:50) Goodnight, though. I’ll mail some sausages to the P.O. box if you’d like.

(19:57) 😊 ! Good night! Sleep well, or try to, please.

Monday

(14:03) Cheese Man? You there?

(14:03) Tell me I’m not sitting here for nothing.

(14:05) 🙏 Yeees?

(14:06) Oh! Do mine eyes deceive me? My texts aren’t languishing in “sending” limbo!! 😐

(14:06) You’re right. I’m sitting in a cafe and there’s free wifi just lying about. Figured I’d take advantage of it.

(14:07) Are you there so you can talk to me, or… 😐

(14:07) Your ego has you growing bold, Cheese Man. I was here having lunch with a friend, nothing more.

(14:08) Oh. 😐

(14:08) Are they still there?? You’re texting me while lunching with a friend? Your rudeness has you growing…rude. 😎

(14:09) Nah, he’s been gone for a few minutes. I’m still here because

(14:10) Shut up.

(14:10) 😐 😐 😐

(14:11) So, friend. Man friend! Boyfriend? 😐

(14:11) Getting real sick of that emoji, to be honest.

(14:11) Boyfriend!!

(14:12) Oh, ew, no thank you. Nate couldn’t get it, not with that soul patch. Plus the bloke’s got a few years on me - I’ve told you I have standards.

(14:13) Methinks the Dog Lord protests too much 😎 😎

(14:13) And what’s wrong with a soul patch!?
Listen, you can’t go wrong with a bit of stubble. You don’t need much more than that.

I didn’t come here to talk about my preferences in men. How are you? Have I missed anything?

More dogs? Something stupid with that Cullen guy?

You sound desperate 😐

I sound like I’m crawling out of my skin, because I AM. My brother wanted to “just” go for a ride around the property, luring me in like I was a horse and his lies were a sugar cube. Thank the Maker Nate showed up, I was subtly begging him to get me out of there.

I’d never been so happy to see him

Ah, interesting. How do you know this “Nate”?

Sort-of childhood friend? The coast is a popular place for vacationers come Bloomingtide, people buy their summer homes and hog up the slices of beach along the north.

I’m more friends with Delilah and Thomas, his siblings, since they’re closer in age to me.

But he and I got along fine if we were forced together. The four of us crawling around Apostate’s Landing and Storm’s Solitude, pretending we were a bunch of brigands or something, creeping on other visitors because I said they were invaders of my territory

You LARP’d!!

It’s not “LARPing” if it was the truth. Anyway, eventually we grew up, began sneaking beers and being public menaces. Because it was summer, no school, whatever.

Then Nate stopped visiting, Delilah and Thomas too. They live in Amaranthine and the summer home was only fun because it was a reprieve. When everyone finished school, there were better places to vacation. Nate briefly fucked off to Kirkwall or something, I guess

He doubled as an excuse to get away from my brother, but part of me wanted to catch up with him. To see someone who knew me from “before”

He’s changed. He got... really tall.

Little Dog Lord, protecting her lands from the grubby hands of seasonal migrators! A cute mental image, even if I don’t quite know what to imagine 😊

He sounds nice

You really never considered?

Did you ever shack up with your childhood friends?

What? No! Why would you ask that?

Why are you asking me then? 😞

Natural curiosity, is all. I promise 🙏
(14:24) Well, curiosity killed the cat.

(14:25) But satisfaction brought it back! 😏

(14:25) Does it satisfy you to know I’m not hooking up with Nate? Maker, you sound like my mum, making sure I’m not consorting with men or women she doesn’t think are a “match”

(14:26) I never said anything of the sort 😳 I was just...curious! I said that. I’m sure he’s a nice young man.

(14:26) There you go again, you sound like mum after my fling with Dairren.

(14:27) Fling? 😝 I’ve got some paperwork to attend to. Some pencils to push. Some puppies to pet. Oh do you hear that, my phone is ringing off the hook!! The desk phone, not this phone. That would make it harder to text so

(14:28) Gotta! Dash! Woo look I’m gone

(14:28) Uh-huh.

(14:29) ✔️ Read 14:29

(14:29) That’s not even a read stamp. Do you want to hear about my first kiss, since you’re apparently the Dating Inquisition?

(14:30) It was a dark and stormy night

(14:30) 🍀 Hello you’ve reached the text...inbox… of Cheese Man, please cease and desist because I’m doing important things 🍀

(14:31) Right 😊 I’ll leave you be. But you got what you deserved

(14:32) I’m leaving the cafe finally, I’ve nursed this cappuccino long enough. Say goodbye to the wifi 🧧

Tuesday

Nerves piling up inside of her, Olivia comes down the foyer staircase, muscles tightening reflexively at the sights and sounds, the eyes that crowd around her. Today isn’t about her, though, she thinks, and she doesn’t want it to be, as the Banns swarm her and Arls and Arlessas fan about her radius. It’s short-lived, thankfully, as commotion stirs and everyone remembers the occasion and their children, and they ebb away from her after snippets of pleasantries.

Fergus has wasted no resource on his son’s birthday, despite him only turning seven. Olivia picks at plates of watercress sandwiches, breaded cups of spinach dip, oysters on ice, bite-sized cupcakes adorned with dragees from Orlais—a cornucopia of things the children will eye with disdain. The walls coruscate with light from chandeliers and ornaments in the windows, droplets of color bouncing from room to room, while the kids chase them in droves. The staples of a classic birthday are scattered about; a mountain of presents in ornate wrapping, streamers, balloons with well-wishes, cone-shaped party hats.
Party games commence, with phones at the ready, freezing memories onto screens. Olivia tries to
take her own photos of the occasion, to have a tangible memory, the proof that happiness still dwells
in this old castle. But as she taps through her camera roll, she shudders at the familiar locations with
new faces—a fatherly Fergus she doesn’t recognize, a kitchen table enveloped by his taste in
tealcloths and silverware. She lingers in the garden when the presents are unwrapped, face prickling
with shame as she plucks one of her mother’s snapdragons and wishes she could offer a better
excuse for leaving than “I forgot a gift.”

Nathaniel visits her once or twice, glass of a virgin drink in hand, but he’s here for Fergus too. Most
of the guests are, regardless of the star of the show. The guests flock to him, mouths dripping with
news and questions, propositions and plans. She knows because he seeks her out, and the throngs of
people come tied to his ankle, ruining any privacy they have. Olivia feels blessed, because her
brother looks accusatory with every second of shared eye contact as she slinks away, removes herself
from more of Oren’s special day.

When the festivities die down and the guests are funneling out the front gates, Olivia busies herself
with the clean-up. No one can blame her for her absence, for spreading herself so thin, if she tidies
up the mess she didn’t make. One bag of garbage into her mission, there are footfalls echoing in the
anteroom, the creak of a bannister. “Livvy,” Fergus begins, soft as the steps he takes.

She hunches her shoulders, collects a fistful of lurid tissue paper.

“You don’t need to be doing that, honestly.” He comes down the staircase completely, already clad
in his monogrammed robe and its matching royal blue slippers. Regardless of his words, he begins to
clean up beside her, chucking ribbons into a pile. “We pay people for this, you know.”

Olivia grunts in response. Her eyes are sore, her stomach feels empty. The sound of anyone speaking
has her skin buzzing in protest. When Fergus inches closer, she feels herself edging away.

“Have I hurt you?” Fergus asks. “Is there more to this than mum and dad?” He reaches for her arm
and Olivia pulls away, as though he has thrust a brand towards her skin. It seems enough of an
answer for him, and they continue working in silence. A few minutes later, Fergus tries again, with
less touching but more probing. “Have you been seeing anyone?”

“What? What kind of question is that?” Olivia fumbles.

“I don’t—I don’t mean it that way.” Fergus inhales through his nose. “It’s been a good seven
months, I wondered if maybe you were seeing someone. Professionally.”

Olivia’s eyes narrow, her nostrils flare. The audacity of her brother. “You want to know if I’ve been
seeing a shrink?”

“Oriana recommended one for me and I—well, it was only a question. I figured if you weren’t going
to talk to me about it, you’re probably talking to someone else already.”

When she turns to face him and sees his eyes glossy with wetness, she wants to throw the glasses on
the table she’s cleaning. She can’t look away, because everywhere she turns there is a reminder of
some kind. Penciled-in lines on the wall from the days when she was almost as tall as him, despite
their age gap. Residue of “frescoes” they helped their parents paint, in the days where they could be
anything they wanted to be. Willow catkins slapping against the window panes behind her, the ones
she planted with her mother, the sign of spring coming next week. Instead Olivia stands her ground,
watches her older brother with her eyebrows scrunched up, trembling for reasons she can’t put voice
to.
“Livvy?” he asks, the nickname stinging with how careful he says it, how fragile he makes her feel. “Talk to me. Tell me how you feel.”

She presses her tongue to the roof of her mouth, forcing herself to take a moment to think before she speaks. She does not trust herself otherwise. “You want to know how I feel,” she repeats, slowly, as if the words are foreign to her. Fergus nods, though he has the decency to appear wary.

Olivia transfers a plastic cup to her garbage bag with more force than is necessary, and her front teeth pull at a loose piece of skin on her lip. She is silent a long moment, begs herself to find a diplomatic answer, but the only thing that circles around in her head, over and over, is:

“I feel annoyed.”

She rounds on him, and she can feel it bubbling in her chest even as she says it out loud, all the small tics she has tried to bury in the last few days no longer squelched underneath what thin veil of self-control she could claim. He blinks in surprise, and she does not offer him respite from an intense, irritated glare.

“I feel annoyed that you forced me to come here against my wishes, and I feel annoyed that you continue to deny me the privacy of my own thoughts—even though you know very well that’s all I want—in some misguided attempt to head shrink me into being okay.”

Fergus purses his lips in an instantly recognizable signal of anger and Olivia feels a pulse of satisfaction. Finally, the composed and proper stranger had folded to her willful brother, the brother she recognized and hadn’t seen in longer than the two months she had been gone from Highever. A small, malicious flame in her gut grows larger.

“I feel,” she continues, stepping closer to him, her voice lower now, “that if I have to hear that stuffy Teyrn voice come out of your mouth one more time I’m going to put you in a headlock and keep you there until you cry like you did when we were kids.”

A spark of annoyance flares in his eyes, and it’s a familiar one. “I wasn’t crying and you know it,” he snaps, before shaking off the old argument to focus on the current one. “I’m just trying to help, but you make it so much more difficult than it needs to be! I don’t understand why you won’t just talk to me!”

“Because I don’t even know who you are!” She feels tears sting in her eyes and she desperately wills them away, wills herself not to break in front of him. “You try so hard to be Dad—wearing these suits and obsessing over renovations, fancy cooks, staring down at me from his seat at the table, all disapproving and worried. It was bad enough getting the pity from people I barely even knew, from my friends, but from you, Fergus?”

Olivia feels a hot tear land on her cheek, and she whirls around, hoping her brother hadn’t caught a glimpse of it. She rubs it away with the heel of her palm, runs her hands through her hair and clasps them together behind her neck. The lump in her throat tastes like defeat.

“I already had a father, Fergus,” she says, quietly now so as not to give herself away and yet doing so more than ever. “And I don’t want a therapist. I just want my brother.”

The garbage bags drop, party favors spilling onto the rug. Fleet of foot, Olivia takes to the door, déjà vu dogging at her heels as she takes the steps to the driveway two at a time. Two months ago she did this, and she’s doing it again, heart hardening as she realizes that this time it is not an echo of the past, because she’s forgotten her keys. Not daring to rush inside and be accosted by a worried Oriana or a potentially frustrated or furious Fergus, she walks. She walks, and walks, left foot, right foot.
It was not her intention to end up at the cemetery, not after her verbal brawl with Fergus, but there were only so many places her feet could take her, and the city proper was too many miles out. A sunset blanches across the sky, capping the clouds in orange and salmon light. Salt from the sea below the cemetery’s cliffs clings to Olivia’s lips as she scales the locked gate. Her phone rattles in her pocket as she hits the slick grass with a muffled thump, and she sets off, pretending to be aimless, even though her feet and her heart are navigating her someplace forbidden.

In Loving Memory of:
The Soldier and The Seawolf
Bryce Cousland
8:80 Blessed—9:34 Dragon
Eleanor Cousland
8:82 Blessed—9:34 Dragon

Olivia traces their names on the headstones, the words “beloved mother and father” and “we miss you.” She did. She does. As she sits down, Olivia clumps up a handful of grass and rips it from the ground, scatters them to the wind as she bites her lip. For seven months, Fergus has nagged her to come here, to spill her feelings, to make peace. Looking at the lustrous granite that marks where her parents lie, she’s never felt more at war within herself.

He’s told her to talk to them, but there’s nothing to say to people who cannot hear.

Hi. You’re gone and I’m here. Why are you gone? Why did you both leave when I needed you?

Olivia’s breath catches, tongue locked in the back of her mouth, stomach roiling. Her fingers travel to the top of the headstones again, dipping inside the shallow puddles of rainfall from the early morning. It’s hard to hear the Waking Sea over the thundering of her heartbeat, caged inside her throat, and even though her parents left her just last year, she feels so small, infantile, afraid of every staccato beat rumbling within her chest. Their deaths feel so fresh, too real.

Her hands come back into her lap, shaking. The night is rolling in with the fog and the fear in the pit of her belly is too alien to comprehend. She can’t go home, she doesn’t know where home is. She scrabbles at the stone and the ground and the grass and her skin. She claws, digs herself deep into the dirt, but she remains quiet. Still. Her chest bloats with a hiccup; Olivia holds her breath and counts to ten, then ten again, thinks of something terrifying to make them dissipate, except now she’s left cold and lingering with thoughts she can’t shake.

I can’t do this alone anymore, I can’t.

Olivia slides her hand into her pocket and pulls out her phone, turns it over again and again. There’s reception here, and though she hardly believes in the Maker anymore, she thanks Him for such a tiny blessing, as small as it is. She tries to compose a text to Cheese Man but she loses momentum halfway through every sentence. Hey. What are you up to? She backspaces. Not having a good time right now. Deletes that. I don’t know what’s going on but I need someone to talk to right now. No. I need you.

Backing out of her messages, she scraps that idea completely. Olivia opens her Phone app, taps to get her contacts. Her phone has so few numbers in it, it’s not hard to find his, to click on his name and hover over the small, blue telephone icon. She has to hit it without hesitation, or she knows she’ll be there all night wondering what might have been if she had the courage.

The screen fills with his contact name, “calling home,” and she bites back the laughter that edges at her lips from the irony of it all. “Pick up, pick up, pick up,” Olivia whispers into the receiver, desperate. Don’t pick up, don’t pick up, don’t pick up, is the frantic message tattooed onto the backs
of her lips. After a minute, the dialing stops. She pulls the phone away from her ear to see the call’s connected. A wave of silence washes over her and for a minute she worries she’s made a mistake; called the wrong number somehow, some way; the pause grows longer, he doesn’t want to talk to her, it’s a bad time—

“Hello?”

The wall of anxiety topples down and she yearns to take a gulp of breath, but she covers her mouth instead. His voice, in her ear, Olivia feels like she is absorbing the sea with every tear she blinks back. The anger from earlier that lapped at her teeth and the corners of her eyes was now abating, his voice like a cooling balm. It wasn’t how she expected or dreamed it to be, higher-pitched, more airy, but maybe it was his nerves, too.

“...Dog Lord?” he tries again, and she can’t resist smiling through her surges of adrenaline. Olivia touches her cheek, the corner of her lips, and shakes her head at the pet name.

She becomes suddenly conscious of things that don’t matter, wonders if her breathing is too loud, is her voice unattractive? What if without the time to formulate words, he won’t find her as interesting? Or worse, what if he finds her annoying?

She realizes that she hasn’t even said hello yet, but her voice can’t seem to find traction. Her first word comes out as only air, until—“H-hi.”

There’s a breath—of relief?—and a chuckle on the other line. “I thought you were having me on with a prank phone call. But, that’s really you, isn’t it?” It’s almost as if she can hear his smile too. “Good.”

The warmth of that voice floods her limbs through the phone, and she barely feels the chill from the evening air in her fingers and ears through the flush that burns across her. She blinks, once, twice, and a third time, trying to clear her head. “I’m sorry to just—for the lack of warning or permission, I just—” She swallows. “I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Wait, hold on.” There is rustling on his end, she hears his breathing pick up and a cushioned impact. “Alright. Dog Lord,” he says, softer this time, more assured. “Are you okay? What can I do to help?”

She can’t help the breathy laugh that escapes her. She hadn’t really thought that far ahead. Olivia remains quiet for a minute, maybe two, trying to take inventory of her thoughts, where did it all go wrong?

“You still there?” Cheese Man asks, and inwardly Olivia wishes again that she had a name to put to this voice, more than a freckled hand, bizarre “fun facts,” and the imagery of strange facial hair.

“Yeah, of course,” she replies.

“Should I talk about my day? Would you like that? I can’t really add emojis to the story, I suppose, guess that makes it a little less exciting. You can’t say ‘two sunglasses emojis and a wink emoji’ and have that sound remotely cool, huh.”

“It’s my brother,” Olivia blurs. “A fight. Had one.” She stops, her heart pounding so hard, impeding her from going any further.

Cheese Man, on the other hand, barrels through the pregnant pause. “He didn’t hurt you, did he?” he says, all trace of humor gone until she responds in the negative. “Brothers, a wholly unhelpful bunch, aren’t they? Cullen’s a brother—you remember him—and I can’t help but feel a titch sorry for
Rosalie and Branson. Not Mia though, she gives as good as she gets. Oh, Maker, this isn’t helping, I’m—well I don’t know what I am right now, can you tell? I thought sitting in bed would make this easier, but I think I got the comforter wet. With sweat. You’re not laughing, are you? Don’t answer that.”

He talks a mile a minute, but Olivia finally feels herself slow to match it. Enough to admit, “I’m here in the cemetery. If I were laughing, at least no one could judge me.”

“You don’t know that necromancers aren’t around, waiting to raise the dead.”

“For the sole purpose of… mocking me?”

“I didn’t say they were smart necromancers who have good time management skills.”

Olivia does laugh at that, and she’s awash with elation. Every text they’ve ever shared, it’s just like this; he is no wrong number, like she was.

“So, cemetery? Spooky place. And it’s night time, even spookier. I’d ask why you’re there, but maybe I’m not a high enough level—to unlock your tragic backstory, I mean. That’s fine,” he assures her. “I think, maybe, you’ve unlocked mine. Since I can take a guess why you’re there.”

“Oh?” is all Olivia can offer in response.

“I mean, if you were a necromancer, I think I would’ve picked up on that by now. Anyway, where do I begin… I guess the start is as good a place as any. First off, I lied a while back: I wasn’t born in Denerim. I don’t think so, at least, because my earliest memories are of Redcliffe. I know I’ve said I don’t do much traveling, and that’s true—from Redcliffe to Denerim, there was only one pit stop in between, Bournshire. And that’s because I—well my parents gave me up as a baby. I was inconvenient, or so I was told, because I was given to the Arl’s family and they carted me off to an orphanage when I was ten. The Arlessa couldn’t stand me, and I get that now, but back then? It’s a lot for a kid to ‘get.’”

“An orphanage? Really?”

“Run by the Chantry, too, so you know it was an absolute blast of a good time. To spice things up, sometimes I’d scream in the middle of the night, just to see if the cloistered Sisters actually cared about me. I think they branded me un-adoptable after that.”

Olivia snorts a tiny bit, quickly covering her mouth to hide the offense.

“No, no, you can laugh. It’s funny now, even if I was a surly little bastard then. Ha—anyway, so, no one ever adopts kids when they’re older. It’s just a fact I think everyone accepts as inevitable in there. I was about fifteen when they started talking to me about what I could do when I came of age, which to them was eighteen, and since this is the Chantry we’re talking about, all my options were: templar, templar, and—oh yes, templar.”

“I’m going to go out on a limb and assume you didn’t become a templar.”

“Right. But it seemed that way to me, and I was not a happy camper once they began giving me pep talks to go into the bloody army. Maybe some boys want that, like Cullen, but he’s—well this isn’t about him. So I got adopted! Except not. It was a fostering thing, which some people do because they apparently want to get paid to deal with snotty brats, but… Duncan,” he sighs with reverence. “Duncan cared. I was fifteen, still, and he must’ve seen something in me. There’s plenty of babies and younger kids in the orphanage, but he picked me.”
He continues, hastily. “But he never adopted me. Not truly. He got sick, and I went back to the orphanage—this time in Denerim—until I was of age. They never took me into the templars, because all I wanted was to find Duncan. I did but, you know, sometimes sickness never goes away. Sickness like that. It’s why…”

“There what?” Olivia lowers her voice. “It’s okay if you can’t tell me.”

“Why I never have money. I’ve put him up someplace, trying to hang onto whatever life he has left. But I didn’t want it to be a bad life, so it’s rather ritzy, if that’s the right word for it. He’s the dad I never asked for but always wanted, so he deserves this, he deserves to live in the lap of luxury, so long as he’s not in pain.” He tries to laugh, sounds like he moves his face away from the phone. “He’s told me he’s from Highever, before. I think he’d like that about you.”

Something in the earnest way he said it has Olivia shuddering, curling up closer around her parents’ headstone. It’s then that she remembers where she is, not lost in the aether, wherever in space the phone call resides. “I’m glad you’re not a templar,” she says.

“As am I! I’ve got enough problems, struggling with an addiction would require more fortitude than I have to go around. I shouldn’t laugh, it’s not funny. Cullen would be tearing me a new one right about now.”

“I meant—” Olivia looks away, even though he can’t see her. “Well, my parents are dead. Not too different from losing Duncan like that.”


“Seven months. Last Justinian.”

“I think that’s a big difference, Dog Lord! You’ve had however-old-you-are with them. No, I’m sorry, now I’m being insensitive. Foot, meet mouth. But, Dog Lord,” he says again, with the firmness and comfort he spoke with before. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, it’s fine. It’s not fine, but it is. It’s why we fight, my brother and I.” Olivia fills her lungs and breathes out as evenly as she can muster, eyes shut tight. “I don’t know if it was an accident, their murder. A mugging gone wrong, I think they tried to explain to me, but when your world is being upended, details go in one ear and out the other.”

He hums. She imagines he nods.

“My brother spent months trying to fill the gap, as if he could—he’s a dead ringer for dad sometimes, but with the temperament of mum, too. That made it worse. He’d come to me in the middle of the night—warm, sweetened milk and all, the prat—and try to get me to talk. Like I was some damaged child, like I was his son. I could only take that for five months.”

“To...Firstfall? Oh.”

“Yeah, ‘oh.’ Satinalia. We endured All Soul’s Day without a hitch, but Satinalia, that shit lasts a week.”

“You celebrated it for a week? We only get the day! Sorry—continue.”

“I think it was a tradition, but it’s a tradition I’d happily break, because one day is hard enough, but, you know.”

“I know.”
“So, yeah. Fergus, he knew something was up after Satinalia. He doubled down on his efforts to pry me open. Like if I wasn’t going to talk before, surely after the drama of a huge holiday would make me spill my damn guts.”

“Unfortunate.”

“It didn’t work, though that’s probably obvious. I took the week to pack my things, but on the inside I was gone, I’d already left. I left,” she repeats, rolls it around on her tongue, the reality feeling acidic, burning a hole in her tongue, straining her ability to speak. “To Denerim, because I didn’t know where else I could go. It’s big here—there—and foreign. Dad would take us there on business trips, but that was when we were little, so restaurants and shops aren’t the same now. I don’t recognize anything, nor do I want to. I’m glad. I wish I were there now, honestly.”

“I wish you were too.”

“What?”

“As in, so you were someplace you liked! Obviously. Continue.”

“That’s it, really. I’m... angry, a lot of the time. Can’t be helped.”

“I understand. I felt a lot of anger, too, if you can believe it. I don’t know who my mother is, but I know who my father is, and he had a son whom he kept. As far as I’m concerned, Duncan is my real dad, but it didn’t make it hurt any less when I was younger. I don’t know that I’ve told anyone, I don’t think even Cullen knows the extent of it, even though he takes me to visit Duncan.”

“Same. I mean I don’t think any of my friends know about this. I wouldn’t tell my Highever friends, they all treated me with that saccharine pity, with the way they dote and their parents dote, and I just want to be treated like a person, who just so happened to have the worst thing in the fucking world happen to them, but still a person outside that.”

“Yeah. They don’t treat you like a kid in an orphanage. Not in the one I was in. Just something to pawn off, though maybe that’s the Chantry, they love to use people as their pawns.” He gasps.

“Sorry for the irreverence.”

“No, I agree. Hard to believe in the Chantry and the Maker when they tell you it was His plan and it’s ‘just.’ Some plan this was.”

They stop talking for a while, accompanied only by the sound of their breathing. Unbridled nerves come and go; Olivia opens her mouth to speak, but wonders if there’s anything more to say. But she wants to keep talking to him, keeps tracing topics into her skin in lieu of paper and pencil, because she doesn’t want to stop hearing his voice, or his lilting laugh when he’s said something outlandish or inappropriate.

He breaks the ice, she sends a thanks to the heavens. “What were they like?” he says, no pity, just curiosity.

“They were…” Olivia thinks on this. “Great. Mum, she always… I don’t think she ever wanted her life for me, sitting on my thumbs all day atop an arling. Not for lack of trying though, but all she ever wanted for me or Fergus was to be happy, and those arranged marriages you and I talked about, they wouldn’t have made me happy. I love—loved—her for that. The devout stubbornness, matched only by her love for us.”

“She sounded amazing,” he replies. “And your dad?”
“Much more lenient. Maker, he let me and Fergus practice with swords in the courtyard when mum wasn’t around. And, oh, one time… I’m sorry, is this too much?”

“No, no, I’m happy to hear it.”

She believes him. Olivia regales him in stories she hasn’t thought about in years; tales of her parents before they had their children; the time Bryce snuck her and Fergus away for an impromptu vacation, all in the name of helping foster a love for history within them; the parent-teacher conferences that either went very well or abysmally bad, with no in-between; anecdotes about Fergus and his older-brotherly ways. It feels like her own body is being exhumed within the cemetery walls, dirt unearthed, allowing her to breathe now that she has someone to share things with. And he gives her memories of equal value, about Duncan and the limited time they had together when he was a teenager, or snippets of his roots—the Arlessa that hated him, his sleeping with dogs, and bitter winters in the stables. Olivia feels an inexplicable urge to strangle someone as Cheese Man’s stories taper off, but she keeps those thoughts to herself.

With the moon peeking overhead, Olivia’s body acknowledges how cold she is, though she can’t tell if she’s shivering from the temperature or the excitement. Still, she knows it can’t go on forever, not with dwindling battery life. “It’s getting late,” she starts. “I should walk back before my brother sends a search party, which I’m surprised he hasn’t already done. Maybe he’s figured it out by now, what I’m up to.”

“How are you supposed to walk home in the dark? Should I stay on the line, just in case?”

“It’s fine, Cheese Man,” says Olivia, and she still can’t believe that after so much soul-baring, she still calls him that, when there’s so much more to him. Her chest aches again, her shoulders tighten. “I’m almost in bumfuck-nowhere, and there’s no one out here whose ass I couldn’t kick if they tried anything. I promise.”

“Hmm…” He huffs. “I believe you. Still, be safe, or I’ll find Hessarian and keep him for myself.”

“Your dog-napper fantasies will have to remain fantasies, I’m afraid.”

“Sooo… Who hangs up first?”

“I’m not doing that, I’m telling you now.”

“No ‘you hang up’, ‘no you hang up’? That’s no fun.”

“Honestly, I’m exhausted and would like to sneak in through the dining room window as fast as possible, so. Goodnight, Tiger Emoji.”

“Aw, have I lost Cheese Man status already?”

“You’re still that, just, yeah, the nicknames are interchangeable. Leave me alone.”

“Well you’re still Dog Lord to me. So, erm, goodnight then. Be safe. Have sweet dreams and, uhm, thanks. For trusting me.”

“Thanks. For listening to me. Same to you, sweet dreams or something. Bye.”

“Bye.”

But they don’t immediately hang up. They sit there, exchanging breaths, nothing else. Olivia unsticks the phone from her face and hovers over the red button, now illuminated, until after one last shared
breath, she taps it. It’s over.

Even once she’s snuck into bed without being accosted by another Cousland or a servant, Olivia replays pieces of the phone call in her head; she goes through their recent texts and ‘hears’ his voice with every message, even the ridiculous way he says “emoji.”

She falls asleep imagining him saying “be safe” on loop, the only words she wants to hear.

**Wednesday**

The next morning, the sun breaks through her window in gentle rays that cast away the cold melancholy of the night before like water splashed on pavement. Dust motes dance in them like tiny fairies, and pearls of dew adorn the window glass, flecked with rainbows and sparkling.

Olivia dresses slowly but with renewed purpose, feeling as she pulls on a well-worn leather jacket that she is also donning a fresh self. She doesn’t bother with makeup, only tames the black tumbleweed of her hair into a loose braid that hangs down her back.

She finds her brother’s family seated around the dining table with a familial ease that makes her heart constrict. They speak in soft, pleasant murmurs, words low and intimate and not meant for her ears. The image is that of a Teyrn’s family. Of love and comfort and home. Of a thing she can now only visit.

She taps her knuckles against the door frame, quiet, reluctant, not wishing to pop their comfortable bubble. When they raise their faces to find her, they smile, and the bubble does not pop—it expands a few more inches to embrace her, like a summer breeze against cold skin.

“Liv, would you like some breakfast?” Oriana calls to her, her voice melodious despite the discordant echoes of the cavernous room. Olivia gives her a grateful smile and shakes her head no—though her stomach yearns for the sweet, downy scent of perfectly-browned pancakes, billowing with tiny air pockets and bathing in pools of syrup—

She pulls her eyes away from the food on the table and brings them to rest on her brother’s face. She wonders idly if he has always had so many lines, or if many of them are carved from the blade of the anger she had brandished at him the night before. His shoulders are stiff and he avoids her gaze, focusing instead on the fork in his hand that is carefully arranging continents of syrup on the map of his empty plate.

“I’m taking Cathaire out for a spin,” she says quietly, the room’s echoes abrasive on her ears. “Thought I’d see if you wanted to come with. That is,” she smirks, “if you aren’t too old to ride.”

Fergus’s eyes flash to her with a fire that is all too familiar. They gleam in the natural light of the room, competitive, determined, Cousland. She props a fist on her hip and cocks her head at him and it is fuel on the fire. He stands, six feet of stolid grace, and to someone who was not his sister, he might appear intimidating. When Olivia looks at him, she still sees a fresh-faced twenty-year-old overflowing with enthusiasm and insecurity; no doubt he, himself, still sees a willful teenager in her, brash and full of vinegar.

Her brother smiles then. He kisses the top of Oren’s head and gestures with his hand toward dining room doors. “Let me change, and I’ll meet you at the stables.”
If there truly is a heaven, a seat at the Maker’s side, Olivia very much doubts it can hold a candle to the bliss of riding through the hills of Highever. The chill of the damp air against her face is like a salve on her invisible wounds as she trots beside her brother. She has missed these hills more than anything else since her move to Denerim, has longed to see them blur under her fingertips once again.

Amaranthine Chargers are the pride of northern Ferelden, and Cathaire lives up to her legacy well. Seventeen hands high and built stocky for the northern highlands, with a coat that shines like an oil slick, she is Olivia’s second most beloved possession. She is willful and spirited, a kindred soul to her rider and untameable to any but her.

Olivia and Fergus circle the grounds of the house in silence, though she can see him examining the house thoughtfully from his perch atop his dainty Orlesian Courser (a source of endless teasing from his sister, though he was unabashedly proud of the lovely mare).

It’s cold, but there is no sleet or hail, and Cathaire is chipper and frisky, no doubt overjoyed to be taken out to ride after her owner’s long absence. Her restlessness is contagious, and Olivia is all but bouncing in her saddle with impatience. Fergus is the calm to Olivia’s perpetual storm, and he rides in calm elegance, his back straight and his stance perfect. The sight makes her smile; it’s almost as if they are young again, without a care in the world.

They come upon the road from the castle drive, and Olivia feels a smirk slide across her face, slowly, like ice sliding across a plate. Cathaire whinnies with excitement below her, as though she can read her rider’s thoughts. Perhaps she can—Olivia has always wondered. She looks to her brother, and he raises a brow, expectant, challenging.

Her horse is not the only one who can predict her.

She jerks her head in the direction of the road. “Last one to the gate has to buy the other a drink?”

He hesitates, she can see it in the way his head pulls back just a bit and his brow lifts. She wonders if he, too, is remembering the many times they had settled arguments with racing when they were younger, and the many times they were scolded by their father for misusing their horses. She wonders if he, too, is remembering the many times she soundly beat him.

Finally, he straightens in his saddle and pulls his horse’s reins tight, bringing her to attention. Cathaire dances beneath her and Olivia lets her, because she knows that her mare loves a challenge.

Before Olivia can even begin to count down, Cathaire leaps into action and her hooves pound the dirt like cannons. Olivia can hear Fergus call out behind her and she laughs, high and free. The sound is carried away on the wind into a whisper. She grips the reins tight and she can feel the powerful locomotive of muscle, fur and sinew churning and pistoning underneath her, powered not by coal or oil but by the pure joy of living.

Her leather jacket billows behind her as the wind whips past them, her braid slaps against her back, and her nostrils burn in the cold, but she barely feels any of it. The inches between her and Fergus grow wider and wider, the grass blurs beneath Cathaire’s feet, and all she can feel is her own suspension from the earth as she flies higher than world-weariness can reach.

Whooping with abandon, Olivia throws her arms out wide, letting Cathaire take control, putting her trust entirely into her companion. Her horse has never needed incentive to run as fast and as hard as she can, and Olivia has never had incentive to stop her.

She chances a glance behind her, and finds that Fergus is catching up. While Cathaire has endurance,
Fergus’s River has speed, and he has always known how to direct her into a sprint just when he needs it the most. The gate is only a few hundred meters away now, and in a split second decision, she gives a discreet tug on Cathaire’s reins. Her horse resists at first—she has always preferred to be at the front of a herd, the leader, the fastest. But Olivia persists, and finally she can feel her horse slow, ever so slightly. Fergus overtakes them just in time, and he crows triumphantly as they bring their horses to a stop.

“Looks like I’m a bit rusty,” she calls out to him, grinning. Cathaire gives her an indignant snort and dances in place. She pats her on the neck and whispers promises of treats into her ear.

Fergus turns his horse in unison with her, shaking his head. His dark face is tinged red from the cold and the exercise, his hair mussed from the wind. He looks ten years younger, the way he did before their parents died. She herself blows a wayward curl from her eyes, and she knows her hair is a flyaway mess. Her cheeks burn, flushed and full of joy, and she can still hear the adrenaline pumping in her ears, a backbeat to her exhilaration.

“I think you put the cart before the horse,” Fergus says finally. They relax in their saddles, and Olivia only gently nudges Cathaire where she wants her to go, letting the horse take the lead once again. “So to speak.” He glances over at her and his eyes are glittering, content. Olivia rolls her eyes at him.

“Oh ho!” Her brother laughs jovially. His laughter is warm and genuine, and sounds just like their father’s. She was grateful for it—her father’s laughter had always reminded her of a thick fur blanket sliding around freezing shoulders. She’s glad to keep it in her life. “Two months in the city and suddenly you know all about hard work and roughing it!” His eyebrows waggle at her. “Tell me, how is that library treating you?”

Olivia huffs. “It’s a bookstore, and if you met my boss you might have a bit more pity, but I see your point.” With a toss of her head, she gives in to laughter. “It’s been weird, living alone. But I think it may be growing on me.”

Her brother seems to glow at that. “I’m glad. I’ve been worried about you.”

A silence falls over them like a heavy blanket, filled with the down of her own guilt.

Ahead, her eyes land on a familiar space, small and inauspicious among the grand rolling hills and thick, towering trees that surrounded it. Fergus spots it too, and shoots her a slightly alarmed, questioning look.

She doesn’t acknowledge it. Simply pulls Cathaire to a stop and dismounts, stroking her nose and tying her reins—anything to busy herself so she doesn’t have to meet her brother’s eyes.

Stuffing her hands into the pockets of her jacket, she trudges determinedly to the graveyard. Gravel crunches underneath her boots, as if to welcome her back, and a chill breeze brushes her cheek in greeting. She can hear the similar crunch of Fergus’s boots not far behind her, and he is silent, waiting for her to speak first.

She doesn’t do so until she reaches the now familiar headstone, wide and standing proud. She reaches out to brush her fingers against the top of it, gently, as though the stone will burn her hands.

“I came here last night, for the first time,” she says finally, so quietly she can barely hear herself. Surprisingly, Fergus nods in acknowledgement, comes to a stop beside her but leaving space enough for her to feel comfortable. “I couldn’t face it, after the… funeral,” she adds. “It was just too
difficult.”

He is silent for a long moment, crossing and uncrossing his arms, his hands flitting about like nervous birds until they come to rest tentatively at his sides. “I didn’t realize. I’m sorry I kept pushing you to come.”

Olivia looks at him now, and musters her courage to give him a genuinely warm smile. “It’s okay. I understand now that there are a lot of things we should have talked about, a long time ago.” With a shrug of her shoulders, she digs her hands deeper into her pockets. “I never have been very good at that.”

“Ha,” he scoffs, but gently. “That’s an understatement.”

“Yeah, yeah, all right.” She rolls her eyes, and it almost feels as though they are siblings again. “But I figured I should try. For Mum and Dad.” As if acting of its own accord, her hand reaches out to trace the names of her parents, engraved in shining black letters and looking as elegant as befitted them.

“All I want is to help,” her brother murmurs. “To fix it.”

Olivia shakes her head. “That’s just the thing, Fergus. You can’t fix this. This isn’t a falling down roof, or a broken-down engine. We lost our parents. It’s not going away.”

“You can’t just run away from it either—“

“I’m not running,” she interrupts firmly, and she’s surprised at how calm she feels. “At least not from this.” She gestures to the headstone in front of them. “After the—the incident, and the hospital, and the funeral, nobody treated us like people. I didn’t want to talk about it anymore but that’s all anybody does. How are you holding up, how is your brother dealing with his new responsibilities, how are you feeling.” She pulls her hands out of her pocket now to wrap her arms around herself, though it’s not the cold she is protecting herself from. “My life became a great tragedy that everyone we’ve ever known was suddenly the audience to. And I just wanted to be me again. Not ‘Poor Olivia.’”

She glances at him through her eyelashes, and in her mind she can practically hear the sad, sad voices of “family friends” she barely knew. “You were the prodigal son, the heir, the new Teyrn with his lovely family. But I was the misfit. ‘That wilful girl’ whose future was in question now that Mum and Dad weren’t here to rein me in.”

Fergus clucks in annoyance, offended on her behalf, and the sound spurs her on.

“Honestly I could have dealt with all that, but then you started acting different. Worrying about me all the time, asking where I went, what time I’d be home, what were my plans. You asked me how I was feeling. And I just—I could grin and bear it when it was people I didn’t care about.” There’s a lump in her throat and she swipes angrily at her eyes. “But not from you, Fergus.” She mentally begs her voice not to break. “I felt like I’d lost my brother as well. So I left.”

His movement is stiff when he turns towards her, and she can see him open his arms a split second before stopping himself, hesitant. So she closes the gap, folds herself into his arms and wraps her own around his back. She thinks for a moment she can feel him shaking, but it passes as though it never was. He hugs like their father, firm and sturdy, but there’s no mistaking him for Dad now. This is her brother, all the way through, and she cannot be more grateful to have him back.

It takes all of her willpower not to sniffle into his shirt, so she pulls away instead and tucks her hands
back into her pockets. Fergus drags a hand down his face, his palm scratching over his unshaven chin and clearing away his grief.

“I’m sorry, Livvy,” he says after a long moment. “I was so wrapped up in my own shite, I wasn’t thinking.”

She nudges his shoulder with her own, offering up a halfhearted grin as she does so. “If you hadn’t been so busy trying to be Dad, you might have realized that you had what it takes to be Teyrn all along. Besides, you always did have too much Mum in you.”

Fergus raises a thick black brow at her. “Oh, do I? And shall I start nagging you about getting your life together, then?”

Olivia bats at his arm and glares. “Not if you know what’s good for you.”

He only tosses his head. “That’s all right,” he scoffs. “I wouldn’t have needed to anyway.” His face falls into a gentle smile, and he rests a hand on her shoulder. “Mum would be really proud of you if she could see you now.”

“Really?” She looks up at him in earnest and thinks of all the times she argued with her mother; all the times her mother had simply looked defeated. “I wonder sometimes.”

“She just wanted you to be happy, Liv,” he says quietly.

Happy. She contemplates this, thinks of the Crossroads, her desk with its piles of unchecked books. Morrigan, lurking around the store doing Maker-only-knows what. Leliana and her tuneless humming, and Dorian’s strange brand of belligerent academia. She thinks of her Cheese Man, the soft cadence of his voice when he was speaking to her the night before.

“I’m trying,” she says softly, smiling to herself.

“Good.” He wraps an arm around her shoulder and steers her gently back toward the horses. “Now, let’s get back to the house before we freeze, and you can tell me how you got this new job.”

“Ha! To tell you that, I’ll have to tell you about the Cheese Man first!” She chuckles and shakes her head. “Honestly, I’m surprised I haven’t already…”

**Thursday**

(18:22) It’s better now

(18:22) Things are better now.

(18:30) Are they? That’s amazing! That’s great to hear 😊

(18:31) ❤

**Friday**

(12:02) Sorry for not saying much for a couple of days, but on the bright side
(12:03) I’m boarding the plane back to Denerim right now.

(12:11) It’s alright!! I’ve been busy, I do stuff when you’re not around to bug 😊

(12:13) You don’t… Nevermind 😪

(12:14) Hope your flight is good, stay safe! Have fun getting chatted up by businessmen 😊
Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do 👌

(12:16) I can’t tell if that’s a lot of things or hardly anything. Thank you, though.

(12:25)

(13:55)

(13:58) !!!!

(13:58) You’re home! Right?

(14:08) 😐

(14:21) Airports were devised by some kind of blighted creature, like when the magisters went and accidentally came back as darkspawn, their first order of business was “why don’t we create airports?” Because why not

(14:22) And yes, I’m home. I don’t see you waiting for me at baggage claim. Colour me surprised.

(14:24) I considered it, but I didn’t want to make it weird 😎 And I’ve been at work for most of the day, but more importantly I just didn’t want to ambush you

(14:25) Maybe next time then?

(14:25) Haha, yeah 😊😊

(14:32) Wait, have you already left the airport??

(14:35) Dog Lord? 😸

(14:41) Sorry, I didn’t want to text while driving through Friday afternoon traffic. I did not miss this traffic, let me tell you. Andraste didn’t die for this.

(14:42) Maker…

(14:45) My HOUSE

(14:46) What? What?? Did someone break into it? Is Hessarian okay???

(14:47) What’s the opposite of a break in? Is there a word for THAT

(14:47) Well, uh… No, I don’t believe so? 😐
(14:48) Let me check something

(14:49) YEP. My coworker has done the opposite of ransack my damned home. What in the Void’s name… Cheese Man, I have pots and pans

**14:50** What did they do to them?

(14:50) She BOUGHT them. I’m… what

(14:51) She put food in the pantry and...made my bed? What’s the point of that if I’m just going to mess it up again? Why do I have decorative couch cushions? That’s even more useless!

(14:52) She organized my weights?? I don’t understand

(14:52) There’s new body wash and lotion in the bathroom. Is she trying to tell me I smell bad?

**14:53** Stop, stop 😂 Everyone’s looking at me like I’ve gone deranged, Cullen’s gonna take my phone

(14:53) Alright, well, that’s your problem. My problem is that now I have stuff in my freezer and I can’t complain about not being able to make it, because she’s gone and furnished my whole damn kitchen

(14:54) There’s a book on my coffee table. I didn’t even used to HAVE a coffee table. And it’s not even a regular book, it’s absolutely just a “coffee table” book, like I’m going to have guests and this picture book’s gonna make me seem cultured.

**14:55** Dog Lord I’m dying

(14:55) You’re dying? I’m dying! She’s washed the dog!

**14:56** I know this is probably not a good time to say this, because you’re clearly in shock from a single act of kindness

**14:56** But I’ve left the key at the post office 😓

(14:57) Why are you telling me now? I could’ve gone on the way home, put off this disaster until later!

**14:57** You were busy driving 😞

(14:59) Same place?

**14:59** Same place 😇

In the second planter to the left, Olivia unearths the familiar key. Without hesitation she rushes into the building, honing in on the familiar box. As she inserts the key, she glides a hand over the front of it; she wonders if he had done the same before, if she should have watched and waited to see him. Out of curiosity she looks around, but there is no one with strong, freckled hands keeping an eye on her. The thought leaves her almost as soon as it came, replaced with excited trepidation, interest in the box’s contents.
Her Cheese Man had not gone through the trouble of wrapping his tokens for her. Out spills odds and ends, a week’s worth of “I missed you”s, incarnated in the form of sticker sheets, paper clippings, books. She finds a printed-out photo of a dish she supposes he made, with the annotation: *I used the book you gave me! It was delicious :)*

There’s a small, black runestone in the pile, along with a brochure for Denerim—replete with a list of all the selling points of the city, the best places to go—and a necklace, a dog tag dangling on the silver chain. On one side reads *Dog Lord* while the other reads: “*If lost, call*” with his number attached. A folded-up note inside the box comes with instructions: *You don’t actually have to wear this, you know. It’s a joke! The lady at the pet store looked at me like I was crazy when I asked to get this engraved. Just in case you forget my number, if your phone breaks or something. This isn’t for weird things, I’m not into that. Why’d I write this in pen? Welcome home back!*

Scooping up the plethora of gifts and closing the box, Olivia hauls everything back to her car. For a minute she sits, unbuckled, miscellaneous trinkets pulled close to her chest.

(15:31) You’re such a prat.

(15:33) 😐

(15:33) I take it you liked them? I figured you probably owned every history book known to man, thought you could use some good ol’ fiction in that giant home library of yours 😊👍

(15:34) I loved everything. No clue what I’m going to do with...emoji stickers, but they seem appropriate. I’ll find something to put them on.

(15:34) 👶🏻 I can’t wait to see!!

(15:36) It’s good to have you back, y’know, without the uh

(15:36) Delays and such.

(15:37) It’s good to be back, I missed you too.

(15:38) 😓😢😢

(15:38) Really, I mean it.
Another lengthy chapter - longer than the last! We're not even halfway through the fic, but we're finally getting to the start of the flirting/relationship B)
We wanted to take a moment to (as usual) say thank you all so so SO much for the continued support of this silly little fanfic. We don't really respond to any of the comments because we don't want to skew the comment count (though we're unsure if anyone actually cares, and there are only so many ways to say "thank you!") but we love the feedback and we love talking to those of you who send us messages on Tumblr.

We love seeing familiar names, along with new ones, and we adore the short "kudos++" comments just as much as the long ones.

This chapter's art is by the majestic nippaaah :

Our personal blogs:
Carouselfancy
Tijgertje
And our fic blog, where we post additional art, drabbles, playlists, and updates!
Auguries

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday

Daisies for innocence, ivy for friendship, snowdrops for hope.

Coral roses for desire, pink roses for indecision, red roses for—

“Sir?”

Alistair’s back straightens, a lone leaf plucked from a rose and covertly stuffed deep within his pockets. The elf who has interrupted his thoughts brushes down her smock, crusted in dirt like her name tag; her foot taps furiously, her tiny shoe a dirty blur. Her eyes are flicking up and down, her lips pulled into a thin, tight line. “I’m sorry?” he says, turning away from the flowers.

“Oh, no, I’m sorry,” the elf quickly replies, and her face breaks into a lip-biting wibble. “I’ve just been trying to get your attention for three minutes. I, well, I was getting kind of impatient. Can I help you?” Her mud-flecked glasses struggle to stay steady on her sloping nose.

Alistair remembers, amidst the barrels and planters of loose stalks of flowers and puddles of petals, why he came to the florist. Fingers turning the leaf over and over, he looks around. “Have you got any potted plants? Something practical, my friend is a fan of practicality.” She stares at him, befuddlement written all over her face, and Alistair thinks that her wide, long-lashed eyes remind him of a cow, though the way her nostrils flare recalls the image of a bull. It seems to be a long day for the both of them.

The elf leads Alistair over to the adjoining room, where the ceiling is a translucent green and he can see the last dregs of winter rain pelleting the surface. The air is thick, almost solid, and the aisle they are crossing morphs from aromatic flowers to miniature trees and hanging leafy tendrils. “It’s a gift,” Alistair offers, as if that were helpful. He feels lost here; he sees the plants, he reads their meanings as though there are words inscribed on all their veins, but the mental fog leaves him blind.

Twenty minutes later he is walking out, a baby dracaena looped under his arm with an unnecessary purple bow stuck onto the pot. In his mind there’s a calendar mapping out the days of the week, reminding him that Barris’s birthday is after Wintersend but not before the end of week, something ends-with-day. He walks home, tips of his hair dripping onto the sidewalk and his hardwood floors all the same, house empty yet filled with the white noise of fans and muffled rain. The dracaena sits neglected on a countertop.

It isn’t late but then the rain finds total release, blanketing Denerim in sheets of water, the clouds knitting together to form a grey wall of early evening depression. Though street lamps flicker to life on the road down from his house, Alistair is cocooned in his dark room. Somewhere in his nest is his phone, but he’s electing to ignore it. No texts have come in, no texts have gone out. He throws his arm over his eyes and breathes in, out. Inhale with breath held. Exhale with breath held.

The thoughts don’t go away.

The unraveling laughter, the blasphemy, the utterance of oft-used monikers. So many phrases he can carefully construct in her voice, piece together like fridge magnets to say a multitude of things. The one thing he can’t seem to imagine, the thing that has him burying his face in his pillows, feels so
forbidden. Maker take him, he wishes he knew what his name sounded like in her voice, in her mouth.

Cheeks prickling with heat, there it is again: the shame.

That night Alistair dreams of the Dog Lord, no face to the name, haloed in flushed pink dog-roses, nightshade between curved lips, yellow acacia flowers swimming in her hair.

**Sunday**

(21:20) Hey.

(21:25) Did we suddenly regress to stranger basis while I was unpacking my baggage? The physical kind this time.

(21:27) 😞 No, of course not! I’ve had a lot on my plate and

(21:27) Alright, you’ve caught me. I don’t know what to say now, after all that 😞

(21:28) It was a phone call! You act like we had awkward casual sex and now we can’t meet in the breakroom anymore.

(21:29) What if our coworkers discover we’ve had a torrid affair, and the entire workplace ecosystem is torn asunder? Dog Lord, I don’t think the office could take another scandal.

(21:29) Yeah, well, a woman has needs. Tell the gossipy receptionist to get her head out of her ass and her ass out of the Divine Age.

(21:29) There goes my invite to the office Satinalia party 😞

(21:30) What’s the point of going if we’re not “taking inventory” in the supply closet and causing a third scandal?

(21:31) I think this hypothetical scenario got away from us 😞

(21:31) My original point still stands.

(21:33) How about another phone call? To demystify the experience for me 😊

(21:33) You just want me to say “Cheese Man” out loud again or something. I remember how heartbroken you were over the sudden change to “Tiger Emoji”

(21:33) Which is a much cuter nickname, so I don’t see what the problem is.

(21:34) Exactly, it’s cuter. I’m not exactly “pinch my cheeks and coo over me” cute, you know.

(21:34) I’ll believe it when I see it.

(21:34) 😊

(21:36) So, phone call?
Alistair shimmies out of his blanket cave, fingers picking at his phone case with anticipation. *When will she call?* he asks himself. *Am I supposed to call her or is this going to be like last time?* His anxiety abates when the incoming call rattles his device, but it returns once he realizes that he actually has to accept the call. A hand smooths his hair, he pulls up the blanket to cover possibly offending breath—things that don’t matter in the grand scheme of things, as they never do.

The call connects. He doesn’t feel more prepared this time than he did the last.

“Yeeeesss?”

Alistair smacks his forehead. Bad, bad opening line. ‘Hello’ was good, everyone uses that one, so why didn’t he?

Pulling him out of his insecure reverie, Dog Lord whispers into the receiver, “Are you always this awkward?” He wonders how long he’s been wrapped in his own head. Apologies want to spill forth, his calm, cool demeanor from days ago washed away, left behind in some unmarked grave at that cemetery she visited. Alistair mumbles something that she doesn’t catch, earning him a polite chuckle. “So that’s a yes, then.”

“I’m only wordy and charming in times of great need. If you’re without a personal crisis, then I’m afraid this is what you’re stuck with,” he admits.

“That’s fine by me. I’m sure it’s refreshing to hear me not dangling on the precipice of a breakdown.”

“I didn’t dislike hearing you like that.”

“You like hearing me verbally in shambles, do you?” His skin grows tight with goosebumps, arm hairs standing to attention even under his comforter just at the way she laughs at his foibles.

There’s a distinct snuffling on the other line, Alistair strains his ear to make sense of it. “Hessarian?” he asks.

“My hip is currently his pillow. He missed me, the lug, won’t even let me out of his sight. He probably thinks ‘I did it once and she disappears for a week, now I smell like Orlais and apple blossoms.’” Dog Lord’s voice goes deep as she affects what must be Hessarian’s voice, the cadence lumbering and oafish, a war dog that’s lapsed into the spoils of lazy afternoons. It’s almost as if he can feel the slight nose crinkle as she waxes lyrical about dog anecdotes; the methodical rubs between her pet’s velvety ears; a finger wrapped in hair of an indeterminate length, but it too must be silky. Perhaps flaxen, or a rich strawberry blonde, or even a fanciful, rebellious color, given what he knows of her. The stuffed mabari he keeps on his bed is jostled around by his restless feet, propelled by imagination and the stories of soggy rawhides and veterinarian mishaps.

“Your silence tells me this is riveting information,” Dog Lord says with the equivalent of a verbal eyeroll. “You don’t have to be polite, you *can* tell me stuff a sock in my mouth at literally any point.”

“I owned a cat once,” Alistair says, and his eyes widen at his own admittance, a fact he’s long
forgotten. “If you could call ‘feeding the resident stray in the cafeteria’ owning a cat. Unsurprisingly, she was rather large.”

“Oh? Tell me about your fat cat.”

“Nothing to say, really. I forgot she ever existed until this moment. Bourmshire was overrun with strays, there weren’t any shelters for them, so the orphanage unwittingly adopted a few.”

“You and your cat had something in common, I take it? That’s adorable.”

“Ha! What we had in common was love of food and the desire to be warm. She was an affectionate old lady while I was a sullen teenager. A pristine white coat on her while I was loathe to take communal showers and my face was pockmarked beyond belief. And don’t forget: she was fat. I, on the other hand, was a beanpole.” Alistair sighs. “The only person she ever really liked was me. Tried to groom me every so often, probably knew how dirty I was.”

“I’m surprised you don’t have a cat now, or a dog. How do you not have a dog?” Hessarian snores in the background, reminding the both of them of the joys of pet ownership.

“I’m too busy for any of the kinds of dogs I like. And,” Alistair pauses to grab his plush, to clutch it tight to his chest, “I’m a little afraid of dogs sometimes.”

“What?” Dog Lord balks. “You’re always going on about dogs—puppies in the park this, pet store rescues that. I’m confused, I thought you loved them.”

“I do! Or, I want to.” Alistair fidgets. Lightning streaks down the skyline and for a moment his room is illuminated, the spotlight on him. “I see a dog and I force myself to go to them, earn their trust, you know? To remind myself they’re not all bad. That they’re what I’ve always wanted.”

“Is this about the time you slept with them?” Dog Lord asks, concerned.

“That was only a few times, but that’s part of it. I’ve been trapped in their crates, they growled any time I mentioned cheese, had my ankles nipped at on the way to the kitchens. And not in the cute way that puppies love, they simply didn’t want me around.”

“Like the Arlessa.”

“Like the Arlessa,” Alistair confirms. “You remembered.”

“I mostly remembered that I want to knock her about a bit.” There’s a bite to Dog Lord’s tone, it makes his mouth sweat and his head feel cluttered.

“No, I don’t,” she says. “But some people deserve a special place in the Void—or worse, the Deep Roads—for giving you shit.”

“I—” Alistair falters, his phone almost stumbling from his hand. “Well I wanted to reply with emojis, but, erm. Something with a sweatdrop? Maybe a tear or two?”

“Mmm, yeah, I can imagine that.” Dog Lord’s voice sounds like it’s drooping, drifting off or sailing away from him. Every word that follows seems punctuated by a clipped yawn, the former fire at the thought of decking Arlessa Isolde now flickering out in his ears. To hang up or stay on the line, Alistair is unsure which option is the correct one, but she’s fading fast. Deep down, he feels an unsavory excitement at the prospect.
“Do you have work tomorrow, Dog Lord?” he asks, and there’s a jolt accompanied by a snuffle on the other end.

“I do, but,” she replies. “You couldn’t see it, but I shrugged. I don’t know. You could hang up if you like.”

“I don’t really want to,” says Alistair. He rubs the back of his neck out of habit. “You could hang up too.”

“I don’t want to play that game of ‘you hang up first.’”

“Then don’t.”

That’s all it takes for her to give in to sleep, he assumes. Her shallow breathing grows deeper with each minute; he hears Hessarian groan as he shoves off his owner and presumably makes for the end of the bed, and then there’s only the sound of his friend falling away to the Fade. Alistair wonders what she’s dreaming of—if it’s fighting a woman as faceless as she, fat country cats, or him. Wonders if she’s ever yearned to know his face, like he’s pretending the pillow beside him resembles hers. “Would Hessarian like me?” he considers aloud, still holding onto his mabari plush.

Voice thick with sleep, Dog Lord responds. “He’d love you.” It sounds like she rolls over, but the phone still rests near her mouth.

The call stays connected for another half hour, until Alistair feels that he too is being pulled to sleep by the lullaby of her constant breathing. She snores only a teensy bit, he thinks, isn’t sure why that makes his heart surge if he listens too intently. She sounds like a kicker, and that makes him laugh. When he goes to hang up, the only thing that quells his sadness is the lone rose leaf, wilting on his bedside table. A symbol of his hope.

That tomorrow, he might see her.

Monday

Denerim’s final winter deluge has made way for budding birth, of flowers and fauna, breezy caresses and romance alike. The market is canopied in silks, while the smell of fresh confectioneries lures everyone five steps closer, until suddenly everyone is dazed and milling away with cupcakes and sticks of incense. Arches are erected with raining wisteria, booths stand tall with their blinding bold signs. A dwarf beckons for bystanders to stop loitering, to buy his pots made from Redcliffe clay. An elf steps on a human’s foot but instead of bickering, they apologize in unison and wave each other off.

Alistair fills his lungs with crisp air and sighs, “Wintersend.”

Not yet warm enough to shirk off hoodies and pullovers, he forces himself into where the body heat is thickest, with Cullen at his side and Luana barely a foot behind. She grabs the backs of their jackets, desperate to stay close when the throngs of people threaten to sweep her away. It’s difficult to make it from one stall to another so early in the festivities, especially when merchants are still laying out their wares; Alistair doesn’t have the heart to push people away, but Cullen feels no similar compunction. As he elbows someone aside, Alistair and Luana swarm towards a table of figurines from Ansburg.

“Do you think Duncan would like one of these?” Alistair asks, eyes scanning for something. Something perfect, he’ll know it when he sees it.
“What about one of these?” Luana suggests. Her finger is jabbing at the plump fertility statuettes. Alistair blanches and focuses on the nesting dolls instead. Together they unpack them, giggling inside their hands as the paint on the smaller ones becomes less precise and more ugly as they shrink.

The crowd trickles out of the market as the first morning tourney begins. Cullen and Alistair have agreed to avoid off-the-clock violence, regardless of how staged it is. With benches unoccupied, the three of them nibble on caramel apples together.

“Ferelden needs more holidays,” Alistair says around a mouthful of apple.

“Agreed,” the other two reply, or he thinks they do. Their teeth are glued with hardening caramel and the three of them laugh as it happens to Alistair too. A gust of wind knocks the remainder of Alistair’s apple out of his hands; only Cullen and Luana continue laughing.

It’s a reprieve they’ve all been aching for. If there had been no holiday, he thinks he would have called in sick. Two victims were found on Friday and if he dwells on it for longer than a nanosecond, the bile rises. Humans, both of them. The crowd is teeming with human life. Concern already flashes in his eyes when he sees an elf—if Cullen wasn’t with Luana more often than not, he would fear for her life too—but now it’s humans, and there are so many more of them.

But on a holiday, it’s too loud. Too many witnesses, people on every corner, flooding every block. Garbages will be filled to excess, there’s nowhere to hide. There are plainclothes officers skulking about, integrating with every group. The rock sitting atop Alistair’s chest won’t leave, but it lets him breathe today, just for a little while.

They reach a booth boasting books all the way from the Anderfels and Seheron, some rare, some merely uncommon. Cullen takes more notice of the table next to it, littered with glittering everite chess pieces, rolling each piece between his fingers to feel the weight of the queen and her pawns. While Luana tries to make sense of a book titled Feasting on the Fallen, Alistair flips through several paperbacks, grimacing at the smell and dust assaulting his nose.
(11:52) I’m standing in front of a rack of dirty old pulp fiction books with some educational mumbo-jumbo mixed in. Spines are ridiculously broken. Thought of you.

(11:52) I’d send pictures, but, well, you know. 😏

(11:53) Anything good? Did you at least read the first page of any of the books before judging them judiciously?

(11:53) Does “This is Your Brain on Elfroot” sound like a Genitivi-award winner?

(11:54) Not particularly, no.

(11:54) Good, because a heap of elfroot fell out of the book. I didn’t know my friend’s eyes could get this wide, but behold! She looks like a bug 🎃

(11:55) You’re hanging out with a friend and texting me? This sounds incredibly hypocritical of you,
Cheese Man! Pray tell, how have they not lectured you like you would lecture me?

(11:55) 🎱 would never 😢

(11:55) Are you by any chance at the market, milling around? The tourney?

(11:59) Eh, no.

(12:00) You have an aversion to spring, sunlight, pollen, and/or people? 🌸 🌼

(12:00) No, but we’re swamped at work. Since apparently everyone and their mums have the day off, foot traffic is at an all-time high. 3 people is not enough for this job.

(12:01) A customer walked in with a cherry snow cone and a croquette and I thought I was going to die. It’s probably not worth it though, aside from the food.

(12:04) If you say so… But I did just pass a vendor who had a couple diaries from one of the only explorers to venture to the Sunless Lands. Probably a snoozefest, huh 😑

(12:04) Seriously?

(12:05) 😴

(12:05) Alright, alright. Either on my next break or if I can leave early I’ll walk over. Make sure no one buys them for me, will you?

(12:06) 🐅 ♀️ ♂️

“Who are you texting?” Luana asks, dancing on her toes to try to sneak a peek.

“It’s ‘Dog Lord,’” Cullen supplies her, complete with the air quotes no one asked for.

Alistair glares between the two of them. “Is not,” he grumps. “I have other friends.”

“Do you?” Cullen tilts his head, lips scrunching up. “If I’m here, and Lua’s here——”

“You know, if I were talking to Dog Lord—which I’m absolutely not—she’d be a lot less judgey about my taste in company.”

Cullen holds his hands up, palms facing out, signifying his retreat. For over a week he’s dealt with Alistair’s incessant moping over his best friend’s absence, and Alistair wouldn’t be the first to admit that his partner was nothing if not a trooper. But Cullen’s demeanor has shaken from grouchy disbeliever of all friendships formed via technology to sarcastic windbag who feels the need to make comments on the now-valid existence of Dog Lord. Alistair’s not sure which version he would rather endure. Still, though, this is the happiest he’s seen his partner in many weeks, the smile he sports so foreign but not unwelcome.

The bazaar only holds so many wonders for so long. Their feet begin to whine with the first cries of tomorrow’s pain, and the honeyed smell of hours-old doughnuts starts to wear on the senses. While all the glitter and confetti looks at home in Luana’s pink hair, it only makes Alistair frown thinking about how much time he’s going to spend scrubbing it off his skin and grey hoodie. Cullen’s starting
to clean his glasses every two minutes instead of every five.

Despite their flagging moods and annoyance at the performers who think they need to play their instruments loud enough to be heard at Fort Drakon, Alistair urges them forward. His head swivels this way and that, searching for a sign. Mabari balloons tug him one way, squeaking nugs repel him another.

“We’ve been here three times,” Luana mentions, soft as can be. Alistair looks over his shoulder and sees them holding hands, but in her free hand is an uncapped bottle of aspirin.

“Is he going to be alright?” Alistair swoops in to Cullen’s other side. The sleepless nights and the withdrawals have been weighing Cullen down, he knows, but Cullen has been so insistent on ignoring them. He knew he shouldn’t have listened to him.

“Yes, I—” Luana tries to tug Cullen in the direction away from the crowd, the masses all swarming towards another bout in the tourney. “He just needs to be somewhere dark and quiet for a bit.”

“I doubt we’re going to find that within a five mile radius,” Cullen says, wincing.

“If we don’t, it won’t be for lack of trying.” Luana dips a tiny bow to Alistair before zigzagging away, Cullen in tow and possibly exacerbating the headaches, but it’s a valiant effort. As soon as Alistair hears the crackle of fire magic behind him, summoned by a troupe of street performers, he too feels the urge to jostle his way out of the area. A nearby park allows him to catch his breath, renew himself with air that hasn’t been breathed five times over by all the people around him. In his peripheral there are swathes of young Antivan women, eyes twinkling and floor-length tulle skirts blowing in the wind, men with hungry eyes on bended knees before them, dripping with proposals.

Alistair’s fingers twitch.

(15:45) Pretty sure some kind of literary snob is eyeballing those diaries you want so badly 😊

(15:46) How do you know it’s not me?

(15:47) I don’t, but I’m also pretty sure you’re not white, a man, or bald? Unless you have something to tell me, in which case I’m a little disappointed. That you’re bald. Doesn’t quite match up with the mental image I had of you 😊😊

(15:47) I’m sorry we can’t all look like Andraste Herself 😊

(15:48) I maintain that she was a buck-toothed redhead who was too tall. Every statue of her is to scale.

(15:48) You’re so sacrilegious and weird. And are those inherently bad traits? What if it turns out I fit that description? I’m sure you’d be wishing I was bald then, huh.

(15:49) That wasn’t the point I was trying to make and you know it!! 😞

(15:49) And what was that point exactly?

(15:49) That, uh, maybe Andraste Herself didn’t look the way we imagine her either? Something about beauty being greatly exaggerated? 😊
I’ll concede that her defining traits aren’t inherently beautiful.

Plus, how good looking could anyone have been back then? Last I checked, they didn’t have running water. Where are the depictions of Andraste with greasy hair and dirty clothes? 😏

Maybe she was a mage and conjured water to wash herself as she pleased. Only explanation, right? When time travel magic exists, we’ll pop on over to the Ancient era and investigate.

So wait, are you here?

I’m on my way. Or trying to be. This traffic is thicker than Fereldan stew. Getting my wisdom teeth pulled sounds like more fun than trying to find a parking spot when I get closer.

How will I know how to find you?!!

Keep your eye out for women on par with Andraste, apparently 😏

Alistair races around the length of the marketplace, breathless, hopeful. Scarves catch in his face as he rounds yet another “exotic wares” stall, and magic blinks around him at all sides. A flash goes off, he stumbles but pulls himself together twice as fast. In every silvery voice he thinks he’s found her, heart pounding when eyes meet. But she is wrong, they are wrong, all of them. No recognition flashes and they all turn away, fold themselves back into their company and set up walls to keep him out.

Where is she?

All the book stalls are devoid of window-shoppers. Alistair thinks this would make it easier for him to find her, but minutes crawl by and still no one is perusing. He doesn’t know where else she’d be if not here; what else does she like? Old artifacts of days gone by remain untouched at their booths and no one that’s tasting what the local breweries have to offer seem to be her.

Every idea of where she might be gives him whiplash, tugging him from one end of the festival to the other. Alistair’s eyes stay peeled, but his confidence wanes. The adrenaline flushes out, replaced with disappointment that sags his posture. He has no clue where his friends have gone or where he is, with how much ground he’s covered and how unrecognizable the people have made their city.

He kicks around until he finds a tent he has not seen all day. Wonders if it’s always been there, or if it’s a mirage of some kind. He pulls back the curtain that serves as a doorway, immediately recoils when he smells the stale air within. It is like a funeral parlor inside, a heady mix of flowers and candles, of the wine people drown themselves in for absolution. Baffled by how deep the room is, Alistair keeps going, his hands holding onto walls sturdier than they look.

A woman crouches over a table at the end of the tent, both bathed in lamplight with gilding at their edges. She picks and slides the pieces of a shattered ocularum crystal, and a cup of tea to her left looks decidedly abandoned.

“Hello?” Alistair asks, hardly expecting a response. He doesn’t get one. Something compels him to sit down opposite the woman—probably fear and alarm—so he does as his body wants. He tries to
convince himself that it’s the right thing to do, to stay, because this old woman probably hasn’t had many customers today. That’s all he can think to keep himself from bolting.

“Another fortune telling?” The way she looks, hunched over, Alistair had expected she would croak or speak like she gargled glass for breakfast. Instead, her voice seems slick and disembodied. Her mouth moves and he can’t quite place it, but it looks as though it moves slower than her speech. He blinks away the concern before it swallows him.

“You’re looking for someone. Take a piece.” Her spindly fingers, wrapped in tape, push the crystal shards towards Alistair.

“How do you know that? Who are you?”

“Eleni. Take a piece.”

“Are you registered?”

“Take. A piece.”

Alistair takes the longest, most jagged slice of crystal he can find. Looking around the room, he sees the vestiges of the old Imperium in every darkened crevice: dragon eggs, unfurled scrolls written in Old Tevene, the symbol of the Black Divine. Alistair knows he should have trusted his instincts. Still, something compels him to keep sitting despite knowing who could be somewhere outside, waiting for him. He catches a glimpse of his eyes and his freckles in the crystal.

“You have too many questions and not enough coin to answer them all. You may only pick a few,” Eleni snaps.

“Well that’s rude,” Alistair bites back. “True, but rude.”

“You’re not paying me for pleasantries, you’re paying me for prophecies.”

“I wasn’t aware I was paying you at all, frankly.”

Eleni reaches under her table and places a small stone figure of a man before him. “Neither did he.”

“Is that... supposed to scare me?”

“No, no, your future will do just fine.”

Alistair chews on his tongue. The more she speaks, the more unsettling it is to watch. It’s as if her voice is growing hotter but her mouth is cooling, slowing.

“I hate to say this, but I don’t really believe in scrying, or whatever you call what you’re doing.”

“Yes,” Eleni nods. “They do all say that. And then I tell them about potential riches, soulmates, deaths, etcetera. As you can imagine, they come around fairly quickly after those types of readings.”

“Soulmates?” Alistair perks up. He’s heard the term thrown around at weddings or between new couples, whispers to read between the lines when there’s chemistry and tension. He knows they can be family, or friends, or…

“Crock of shit,” Eleni says bluntly.

“Oh.” Alistair deflates.
“There, there, boy. Just because the heavens didn’t rent itself apart to gift you a subservient man or woman who loves you unconditionally doesn’t mean you won’t find love.” She gives him a sobering stare. “The Maker does not deign Himself to give you a love you didn’t ask for, other than His own. You took your piece, now ask your question.”

It dances on his tongue, burns his lips. He could use his questions to point him in the right direction of his case, though the evidence he gathers would be questionable and quickly thrown out of court. Alistair can’t recall a time where a serial killer was caught through sheer divinity and luck. He doesn’t think he wants to start that trend, either. He thinks of money, his mind retraces itself back to Dog Lord. He thinks of his future, the most important days of his life all the way to his death, and still it loops back to Dog Lord.

“Fine! Fine.” Alistair combs through his hair with trembling fingers. “What can you tell me? About her. Am I ever going to meet her?”

Eleni leans over the table and stares into his chosen piece of crystal. “You already have.”

“No, I know that. I mean, wait, are we talking about soulmates, or are we still agreeing they’re not real? Am I going to meet her in person?”

Eleni smiles, lips curled over almost ashen teeth. He wishes she wouldn’t do that.

“She’s out there, isn’t she? I’m wasting my time in this room, when I could be looking for her.”

“There isn’t a gun to your head, is there?”

“Can’t you tell me something?”

Eleni makes an approving sound. Her finger plucks at his shard until he stares at it long enough to satisfy her. His reflection exhausts him, as the day has, as his determination to see Dog Lord is slipping through his fingers. Was it only recently that his eyes have grown sunken? Alistair doesn’t want to look at himself anymore.

“You will pick and cry until your lips spring free, swallowed by the silence. You will search low when the answers are far; by then it will be gravely late. Death becomes you, and when her legs run too long, they will break and give way, ‘til you find she has been by your side for so long. You pray there is still time.”

Alistair squints. “Are you implying I’m going to die? Great. That’s exactly what I’m paying to hear.”

“Fate isn’t immutable, nor is it only interpreted one way.” Eleni takes her shard back, the surface of it swirling with mist and clouds. Alistair thinks he sees something in it, unaware it had been mutating when he wasn’t looking, but it’s gone before he can muster the courage to grab it. “Maybe you need to look both ways before crossing it.”

“Alright, I’ve had enough doublespeak to last me before ‘death becomes me,’ thank you.” He slaps two silvers onto her table and shoves himself up and away. “If I need my intelligence insulted again, I’ll give Morrigan a call.”

“In stone I came here,” Eleni says, simpering, “and in flesh I will stay.”

“Right. Good talk. Eleni, was it?” Alistair asks, lifting up the exit’s curtain.

“Eleni Zinovia.”
“Hessarian’s mother? Yeah, and I’m Maferath’s more handsome brother.”

As he exits the tent, Alistair looks behind himself. Still there, he thinks, then shakes off his incredulous superstition. Creepy witches and mages don’t vanish out of thin air, but he wishes “Eleni Zinovia” would. And though he gives up his search for Dog Lord with a heavy heart and sets out to find his friends, he passes the tent multiple times, and each time it still stands.

It takes upwards of twenty-five minutes for Cullen to free their car from the post-Wintersend traffic. “Ferelden doesn’t need more holidays,” Alistair mumbles. He’s transfixed with looking out the window, watching people walk home and wondering.

“Agreed,” the other two chime in.

In his lap he toys with a statuette he bought for Duncan, but with or without it, he feels empty-handed. Luana reaches back from the front seat and pats his knee in a disjointed rhythm. “Maybe next time?”

“Yeah.” Alistair squeezes his legs together. “Yeah, next time.”

**Tuesday**

(7:01) Are you awake?

(7:03) 😴 Trying to be

(7:03) I’m really sorry.

(7:03) For waking me up? My alarm had already gone off a few minutes ago, you’re safe 😎 And I don’t think I’ve ever had a problem with you waking me up before 😃

(7:04) No, not about that. For yesterday. For not getting back to you

(7:04) At first I figured I didn’t get any of your texts, but now I see that there weren’t any texts to get.

(7:05) Oh. Oops 😖

(7:05) I have an excuse but I still wanted to let you know I was sorry before I launched into an explanation to get you to forgive me

(7:05) 😊 It’s no big deal! Well, okay, I was sad about it. I felt pretty silly running around for hours, wondering. But that’s my problem!

(7:06) If I wanted to make it work, I could’ve called you. I guess it was just ~destiny~

(7:06) No, it was traffic, my break being over, and my phone dying. Roughly in that order.

(7:06) Right. That...makes so much more sense, actually.

(7:07) I knew that by the time I actually made it remotely close to the market, I’d have virtually no time to get into the thick of it, or buy anything, or see you. I wasn’t going to come meet you for 30
seconds and run off, Cheese Man. That’s not how I want it to go.

(7:07) 😅

(7:08) And I wanted to text you and let you know what was up, but just my fucking luck, the phone died as I was trying to do a u-turn out of the cesspool of cars. I went back to work, came home to charge my phone, and passed out early because I was too damn sad about it

(7:08) Texted you as soon as I woke up to just make sure you definitely didn’t hate me for that

(7:09) No!! No hate. Now I feel ridiculously silly for being sad at you about it. How do you want it to go? Do you have plans

(7:09) Have you...thought about this 😐 😐

(7:09) Not in detail, no. It’s still a strange concept to me

(7:10) I wanted to make it up to you, though. I know it’s not a big deal and I don’t owe you “something” for not showing up but

(7:10) I still want to make up for all those gifts you gave me at the post office, since this is apparently a thing now.

(7:11) I wouldn’t be opposed to continuing our post office gift exchange 😊 You definitely do NOT have to do anything you don’t want to, but I’ve been enjoying this!! I wish I could’ve afforded those diaries, I wanted to put them in there 😐

(7:11) They’ll find their way into my possession at some point, if they’re legitimate.

(7:11) And speaking of gifts, what’s the meaning behind this runestone?

(7:12) Is it for luck or protection? Am I supposed to put it somewhere? I haven’t had the chance to look up what the rune means, I figured you knew and I’d take your word for it.

(7:12) 😐 😐 😐

(7:12) ?

(7:13) 😐 😐 😐

(7:13) You don’t know, do you

(7:14) No 😐 It was a gift from Duncan to me, not long after he’d brought me to Denerim. We went to Wonders of Thedas and he let me pick out whatever I liked, and that was the utterly random little rock I chose.

(7:14) What?! Why did you give it to me then? You should’ve kept this!

(7:15) You only recently came to Denerim too, I...wanted to make you feel as welcome as I felt? 😐

(7:15) If that makes you feel uncomfortable, you’re free to chuck it back in the box, but it’s the thought that counts?
Cullen pins an elven woman into a wall, chest first. She’s trapped, they know, with the alley walls caging them at almost all sides, and backup’s on its way. Still, Alistair trains his gun on her feet for as long as she’s holding onto her knife. “Drop your weapon,” Cullen snarls into her ear.

It clatters on the ground, the dried blood flecking onto the cement.

She makes a move to try to fight him, but her wrists are trapped, and Alistair is more than ready to physically throw down with her if Cullen can’t handle it. He was ready—beyond ready—when they tracked her down, body in tow. When the human in her hands had a lolling head and the skin was carved, small ears nicked to shreds. When she brandished a knife and made a go at his partner, prepared to make a last stand.

It de-escalates before it can come to that, with other officers pulling her out of the alley, ducking her head down into a car. Alistair watches Dorian and his coworkers sample the body and the scene, the flashes from their cameras blinding. The victim, a woman, looks so young, almost serene. Despite the cuts that snake up her arms, the rest of her naked form is smooth and clean. Her heart-shaped face and all its features make her look as though she is simply resting; her glazed, milky blue eyes are downturned, her lips frozen into what could’ve appeared to be a tiny gaping snore. They dress her body after Alistair thinks he’s seen enough, before he can postulate what her life was like before it was taken.

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“Devera,” Cullen reads from his report, stabbing the blank fields with his pen. Alistair can’t recall when they made it back to the precinct, the drive back a surreal blur.

“Last name?” Thom asks. He’s leaning against Alistair’s desk, throwing the questions when Alistair can’t find the words. It feels like he’s trying to grasp them while they float away in a pool of treacle.

“None,” replies Cullen. “She’s a city elf, Tevinter born. Clearly Tevinter raised.”

The corkboard Zevran and Alistair constructed two weeks ago proves its usefulness again. Photos of Devera’s mugshot and her weapon are tacked up, red strings connecting to a new, shadowy figure. They know she’s not working alone, but her lips snap shut any time a detective comes near her. She’s given a lawyer, but she doesn’t want one. She doesn’t want anything.

“Rutherford.” Rylen jogs up to Cullen, waving a plastic bag in his hand. “We searched that elf you brought in. Everything was fine, but then she lost her damned mind when we found this thing. Not going to tell you where.” Both Cullen and Alistair crowd around him to get a closer look. “You can just take the bag, no need for the close quarters. Return it to the evidence locker for me, if you please.”

They splay the bag over Cullen’s desk—Alistair’s looks like a “tornado made of crime” hit it—and prod the contents. It’s a diamond-shaped silver coin, small enough to fit in the center of their palms. It’s stamped with an indiscernible face atop a bird? A dragon? Some winged creature, while the other side bears two intricate, crossed daggers. “I’m unfamiliar with this coin,” Cullen admits. “It’s no caprice or andris.”

“I could take it to Dorian,” Alistair suggests. “I wanted to pick his brain about the victim, the woman,
if he’s been able to identify her.”

Cullen nods and takes a seat. “Don’t forget: evidence room. Rylen’s been looking for an excuse to have someone to pick up his dry cleaning.”

Alistair heads down the staircase to the lower levels, two steps at a time, and raps on Dorian’s office door. No response. He knocks again, harder this time, still no luck. He presses his ear flat to the door and knows he hears Dorian’s voice within, but it’s so sporadic, it can’t be a phone call. No one calls Dorian and gets a word in edgewise. He tries the door handle, finds it unlocked and lets himself in.

*Bleach, where’s the bleach? Brain bleach, eye bleach, I need bleach.*

Dorian Pavus, in all his splendor, is perched on a counter in the back of the office, legs straddling the hips of a hulking qunari, squirming and making noises that should never fall on innocent ears. “Ihadquestionforyou!” Alistair all but yells, tucking his head into his arms as he holds the evidence back in the air. Dorian pushes the qunari away from him with barely any force, though, and the qunari—*The Iron Bull*—salutes Alistair as he brushes by him on the way out.

“I knocked,” Alistair says, fighting to keep his blush from deepening.

“I know, and I elected to ignore it. I understand you’re in need of my help?” Dorian is unruffled; no hairs are mussed, his clothes are crisp, unwrinkled. The only thing disheveled is the *want* in his eyes. Alistair avoids direct eye contact while they talk.

“Did you know I was coming?”

“No, not you, specifically, but I had a thought that someone would.”

“And you still did... *that*?” Alistair blinks.

“You expect me to deprive myself of all my vices the second I walk through the front doors? You can take the alcohol but you—no, nevermind, I still have a bottle somewhere in my cabinets. So you have something for me, yes?” Dorian strides across the room and snatches the bag from Alistair’s fingers. “What has a little elven wretch absconded with this time?”

“This time?” He looks around for a seat to take, but the office only exhibits one chair: Dorian’s.

“It’s a figure of speech. And this, my friend, is a tesserae.”

Alistair follows Dorian to the counters, though Alistair gives them a bit of a berth. Magnifying glass in hand, Dorian studies the coin through the plastic, moves the bag around to give them a better view. “Is this a Tevinter thing?” asks Alistair.

“Oh, I assumed that’s why it was brought down to me. Fancy that, I was wrong. But yes, it’s a Tevinter coin.”

“What’s it worth?” Alistair screws up his face in thought. “Is there an equivalence to Fereldan currency?”

“Oh, no no.” Dorian clicks his tongue. “These have purpose. You don’t make a tesserae without a *purpose*. That elf: Devera, was it? She was invited to some event, possibly a magesterial one, probably the sinister kind if she’s been caught red-handed with a murder weapon. Again, it’s a Tevinter thing, so no bloody clue what she’s doing carrying it around the south.” He passes the bag back to Alistair. “It has no worth so long as the event’s passed. Unless it hasn’t, then you’re *severely* impeding her plans.”
“Oh. Hrm.” Alistair rubs his chin. “I guess this helps. Somehow. Probably not much, but somehow.”

“I’ll tell you what would help: letting me revive the victim.”

“No!” Alistair’s stomach churns, twists and flips. He can see the body in the next room, covered in a sheet as she lays on the metal table. All the questions he has for Dorian vanish from thought, replaced with the desire to find the nearest exit and take it.

“Oh come on, it’ll be a hoot. If we’re lucky, she won’t be disoriented and ‘dead arm’ me for the afternoon.”

“You do what you want, I’ll pretend like I didn’t just hear you talk about bringing the dead back to life.” Alistair puffs his chest out, throws his head back, and marches out of the room. “And please lock your door more often. Spare my poor, pure eyeballs.”

“Perhaps learn to take a hint, hm?” Dorian says, smirking. “Oh, and Alistair?”

Alistair pauses in the doorway.

“You do what you want. I’ll pretend like I didn’t just hear you talk about bringing the dead back to life.” Alistair puffs his chest out, throws his head back, and marches out of the room. “And please lock your door more often. Spare my poor, pure eyeballs.”

“Perhaps learn to take a hint, hm?” Dorian says, smirking. “Oh, and Alistair?”

Alistair pauses in the doorway.

“Your evidence.” He lobs the bag to Alistair, who lets it hit him in the chest before catching it. “Tell Bull to come back if you find him lurking for coffee.”

Groaning fills the entire floor, loud enough to wake the dead—hopefully not literally.

Alistair returns to his desk after a long discussion with Rylen, one that ends with him agreeing to pick up his steam-pressed suits. Luana is occupying his chair, fighting a losing battle with Cullen, her knights engaged in warfare with a queen they can’t hope to take on. Cullen, on the other hand, is shoving forkfuls of chicken and broccoli into his mouth, nonchalant as he takes one of her bishops.

“I’ll stop making you lunch if you keep beating me into the ground,” Luana pouts.

“You would rather I let you win?” Cullen smiles as he sucks in a slice of carrot.

“...No.”

Alistair throws his arm over the chair. “It’s alright, I never beat him either. That’s what he’s doing when he stays here all night: plays chess by himself. Look at his Google searches, it’s all ‘good chess strategies,’ ‘how do I beat my loved ones and discourage them from playing with me.’”

Luana chances a glance at Cullen’s monitor, which he immediately tilts away. “Stop telling her things like that when you know she takes it literally.”

She crooks a finger towards Alistair, to which he leans an ear close to her lips. “His search history is actually full of DIY tutorials and videos of that one famous Rivaini pop-rock band.”

Alistair glares. “Don’t lie to me, Lua. Don’t get my hopes up like that.”

“He sings ‘Ever After’ in the shower when he thinks I’ve left for work.”

He laughs so hard, he’s almost positive he’s bruised a rib. Cullen couldn’t hear the exchange, but if his look of consternation is anything to go by, he is the opposite of happy about it. Feeling light-headed and holding his stomach, Alistair claps Luana’s shoulder, until he notices something that makes him stiffen. “Where are your gloves?”
She covers an arm with her hand, a flash of old, forgotten fear lighting up her eyes. Just like that, though, the fear dissipates and she lets go of her arm. “With everything that’s been happening around here,” she says. “I wanted to be open about who I am. I wanted to feel free again.”

As she picks at her blouse and hugs her waist, the men look away, their own grief making minds wander. Alistair hates that his vision can’t stop orbiting the view of her arms, the white lines breaking wayward freckles and moles, a story in each indentation that she’s never shared. “If you ever need to talk...” Alistair says, trailing off. Luana stands to give her chair back to him, nodding, and ties her hair up before collecting her things.

“I may take you up on that offer,” she replies, and the room regains a soothing succor as she stands tall. “But maybe later. I have court in a few hours and my client’s in shambles already, so I’d better meet her for tea or something.” She skitters over to Cullen’s side of the desk and gives him a quick peck to the forehead. “I’ll talk to you later!” A slick, glittery stain lingers. He doesn’t wipe it off.

(19:02) Are you busy right now?


(19:03) Can you ever give me a straight answer when I actually want it?

(19:03) I’m not busy!

(19:04) Post office, then.

(19:04) At this hour?? 😐

(19:05) It’s still technically open. No one will be there, I promise.

(19:05) 😜

Alistair speeds off towards the post office on his motorcycle, a vague hope doing flips and fluttering in the confines of his belly. When he gets there, she’s right: no one’s there, inside the building, or out. He digs into the familiar planter and grabs the key, which still feels warm as he lets it weave between his fingers. The lights are dim inside, and it surprises him to push on the door and have it let him through. Silence birthing paranoia between his ears, he sneaks over to the boxes and makes quick work of the lock.

There’s very little inside, and no runestone, which gives him relief. It’s two coins, ones he’s unfamiliar with, but he’s happy he doesn’t have to see more tesserae. They feel as though they have no weight, are made of glass, little bubbled teardrops that fall down no one’s face. The gift confuses him, making him pull out his phone.

(19:31) What are these? 🧐

(19:31) Are you home yet?

(19:31) No...

(19:32) I can wait.

(19:55) How about now? 😍 😍
They’re Andraste’s Tears. Not really, but they’re modeled after them, or something to that effect.

A long time ago a limited quantity was made, said to contain a bubble that held the air of Andraste’s last breath. Nonsense, of course, but the sentiment remains. Not why I gave it to you, though.

My father gave my brother and me these little tears, a gift from some Arl, a show of goodwill. My brother thought it was a “stupid” gift at the time and let me keep both. And now, they’re yours.

 мягко 😞 You didn’t have to give me these! They’re from your dad 😐

You didn’t have to give me the runestone either and that’s from your dad. I think we’re almost even.

Almost?

You’re at home, right?

Oh no. You’ve discovered my address and have sent me a giant cake, which Hessarian will jump out of. You shouldn’t have, Dog Lord 😛

You shouldn’t have???

Fuck, really? Fuck

No, I

Hand!

That’s a hand!

Maker, that sure is

Alright, I’m okay.

Are you? I’m starting to get convinced that you’re a relic from an old era and the sight of
skin is enough to rustle your jimmies, in a really weird way

(20:06) It’s just

(20:07) Proof. That you’re real! 🤣

(20:07) I never was and never will be that “sassy spambot”

(20:07) 😏

(20:09) So….what’s with the completely black background? Bit of an odd choice, I’ll say. You trying to hide something?

(20:09) Yes.

(20:10) I’m hiding my gigantic stash of portraits of Duke Gaspard, including the ones I painted myself. I didn’t want you to find out this way.

(20:10) Oh hush up 😏 You’re not going to be pulling my leg like this.

(20:11) You’re right. I was hiding my Tevinter torture devices in the far corner of my living room. The Tevinter sex swing is definitely too much for your eyes to comprehend, since the sight of a hand is also too much for you. I didn’t want your eyes to melt out of their sockets, you know?

(20:12) I get it, they’re your bed sheets or something!

(20:12) No, they’re my collection of blindfolds. They go with the torture devices.

(20:13) 😌سبق

(20:13) Not buying that one either? They’re my blackout curtains. I didn’t know what else to use, and the room’s a mess. Nothing to hide, but nothing I want to show either

(20:13) 😊👏👏👏👏

(20:14) I’m glad a hand could bring you so much joy. You’re an easy guy to shop for.

(20:14) 😊

(20:15) Could I ask you for a favour, though?

(20:15) Oh? Of course 😞 Anything.

(20:15) Can I call you? Tomorrow night.

(20:16) Er, yeah? What’s the occasion, is something wrong?

(20:16) No, I just wanted to get permission and give you a heads up. I felt like I slept a little better when on the phone with you and I wanted to make sure it was alright with you if we did that again.

(20:17) Yeah!!!

(20:17) I mean yeah, that’d be cool. That sounds nice. Yeah. 🧼😊
Why not tonight?

I’m exhausted and I don’t want to conk out immediately and not get to enjoy the conversation for longer than like 3 minutes.

So this is goodnight?

Yeah. I hope you sleep well, sweet dreams, all that good stuff.

Same to you! And thank you so much. I’m going to keep these tears somewhere safe 😊

Talk to you tomorrow 😊❤️

Wednesday

The stovetop flickers to life as the pot fills with water. Mugs are set out—do I choose one or two? Not like she’s here—and a hand goes scavenging in the back of the cupboard for bags or loose leaf canisters. Alistair finds an old box of chamomile, deems it acceptable, and chucks the packet in the teapot. Minutes later, after steeping and a touch of milk, he slides under the covers, a blanket around his shoulders and every pillow in the house propping him up. His phone waits beside his steaming drink.

I’m ready when you are 😊

You want to go to bed already?

Not quite, buuut… I want to enjoy the conversation for longer than three minutes, too 😊

That’s fair

Give me a few minutes. I was caught up in one of the books you gave to me, I’m not ready for bed whatsoever. Have to brush teeth, get changed, the bedtime ritual.

I can wait 😊

He would prefer not to wait, with the anxiety that’s been dogging him all day finally catching up. It pools inside his feet, giving them staticky tingles that move their way through his calves, his thighs, until they reach his fingers and his chest. The heart palpitations are enough to do Alistair in, exacerbated further by the phone when it vibrates around his lap.

“Hello,” he breathes into the receiver with an unspoken finally.

“Less awkward this time,” Dog Lord replies, a hidden smile in there somewhere. “I like it.”

“How was work?” Alistair asks.

“On the spectrum of the mundane, I’d give it a 6. Still no signs of anything about the Sunless Lands, either, so either you were making it up—”

“I wasn’t!” he interjects.
“Or it’s out there somewhere, waiting for me. And you? How was your job? Andraste’s ass, this sounds rather domestic.”

Alistair nods and wipes his forehead. His grace under pressure is slipping already, and he can’t decide whether it’s her voice or the tea that’s making him hot. As he carefully describes his day without any consequential details, he shifts the blankets around the bed until they are a wad on the floor. His standing fan is on low, high, then medium when the extremes are making him uneasy.

“Overall though, I was...distracted,” he finishes.

“You whole story sounded distracted. You’ve been thinking about this all day, haven’t you?”

“Is that a trick question?” Alistair’s nose scrunches up.

“No!” Dog Lord laughs, and while it doesn’t sound musical or delicate, it sounds so genuine that it rumbles in Alistair’s chest. “I can’t blame you either, because it’s been the same for me. Clearly I didn’t have my knickers in a twist about it though. Do you talk to girls often?”

“I do,” Alistair says, scowling. He mentally cycles through a list of all the women he’s ever spoken to, tries to catalogue all the ones who make his hands feel clammy, but most don’t do that. Luana never does, the Rivaini woman who delivers lunch to the precinct doesn’t, nor did the tall qunari at the bar, or— “But I don’t do as well on the phone.” A lie. He orders food over the phone, he takes statements over the phone. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to look at when talking to you. Is it the wall? Is it this pillow?”

“Fair enough,” Dog Lord yields. “So, are you in bed as well?”

“Yes. With a cup of tea and, amazing, all the blankets are on the floor.”

“Is this the first warm night of spring to you?” she asks.

“No.”

Dog Lord doesn’t press any further. They dance around conventional small talk; the longer it goes on, the thicker Alistair’s anxiety feels, rattling his teeth and turning his mouth to putty. “Are we going to keep talking about the weather and current events, or have we really run out of things to talk about? I didn’t realize we were such one-dimensional people,” Dog Lord prods.

“I did tell you my life story a while ago,” says Alistair. “You can really only go down from there.”

“That line of emojis? Honestly,” Dog Lord huffs, sounding as though her head is shaking against a pillow. “It left out the parts where you like to sing at cafes, know flower language and bizarre sports facts, think rocks and statues are pretty, and probably a hundred other things. It mostly told me that you got real fit and dealt with a hospital, which I assume is Duncan. And the elephant! I still don’t get the elephant.”

Alistair rolls onto his side, holds the phone up to his free ear. “It was a flourish,” he admits, “to make my life seem more interesting. I grew up, Duncan got sick, I—” He remembers the string of images, the police car, and decides that that part of his life is too telling. “I dealt with the authorities, and I started going to the gym. If I’d added the flower emojis and a microphone, you might’ve thought I was some famous singer, or a gardener! We couldn’t have that.”

“Well that’s one mystery down, I suppose. Where does your love life factor in?” Dog Lord nearly purrs into the phone, and he feels as though he needs to be wearing a button-down, if only so he could properly loosen his collar.
“My what?”

“You may be a very awkward man, one of the most awkward I’ve ever spoken to, but there has to be something or someone in your past. The way you clam up whenever we talk about my sex life, there’s a story there.” She pauses. There’s a sharp inhale that Alistair can’t quite place. “Unless you don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to goad you into telling me things you shouldn’t divulge.”

He chuckles to assuage her fears, then tugs on a fraying strand at the edge of his boxers. “Why don’t you go first? See if I can, um, top you. Maker—these double entendres are going to do me in.”

Dog Lord laughs, and instead of confusing his nerves, it calms them. “Alright, I can do that. I could start at fifteen, I suppose.”

“You got your first boyfriend at fifteen?”

“I lost my virginity at fifteen,” Dog Lord corrects. “My first ‘real’ boyfriend was two years later. He lasted a few months, then I had a girlfriend who lasted a few months longer.”

“Was...Dairren one of those?”

“No, remember, he was just a fling. But he was mum’s friend’s son, so she sort of lost it. I think he was engaged to some Nevarran princess of sorts, but clearly he wasn’t going to be good enough for crypt-dwelling royalty if he was willing to take a tumble in the hay with a girl he was hardly even friends with.”

“Isn’t the onus on you a bit, if you had a hand in his infidelity?”

“I only knew that once mum was yelling at me about how I’d burned that bridge.” Dog Lord laughs through her nose and goes quiet for a minute. “At least it was never Nate, right?”

“A soul patch is just a landing strip to kiss town.”

“I take it you’ve got one, then. You terrible, terrible man,” she teases.

“I’ll have you know it’s more like a… thin goatee. I did say I wasn’t skilled at growing facial hair.”

“Hmm.” Dog Lord pauses, seems to consider this. Alistair wonders if this is a test, if it’s one he can pass and if he should pass. “That sounds much better.” All at once he lets out his held breath, feeling as though his anxiety has been drawn out like a fever. “So, what’s your story? Unrequited love? Girl next door gone and moved away, didn’t reunite until college except now she’s got some hulking boyfriend who’s bad for her and you’re helpless to watch that crash and burn? Or maybe you fancy the older ladies, with their lap dogs?”

“Do you read Swords and Shields a lot?” Alistair asks, pinching his nose bridge.

“You don’t have to read a popular book to have its plot contents spoiled for you everywhere you turn.”

“Well, my ‘love life’ isn’t quite as…racy, or sensationalized. Or existent.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Not even once?”
“‘Not even once’ what?”

Dog Lord lowers her voice. “Have you ever...been with someone?” She immediately bursts out laughing before Alistair can attempt to answer. “Have you ever had sex, Cheese Man? Sorry, I couldn’t ask it like it was some taboo thing that no one talks about. We’re not Orlesian, for Andraste’s sake.”

Alistair’s mind wanders away, unsupervised, to memories of pretty women that were flashes in his peripheral. Women with dark hair, short women, women who said ‘hi’ to him in line at the deli. Then it’s female detectives, delivery women, even a few men that have caught his eye, and then it’s just work. Criminals he has to apprehend, cases he takes home either physically or emotionally, it’s sitting on the witness stand being interrogated, it’s visiting Duncan on weekends and never making time for himself. It’s talking to her any time he can spare a second.

“You still there? Or are you wrapped up in the best lay you’ve ever had?”

“Sorry, my inner monologue was too loud,” he apologizes sheepishly. “No, I haven’t.”

“You ever go down on a girl?”

“No...?”

“Kiss a girl?”

“No.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four?”

“Cheese Man.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be, please,” Dog Lord says in a tone that brokers no protesting. “I’m sorry. Are you—do you not like the thought of it? Am I making you uncomfortable? Please tell me.”

“No,” Alistair assures her, but a piece of his heart says yes. He grabs at his chest, dulled nails scratching and picking at the place where the words and the feelings should be, because he wants to pull them out, to identify them, that’s part of his _job_. He can’t say yes if he doesn’t know why, but she’s so smart and experienced, she has to know if he doesn’t. Alistair rolls onto his back, eyes obscured by his arm while he still holds his phone in his other hand. It wasn’t a conversation he was ready to have, but... “Actually, yes.”

He hears Dog Lord gasp.

“I am uncomfortable,” he says, though it pains him to admit. “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with it, waiting this long. I’m not outrunning a Blight and I don’t have a contract out for my life, I think I should be allowed to wait.” Alistair pinches the bridge of his nose again, squeezes his eyes shut to block it all out. “I didn’t think you’d be like that.”

“Cheese Man,” she repeats, almost inaudibly. “I...It’s me that should be sorry.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“I shouldn’t have pried, not after the first ‘no.’ It’s none of my damned business. And it—it wasn’t
because you’re twenty-four.” There’s the sound of sheets shifting, her rustling around. “It was...disbelief. You seem... so likeable—funny, kind, genuine, I was just surprised that no one has—I don’t mean to butter you up in the name of forgiveness, I…” She catches her breath. “I’m so sorry.”

They stew in it, the silence that makes them feel a thousand miles away.

“It’s good.”

“What?”

She pauses, as if collecting her words more carefully this time. “Don’t let anyone ever change you, Cheese Man,” she says after a long moment. “If you ever decide to be with someone—or if you don’t—don’t let anyone walk all over you and make you do something you don’t want to. Not me, not anyone, no matter how much you love them.”

Alistair blinks, thrown off-kilter by her honesty. “I won’t,” he nods. “I just… I want it to mean something. Not that you can’t do it if it doesn’t, but for me, personally.”

“That’s a good rule.”

“You were fifteen, did it mean something then?”

She freezes. “No,” she sighs. “It didn’t. Do I regret it? No. But all this ‘experience’ I have, fat lot of good it’s done me.”

“Look at you now, can’t even settle for the gym rats anymore.”

“Yeah? Go down to your local twenty-four hour gym and tell me it’s not slim pickings in there. You can’t.”

Laughter, laughter feels good. Alistair is shaking like a leaf on the wind—a recollection of ‘backtalk’ earning him something unspeakable, but he doesn’t want to stay silent any longer. “Have you ever turned a man down because he’d never…even kissed someone before?”

“Wh—” He hears her stop herself. “I need to dial it back or I’m going to be eating my foot until the Divine dies. No, I’ve never. All that matters is whether or not he’s a good man. The rest can be taught, over time, with trust and patience. Sometimes it’s better for it! I’d—” Her thought abruptly goes unfinished.

Alistair tries to will his heart into hammering a little less loudly in his ears, wishes he could hear something like the ocean or crickets instead of a deafening boom.

“I know I joked about how you’d be the last person I’d tell if I ever fancied someone, but I hope for you I’d be the first. If I haven’t cocked up and lost your trust.” Her voice softens almost imperceptibly, the telltale sign that sleep is coming for her soon. She does not yawn, does not laugh, only breathes steadily into the phone, and Alistair’s heart finds itself quieting down to matching the pace.

“I would,” he promises. He doesn’t know if he can keep that promise, with the way he has to struggle to even say it, but he’ll try.

“We should sleep together,” Dog Lord whispers. Alistair’s heart flies into his throat, and then comes the yawn. “I don’t want to sleep yet, I don’t want to end this conversation, but… My eyes can’t stay open, you know?”
“I know.”

“And work tomorrow. I open.”

“I know,” he repeats, softer this time.

She’s out like a light, falling into a kicking slumber faster than the last time. Alistair wishes he had that kind of skill, along with the ability to stay asleep through any noise. The moment he drifts is the moment she babbles sleepy words he can’t decipher, but his ears strain themselves through the veil of sleep regardless. He keeps hoping her subconscious will reveal some secret she’s keeping, the meaning behind her words or otherwise, but this isn’t *Swords and Shields*, the revelations aren’t easily won.

He tosses and turns. The tea’s grown cold. He’s made a promise he can’t keep.

**Thursday**

“Theyrin! Just the man I’ve been looking for.”

“Pavus!” Alistair imitates sarcastically. “Just the man I never wanted to see again. Ever.”

Since barging in on Dorian and the private investigator, Alistair has been avoiding the entire basement floor of the precinct, going so far as to bribe the newest cadet, Lysette, into retrieving test results from there. He still hasn’t found any bleach or other means to repress the image of Dorian writhing around.

“Come on, you. It will never happen again, and truly? I believe he and I were doing you a favor.”

“Oh?” Alistair’s eyes narrow.

“Yes, seeing as your southern manners didn’t include avoiding closed doors when nobody’s home. Or is that just a police thing? I can never tell.”

Dorian seats himself on the side of Alistair’s desk, gingerly shoving away stacks of old case files and takeout containers. Cullen spares but one glance upwards at Dorian before returning to his computer, and Luana is a shadow somewhere in the room, likely showing Thom her June’s knot or conversing with Barris. “I don’t want to sound like Cullen,” Alistair groans, “but can I help you?”

“You do, though,” Dorian replies.

“He’s right, you do,” Cullen confirms. Alistair fights the urge to glare at his partner and fails.

“In any event, it’s me who is going to be helping you. Where’s Luana, the dear, I may need her for this.” Dorian peers around the workplace, tutting his disapproval when he can’t find any shocks of pink by any of the desks. “Excuse me one moment.” Minutes later he returns, elf in tow, and reclaims his spot on the edge of the desk. “As I was saying.”

“There were _bodies_ in there, Dorian!” Alistair shouts, and the lack of context has everyone jolting and twisting their heads to look. “*Dead* bodies,” he adds, more quietly.

“My office? Hardly.” Dorian puffs himself up, looking uncannily like a proud bird of sorts, and only then does Alistair notice that he’s not even wearing his work clothes, adding more fuel to his feathery parallel. The ‘plumage’ is colorful, to boot. “In the next room over, yes, and I don’t doubt they’d get
Alistair fidgets and tries to swivel his chair away. Dorian grabs the back of his chair and spins it back around. “You’re doing it again,” he accuses.

“What?” Alistair blinks.

“I’ve never seen a grown man mope on the hour so reliably, I could set a clock by it. Your frown is at its deepest either after lunch or by five o’clock, always accompanied by a glance at your phone. Tell me it’s not broken again and you’re reminding yourself with painfully longing glances at the cracks?”

He chances a look at his phone, which was already in his right hand rather than a pen for working. How long has it been there? How has it already become the end of the work day? Alistair’s scratches his forehead while Luana crowds his other side. “Is something the matter? Is Duncan feeling well?” she asks.

“No, no,” Alistair says, waving her away. “I mean yes, he’s fine. It’s not that.”

“How about we don’t discuss this here, in front of all of our colleagues,” Dorian suggests. “You, me, Luana: the bar. Someplace classy, it’d do you some good.”

“I am literally sitting right here,” Cullen grumbles.

“Oh? And you want me to extend you an invitation?”

“Not particularly, but—”

“That’s what I thought.”

While Cullen and Dorian argue about the common courtesy of not making plans in front of people who aren’t invited—“Just because I don’t want to go doesn’t mean you shouldn’t offer.” “You never want to go! I’ve learned my lesson!”—Alistair brushes his tongue over his teeth, thinking. He wants to text Dog Lord and talk to her, but it’s back again: the shame. This morning he had woken up in a sweat, a nightmare about breaking promises and denial granting him a sweet, throbbing headache at the crack of dawn. This misplaced emotion makes him want to be angry at her, but he knows it’s irrational, because she’s done nothing wrong. She’s just been...available, a crime in itself.

“You don’t have to go,” Luana mumbles, at his side still. “But if you do, I’ll protect you from his machinations, of which I know he has at least five.”


Thom shakes his head. “Can’t. Me and the missus have a date planned, reservations and all. I haven’t seen Rhea—”

“Alright, yes, you can’t come. Alistair, are you in or are you out? The sooner you supply the answer, the sooner we can ply you with alcohol.”

Alistair looks between his friends; at Dorian’s wolfish face-splitting grin; to Cullen’s general disinterest; to Luana’s tender assurances and head-nods. “Let me grab my stuff.”

While Dorian claps his hands together and leaves to grab his own belongings, Luana follows Alistair out to Dorian’s car. “You don’t have to do this,” she reminds him. “But in the event that you want to,
I’m the designated driver.”

“What could Dorian do that I couldn’t possibly handle?” Alistair says, trying to placate her with a half-hearted smile.

“Set you up with someone.”

“Oh.” Alistair’s shoulders sag. His phone feels heavy in his pocket.

Dorian throws open the precinct door’s and marches down to the sidewalk, where Alistair and Luana exchange worried glances. “So,” he says with a smirk. “Let’s paint the town red, shall we?”

The milieu of the Gnawed Noble Tavern—one of thinner smoke than the Pearl but stronger alcohol, and chattering nobility—is one in which Alistair feels remarkably uncomfortable. Hats with peacock and raven feathers do not so much as turn when Dorian and Alistair cross the room, but Luana’s presence make for a few terse jerks in the opposite direction and the bar’s populace ebbing away. If it bothers her, she doesn’t let it show, mentioning that it must be the long scar on her nose that alarms people. Alistair offers the crook of his elbow for her and leads her away to a booth, far from the tailored pinstriped suits and gossamer dresses, the overpriced attire made from the sweat of her people.

“Perhaps I was mistaken in thinking we should come here,” Dorian says, his lips curled back into a sneer until a waitress brings him and Alistair a drink, water for Luana.

“You think?” Alistair snaps. The thought of getting drunk is tempting but ill-advised in his mind.

“I do prefer a challenge, though.”

“What?”

“Let’s talk about your apparent relationship troubles, Alistair, it’s necessary. Shoot one back first, it makes your tongue wag more easily.”

In response, Alistair nudges the glass away. “Necessary? Having to relieve yourself after an eight-hour ride is necessary. This is...excessive, at best. I want to go home.” He shudders away from the eyes of a passing woman, whose gaze lingers too long. “It doesn’t even concern you, for starters.”

“It concerns me when it distracts you from doing your job, for starters,” Dorian mocks. “You haven’t even asked me for the results of the toxicology report, or the lack of a blood test. Because she had no damned blood, Alistair.”

“I figured the results would take weeks,” he admits, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Yes, well.” Dorian wiggles his fingers. “Magic.”

“Right.”

“Back to the matter at hand: your relationship with whomever isn’t texting you back. With the way those sad puppy dog eyes have been hounding your phone, my advice is to give up on them. Alternatively,” Dorian stops to crook a finger at a woman, who sashays her way to their table and seats herself beside Dorian, across from Alistair. “Forget them with her.”

“No!” Alistair pushes back from the table, remembering that they’re trapped in a booth. “My
apologies, miss, my friend here is being obtuse to the nth degree. Sorry for making you come all this way over.”

She smiles, bemused, and waves before flitting off elsewhere.

“That was rude,” Dorian sniffs.

“You’re rude,” Alistair bites back.

“At least try to chat up a few ladies.” Dorian kicks back another drink. “Humor me.”

Annoyed beyond comparison, Alistair wriggles his way out of the booth, much to Luana’s pawing dismay. Oh, he’ll chat with someone alright, he thinks. He’ll tell them nasty stories to reflect his nasty attitude, be as undesirable as possible, and his coworker will drop it. But as quickly as he makes it to the first attractive woman, his resolve falters. Over his shoulder he can no longer see his friends, meaning they can’t see him either, and he ducks away towards the bathrooms to pull out his phone.

(19:20) Dog Lord! Mayday, mayday! 😞

(19:20) This ship is sinking fast, but I don’t know how to swim. Do I jump off the boat and paddle as best I can, or do I stay and drown??

(19:21) Hmm, is this some type of analogy? I would say you might as well jump and salvage whatever life you’ve got left.

(19:21) Unless you’re the self-destructive type? Maybe if you stay on the ship, someone will come to your rescue.

(19:22) Which is me, isn’t it? 😃

(19:22) Wingman me, like old times? As a distraction?

(19:22) What? Why?

(19:23) Are you fucking with me?

(19:23) ...No? 😂

(19:24) Is that your sinking ship then? You’re striking out with women tonight and I’m rescuing you from being awkward?

(19:24) Am I supposed to tell you whether you should give up the game or keep trying?

(19:25) Either way I’m not here for it, sorry.

Alistair pulls away from his phone, face falling. What has he done? The clipped tones of her texts, despite how nonverbal they are, feel scathing, has his heart pounding hard.

(19:26) Have I done something wrong? I was just hoping you’d navigate my way out of this
Look away from your phone and you can find the damn shore.

It pains him to do so, but he does as he’s told. Alistair mingles back in with the crowd, but his footsteps are dragging, his desire to be here flagging. He takes two steps forward and the whole room takes four steps back, away from him. A woman remarks on his sorry state of his dress and he’s inclined to agree with her, which concerns her enough to eye him warily for the rest of the night.

What did I do? Alistair asks himself as he seats himself at the bar, feeling like a facsimile of himself. He stares at the counter, chipped under his fingers. He stares at his fingers, trembling around a glass of ice water. And why does it hurt?

“Oh sweet thing,” a familiar voice cooes. “Who went and broke your heart?”

Alistair turns around. “Isabela?” He watches her, eyes wide, as she steals the seat beside him.

“None other than,” she replies, grinning. “You must be in a sorry state to have come out here.”

“I could say the same about you,” he quips back. “This is quite the upgrade from the Pearl.”

Isabela flips her hair over her shoulder and waves her hand around, eventually coming to rest beneath her chin. “I’m less likely to get groped here, not that I don’t enjoy a good grope, but a girl’s got her limits. And while the Pearl is easier to steal from, the Gnawed Noble is rife with riches.” Her eyes scan the crowd. “And a few prettier faces, not that I’m here to shop.”

Alistair grunts his acknowledgement while Isabela flags the bartender down with a familiar ease, orders herself a pair of the strongest drinks the tavern has to offer. “How have you been?” he asks. Isabela reaches over to clink their glasses together, takes a shot before she can fathom answering, he assumes.

“Same old, same old. A few impassioned nights here, a couple troublesome days in the ‘tank there.”

“You never want for excitement, do you?”

“Sweetheart, I never need to want for anything.” A mischievous glint lurks in the corners of Isabela’s eyes, and her pose is borderline tigerish, on the verge of pouncing. This is a woman who can make Alistair’s palms turn wetter than Lake Calenhad, flee like the rabbit it bears resemblance to. As he debates whether it’s her form and lustful poise or the glass making his hands damp, he realizes it is not the same at all. A passing thought of Dog Lord makes his heart feel electric, while looking back at Isabela makes him feel equal parts frightened and cold.

“If my libido was waxing at the sight of you, it sure as the Void is starting to wane,” Isabela says with a glass to her lips. “Who is she, then?”

“What?” Alistair feels the tips of his ears start to color.

“Who’s curling your toes? You know, floating your frigate?”

“Um.”

“Dampening your Divine?”
“Erm.”

“Cupping your Joining?”

“Isabela.”

“What?” She smiles, all bite and no bark. “You mean to tell me no one’s exploring your Deep Roads?”

Alistair runs a hand down his face. All things anonymous are enough to startle him, but an anonymous confession to Isabela shouldn’t do more harm than it does good. The thought of already breaking the promise has his mouth running dry. “There...is someone. A woman.”

“Oh, love, I’d already figured that one out.” Isabela holds her hand up for a brief pause, long enough to get the bartender to refill her drinks. Alistair isn’t the least bit surprised that neither of her glasses were ever meant for him. “Tell me about her. Does the sun shine out of her arse? Is every word she speaks some kind of bullshit melody? Let me guess, she’s got legs for days. I’m right, aren’t I?”

“I’ve never met her.” Alistair admits. Isabela’s eyes narrow, and he finds himself studying the bottom of his glass with rapt fascination. There are a few cuts in the bottom, the cup is warped from a dishwasher.

“Catfish, then.” She nods sagely, words spoken with the experience of a thousand blind dates gone wrong.

“No,” Alistair replies, head shaking. The thought has crossed his mind a number of times, of Dog Lord being branded a gigantic fake. Deep down he knows his breath was always held until the phone call. “I’ve heard her voice. We’ve, you know…”

“No.”

“Had phone sex!” Isabela chirps.

“When a girl can get you off with her voice alone, she’s a keeper.” Isabela waggles her finger inches from his nose, then presses it to her lips, as though she has imparted some secret wisdom. “Continue.”

“We’ve spoken on the phone is what I meant to say,” Alistair soldiers on with a heavy frown. “And no, her voice isn’t some ‘bullshit melody,’ she’s just... Dog Lord.” Her nickname comes out with a breathier sigh than he has intended, but his point comes across as Isabela’s eyebrows fly up, head cocked to the side. “She only called me recently, but we’ve been texting for a couple months.” He recounts the oft reminisced-upon story to Isabela, sparing no detail on inside jokes that span weeks, or random photos that sit in his camera roll for an occasion like this. Alistair shies away from revealing the photos of her body, lest Isabela judge, but before he can choose not to show them to her, Isabela has pried his phone out of his fingers and discovered them for herself.

“You’re right, she’s fit.” Isabela swipes back and forth between the photos of Dog Lord’s body and her hand. “These hands, they’re good for something.” The wink she delivers with that line is highly unnecessary, Alistair decides.

“It’s always about sex with you, isn’t it?” he chides as he hides his face in his hands; rips it back out when he realizes that his hands are moist enough to overwater a flower.

“I didn’t say what they were good for! They could be good for cleaning, or heavy lifting, or picking up handkerchiefs after she’s bent over to get it…” Isabela drifts for a second, then snaps to attention.
“Oh alright, it’s about sex. You clearly have the infatuation on lock, I thought I could help you with something you clearly hadn’t considered. Unless you have.”

Alistair finds himself in the bottom of his glass again. His reflection is looking worse for wear, which comes as no surprise to him; this conversation has aged him by thirty years.

“You have! Oh, that’s cute.”

“There’s nothing to consider,” he bemoans. “I don’t know what she looks like, I don’t know if I’ll ever meet her. Maker’s breath, I don’t know that she likes me either. I’m getting ahead of myself, what are you doing to me, to make me start thinking about this?”

Isabela smirks over the top of his phone, her finger flicking up and up and up. “She’s mad at you,” she confirms. Alistair shrinks. “Because she might like you too. This is so charming, this mating dance around your feelings. Oh Alistair, I can’t help you with this at all.” Isabela takes a final swig out of both of her glasses and pricks a finger beyond Alistair’s shoulder before signaling her leave. “I think there’s someone who can, though. Remember: you miss one hundred percent of the girls you don’t shag.”

A gloved hand grabs at Alistair’s elbow.

“Lua? How long have you been there?” He looks down at her hand, bites down on his bottom lip when he recognizes her gloves. “What happened?”

Luana dips her head down, far enough to let her hair curtain her arms. “I put them on when that little kaffas went for drinks and never came back.” Alistair stares at his friend as if she’s grown two heads, blinking wildly all the while. “Pardon my words, m’sorry. And I’ve been here since…” She taps her chin. “Dog Lord dampening your Divine?”

Alistair hits his head on the counter of bar, until he’s barked at to stop by the bartender.

“It’s true, then, isn’t it?” Luana asks in hushed whispers. “You like her?”

If the promise was broken before, now it’s shattered beyond repair. Alistair tries to look away, to notice something else or find a new topic, fixates instead on the hem of Luana’s skirt or the way her gloves bunch up at the elbow. When she cups his cheek, his body stills, the anxiety and embarrassment flushing down to the tips of his toes. “You don’t have to tell me, but you can. You always could.”

“How did you know?” Alistair asks. “How did you know you liked Cullen? How did you two even get together?” He’s always wanted to ask, but he rarely has reason to get Luana alone long enough to do so.

“You know he visited me at the hospital, when my soon-to-be client was recovering?”

“Creators, no!” She places a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh too girlish for even herself. “I was afraid of him then. Looming in the doorway, in his seersucker shirt and his holsters, he looked like the men the clan was told to avoid. There’s a templar in the way he holds himself, and now he’s to be a man of the people, but you don’t know, you never know for certain, when you are Dalish.”

Alistair nods, his shoulders pulled back and stiffening.

“I felt caged in the hospital room, fearful that he would interrogate me even when I knew he was
really there for my client. Except he didn’t. He came back every day, and some days he brought me lunch. It was very suspicious, and the only thing that kept me unafraid was that he was your partner and your friend. If he did anything, you were sure to know.”

“I’m...touched, genuinely.”

“I may not have been very close to you at that point, and our friendship is really only forming now but I knew then that I trusted your judgment. When my client was discharged from the hospital, fully healed, we both knew we couldn’t keep seeing each other that way, and that was that. Except he invited me for lunch. And again. He would ask me about books I’ve read—which aren’t many, I’m no good at reading Common—and asked me about the alienage. Not for work reasons, just because he knew how much it meant to me. He asked about the Minrathous Alienage, he asked about my language, he asked about my clan. I asked him about Honnleath, the military, you.”

“Aww, you talked about me,” Alistair says with a flamboyant handwave. “Wait. He’s probably told you weird stories, hasn’t he? Maker.”

“Nothing unflattering, don’t worry. Though, were you really in a bear suit at the captain’s party?”

“He knew that was me?”

Luana leans in and beckons Alistair to do the same. “Alistair, who in Mythal’s name else could it have been?”

They pull apart, Alistair gurgles. “You’re right. Continue.”

“Oh! There’s not much else, we haven’t been seeing one another for very long. Some nights I don’t see him at all, and all I can do is deliver copious amounts of medicine and coffee to a locked-up precinct at midnight.”

Alistair’s hand shoots out, holds onto Luana’s arm with a vice-like grip. “You shouldn’t be out that late, Lua.”

“Someone has to be,” she asserts, delicately plucking his hand off, finger by finger. “That he’s alive is a miracle, and I would like to keep him that way. I have a car, I’m not foolish enough to walk around, and he’s taught me to use a gun.”

“He what?”

“At least it wasn’t the first date.”

“No kidding. I don’t envy you, being with him.”

“He’s nicer outside of the precinct! The murders have been getting to him, you know that, Alistair.”

“I do, I do.”

“Sometimes he smiles.”

“Well now you’re pulling my leg! I still don’t believe that he sings in the shower.”

“He was in the Chantry choir, I have photos. Anyway, why don’t we talk about you and Dog Lord?” Luana cups his cheek again, brushes her thumb along a streak of freckles. “It’s been bothering you for some time, I remember our visit to the alienage.”

Alistair looks into the palm of her hand, sees the shadows and the dirt in her gloves, the skin flakes
that she’s picked off from the nerves and ghosts of scars. Half-heartedly he pushes her away by the wrist and props himself up by the elbows on the counter, a sigh muffled by the music and the voices, the sounds of bodies pieced together. “As I said, I’ve never met her. Pathetic, isn’t it?”

“No,” Luana insists, rubbing gently into his shoulder blade. “Not one bit. You want to, yes?”

“More than anything,” Alistair breathes, a calm washing over him at the admission. Until he realizes that yes, he admitted it, that’s how he feels. The shame that’s burdened him for days is overwritten by sheer panic, alarm bells sounding in his head at alarming frequency. Before he is trapped in a vortex of doubt and fear, Alistair looks—really looks—and finds Luana touching his forehead with her bare hand. “I thought you were going into shock,” she says, grinning through her own fear.

“I’m alright, really, I just… I had never said that out loud. I love being emotionally stunted sometimes, you should try it.”

“That doesn’t sound fun at all.”

“You’re right, I lied. It sucks.”

They mull on this for a while, tiptoeing around the topic to give Alistair a moment’s rest from the disease he has decided is called Feelings, of which he is sure there’s no cure. It had seemed foolproof, to go out for a night and talk to friends and strangers alike, and not think about this emotional catastrophe. Maybe if it were anyone else, he thinks, someone he knew in person, this wouldn’t be happening—it would be organic, ideal, and for a first crush, it would be at a rational pace. But Alistair Theirin is so much of a fool sometimes, he is certain that next year’s edition of the dictionary will forego their written definition of the word, replacing it with naught but a photo of himself.

“I told you about Cullen, so tell me about Dog Lord, more than what you told Isabela. It’s an adorable nickname for starters, it sounds like it suits you two.”

You two. More than Alistair’s ears turn red. “Where do I start?” he says, and Luana’s beaming grin is as infectious as the Feelings. Gesticulating wildly, he starts from the top with the wrong number Cullen bestowed him—Luana nearly shrieks with joy—to their bizarre continued dependence on each other, as alarm clocks and mutual coping methods. The PO box story comes out and Luana begs to touch his phone, to feel the very real proof of Dog Lord’s influence on his life. The gift exchanges, the phone call in the cemetery, the dog tag, all up to their stilted texts, the latest point of contention.

Luana scoops her keys out of her purse. “We have to go,” she insists, her soft rounded jawline suddenly gritting hard enough to cut through dragon bone.

“What? What about Dorian?” Alistair shouts over the music as Luana is dragging him out by the hand.

“It’s his car, I’ll come back for him!”

As unfamiliar with the swankier side of Denerim as he is, Alistair knows she’s taking him home. Once they reach his driveway, Luana lets the car idle, unsure of how to send him off.

“You—”

“Thank you,” he says, cutting her off. “For listening to me babble about all that. It felt good to tell someone who isn’t a complete stranger, one that’s trying to get a peek at my smallclothes any time I so much as move.”
“How do you even know Isabela?” Luana blinks.

“What? How do you?”

“I’ve seen her in the Alienage a few times. She’s my friend’s girlfriend, but I don’t really know her. Not the way Merrill does, anyhow. Now go, text Dog Lord!”

Alistair doesn’t need to be told twice. He unbuckles himself and launches a hug at Luana —”Lethallin, please, go!”— and barrels to his front door. He stabs at the lock with his key, adrenaline coursing through his veins, making his fingers falter. It would be nice if no one could see, but the car doesn’t budge until Luana is sure he’s safely inside. Alistair slams the door shut behind him, quickly making it to the outermost window to extend a shaky thumbs up to his friend, before darting to his bedroom.

Clothes, meet floor.

A trail of his belongings lead to the edge of the bed, where Alistair lays on his back in the dark, phone held high with eyes squinting at the brightness. A bevy of thoughts and ideas, ways to start his texts and apologize and admit, whirlpool in his mind. He thinks he can do it, is ready to throw all common sense to the wind when he sees his phone is set to silent. The messaging app has a red bubble with a number four in it. He’s been missing her texts.

Heart in his mouth, he opens the app, chest feeling sunken and the exuberance for love and life gone. No texts, just voice messages. Alistair braces himself as he presses ‘play’ on the first one, for spitting anger, venom, distrust. He knows now that he shouldn’t have tried to get her to play along, the miscommunication shames him when he knew she didn’t like it last time—

“Hey Cheese Man, Dog Lord’s sleepy voice mumbles, filling the otherwise quiet room. “I’m too tired for texting right now. I’m getting used to falling asleep earlier, imagine that. You’re probably still out and I…” She sounds like she’s restraining herself, and the first message ends. Alistair frowns and plays the second one.

“Fuck. My cheek must’ve ended that message, it wasn’t even that long. Fuck, s’ a funny word to say. Andraste’s random body part, I’m tired, aren’t I? I usually pass out before I get like this so you’ve yet to deal with it, lucky dog. I’m sorry, by the way. I don’t get many chances to say that, because I’m usually in the right, but I’ll concede. I’m sorry I jumped down your throat for reasons you don’t even know but—”

Alistair feels his fist clenching, tighter and tighter. He plays the third message.

“Fuck! Alright, this is ridiculous. I said I was sorry, that’s the important bit. Yet I don’t want to stop sending these messages. They’re just saying ‘delivered’ so Maker knows if you’re even getting them, if you haven’t just turned off your phone because I was an arse. Said it again, see, I was wrong so you know I’m being genuine. I want to keep talking to you, though, I wish this were a phone call. I’d sleep better that way, among other things… Shit, I’m sorry again. I know the innuendos make you uncomfortable when they come from me. I won’t talk about sex if you don’t like it, even though your voice does things—”

Alistair looks around the room, wonders if his bed’s on fire, if the flames are lapping at his ankles and his thighs like he thinks they are. A wandering hand thumbs at the waistband of his boxers, the only thing he bothered to leave on. He plays the final message.

“Alright apparently there was some kind of limit to that voice message. Fuck phones, they’re useless. I’ll stop leaving messages on your phone like some dodgy ex who can’t quit, yeah? Fuck,
but those hands are good for something. Goodnight, tiger...emoji. Mmmrrmph.”

The phone drops to his side, those hands find their way under cloth.

As the messages replay, they whisper fuck in unison.

Chapter End Notes

And to no one's surprise, this chapter is longer than the last! We know everyone has no qualms with long chapters, but this is 16.5k words, this is so Unnecessary!

Chapter 9 had such an overwhelming (to us) response, and more often than not it brought little tears to our eyes. All you immensely kind souls out there, who left us comments or Tumblr messages or BOTH, you're seriously our heroes. Anyone who writes fanfic can tell you that the power of positive feedback and validation just makes the arduous journey SO worth it. I don't know that we'd have gotten this far without wonderful people like you all :')

Other sidenotes: if you think you spot a Monster Factory reference in there somewhere, chances are you are 100% correct. And the 'song' Cullen sings is absolutely a real one, but I'll spare you all from a link. Additional thanks & shoutout to Rye and Maria (for being supportive monsters on Twitter with their amazing fanart), and chralotte (who has not been doing well and I wanted them to know we care!)

The chapter art is by the unfathomably great nippaaah
Our personal blogs:
Carouselfancy
Tijgertje
And our fic blog, where we post tortuous updates, additional art, music, etc!
Friday

She awakes with a kick and a swear.

Her dreams had been rife with nonsensical horrors. Over-saturated colors, twisted versions of people she knows... Trying to recall exactly what she’d seen makes her feel uneasy, and she groans when her stomach rolls in ill-timed unison. Her sheets tangle around her limbs and hang halfway off her bed. It seems she had not bothered to put on pants after her shower last night.

She's never been so glad to live alone.

Olivia groans and curls up on her side, berating herself. She had ingested an unconscionable amount of garbage last night in a self-destructive binge. When she had returned from Highever, she had promised herself a new leaf. Better control of her emotional baggage. And yet…

She glances up at her bedside table to investigate the evidence of her mistakes: an empty cookie tray; an open bag of half-eaten potato chips; the melted dregs of a quart of cookie dough ice cream and—an almost-empty jar of chocolate hazelnut spread with the spoon left in it?

She flops onto her back and finds herself wishing she had turned to alcohol instead. She’s going to have a lot of running to do.

With a jolt, she remembers why she had been eating her feelings. She dives into her blankets to retrieve her phone and swears to herself when she finds the battery at 20%. Had she fallen asleep while texting last night?

She rubs the sleep from her eyes and sucks on her upper teeth. She winces at the sour taste of trans fats and sugar left in her mouth from sleep, and looks askance at her phone. Hessarian’s panting face on her lock screen taunts her.

Finally, with a sigh, she touches her thumb to the “Home” button.

Cheese Man kept an audio message from you.

Yesterday 20:33

Cheese Man kept an audio message from you.

Yesterday 20:33

Cheese Man kept an audio message from you.

Yesterday 20:34

Cheese Man kept an audio message from you.

Yesterday 20:35
“Oh, shit!”

Olivia drops her phone as if it burns her, and stares down at it with wide eyes. She scrunches her face and tries desperately to remember what she could have said. She tries to backtrack through her sleep haze to guess at her state of mind, but she comes up with only vague impressions of emotions. Nothing corporeal or even remotely useful.

A million profanities that would have made her mother faint dead away course through her head at once. Blasphemes and oaths, nine uses of the word ‘bugger.’

But the only thing that leaves her mouth is a tiny, whispered, “Noooooo.”

She checks the time. 7:28. He shouldn’t be at work yet, if she’s lucky. She scrolls up in their text window, wincing at the words that glare at her from the blue bubble on her screen. She’d been so harsh to him, there’s a good chance the audio messages were harmless.

Hopefully.

A small, nagging voice whispers that they’re probably more than a little embarrassing. She winces and jabs at the green icon on her phone before she can talk herself out of it.

She doesn't wait to hear the first ring in her ear. She leaps up and pulls the first pair of jeans she finds out of her dresser. She is attempting to pull them over her hips, jumping and wriggling, when she hears him accept the call.

“You know it’s seven-thirty on a Friday morning, right?” She just about drops her phone at the sound of his voice.

He sounds annoyed, but she catches an upswing in his words that she hopes is a smile.

“Contrary to what my boss believes, I’m quite good at telling time, but thank you for the tip.” She smiles at the tiny release of air on the other end of the line. She buttons her jeans and rifles through her closet for something work-appropriate to wear as she talks. She tries not to imagine him doing the same. The conjured image of him in a similar state of undress is not something she’s prepared to deal with right now. “I wanted to catch you before work, though.”

“Whyyyyy?” He draws the word out, long and low, sounding suspicious. She feels her heart thump and wonders if she has ruined everything after all.

“I don’t mean to bother you,” she says, quieter now, hesitant. “If you need to get ready for work, I can leave you alone…”

“No!” he interjects a little too loud, and clears his throat. Her heart unclenches with relief and she can’t help the smile that creeps back to her face. “I mean, I’m on my way to work already, so I have some time. Although it would be easier if Cullen would stop glaring at me through the rear-view mirror!” His words grow loud and firm, as though they are being pointedly aimed at the man in question. She could almost imagine it if she had a face to put with the name. “What do you need?”

The question is quieter and warmer than his voice had been before. He sounds much closer to the phone and, by proxy, her ear. It distracts her utterly, and all she can think to ask is, “Are you in the backseat? Is he your chauffeur?”

He hums. It’s a thoughtful sound. The cadence of it lifts the hair on her arms like a summer breeze
through blades of grass. “We carpool to work, and I—well, I used to get shotgun but I got demoted.” She smiles despite the utter lack of context.

Olivia pulls an open-front cardigan over a black tee and hastily piles her mess of hair on top of her head. She doesn’t bother with the short flyaways that fall into her face. She knows how to pick her battles, and the ongoing one she has with her hair is almost never worth fighting.

“I wanted to make sure you didn’t go to work thinking about what an absolute prat I was to you last night.” She is pressing her phone to her ear with only her shoulder, trying to pull her socks onto her feet while standing. She is rather glad he can’t see her. “I… saw that I sent you some voice messages, but I admit I don’t really remember what I said. Whatever it was, I promise you I wasn’t drunk and I’m really sorry.”

There’s a long silence, broken only by his small murmur, she assumes to his companions. She accidentally grunts aloud as her balance wavers in her attempt to put her other sock on.

Finally, blessedly, she hears him chuckle, almost too quiet for her to hear. “You mostly just apologized a lot.” He pauses. She pauses as well, listening to his breathing as though she might decode something from it. “I think you fell asleep on your phone. It was pretty cu—pretty funny.”

Olivia winces. She has no trouble imagining her dog-tired and half-dressed self mumbling like a twit into her phone. With the rate at which she’s been stuffing up lately, she’s surprised he took her call at all.

“Bet you’re finally regretting not just deleting my number now, eh?” she quips. It’s meant to sound casual, but her jaw clenches around the words to prevent them from leaving her mouth.

But he laughs, and the sound of it chases her fear away. It’s breathy and ends in a tiny snort. She wishes she could catch it in her hands. “I could have sworn I was the one who bothered you into talking to me, so I don’t exactly have a lot of room to regret!”

He falls quiet, and Olivia struggles to shove her foot into a boot with one hand.

“I’m sorry too, for bothering you about the wingman thing,” he says then. Olivia starts to protest, but he cuts her off. “No, I don’t want you to think—I don’t think of you like that.”

She wants to ask him like what but is too afraid of the answer. She nudges her phone back into the crevice of her shoulder so she can use both hands to hop into her shoe. As she opens her mouth to give him a half-baked reply, her foot slides into her boot. Her hands slip and she’s propelled swiftly backward. She falls on her arse and only just manages to save her phone from taking a tumble as well.

“Andraste’s buggering shitehole!” The rather creative expletive flies from her mouth before she can even think to stop it. Cheese Man splutters on the other end of the phone before bursting into laughter.

“Did you just fall on your arse?” He barely manages to squeeze the question out through his laughter. She sticks her tongue out at him as though he can see her.

“Stop laughing! I’m trying to get ready for work and let me tell you, putting on shoes is bloody difficult with only one hand!”

“Maybe you should invest in one of those hands-free headsets,” he chirps back merrily. “I hear they’re great for all sorts of hand-related activities.” He does not suggest she hang up, or that she shouldn’t have called him in the first place. She’s not sure why this is important to her, but the
thought makes her chest swell anyway.

“Then how would I entertain you? My pride and my arse would be unbruised and you, poor Cheese Man, would have to go back to titillating Templar erotica to get your kicks.”

“I maintain that Templar erotica—stop giving me that look Cullen, how about you keep your eyes on the road—is far better than dusty old journals written by dusty old men.”

“Thank you for reminding me,” Olivia responds wetly around her toothbrush. “I was going to ask after that today at work.”

“Stop brushing your teeth in my ear,” he complains.

“Stop yelling at poor Cullen when he’s driving your freeload ing arse to work,” she fires back.

“No!” There is a distinctly feminine giggle somewhere in the background. Deep in her gut, some small, angry beast claws at her innards. “You have to take my side,” he whines, “I’m already outnumbered as it is and if you knew what a grumpy old fart he was, you’d understand.”

She hears a thump, followed by a “Heyyy!” and several repeated muffled slaps. After a brief moment of silence, she hears the distinct sound of his face returning to his phone.

“Gramps says I have to go,” he says finally. His words are sarcastic but his tone is full of regret. Olivia feels her own pang of regret, but her cheeks are aching from the broad smile she’s been wearing. She chuckles.

“Thanks for the morning pep-talk, Cheese Man,” she says, her voice swelling with affection.

He huffs a silent chuckle of his own. “Same to you, Dog Lord.”

“Talk to you later?”

“I’d like that.”

She smiles and hits the “End” button on her phone.

(7:39) Buy Cullen a coffee for me to make up for annoying him 😊

(7:39) You say “for you” but it would be with my money

(7:39) And I am fundamentally opposed to spending what little I have on sucking up to Cullen 😱👎

(7:40) You’re a prat

(7:40) 😅

(7:41) I leave you a few coppers in the PO box if you want 😏

She pulls up to the Crossroads at exactly eight o’clock. Morrigan is unlocking the front doors as Olivia steps out of her car, and gives her a suspicious look as she approaches.
“You are… early. Again.” Morrigan raises a thin black brow. Olivia gives her a guileless smile.

“I’m trying to make a dent in the work I missed while I was out of town.” She gives her boss a one-shouldered shrug. “I figure if I come in before the customers, I can get in some uninterrupted work.”

“Uninterrupted by customers, perhaps,” Morrigan replies dryly. Olivia widens her eyes to look as innocent as she can, but her phone burns in her cardigan pocket. Morrigan narrows her unsettling catlike eyes at her, and Olivia can only offer a cheeky grin in response.

With a final shake of her head, Morrigan slides open the glass doors of the Crossroads and gestures with an outstretched arm for Olivia to go in ahead of her.

She loves the quiet of the store before it opens. The converted warehouse building seems all the more cavernous for the lack of milling bodies, and it almost feels as though the books are old friends, waiting to greet her and watching dutifully from their perches on shelves and tables. She’s always strolled in with the first customers, but lately, she has been considering making this schedule change permanent. The peaceful quiet made for a good start to the day.

“You do not get paid overtime,” Morrigan’s voice breaks through her reverie, and she turns to her, questions in her eyes.

“I’m sorry?”

Morrigan huffs, strangely flustered, and places her purse on the checkout counter. She crosses her arms over her chest, and Olivia can see the guarded look fall back into place on Morrigan’s face.

“What I mean to say is that we have not agreed upon an overtime wage. I had not thought it necessary when I hired you.”

“Oh!” Olivia shakes her hand, waving Morrigan’s concern away. “I’m not doing this for money. I felt bad for missing an entire week of work with almost no notice. Especially after I saw the pile of books that stacked up while I was gone. I don’t want you to think I don’t take my job seriously. Despite my… texting habits.” She flashes Morrigan a guilty smile.

She and Leliana have a running joke that there is nothing in the store that Morrigan doesn’t see. She always seems to be lurking in a nearby bookshelf, ready to scold them for slacking off, no matter where she had previously been in the store. Olivia had once seen her skulking in a bookshelf in the very back of the store. As soon as she had mentioned it to Leliana, Morrigan had snapped at them from a shelf near the front window to stop paying so much attention to her, and to pay more attention to the customers.

Morrigan’s face flashes with something strange, unrecognizable. It seems to soften for the briefest of moments, before she turns on her heel and disappears into the curtain that hides the sales office.

Olivia is debating whether or not she is meant to follow when Morrigan resurfaces, clutching a small square of paper in her hands. When she shoves it unceremoniously at Olivia, she realizes it is actually a photo, wallet-sized and slightly worn at the corners.

It’s a school portrait of a young boy, perhaps six or seven years of age, with dark hair and freckles and distinctly catlike eyes. She can’t help the way her eyebrows shoot upward in surprise.

“Is this—do you have a son?”

“His name is Kieran.” Morrigan’s voice softens with affection as she speaks his name, and Olivia feels every preconception she’s had about her boss flip onto its head.
“Does he—are you married, as well?” She knows she’s blinking owlishly, and is powerless to stop herself. Morrigan shakes her head.

“His father died before he was born. Military.” Olivia bites her lip and gingerly hands the photo back to Morrigan, who smiles—actually smiles—down at it. “I have raised him alone for most of his life. For a long time, he was all I had.”

Olivia is still trying to wrap her head around this new information and, even more, around why Morrigan has suddenly chosen to reveal this information to her. She feels as though her entire worldview has been rattled, though she knows it’s silly to feel that way just because her boss has turned out to be human.

“You don’t have any other family?” She knows she shouldn’t pry, knows she wouldn’t appreciate it if it were she, and yet she can’t help herself. She is entirely fascinated.

Morrigan shakes her head a little too vehemently and busies herself for a long moment with opening the cash register and counting the bills stashed inside. Olivia has just begun to think it a dismissal when Morrigan speaks again. “My mother was… to put it politely, ill-prepared for motherhood. She always had some business venture or another that was more important than I.” She pauses, and her expression becomes pained for such a fleeting second that Olivia wonders if she imagined it. “She was often more concerned with teaching me of the cruelness of the world than showing motherly affection.”

“I’m sorry.” It’s a platitude, but Olivia does not know what else to say. She feels suddenly, inexplicably lucky that she at least enjoyed the time she had with her own mother.

Morrigan recognizes the platitude for what it is and waves it away. “Do not be. I chose to free myself from her. I did not want her influence in Kieran’s life and I was determined to be the mother she could not be.”

Olivia glances down at the photo. Kieran smiles up at her from the countertop and she can’t help but smile back. “He’s cute. I bet he’s a great kid.”

Morrigan smiles down at the photo as well and nods. “He is.”

With a blink of realization, Olivia looks up at Morrigan. “Is that why you leave at four o’clock every afternoon? To pick him up?” She had always noticed, and yet never wondered. She had taken so much of her boss’s behaviors to be idiosyncrasies. She feels a pang of guilt.

Morrigan nods again. “He has band practice after school.” She chuckles and Olivia wonders at how lovely the sound is. “He loves music. Though he’s young, his teachers say he has a natural talent for it.”

“You sound very proud,” Olivia muses.

“I am.” For a long moment, Morrigan gazes lovingly at the photo of Kieran before finally scooping it up and taking it back to where it came from in the office. When she resurfaces once more, her face is settled back into its mask of seriousness. “I tell you this because I understand the importance of birthdays. Your nephew will only turn seven once, and I do not mind giving you the time off so you do not miss it.” Her voice still has the soft quality it had taken on when she spoke of Kieran, and Olivia notes with appreciation that she remembered Oren’s age.

Morrigan scoops up a handful of books and marches off toward the back of the store, and Olivia understands the signal of dismissal. She’s about to head to her own desk when Morrigan calls out to
“Olivia.” She turns to face her boss, her eyes questioning once more. Morrigan does that thing again—smiles—and nods to her. “Thank you for putting in the extra time. It is appreciated.”

Olivia returns the smile. “It’s my pleasure.”

Morrigan turns on her heel to continue her journey to her office, when Olivia stops her.

“Morrigan.” It’s her boss’s turn to give the questioning look, and Olivia grins at her. “Call me Liv.”

Morrigan rolls her eyes, but Olivia doesn’t miss the smile that pulls at the corners of her mouth as she turns away.

(8:15) Nothing in this world makes sense and I already need a nap.

(8:15) Work is that exciting already? 😏

(8:15) I’ve just had my entire worldview rocked to its foundation. Everything has changed.

(8:16) Sounds a bit overdramatic 😏

(8:16) If you only knew. How is work on your end?

(8:17) 😞😭 Don’t ask

(8:17) Oh good, at least it’s not just me.

(14:22) If I die tell my dog I love him

(14:29) 🐶🎈 Tell Hessarian I am on my way! Finally, all my dreams will come true

(14:29) I don’t know why I expected you to mourn me

(14:29) I should have known better.

(14:30) I will make sure he looks very dapper at your funeral

(14:30) He will give a stunning eulogy

(14:30) Oh good, that’s comforting

(14:30) I suppose I should know what to tell him when he wants to know how you died

(14:31) Oh how kind of you to ask!

(14:31) 😈

(14:31) I told my boss she was doing a “great job!” and stuck an emoji sticker to her jacket

(14:31) You did not!
I ran away as fast as I could but I’m PRETTY sure I saw her smiling as I did.

RIP Dog Lord. She was a good friend and was occasionally good for a laugh.

Aw, do you really mean it? 😏

Would I put up with you if I didn’t? 😏

And here I thought it was just because I’m your only friend!

That too 😅

Smarmy bastard

You love it

Don’t put words in my mouth

My stupid coworker won’t stop trying to steal my phone because he’s convinced I have “racy photos” on it

I may be arrested for homicide today so you’ll have to convey my apologies to Hessarian

DO you have racy photos?

Oh yes, whatever will I do if he finds my stash of secret hand photos

Yours was just the latest in my extensive, very secret collection

That explains why you got all hot and bothered by it!

Maybe I’ll just have to send some racy photos to you so he’ll have something to find! 😏

WHAT no you wouldn’t

You won’t

He’s not getting hold of my phone so there would be no point!!!

Are you actually 😧

(15:47)
Maker’s breath that’s the worst photo I’ve ever seen I hate you

Oh?? Are you disappointed?

NO

You scared me that’s all

Hmmm

maybe I’ll have to send something better then!

Can you hear my groaning in exasperation where you are? Because it’s pretty loud

Dog Lord

Dog Lord?????
Olivia is desperately trying to get the blood to drain from her cheeks when she hears the overdramatic bass of Dorian Pavus call her name from the front of the store. With a start, she shoves her phone into her pocket as though it is some guilty thing to be hidden away. Her hands are cold from the Crossroads’ central air conditioning, so she presses them against her cheeks in a desperate attempt to draw the heat out. But wayward thoughts of Cheese Man’s last texts keep slipping through the cracks and causing the heat to flood right back unbidden.

She’s just going to have to hope that the flush blends in with the darkness of her skin well enough that Dorian and Leliana won’t notice. She can’t remember blushing at all in the last ten years, at least, and the thought of it is enough to embarrass her all the more.
Shoving her hands into her jean pockets as she shuffles to the front of the store, she finds Dorian standing next to the checkout desk, holding a book with a flamboyant, curly ribbon stuck to the front of it. He gesticulates to Leliana, and his hand gives a specific flourish that Olivia knows is reserved for complaining. She knows better than to interrupt him.

“I’m telling you, Leliana, I’ve never seen him so uptight before. It’s the face of a man who desperately needs to get laid. When even Cu—there you are, Livvy love! What took you so long?”

Leliana is shaking her head in amusement, and Olivia scratches the back of her neck sheepishly. “Who needs to get laid?” she asks, affecting as casual a tone as she can manage.

Dorian looks her up and down, and his grey eyes narrow. He plants his hands on his hips. “Well, clearly not you! What have you been doing that has you so flustered?” He wags his finely plucked eyebrows at her. “Has some deliciously filthy romance serial crossed your desk?”

“What?” Olivia is so surprised that she can’t help but laugh. “Don’t be silly, Dorian, you know I would never keep that from you.”

It’s the wrong thing to say. He rubs his hands together, as though he is a thief plotting his next target. “You’re right,” he agrees, taking a step closer to her. His eyes narrow even further, and her hand flutters nervously near her cardigan pocket. His eyes latch onto the motion as if magnetized and he gasps. “Olivia Cousland, are you sexting?”

Leliana stops counting cash and looks to them, her eyes widening in interest. Despite the inaccuracy of the accusation, she feels her cheeks burn hot once more. Dorian crows with glee and makes a swipe for her pocket. Olivia is ready and dances away from him, reaching into her pocket to clutch at her phone. The action is involuntary, and she regrets it immediately. She’s only convincing them even more of her guilt.

“Fine!” Dorian declares dramatically, shaking his head. “Keep your secrets! I’m here on a much more important mission, anyway.” He wields the book at her with a little shake. “I’ve brought you a gift. You know how I can’t resist spoiling you.”

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She grins at him. “Is it a blasphemous Tevinter artifact?” she asks with a greedy smile. Leliana sighs louder than is necessary, and Dorian waves her away.

“Alas, nothing so fine. Just something I saw that reminded me of you.”

“Hmmmm.” She narrows her eyes at him, taking the book gingerly into her hands. “Guess you just don’t love me as I much as I do you.” Her smile is entirely cheeky and he cocks his head and raises his brows in a challenge.

“Do you love me, or do you just love winning my hard-earned coin for Morrigan?”

Olivia only laughs, and opens the worn leather cover of the book.

She nearly drops it in shock.

“Th-this is the journal of Lady Anya Enversen, the—the first explorer of the Sunless Lands,” she says, almost in a whisper. Her hands shake ever so slightly as she flips carefully through the pages. Black ink in a delicate hand scrawls across pages that are thick and incredibly old, as if made from—real parchment? “Is this an original copy?” She looks up at Dorian incredulously, and he gives her a smug smile in return. “Dorian, where did you get this?”

“The Wintersend festival. I remember you telling me the harpy—”
“Dorian,” Leliana chides, but he talks over her.

“—wouldn’t let you off work to go, but I saw this at the booth of a used book vendor and I knew you absolutely had to have it.”

Olivia caresses the embossed cover of the journal with gentle fingertips, and she can’t help but wonder—was this the same journal the Cheese Man had mentioned? Had he touched it, thumbed through it to see if it was something she’d like?

She looks back up at Dorian and swallows thickly. “This means more than you can imagine,” she says quietly, trying to keep her voice steady.

His smile is genuine now, and full of warmth. “I knew you would love it.” He reaches out and squeezes her hand with his own, before puffing up haughtily. “And you know how I do love being right.”

Olivia laughs and swipes at her damp eyes, clutching subconsciously at the dog tags around her neck as she clutches the journal to her chest. “I wish I’d known, I don’t have anything for you that even remotely compares,” she says when she’s regained her composure. Dorian opens his mouth to reassure her when she remembers the stack of books on her desk. “Wait!” She is grinning already at the thought and holds up her hand. “I’ll be right back, I do have something for you.”

She jogs back to him with an entirely different tome in her hand, heavy and gilded, all the right kinds of flashy. She can see Dorian’s eyes light up at the sight of it and smiles inwardly as she shoves it into his chest.

“Oh I do hope it’s something controversial,” he says gleefully, tipping the heavy book to look at it’s spine. “The—The Malefica Imperio? Liv, I appreciate the thought, but this—this book is nothing but ___.”

“—trite propaganda,” Olivia and Leliana recite in unison with him, and Dorian narrows his eyes at them.

“Yes, all right, very funny!” He rolls his eyes with a long-suffering sigh, but Olivia notices the way the corners of his mouth turn upward underneath his mustache. He does not hand the book back to her.

“You know it’s Friday, Dorian,” Leliana says conversationally as he pulls his wallet from his coat pocket. “Were you going out tonight?”

Dorian makes a face. “I thought about it, but to be honest the bar scene is entirely droll lately and I have grown rather bored of being groped by drunk women.”

Leliana hums, and Olivia thinks of the constant flow of men that had approached Leliana the last time they had gone out together, and the subsequent bored rejection they had all inevitably received.

“It’s probably the Maker telling me to stop, anyway,” Dorian continues, his nose scrunching in distaste. “I’m getting rather too old to be barhopping.”

“You’re only twenty-eight,” Olivia laughs.

“Tell that to my poor, beladen liver.” He heaves a sigh. Olivia and Leliana laugh again. Leliana shakes her head at him.

“I’m afraid to think of what you’ll do with your time now,” she remarks.
Dorian swipes his credit card with a glare, and opens his mouth to reply.

“My place,” Olivia interrupts. She isn’t sure what causes her to blurt it, but as soon as the words leave her mouth she knows them to be perfect. Dorian and Leliana turn to her with matching looks of curiosity, and she smiles. “I’ve recently acquired the furnishings of a proper home.” She smirks at Leliana. “It’s actually quite cozy. We can watch bad movies and get wine drunk.”

“I still have the receipts, if you were wondering.” Leliana blinks innocuously. “I hear House Cousland of Highever is rather affluent.”

Olivia narrows her eyes at her suspiciously. “Is there anything about anybody that you don’t know?”

Leliana’s only answer is a slow, innocent smile that tells Olivia everything she needs to know.

Dorian sweeps his book from the checkout counter and into his finely-stitched leather briefcase. “In that case, I know of a delicious Rivaini restaurant that delivers.” He flashes Olivia a brilliant, mischievous grin, and it spreads across her own face as though infectious.

“Sounds perfect,” she says, and it does.

(17:01)

(17:01) Look familiar??

(17:01) ! You weren’t joking when you said it would find its way to you

(17:02) Did not think it would be so soon though

(17:02) Apparently my friend was at the Wintersend festival as well and he also thought of me when he saw it 😊
(17:04) How thoughtful of him

(17:04) And here I was thinking I’d had some incredible insight into the psyche of the lord of dogs

(17:04) To be fair, he had an unfair advantage. We have this silly thing where we gift each other books

(17:05) Sometimes they’re stupid and cheeky, and sometimes they’re incredibly sweet!

(17:05) Sounds like you two are quite close 😊

(17:05) What’s that face for?

(17:05) Nothing!

(17:08) Come off it, Cheese Man, what’s got your knickers in a twist?

(17:08) My knickers are fine

(17:08) They bloody are not

(17:08) Any man who spends that much money on his female friend does not just want to be friends

(17:09) Is that right?

(17:09) Jealous, are you?

(17:09) I’m not jealous! I’m just trying to look out for you

(17:09) Well, not that it matters since you are ~totally not jealous~ but he’s gay

(17:10) Oh.

(17:10) Well, good then. Glad you have such a generous friend.

(17:10) Why are you being so snotty??

(17:10) I’m not being snotty. But if I had that kind of money to throw around I’d be buying you all kinds of old books

(17:11) Would you now 😆

(17:13) Cheese Man, I would hope you don’t think so little of me as to think I would rate my friends based on how much money they spend on me

(17:13) I don’t!

(17:13) Think little of you, I mean

(17:13) But a priceless historical book makes dog tags look rather stupid

(17:14) Don’t you dare insult my dog tags
I love them.

Cheese Man, you were my first friend in this city. You were my Yelp man! I wouldn’t have any friends if not for you.

I gave you my tragic backstory.

You’re not just some friend to me.

So can I apologize for... whatever it is I’ve done, so you can stop being mad at me and we can get back to talking about cheese and making fun of Cullen?

I’m sorry.

It’s been a hard day, not that it’s any excuse.

I don’t have any right to police who your friends are. Or... anyone else.

Thank you.

Because I’m having friends come to my actual house to hang out tonight and it would have been really hard to ask you for advice if you were going to annoyed about it the whole time.

You, entertaining? Andraste strike me down.

I know. I need you to tell me what one typically does to “entertain” guests.

I would think your butler would be able to take care of that for you.

You could all go into the Market District and point and laugh at poor people!

Dine on tea and crumpets and wave your little fingers in the air.

What.

Oh I see, it’s a joke about me, the lord of dogs, being rich.

Despite being a prat, you’re rather spot on in your assessment of the activities of the wealthy.

I liked it better when you were mad at me.

Don’t forget to be polite and call everyone “old sport!”

You’re incorrigible.

Maybe but I’m your favorite, you said so.

😊😢😢
Olivia hadn’t been sure what sorts of wine her friends preferred, and so she had gone perhaps a little overboard on a trip to the market. Her kitchen counter is bedecked in bottles of varying colors and sizes, from red to white to pink. She’d even purchased boxed wine, though that was mostly because she wanted to see Dorian’s reaction.

She has also procured boxes of popcorn and movie theatre candy, because it seemed like the thing to do.

She has just started to worry that perhaps she’s made herself look pathetically overeager when she hears a musical knocking on her door that can only be Dorian’s.

Olivia has barely opened her door before her friends flock into her home like brightly colored birds. They seem to flutter about the living room, and Leliana smiles approvingly when she finds that Olivia has kept her… *adjustments*. Dorian deposits a large canvas bag filled with films and wine bottles onto the island counter in the kitchen and turns to appraise her home.

“I must say, I’m surprised at how delightful your home is. I’ve always pictured you in some grim, sparsely-furnished studio apartment,” he says finally, nodding his approval before turning to smile at her. “Like the protagonist in a noire film.”

Olivia shoots a guilty glance at Leliana, but Leliana is too busy pulling throw pillows Olivia doesn’t recognize from the hallway closet.

Relieved, she opens her mouth to respond but Leliana beats her to it, calling across the room as she sets the throw pillows on the floor in front of Olivia’s television.

“Oh, Dorian, you should have seen this place two weeks ago. The most depressing thing I’ve ever seen, only a couch and a television, boxes everywhere, nothing in the fridge. I thought I’d walked into a crime serial.”

Olivia frowns. “It wasn’t *that* bad. I was fine!”

Leliana raises a brow at her, her face impassive. “You were using a milk crate as a coffee table.”

Dorian makes a sound of utter disgust. “Where did you even get a milk crate in this day and age, a home decor catalogue for serial killers?”

She rolls her eyes and shoves a bottle of vintage Tevinter red into his chest. “Yes, alright, I would be lost without the interior stylings of Leliana. Can we proceed to the drinking part and watch whatever awful garbage you’ve both brought?”

Dorian eyeballs the wine bottle carefully, rotating it in his hands and looking like a jeweler examining a gem. He apparently deems it worthy, because he cradles it in his arm like an infant. With his free hand, he digs through the movies in the bag.

“I think Leliana took you a bit too seriously when you said ‘bad movies,’” he sniffs, holding up a rom-com that is almost as old as she is. Olivia laughs, but Leliana scoffs.

“As if your choices are much better! They’re all black and white horror films with glamorous old starlets.”

“The woman said bad movies,” he argues haughtily. “What could possibly be worse than watching some poor stunt double in a rubber suit chasing around screaming ninnies?”
“This.” Olivia brandishes a movie from her own selection and grins. “Badly dubbed martial arts films.”

Dorian groans and reaches for another bottle of wine. “I’m going to need to be very drunk for this.”

They make it through two dreadful films about a man who can summon the power of dragons into his fists and one black and white film about a swamp creature before the end of their wine supply is announced by a loudly complaining Dorian.

“I can’t believe wine even comes in a box, that can’t possibly be normal,” he says belligerently, wrinkling his nose at Olivia from the kitchen.

“It still has alcohol in it!” She throws a pillow over the couch at him, but it veers wildly off course and knocks over a potted plant that Olivia distinctly does not remember owning.

“I may be drunk, but I will never be that drunk,” he says with an emphatic shake of his head. The seriousness of his statement is harshly undercut by the piece of popcorn that still sits in his otherwise perfect hair from where Leliana had tossed it at him earlier. Leliana snickers, topping off the glass of wine from a bottle she had stashed away earlier, before palming her copy of Maid in Minrathous and waiting for Dorian’s reaction.

“No. We need more alcohol for… whatever that is.”

“Did we not already have enough?” Leliana asks, lips pressed up to her glass.

“We did up until the moment you brought that out. Whatever stereotypes you think I embody, I can assure you that I don’t.”

“It’s not about that, it’s about—well nevermind that, who is going to get the drinks?”

“It should be you, I would think. If you’re going to make us suffer through some subpar acting and a certifiably rotten ‘whirlwind romance,’ I wager you should suffer through the supermarket.”

Leliana huffs. “I can’t drive like this—”

Olivia forces herself to her feet with a queasy sway. “I will take it! I will take the ring.” Anything to get these squabbling lushes to smooth their feathers down.

“You can’t drive either,” Leliana chides.

“I live here, I know this neighborhood, thank you.”

“So you do know the way, Frodo?” Dorian’s smirk from across the room looks to be a challenge, one Olivia is willing to rise to as she slips into her jacket and grabs her phone.

“I’ll be back so fast, I’ll be… like something that is really really fast. You’ll see.”

“Good one,” she hears Leliana comment before slamming the door behind her.

Olivia does not know her way to the store.

All the hunger-fueled late night runs to the convenience store have been exclusively conducted via
car with GPS holding her steering wheel the entire way. Right now GPS sounds like a faraway novelty. Despite having her phone on her, she can’t fathom typing in the word ‘convenience’ correctly or doing anything other than shouting “Where is the alcohol?” into the microphone. With her luck she’ll wobble in one direction long enough to sober up and go home.

Nighthawks dot the sidewalks, curtaining Olivia’s stumbling journey to the store. She wonders if wobbling around at night like a fresh foal can be considered public indecency. Trying so hard to keep her chin held high and one foot in front of the other, she wants to feel like a determined warrior crossing the frontlines into battle; her uneven gait only makes her look like a tranquilized beast too stubborn to go down. The streetlamps flicker, her boot misses the curb, and her resolve falters.

Has it been one block already, or two? She’s been resolutely going straight, because all roads lead to a shop of some kind in Denerim, except she’s seeing nothing but abandoned buildings crowding her vision. A glance back tells her she’s left the more residential area, and the burning glow of gas stations are pinpricks in her peripheral. Against her better judgment, skewed by wine and spirits of all kinds, Olivia continues slogging forward.

In the daylight hours, Denerim feels as it should: like a city. At night, it feels more like a hungry entity; pedestrian whispers masquerade as its stomach growls. With every step and pant of cold breath, Olivia sinks her hand deeper into her jacket pocket, thumb poised over the phone buttons. A distant shout has her tongue massaging her gums, a means of distraction while the alcohol tries to seep out of her skin. Someone barks at her from an alley. She’s in no mood to bark back.

She slips her phone out of her pocket.

(22:21) Hey are you bday because i could really use a favour tight about now
(22:21) I meant busy. Might as well be using predictive text or whatever. Call me maybe?

The phone begins to ring before she can even lock it and wait.

“Sorry to bother,” Olivia slurs into the receiver. At times like these, she continues to miss the past version of her who could hold her liquor and not sound even remotely wasted.

“Are you drunk? For real this time?” Cheese Man replies, though his tone is more entertained than accusatory. She wants to say no, but his voice makes her feel so very, very yes.

“Only a little,” she lies. “Less so now than I was before, which is good. Unfortunate. Don’t think less of me if I tell you why I called.”

She hears the sound of a tiny slap on the other line. “I’m not bailing you out. That’s not how we’re meeting.”

“What? No! I called so I look less like a sloppy drunk. I think me being on the phone makes me seem more composed, don’t you think? Also makes me look like I know where I am and where I’m going.”

Cheese Man’s voice evolves into something severe, something heavy and stern, weighing her down, makes Olivia feel like she’s sinking. “Are you on the street right now? Alone?” It’s enough to make her stop mid-step and look around; is he watching? Is he judging? She nods and hums in the affirmative. “Go home, Dog Lord. Right now.” His voice turns sharp and she tries not to flinch at the
unfamiliar tone.

“What? Why?” Olivia pivots on her heel, scouts the area. “I’m running errands, I can’t go home empty-handed.” The sudden pump of adrenaline is starting to clear her head. She hears commotion on his end, a flurry of fabric and the tinkling of grabbed car keys. “What’s gotten into you?”

“Please,” Cheese Man implores, though his voice still sounds hard enough to cut through bone. “Dog Lord, I need you to go home.”

Something crashes into a nearby garbage can—a stray cat or a raccoon, the species doesn’t matter—and startles Olivia back into motion. Between her friend’s begging and the shadows of the city closing in on her, she can’t seem to read street signs. There’s a road, a crossing, a drive, then a court; the thumping of her boots as she hops off a curb to cross the street gets her heart into her mouth.

“You still there?” Cheese Man asks. “If you can just get your phone to send me your location, I could pick you up. I wouldn’t judge you…”

She’s positive she’s going the right way home after a handful of u-turns when she passes an alleyway, when she sees it. “I think I’m going to have to call you back,” Olivia murmurs, her voice finally returned to her.

“No, Dog Lord, don’t hang up.”

She sees something fiery, something hot and silken in the way it drips. Something animalistic in the way it wrenches itself up from the pavement and waves its appendages around to seek purchase on a nearby grate. Her phone is a portable camera, a voice in the back of her head is telling her to use it, or perhaps it is her friend, whose volume is at an all-time high. But Olivia won’t move, can’t move. The air is crackling and the creature with its ooze is pooling around a body, or maybe it comes from the body, its home, its source. It’s almost like lava in the way it ripples slowly, but it does not cool and harden, only spills over and sparks.

“Dog Lord!” He sounds ragged, like a man ripped back from the brink of throaty screams, pulling her back into the world proper.

“Cheese Man,” she whispers back, voice shaking. “Have you ever seen a demon?”

“Run.”

He doesn’t have to tell her twice. Olivia bolts, the alcohol in her system fleeing her as she flees the scene—crime scene? Should she call the cops? She chances a quick glance at her phone as she pauses to catch her breath, and her call with Cheese Man has been dropped. No time for the police, she thinks. A drunk woman belligerently ranting about a demon in a poorly lit alley with no evidence doesn’t seem credible even to her addled brain. She zips across crosswalks, deftly darting around other people foolish enough to walk the city at this hour, and she wants to tell them and stop them, but home, she needs to get home.

Home is on the horizon.

Olivia sees it from down the street, her mind cycling through all the horrific things that could happen from this spot to the front door. The fear and adrenaline keep her going, but even as she walks up her driveway, the thoughts don’t vanish. Her hand on the doorknob, she worries about what’s within. If the demon—was it a demon? could it be?—has reached Dorian and Leliana, or if someone robbed her house, or worse: they were gone and she is alone. She pushes the door inward and hears the gentle pattering of Hessarian’s nails on the hardwood, which has her breath evening out as calm washes over her. There’s heavy breathing from the other side of the couch, a snuffle and a hum.
“Leliana?” Olivia says as she gropes her way around the furniture she still isn’t used to. It’s comforting to find things where she doesn’t expect them instead of the usual narrative, things not being where they should.

“She’s passed out,” Dorian whispers from the kitchen. “Went down like dominoes mere minutes after you closed the door. I hope you don’t mind that I rummaged through your closets to give her a blanket or two.”

Stepping into the light of the kitchen, Olivia shakes her head. With her head drooping, all her fears unfounded and the adrenaline ceasing to course, she doesn’t notice Dorian swooping in until she feels him brush her hair out of her face. “Livvy, what’s happened? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Chair.”

Dorian supplies her with one of her new stools, though her body wishes for something with a sturdy backing. Olivia’s body sags as she sits, her head in her hands, her fingers splayed out over her eyes.

“Could I get you something? Water? Another drink, to chase away whatever in the Maker’s name you just saw?” He rifles through her cabinets as softly as he can, wincing any time two cups knock into each other, or when a pill bottle topples over. Olivia removes her hands from her face, lets them knead her jeans for a bit while she watches him look for pain relievers or ice packs or whatever he must think she needs in the moment.

“I just,” she says, tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth. “Water?”

“I can do that.”

She notices that his fingers twitch as he reaches for things, minuscule movements as a cup fills with her chosen liquid. The thought of him using magic in her house—the thought of magic at all—has her recoiling when he tries to place the glass in her hands.

“Did someone hurt you?” he probes. He means well but it still feels so intrusive. She shakes her head. “We can rule out robbery then, yes? Did you see someone else getting hurt?” He’s part of the police, Olivia has to remind herself when his questions begin to feel clinical and generic, but this is why she’s avoiding the police. “Was there anyone suspicious in the area—”

“Please,” she cuts him off, voice tight, her body fighting the urge to uncoil and bolt. If she’s not careful, she’ll shatter the water glass, and Leliana will reprimand her and… She takes a few sips and empties the glass. “I don’t want ‘medical examiner edition’ Dorian right now. But… thank you.” Pushing herself off the stool, Olivia heads towards the bedroom.

Dorian reaches for her arm. “Well ‘extremely concerned friend’ Dorian isn’t about to let you, my formerly wasted friend, go to sleep while clearly shaken. You saw something so please, Olivia, humor me.”

A swarm of half-truths began to populate her thoughts. To tell him about the lava, the ooze, was unthinkable, because she was drunk and not ready to face the truth of what that sizzling pile of demon might have actually been. The adrenaline has mostly abated, but there’s a cruel resurgence of it every single time she considers that maybe it was a manifestation of guilt, and oh here comes the dizziness and nausea. “My parents,” she blurts, wriggling her arm free of Dorian’s hand. “You see weird things when you’re out of it.” She’s cherry-picked the best of the almost-lies, and it works because Dorian lets her go after she promises to come to him if she needs anything tonight.
When finally alone, she strips out of all her clothes, anything that smells of alcohol or the city. In fresh underwear she paces the room, eyes the weights, fingers shaking and legs bouncing. If only Denerim didn’t sequester her to this hole, she could go out on a stress-jog, but instead Olivia gives in and collapses on the bed. In her jacket she hears her phone buzz and after a quick scramble she retrieves it. A useless push notification, nothing more. Without realizing it, she’s been staring at her screen for fifteen minutes without unlocking it.

He hasn’t called her back or texted her. Is he as on edge, somewhere out there? Did he take his keys and begin to scour the city, hoping to find her after begging her to go home? It wouldn’t have been an ideal way to meet, but at this point in her life, is there an ideal other than just meeting him at all? Olivia dials his number out by heart and waits while she scrunches up her pillow in her fist.

“Dog Lord!” he shouts, sounding like he’s held his breath for so long and he’s got stars in his eyes. It’s enough to make some of the ache slide away from her, but the adrenaline creeps back in through her fingers. “You, ah, you called back!”

“I did,” Olivia replies lamely. “I figured I owed you that much.”

“I was so worried about you, I baked two dozen cookies. Except I messed up the recipe my friend gave me, because I’ve never made these kinds of strange elf cookies before—obviously—and I didn’t add enough sugar. But I’ve got all these cookies so I have to eat them and my stomach hurts. But you’re okay, so that’s really great. I’m glad, even if it gave me at least two kinds of a stomach ache.”

“Oh, I thought you’d gone out to find me.”

“I didn’t think you… I mean, would you have wanted that?”

“There are worse things to find out there than you, Cheese Man.” Olivia swallows. “Like demons.”

“Demons,” he echoes. “Did you… Did you really see one?”

“I don’t know,” she admits. “I’ve only seen them in grainy photos and piss-poor recreations on the history channel. I don’t know what else it could’ve been, though.”

“I believe you.”

“You do?”

He laughs, and if it were anyone else, she would think he was taking the piss out of her. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well I was drunk when I rang you up. Your first thought was that I was in the drunk tank and you needed to bail me out. Not a ringing endorsement for what you think of me when I’m not sober.”

“You make a good point. That’s it, I no longer believe you.”

“Oh come off it.”

“What’s that? I can’t hear you over my disbelief and adherence to a really poor joke, thanks.”

“You’re bloody impossible sometimes, you know that right?”

The two of them lapse into easy laughter, and Olivia notices that she’s no longer strangling the pillows, instead gripping at the sheets. She releases them and cards her fingers through her hair,
trapping them in a few stray knots. “My friend asked me what I saw and I lied to him. I, uh… pulled the parents card on him, actually. Told him I saw them in my drunken stupor.”

“Alright, but did you?” asks Cheese Man.

“Of course not! I’m sticking to my demon story.” Olivia pauses. “But I did wonder for a minute. Just because it was nighttime and this is the city, and they were… Well I told you already so, yeah.”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “Where were you?”

“Are you trying to suss out my location again?”

“Sue me for my curiosity, lord of dogs.”

Olivia taps her finger to her chin, tries to recount the location to him without cross streets and specific landmarks. Not because she wanted to hide where she lived, more because it was hard not to develop a headache thinking about the details, and everything ended up a blur when she sprinted away. Cheese Man remains silent about it for a couple minutes, save for the sound of pencil scratches on paper, making Olivia chuckle. “You sound cute when you’re thinking really hard.”

“Who says I was thinking hard? And—wait, cute? Dog Lord deigns to find something cute? Pinch me, I’m dreaming.”

“Whatever, I find plenty of things cute.” Olivia huffs and rolls away from the phone.

“Yeah? Name three.”

“Easy. Hessarian.” She looks around the room, unable to find the furry lump that usually soothes her frayed nerves.

“That was a given, but I’ll count it. Two more.”

“Dragonlings,” Olivia forces out.

“Somehow I expected that one too.”

“And… you?”

The way he splutters and flounders afterwards is worth it, she decides. “You don’t know what I look like, I could be eight feet tall and have two really big noses instead of the one!”

“Mmm, still sounds cute. I like tall guys.”

“Alright, ten feet. I could be ten feet tall.”

“Could climb that like a tree.”

Cheese Man grows more flustered by the second, and it takes everything within Olivia to not writhe around giggling like some predictable schoolgirl. Every time he starts a sentence, she drags out the word “cute” longer and longer, until he is a mess of fed-up sounds and startling puffs of breath through his “really big nose.”

“Let’s talk about that rare journal of yours,” he attempts.

“Lady Enversen didn’t record anything about your freckles—you’ve got those, don’t you? On more places than your fingers?”
“Yes, but stop that!”

“Freckles are cute too,” Olivia teases. It goes around and around until Cheese Man exhausts himself and the well of laughter runs dry. She hears his breathing and little else, feels triumphant and pleased that he’s all but confirmed his adorable self to her. The feelings that train of thought give her are duking it out with thoughts of the demon, which keep surfacing if she focuses on anything but Cheese Man for too long. Their conversation picks up as though the previous one never happened, and Olivia’s teeth chatter their way through some topics, distressed and occasionally fretful. On cue Cheese Man takes over and distracts, distracts, distracts, a master in the art of diversions and subject changes.

Soon enough, Olivia begins to yawn and Cheese Man follows suit. “Do you work weekends?” he asks.

“No, not usually,” Olivia replies, eyelids struggling to stay open.

“Sorry if I kept you up with rambling nonsense.”

“I called you, remember?”

“Right.”

Olivia sucks in a deep breath. “Would it be okay if we stayed on the phone? Like usual?”

“I was going to ask you the same thing,” he says, and she can almost hear him smile.

“Were you really?”

“No, because I’m not half as bold as you, but I was thinking it. Not everything in my brain gets the privilege of reaching my mouth.”

“Does get the privilege of reaching your fingers though, apparently.”

“I could hang up right now and not even miss this conversation,” Cheese Man grumbles.

“You would though,” Olivia teases.

“I don’t like that you’re right all the time. Makes me feel silly and fuzzy, so thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome. And, well, good night?”

Cheese Man sighs, and she can hear him pulling up his blankets around the phone. “I hope you sleep well. And Dog Lord?”

“Yes?” she replies, voice slurring, with sleep this time instead of a loosened tongue.

“I… I’ll always believe you.”

**Saturday**

This time Olivia awakens with a tiny gurgle and her hand slapping around her nightstand for a phone that isn’t there. She finds it instead stuck to her cheek, eliciting a gasp when she realizes that the call never ended. The battery is shot to shit, but the internal lashing she gives herself for not putting it on the charger is cut short when she hears his warm laughter in her ear.
“You’re up!” Cheese Man says, sounding like the lovechild of the sun emoji and the sunglasses emoji. “I was washing my skillet, I hope that’s not what woke you. Because wow, talk about rude awakening, right?”

“No, that wasn’t it,” Olivia replies, wiping her eyes and resituating her pillows against the headboard. “How do you always get up before me? Literally, what is your secret?”

Cheese Man hums and she hears running water briefly and a couple dishes clattering together. “It’s not a secret if I tell you, is it? You know how much we love secrets.”

“Says the cute cop-lawyer-spy, of course.”

“Cu—it’s too early for this!”

There was another clatter of dishes, but this time within Olivia’s own home. “Shit—can I call you back later? I forgot that my friends had a drunken slumber party here last night and I really should be cleaning up after them.”

“Of course! I have to go see Duncan this afternoon anyway. Places to go, people to see. I’ll text you, though. Send pictures of the destruction!”

“You wish,” she says before hanging up. She wishes she had thanked him, but at this point she knows he knows she’s grateful, and that it’s mutual. To the tune of Leliana and Dorian’s voices in the kitchen, Olivia gets dressed and ties up her hair. She expected there to be beer cans littering the living room and pillows all askew, but the house is pristine when she steps out of her room. Leliana is by the stove, plating an omelette as though she were a cooking show contestant, and Dorian is scrolling through the news on his tablet.

“No bacon? Where’s the grease?” Olivia asks while taking a seat across from Dorian.

“And make you feel worse?” Leliana sets the fluffy eggs in front of Olivia. “I am here to help, not hurt.” She too pulls up a chair, nibbling on toast with honey drizzled across it, seeming expectant while Olivia downs her breakfast. Dorian’s eyes flick up and down for a minute, scanning Olivia until he returns to his news, seemingly satisfied with what he sees.

“What are everyone’s plans for the weekend?” Olivia asks, fork scraping across her plate.

“Work, naturally,” grumbles Dorian.

“Same as well,” Leliana sighs, then perks up. “Liv, why don’t you come with me to work today?”

“Go to work on a Saturday?” Olivia’s nose wrinkles. The more she considers it, though, the more appealing it sounds. Left to her own devices, she knows she’ll be hitting up every news site, praying that the demon from last night wasn’t a hallucination. Or she’ll be stuck in her head, dwelling on the could-have-beens if she’d stuck around and investigated.

Before she can decide, though, Dorian pipes up again. “Livvy, I think you should go.”

“Why? Were you two talking about me this morning?” Olivia says, squinting.

“You’ve been our favorite topic of conversation as of late,” Leliana confirms.

“I hope you don’t mind.” Dorian pauses to put his tablet in his bag. “And I couldn’t resist, not after hearing you giggling well into the night. I assume this means you’re feeling better.”
Olivia abruptly breaks eye contact, finding the pattern on her new plates to suddenly be interesting. “I think I am,” she says, swallowing. “Thanks for being there for me, both of you. We should do this kind of thing more often.”

Shortly thereafter Dorian packed up his things while Leliana did the dishes, then said goodbye with promises for more wine and movie nights, under the stipulations of “no more boxed wine” (Dorian’s suggestion) and “no drunken store runs” (Olivia’s suggestion). The house feels emptier without Dorian inhabiting it, but there is little time to dwell on lonely thoughts as Leliana whisks Olivia into her car and heads towards the Crossroads.

Leliana isn’t one for music during a commute, and Olivia begins to fidget. “What did Dorian mention about last night?” she asks.

“Only that you appeared shaken up when you came home empty-handed, but also that he heard you talking on the phone for quite some time before bed. He said he was staying up in case you needed him, however unlikely that might’ve been, but it seemed someone else was taking care of you.”

Olivia folds her arms firmly against her chest, looks out the window to see Denerim out of the shadows finally. By the time she responds, they’ve arrived at work. “Someone was, yeah.” Leliana unlocks the front doors and switches the store signs over to ‘open.’

Though the drive was over, the conversation was not. “It was him, wasn’t it?”

The first sizeable drove of customers begin milling around the store. “Who?”

“Your text friend of course.”

Olivia shoves a book onto a shelf. “He… Yes.” She pulls a pile of books onto her knee and thrusts them up into her arms.

“So he’s moved beyond being a text friend. I see.” Leliana juts her lip out and taps it. “I’m sorry that Dorian and I couldn’t appropriately be there for you.”

Maybe it would be easier to tell her coworker about the demon incident, if only to avoid the subject. Olivia feels her chest itch every time she meets Leliana’s eyes—the expectant look from breakfast is back, and it was never about learning what transpired when she was wandering the streets, but instead what had her squirming and tittering in bed at 1 AM? Face hot, Olivia wanders around the Crossroads, doing work but never the kind assigned to her. “It’s not that,” she finally admits as Leliana is dogging her in the history section. “I text him or call him whenever anything is up. I’ve gotten so used to turning to him instead of my real friends, I guess.”

Leliana scoffs, affronted. “What makes you think Cheese Man isn’t a real friend?”

“Why are you so quick to defend whatever it is he and I have?” It was the wrong question to ask, she knows. If ever there was downtime in the store, Olivia typically caught her coworker nose-deep in the throes of modern chick-lit, pages practically weighed down by all the heaving bosoms and fates of star-crossed lovers. Maker, what must she think of everything she’s heard about Cheese Man?

“Because I know how important he is to you, I know what you look like when you are texting him,” Leliana replies, confirming her suspicions. “I’ve wondered for weeks when this would progress, and I’m pleased to know you two have moved onto phone calls.”

“I—we’re not living in some fluffy fairytale, Leliana. And I…” Olivia looks around, sees only one customer lurking at the edge of a shelf, but they’re engrossed in the hardback they’re reading, so she soldiers on at a lower volume. “He and I? We can’t become a thing.”
“Why not?” Leliana hisses back in a whisper.

“Because as much as my stupid feelings for Cheese Man grow like nasty weeds, as cute as I think he may or may not be, I didn’t come to Denerim for unrequited romance or what have you. I’m self-aware, I know I’ve got problems, I know we’re dancing around the subject of meeting, but I like it that way. He’s an abstract concept and I’m… I’m working. Here. Trying to condense all those years I should’ve used on figuring out what I want to do in life into a couple months.”

“It doesn’t sound unrequited...”

Olivia rolls her eyes. “I don’t care, one way or another. Feelings come and feelings go. Sure, they’re festering and eroding my better judgment, and sure, if he showed me more than a photo of his damned hand, I’d probably be over the moon for a week.”

“But...?”

“Oh, there was no conclusion to that thought, I got a little stuck thinking about his hand freckles.” At the end of the bookcase, the customer Olivia had noticed makes a little squeak and launches their book a couple feet away. She and Leliana exchange glances, but she waves Leliana away. “We’ll talk about this some other time, I’ve got this.” Olivia jogs over to the tossed book, a weighty tome detailing the event known as The Long Walk, and offers it back to the customer. They try to apologize in more words than necessary, but Olivia hears none of it, distracted by their face markings.

Vallaslin.

“Are you Dalish?” Olivia blurs.

They rub their hands and wrists, blinking wildly in confusion. “Am I not allowed here?” they ask, voice growing softer with every syllable.

“No, Maker, I’m sorry—I’ve just never seen a Dalish come into the store before. I hope that’s not an offensive thing to say, but you know with my luck today, it probably is. I apologize.”

“Oh, don’t! I was only afraid you were here to kick me out.” The elf begins to dig their foot into the floor and twist it back and forth. They hold onto the book as though it were a life preserver, the only thing keeping them in the store.

“Do you need help finding anything else?” Olivia asks.

The elf takes a minute to think about this, and while it normally doesn’t bother her, Olivia feels a kind of throbbing sadness in her chest when the customer struggles to look higher than her knees. “I think I will be alright, thank you.” They turn to leave, long braid hair whipping over their shoulders, when Olivia stops them.

“I hope this isn’t too forward of me, but can I ask you something?”

The elf stops themselves, holds onto a bookcase as they look over their shoulder. “Yes?”

Olivia steps forward, does her utmost to make herself less tall, less imposing, if it could put them at ease. “Could I… pick your brain sometime? I know, this is totally out of left field and probably pretty damn strange. I’ve got this friend and also this coworker, they bicker madly about elf things and Dalish things, and I think neither of them have got a leg to stand on, personally.”

The elf turns their whole body around, head tilting.
“Anyway, they repeatedly have spats about this, like it’s a point of pride and contention between them, to see which one knows more about something they’re out of their depth on. It made me realize that we don’t have a lot in the way of elven nonfiction around here, and I don’t know a lot about elves in general.”

At that admission, the elf’s eyes seem to sparkle. “You want to know things about the Dalish?” They begin to bounce on their heels, their braid slapping their back repeatedly. “Even my friends haven’t asked me for that.”

“I don’t want to use you or bother you, but if you ever come back by the store, maybe you could point me in the direction of some good literature?” Olivia says, rubbing her neck.

“Oh, I don’t usually come to this side of the city very often.” The elf casts their eyes down.

“Wait!” Olivia pulls out her phone. “Is this too forward, asking for your number? I should probably get to know you before I ask you questions, right? That sounds like the bare minimum of human decency, huh.”

Hopping over to her side, the elf peers over Olivia’s arm while giving up their phone number. They stick a finger out at the screen, blowing a renegade strand of hair out of their eyes, and jab at one of the on-screen buttons. “Could I have an emoji with my contact name?” they ask, looking up finally into Olivia’s eyes.

“Oh, ah, of course. I’m gonna need an actual name first though.”

Their eyes dip down, closer to Olivia’s neck and chest, watching the slight movements of Olivia’s necklace. “It’s Luana.”


“It’s nice to meet you too, Olivia.” Luana’s eyes flick briefly downward and Olivia catches the flash of a smile. “I like your dog tags.”

Chapter End Notes

Alistair confirmed for stress-baker, nice.
Sorry for the break between updates again. Life got exponentially harder than it usually is, and at some points it didn’t seem like the fic was even going to continue. But we pulled through, and we’re so thankful for the usual support here and the oodles of support we got and continue to get on Tumblr <3
Just a heads up in case people would prefer to be forewarned about this kind of thing: chapter 12 is going to be nsfw, and the rating is going to be changed to ‘explicit.’

Our personal blogs:
Carouselfancy
Tijgertje
And, as always, our fic blog, where we post art, silly teasers, and answer messages <3
We love you!!
Monday

“Alistair, drop your weapon!”

He hears Cullen’s voice, demanding something of him, but the words are on the wind. The safety is off, the gun is rattling in his hands. He’s taken arms against lesser things, things with less bite, but the demon looms in the corner of the alley. Has it grown since he last blinked? Focus, focus, he can’t seem to focus with the way it shudders and pulsates. Not the right mindset for holding a gun, but…

Dorian appears at his side, hand pressing down on Alistair’s wrists. “They’re gone already, Alistair, so don’t exacerbate things even further.”

Alistair’s eyes flash to the body crumpled at the demon’s base, partially engulfed by the puddles of heat and muck that make up its lower half. They were right, it was too late for that victim, but the next? What if this monstrosity escapes? Reluctantly, Alistair lowers his gun and holsters it, fingers itching to bring it back out.

“How do we know that guns don’t work on these things? Why did we never think to invent, I don’t know, lyrium-y magic guns?” Alistair asks, hands in the air.

Cullen glares. “Can’t we discuss the failings of modern technology another time?”

“Why don’t we ask how Alistair even found a demon in the city?” Dorian snaps. His fingers, they can’t seem to stop twitching, and Alistair knows there must be literal electricity dying to shoot out from around the tips. And the question itself has Alistair sweating. He’d skipped his weekly meeting with Duncan to track this damned thing down and all he earns for it is the suspicion of his coworkers.

“I…” Alistair struggles. “I have sources.”

“Another time.” Cullen cuts in. “We need to call for backup.”

“I agree,” Dorian says, nodding. “Better than standing here, blockading the alley like we’ve got our heads up our asses.”

“No!” Alistair gestures to the demon, who has finally swiveled its head around and fixed its beady glowing eyes on them. “We have to kill it. Now.”

“In the time we’ve squabbled, we could’ve had at least five templars out here. The situation could’ve been neutralized by now.” Cullen flips his phone open, periodically checking the street behind them as he punches in a few numbers. Dorian and Alistair exchange knowing glances, both reaching for the phone at the same time.
“Changed my mind, we’ll take care of it,” Dorian declares. “What your five templars could do it ten minutes, I can do right this second, if you trust me.”

Cullen blinks.

“Magic. He means magic,” says Alistair.

Lips pulled so thin they’re almost nonexistent, Cullen runs his hands through his hair. “Can someone convince me why we should be taking the illegal route instead of the perfectly sane and safe legal one?”

“People could die,” Dorian supplies.

“I could get in trouble?” Alistair chimes in.

“People could die.”

“We could all be in trouble because I dragged you two in?”

“He has a point. My career could die.”

Cullen drags his hands down his face. “...What do we need to do?”

Alistair refrains from whooping in the face of a grim victory, and the anxiety creeps back in. As Dorian speaks of outdated weaponry and obsolete magics, the words seem to scroll by in front of Alistair’s face, his sense of self seemingly detached. To his right is a literal demon and no amount of forcing his eyes shut will make it go away. While Dorian and Cullen argue about the best way to use a sword conjured by magic, Alistair swears he can see the creature breathe, and worse—its form has filled out, its shape certainly larger, more monstrous.

“Can we just bring out the magic sword and let me stab the thing? I think I could use a good stabbing right now. And look, I’ve already thought of a name for the sword,” Alistair huffs.

“Is it ‘Stabbins’?” asks Cullen.

“Yes, how did you know?”

“I don’t mean to burst your bubble, Alistair, but I can’t give the sword to you.” Dorian removes his gloves and tucks them into a coat pocket. Already they can all feel the way the air rends itself to make room for magic to bloom.

“What? Why not?”

“Cullen was a templar, he’s had the training. No offense to you, but I much prefer a man who knows his way around a blade.” Dorian waves his hands around in a flourish that seems too extravagant, then continues to bend his fingers, pulling at an object that does not yet exist. Alistair can’t recall the last time he saw magic cast, especially not in the safety of people who are allowing it. There were no mages in the monastery, and contrary to what bands of Andrastian zealots say, most criminals are not mages. “Stand back,” Dorian advises as the ground warps in a way the eye can’t quite comprehend. “I’d hate to spend my energy, only to have it wasted when one of your boots becomes my new crossguard.”

From the ground the sword rises, translucent yet glinting even where the sun does not hit. Alistair wishes he could wield it, though it looks like his hand would simply pass through it. Dorian takes it by the grip and yanks it once the point forms, and thrusts it into Cullen’s hands. A bead of sweat rolls
down his temple. “Give it a good show, will you? Let us see what the militaristic rough-and-tumble man you keep locked up is all about.”

For a flash Cullen’s face shows terror and little else. It’s gone as soon as it rolls in, however, as he adjusts his stance and the former templar manifests. With a grunt he breaks into a dash, sword in tow, and then… It ends. The sword slices clean into the demon, who put up no fight, and they both shatter into polarized rays of light—one blindingly white and the other dark and all-consuming, respectively. Alistair feels his heart seize up when Cullen turns around, chest heaving and curls scattered about his face, but his own worries scatter when his partner stands straight and fixes his glasses.

“Did it feel as cool as it looked?” Alistair asks.

“It looked anticlimactic, so how ‘cool’ would it have felt?” Dorian says with an eyeroll.

They all peer at the blackened pile of ash the demon left behind, and the dead body bathing in it. Alistair forgot they were there, and he knew they wouldn’t survive, but he can’t resist checking their pulse while Dorian and Cullen collect themselves against opposite alley walls. No pulse. There’s never a pulse these days. Not on the elves, not on the humans—what’s next, dead dwarves? Alistair rocks back and forth while squatting beside the body, lash after lash, hating himself because there’s probably a veritable slew of bodies that were cut down before he found the demon today.

“Might I make a suggestion?” Dorian asks, suddenly close enough to Alistair’s ear to make him jump.

“Is it that we either report this anonymously or we forget this ever happened?” says Cullen. He rolls his sleeves up to his elbows and swipes an arm across his forehead.

“I was thinking more along the lines of necromancy and spirit-calling, but yes, your idea sounds so much more productive. I’ve suddenly remembered why I don’t invite you places.”

“I’ve tolerated one unethical endeavor today. More magic only piles onto our many problems.”

“Yes, well, fuck your ethics. Your ethics got this poor man or woman killed! How about I pull their spirit from across the Veil and you explain to them why your templars, your precious police chief, and the city of Denerim itself failed them.”

The two stare each other down, and though Alistair knows Dorian would never use magic to harm someone, he worries. Dorian is a man of occasional drunken parlor tricks, of bombast but no bite, but now he has his shoulders back and one foot forward. Whatever Ferelden’s templars have done to him since he arrived from Tevinter, Alistair doesn’t doubt it was worth the hair trigger rage.

“Let’s call it a day,” Cullen mumbles, almost under his breath.

“Let’s not lie to ourselves while we’re at it, hm? Could you take at least five steps back, Alistair?” With no hesitation, no permission, Dorian whips his hand out faster than a cracked whip and a vacuum creates itself around him. Air sucks in, flickers of green pop into Alistair’s vision. It’s too much magic for him today, he’s going to go on some kind of cleanse, he decides—no offense to Dorian, he thinks. There’s pulling that can’t be placed, like skin being lifted or oxygen leaving the lungs, except neither is happening, just Dorian hunched over and concentrated as his hands orchestrate a tear in the Veil.

Between blinks there is a spirit, and as the spirit enters, Cullen makes his exit. “I’ll be in the car,” he growls after one look at it. Alistair chooses to stay, because his need to save lives always outweighs his discomfort.
“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Dorian asks as if it were all a joke, but Alistair doesn’t reply. He beckons to the spirit, which comes and takes his hand, holding it while it learns to walk without a corporeal form. “What happened?” he asks, voice calm. “Who did this to you?”

WHERE AM I

“Oh, Maker, I hate when this happens,” Dorian groans. Alistair pantomimes his confusion, at which Dorian waves them away. “You’re dead, and I presume someone killed you, correct? Have you any idea who?”

The spirit gestures at its arms, which are tendrils of light and little else.

MAGIC

“Alright, but I said who not what. Work with me here.”

Its face elongates and a small hole opens up, to which Alistair supposes it’s trying to open its mouth. Before he can wonder what it’s trying to do, a cacophonous sound erupts from the hole. Dorian hits it with a wisp of energy to calm it down before sighing loudly. “This ordeal would be a thousand times easier with a staff. You wouldn’t happen to have lyrium on you, would you?”

Alistair shakes his head, baffled that he isn’t deaf.

“Worth a shot. Oh lovely spirit, I am terribly, terribly close to sending you back to the Void. Can you name your killer or not?” He lifts up the arm of the spirit’s original body, glances at the myriad of scars. “Have you consorted with any blood mages lately?”

HE...CALADRIUS. DID THIS. MY HEART

“What about it?”

GONE

Alistair scrabbles over and rolls the body off its side. Lo and behold, there’s an unevenly colored patch of skin over the chest. He feels the blood drain out of his face.

“Why? Why in Thedas would this ‘Caladrius’ do that?”

TO PROVE THAT HE COULD

“I’ve seen enough horror films to know where this is heading if I keep a nasty, vengeful spirit here any longer. Tell the Maker I said ‘hello.’” Dorian mimics his previous snap-like hand gesture and banishes the spirit before Alistair can stop him.

“But we could’ve asked it so many more things! We could’ve... I dunno, asked it about the other side? The Fade? Or things about the case!” Alistair cradles the head of the victim, questions swirling. “Keeping them here any longer would’ve prevented them from going back. Don’t they teach you these things in school?”

“We didn’t all go to fancy mage colleges, thanks.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Dorian stands up and offers his hand to Alistair. “We can’t use what little we’ve learned here as evidence, should we ever be called upon in court. If ‘Caladrius’ is the kingpin of this operation, you have no leg to stand on against him.”
The two walk out of the alley and towards Cullen’s car. “You’re right,” Alistair admits. “And it’s just another name, like Devera and anyone we found before her. We’re going nowhere fast, I get it. I’m going to keep looking into it, though, I’m not letting this go.”

Dorian claps him on the back, pushes him towards the passenger door. “Alistair Theirin, you’re the last person I would ever expect to give up on a case like this.”

Alistair threads his way through the precinct, pushing past clusters of people milling around and avoiding work. In one corner there are peals of laughter, folks unscathed from the morning’s brief bout, and in another is Luana and Fenris discussing something with Officer Hadley. He can’t get through the bodies fast enough, and when he reaches his desk with coffee in hand, he frowns. Head buried in arms, glasses off, Cullen is silent.

“He didn’t get to you, did he?” Alistair gingerly places the drink down out of reach of an accidental sweeping arm’s reach. Cullen is silent, confirming his concerns. “We’re doing the best we can, Cullen. We… We’ve made progress. I have to keep telling myself that on most days, obviously, but we’re farther than we were a couple months ago. By the way, there’s coffee if you’re interested.”

“How long?” Cullen asks from within the fortress of his arms.

“What do you mean?”

“How long did you know about this demon? Hours? Days?”

Alistair seats himself at his own desk and lowers his eyes. “Since Friday. I’ve been looking since Saturday.”

The precinct is far from silent, though all the noise is on opposite ends of the room. Is this isolation, even with your peers all around? Alistair takes inventory of all the workplace fixtures as he endures the quiet bubbled around him. There are obligatory filled trash cans overflowing, Rylen sitting on his desk to do work instead of his chair, a fear-fueled family trying to make sense of where a missing relative has gone. He looks back at his partner and he wishes that Cullen had chosen a different career path, because between the clutter and his history, he shouldn’t have to suffer anymore.

“Why didn’t you come to me first?” Cullen says, voice strained and weak. “Three days later. We… We could’ve controlled this. We could’ve gotten backup.”

“I didn’t want backup. I’m sorry, I—”

“Do you think I’m so stubborn that I won’t give this up to Samson? After today, maybe we don’t deserve it. Maybe we’ve become too big-headed, too prideful about our abilities.”

Alistair grips the edge of his desk. “It’s not about pride, Cullen. There are more people we need to keep safe than just the people actively at risk for trafficking or blood magic now.” Saying the words is like a curse, sends a shudder and a wince through anyone nearby.

“So it is her, after all. She put you up to this.”

“Alistair! What is with you? Are you forgetting about all the people who might be in danger?”

“Who?”

Cullen fishes around his desk for his glasses, takes the time to clean them when he finds them, spends a genuine eternity adjusting them on his nose. “Her. Dog Lord.”
Alistair gulps, blushes out of sheer shame. He didn’t count the people who heard his “blood magic” slip, but it feels like twice that many must have heard his Adam’s apple bob in his throat. “You can’t tell the captain, Dog Lord doesn’t deserve that.”

Cullen’s eyes narrow. “She told you there was a demon and you didn’t, by any chance, report this? Report her? That thought never once crossed your mind?”

It didn’t because how could it? The panic in her voice, the breaks, the trembles. She hung up on him or the call dropped, but for hours he had assumed she was captured, and there was little he could do about it when the anxiety kicked in. “No, no it didn’t. It’s hard to assume your best friend is a mastermind of diabolical proportions, one that tries to set you up by crying ‘demon,’ because I had sort of assumed she was dead by its hand instead of summoning the damned thing. I chose to look for it instead of interrogate her.”

“Alistair,” Cullen warns.

“I need to protect her, and if you tell Pentaghast that that’s my source—if we tell her about the demon at all—then I don’t know what will happen to her. She won’t understand! We can’t meet like that.”

Voice sotto voce, Cullen blinks. “She still doesn’t know who you are?”

“She knows me uncomfortably well, I assume.” Teases of “backstories” and casual flirtations, reluctant admissions and sarcastic jokes with truth at their centers drift through his head. “But name, appearance, occupation? Only guesses. With what’s going on right now, I always thought… that it would be better if we waited. I want it to be perfect, but I bet that sounds silly.”

As Cullen’s fingers steeple—a motion that puts Alistair into deflection-ready stance at this point in his career—he feels himself calm. The subject change was not what he had expected, but maybe the Maker is real and shows himself in mysterious but blessed ways. Until He doesn’t. “So you love her, is that it?”

“What!? No! Love? That’s...absurd! What kind of logic leap is this? I’ve known her for…” Alistair counts on his fingers. “Two months!”

“Would you say I don’t love Lua? I’ve known her for less than that.” Alistair follows Cullen’s eyes across the room, where the elf is picking at leaves while Fenris argues with Hadley.

“No, but you know her in real life.”

“I hadn’t pegged you for someone that thought less of their online liaisons. Her number might still be in my phone, maybe I should call her and tell her your thoughts.”

Alistair splutters. “I like it better when everyone else teases me. You go straight for the jugular, and I don’t appreciate it!” Shrewd Cullen was the worst type of Cullen, he decides, next to any kind of Cullen that tries to make a joke.

“Alright. You believe her when she says there’s a demon, I’ll believe that you don’t love her. But I understand, Alistair, I do.”

Alistair’s head tries to recoil into his neck. “You...understand.”

The coffee has been cold for ages, but Cullen takes a few sips anyway. “I understand what it’s like to fight to protect someone, so yes. There’s a reason I tell my siblings every Satinalia to stay in South Reach: Denerim is chaos, especially now. I won’t tell the captain about the demon, no, but we do
have to find a way to use the information about Caladrius without being suspect. Dog Lord’s
testimony might have helped, but spirits and other Fade creatures don’t hold a lot of clout with
Cassandra or in court.”

“Thanks for continuing to not judge me about this fiasco.”

“I just wish you’d communicate with me instead of thinking I’m made of porcelain. I would’ve
looked with you, would’ve found a way around the backup situation that involved more tact.”

Alistair regards him timidly. “Are you...mad? Because of the magic?”

“Not mad, only disappointed.”

His shoulders sag. “Somehow that’s worse.”

Cullen forces out a rough laugh from a throat that needs proper hydration. “Maybe ‘exhausted’ is a
better word for it.”

“I can live with exhausted.”

The rest of the work day is no easier than that moment, even after some of the tension slides off.
Luana eyes him with words hanging from her lips, he can tell; she all but dances around his desk to
have a conversation with Cullen, words too muttered to catch. Dorian is little more than a shadow,
and the captain—crabbier than usual—is pacing in her office, in the dark and well aware of it.

If he keeps his head down, Alistair believes he can skate through the afternoon. Dog Lord, safe and
sound in her home, will be waiting for him, as well the rest of his stress cookies. He repeats mantras
under his breath about overcoming things and being patient, tries to pretend like he’s not weighing
whether or not the demon was what made today shit, or the conversation about Dog Lord.

Feelings are things to be eaten, not talked about.

(18:49) If I were to, say, be a superhero, what do you think I would wear? Serious answers
only. No buffoonery allowed.

(18:52) Lot of spandex. Potential boob window?

(18:52) I said no buffoonery! 😞

(18:52) And I gave none 😞

(18:53) So why did we shift from pulpy bargain bin spy thriller to dime-a-dozen superhero lit?

(18:53) Do you think I’d wear a cape? 🤷‍♀️ They look cool, but at what cost?

(18:54) Depends, can you fly? If yes then say hello to a jet engine for me.

(18:54) Listen, if I could pick my powers, flying isn’t what I’d reach for. Ability to talk to
animals is first and foremost on the list! 🐾 🐿️ 🐨

(18:54) Hessarian isn’t going to listen to you, btw.

(18:55) My superhero career, ended before it could really take off...
(18:56) Was this going somewhere?

(18:56) Yes, unlike my career

(18:56) The demon is taken care of 😊

(18:57) Taken care of? Like ‘sent off to the Anderfels to roam free and never bother anyone ever again’ taken care of? Or dead?

(18:57) Do people routinely ship Fade creatures to the Anderfels to let them live out their aggressive, lonely lives?

(18:58) I don’t know, that’s what they always said when pets died. “We sent Fido to the Anderfels, they’ve got loads of room to run out there!” Anyway, you didn’t answer.

(18:58) Well it’s dead

(18:58) Dead dead?

(18:59) Are there other kinds of dead I don’t know about?! 🤔 Barely dead, spicy dead, nacho cheese flavoured dead?? Unrelatedly, I’m very hungry.

(19:00) How would you know that it’s dead? I’ve been scouring the news for days trying to prove it even EXISTED. It was a demon afterall? Did you see it? Am I too new here to know all the reliable news outlets?

(19:00) You’re not missing anything, I promise

(19:01) That doesn’t sound ~promising~ Cheese Man

(19:01) I may have been drunk, but I know I saw something. You’ve confirmed it but won’t tell me more than that?

(19:02) I don’t know what more to say than I know it’s dead! 😞

(19:02) Do you know why Denerim is so keen on hiding it then? A corpse so much as stirs in Nevarra and it’s on the front page, but a literal demon is a future footnote in city history?

(19:03) I always forget you’re a newcomer to Denerim 😒 You never looked into this place when you came here? Of all the cities in Ferelden, you chose Denerim

(19:03) I’ve been here before as a kid, and my father’s worked with people in the city, figured it was as good a place as any to get lost and be like everyone else

(19:04) For a self-proclaimed history buff, you were quite ill-prepared for the seedy past of Denerim huh 😃

(19:04) Maker, what salacious scandals did I miss out on?

(19:04) First of all, this city is a hotbed of criminal activity 👌

(19:05) It’s a densely populated city, I expected that much
(19:05) No I mean things like trafficking and murder and magic of the most illegal kind. It’s happened before. If it were happening again, I wouldn’t be tooooo surprised

(19:05) This doesn’t surprise me overmuch but why cover it up? The people have a right to know about this.

(19:06) Well… Story time! 📚

(19:06) A good 7 years or so ago Denerim was a hub for illegal slave trades to Tevinter and Antiva. It’s always been a thing of Denerim’s past, given the location of the city, the proximity to the sea, the population. People value the anonymity and volume as much as you do!!

(19:07) But people thought then that it was only a Thing of the Past, so many turned a blind eye. Evidence started coming forth, though, and the media decided a wake-up call was necessary. Everyone deserves to know so they can protect themselves, right?

(19:07) Exeeeept oddly that had the opposite reaction? There was unexpected amounts of vigilante justice, and more people ended up dying. People panicked and were caught off guard, it made it easier to nab people I guess?

(19:08) So if something is happening now, I don’t doubt they’re trying to hide it because “we warned them before and people were hurt!!” They think that’s always going to apply for every major issue, and it’s definitely major because, you know, demons! Ignorance is bliss, as the saying goes, and something something about correlation and causation too.

(19:08) I don’t typically agree, but I also don’t think people should get up in arms before more is said.

(19:08) That’s part of what happened last time.

(19:09) Without the full story, people will take matters into their own hands. If scared young mages knew, they could summon demons too. It’s…complicated.

(19:09) I see.

(19:10) I don’t disagree, I just… Find this oddly personal now that I’ve seen firsthand what they’re trying to protect us from. But you know more, don’t you? You didn’t want me out that night.

(19:10) 😊

(19:11) I hear a lot of chatter in my spy dealings!

(19:11) Being a spy isn’t a very good alter ego for a superhero. Or is it the other way around? 😁

(19:11) Maybe I’m a superhero spy. Maybe my powers are being reaaaally sneaky and having superb hearing.

(19:12) Funny, you’ve always struck me as the kind of guy that PRETENDS to be sneaky late at night and ends up running into a wall or a table, then has to play it off like it’s intentional 😁

(19:12) And you strike me as the last person to save in a burning building!! 😆
(19:12) Don’t lie to yourself, I’d be the first.

(19:13) You’re no damsel in distress, you’re the villain in disguise! Why should I save you at all?

(19:13) Because you like me

(19:13) 😞

(19:14) And it’s the RIGHT THING TO DO. Get your head in the game, Cheese Man.

(19:14) Oops, I’m sorry I’ve failed you, good citizen 😞 Anyway, please don’t go out walking at night, especially not when you’re alone. Or drunk, but I think you knew that one

(19:14) Yes, sir 😊

(19:15) I’m serious! 😊

(19:15) No, I know. I don’t have any plans to get hammered like that again, I’m supposed to be turning over a new leaf or two 🐾 If, on the off-chance, I do get hammered, I’ll stay indoors. Hessarian may never let me leave at night again if he’s as smart as I give him credit for

(19:16) Because he is a good boy 😊 I owe him so many doggy treats when I meet him!

(23:12) Did you kill the demon yourself?

(23:13) No. Why?

(23:13) It’s been on my mind since we talked about it, that’s all.

(23:14) I was kind of jealous that it wasn’t me. Saw it happen, that’s how I know, but I wish it could’ve been me 😞

(23:14) Were you in the wrong place at the right time?

(23:14) No, I’d...been looking. For the demon.

(23:15) Cheese Man?? What if something had happened to you instead? At least someone else was there to do something about it but.. what in the Void were you thinking

(23:15) I only ever wanted to ease your fears 😊

(23:16) I appreciate that. But if you die because of some dumb shit you think might make me happy, I’m going to find a way to bring you back so I can kick your ass. Even if it’s via a séance. Astral ass kicking, you vs me.

(23:16) 😓 I’ll do whatever I’m told so long as you don’t tear the Fade open to yell at me

(23:16) I’ll do worse:

(23:17) No petting my dog, ever. Goodnight!
Tuesday

(11:21) Do you have any strange, unexplained habits? Like character traits except it’s stuff you have to deal with on a regular basis because you’re you?

(11:23) Off the top of my head I’m drawing blanks. Do you have an example in mind, or are you trying to provoke a conversation?

(11:23) Well my friend just dropped exactly 322 cotton swabs onto the floor and has spent the better part of 10 minutes picking them up. Happily.

(11:23) Is your friend okay…

(11:24) She did it on purpose, so yes? 🐻 has her unexplained quirks, so I wondered if you had any too.

(11:24) Since we don’t hang out in person, I was kind of curious!!

(11:25) The best I can come up with is leg bouncing. Impatient? Leg bounce.

(11:25) Bored? Leg bounce.

(11:25) No reason whatsoever?

(11:25) Leg bounce.

(11:26) You understand me. And you?

(11:27) You already took the leg bouncing, so… Pen clicking? Cullen’s nearly trained that one out of me 😊 The inability to pack anything for lunch other than baby cheeses?

(11:27) That sounds less like a character quirk and more like you don’t have enough money to buy actual food.

(11:28) I like to take aggressive jogs when I’m stressed, I guess. Aggressive because of the music that’s playing. I don’t swing bats at mailboxes or trample flowers while I’m out

(11:28) More productive than spilling swabs or paper clips!

(11:28) I’m sure she has her reasons.

(11:29) Also I’m disappointed we didn’t know each other for Satinalia now

(11:29) ???

(11:29) Three words: cheese advent calendar.

(11:30) You continue to be a Dog Lord after my heart 😜🧀⏰

(11:30) Or maybe a Dog Lord that’s apparently trying to feed you lunch. Really, nothing but baby
Sometimes people leave food in the break room for everyone to eat.

I sense I’m going to have to start a fund based solely around your need to eat actual food. You go to the gym but you don’t eat more proteins?

Hey wait!! I do eat, I just don’t...plan ahead...for work lunch. Home is an occasionally different story. Sometimes!

Do I need to poke fun at your privilege for the millionth time this week?

You better hope we don’t meet any time soon because I’m going to bully you a million times in a week.

You’re always pulling my pigtails, I’m used to it 😊

Yeah, well, I bully because I care.

Work exhausted me so I went home early today, and I just have to ask

Talk about privilege over here

I’m watching a show — shut up

I’m watching a show where people get far too tipsy for their own good and blather on about...history? I don’t know how I made it to this channel, but I guess when you have 5 channels to choose from, it’s slim pickings.

So if someone sauced you up and told you to talk about history, what would you talk about??

Warden history, probably.

Especially Garahel. Probably because we know the most about him, so you could never shut me up about all the fun Garahel facts I know.

This… doesn’t surprise me 😊 Why Wardens? 😅

‘Why not Wardens’ is a better question. Secretive order that everyone holds in high regard, despite being probably a titch more corrupt than anyone gives them credit for? Sign me up. The Blights are all done for, as far as we know, but the Order still technically exists, albeit repurposed for military use, and we STILL don’t know so much about them.

And if I were drunk, I’d be yelling “isn’t that INTERESTING” a few times, here and there.

I actually know a Warden, now that you mention it 😅

Probably a more basic military type, unless he’s older than dirt. What would you ramble about if you were drunk? Do you even get drunk?

I don’t get drunk often, no. The emoji serfs don’t get the privilege very often
(13:08) Please. Our generation practically lives in pubs, and aren’t you usually in a bar when we talk at night? Don’t pretend like you’re above being under the influence 😐

(13:08) Bwhhh!! I am not “usually in a bar” when we talk, that’s happened a handful of times!

(13:09) And I don’t know that there’s a part of history I know enough about to ramble about either. I know my fair share of Warden things, thanks to Duncan, but it’s all anecdotes of the military stuff, none of the secret conspiracy Order you’re privy to.

(13:09) If you’re not a fan of pubs, what are we supposed to do when we hang out?

(13:10) I didn’t say we couldn’t go to them! But we’ll go other places too 😊

(13:10) A night on the town, courtesy of Cheese Man. What would that look like?

(13:11) Well…erm…

(13:11) You’ve repeatedly mentioned that you have an idea of how you want our first meeting to go, so lay it on me. What’s the plan?

(13:12) This tv show got really interesting suddenly! The guest star is drunk off their arse, ha ha wow!!

(13:12) C’mon, what do you want to do with me? Work is slow, I’ve got time.

(13:13) An interesting way to phrase it 😊

(13:13) Interesting if your head is in the gutter 😕

(13:13) Actually, pause, I have something I need to do, but I’m not letting this go.

(15:22) So what’s the plan?

(15:22) The plan?

(15:23) For when we meet? You act like a man with a plan, so time to put your money where your mouth is.

(15:23) 😏 😏 😏

(15:23) That’s it? I got my hopes up for nothing?

(15:24) I… I don’t know. Trying to type my ideas out makes them seem almost silly.

(15:24) Like… a dinner? Or a movie?

(15:24) Sounds a bit like a date, don’t you think?

(15:25) Exactly 😊 Coffee at Andrastea?

(15:25) So a coffee date.
(15:25) The park with Hessarian?

(15:25) A park date!

(15:26) Why are you so insistent that it’s a date?? Friends go to parks, friends steal each other’s dogs!

(15:26) Oh I see how this is. You’re going to meet me under false pretenses! You’re going to wine and dine me just so you can take me home and coax my dog into your arms. And you’ll do a piss poor job of it, I can tell you that already.

(15:26) wh. No!

(15:27) I know you love your dog, I’m not going to steal him.

(15:27) Just borrow him… For an indeterminate amount of time! 😏

(15:27) This was your second ruse. Talking about my dog to distract me from the original topic. How come you always do this?

(15:28) How come you always fall for it?

(15:28) Maybe we should be making the plans together, instead of foisting all responsibilities for planning onto me. I’m not good with responsibility!

(15:28) And you think I am?

(15:28) ...No.

(15:29) Making a big deal out of it is only going to stress you out. Coffee at Andrastea, sure, then go to someone’s house and I don’t know…talk? Watch bad movies and shows? We don’t need to make a scrapbook-worthy adventure out of this.

(15:29) What do we do after that? 😥

(15:30) What do you mean?

(15:30) What do we do after we meet? Where do we go from there?

(16:20) Dog Lord?

(16:50) I found something neat, go check the box

(16:50) I thought I had the key? Do I not have the key? Did you mug me?

(16:50) Now we both have keys. Go check the box!

(17:19) Where did you find this?? Am I supposed to wear it? 😋

(17:20) I went for a bit of a break and there are quite a few stores in this little shopping center, so I checked out a crafts store. Lot of weird rubbish in there, but also a lot of emoji stuff?
(17:21) So alongside an emoji bracelet, I saw shite like this.

(17:22) Why didn’t you get me this?? 😊

(17:22) Are you my “Babe!” now?

(17:22) For all intents and purposes of owning this cup I could be.

(17:23) But you don’t like the bracelet? I guess I fundamentally misunderstand your priorities.

(17:23) It does have the poop emoji on it

(17:23) That’s fair. But it has the heart eyes emoji and the sunglasses emoji too? I feel like the good outweighs the bad.

(17:24) But they’re not next to each other. We’re not next to each other! 😞

(17:24) In which universe am I the heart eyes emoji? Unless you’re assuming I’m the sunglasses emoji, after all this time. You, the living embodiment, are passing the torch onto me? All so you can be lovestruck?

(17:25) I accept.

(17:25) That’s not… 😞

(17:25) You’re backing me into so many corners today!
(17:27) That doesn’t sound so bad 😊

(17:27) ...

(17:30) I’ll talk to you when I get home, “Babe”

(17:30) 😆

(19:02) My puppy was so glad to see me when I came home!! I love him.

(19:03) Puppy? How old is Hessarian?

(19:03) 9 or 10 years, give or take. I don’t know when his exact birthday is since I adopted him.

(19:03) That’s pretty old for a puppy 😬

(19:04) All dogs are puppies. Your life will be a thousand times easier when you accept that.

(19:04) You know what… You’re right. Thank you for giving me the gift of knowledge on this day 😊

(19:04) Maker, I’m still thinking

(19:05) Thank goodness, I don’t need a brain dead Cheese Man on my hands 🙃

(19:05) I meant about us meeting! 😞

(19:06) Maybe don’t trail off in the middle of a text, then

(19:06) But go on. New plan, new date? A set date? I should know in advance so I can actually take time off without my boss’s blood boiling. Not that she’s still mad, but, y’know, anything to avoid the ire!!

(19:07) It’s nothing

(19:07) Always sounds like something, if past experiences are anything to go by.

(19:07) It’s legitimately nothing! Just fleeting daydreams of what you look like, or what it’ll be like. What I’m supposed to wear, what you might wear. What we do, what we won’t do, what awful jokes I will inevitably make to scare you away.

(19:08) But no pressure, right?

(19:08) Oh! I’m sorry 😞

(19:08) I’m joking!

(19:09) I also don’t know how to ease your fears, though. We’ll keep it casual, see what happens from there. Can’t believe it took us so long to actually discuss it and sound like we’re serious about it.
(19:09) I could use something good happening to me. I feel like I’ve maybe deserved it.

(19:09) Something good? How about another picture of my mouth really close up?

(19:10) MaKER NO.

(19:10) A picture of another body part really close up?

(19:11) What, like a foot?

(19:11) Not what I had in mind, and I don’t think I want to unpack THAT weird fetish you’re implying you have.

(19:11) A companion to the hand! Back, meet yet another corner 😇

(19:12) You’re so easy to tease lately. What’s gotten into you? 😏

(19:12) I’m simply an easily flustered man, thank you.

(19:12) I’ve noticed!

(19:12) I like it.

Alistair looks down at his phone, fingers absently swiping at buttons and the screen as he tries to navigate a conversation and his feelings simultaneously. Photo? Of what? He wants to ask but the words delete themselves before he presses send.

For every push that Dog Lord gives, Alistair feels like pulling back, or shoving away. He reads “I like it” and his instincts are to reply with a joke, another classic Alistair deflection, but he stops himself as warmth creeps up his neck.

One slow letter at a time, he crafts his reply. He smiles. Nothing can come of this.

(19:14) I like it too.

Wednesday

“...istair. Alistair?”

Luana is waving her hand in Alistair’s face. Her lips have been moving for minutes now, but Alistair decides to be somewhere else. The words aren’t making sense, the request—no, the declaration—doesn’t fit with what he knows about her. His eyes fall to her bare arms and out of habit she brings them close to her chest, her eyes narrowing.

“I’m not asking for permission, I’m only asking for acceptance,” she whispers.

Usually so tactile, Luana shies away from him. Feet pointed inwards, knees bent, hair unbraided and masking half of her face. It’s obvious she’s keyed up as she speaks, eyes darting and fingernails tapping at her knuckles. There aren’t any cotton swabs to drop, or paper clips, thumbtacks, loose
papers. The absence of Cullen tells him more than he wants to know.

“You’re a civilian,” Alistair insists.

“And I’m an elf,” she adds. “I was brought into this almost two months ago, and I’ve lost so many people to it. To distance myself any longer feels like some kind of treason.” Her mouth wavers between neutrality and a deep, wobbling frown; she fights to keep the corners of her lips afloat, to stop herself from drowning.

Alistair allows himself to look away. “Dorian shouldn’t have done that to you. He should’ve known better.”

“I would’ve found out anyway. They’re my people, I protect them as much as you do.”

“What does Cullen think about this?”

Luana picks at her scars. “What matters is what the captain thinks, that’s what goes in this precinct.”

Alistair wonders what Cullen must be thinking, wherever he is right now. He lost a whole squad to magic, he lost years of his life, he lost his grip, and now… Luana places a file in front of Alistair. “Devera implicated Caladrius. We have a lead, we have an in. I just need to… go and finish what we’ve started.”

“What do you want me to say?” Alistair asks, faces her.

“I want you to have my back on this, to know that someone I love supports me.”

Alistair closes his mouth.

“I won’t be alone in the ‘operation’ but I feel very alone here and at home. There’s no one else that can do this, you understand that, don’t you?” Luana implores with both her mouth and eyes. “I’ve given so much to this case, I’ve scratched my skin raw and taken risks that I didn’t need to take, because I love them like a family. And you, you have something to lose too. If you can face a demon, why can’t I face mine?”

The precinct stills around her as she runs her vocal cords raw. Alistair admits to himself, purely in his head, that he has not been good enough, kind enough to the friends around him as of late. He has not forgotten that she’s taken the long way around to get anything done, as if he were a roadblock. Was this her plan all along, or was there something else keeping her from him? Tears prick at the corners of her eyes, her fists clenched around her waist; a hug would be remiss, but words are hard.

“So you won’t be alone. Who’s going with?”

Luana sniffs. “Rylen and Hadley agreed to go. As far as they can, anyway.”

“But Hadley is new here!” says Alistair. Rylen he can understand, but Hadley?

“Cassandra said that his former precinct recommended him for templar-type duties. And neither you or Cullen can be a part of it, it’s a conflict of interest.”

“It’s not as if I’m the one dating you.”

She shrugs. “I know I’d feel better having you at my back, but you’re a little too self-sacrificial to trust. Cassandra knows about the demon thing, Alistair.”

“Is there really no one else? No one but you?” It’s a pointless question, and he’s aware he’s grasping
at straws, but… Alistair does a sweep of the precinct. No elves. No dwarves or qunari, either, but especially no elves. “I know we don’t want outsiders involved but… Can’t we? Just this once break all our own rules and, I don’t know, come out on top? Doesn’t something have to give?”

A hand gently rests on his arm—Alistair didn’t realize he had his eyes shut, hard enough to give headaches, but when he opens them he’s met with her usual placid expression. “I’m giving us that chance.”

“Aren’t you being self-sacrificial too?” he snaps.

“Yes,” Luana replies, lips twitching. “Cassandra just doesn’t know I have a history for it.”

At some point in his life, did he step on one too many cracks in the sidewalk, to have such extraordinarily bad luck? Alistair stands at the precinct’s entrance, thinks about alternate universes and time travel magic, the butterfly effect, the possibilities that weave between the impracticalities. Work ended almost two hours ago, yet he’s still here and kicking at the concrete, wondering how much would be different if he didn’t have to watch his friend get loaded into a car with a fellow detective. If he could have convinced her to stay, what’s the worst that would happen?

The alienage is up in flames. Luana is nowhere to be found. Denerim is in a state of emergency. He’s kicked off the police force for being so selfish. Dog Lord flees the city. The Blight finds a way of returning—

“Get out of your own head.” Cullen bumps his shoulder into Alistair’s, knocking him out of his dystopian future.

“You showed up.”

“Dorian’s friend, the Iron Bull, caught me refilling staplers in one of the storage cupboards.” Cullen’s shoulders slump forward. “I knew it served no purpose, but I thought that if something menial helped her…”

There’s little more to say as they watch their captain discuss the plans with Rylen, Luana hanging off to the side with glassy eyes cast skyward. Though the street is a busy one, it feels as though the precinct itself leans in and holds a breath, the bricks withholding all the sirens and the street drinking in the pedestrian murmurs. Alistair’s chest trembles with his own held breath, looks to Cullen and sees his body stiffen as Luana crawls into the backseat. The goodbyes were already doled out, but they didn’t want to think of them as such. She called them “until we meet agains.”

Heart shaking, Alistair takes the stairs down, one by one. “Let me give you a ride home,” says Cullen. He keeps walking. A walk will do him good.

(21:05) Somebody’s been quiet today.

Alistair flops over onto his side and throws an arm out to grab his phone. He knows it’s her, but not how to respond. Work has taken everything he’s had to give, then asked for seconds, but he can’t just say that. More often than not lately he’s been forcing himself to carefully construct his texts, to leave them short and sweet, to not mix his work life with his personal life. Personal life? He grips the edges of his phone. This is all there is to his personal life, and he’s never been so scared to lose it.
(21:10) Work has been...exhausting.

(21:10) Tell me about it. Someone rang us up 5 times today, asking for a very specific item, which we didn’t have. They came into the shop and the SECOND I heard their voice, I chased them out. The customer is not always right, the customer is sometimes an asshole.

(21:11) Haha, aww

(21:11) I’m going to be on edge every time I hear a phone ring for the next few days, I swear on Andraste’s burnt corpse

(21:11) Well that’s a mental image I didn’t need

(21:12) Sorry, my bad.

(21:13) Are you...doing okay? Lack of emojis, very alarming.

(21:13) Should I send some pictures of Hessarian to cheer you up? I bought him a sweater as a joke but he actually looks kind of cute in it. He doesn’t agree, but it’s still funny.

(21:15) Should I just slap a stamp onto his butt and mail him to you? You have to promise to mail him back.

(21:15) I don’t think he’ll fit into the PO box. He’s a big boy.

(21:16) Cheese Man?

(21:17) I was spacing out, I’m sorry. I appreciate this, though. Even if I’m not responding

(21:17) Do you think there’s such a thing as the butterfly effect? I just...want someone to pinch me, you know? I feel like I’m dreaming, like this can’t be happening.

(21:18) Butterfly effect? A flap of its wings and a hurricane happens? I’ll bite, I know little things can add up. You can always trace huge occurrences to a single happenstance.

(21:18) Any happenstances that might’ve led to your breakdown? I’m ready to listen if you’re willing to talk.

(21:18) It’s all work related and I just

(21:18) Wanted to come home and leave it at the door.

(21:19) How about I call you? I can talk. You don’t have to say a single thing.

(21:19) I’m getting pretty sleepy.

(21:19) I’d offer to sing you to sleep if I could sing to save my life. I don’t know any good lullabies anyway 😞

(21:20) Really, not a single one?

(21:20) My friend taught me Mir Da’len Somniar, but again, I can’t sing for shit. Bet I could get ahold of her if that’s what you really wanted. She seems the helpful type.
(21:20) No, no. I don’t know what I want right now, or in general. Confusing, isn’t it? You must love dealing with me sometimes.

(21:21) Come off it and pick up your phone.

In the middle of a reply, Dog Lord’s contact picture fills up the screen, giving him few options. He accepts the call, presses the phone to hear his ear and waits.

“No talking?” Dog Lord asks. He can hear Hessarian’s telltale snuffling through the receiver.

“No talking,” Alistair confirms.

For twenty minutes he opens his mouth over and over, only to shut it back up and throw away the key. Dog Lord’s no therapist, she can’t explain away the black hole of morbid thoughts that threaten to consume, or why it feels like an event horizon around said black hole, why time seems to stop whenever his mind so much as lingers on Luana and her fate. He’s never worried about Zevran undercover before, or about Cullen being in the line of fire alongside him. He has started worrying about Dog Lord, but her day-to-day is so abstract that his new concerns about her slot easily in with the tangle of other feelings he’s grown to have.

When it feels like silken pink hair is slipping through his fingers, Alistair jolts and rolls over. He’s imagining it again: a crumbled Denerim engulfed in flames, devoured by abominations. As his breathing quickens, Dog Lord sighs. She’s still there. Denerim falls away and is replaced by smoky lashes, dark hair that curls around slender shoulders, the little crescent moons in her nails. He thinks about what it would be like to kiss her there, as a thank you. Alistair shifts the sheets around to cover his face.

“Thank you,” he mumbles before sleep can take him.

“My pleasure.”

He keeps thinking about kissing. As a thank you.

**Thursday**

Alistair decides he and Cullen have a deficiency of something, seeking sugar and caffeine as they do. And while the bags under his partner’s eyes tell a story of lost sleep and the furrows in his forehead read of a man with a headache sharper than wolves teeth or wit, it’s no excuse to be so callous. Already Cullen has snapped at him three times, for a coffee run or a report he’d neglected to write. Nevermind that Cullen’s the one who drives, that it was Cullen’s report in the first place.

At lunch there is calm, but it is tenuous. Alistair grows weary of the berth their palpable anxiety affords them.

“How have you heard anything since last night?” Alistair flinches as the words leave his mouth.

Cullen doesn’t respond.

“No news is good news, they say.”

Cullen takes a small spoonful of soup into his mouth, and it smells heavily of smoked fish and garlic,
as Fereldan as it gets. The empty spoon stays at his lips as he ruminates on the comment, then clinks against his bowl. “I wish we weren’t always rushing into these decisions. It seems to be a trademark of ours.”

Alistair thumbs a cluster of crumbs out of the corner of his lips. “Then why’d you let her go?”

“I didn’t let her do anything. She and Dorian colluded on their own time, but it was their decision to make, for the most part.”

“She seemed awfully distraught that you weren’t supporting her!” Alistair pointedly bites into his sandwich. The bread is stiff, dried out from sitting on his desk all morning; the bite rolls around in his cheeks like rocks. “I thought that’s what ‘love’ was about. Supporting your significant other’s endeavors. Unless, you know, fairy tales have been lying to me. They’re known to do that, I guess.”

Cullen squints, but if it’s because he’s angry or because he’s not wearing his glasses, Alistair is unsure. “It’s not all that easy to separate your work life and your personal life when they frequently intermingle and engage. Remind me why Dog Lord doesn’t know your profession, and how you came across the demon? I thought we established your motivations for closing this case, aside from the obvious part about how it’s your job.” It’s because he’s angry.

“But—”

“And just because you don’t like what someone is doing doesn’t mean you don’t support them. I don’t always like what’s best for her, but it’s what’s best for her. It’s a little hard to cope with your civilian girlfriend walking into the lion’s den, unarmed save for her trauma.”

“Is ‘lion’s den’ what you call your bedroom?” Alistair lights up with a smile.

“I’m not Orlesian, stop calling me a lion,” says Cullen, with an added eyeroll. After a minute of silence and snacking, he starts up again. “Why don’t you tell her your name, if not your profession.” Pause for ten seconds of chewing. “Those nicknames seem like a mouthful.”

Alistair stiffens. Because my name is weird and unique. Because names are traceable. Because a name is an offering, a commitment. Because names have power, and I can’t fritter away the last of it I have over my self-control and wants. “I don’t know, ‘Cheese Man’ is kinda cute.”

“And when she inevitably flirts with you, that’s the name you want coming out of her mouth?” Cullen snorts.

“What?!”

“Don’t look at me like I’m fifty years older than you and don’t know what sexting is.”

Despite being told not to look at him like that, Alistair is absolutely looking at him like that. “Who told you?” Alistair whispers, the back of his hand curtaining the side of his mouth.

“You’re ridiculous.”

“This is why we never talk about things, you get all ‘wizened old dad’ on me! Grandpa Rutherford is about to give me The Talk!”

“Alistair—”

“When a Cheese Man and a Dog Lord love each other very much,” Alistair mocks.
“Oh? I thought it wasn’t love.”

“I’ve decided I don’t like this conversation anymore.”

Lunch time ends with secret glares shot in one another’s direction, but it’s nice. It’s good. It’s familiar. It’s a distraction that is wrenched out of their hands when multiple bodies flood into Cassandra’s office, the buzzing whispers just audible enough to incite panic. Alistair’s heart can’t handle the emotional whiplash, not even this late in the week.

One minute he prepares to mourn for his friend, mentally preparing the eulogy he knows he’d blubber too hard to read, and the next he’s tugging at his collar at thoughts of Dog Lord. It’s nothing, it’s nothing, he assures himself. These thoughts that break the tension between stretches of news are nothing. Just thoughts.

Alistair catches wind of an “incident” in the operation. No one wants to tell him what happened. The implications wrap themselves firmly around his throat, violate his mind until he chokes. They have to beg him to go home at the end of his shift. Why won’t the street swallow up the sirens now? It’s all so loud.

(19:25) My coworker has been crowing over this ridiculous epistolary novel all day

(19:25) It’s some kind of “love story, told in 3 parts” except the 3 parts are: chat logs, letters, and then ‘in person’. Two dwarves, different castes, finding love in the Modern Era.

(19:25) I can’t believe it’s a thing now. Forgoing real writing for chat logs? Varric Tethras would never hurt us this way.

(19:26) Maybe I’ll check it out sometime

(19:26) Cheese Man. I accept you at your best and sometimes your worst (templar erotica), but this goes beyond worst.

(19:26) There isn’t anything worse than worst, though

(19:26) Well then this is your good, bad, and ugly. Chat logs!

(19:27) You’re not going to make any jokes about what dwarves cyber about?

(19:27) That seems so right up your alley.

(19:27) Is one of them at least part of the Coterie or the Carta?

(19:28) It’s not even that interesting! It’s not even lovers in a dangerous time! It’s just “urrrr I’m part of the warrior caste” “urrrr i’m part of the smith caste”

(19:28) “urrrr we discovered a thaig together and we’re going to elope in it”

(19:28) I would not be surprised if that’s where their magical meet-up was. I bet they discover a thaig together during a clandestine meeting and become Paragons, so no one can tear them apart. Because the dwarven government is wonky as fuck.
(19:28) You’re particularly passionate about this, I see

(19:29) The more you learn about dwarven history, the more you wonder if they’re just making it up as they go. Why do rules mean nothing and also everything? Why do anything if an arbitrarily elected king is going to undo it because someone peed in his cornflakes that morning

(19:29) Haha

(19:30) Work’s got you down again, hasn’t it?

(19:30) 😞 I still haven’t learned how to fake enthusiasm in texts.

(19:30) It’s a comfort to know that you’re always so excited to talk to me otherwise. I feel like we’ve swapped demeanors. I’m the sunglasses emoji in this relationship, I’m not acting cool and collected enough 😌

(19:31) I’m weirdly just throwing words out into a void in hopes they stick to you.

(19:31) I miss the happy-go-lucky Cheese Man, but I can learn to adjust to this one. I’m flexible.

(19:32) The bad stuff is still happening at work, except it’s getting worse? Somehow? I didn’t think it could, but ~the Maker works in mysterious ways~

(19:32) Everybody tiptoes around me and Cullen, everyone looks at us with such pity. I haven’t seen this much pity since I had Chantry sisters looking after me and a revered mother wondering what to do with me all the time.

(19:32) I come home, hoping something will change, something will happen.

(19:33) But home is quiet. I’m a bit sick of being stuck with my own thoughts.

(19:33) What kind of thoughts?

(19:33) The kind that tell you you’re helpless and worthless, useless. I heard plenty of that in the Chantry when no one was adopting me, but now? I guess I never got past the self-deprecating phase of my life

(19:33) It’s not a phase, mum, it’s a way of life

(19:34) Pretty much!! 😞

(19:34) But that’s why you talk to me, isn’t it?

(19:34) I can distract you.

(19:34) I could distract you right now.

(19:34) I don’t know that I’m ready for a phone call and bedtime. A bit early, isn’t it?

(19:35) Wasn’t talking about a phone call.

He cocks his head and looks away for a fraction of a second, long enough for a photo to appear
when he looks back. Not a photo of Hessarian, like he was vaguely hoping. Not a photo of someplace she’s lounging per his advice. Not even a photo of her face, but that was a bit beyond hope.

She’s holding the phone above herself, from where she sits—on her bed? The sheets are a wrinkled up mess—and she’s tugging her tanktop down, far enough to reveal more than just the outlines of cleavage. It’s a strange angle, Alistair muses as he swallows hard, and are her thighs even covered? He worries he’s over-analyzing something so obvious but really, is she wearing pants? Shorts? Anything else? There’s a ghost of a sly grin in the top corner of the picture, and he knows he would do well to not question its intentions.

Choking back a startled gasp, his thumbs fly over the keyboard, but the sentences aren’t coherent. He backspaces furiously, only to unload another flood of garbled text.

(19:38) 😐 😊 😇 😢 👍 👎 👎 👎 😐 😃

(19:38) Did half of those mean anything or are you just abusing the language

(19:38) aslknsklfbf;;


(19:39) If someone wrote an epistolary novel about our friendship, I want them to make a note about how absurd you are.

(19:39) How absurd i am?? I? Am? What is this photo ??

(19:39) Thought you could use some distraction. Took a photo of the top of my boobs. Did it work?

(19:40) Are you even wearing PANTS

(19:40) I’ve got boyshorts on, we’re good

(19:40) What are boyshorts? I’ve never had my shorts be gendered before.

(19:40) Is this your roundabout way of asking for a picture? How forward of you

(19:41) No nEED I Googled it. I’m

(19:41) But it worked, didn’t it?

(19:41) WHAT WORKED 😐

(19:41) The distraction!

(19:42) We’re going in circles now.

(19:42) I mean I GUESS. Dog Lord why

(19:42) You act like you’ve never seen a boob! It’s not even a whole boob! It’s a fraction of boob!

(19:42) It was a surprise boob. Augh!
I’m just trying to be a good friend and help you take a load off. What are friends for?

Friends………

Cullen never send you snaps of his boobs before? 😏

I still have two eyes, don’t I?

How would I know? I’ve never seen your face! I didn’t want to be presumptuous.

I think that’s exactly what you are. All the time.

I feel like I should be thanking you but I’m still trying to make sense of what I’m thankful for.

Take your time.

Well

Did you take that time to keep looking at the picture?

You said I could take my time!

Alistair clutches his chest and looks down at his phone. No more texts come in, she stops pushing him. He feels...discomfort, but not uncomfortable. He knows she meant well, but…

He doesn’t need to look into a mirror to know the weirdly-angled photo has painted him red, drawn a blush across his freckled cheeks and sent it blooming through his skin elsewhere. His stomach feels like a clenched fist, unwilling to open up and reveal the nothingness inside, nothing but hunger. And that hunger claws down his torso, has him curled over his phone, at a photo and brown skin that glows back up at him.

Before he can spend too much time rolling the imaginary taste of skin on his tongue, he softens at the gesture she’s extended. He’s reading into it, as Alistair knows he’s prone to doing, and she is… Dog Lord is sweet, sweeter than Wintersend’s confectionaries and softer than the wet petals that fall at spring’s end, even if she won’t admit it. Even if she masks it with coy winks and her own heady brand of deflections.

His heart pounds. He feels it through his fingertips and between his legs.

Listen, Cheese Man

If you’d let me, I’d drive to your house right now and figure out what’s wrong and fix it. Or punch it into submission.

You don’t need to do that!

I could leave a ticket to Antiva in the PO box. A much-needed vacation? Tell me you don’t want that.

I do but I don’t. I appreciate the offer, though, I do!
(19:52) I figured you’d say no to all of those things, hence the photo.

(19:52) **You show love in the most bizarre ways, you know that?**

(19:52) So long as you know I care. You want more? I’ve got more.

(19:53) **nononononono**

(19:53) The offer’s on the table, regardless. I’d punch a bear for you, Cheese Man. A photo to make you laugh or smile is the least I could do.

(19:53) **Please don’t punch any bears, they’ve done nothing wrong. Yet. 🐻**

(19:53) Are “thank you”s even acceptable here? Thanks for your...not-nude, but still risqué photo.

(19:54) Are you implying you want more? I don’t know if you knew this but there’s more to a breast than the tops of them. They have sides too! I can manage some killer side boob in this top.

(19:54) **jdbfksb nO. Maker, I’m going to need to take three cold showers or something**

(19:54) Interesting 😊 You just keep proving that you’re a cute guy.

(19:54) **You’re never letting that go, are you? 😘**

(19:55) No. And I can say whatever I like, you’re the one who just implied you’re hard enough to need three! Whole! Showers!

(19:55) **What! No! Wait? I mean**

(19:55) **People take showers when hot and bothered, right? To cool off!**

(19:55) Hot and bothered is literally code for boners.

(19:55) Deny that all you want but we’ve all read smutty fiction, who are we lying to, if not ourselves?

(19:56) Next thing you know you’ll be subtly sexting me.

(19:56) **Is that a thing friends do? Sext each other?**

(19:56) I don’t know, I don’t have a lot of friends. We could set a precedent.

(19:56) **I don’t think I’d even know how to compose a sext.**

(19:57) For starters maybe don’t sound like it's an academic text that requires deep thought.

(19:57) **I walk into a room. You’re also in the room. No one has pants on**

(19:57) **Am I doing it right?**

(19:57) I leave the room.

(19:57) I try to get you to come back because you forgot your pants! You can’t leave without your pants!
I ascend to the Maker’s side, pants or no pants

I mourn the loss of you, with Hessarian at my side. He doesn’t mind me when I don’t wear pants

Yes he DOES don’t put words in my dog’s mouth. How did we get here? I just wanted to do One Nice Thing and it became a weird roleplay situation

Isn’t that what sexting is? Oh wait, I wouldn’t know!! Because I’ve never done it!!

You sure showed me.

You go enjoy your 500 cold showers and think about what you’ve done

Yes ma’am.

And don’t forget: the offer is on the table. Goodnight!

Goodnight? It’s only 8??

I think you could use the time to yourself. Also

[picture attached]

I BELIEVED YOU ABOUT THE SIDE BOOB 😞

Friday

There is no choral arrangement to signify her return, no blessed prayers and arms outstretched to the sky. She goes boneless in Cullen’s arms, a put-upon sigh huffed into the folds of his jacket, the color drained from her skin. Alistair had wished there would be pomp and circumstance on her arrival, something loud and brash to replace the need to pinch his skin, but when he sees her he only wants to give her a cup of hot cocoa and a pillow for her drooping head. She seems so dazed, distracted by something no one else can see while wearing a faraway stare.

The truth is coaxed out, and once it’s pushed, it snowballs.

“Caladrius is dead.”

Alistair shoots a glance at Cullen.

“And I killed him.”

They suck in air harder and faster than a punch to the gut.

Her faraway stare is mired in longing, sadness. Alistair does not miss that she’s wearing gloves again, and that a puffy cut peeks out from where the fabric finds her elbows. He wants to sink to his knees and ask for forgiveness at her feet, but Cullen has it covered.
“I’m so sorry,” she says, words coming unbidden from her mouth. “He touched me here.” Luana’s fingers ghost over where she was carved, where it joins the others like it. “And that was the last time he touched me. Touched anyone.”

The apologies that followed were uncountable. A sorry for ruining the whole of the operation, a sorry for killing a man, a sorry for not following orders. Never a sorry for going, but a sorry for everything else under the sun. She blots at the corners of her eyes with the heel of her palm, embittered by her mistakes. “We salvaged some documents—Hadley did—but I—I took a life. He took some and I took his. I’m sorry.”

She spills tears when she can’t spill swabs or paper plates or drinks, Alistair discovers. Luana is kind in a way that so many others lose when they’ve been through as much—where others harden, she wobbles and molds herself anew. He does kneel, after all, and pulls her out of Cullen’s chair and into his arms. He smooths down unwashed waves of hair, because she did good and what were they thinking, sending her in there?

But that was an argument, a scolding for another time.

Rylen interrupts the moment, waggles a folder in the air. Alistair grows tired of the color manila folders have.

“Got something here you might want to peek at. When you’re done, I mean.” He deposits the folder onto Cullen’s desk, where Alistair makes a quick swipe at it. He gets back to his seat and begins to skim.

“It wasn’t a bust,” he says with awe, but the feeling is replaced with annoyance. “Not completely.”

“Fill us in.” Cullen stands behind his own chair while Luana crawls back into it.

“All I know is that Caladrius wasn’t ‘the one’ we were looking for,” Luana supplies. “For what little time I was there, I had to hear Caladrius relay a lot of coded nonsense to someone.”

“Servis?” Alistair asks, looking up.

“Is that a name? I never suspected it was a name, it sounds so much like, well, yeah.”

Alistair pulls out one of the documents and shows it to her.

“S’not a very good name.” Luana bites her tongue.

“Not everyone chose their name like you,” Cullen laughs.

It doesn’t make sense, Alistair thinks. He tries to pool his thoughts together, but the new information is hard for him to parse. Devera and many others worked for Caladrius, Caladrius worked for Servis, and… He reads on. There are photocopies of letters Caladrius wrote long before the operation, and they’re mostly encrypted. The ones that aren’t make little mention of someone above Servis, but there is someone. Worst of all, they’re aware of the police presence. The call for action grows more frantic as the letters close in on the current date.

Alistair rubs at his temples. “This chain of command isn’t leading anywhere, is it?”

“It...isn’t?” Luana withdraws her arms closer to herself.

“It seems like we cut off one head, but it’s going to sprout another. They know we’re onto them. I wouldn’t be surprised if Caladrius warned this ‘Servis’ guy before last night. Did anyone else see
you? Because you could be in danger, Lua.”

“No. No one else saw me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well,” she taps her chin. “I think they’ve got bigger problems on their plates now, being dead and all.”

Alistair resumes reading the documents, a little more thoroughly this time. Another name keeps cropping up; sometimes it gets burnt out or smudged but he knows it’s the same name. Perhaps it’s a code, but he knows it’s worth mentioning. “Does the name Avernus ring any bells?”

Luana shakes her head, but Cullen speaks up. “He was a Grey Warden at Soldier’s Peak, before it was torn down and built back up.”

“So he wouldn’t still be around?”

Cullen squints, his mouth hanging open. “That was the Storm Age. I don’t recall anyone living to be almost two hundred or so.”

“…A code name, then.”

“That’s more likely.”

“Well they really want to find whoever they renamed ‘Avernus.’” Alistair underlines a passage with his fingers and turns the paper towards Cullen. “Caladrius keeps stressing that if they can find Avernus, whatever they’re doing will ‘go faster’ but they’re making do with what they’ve got for now. You think they need to do more blood magic to get something done?”

“How much more could they possibly need?” Cullen groans.

Alistair shrugs. “However much it is, it’s already too much. I just… don’t know where we go from here.”

They meditate on the thought, chewing it over and over. The late morning sun shines through the blinds, tiger-stripes of shadows on their forearms while they hunch over in a triangle of thought. Luana scrubs at her arm and looks around, face scrunched up as if she’s perpetually got a song she can’t recall stuck in her head, until her expression breaks like a fever. “‘In uncertainty,’” she quotes, “‘find infinite possibility.”’

However apropos the quote is, Alistair can’t find it in himself to believe it. Infinity sounds hard and unquantifiable. Infinity stretches where he’s already stretched himself too thin, and he’s exhausted, nose pressed against the grindstone for the foreseeable future. He wants to catch Servis and this make-believe Avernus, and whatever puppet-master controls the lot. He wants to stop the blood magic before it encircles and traps the city itself, he wants answers. He reaches into his pocket and wraps a finger around his new bracelet—the one he can’t seem to wear in public, from Dog Lord with love—and lets it rub against an emoji charm.

He wants so much.

“Alistair, could I borrow your phone for a minute?”
It seems an innocuous enough request, especially from Cullen. He’s standing behind Alistair, craning his neck downwards, idly watching him play with some kind of app that involves feeding a menagerie of puppies, and it seems safe. Alistair closes his app, ready to relinquish his phone for at least a couple minutes. Until his stomach unexpectedly sinks.

“I...don’t have a phone.”

“What?”

Alistair pockets the device. “I suddenly can’t read.”

“We’re having a face to face conversation.” Cullen holds his hand out. “I just want to call Mia and let her know Luana is safe. It’ll only take a minute.”

“You have a phone.” Alistair grips his pocket as if it holds richest beyond one's wildest imagination, like a dragon protecting its hoard.

“I wasn’t thinking when I left for work this morning, and left it somewhere at home. I promise it won’t take long, if ‘minutes’ are your concern. I can pay you back if you’d prefer.”

This shouldn’t be a big deal, Alistair chides himself. Cullen Rutherford, historically, is not good with technology. Navigating applications on his outdated flip phone is a challenge in itself, and he’s never seen the appeal in a smartphone and the overabundance of “useless” features they come with. “A phone is for phone calls” he’s always tried to emphasize. Alistair knows this. Still, with clumsy fingers and all the wrong swipes and taps, he could open Alistair’s photos. The photos from last night might still be open! He’s fabricating all the worst case scenarios, the mortification already setting in while Cullen stands there with hands on hips.

“I let you use my phone while yours was broken. Can’t you extend the same courtesy?”

Alistair hisses. “Well your phone’s not broken, call Mia later!”

Eyes widening, Cullen makes a pass at Alistair’s pocket. Alistair’s rolling chair scoots away. Another pass, another roll. “Stop being so...testy and let me borrow your phone.”

“Over my dead body!”

“I’m about to make that happen!”

Alistair’s chair topples over and Cullen is quick to take advantage of the situation, fishing in his partner’s pockets. There are hands everywhere, flailing knees and the occasional yelp. No one stops them—in fact, Rylen cackles and pulls out his phone, training it on his two coworkers battling it out on the precinct floor. Another day, everyone must think.

When Cullen procures the phone, he looks so satisfied, his hard-won prize in hand. “That wasn’t so hard, was it? You’re still ridiculous.”

“Give it back,” Alistair growls. No one takes him seriously, though. It’s hard to when his hair is sticking in every direction and he’s panting while his tie is askew; Cullen doesn’t fare much better, but the victor always comes out looking good, even if his glasses are falling off his nose.

“When I’m done,” he assures him before walking off. As promised, minutes later he places the phone on Alistair’s desk.

No mention of photos or Dog Lord—the thought alone has his cheeks burning below the skin. But
it’s nothing, his secrets are safe, the coast is clear—

“How’s Dog Lord doing?” Luana’s hair hangs over his shoulder. That question earns her a sharp gasp and flail, almost enough to tip the chair back over.

“Fine, fine, she’s… fine. Everything is peachy keen. Things are swell.” Alistair continues to covet his phone, holding it close, lest its contents magically appear. “Did I mention she’s good?”

She removes a glove and reaches over him to swipe around his phone, aiming for the app with the dogs. When she taps it open, the only puppy in his virtual yard is one he renamed Hessarian. “That’s…” she exhales, breath cold on his neck, “I’m glad. After what’s happened, I’m glad she’s okay.”

“Peachy keen,” Alistair corrects.

“I don’t know what that even means,” she admits with a laugh. She brushes the tiny Hessarian on the screen, coos when it gives her a heart.

“It’s… Are you okay? Stupid question.”

“I’m getting there.”

“Why are you suddenly so interested in Dog Lord?”

Luana exits the app for him and pushes herself off of his shoulder and side. She seems to grapple with a response, with the way her face morphs from one expression to another over and over in the span of fifteen seconds. Eventually she gives a noncommittal noise and flounces off, saying “no reason” and fluffing her skirt around. She knocks into the plant beside the printer, brushes it off, and keeps going, checking over her shoulder to see if Alistair is watching. He is.

What was that about?

(19:21) I am home and all crises have been averted! Now, fingers crossed that only good things happen from here on out 👍👍👍

(19:22) Something nice happen at work, I take it?

(19:22) Yes 😊 One of the major things stressing me out is now taken care of and I can resume my role as sunglasses emoji 😎

(19:22) Hey wait, I didn’t agree to this

(19:22) I took up the mantle, you can’t take it back from me

(19:23) Can and I will!! I am the living embodiment, you can’t really ‘take’ that from someone when they’re living it

(19:23) Fine, whatever. Either way, I’m glad you’re feeling like yourself again. That’s always a plus 👍

(19:24) You helped me out a lot, you know. Even if your methods are… unconventional
(19:24) My methods have a high success rate, I maintain that my photos were the catalyst to this welcome change. I’m sure you were significantly more productive, if you saved the photos

(19:24) More productive? Debatable 😏

(19:24) But you did save them, right?

(19:25) 😏

(19:25) Called it 😏

(19:25) What else was I supposed to do? They were a gift! I think. Less of a blessing, more of a curse, honestly

(19:26) Cullen wanted to borrow my phone and I got so intensely paranoid he’d find SOMETHING and we fought over the phone. He doesn’t even know why, he just thinks I’m mad about my damned phone. Like I’m married to it

(19:26) You had a tussle over a phone because somewhere in your albums are pics of my chest? Incredible, Cheese man, incredible.

(19:26) It wasn’t something I think he should see!

(19:27) Why did he want your phone?

(19:27) ...To make a phone call

(19:27) I didn’t know you had it in you to have a bit of a possessive side

(19:27) I don’t!

(19:27) Only explanation

(19:28) 😏*****

(19:35) I’ve still been thinking about last night

(19:35) Not about the pictures!! The other stuff.

(19:35) You want to elaborate? Refresh my memory.

(19:36) The...sexting thing.

(19:36) Oh? Doesn’t sound like too bad of an idea the next day?

(19:36) If you’re going to tease me about it, it’s always going to sound like a bad idea, no matter what day it is 😏

(19:37) Not teasing! Only gauging your interest. You seem flighty and hesitant, I’m not going to force you into something you’re clearly not ready for.

(19:37) I feel...ready-ish. Just how do you even start something like that? Do you agree when it starts? Do you do it out of the blue? Do you have to be wearing your special sexting suit?
I hope that last one is rhetorical

So I’ve been scammed? 😊 Seriously though, if I don’t know how to start it, maybe I wouldn’t be any good at it

I mean, you know I’m

Inexperienced

I could get lots of terminology wrong. Things could go in the wrong places. I might slip on a banana peel on the way to this imaginary bedroom

Nothing turns me on more than visual humour and poor comedic timing. Cheese Man take me now

Also how does your lack of experience factor into these scenarios? Blushing virgins can be some of the nastiest people by virtue of having fantasized about it for so long and imagining what it would be like

Tell me that some of the books you’ve read that detail sex scenes don’t sound like they’re written by dudes who have never seen a boob in their lives. They can be raunchy and get the job done, even when you know it’s wrong

But I don’t want to be wrong! I want to get it right! 😅

If you want to be good at something, you have to practice.

Cheese Man? You’ve been typing for two minutes, it’s concerning

I kept trying to write something out but having to read these things is embarrassing. Absolutely embarrassing. People get paid to write naughty books and they don’t go over them and think “no, this is too much, I can’t go on”?

I’m sure everyone starts out that way!

I don’t know that I could 😏

We don’t have to, please don’t forget that. It was sort of a joke, one of those “I’m only into it if you’re into it” things. Because if you’re not into it, neither am I.

I’m disappointing you 😤

That’s not it at all! You’re right, sexting isn’t a thing friends really do. I’ve never done that with a friend so we don’t have to make it weird

But if you’re interested but the act of typing it out is too weird, we can talk on the phone. Or not. Again, don’t want to make it weird

Typing these things out is embarrassing me

I didn’t know your feathers were capable of being ruffled

It’s a testament to how pent up and frustrated I am
If we did that instead...how would we start?

Asking for a friend

Being that I am the more experienced one of the two of us

Hey!

I meant with doing this kind of thing on the phone! Don’t get so defensive. Though it’s true either way

I think I would do most of the talking, Setting the scene, all that junk.

“All that junk” she says. Very titillating.

You’re one to talk. You said we were both in a room and no one was wearing pants

And then you apparently DIED. I was doing great, I was being a natural, you were the one that croaked.

Yeah so anyway I would be the one talking until you felt comfortable to contribute. And if you didn’t, that would be fine. We could have watchwords if it made you feel better.

Watchwords?

A word or two you wouldn’t normally say, given the situation, to make your partner stop what they’re doing

“Stop” and “no” aren’t good enough?

They are! “No” is always good enough, trust me. People roleplay things, though, where “stop” isn’t always clear, or they might say stop in a completely unrelated context. But if you said “wet frocks” out of nowhere and we agreed that was your watchword, I’d know you weren’t comfortable

You make a good point. Not a lot of sexy situations I can think of that would involve wet frocks. Some, but not a lot 😊

Precisely

So should I use that? Wet frocks? In case something happens?

If you’re sure that’s something you’d never accidentally shout, then go for it.

But I don’t want you to rush into something, give yourself time to think about it, okay?

Don’t want to make it weird?

Wouldn’t dream of it, so… think about it.
(21:30) Do you have one?

(21:30) A watchword?

(21:31) No.

(21:31) Oh.

(21:33) Is there a reason? For that, I mean.

(21:35) I’ve never put myself in a position where I’d need one

(21:35) I don’t trust anyone enough for that.

(21:36) Oh, alright

(21:36) Goodnight, Dog Lord 🤣


Saturday

She had said to take time to think about it and since then he’s done nothing but think about it. Alistair paces around the length of his living room to his kitchen, through the bedroom and the bathroom. On fingers and toes he counts the ways it could go and where it could lead, the pros and cons, what there is to lose and what there is to gain. How bad could it go that he would lose a friendship? How good could it go that he might gain something more?

He pulls at the collar of his t-shirt.

He’s not thinking with his head, and he hates it.

To: 🌈Zevran🌈

(13:02) This is probably a bad time, but I need your help. With something dating related, I think? I could be blowing this out of proportion. Hope you’re not busy.


(13:05) I’ve been talking to this girl for a couple months and she’s basically my best friend now. Feels weird to type that out. Not because she’s a girl, but because I can’t believe she’s my best friend. Anyway, wow, ok so I think she’s been flirting with me? Even when I’m feeling like work has chewed me up and spit me out, she’s still...being flirty?

(13:05) Interesting, interesting. Do go on.

(13:06) And she jokingly suggested we sext but I think you and I both know how that would go. So she said we could talk on the phone? Sext with voices?
(13:06) Phone sex, yes. I’m familiar with the concept!

(13:06) Well when you put it that way, it sounds daunting. What am I supposed to do?

(13:06) Alistair, my friend. Questionably platonic love of my life. Ha, actually that sounds like it describes your friend to you more than it describes you to me. I do make myself laugh!

(13:07) Did you really text me so I could give you my blessing? Did you expect to hear me say anything other than “seduce her with your voice” as if there were any other option?

(13:07) I don’t know that “my voice” can do anything seductive. Have you met me? Yes you have so you know the answer to that.

(13:07) I don’t see what the problem is.

(13:07) She said she’d do the leading until I could contribute, so maybe I don’t... have to do anything. But that sounds kind of pointless.

(13:08) Ooh, she’s a dominant one! If you don’t pursue her, consider giving my number to her. As a gift.

(13:08) No!

(13:08) I worried you would say that. A shame, really. I don’t know what to tell you other than: stop thinking and just do it.

(13:08) But

(13:08) You asked for my advice. I gave you my advice!

(13:09) Also the Imperium is lovely this time of year, but that’s a conversation for another day. Go get her, tiger emoji ;)

(13:09) Thanks, Zev… I think.

He paces for another hour more, decides that while Zevran’s “advice” was a step in the right direction, it was predictable. It doesn’t stop him from doubting, even when half his body is in the for column while the other half is stuck in the against column. Alistair pulls his phone back out.

To: Luana 📞

(14:13) Are you busy right now? I’m experiencing a dilemma that could use your expertise.

(14:13) I actually don’t know what kind of expertise you have, it just sounded like the right thing to say.

(14:14) I know a lot about elven culture, how to take care of halla, I know a lot of folklore and children’s stories, I know a lot of things about the law! And I have a friend teaching me some things about history and vocabulary since I haven’t been reading for very long!

(14:15) Okay well do you know anything about, like, dating... Please do not tell me anything
about Cullen’s love life right now, that doesn’t count.

(14:15) It doesn’t ? Okay..

(14:15) I don’t know a lot, but I can try to help anyway. I’ve only been with a few people. I don’t think that makes me an expert.

(14:16) You’re currently the only one I can turn to

(14:16) What about Dog Lord? 😍

(14:16) It’s...about Dog Lord.

(14:18) Lua??

(14:18) Sorry, I got really really really excited ! And I shouted “oh Creators !” and startled Cullen a lil bit ^^; It’s okay, everything’s okay. Go on go on

(14:18) …

(14:19) Does she want to meet finally ?

(14:19) No, I don’t think… Maybe she does but that’s not the focus of the ordeal. I think she wants to get more

(14:19) Intimate

(14:19) And I don’t know if I should go for it. Thoughts?? This is stupid.

(14:20) It’s not stupid, Alistair :(.

(14:20) Do it ! Follow your heart !

(14:20) I don’t know that it’s my heart that’s doing the talking right now

(14:20) Follow your... you know !

(14:21) 😅😢

(14:21) 😅

(14:22) Is there anything else you need ?

(14:22) I think I’m good. I’m going to lay down and figure this out

(14:22) Tell me how it goes 😊

(15:03) Dog Lord? Are you busy? Tonight?

(15:03) Am I ever?

(15:04) Sometimes you are! 😊
(15:04) Tonight I am not. What’s up?

(15:06) I think I want to. Have the phone call.

(15:06) ...I’ll call you around 9. Don’t forget your “special suit”

(15:06) I thought the suit was only for sexting! 😒

(15:07) Right. Your birthday suit then.

(15:07) 😒

Alistair lays on his bed against a mountain of pillows, collected from all around the house, and stares with glazed eyes at the clock on his phone. The proper protocol eludes him, for what to wear and what to say, how to hold himself as he cradles his phone. What social mores must’ve cracked and crumbled to allow for a man his age to wait so diligently for a phone call with intentions so impure.

With every thumb swipe against a darkened screen, he knows he has to admit it to himself by now. He cares about Dog Lord, first of her name but with no name at all. Feelings are hard, yes, and they obfuscate themselves with little to no assistance. But after a day of chasing them and asking for opinions, he knows what they are. He thinks he likes her. That has to be why his palms begin to sweat, why he must command his thigh muscles to unclench, why everyone is so interested in knowing where this goes.

(21:01) Are you prepared?

(21:01) Only if you don’t make it sound like a routine teeth cleaning 😐

(21:01) Yes. Mostly. Trying to be?

The phone rings. Alistair answers, is greeted by the immediate even keel of her voice. “Breathing heavy?” she asks.

“Not yet,” he replies.

To call the silence awkward would not do it justice. In the time it takes either of them to voice desires or commands, Alistair sifts through his myriad of misgivings. Maybe he’s not ready to submit himself, or give up what little innocence he pretends to have. Or the friendship they’ve carefully cultivated. That’s the most important piece of all, and he’s scared.

“What are you wearing?” Dog Lord asks with a lilt at the end.


“A shame.”

“Is it?” He pauses. “What are you wearing?”
The phone buzzes and he pulls it away from his ear to check it. His lock screen lights up with a notification accompanied by a tiny image, and his breath hitches as he swipes to reveal it. Thanks to read receipts, she’ll know he’s seen it and why he’s grown so quiet, but he lets those thoughts dash away. Palms sweating more, he pulls his legs up closer to himself and balances the phone against his upright knees.

The photo she’d sent mirrors the one from days before. Calves tucked underneath herself, the photo is taken from above. A misleading angle, but it obscures her face and makes her chest the focal point. There is no tanktop being tugged down, only a bra and matching underwear. A lump forms in Alistair’s throat.

“Do you not like it? Shit, should I have kept that to myself?”

“No, no! It was a surprise.” He rubs the back of his neck. “I like it,” he adds, softly.

It shouldn’t have surprised him, though—he thinks about that belatedly and admonishes himself in his head. Lots of people wear frilly underthings, Alistair. Plenty of people. Most of them women, even! Finding out that Dog Lord was one of them was the actual surprise—the woman who argues with him about the most mundane things in their spare time, but never in a mean-spirited way; she who waxes lyrical about history lessons and her beloved dog. She keeps talking for his benefit but it could be gibberish for all he knows, because he’s lost in the gentle tone she’s affected.

“Cheese Man? Are you sure you want to do this?” she asks. He hears her shuffling her sheets around. He doesn’t hear Hessarian this time.

“I think so.”

“Then I want you to imagine that we’re together, in the same room.”

He laughs, a bevy of emotions and reactions bubbling to the surface at the mere thought of it. “I don’t really know what all you look like, in your entirety.”

“You know my lips and my body. That’s enough, isn’t it?” Dog Lord’s voice sounds deep and thick like molasses, trapping Alistair. Shivers wrack his body, he nods while swallowing though his mouth is already bone dry.

“You’re starting off strong,” he admits.

“Wet frocks?”

“No, keep going.” Heat snakes up his sides and constricts his lungs; he opts to take his shirt off, just in case. His fan, always on and ever rotating, greets him with a brief gust of cool air, but warmth persists in his abdomen. “Do you want me to… do something?”

Dog Lord hums, evidently pleased. “Maybe. Could I ask you for a favor?”

“Anything.” Torn between embarrassment and something unnameable, Alistair shuts his eyes.

“Could I imagine that it’s your fingers inside me right now, instead of my own?”

All the warmth is replaced by a sudden chill, and the shivers return more violent than before. He hears her sigh and along with it he imagines eyelashes fluttering and fanning out across the tops of her cheeks, one of her hands snug between her thighs. A lip being bit. Toes curling. His name.

His cock twitches against his boxers, making his hand clench.
“Sexting might’ve been easier,” he jokes. “Then you wouldn’t have to hear my reactions.” Then you wouldn’t have to hear me come undone.

“Would you rather try that instead?”

Swiping a forearm across his forehead, Alistair thinks about it. His underwear feels tighter and the sound of breathing is slowly driving him insane, but he can’t imagine going without it. To read the words she speaks would feel like torture, and without the intonation? Would it have any effect if he didn’t hear her talk about him? So “no” he replies, voice deepening to match hers. “Keep going,” he insists again.

“I’ve thought about your hands,” she confesses. “A lot. I’ve only seen them once but—ah, this is stupid. You’ve got big fingers and I, ah—”

Alistair palms himself through his boxers, wishes she could just know to go on, but her voice becomes unsteady, unhinged. It forces him to roll the waistband down. “I hope they’re big enough for you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She doesn’t sound accusing, can’t sound accusing when she’s speaking halfway through a pant.

“Just hope they can satisfy you, is all. I don’t mean anything—”

“I know. Maker, I wish that’s what they were doing. I’ve wanted that, is that wrong?”

A rough gasp comes out of him without his permission. “No.” Alistair’s body stiffens; his hands almost pull away from himself. Every time his nervousness ebbs away long enough to fondle or stroke, a quiet whimper whips him back to the here and now, forces him to blink and laugh at himself. Is this really happening?

“What are you doing to yourself? Tell me,” she asks. “Please.”

“I’m…” Alistair looks down—hadn’t realised he was looking up at the ceiling. “Well, y’know.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“It’s hard to think. I’m bad at this, aren’t I?”

Dog Lord laughs. “Only a little, but that’s why I’m doing the talking. Should I keep going?”

“Please.”

“Even if you don’t know what I look like entirely… How about you imagine me on your lap?”

Alistair bites his lip as he thumbs the tip of his cock—he likes the sound of that. He hasn’t forgotten the muscles he’s seen in her photos, and he’d like to imagine how they would look as he bounces her up and down. His hips jolt in response to the fantasy and knock him back to reality; how long has he been gone? He hears her laughter again but it’s sweet, like he can imagine it as the way she’d laugh if she rode him and enjoyed his rough—why is he tangoing with such dangerous thoughts?

“You’re fucking me, aren’t you?”

“I wish.” Alistair feels the betrayal licking at his lips, forgotten as he strokes himself faster, pants a little louder.

“Shit,” she replies, breathy, unbecoming. He can almost see the way her chest should be heaving at
the thought and he tears the dry skin from his lip just considering it. He doesn’t know what her face
looks like or even what her chaste touches are like, but he forgets about the wrongness of this as he
moans to match her whimpers.

“Do you… like that?” he asks.

“I want more. Go harder. For me.”

He can hardly breathe. He feels like he’s taking too long, wasting her time because he wants the
strokes to be slower, so he has time to envision her curling over and kissing him, faceless, while he
bucks and drives those wrecked sounds from her. “Go deeper,” he begs—actually begs—and he
hears her turn her head away from the phone because it’s overwhelming. He whines in kind, he
wants to be forcibly shoved off the deep end. “Please. Please.” Alistair doesn’t know what he wants
now; he’s never felt what he thinks he wants. He wants this woman to tell him what he needs. He
wants her guidance more than a Chantry mother could ever give and he doesn’t even feel half as
filthy as he should when he considers fucking this near stranger into receiving him with benediction.

And then Alistair’s lack of stamina asserts itself, leaves him huffing like a horny teenager that would
probably finish the second a pair of lips touched the head—that thought alone drives him wild, a pair
of lips he’s only ever seen smile so knowingly. He knows she hears it, and she returns to the phone
with her breath caught to ask him: “Will you come for me?”

“I—“ but he can’t deliver a witty one-liner, smooth like his texting persona. He pulls on his cock and
he comes, hot on his hand and belly. He’s reminded of adolescence but he can’t for the life of him
remember what he used to fantasize about before her in this very instance. There’s nothing to clean
himself up with and he moves to get up but she calls him back.

“Leaving so soon?”

Alistair grips the phone and hangs his head. “You could tell?”

“I’m familiar with the sound.”

He frowns. It’s one of many small blessings that she can’t see it.

“So…” Dog Lord clears her throat.

“So…”

“Was it good for you? Was it worth it?”

Looking down at the mess he’s made, he figures it was worth it, and whatever qualms that are left
over can be scrubbed away during a hot shower. “It was, I think.” Alistair curses inwardly at the way
his voice wobbles. “It was… different, but not a bad different. A good different. Brain’s a little
fuzzy, still can’t believe it happened.”

“Why can’t you?” He hears her roll over in her bed.

He sits back down on the bed. Fingers trace lazy circles into the sheets; he wishes he could clean
himself up already, but there’s a thread of something needing to be said. “Didn’t know I had it in me
to do this. I must’ve sounded like a blubbering mess.”

“You sounded fine.”

“You say that, but how am I supposed to face you after that? Embarrassing, much?” When he
laughs, she doesn’t accompany him. Alistair’s heart feels like it’s caught somewhere between two of his ribs.

“What’re friends for?” she says, and it’s with a special softness that’s uncharacteristic, even for her. It sounds like something deteriorating, a whisper beneath the breath reserved for disclosures that are off the record.

“An interesting friendship we’ve got going on,” Alistair replies, gesturing to nothing in particular.

“What else would we be?”

He can’t answer that. There’s silence, a true ‘awkward silence,’ not like any in the past. She laughs as though it never happened.

“Go clean yourself up, Tiger Emoji. I’m going to hit the hay, and I’ll text you when I wake up.”

Alistair wants to stop her, to see if everything is okay. He doesn’t, though. He sticks a foot in his mouth. “Alright. I’ll, uh, talk to you later. Goodnight?”

The call ends.

He wishes he could crawl under the covers, suddenly feeling dirtier than before and more regretful than ever. What was that? Did he fuck up after all? The conversation plays over and over, he visualizes a reel-to-reel in his head, stopping and starting to replay key phrases. You’re a detective, so think like one! What did he say that changed the tone? Was it about leaving? Was it about meeting, even after all this?

Alistair hauls himself off towards the bathroom, feet dragging. Was it about being friends? Because if that’s not what they were…

What were they?

Chapter End Notes

Anyway, Alistair is absurd.
After the month from medication hell, I have churned this monstrosity out. I feel bad that it took so long, but I did it!! It was such a hazy experience, I'm not entirely sure I remember writing half of this chapter tbh. But as always, the two of us are ever thankful for the incredible support we've gotten, and the friends we've made even since the last chapter <3
I had meant to include some more Hessarian love for an anon but I failed spectacularly; in any event I hope that anon is doing well.

Our personal blogs:
Carouselfancy
Tijgertje
And our fic blog, in case you want to see additional art, updates, or send us cute messages! <3
Sunday

"What the fuck."

Olivia wakes drenched in a fine mist of sweat and swathed in a heavy comforter she honestly does not remember owning. She has somehow maneuvered her pillow over her face in her sleep, and for a moment she blinks owlishly into the fabric, her eyelashes tickling against it with a soft schk that rings in her ears like Chantry bells.

Her dreams had been plagued with images of faceless lips against her skin, one moment smiling and stubbled, the next, dimpled and smooth-shaven. Freckled hands trailing across an abdomen pimpled with shivers and sweat droplets; opening thighs; grasping the base of her neck and threading long fingers into the dark curls at the base of her skull. She had dreamed of those hands pushing her legs up to lock around his neck, to rest on shoulders that were painted with constellations of freckles, galaxies she wanted to explore every inch of, to devour with her eyes, sail with her fingers, and memorize with her lips.

Her dreams had been so vivid, and so tactile, that she wakes, drenched in a fine mist of sweat, in the same bed she had just been in with a faceless stranger.

Olivia groans, and steadfastly refuses to acknowledge the echo of the same sound that replays in her mind.

Through a too-long (and freezing cold) shower, a breakfast of burnt toast and a protein shake, and a distracted flicking through of Sunday morning television channels, Olivia battles with all-too vivid flashbacks of the night before. Part of her wonders if that had been part of her dream as well, but the way that Cheese Man's voice replays in her mind in high-definition clarity, she knows she can't try to claim innocence on that one.

Not that she would try to claim innocence in any of this. There was absolutely, by all definitions and translations of the events of the night before, no possible way she could pretend at innocence in that.

"You're fucking me, aren't you?"

Olivia groans again and puts her face in her hands.

She isn't surprised at herself, not necessarily; she'd had relationships back in Highever, and enough flings to know how to find a mutual understanding. But it has been more than a year since she had
been with anyone, and even longer than that since she had been with a man. Olivia tries to think
back to some of the men she had been with in the past, but she suddenly cannot remember a single
name or face. Forgettable, almost all of them.

And if she really tried hard enough to quash the voice of reason in her head that always sounded
suspiciously like Fergus, she could probably convince herself that it was easy to throw out the
suggestion to Cheese Man, to act as though it wasn't a Thing. To smile and flirt and lower her voice
to a throaty hum the way she knew could set a mood in a moment. And perhaps she'd had to do just
that in order to summon the courage to suggest it in the first place.

But if she was really honest with herself (and Olivia made a habit of doing so as little as possible, as
a self-preservation technique), not a single one of her previous flings had ever made her feel the way
she had last night. Or this morning, for that matter.

"What're friends for?"

If she was really honest with herself, she had hated those words the moment they'd sprung from her
mouth. Because they weren't friends, were they? Not anymore. They had been—Cheese Man has
been there for her when she felt like she had nobody else, and she trusts him. She misses him, even
when they're texting, and especially when they're talking on the phone.

Because she has no apparent sense of self-preservation, she opens her phone and scrolls back
through her texts with Cheese Man. Between risque photos and audacious flirting, she can only stare
in befuddlement and wonder what sort of desire demon had possessed her the last few nights and
taken away her inhibitions.

No, this was entirely out of character for her. But between her firm desire to stay single and her
constant declarations that her relationship with Cheese Man was a purely platonic, if not unique,
arrangement, she feels as though last night was a little out of left field.

Except it wasn’t.

"I want more. Go harder. For me."

"Please."

She can still hear the way he had begged her for more. Can still feel the crazed want that had burned
through her as she listened to him peak at her own words.

She winces, and grabs at the roots of her hair, and wishes she could get her own voice out of her
damn head.

She had told him she would text him when she awoke.

She woke up 4 hours ago.

Every time she opens her phone, she is confronted by the texts she had sent him last.

(15:07) Right. Your birthday suit then.

The sight of it throws her off completely, and she swears to herself it has nothing to do with her
overactive imagination. Though it may. Just a little.

She tosses her phone onto the coffee table and stares at it as though it's infected with disease, and she does not text him.

(14:29) Are you going to see Duncan today?

It sounds awful and formal, but it was the final product of 13 deleted messages and half an hour of pacing around her coffee table, and she had to close her eyes to send it.

He doesn't respond right away, but for just a brief second, she can see the small ellipsis that indicates he is typing before it drops away and her phone goes back to silence.

And that is worse than if he had said anything at all.

Olivia stares at her phone with her brow furrowed and she does not look away.

(14:47) Yes. How did you know?

Her veins flood with relief just to see him respond, and she only realizes now that she had been expecting him to call it all a mistake and tell her to lose his number. Her fingers fly across her keyboard.

(14:48) You usually mention it so I wondered if something came up.

(14:48) Is that a euphemism? 😒

(14:48) Should it be? 😒

(14:49) NO

(14:49) Awfully quick to answer.

(14:49) I can't believe you've finally texted me and it's just to tease me

(14:50) You started it!

(14:50) I'm actually glad. I was worried things would be weird.

(14:51) Can I be honest?

(14:51) It was at first. It took me hours to text you.

(14:51) I was worried I'd scared you away.

(14:52) What are you talking about
(14:53) Sorry, I just mean that I'm fairly certain I was setting a record last night for most awkward human in a phone call - well, ever.

(14:53) I thought you weren't texting me because you had keeled over and died laughing after we hung up.

(14:55) Not quite.

Olivia's fingers hover over her phone, reticent now as heat floods her entire body.

He had finished before her, that was true, yet she had rather expected it. But it had left her overwhelmed and frustrated, and she feels her cheeks heat now as she remembers the way she had plunged her fingers between sweat-soaked thighs upon hanging up the phone; had rolled onto her stomach so her gasps and moans would be lost into her pillow while she replayed his pleasure in full mental stereo. She had climaxed to the image of him on every part of her body, wondering what filthy sonnets that voice could whisper into her soul if she begged him just right.

And it hadn't been the first time.

She bites her lip now, feels the embarrassment roll in her stomach, and is grateful he cannot see her face.

(14:56) Are things weird? I mean

(14:56) Do you regret it?

His silence seems to last an age, and Olivia panics.

Darkening thoughts rattle against the gates to the forefront of her mind, begging to be over-considered, fretted upon. With each passing minute they are harder to quell, insistent that she has been asinine, indelicate with her actions and untoward feelings. So sure that she will lose it all in one fell text.

Her phone chimes and she beats them back.

(15:00) No

(15:00) It was nice.

Her face breaks into a smile, and she exhales through her teeth.

(15:01) Good.

(15:02) Neither do I.
Olivia Mairyn Cousland was always in control.

This was a well-known fact in Castle Cousland. Born the only daughter to the second wealthiest man in the country, she was blessed by virtue of birth with health, beauty and a quick mind. She was expected to be the picture of feminine beauty, lovely like her mother and bold like her father, and clever as the two combined. And while she certainly was these things, they quickly became overshadowed by what visitors and friends of her parents politely called "a lively spirit."

From a young age, Olivia learned all her lessons the hard way. If someone older and more experienced told her how her actions would play out, she had to find out for herself if only just to prove the truth of the words that were spoken to her. She played the knight in all her imaginary games, and instead of rescuing damsels she would make off with troves of treasure and rule herself a kingdom. She entrusted her fate to nobody but herself.

If anyone expected Olivia Cousland to grow into a blushing orchid, they surely were thrown off by the broad-shouldered, well-muscled young woman who only ever seemed to want to fight and ride her horse. She had no patience for proper manners and political dinners and pretty frocks to impress young men. She was well-enough entertained by them behind closed doors, but it didn't take long for hopeful men and women to realize that Olivia Cousland called the shots, and there would be no tying her down to any one person.

She discovered her own sexuality at an age that would make her mother faint, and the experience had been horrible at best. It was another lesson learned the hard way, but she never forgot it. From there, she learned what she wanted, and how to get it, and as she got older, she learned that as long as she was in control, she could not be made a fool of.

Romance was an abstract concept, and it wasn't a bad romantic run-in that had convinced her of this; rather, it was the shining example of romance that lived within her very home, that had raised her on warm smiles and warmer praise. Her parents' love was storybook, and the storybooks had always said that true love like that only happened once an age. Was it not simple fact, then, that no other couple stood a chance afterward? And so she had never fussied with it, never been concerned with it, because the world was so big and full of wonders that required one's utmost attention, how could she be expected to have any to spare?

Romance required effort, and selflessness, and the ability to give one's trust away to another person wholeheartedly, and that was the true sticking point for Olivia. How could she trust another person to do with her as they pleased, and have some sort of abstract faith that it would align with her own desires? She hardly knew what her own desires were, and so how could she expect someone else to know any better?

Romance required ceding total control, and Olivia Mairyn Cousland was always in control.
Monday

(12:01) Day off? Don’t mind if I do! 🌴

(12:03) Are you trying to tell me you’ve slept in this late and now you’re rubbing it in my face? All while I’ve been staring at a book about religious customs in Seheron for 20 minutes?


(12:03) I didn’t just wake up, I’ve just been very absorbed in video games since I woke up. Since, you know, I do have electricity in the rock I live under 😏

(12:04) Oh do you? And I take it you’re killing lots of virtual baddies with next to no repercussions

(12:05) There are lots of repercussions!! One of my party members disapproved of me arresting someone, even though it was the right thing to do. Space isn’t lawless!!

(12:05) Space?

(12:05) The setting is space, yes 😊

(12:06) So the virtual baddies are all aliens, huh. Bet you’re feeling like a very proud human

(12:06) Some of my best friends are aliens, thank you very much. I’m even dating one of them! I take her everywhere ❤️

(12:07) Should I be jealous?

(12:07) Possibly. She’s very tall and could possibly carry me. Granted, my character is a woman and a little slight, so picking her up wouldn’t be that much of a feat anyway 😏

(12:09) You’re playing as a woman? It better not be so you can stare at your character’s arse for 40+ hours

(12:09) Do I sound like the kind of guy who would do that? Dog Lord, you think so little of me, that hurts…

(12:09) ⭐⭐ The female character has a better voice actress, so there’s also that bonus

(12:10) I don’t know how much you care for space, but I think you’d like this game! Maybe, I dunno, sometime I could show it to you? That wouldn’t be so bad for hanging out, would it?

(12:10) I’d gladly watch you play games for hours. Snark at all the writing when it’s bad. Probably yell a bit when sucked into a black hole because you don’t understand how it works.

(12:11) You wouldn’t even warn me? You get your kicks from watching people discover the meaning of an event horizon, do you?

(12:11) 😊

(12:11) You’ve got co-op games, don’t you?
(12:12) Maybe one or two. Most games are vs, not cooperative.

(12:12) I think we’d work well together.

(12:12) It’d be hilarious to utterly wreck you in a vs game though too, don’t get me wrong.

(12:13) I’d never let you win 😞

(12:13) You wouldn’t have to, I’d beat you fair and square 😝

(12:14) I can’t believe our friendship is going to be so short-lived. Oh well, maybe it was always meant to end this way. It starts with cheese and it ends with kart racing.

(12:14) Rest in peace, whatever I had with Dog Lord. It was good while it lasted.

(12:15) Save the mourning for when I come visit and beat you into your couch.

(12:15) I’m going back to my game, where my tall space girlfriend supports me and loves me and would take a bullet for me 😎

(12:16) Tell her I said hi 😌

(17:33) So do you like space?

(17:35) Like it? Love it. If I could visit it right now, you bet your arse I would. I’d drop everything, no hesitation.

(17:35) Do you think we’ll ever make it out there? What do you think we’ll find?

(17:35) Don’t doubt there’s cool aliens, maybe a few tall ones you could smooch.

(17:36) 😞 it’s just the two! Leave them out of this!

(17:36) So you’ve got another tall alien paramour? What’s their race like? What is Tiger Emoji’s fictional alien type? 😎

(17:37) I’m not telling you anything. You’ll Google them and think they’re ugly.

(17:37) I like them for their personalities, not their weird faces!

(17:37) Too late I’ve already Googled based off of what you’ve told me and

(17:37) They don’t have lips, what are you kissing?

(17:38) This was supposed to be a deep, maybe even existential conversation about space and what lies beyond Thedas 😎

(17:38) And it turned into a chat about your disposition towards weird bird-like aliens. That’s ok, we can still be friends. I won’t tell anyone you know.

(17:39) Thanks for reminding me to never let you meet any of my friends. They’ve all heard
about you but it’s going to stay at that. You know too much about my personal life, you’d blab 😬

(17:39) “Tiger Emoji? Yes I know him, he wants to go to space and find a girlfriend with a carapace!”

(17:39) Unrealistic standards, tbh.

(17:40) 😏

(17:40) And anyway, I think we need to make it across the Amaranthine Ocean or the Frozen Seas before we can consider one of the moons or further

(17:41) Want to found the Thedas Space Program with me?

(17:41) 😜 😊 😂!! I’d love to. Our little side project. To the moons and beyond 🌌 🌌 🔺 🌌 🌌

(17:41) First thing’s first: space suit for Hessarian? Yes or no?

(17:42) While it would be nice to have the first dog on the moon, I don’t know how much he’d enjoy that. He might accompany me to space out of sheer unwillingness to let me out of his sight for too long, so put that under the ‘maybe’ column.

(17:42) I’ll be sure to allocate space on the shuttle for dog treats. He might run right off the moon if we don’t have treats! 😳

(17:43) You think he won’t come when I call him?

(17:43) I don’t think there’s any sound in space (despite what these video games are trying to make me believe) so would he hear you?

(17:43) Good point.

(21:13) Would it just be us going to space? With Hessarian, of course, but are we the entirety of the flight crew?

(21:13) I don’t know anything about what it takes to go to space, other than probably a lot of maths, which, ew

(21:16) You mean we can’t just build a big aircraft and point it at the moon, light a fuse, and hope for the best? I guess if it were that simple, we’d all be eating moon cheese and having spacey parties with the three-headed locals by now 🍀

(21:16) But in this hypothetical situation, yes. I think it should be just us.

(21:17) I mean, we founded the Thedas Space Program. We have dibs on “first contact” and moon cheese 🧀

(21:17) How about I deal with first contact, you...mine the rock for cheese?

(21:17) You never heard those things at school? What do they talk about at private school or
boarding school or wherever you went?

(21:18) I can’t think of anything off the top of my head but it certainly wasn’t “can we eat that thing up in the sky that comes out every night?”

(21:18) Your loss 😊

(21:22) The moons are very far away. Maybe we should make more realistic plans. Someplace closer. Much closer.

(21:23) In or out of Ferelden? Because no Orlais 😞

(21:23) No “returning to my homeland” jokes either. Thank you in advance

(21:23) If it were a road trip someplace else, it’d have to go through Orlais, you know that right? It’s quite big.

(21:23) Hrmmm

(21:24) I’ve never been to Seleny, and I hear it’s beautiful in late summer, when the number of tourists trickles down. Or Antiva City. Last time I went I was too young to remember much.

(21:24) Wait, you’re serious?

(21:24) I always fancied the thought of visiting Rialto or Bastion…

(21:25) The first official voyage of the Thedas Space Program? We could reason that in order to see the stars, we first have to go beyond our borders 🚀

(21:25) I knew you’d like that

(21:25) And Hessarian comes with?

(21:26) He’d be fussy about the backseat, but he’d understand by the time we hit Jader

(21:26) That’s still… a long trip. A very long trip. I’ve never been past Redcliffe but… It sounds… Exhilarating

(21:26) Would we be staying in hotels? Or camping? Sleeping in the car?

(21:26) We’d have to stop so often and stretch our legs, but you know if we’re taking the north route through the Coastlands, we could see the stars all the time with no light pollution. And food, how do we eat?

(21:27) I guess you’d be paying for a lot of it. Could I get the time off work for this?

(21:27) Slow your roll, Tiger Emoji 🐆

(21:28) I said late summer. You think we’re going to meet and embark on a journey across Thedas immediately? I know I’m impulsive, I’m painfully self-aware

(21:28) It’s just a thought for the future
(21:28) I didn’t realize I don’t think very hard about the future until this moment 😊

(21:29) If you asked me what I was doing in Justinian or Solace on any given day, I couldn’t tell you. Really, truly, honestly, couldn’t tell you. A month ago, if you asked me what I was doing in a week, the most I’d say is working

(21:29) I guess that’s what I’d say I’d be doing in Justinian too. Exciting, isn’t it? Big nose to the grindstone, day in day out

(21:29) Running away doesn’t sound so bad sometimes. Run away to Orlais, eat cakes all day!

(21:30) Tiger Emoji

(21:30) I don’t think I’ve done much thinking about my future either. I didn’t do it much before my parents died and it was unthinkable afterwards too. I know I’ve talked about turning over a new leaf

(21:30) Maybe instead of ‘running away’, a road trip would just be running and then coming back

(21:31) Especially if I’m with you. I’d make sure you came back 😊

(21:31) Is that a threat?

(21:31) No! Just

(21:31) A reason

(21:31) A reason to come home.


(21:59) Goodnight, Tiger Emoji

(21:59) Goodnight, Dog Lord 💖

(22:00) 💖

**Tuesday**

Work is as it always is: the stacks of books Olivia is to sort through grows ever higher while the store empties and refills like clockwork. It’s not quite in the doldrums—no, she would never describe it as such. But her eyes fall across the pages, letters making new ligatures that she can’t unfuse; three customers have asked her where the historical fiction section is, or was it the same person three times? Someone is carousing two aisles over, but when she goes to tell them off, all that’s left is an empty coffee cup holding up a copy of a very chewed and moist book.

Olivia strains herself to avoid texting Cheese Man, because that’s the easy and irresponsible thing, even if she does it on the regular. No, there has to be breathing room, not every moment of every day has to be filled with inane conversations. Because that’s what they will be if she lowers herself to texting every time she thinks of him, and the well will run dry for topics of conversation. *What other video games do you play? Where’s your favorite place to get dinner? Want to guess which city in the Anderfels has the smallest population? Hey, which dog toy do you think Hessarian would like better?*
Fingers curl around her kneecaps as she sits on the floor in the travel section. A hefty book detailing the best locations for the lowest prices in Antiva mocks her, as does each book dedicated to every port city in the region. It’s stupid. One day it’s panting, sweating, washing sheets and icy showers, the next it’s road trips and the Thedas Space Program. It’s far off ‘dates’ and hang-out sessions.

It’s fanciful (read: unrealistic) daydreams about bumping into him at Andrastea and knowing him by specially placed finger freckles. It’s the thought of going for a jog and colliding with him and his voice saying her dog’s name, but not her own. It’s having to swat away the hazy clouds of gross idealism on the regular, because this is the damn hole she’s dug for herself on this particular week. Maybe next week’s obsession can be cooking shows or couponing or the start of a stamp collection.

(Hard mode: stamps of past Divines only.)

That thought makes her chuckle to herself, is one worth telling Cheese Man because she knows he’d have something to say about Divine Theodosia II or he might mock her because everyone knows a stamp of Divine Amalthea I would be too rare, too expensive, but she could afford it. Her hand goes to her jacket pocket, the set-up to a joke already forming in her head, but the phone isn’t there. Olivia gets up and jogs back to her desk, but her phone isn’t there either.

A stolen phone is little more than an inconvenience to her, a setback that would require her to spend hours in a shop that she does not have. This must be the Maker’s way of punishing her, then, for being so privileged. For leaving it out where anyone could have taken it. Even worse, the more pressing concern is not that her phone was taken but that she has no other means of contacting Cheese Man. She has no equivalent of a Cullen on standby, ready to proffer a phone.

Unless.

Olivia stalks around the aisles, determined to find Leliana. Not behind the register. Not in the office. Every aisle and every corner lacks the redhead she’s looking for; she’s ready to give up the manhunt for her coworker when the restroom door opens and the musical stylings of Leliana’s jubilant laughter makes itself heard from shelves away. An untrained eye would overlook the color and design of the phone that she carries, clutched close to her face so as not to miss a single detail on the screen.

Olivia notices.

“Leliana—” she starts, voice raised, ready to bring down the seat of the Maker Himself if need be.

“Olivia.” Leliana ignores the fury and dismay tweaking all of Olivia’s facial features in favor of bringing her hands—phone included—to her lips. When she speaks, it’s as though an unreleased giggle is caught between every syllable. “You didn’t tell me you were seeing someone, least of all not your text friend.”

The flames of rage simmer into vexation, which melt and drip into embarrassment. Shoulders are slumped, heads are hung.

There’s not even a sliver of opportunity to stem the tide before Leliana launches into her speech, gushing about what she’s read, repeating lines as though they were penned by an author and not fragments of a real conversation that Olivia was very much present for. “The road trip sounds so romantic!” she continues, overflowing like a river into a sea of excitement. “And further back, his birthday suit! Watchwords! Olivia, these photos!”

“Alright, alright, enough.” Olivia plucks the phone out of her hands before more damage is done. “This probably violates some kind of code of conduct, but I won’t tell Morrigan if you tell me why
you stole my phone and snooped through it.”

Leliana regains her composure and catches her breath. “You’ve been so different since when we last hung out and you joined me for work the following Saturday. Asking you what had changed would be the simpler thing, no? Of course, that seems so obvious now, saying it out loud, but simple does not mean easy. And I’d only meant to borrow your phone, put it back before you noticed! I didn’t realize I’d been gone for so long, but you text a lot, and you tell him much more than I imagine you’d ever tell me…”

Olivia pinches the bridge of her nose, her eyes scrunch up while she massages the skin.

“But you must meet him!” Leliana continues. “I didn’t go back very far, but this is something I’m sure of. Liv, if I had known you were seeing him this way, I wouldn’t have pushed to set you up with someone else.”

Where to begin? “I’m not seeing him, and this isn’t one of your chick-lit novels. We’re not going to meet, fall in love, and elope in Antiva City with Hessarian as my ringbearer or whatever.”

“Not until Justinian or Solace,” Leliana assures.

“Not ever! Even if I wanted that—which I don’t—real life doesn’t slot itself into place like that. And if this were some type of chick-lit novel, that kind of thing doesn’t come without conflict and the climax of it. Not here for it, honestly.”

A thousand responses must die on Leliana’s lips then, because there is no swaying Olivia when she is firmly grounded in her wants and beliefs. She can argue all she wants, she can turn blue in the face as Olivia crosses back to where ten more books wait for appraisal, but it won’t change the fact of the matter. For as good as he is, for as enjoyable as Saturday night was, this is not something she will allow herself.

“But why?” Leliana asks as she hovers around Olivia’s workspace. “There’s clearly something here, what with the way you text him. Maker only knows what your phone calls sound like. If you like him and he likes you, is that not enough?”

“I told you I didn’t want a relationship.”

“Did you tell him that?”

Halfway to the next book in the pile, Olivia’s hand stills. She has not told him. For all their flirty banter and Saturday nights, half-promises and oaths to tell each other if they ever like someone (how juvenile, in retrospect, how cliche, how predictable), she had not considered that he could lie. That he could withhold information. That mired in the initial discomfort that broke into desire was the foundation of a very familiar want.

But she’s Olivia Cousland. She can shove that down, because she is in control.

“It’s fine,” Olivia says, finally, grabbing the book and opening it to the middle while the spine cracks in refrain. All the passages seem unreadable. The ligatures are back in full force, all words becoming one long letter, and collectively they don’t spell anything she cares to read.

Leliana’s probing persists. “Is it though? It doesn’t sound fine. Why don’t you take him out to The Charming Halla? They do have a bar, so if you’re disinterested in committing to dinner, you could always have a few drinks. It would do you well to loosen your lips a little bit, if you’re nervous about it.”
“I’m good.”

“If that’s too intimate, maybe a drink at Herald’s Rest? I’m sorry, I guess I find it hard to separate you from drinking.”

“Are you calling me an alcoholic?”

“No, no! How about taking Hessarian for a walk at one of the parks? Perhaps meeting at a gazebo, or beneath some willow trees—and you can use your dog as an excuse to leave should he not be as handsome as you hoped!”

“No.”

“You could even take a stroll during Thursday’s farmers’ market, buy some produce and make a meal together!”

“Am I going to have to start saying ‘no’ in other languages? How do I say it in Orlesian?”

“Well, it’s ‘non’ but—”

“Non.”

Leliana glares. “Be reluctant all you like, I’ll leave you be. If you come to your senses, however, you know where to find me.”

The urge to text Cheese Man is heightened the moment her coworker is out of range, but that brings Olivia to the worst part of this whole ordeal. She can’t tell him about it, because he’s the subject matter; how do you nonchalantly drop and play off the situation when the situation is *hey, my coworker stole my phone and was teasing me today about how I clearly like you and she thinks we should meet up and get together. Wild, huh?*

That’s too on the nose, even for Olivia.

Texting him in general feels out of the question, too, because simply *opening* the conversation with him makes her think about it. When faced with the hearts they exchanged at bedtime her cheeks burn, her stomach drops. She’s leading him on, surely that’s what she’s doing, and he deserves better and he’s too soft, so sensitive, they need to *meet.*

Olivia taps out of the conversation in favor of diving into one with a different contact. She needs a distraction, one that won’t end in talking about *him.*

To: 🌸 Luana 🌸

(12:09) Hey Luana, it’s Liv. Haven’t heard from you in a while, wanted to know how you were doing.

(12:12) Liv! Hello Liv. Things were pretty busy last week, I’m sorry I never responded to your last texts :( 

(12:12) It’s alright! You’ve got a life, I know it wasn’t personal.

(12:12) It definitely wasn’t! I’m glad you texted me again, I would’ve forgotten otherwise. Not that you’re forgettable, I’m just forgetful.
(12:13) I understand, no hard feelings

(12:13) *Was there something you wanted to talk about? I hope nothing’s wrong. You can tell me if so.*

(12:13) *Are you in trouble? I can keep a secret.*

(12:13) ...Do you need to keep secrets often?

(12:14) *Sometimes my clients text me very strange things! Perks of being a lawyer, maybe? Maybe I should stop letting people have my number...*

(12:14) Haha, well I was actually wondering if you were available sometime. I’m still super interested in hearing what you have to stay about the Dalish and elves in general. We could get something to eat and discuss it?

(12:15) *I would very much love that!!! Well, um, hold on.*

(12:18) *I’m free tomorrow? Sometimes it’s hard to know when I’ll be free, because crime doesn’t sleep! But for certain I can do something tomorrow. Or is that too soon? I hope not.*

(12:19) I’ll see if I can slip out of work for an hour or so. My coworker owes me a favor so I think she’ll be able to cover for me 😊

(12:19) :O This isn’t going to inconvenience you, is it?

(12:19) Nah, it’ll be fine. Where should we meet?

(12:21) *How about I pick you up from work? Then I can take you back. Saves gas! Plus I’m not good with directions.*

(12:21) My map app could tell me where to go, but if you insist

(12:21) *I do! I’ll pick you up tomorrow around 2!* 😊

**Wednesday**

“Aneth ara! Will it just be the two of you?”

Luana nods and the server guides them to an empty table in the far corner of the cafe. The establishment is quaint, painted in eggshell whites and cornflower blues, complemented by cheery waitstaff and arrangements of larkspur on every surface. Though she said she’s visited this place only once before, Luana chats with all the waitresses and customers passing by with practiced ease; Olivia feels like the odd one out, a human face amongst a plethora of elves. They don’t look at her any longer than they do at Luana, who is the only one without a bare face.

Despite the convivial atmosphere and her patient guest, Olivia is uncomfortable, brimming with questions and no decent way to broach any of them. This was a stupid idea, as all of hers this week have been. Sensing her discomfort, Luana orders for the both of them and zeroes in on the problem.

“So what would you like to know?” she asks, fidgeting with the sleeve of her glove. “I hope you don’t actually want me to ramble about random things, because even I don’t know everything there is to know.”
“If it’s not too insensitive,” Olivia begins, already worried she’s off to a bad start, “can I ask why you’re the only Dalish elf I’ve seen here in the city? Granted I haven’t been here for more than three months, but I’ve seen my fair share of elves. Dalish? Not so much.”

“Well—”

“And just,” Olivia continues. “I’ve read a lot of texts about Thedas’s expansion post the final Blight. Despite the acceleration of technology and the literal expansion of cities and populations, it seems as though the Dalish didn’t jump aboard the wagon? I mean, I can barely find anything about what they did after the Blight aside from continue to roam as though nothing changed. What was it like for you? Why are you here in the city but not more of your people?”

They’re served their iced coffee and sandwiches, but Luana ignores them in favor of folding her hands in her lap. Olivia wonders if it was too sensitive a subject with the way her friend stares out an adjacent window, pupils flickering back and forth, trained on cars and pedestrians. A weak smile on her lips almost confirms her suspicions, though it grows wider as Luana returns to the conversation, voice steady but lowered.

“Are you sure you want to hear about it? It might be long, I worry I’ll take up too much of your break.”

Olivia waves the notion away. “I don’t sit around appraising historical texts because I need the money. This seems like the thing I should know, that everyone should know.”

“You say you’ve read about Thedas once we declared the Blights over, the Archdemons dead, all those Ages ago, yes? It was a different time, but we’ve been treated the same since then. We’ve been treated the same since Andraste and Shartan, really.”

“You came to the Crossroads for a book about The Long Walk, if I remember correctly.” Olivia takes a large bite of her sandwich while Luana ducks her head.

“Yeah, it’s been the same since then. It doesn’t seem to make a lot of sense, given how far we’ve come. Mages never thought they’d be granted more freedom, to kiss the ground outside their towers, but war demands more from all of us. It demanded that the mages be given more if they were to help save everyone and kill those dragons, and I don’t blame them for being afforded that, because they deserved it. But elves helped as well; the Dalish healed the fallen and went into the Deep Roads with everyone else, and while Gaharel wasn’t Dalish, he was an elf who is possibly the most well known Warden.

“Even though it was built on our backs, the world has been hostile to elves, but I’m determined to see that it won’t always be. The Dalish don’t join our cities because most of the elves live in alienages—I don’t, but I still remain in the Poor Quarter, which doesn’t fare a whole lot better. If my clan were to come all the way to Denerim, they would have to give up their customs, their religion to… What’s the word for it? I still struggle with Common on good days.”

“Assimilate?” Olivia suggests.

“Yes! Assimilate. And I don’t want them to have to do that. I want my people to be allowed to roam if they want to roam, settle if they want to settle, and worship the Creators in either situation.” Luana scrunches her nose up. “Sometimes it wouldn’t even be so bad, you know, if cities didn’t get bigger and people didn’t keep buying more land. Wild animals may lose their habitats and people care about those conservation efforts, but no one cares that the Dalish lose their forests and plains, the last places we can make homes in. Some humans would rather save the varghest than someone like me.”
“Is that why you came here? Or were you tired of having no place to stay?”

“I’m not natively Dalish—I came from Tevinter originally—but I owe it to them to make life easier for all elves. I figured if I left to come here and started making the alienages better and not these giant walled-off prisons for poor elves, one day I could make Denerim more tolerant! And then from Denerim I could move on, try a different city, and the Lavellan clan could come from the Free Marches and find someplace steady.”

Their conversation pauses for the sake of food and drinks being topped off; Olivia orders another sandwich for herself while Luana declines, asks only for a strawberry muffin. As she picks the dried fruit out and pops them into her mouth her ears wiggle, a genuine smile flashes and reaches her eyes. “And I’m not the only Dalish, actually! There’s Merrill of Clan Sabrae, and Velanna, her sister Seranni, and Lanaya too. Between us, I think only Merrill and I ever really go around the city, though. Velanna is...wary towards humans, moreso after all the missing alienage elves we’ve been dealing with. Seranni once said we should tear down the wall, but sometimes they need the protection, to keep people out.”

“Is there anything I could do? Anything anyone could do besides you?” Olivia picks at the crusts of her new sandwich. “Educating me is all well and good but...money?” What good is money if you don’t have things to spend it on, causes to fall for? The memory of spending eight hundred sovereigns on a book haunts her now, when all its potential uses come flooding to mind: new schools, better homes, clothes, food.

If she expected Luana to decline out of politeness, though, she would be surprised. “Really? You’d do that? We’d love that. I—I do most of my work for free, because hah, a lot of elves can’t afford it and I wouldn’t feel right taking their money, and I give a lot of my money to the alienage too. This would help so much!” Gloved hands grip the sides of the table. “A lower poverty rate would decrease the crime, too, I wouldn’t have to go to court every other day. Not that I don’t mind, because I don’t mind! I just worry. A lot. And I want to change public opinion, making the alienage safer could do that!”

It’s impossible not to soften at the sight of Luana, beyond ecstatic as she rifles through her bag, trying to take notes at how much she thinks things might cost, where the money would likely go, answers to assuage any doubts Olivia might have. “You don’t have to do this,” she insists. “But if you did, it would be so amazing, Olivia, really. Sorry if my writing is shaky, it’s just very very exciting!”

“Liv, remember? Friends call me Liv.”

“Right! Liv! We can, ah, sort things out another time, because I’ve never had this happen, I don’t really know what I’m doing. Kind of scattered, aren’t I? And this is your lunch break, I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, really.” Olivia picks at the crumbs on her plate, rearranges them until it bores her. “I didn’t want you to think that all I wanted from you was leverage and that’s why I invited you out.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told you about my friend and coworker that argue about elven things occasionally; I didn’t want you to think that I only wanted to learn more about you because I wanted to win arguments, or because I think you’re a fascinating specimen I have to study. I can’t say I don’t love this as a learning experience, but also it’s learning about you. Proving Dorian wrong is peanuts compared to making a new friend.”

Luana perks up with both her ears and her eyes. “Dorian? Dorian Pavus?”
Olivia groans. “You know him too? Maker, I thought this was the largest city in Ferelden, but it damn sure feels like the smallest.”

Eye contact broken, Luana rubs her neck. There’s no coffee left in her glass, only melting ice cubes, but she tries to sip the dregs out regardless. “It’s a small world, I guess! I, well—hey, your dog tags?”

“What about them?” Olivia grabs at them, suddenly self-conscious.

“Is that a phone number on the back of them?”

It’s hard to resist, then, talking about him. Is that it? Is he determined to color all interactions, make everything about him? Olivia pauses to regard her new friend with suspicion, but Luana does little more than blink and tilt her head in response to the silence. And Luana is not Leliana, she is less likely to push and pry as far as she knows, and this could actually be someone to confide in. “You wouldn’t tell Dorian about all this, would you?” she wonders.

The cheque comes to the table and Luana swipes it before Olivia can move a muscle. “I’m very good at confidentiality! I wouldn’t be very good at lawyering, I think, if I didn’t value it.”

Olivia wipes her fingers across her eyebrows and allows her hands to slide down her cheeks. Deep even breaths. “These were a gift. From a friend.”

“Dog Lord?”

“That’s my nickname, actually, but my friend put his number on the other side. He’s got an odd sense of humor, I’ll give him that.”

There’s definitely nothing in her glass now, and it shakes as she holds it. “Caffeine. Very strong. Go on.”

Yes, it would be easy to tell her about Cheese Man, to dump conversation thread after thread on her because she would listen unquestioningly, Olivia is certain of it. She can feel the tattoo her heart is beating against her ribs, the way it scrambles at every breath hitch that comes from across the table when she says his moniker and more. “He’s very special to me,” she admits, thumb grazing the raised letters of her nickname. “He was my first friend here, even though I’ve never met him.”

The trembling persists as Luana fiddles with the cheque. Not long after, she moves to braiding her hair, something Olivia can understand. “Never met him? How come?”

“Because I don’t want to lose him.”

She doesn’t know how long she’s been biting her lip, or how hard. No coppery taste quite yet, but the skin cracks, breaks, a breeze has her sucking the soreness away. Telling the truth is supposed to be freeing. Getting things off your chest is supposed to afford you control.

Yet her feelings don’t break like a fever, she doesn’t feel any less caged by it, by how she feels. Luana watches her, pink eyebrows furrowing and stretching her own infinite batch of freckles down on her forehead. “I don’t want to take a crowbar and wrench into your business,” she says, mildly horrified at the thought itself, because of course she is. “But why would you lose him? I bet he thinks you’re his best friend too. I bet he thinks you’re his best friend too.”

“I think I’m hurting him by not telling him how I feel, what I want. Isn’t that stupid? And bloody typical of me, too.” Olivia swirls the straw in her glass, fights back a bitter smile. “Plain and simple is that I like him, but I don’t know him all the way round. When there’s no name to the face, but there’s no face either, sometimes you forget you’re dealing with a real person. Even as good as he makes me
feel on the days when things go tits up, I forget. I’ve told him things I don’t think I could tell him if I’d known him first, or maybe I could, but I’ll never know. Now I worry that because I care, I’m noticing I’m not always treating him right.”

Luana grabs at her wrist, which is startling, but Olivia doesn’t flinch away. There’s a painful loveliness that crowds in the glossed corners of her lips, the folds of her eyelids, even in the way that her nose was set when it must’ve been broken years past. Why couldn’t she have fallen for someone like this? Someone in the flesh, someone available.

“Are you seeing anyone?” Olivia blurs.

Luana straightens up. She doesn’t release Olivia’s wrist, but the hold on it slackens. “I—oh!”

“You’re not interested in women, are you? Because it’s okay if you’re not. I was just—”

“I am! I’m bi, if that’s the word for it in Common? Are you, or is that weird to ask?”

“Yes—no, I mean yes, but it’s not weird to ask, and I’ve just made this extremely awkward. I’m smoother than this. I’ve been a wingwoman so many times, this is embarrassing.”

The grip on her wrist tightens again and Luana shakes her head, insistent that it’s not weird; Olivia is inclined to trust her. “I should’ve spit it out faster, that I do have a boyfriend! Even if I didn’t, you’re very much into Cheese Man, I wouldn’t want to meddle with that.” She rubs her index finger over Olivia’s hand in tight, comforting swirls.

“I think I’ve got some kind of natural instinct to fuck anything up when I’ve got it good. Does that make any sense?”

“I know a few people like that, Dorian included. Why don’t we talk about something else?” After a glance at her phone, though, she pulls away. “Mm, I should take you back to work, actually. Time flies when… I don’t actually remember how that saying goes. Is it common?”

“You’re adorable,” Olivia says, laughing as they leave the cafe. Denerim is unchanged from the hour they spent cloistered away from it, though things strike her as a little brighter, more saturated—she chalks that up to spring being as it is, new leaves sprouting and all. As Luana starts the car, all the things they discussed eddy around in her short-term memory banks, until something sticks, triggers a tiny detonation. In the middle of backing up, Olivia whips her head around to face her.

“You said elves were missing. In the alienage.”

Briefly, Luana pauses in the parking lot. “I did? I did, didn’t I?”

“Is this a new thing? Is it recent?” People go missing all the time, of course, but… Olivia focuses her attention on all the nervous tics her friend displays, all the ones she ignored previously that didn’t need to be read into.

“…Kind of.”

“This is going to sound crazy, but do you know anything about demons? Like demons showing up in Denerim.”

Luana’s eyes do not flicker from the road. Her gloves grow tight around the knuckles on opposite ends of the steering wheel, and the wheel’s pleather covering squeaks beneath the squeezing pressure. “I have heard...whisperings.”
"It doesn’t sound crazy?"

"No."

Olivia twists her body back to facing forward, picks at her already chipped nail polish as the streets glide by. She chances a look at the hands on the steering wheel, then back to the elf’s rattled face. Was it as easy as that, to make silky hair look puffy and fraught with flyaways? Her eyes look duller; the slant of her rounded cheeks almost seems to droop, but it must be a trick of the light. The sun must be casting shadows where they do not need to be.

“I think I saw one.” When she sees Luana swallow hard, Olivia continues. “It’s dead now, or so I’ve heard. I can’t find any information about it, though. People going missing, demons appearing, it’s reasonable that I think something more is going on, right?”

The Crossroads is only a few streets away. The car stops at a red light.

“I don’t think I’m imagining things, or looking too deeply into it. That’s what paranoid people always think though, isn’t it?”

Green light.

“I assumed maybe you heard something. You see a lot of people every day. This kind of thing is the thing rumors are born from. Rumors and whispers.”

They pull into the parking lot. The car idles.

“If you know—”

“Liv.” Luana’s eyes shut, her rail thin body wracked with a slight tremor. One hand goes to the other arm, scratches at whatever the gloves are hiding beneath the satin. “Please don’t dig into this any further.”

“You know saying that only makes me more suspicious, yeah? That’s the thing they say in old horror films to dissuade plucky kids from getting in over their heads, and it never works.”

“What happens to the plucky kids, usually?”

“Ah, right.” Olivia pushes the door open, kicks one boot out. “I don’t think that’ll stop me though.”

“Olivia please.”

“It’s been fun, we should do this again sometime. Don’t think I’m done picking your brain.” Olivia chews the inside of her cheek while debating on her parting words. “Next time maybe I won’t be such a damn mess.” The door slams shut and she heads towards the front doors to work.

It’s doubtful, but a girl can dream.

(20:31) Still thinking about that demon

(20:35) The demon?

(20:35) From over a week ago? Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten already.

(20:35) I remember! I saw it get killed, how could I forget? I meant why are you still thinking
about it?

(20:36) It bothers me is all. I see a demon, you get a demon killed, I don’t hear anything more about it.

(20:36) What more would you like to hear? I don’t imagine you fancy hearing the gritty details about its execution, because there aren’t any, really. Details, that is. Not a lot happened.

(20:36) Dare I say it was a snoozefest? 😶

(20:37) You expect me to believe that?

(20:37) Weeeell...no. It was worth a shot, though 😊

(20:37) All I want is to feel safe in Denerim. Sounds like I’m asking for a lot more than the city is willing to give 😆

(20:37) I did tell you that it’s got a bit of a background in trafficking and other shady business. Why, you’re not thinking of going anywhere, are you?

(20:38) Nah.

(20:38) Alright.

(20:50) Just ‘nah’?

(20:51) Yeah.

(20:51) Alright.

(20:55) Dog Lord, I’m worried! You’ve worried me! 🙁

(20:56) I’m sorry?

(20:56) Genuinely. I’m sorry for being quiet. I’m thinking a lot. Tell me more about your space girlfriend.

(20:57) Does she like mirrors? Do you feed her millet? I don’t suppose she might be fond of...parroting everything you have to say?

(20:57) Ha ha. I get it. It’s supposed to be funny because you think she’s a bird. Hilarious.

(20:58) Nevermind the fact that she’s got a life and a backstory, abandonment issues, a sibling she cares for, and sometimes has difficulties expressing her feelings!

(20:58) Sounds familiar, doesn’t it?

(20:58) Leave my abandonment issues out of this, you prat

(20:58) 😏

(20:59) Thought you’d like that
I’m going to bed early, clearly you and her need some ~alone time~

Don’t let me stop you two

One day you’re going to really love something, like a lot! And I’m going to tease you every step of the way. Mark my words, Dog Lord. Mark my words.

Thursday

Quiet.

Quiet.

Quiet.

The shelves house hundreds of non-fictional stories, real accounts of eras and Ages gone by, long dead royalty screaming for their side of history to be told—yet the library is quiet.

There are biographies about Dane, the real Dane of werewolf fame, tucked far enough back, as though they seek to join the occult section. There are handwritten lineages on yellowed vellum; every Exalted March lain bare for checkout, due back two weeks from now, please and thank you.

“For your consideration,” reads a stand with carefully aligned copies this month’s book club pick: Divine Justinia’s early life, from scraped knees to holy scriptures.

Far from the computer hub, Olivia slaves over piles of archived newspapers, laminated to the Void and back. It’s not the most efficient method but it’s reliable; she’s dug up the headlines about trafficking crises and Denerim subsequent plummet into chaos. Cheese Man’s claims of vigilante justice are harder to prove, but lo and behold, pages deep into The Denerim Chronicler: crimes upon crimes, covered up murders sparked by police incompetence. History’s footnotes.

Ringleaders were apprehended but never identified. ‘The public has a right to know,’ the masses crowed. Olivia flips to the following week’s publication. Tensions rose and fell, or this time the media curtailed their coverage, seeing how many lost their lives to the state of emergency. She sighs. Demons aren’t featured in any of these front page eye-catching statements. She’s more likely to be validated by the tabloids at supermarkets—the kind that say Ferelden’s king married a darkspawn and a married couple adopted a boy who fell from the sky.

After cleaning up her mess, Olivia slinks back into the realm of the fiction. Demons aren’t fictional no matter how hard one shuts their eyes and covers their ears, but in the Supernatural section is where guidebooks about them lie. She seeks something illustrated, either by photos or drawings, she’s not picky. Fingers trailing across spines, she finds a book about magic with digitally rendered interpretations of spells and spirits. Towards the end of the book are the pitfalls of improper magic use: abominations and demons.

Abominations aren’t hard to find genuine images of—the Chantry still loves to use images as scare tactics to ensure mages go to school and register themselves—but demons are a different story. All the illustrations are, at best, interpretations of hearsay and supposed eyewitness accounts. Nothing concrete to be trusted.

Pride demons: described as hulking spiny ogres, eyes rivaling that of a spider’s. Towering in stature,
horns larger than any known qunari’s. Olivia turns the page.

Desire demons: appearance varies, no one can agree on the visage they take, their true form obscured by the cravings that summon them in the first place. Purple skin? Scantily clad? The rest is subjective, but Olivia knows this wasn’t what she encountered.

It’s not Sloth, or Envy, or even Fear despite how apt that would be, and Olivia keeps turning pages, determined.

Rage demons: blackened burning skin, arms the length of its melting form. Fire and sparks spray from the ooze where it emerges, sluggish when it moves, the air swelters in its perimeter.

Was it hot that night, or did it look hot? Olivia cradles her head in the middle of the aisle, frustrated that she can’t remember the specifics, too intoxicated at first glance and too stupefied to get beyond the surface details, to get past the concept of running, being anywhere but there. Memory far from eidetic, she considers checking the book out, but there’s nothing more that it can tell her besides what they might look like and what kind of mages might attract them.

It’s a bust.

She reshelves the book, leaving with nothing but a firmer belief that she knows what she saw and that it still doesn’t sit well with her.

Olivia swallows and runs her hand against the alleyway walls, eyes the chainlink fence that springs up halfway down the length of the path and considers how long it would take to scale it on a good day. Wonders what’s on the other side, where the alley leads to. Wonders why this alley, if it’s the one she hobbled by in her drunken stupor, or another of many she’s visited this evening.

They haven’t hit the equinox just yet, the calendar inching towards the cusp of it, making darkness fall early. Her phone’s flashlight barely catches anything past the fence and her feet won’t allow her any farther, so it’s a waste. The next alley she pokes her head down is similar in design: concrete ground, looming brick walls, fences and refuse and an inexplicable ability to suck time and conviction from Olivia in spades.

For two days she stalks the rural areas, going only as far as she’s willing to walk back, though that’s never enough. Each outing, day and night, pushes her farther from home, through construction sites and business with windows jagged from months-old break-ins. There’s bound to be an underbelly, a thieves hideout, a renegade mage uprising headquarters, a drug den replete with sinners and demons, air heavy with remnants from the Fade.

She isn’t entirely sure she wants to stumble upon something like that, even if she can fight. Punching and brawling only gets you so far, and then what?

On Friday she barrels into a broad qunari man, who she swears is following her. Promises he’s looking for the same thing she is, though he doesn’t say what. A private investigator, he says. People are missing, he says.

Cheese Man wouldn’t like this.

It reeks of deception.

What line of work is he in, anyway? It’s been a while since Olivia has considered what he does, who he is outside of who he is to her. Cop, lawyer, spy, writer, none of the above. Yet no matter what he
does, he’s someone who’s entangled in the web and he’s someone who wouldn’t want the impersonal touch of a man who snoops for cash. Someone she guesses is more interested in infidelity and fraud than lives and demons and cleaning the streets.

She declines him his offer, of what his expertise and her money combined could accomplish, and he denies her the pleasure of having to put up a fight.

“Suit yourself,” the qunari says, shrugging. “But maybe leave the backstreet prowling to the people who know what they’re doing.”

He’s right, and she hates that he’s right. Swaddled in darkness, eyes casting about for something familiar, Olivia heads towards the main strip of business for fluorescent safety. Pacing towards Druffy’s, the north star that gives her a semblance of direction, she thinks, thinks, and overthinks. In every snatch of distant ambulance sirens is a story, and she knows she would do well to remember her own; if she were a detective instead of a simple appraiser, she’d be kicked off the case, personal history too intertwined that it blinds her.

What if her parents had gone missing? What if a demon had killed them?

They didn’t go missing. Their killer was caught.

Be calm, Olivia tells herself as she vets everyone in the gas station she enters. Her teeth chatter as she grabs a stick of jerky too forcefully, and though no one pays her any mind, she assumes they do. Be calmer.

By the time she reaches home, her skin is buzzing from energy drinks, convenience store sushi rolls, and a heady dose of anxiety. No one’s broken in, Hessarian is bright-eyed and swishy tailed. She should be sleeping or taking care of herself by way of texting Cheese Man; instead she crawls into bed, puts her hair up and opens her laptop, unable to rest.

There have to be answers.

She thinks she might find them in moving vans and plane tickets.

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**Saturday**

(18:11) You know, even though you’re much quieter than I am, there’s still such a thing as too quiet with you.

(18:11) So are you okay? Because I’m here if you’re not. I can be there if you’re not.

(18:15) I’m alright. Having my ups, having my downs.

(18:15) But not having your cake and eating it too? 🍰

(18:15) That would imply that I was having ups comparable to cake. No such luck, I’m afraid

(18:15) I could come bring you cake! I know of a bakery, they might still be open… 🤔

(18:16) You always know of a place for everything, don’t you?

(18:16) When you’ve got as many cravings as I do, yes
I’ve never been able to convince people to go with me and try some of the places I like, so I sort of stockpile them. Soups for rainy days, ice creams for summer days, cakes for bad days.

You’ll never be bored OR hungry when we hang out, consider that incentive.

You think I’m getting cold feet on the idea?

No! Only lately I’ve been thinking about it more. Don’t force it, I tell myself, but then I also tell myself that I should be more obvious about what I want instead of ranting when no one reads my mind.

You’d think Cullen would be able to by now, but nope. Anyway

What are you up to?

Languishing on my couch and laughing at you.

Oh. Should I stop talking? 😏

Please don’t.

Do you want me to tell you another story? I could make one up, if you’d like. I could pull one off the shelf and painstakingly transcribe it to text for you

Or rewrite a story using emojis. You like plays? I bet I could turn a famous play into an emoji masterpiece.

I see those all the time at the bookstore, I think you’ve missed your calling. Or your window of opportunity.

Alright, but I could do it BETTER. Those authors? Looking to make a quick buck. Me, I appreciate the nuances of it all. Ask anyone I work with, I know how to use the peach emoji properly 🍑

As opposed to what, using it as a butt?

Exactly.

And the banana? The eggplant? Whatever this is? 🍌

Do you have any reason to doubt me after months of seeing me in action?

You’re ridiculous.

If it makes you happy 😊

Without fail

Are you busy tonight?
Apart from the load of laundry I’m meant to be doing? No.

Why?

I’ve been thinking

About last weekend.

Hard to ignore that kind of thing

But I didn’t want to bring it up, because awkwardness? But I’d liked it.

And I wanted you to know I was open to it. If you were interested. At any time. Or something. Does that make sense?

Cheese Man

Yeeess? 😊

We need to talk.

Within seconds his contact name is filling up her screen, forcing her to connect the call. There should be protocol for this, she thinks, some warning. A buffer of at least two minutes or so, to let her collect her thoughts at the very least. “Dog Lord?” he asks tentatively. “What’s wrong?”

“Could you give me a minute?” Worrying that’s too brusque, she adds, “Please.”

“Of course. Take your time.”

Any other day phone sex should’ve been fine. With the demons and Leliana and the feelings cropping up, though, she knows this can’t continue. There’s a power imbalance, there may have been a bit of wheedling (she can’t remember how it all went down, but even an ounce of cajoling makes her brain turn to rot), and if she’s honest with herself—something harder and harder to accomplish lately—this isn’t what she ever wanted from him.

“We can’t...do that anymore. The phone sex. I hope you’ll understand,” Olivia admits.

He’s silent at first, but when he speaks the apparent nervousness bleeds through. “Have I done something wrong? To upset you?”

“No, I—” Olivia grimaces. “This may sound vague, or brainless. Like I’ve put no thought into it whatsoever, basically. I didn’t give myself time to practice this in the mirror, but I need to make you understand.”

“Are you going to say ‘it’s not you, it’s me’?”

She holds her breath, exhales it through her nose in defeat. “Essentially. But that’s—that’s not enough of an explanation. You, I…” Pause. “We can’t keep doing it. Because I don’t see you like that.”

“What?” It sounds as though he’s been knocked down, like he’s down and out and she’s the one who put him there. “Do I get a say in this? I don’t quite know what I’ve done here.”
“Cheese Man.”

His voice raises in volume slightly, not in anger but in shaky confidence. “Because I’ll understand it if you, if you don’t...like me? Ugh, not, not like that, Dog Lord, you know. I mean, I thought you did, because of the pictures and the flirting and last weekend and I’m very confused. I’ll understand if the feelings went away, I guess is what I’m trying to say, but did I do something? Did I say something? I can—I can take a hit.”

Olivia immediately buries a hand into Hessarian’s fur and skin. Her heart is roaring, there’s a soreness tucked away beneath her breastbone. She tries to claw at it, remove the offending emotions and pain, but with every harried breath on his end she feels that soreness ebb out into something larger, more intangible. “I’m going to hurt you,” she admits before biting at the tip of her tongue. “If I haven’t already.”

“That’s… That’s what this is about?” Cheese Man replies, borderline incredulous. “I can decide when I’m hurt or not. We had a watchword, I could’ve hung up on you if I’d liked.”

“But I still don’t like how we went about things.”

“Then we talk through it more. Dog Lord, what is it you want?”

“I want—” What does she want? Olivia shrugs; there’s no one way to word it, but she has to try. For him. “I want to see you.”

“Like a photo?”

“Like in person. Cheese Man—Maker it’s so hard to be serious when I’ve got to say that—you’re a good friend. A really great friend. I can’t turn you into some kind of ‘friends with benefits’ or make this into meaningless phone sex when you deserve better than that.”

“Was it meaningless? I…”

“No, and that’s the thing. I, ugh, I think it’s too easy for it to be damned meaningless when I don’t know your face. I think there’s the possibility I could use you and I hate it. Did you feel ready when we did it? You said you did but maybe you thought you’d lose me, yeah? Like I think I could lose you now. It’s a mess.”

He pauses. “Maybe I wasn’t...entirely ready. I don’t regret it, I wouldn’t take it back! It was a bit fast, though, wasn’t it? I’ve always been a follower more than a leader and… Would it be bad if maybe yes, I did want to impress you? A little?”

“A little. But I’m glad that you can admit it. I’m glad you can tell me. It doesn’t always have to be jokes around here,” Olivia laughs.

He responds in kind. “What? Really? That’s news to me. Here I was, going around thinking I had to be at my a-game at all hours of the day.”

“Oh you do,” she says, grinning. “Doesn’t have to be all about jokes, but you’ve still got to be a good conversationalist.”

“Sorry, from here on out I’m either speaking only in emojis or chatspeak. Or puns, you’ll get loads of those.”

“Those are technically jokes and I want nothing to do with them, thanks!”
They melt into brisk laughter and Olivia likes to imagine that he too is falling into his pillows out of relief. Every time she dwells too long on something that could prove poisonous, she can talk to him. She can always talk to him. Why was she ever afraid in the first place?

“So yeah, bottom line, we should stop the phone sex.”

“Alright.”

“Give us a chance to be proper friends before we, I don’t know.”

“We weren’t proper friends before? Maker’s breath, I’m learning a lot about us tonight!”

“Come off it, you knew what I meant. Why do you have to play at being so difficult? Maybe I don’t want to meet you.”

“Please, you do.”

“Prat.”

“Your prat, and you know it.”

Olivia clutches at her sweatpants, heart rate escalating at the words, the tone, his voice in general. The hard part was supposed to be telling him that she didn’t want to do unspeakable things over the phone anymore, it wasn’t supposed to be hearing his voice, still soft and coy with its flirtatious edge. “I can’t stress this enough but in the future, if you aren’t ready for something, if we’re going too far, if you’ve got even a single doubt: I want you to tell me. Even if you’ve started it, you don’t have to follow through. Doesn’t have to be just about sex, either. Tell me, don’t let me get away with hurting you. Ever.”

She feels a strand of control fray and pull away from her, power and strength seeing an exchange of hands. The realization is hard to choke down; she’s under no impression that this has to mean something, that it’s her body reacting, as it tends to do. Cheese Man agrees to her terms while her stomach twists into a corkscrew and she nods, a thing he’ll one day see and understand.

“We should meet though, you’re right.” He whistles away from the phone. “I’ve got time. And if not, I could make time.”

Meeting would be perfect, she thinks. The feelings can work themselves out then, sooner rather than later. Maybe he won’t be so nice in person, maybe it’ll be awkward and their conversations forced. Or it could go splendidly and she won’t have doubts about one thing in her life. If she can’t get answers about demons or what to do in Denerim, she can at least get them about Cheese Man.

“Tomorrow.”

Cheese Man nearly squeaks. “What!?”

“Shit, sorry, I mean let’s discuss this tomorrow! I need to eat and shower, probably sleep. Mentally prepare myself, if I’m lucky.”

“Right, you’re right,” he agrees. “I need to consult ‘the stockpile’ thingy for ideas, of course.”

“Of course.”

“One more thing, before you go eat and all that. Thank you, Dog Lord. People have been more than happy to tell me what to do in my life, it’s nice to know that with some people I get to have a say for
once.”
“I’m going to kill the Arlessa,” Olivia snaps.
“I probably couldn’t stop you if I tried.”
“Good, because you won’t.”
“Is this goodnight, then? Do goodbyes ever get easier, or less awkward?”
Olivia fidgets. “What if I just hang up and we text our goodnights?”
Gentle laughter. “That could work.”

Despite saying that, she doesn’t pull the phone away and hang up, nor does she move a muscle. Five minutes of exchanging breaths, hardly audible, until Cheese Man laughs from deep within his belly. It’s confusing though not unwelcome, and Olivia joins him, albeit more quietly.

“Why are we like this?” she asks.
“I’m sure one day we’ll get the hang of it.”
“Yeah.”
Olivia hangs up.

(19:40) So, goodnight then? Very early. I kind of miss falling asleep to your little snores!

(19:41) Me? I snore? You are one to talk, Mr. Apparently Big Nose. I’ve never been told I snore.

(19:41) I didn’t want to tell you because I thought then you’d never fall asleep on the phone again

(19:41) Well congratulations, you’ve played yourself. Now I never will

(19:41) 😊

(19:42) I’m soooorryyyyyy 😊

(19:43) I didn’t mean it as a bad thing! I like them! 😴

(19:43) I hope you have a good memory, because how else will you hear them again? 😅

(19:43) You’re a bully!

(19:44) Am I though? No one likes being told they snore.

(19:44) I’ll forgive you at a later date. Maybe when I forget just how cruel you can be

(19:44) I’ll text you when I lay down

(19:44) 😊
Goodnight, Cheese Man 😊

Goodnight, Bully Lord 😞

Sunday

So! Plans! To meet! 👋

Hello to you too. So we’re really doing this? Making these plans right now?

I’ve spent all morning doing research and trying to figure out what would suit us the best, but if you’ve got suggestions, I’d love to hear them! 😊

Uhh… Drinks? At the Charming Halla? Or doing that thing where we watch bad movies at someone’s house?

I don’t know, pubs can be very noisy. And I’d like to do it during the daytime, so we don’t feel rushed.

You’ve put a lot of thought into this, haven’t you?

What’s your idea? I’m game for anything, really.

Coffee at Andrastea after all?

The infamous coffee date!

That’s not what it is and you know it!!

It makes sense though. First place I ever suggested to you, very good atmosphere, you can bring Hessarian if you’d like. If we want to hang out someplace else afterwards, we won’t be tipsy in the slightest! Plus I haven’t been in a while. I bet they’ve updated their menu 😊

It’s a great idea, I’m plenty here for it.

You’ve got a day in mind?

Wednesday?

Sounds good to me. Not too short notice but enough time to get my shit together, or as much of it as possible. 👍 It’s about time.

I’m glad you approve 😊

Dog Lord?

Yeah?
Chapter End Notes

(Very) Long time no see!!
I think every chapter we apologize in some way or another, and this time is no different. If you follow the fic blog or either of our main blogs, you probably already know that life has been *spectacularly* shitty for us in a multitude of ways. Again, I think we say that like evERY TIME but *it never stops being true.* Since I had to take the reins and write like 10k words in 3 days to get this out sooner rather than later, I am,,, nervous. I hope the wait wasn't too bad, that it was worth it!! zoo wee. Also this is literally the halfway point of the fic!! Can you believe it took us this impossibly long amount of time to just write half of a fanfic? Also also, huuuuge thanks to like literally every single person who took the time during our hiatus to send us encouraging messages and incredible amounts of love! I'm probably going to write up an ooshy-gooshy post about how much I love everyone and post it to the blog, because I can :*

Our personal blogs:
- Carouselfancy
- Tijgertje
And our fic blog, just in case you want to send us a message or see the occasional fanart or get more frequent updates!
(10:13) Cheese Man, I don’t think I need you anymore.

(10:13) If this is because you happened to see me at the deli on Darby and Ishal vacuuming up free samples, I can understand.

(10:15) Wait

(10:15) Dog Lord??

(10:16) I found this new app that lets me know which stores and restaurants in Denerim are dog friendly, so I basically don’t need Mr. Yelp anymore 😂

(10:16) Taking all the free samples wouldn’t surprise me anyhow

(10:16) You think I would’ve learned by now when you’re playing tricks on me 😒

(10:17) That was hardly a trick

(10:17) A miscommunication maybe. Your assumptions, getting away from you yet again

(10:17) And you think our friendship is dangling by a thread that precariously?

(10:17) It must be, if you don’t need me for recommendations! 👍 just because you CAN bring Hessarian doesn’t mean it’s a good place

(10:18) What dog friendly place could possibly be bad? You’re just sour because I’ve moved on

(10:18) Even though my recommendations have never steered you wrong 😃

(10:18) True. I guess all you’re good for now is...everything else, huh?

(10:19) Spreadsheets and white noise tips?

(10:19) I was thinking good conversation, jokes, and the occasional sweet sentiment at the post office but fine, have it your way

(10:20) You’re a flatterer is what you are

(10:20) Oh good, you’ve noticed! It’s only taken you, what, almost three months to acknowledge that I do that every so often?

(10:20) You must want something, if you’re being so sweet. No one’s sweet on me without wanting something
(10:21) I can’t believe that after (again) almost 3 months, you’d still think that.

(10:21) What can I say, it’s hard to erase almost 25 years of that mindset being ingrained in you 😐

(10:21) Really, from birth? I keep forgetting that’s how old you are and also Andraste’s tits and arse, I’ve never onced asked you about your birthday

(10:22) Don’t tell me it’s passed and you, the humble man that you are, didn’t want to inconvenience me by letting me know

(10:22) “Oh Dog Lord, you didn’t need to get me anythiiiiing”

(10:22) What? And pass up on being potentially spoiled? It’s your assumptions getting away from YOU!! 😆

(10:23) My birthday is in Bloomingtide, you’ve missed next to nothing. At the rate this is going, maybe you’ll have to hang out with me the day of 😐

(10:23) Sounds like quite the inconvenience, having to spend your special day with you

(10:24) I hope you remember that your birthday suit isn’t actually birthday party attire

(10:24) Aw but it’s a tradition! 😐

(10:24) I promise not to be naked on my birthday if it means you’ll show your face

(10:24) I don’t want to rain on any parades. I’m sure this would devastate people like Cullen and 😁 though

(10:25) Cullen might either propose to you for making me more bearable or he might kill you for indulging me, I can’t decide which is going to happen

(10:25) Which, btw, it’s going to happen. Inevitably. You’re going to meet everyone I know at some point or another

(10:26) I’m not opposed. I know fewer people in this city than I can count on my fingers

(10:26) In Highever I knew damn near everyone. Milkman that puts bottles on my doorstep? Probably had drinks with his daughter the week before. That courier who gave me a dirty look for having 6 packages delivered in one day? His wife makes lemon bars like some kind of goddess. Here I don’t know if I’ve seen the same faces twice, save for at the corner store - I don’t know if that clerk ever goes home.

(10:27) My friends will be your friends, it’s decided

(10:27) And then we can all experience your rendition of Andraste’s Mabari together 😊

(10:27) You think I won’t take the stage at Andrastea and do exactly that?

(10:27) Oh I’ll bet

(10:29) Wait why is there karaoke at a coffee shop? Why have I never questioned this?
(10:30) ...Impromptu karaoke?

(10:30) You’ve had me on this whole time, haven’t you? Every time I go to Andrastea I look at that stage for twee indie artists and think “this place can’t possibly get lively enough for karaoke” but I passed it off like you knew the dark secrets of a family-run coffee shop better than me! Like Andrastea After-Hours was a thing!

(10:30) Just because they don’t advertise raucous performances of tavern songs doesn’t mean you can’t do them! 😂

(10:33) I’m making you do it, then, come Wednesday. You may have been joking but I’m going to meet you, shake your hand, and use my grasp on you to shove you up there

(10:33) Be prepared

(10:33) 😅

(10:33) Now wait a second

(10:34) No, we’re doing this

(10:34) You wanted to make a good first impression, right?

(10:34) Is it too late to postpone this meeting? Make it happen somewhere else? Like the park? I hear the weather will be lovely this week 😊😊

(10:35) Oh so you want to make your debut venue the park

(10:35) I’m sure I can arrange for some speakers, a microphone. Concert in the park sounds delightful

(10:39) I’ve always wondered if you enjoyed our friendship but now I think I’ve got to turn the question back on myself and wonder if *I* enjoy it 😐 Are most women as cruel as you?

(10:39) Don’t know many women, do you? 🤖 can’t save you now

(10:39) 😐 😐

(10:40) You’re going to embarrass me at Andrastea and I won’t be able to show my face there again. And then where will I go? I’ll have to skip town to find a quality blend 😅

(10:40) Should’ve thought of that before you lied to me about karaoke. Which we’re going to do sometime, someplace

(10:40) I have a shit singing voice but that’s not the point

(10:41) You’re one of those girls who says they can’t sing, don’t like to sing but steal the show anyway I’ll bet

(10:44) Appreciate my workplace’s bathroom’s acoustics
(10:45) Oh sweet Maker nevermind, I’m going to need a few drinks in me for that night
(10:45) I told you!!

(11:22) Quick q

(11:22) Ask away 😊

(11:23) How are we going to find each other at Andrastea? Are we going to around comparing hands speed date style until it becomes apparent?

(11:23) Ahh a modern Cinderella 🖤 If the hand fits!

(11:24) That comparison doesn’t make perfect sense but I understand what you’re going for
(11:24) I doubt you know all the regulars so well that you’ll see me and figure it out

(11:24) Hmm 😊

(11:24) I could give you clues as to what to look out for?

(11:25) Alright, that works.

(11:25) I don’t have three arms

(11:26) That’s...helpful

(11:26) I don’t have pointy ears

(11:26) Technically helpful?

(11:26) I don’t have a small nose

(11:27) I think we’ve been over that one.

(11:27) I’m not short

(11:27) Why are you telling me what you don’t look like?? Why don’t you tell me what you do look like??

(11:28) I don’t wear glasses

(11:28) I don’t have freckles

(11:28) I don’t have six fingers on each hand

(11:28) I don’t have wings

(11:28) You don’t? A shame. I’m not made up of patchwork body parts

(11:29) I don’t use my feet to hold my coffee cup

(11:30) Maybe we should tell each other what we’re wearing 😊
Servis. A man with a name that isn’t really much of a name.

In full it’s “Crassius Servis,” if the letter they find on Magister Nanterius’s person is any indication. The sky must surely be falling, Denerim sinking into the sea, given that they’ve apprehended an honest-to-the-Maker Tevinter magister skulking around Bann Franderel’s estate late one evening. In the end they had to let him go after a solid tongue-lashing from his boorish lawyer (they can’t all be pink, elf-y, and sunshine all the time), though he’s forbidden from leaving the city in case they have questions.

Cullen was beyond put out that they couldn’t nail Nanterius for anything, even given the damning evidence that Servis has tried contacting him via encoded letter, but that’s not what perturbs Alistair. No, it’s the confirmation that this is a Tevinter-based operation after all. What started as pure speculation, even with slavers involved—slavers can be from anywhere, despite stereotypes—has ended up as fact, a revelation whose victory rings hollow.

Because it is about blood magic, it is about the slave trade. It is about the vulnerability of Denerim as a city.

With that confirmation under their belts, Barris had made a series of phone calls over the weekend, desperate to connect with the authorities in Redcliffe, Gwaren, Ghislain, and Val Royaëux. It was as wide of a net as he could cast and home to the biggest alienages in the south aside from Denerim’s own. Lips tight, all anyone could tell him was that yes, the alienages have been hotbeds of activity as of late and yes, most of their missing persons reports came from there. But no, those reports died out weeks ago, the status quo has been restored, and please, stop asking us about this.

All things considered, progress or no, half the precinct looks as though they haven’t slept in an age or two, dark canyons carved beneath their eyes. In the farthest corner, close to the evidence room, are Rylen and Hadley exchanging conspiratorial whispers while elsewhere Mhairi and Argent are playing best-of-three at rock, paper, scissors to determine who will process the women in the holding cells.

Alistair’s never seen so many of his coworkers glued to their work phones or computers all at once, until he can’t see anything at all.

A pair of cool, slender hands slips over his eyes as all goes dark. “Guess who,” says a throaty voice to accompany the hands, though the words sound slightly distant, almost too far to belong to whoever is touching him. Alistair chances a sniff and it’s all brown sugar and bread, a hint of fruit.

“It’s not the Empress of Orlais, is it? Finally responding to all my love letters, I take it?”

“You have a crush on the Empress?” The hands pull away and an airier voice pipes up, painfully scandalized. Luana cringes. “But…why?”

Alistair’s laughter meets his eyes. “I don’t really and—oh, hi Fenris.” The other elf sits on the very edge of his desk, and he would wonder how the man could possibly fit, but the combination of being small and knowing how to fold oneself up is obviously doing him favors. Fenris bows his head in acknowledgement, then looks over his shoulder at Cullen, whose hand has been stitched together with his pen since Alistair clocked in. “He’s in the middle of trying to requisition another precinct’s men in case we have an emergency. What brings you two here?”
As Fenris says “Business,” Luana floats a plate of banana bread beneath Alistair’s chin. Both reasons are good, he reckons.

“I haven’t seen Cullen since yesterday’s lunch,” she admits. “And you for even longer.” Slices are doled out, moist and squidgy, the way Alistair imagines his mother might’ve made it if he’d known her and she’d been the type.

“Who’s ‘business’?” he asks after swallowing a mouthful of bread.

“No one, he only says it because the alternative is—”

“Fraternizing,” Fenris grits out.

“Could be worse. I could’ve brought you to the alienage and then you would’ve had to listen to Velanna and Keeper Faladhin bicker, so.” Luana reclaims her usual post at the edge of Cullen’s desk, and what is it with elves and their perching? He listens to the two of them argue—well, Fenris speak sternly as the words slide off Luana’s back—until Fenris turns back around to speak to him.

“Who’s in there today? Is there anyone we know?” A subtle effort at discerning whether or not there’s someone who might want counseling from people they can trust.

Alistair glances at a sticky note attached to his top desk drawer. “Let’s see… Someone named Knifey Shivdark—hello again, Sera—and a young woman who goes by ‘Ariya’, who refuses to offer up her last name. Found her scrounging around the evidence room, no clue how she got in. Oh, and ‘Invisible Sister’ Gillian Winger.”

“She looks rather visible to me.”

“Right?”

The elves and Alistair resume eating their bread, with Cullen still ticking off forms in boxes and checking his computer screen for inconsistencies.

“So, Alistair,” Fenris says while thumbing crumbs away from the corners of his lips. “I’ve heard your kind is setting up traps. I fear I almost stumbled into one around the city gates. I assumed you’d want to know.”

“Oh, that’s—that’s actually good to know. Cullen?”

Cullen pauses, nods, and resumes his furious typing. A minute later he rolls his chair away to start his rounds of Deadly Serious phone calls, a finger in his free ear for emphasis. Lysette keeps coming up to him, mouthing questions as though he were a master of lip-reading (he is, Alistair has had experiences) but he shoos her away with a dismissive wave time and time again. Seeing him on his phone gives Alistair renewed purpose in thinking about his own, and his eyes wander to where it lay quiet beside his keyboard.

Following his gaze, Luana fidgets. “How’s Dog Lord?” she asks.

Threading shaking fingers through his hair, Alistair chuckles. “Short answer or long answer?”

“Whichever you prefer is the one I think I’d like.”

The shaking in his digits shifts to idle buzzing as he sets his hands down on the edge of his desk. To talk about the meet-up or to talk about literally anything else? Out of habit he grabs and unlocks his phone, scrolls through the texts to see if there’s anything worth mentioning. Thedas Space Program?
Too cutesy, too obvious. Summer roadtrips? The way she’s teased him about his video games, or oh, maybe how she wants to hang out on his birthday?

“I’m going to meet her on Wednesday, actually.”

As they all stare at him, even Cullen despite still being on the phone, one word swirls around in his head: stupid.

“I mean,” Alistair says, starting to backtrack. “It’s no big deal, it’s nothing. Coffee, it’s only coffee. A scone or two, I could go for a scone, I suppose. You’re all looking at me weird, why are you looking at me weird?”

Cullen plugs his ear up with his finger once more, Fenris clears his throat and suddenly finds Alistair’s stapler very fascinating. Luana’s stare, however, doesn’t falter—if anything, it gets more intense. “You’re meeting her?” The words come out slow, spoken as though they are treading on an icy pond that threatens to crack; the shaky timbre of her words is evident as the question finishes.

Eyes narrowed out of desire to see less rather than be suspicious, Alistair worries at his bottom lip, his hand kneads at a knot right below his neck. “It’s nothing, don’t you think?”

“I don’t think!” she exclaims, causing Fenris to snort. “Please, I want to know more. When? Where? How, maybe?”

“Wednesday. Time? I don’t know, we’re playing it by ear, I think. She has work, I have work, I’m going to have to ask to leave early. And we’re meeting up at Andrastea, that coffee shop with the roses that are magically always in bloom around the entrance.”

“That likely is magic,” Fenris interrupts.

“You probably right, I never thought of that! So yes, and the ‘how’s? We’ve always joked about doing it, meeting each other. A few things transpired and she decided that now was as good a time as any to make it happen.” In a smaller voice, Alistair adds, “I’m excited about it, actually.”

Luana’s ears wiggle and perk up. “I’m excited for you! I agree, it’s about time.”

When Fenris narrows his eyes, it is out of suspicion. “Excuse me, are you saying you’ve never met this person you’ve been speaking to? For how long?”

He checks his calendar even though he doesn’t need to, the exact day this began and the number of days since then tattooed into his frontal lobe. He could say “seventy-six days” but that sounds borderline creepy. He settles on “almost three months” instead.

It earns him a distrustful scoff either way.

“How can you trust them? How do you not know they’re someone who has been looking for you, baiting you into revealing sensitive information? Lavellan, your friend here is being catfished and he is none the wiser.” Fenris crosses his arms, nostrils flaring.

(13:21) Hey, are you catfishing me?

(13:21) No, I don’t think so. Why?

(13:21) Just checking!
“She says she’s not catfishing me.”

“I don’t know why I bother being concerned for your safety,” Fenris replies before leaving his post. “I’ve had enough of the precinct, I’ll be in the car.”

Before Alistair can be happy that his desk is his own again, Luana claims the vacant spot. “Don’t listen to him. For what it’s worth, I believe she’s real.”

“What else could she be? Not a robot, I don’t think robots are half as capable of comebacks as she is.”

Luana smooshes her finger into her lips for a second. “A spirit?”

Alistair shakes his head. “She’s sent me pictures of her… hand. Just the hand, nothing else.” The knot in his upper back grows tighter, angrier.

“Spirit possessing a human body?”

“That sounds like a demon to me.”

“You don’t know! I’ll bet you there’s a kindly old spirit of Compassion or Learning that wants to help someone or visit a library, and normally the Veil stops them from fulfilling their pure dreams, until now. Dog Lord could be a spirit of Love, so you need to go to Andrastea to find out.”

Alistair searches her face for any hints of irony but no, she means it. How does she manage to be so serious about matters so absurd? “I guess I do,” he laughs. “I’ll take my trusty dowsing rod and speak to her through a ouija board.”

“Do you like me? Move the planchette over to where I’ve written ‘yes’ if so.”

He lets out an indignant squawk, cheeks heating up far too fast. “Hey! As if I would ever—how could you think—she doesn’t!” Not that the thought has never crossed his mind; she called him a “really great friend” but the candle he holds still burns, makes him wander the Fade in his dreams to a universe where she’s halted their phone sex out of an interest for more. If Dog Lord doesn’t want more, that’s fine, she’s wonderful in any capacity, but the temperate darkness of a bedroom at three in the morning is the home of uncertainty and delicate desires.

Tracing the freckles on her shoulders, Luana allows him the space to argue in his own head and formulate the inevitable subject change. It doesn’t come. “You don’t think I’ll scare her away, do you?” Alistair feels ten again, when his head was empty from having cried it all out. Small and scared, being made to leave his home because he wasn’t wanted, needed anymore.

Having traced a series of freckles that might just match the constellation Eluvia, Luana focuses on him again. Her ears lay back, her fingers go still. “Alistair,” she breathes. Cullen is doing his best to stay out of the conversation, choosing to watch out of the corner of his eyes, his finger not entirely in his ear anymore.

“What if she is just catfishing me, or worse, she is a spirit lurking around in a pretty woman’s body?”

“A spirit of Love,” she gently reminds him.

“Right. What if she’s either of those things, or she doesn’t find me half as funny in person? I tell good jokes, good stories, but what if I get tongue-tied? If that happens then take me out of the oven,
because I’m done.”

Luana grabs his phone, sending a jolt of panic down his spine. But she doesn’t open it or attempt to unlock it, instead chooses to run her gloved index finger around the screen, more constellations etched in smudgy swipes. “I think…” she starts, then stops to try to find the words. “I think she’ll like you a lot. She’ll find it charming if you can’t speak and stumble over your words, maybe, I don’t know. Why would it be any different now that you can see her?”

“It changes everything, doesn’t it?”

“Doesn’t have to.” She rubs in the constellations Fervenial and Tenebrium before laying his phone back down where she found it and getting off his desk. “It’ll go great, you’ll be great. You’re going to wonder why you haven’t done this sooner, and then we can do double dates. Sometime in the far, far future, if you wanted to.”

Alistair smiles. “Why are you a lawyer and not a counselor?”

Luana stops to give Cullen a kiss on his crown, then stands with her body pointing towards the exit. “Because there are more ways to help people than just listening to their woes. Text me later, if you’d like!”

When she’s gone, Alistair sits his chin atop his palms and thinks.

Maybe he should go home early.

(13:59) Wow Tiger Emoji, I didn’t know you were the author of the worst book in history!

(14:00) If you’re talking about the new Storms of Temptation book, I’m not having it 😅

(14:00) I like his writing, I don’t care how many tropes he abuses, they’re fun!

(14:01) No not those books, I’m surprisingly not even talking about smutty literature this time

(14:01) Btw I hear Mythril’s doing a book signing around here soon. Think it’s at the bookstore you told me to visit when we started texting. In case you want to tell him how much you love him and the 52 different words he uses for the protagonist’s “meat wand” 😍

(14:02) That’s admittedly not one of his… better terms 😞

(14:02) So which awful book did I write?

(14:02) The Chant of Light.

(14:02) Emoji edition.

(14:02) That exists? You’re pulling my leg! You are, aren’t you?

(14:03) Nope. It’s real. So very, very, painfully real.

(14:03) I know we’ve bagged on plays that have been translated with emojis but this? I don’t believe in the Maker and even I think this is a touch too blasphemous

(14:03) Ooh that’s saying something 😞
(14:03) Read me a passage!

(14:04) I didn’t dare pick it up. As if I want to be caught holding that behemoth in my two hands, no thanks.

(14:04) Hmm 😐

(14:07) There was no word 😊 for ☮ or ☯, for ☪ or ☬. All that existed was ☝️. Then the Voice of the Maker rang out ☬️. The ☬️st Word, and His Word became ☬️all that might be: 😊 dream and ☮️, hope and ☬️, endless possibilities ☬️.

(14:08) And from it He made His ☬️st ☬️. And He ☬️ to them: “In My image I forge ☬️ you. To you I give dominion ☬️ over all that exists. By your will ☬️ may all things be done ☬️.”

(14:09) Are you fucking serious right now

(14:09) You did write it, didn’t you? You’re using a pen name or is that your real name on the cover??

(14:09) What no! This is my interpretation 😊

(14:09) Hm

(14:09) Do the part where the Maker gets heartburn or whatever

(14:12) “To you, my ☬️nd ☬️, I grant this ☬️: in your ☬️ shall ☬️ an unquenchable ☬️, all consuming ☬️ and never satisfied ☬️. From the ☬️ Fade ☬️ I crafted you, and to the ☬️ Fade ☬️ you shall return, each ☬️ in ☬️ s, that you may always remember ☬️ Me.”

(14:12) 😊

(14:13) Incredible. That’s incredible. You’re incredible. Didn’t realize you were so devout that you memorized the Chant

(14:13) When your orphanage is run by Chantry Sisters, you pick up a canticle or two along the way 😊

(14:13) I know I tell you to “never change” all the time, but I mean it. I really do

(14:14) 😊

Captain Pentaghast allows him to go early despite the fact that the precinct is all hands on deck, ready to burst onto a scene at any moment. They’re getting closer to Servis, name and visage tacked up in every precinct around the city, traps set. Alistair doesn’t want to think about that right now, though, as he walks up his driveway towards the metal awning shielding his motorcycle.

From a toolbox various assorted tools are strewn in a path leading to the wheels. Even on its best days the bike doesn’t run very well, but more often than not he’s too busy to work on it or he decides walking is a better alternative.
(Alistair once had his ear chewed off by Morrigan for even keeping the bike around. A thousand arguments about what the bike was “doing to the environment” and how he was a “buffoon for making the city an even filthier place” were hurtled at him that day. He doesn’t keep the bike out of spite, but that is a tempting reason.)

After running inside and changing out of his work clothes, Alistair settles down on the side of his house, prepared for a few hours of somehow managing to spill oil everywhere, kicking the wheels, and looking like a greasemonkey. Gloves: on. Tank top: already dirty. Music: jamming.

Is it worth it? He wonders after thirty minutes of tinkering around the filters and plugs. That thought is shaken away without hesitation, because he downright refuses to have Cullen drive him to Andrastea and drop him off like he’s his mother and Alistair is going on a field trip. Absolutely not. And motorcycles are cool! Dog Lord seems like the type of woman who wouldn’t mind sitting behind him on it.

Actually, she seems like the type of woman who would take it and he’d be riding on the back. Both scenarios make him grin brightly, even after he tries to wipe away some sweat and instead smears grease across his forehead.

What would she say if she could see him now?

Would she find that attractive? He stands up and leans against the bike. Should he text her and have her come out and see him like this when they meet up? Or is that too much? Alistair bites his inner cheek and rolls his eyes at himself.

Yeah, too much.

After a couple hours of tightening things and testing the motorcycle, he’s as satisfied as he’s going to get. It’s not perfect, not suitable for a lengthy ride, but it’ll get him to Andrastea and back. Patting the side of the bike, he silently thanks Duncan, who somehow manages to still help him, years later and miles away.

Tuesday

(10:03) I have a bone to pick with history today

(10:05) This is practically foreplay, go on

(10:05) Why did we go from using ravens as message carriers to people walking around delivering mail, to mail trucks and then to email? Why did we stop there?

(10:06) Is email not the end-all be-all of message delivery?

(10:06) Tubes

(10:06) I beg your pardon??

(10:06) Those tube things that dwarves use, you know? The tubes!

(10:07) The ones they use when they’re mining ore? The pneumatic tubes?

(10:07) Yes!!
(10:07) Are you trying to say you wish Thedas could eventually become a series of convoluted tubing? Tubes to every home? How would we send messages, unless I told you where I lived?

(10:10) You’re right 😅 I might not be speaking to you, unless “wrong tubage” is a thing 😅

(10:11) Can you imagine trying to send dick pics through tubes?

(10:11) 😅 And then it goes down a wrong tube?

(10:11) Oh of course. Or it gets to the right person but they don’t want it, so they shoot back a restraining order down the tubes

(10:12) See, you can’t do that as easily with email! Restraining orders, right at your front door 😅

(10:13) I was thinking about all this because the fax machine where I work keeps printing out someone’s handwritten recipe for Starkhaven fish pie. I don’t understand it! Is it a wrong number? Do they think anyone on this planet wants to try their hand at this concoction? A few of my coworkers want to do a potluck where we all bring in fish pie 😅

(10:13) I wish we had enough employees to make a potluck worthwhile

(10:13) Instead I’m stuck with one of my superiors every day, and she keeps breaking into my phone

(10:14) 😅 😅 😅

(10:14) Is that misconduct? Have you spoken to her about it?? 😅 I’ll break out in hives thinking about someone touching my phone, how are you in one piece?

(10:16) I don’t mind as much, I don’t have anything to hide 😅

(10:16) If anything it’s become a passive-aggressive game of wits

(10:16) I see, that’s what you’re into

(10:17) She somehow always knows my password, even if I’ve set it at home, where she obviously can’t have seen me type it in

(10:17) So I’m making my password into things like “fuckyou” with her name at the end, or I put in spoilers to the books she’s reading 😅

(10:17) Cruel! Too cruel!

(10:18) Serves her right. She’s going to be vacationing in Valence for a couple days, I want to see if I can ruin the book she’s taking with her

(10:19) Remind me to never get on your bad side 🙃

(12:37) The workplace is divided. In shambles, really. There’s no coming back from the dark place we’re heading towards
(12:37) Dog Lord, I knew you well. As well as I could’ve hoped. And if a Marcher takes me down, tell Hessarian I loved him 🍀

(12:40) Tell him yourself, you numpty

(12:40) You’ll bring him to me? I don’t know that I want him to see me like this, ready to paint Ferelden’s flag on my cheeks and throw the gauntlet down

(12:40) Are you talking about the Summer Fest? Really? Already?

(12:41) It’s the prelims! No one can decide which we should listen to

(12:41) The majority of us are Ferelden, born and raised, but Rylen’s from Starkhaven. Quicksilver’s Orlesian, I believe. Our boss is Nevarran even if she doesn’t care 😞

(12:41) Sounds like majority wins, yeah?

(12:42) You’d think!! But then there’s someone from Tevinter and his boyfriend is from… Seheron? Par Vollen? Doesn’t work here or anything, is just very loud and thinks we should consider him even though Cullen keeps snapping at him to go away 😞

(12:42) So no, majority doesn’t win!!

(12:43) Are they allowing Par Vollen to participate this year?

(12:43) Don’t know. Last I heard they were finally considering the Tirashan so the Dalish could represent themselves instead of being divvied up amongst whoever’d have them 😞

(12:43) Why even bother with the Summer Fest when we only do good in the Winter Fest 😞

(12:44) Pride!! Dog Lord, this hurts 😞

(12:44) You sound more Orlesian than I ever have 😞

(12:45) Come off it, you know we’re good at MAYBE rugby, and everything relating to skating and ice because only Orlais gets as cold as we do. I love to see us lose to Rivain and Tevinter in all the main events without fail 😊

(12:45) All those dragon hunters in Nevarra are gonna give Tevinter a run for their money 😞

(12:46) In what, archery? Boxing?

(12:47) You’re no fun!!

(12:47) How about this: when we host the Winter Fest again, we’ll grab tickets and go together? Paint our faces up real nice, buy all the obligatory but unnecessary merch, bitch about the fact that it’s in Haven instead of someplace nicer.

(12:47) “Could’ve been Crestwood” we’ll say as our nips fall off

(12:48) 😞 I feel so patriotic just listening to you 😞
(12:48) We’ll fistfight some chevaliers and rip off some hideous masks

(12:48) 😆 So patriotic 😆

(12:49) I’ll outdrink some distant Valmont cousin and be given land in some shithole like Sahnia for being so impressive, then I’ll use my new lands to house mabari rescues

(12:50) 😆 Very patriotic 😆

(12:50) It’s cold there though, shouldn’t we knit them some sweaters?

(12:50) Sweaters in Ferelden’s colours, yes

(12:50) Perfect 😁

(12:51) I should’ve been working this whole time, but I’m going to use the arguments around me as an excuse for being distracted 😁

(12:51) Same

(12:51) I have no regrets though 😁

(20:59) I feel like we’ve been avoiding talking about it

(20:59) Tomorrow?

(21:00) Yes

(21:00) Didn’t think there was much to say, other than yes, it’s still happening. In case you thought the silence about it meant it wasn’t.

(21:00) Maaaybe….

(21:01) Good to know though 😁

(21:03) We’re going to iron details out tomorrow, I assume? The time and all that. We probably should’ve had this planned more in advance, but my coworker will cover me since she’s not leaving until tomorrow night.

(21:03) Good! Perfect! Excellent, great, lovely

(21:03) Yeah, you perusing a thesaurus?

(21:04) No, I’m being nervous. One of us has to be, that’s how it goes.

(21:05) I have that effect on people 🏋️‍♂️ 😎

(21:05) 😳

(21:06) It’ll go swimmingly, I promise. We’ll be making jokes in no time and you’ll feel all at ease. If things get uncomfy, I’ll whip out my phone and let you look at pictures of Hessarian until you feel
better. How’s that sound?

(21:06) Ideal 😊

(21:06) You should probably get some sleep. If I know anything about you, it’s that it’s going to take you loads of time just to lay down, might as well get ahead of it

(21:06) You’re right. I’ll talk to you later? In person, even!

(21:07) Text me when you’re ready to set the time up, yeah?

(21:07) Alright.

(21:07) Goodnight, Dog Lord!

(21:07) Sleep well, Tiger Emoji

(1:10) I can’t wait 👏😊👋

(1:11) What did I say?

(1:11) You were right. Goodnight, again

(1:11) Haha, goodnight. And don’t worry

(1:12) I’m just as impatient as you.

Wednesday

It’s Wednesday.

The final day.

T-minus: however many hours they decide they have to wait. Ideally, Alistair thinks, the plan is to go to work, leave early to go home and change into proper meeting attire, then book it to Andrastea at least fifteen minutes sooner than anticipated and pretend like he hasn’t been waiting long. With any luck, Dog Lord will have done the same thing and it’s the icebreaker to end all icebreakers.

(9:00) It’s game time, I should think. Time to formulate the battle plans and whatnot. Something about buckling up, buckling down.

(9:00) What I’m trying to say is I’m ready to get the timing right

(9:06) Is 3 PM going to work for you? I texted my coworker, I don’t think she could’ve agreed to a time faster if her bloody life depended on it

(9:06) She half as excited as you are? 😝

(9:07) Is that humanly possible? Don’t think so.
(9:07) I'll text you when I leave work or my place or when I get there. With what I’m wearing, naturally. But remember, I don’t have three arms.

(9:07) Still think that’s a shame. Have you considered maybe getting one surgically attached? Right in the middle of your chest. Pros: you can hold more things. Cons: they don’t make shirts with your appendages in mind.

(9:08) If I’m going to be surgically adding body parts I don’t actually need, why not go for wings? It’s the Dragon Age, we’re all supposed to be worshiping our new dragon overlords by this time next year, so I’ve heard.

(9:08) Don’t be daft, everyone’s going to be doing that. If you have to have anything in common with a dragon, try the claws. Treat yourself to a fine mani pedi every week.

(9:08) You know, I think we’re losing the plot again. Not that I’ve ever been opposed to talking nonsense with you! I really should get to work, though, busy my brain, stuff a muffin in my mouth and call it good.

(9:09) Your loss, fire breath, your loss.

A minute goes by. Alistair taps his pencil against a stack of papers; he’s meant to look over Argent’s last narcotics case but names and dates go in his eyes and get lost in the misty haze that’s replaced his brain.

A half hour goes by. Cullen and Barris are discussing a homicide—a cold case, naturally—that was recently used as the plot to some long-running episodic crime serial. Barris is in one camp, the side that believes the case details were taken wholesale from reality, while Cullen remains in the other camp. “The details are not dissimilar, no, but there are only so many variables to your standard homicide, Delrin.”

“The man was resurrected and froze everyone to death, then resurrected those people and made them kill. How is that ‘standard’?”

Alistair grinds his teeth and watches the clock some more.

An hour goes by. The captain’s wife has a sizable box of cupcakes sent to the precinct as a celebratory gift of sorts—"what are we celebrating?" “who knows”—except no one wants to touch them. Deep mushroom and anise is a vile combination, as decided by the majority. Rainier squirrels them away, however, muttering something about missing a few touches of Orlais every now and again.

When Dorian stops by to check out the commotion, he rolls his eyes, saying “That hairy lummock would love something called ‘The Exquisite Misery.’”

It’s not until 2 PM that Alistair musters the courage to ask the captain if he could maybe, perhaps, possibly go home early today? The precinct is generating a steady but quiet murmur and work is being slapped into outboxes with due diligence, it should be fine. On his way to her office he chances a glance back at Cullen, who offers him a silent thumbs up.

Alistair raps softly on the closed door. No answer. When he tries for the handle the door swings open, a gust of air sucking him forward, forcing him nose to nose with his superior. “What a coincidence, I was just about to come see you too, captain.”
“No time,” she replies brusquely. “Rainier, call Harding and have her ready the SWAT teams. Theirin, it’s your case, you and Rutherford are following them.” Pentaghast pushes past him with her shoulder and prepares a similar announcement to the rest of the room.

“I’m doing what now?” He trails after her, rubbing his forehead. “I was about to ask if—”

Her body whips back around, all broad stance and tweaked jaw. “Ugh, must you ask now? I’m in no position to answer inquiries, Alistair, now if you could go…” The rest of her sentence is drowned out by the sound of crashing waves, the ocean, or maybe it’s his heartbeat riling itself up inside his chest. As Captain Pentaghast announces to the entire room that Crassius Servis has been sighted down by the docks, potentially preparing to ship an unknown number of people across the Waking Sea while making his getaway, Alistair slinks back to his desk and begs his heart to slow, to match his body’s sluggish pace.

Barris and Rylen have already left, Mhairi and Hadley are suiting up as best they can. Cullen, one hand on his holster and the other on Alistair’s chair, bends down, tries to see into his eyes. “Theirin? Theirin. Alistair.”

“I’m present and accounted for,” Alistair replies, half-hearted. The misty haze that occupied his skull is now something akin to a deep pond or a lake, murky and drowning his ability to function. He doesn’t realize what’s going on as Cullen’s forcing him to stand and get his gun, his gear, his badge. They’re halfway to the parking lot, marching to an assigned car enchanted with protective barriers and dispel charms, when Alistair notices that his legs are moving even if he can’t quite feel them. An attempt to wiggle his toes as Cullen opens his door for him results in nothing but sleepy limb tingles.

“Alistair,” Cullen calls again, voice sounding like a distant war horn, strong and meant to arouse confidence or motivation. It only makes Alistair feel smaller. He tries again, the terseness toned down. “Alistair, I think we should talk.”

“Bit of a bad time, I think.”

“Can’t you call her?”

Alistair swallows thickly. “I can’t,” he admits, voice breaking on the vowels. “I have to leave in an hour, I told her I would.”

“I know, but—”

“Don’t scold me, Cullen, like I’m some type of baby. I’ve got object permanence, I know the job is here even if I’ve got my eyes shut tight. I’m going to do it, of course I am. Just don’t scold me, not right here. Not right now.”

Cullen starts the car and begins the drive towards the cargo port; about halfway there he flips the sirens on and presses on the gas a little harder. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

Alistair drinks in the apology and holds it close to his chest, because he too is sorry for a multitude of things. It almost feels like a betrayal to his job and his cause, the reason for waking up every day for the past five or so years—he’s supposed to want to save people, is it so selfish to think he deserves one day? To himself? The scowl that writes itself all over his face is surely wrinkle-forming with how deep it is, but what does it matter if someone like Dog Lord is never going to see him now?

The necessary reconnaissance has already been undergone by the time they reach the harbor, and the dashboard clock reads a sickening 14:23. “Deliver the text before we go,” Cullen says, one hand on his door. “You might not get another chance for a while.”
“Mm.”

The phone slides out of his pocket. His fingers tremble with reluctance, regret.

(14:24) Dog Lord, I have bad news and I have to make it quick. I can’t come to the meeting because of STUPID reasons and I’ve basically ruined everything and you’re free to hate me because today is an utter bust.

(14:24) I’m so sorry, I’ll understand if this is unforgivable.

(14:24) Work won’t let you off, huh? That’s okay, Tiger Emoji, not all of us have coworkers who will bite the bullet for us

(14:25) Don’t beat yourself up over this, though. We can always reschedule, unless you’re doing something drastic, like divebombing into the sea because you’re mad about it. I’m not going to meet you if you smell anything like seaweed!

(14:25) Text me when you’re unencumbered and we’ll reschedule, no probs yeah? Don’t be sad!

(14:25) Easier said than done.

It’s been a while since Alistair has last seen Lace Harding, though he’s uncertain he’s ever said more to her than “hello.” When he drags his dejected body over to her and Cullen, he catches the tail end of their conversation: her team has caught someone other than Servis.

“He’s been identified as Macrinus, sir.”

“Harding, there’s no need to call me that.”

“It’s a force of habit on the job, I don’t mean anything by it, sir.” As Alistair squeezes in beside her, she continues. “My men are on standby, all you’ve got to do is say the word.”

“Wait, I’d like to know more about Macrinus,” says Alistair.

“Of course. We only just hooked him when you pulled up, so all I can say is he’s Tevinter and he’s a mage, the extra dangerous kind. Good thing so many templars defect and join the force because I thought for sure we’d be screwed until we started deflecting his fireballs and glyphs. Least it’s not blood magic, right?”

Cullen and Alistair share an uneasy laugh as Harding looks between them and apologizes.

“I heard that’s—anyway, say the word and we’ll move in. Unless you need time to move into position too?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Cullen replies, while Alistair feels a tugging in his muscles, an urge to disobey. Being on the front lines sounds exhilarating, gun cocked and aimed at the object of his frustrations. The misty haze seeps out of his ears, though, and gives him a bit more control of his impulses, leaving him nodding. Twitchy fingers keep far away from his weapon.

Harding holds her walkie-talkie close to her mouth and walks off as she speaks coded jargon into it. There’s an obvious path to where they’re meant to go, armored men and women dotted around
corners, whispering into their own receivers as they grip their weapons, ready their spells. For a split second it’s difficult to tell if the crackle in the air is tension or actual lightning magic conjured by a friendly mage, and then it snaps, the masses surging forward to the building where Servis is holed up in. Alistair scouts the harbor as Cullen jogs beside him and sees the freighter that was to serve as a getaway vehicle.

The slaves are being ushered out, single file.

It feels as though there should be fanfare when the two detectives press forward into the room where Crassius Servis is bound, a knee pinned between the blades of his shoulders. A powerful mage can still cast with a free mouth, but Servis doesn’t dare move a muscle from head to toe; his eyes are trained on his nose, his breathing in a labored pattern.

It’s almost… disappointing.

Is it wrong to wish your criminals would put up a fight? Alistair wonders. It almost feels cruel when they look this repentant.

Cullen offers to let Alistair do the honors of reading his rights and chucking him in the backseat of their vehicle, but he doesn’t want him there. He doesn’t want to look at him any longer, much less keep him gagged and locked in the space behind him in a car. Servis gets carted to another vehicle, a van coated in volcanic aurum and lined with dragon webbing, allowing Alistair time to breathe, timing his inhalations with the distant bobbing of Servis’s cowl.

On the way out of the shipping warehouse, Hadley claps them both on the backs, sporting a megawatt grin. “I wish you two had been here when we were clapping the ‘cuffs on,’” he says. “He went limp, gave up. Mhairi was so suspicious, we’ve never dealt with such an easy catch. I heard Macrinus gave the rest of the SWAT a lick of trouble, but Servis was nothing. Have fun talking to him, his lips look a bit on the loose side.”

Right. The interrogation.

With all the bodies milling around the docks and civilians regaining access to the area, Alistair is afforded is a second to get lost in it. This is it! his brain is screaming. He checks his phone. 15:01. While his brain rattles on and on about how this is a definitive lead and they’re this much closer to shutting down the slave operation entirely, the rest of him drifts to thoughts of Andrastea.

Right now he should be leaving the precinct and changing into something more casual. Nice, but still casual. He should be texting her about what he looks like—in actuality, this time—and he should be gearing up to order himself something iced and drizzled in caramel. He should be picking a rose from the planters outside and sticking it on his table, a signal fire in the sea of tables.

Instead he’s looking out at the Amaranthine Ocean with the sea spray kicking up at him, wetting his trainers. The waves are lapping lazily at the docks, some man is hauling up his nets, and a dwarf is hawking books and galoshes closer to the pier. If he squints hard enough he thinks he can see the abandoned island of Alamar, a fragment of Brandel’s Reach if he believes his eyes capable. More and more places he wishes he could be that aren’t here, and for the first time in a long time he wonders if it was such a good idea after all, to let his job consume his personal life.

Cullen stands beside him and, for a while, adds nothing to the experience. Every so often he presses his glasses further up his nose, that’s it. Finally, he coughs into his hand. “We ought to get back soon. Find out what he knows. With any luck, there might be time, he could tell us what we need to know.”
Alistair groans. “And then we have to fill out the paperwork, put out an APB on whoever the new suspect turns out to be, figure out a new plan of attack. No one’s going home tonight, Cullen, you know that better than anyone so don’t… don’t make it any harder than it has to be.”

“I thought I was making it easier, if anything.”

“Funny how that works, huh?” He rolls his shoulders and hangs his head back, glares at the scant amount of sun that burns through the cloudy skies. “You can count on me to be on the case, you know. My attention’s not going to be divided or anything.”

“It’s alright if it is.”

“This? Coming from you?”

“You’re not a Tranquil, Alistair, as much as you pretend yourself to be,” Cullen sighs. “The thing with Dog Lord is a setback, surely, but once this is over, once we catch the man behind all this, you can take a break. I’ll put in a word with the captain, she’ll understand. She juggles her own relationships as much as the rest of us.”

Once this case is closed and the file is stowed away, only to be referenced in case something similar crops up down the road, there won’t be a break. Alistair knows this. Crime won’t cease because Alistair is having a rough go of it, or because he’d like a paid vacation to Rialto, idyllic as it sounds. There’s a chance he can get the time off for the road trip that’s nestled in the back of his mind, and after that? It’s back to the grind of the streets, back to feeling like a beat cop harassing people for minor infractions and occasionally seeing a body chopped to bits, or closing down a drug ring.

They go back to the car and subsequently the precinct, and it eats at Alistair.

Does he still enjoy his job, and what will Dog Lord think when he has to tell her what he does?

“Is immunity a thing you two would consider granting me, in exchange for my word? Because I will freely offer that up if so. I have few stakes in the matter but as it turns out I am a big fan of freedom.”

Alistair blinks, looks to Cullen, then looks back at Servis. “That easy? This reeks of deception, in my opinion.”

Servis jolts, causing his handcuffs and chains to rattle against the table. “I have no ties to the man I work for, none at all. I did as he asked and now he no longer owns me. If he doesn’t hear from me, well, he might think something went wrong and withdraw entirely, but apart from that our professional relationship is over. I’m as good as carrion to him, so his secrets are your secrets.”

Tugging him out of his seat, Alistair takes Cullen closer to the two-way mirror and whispers. “Could we do that with him? Is immunity so bad?”

“I’m not entirely certain we can trust him, that he’s not who we’re looking for.”

“Luana said that Caladrius’s older letters were to Servis and some of them mentioned someone else. Someone higher. Could we use immunity as leverage, have him prove that he’s not our guy, then give it to him?”

“I can’t promise that, no, but we can pretend until Rainier has a word with the captain. No doubt he can hear our whispers so yes, Thom, get on that, if you don’t mind.”
They break apart and walk back to the table, where Servis waits patiently. Cullen takes a seat but Alistair remains standing, holding onto the back of his chair.

“You,” Servis says, pointing at Cullen. “You seem like ‘bad cop,’ with your neatly gelled hair and ironed lambswool and cotton blend. You’ll be no use to talk to, so I direct my attentions to the more freckly fellow. What can I call you? Detective…?”

“Now hey, I was good cop last time, I’m good cop every time. I could be bad cop, with or without the resting bitch face,” Alistair grumbles.

“Theirin,” warns Cullen.

“Detective Theirin! A pleasure. I can see my immunity is not so easily granted, which is a shame, but protocols, protocols. I do mean it, though, when I say that my employer means nothing to me. You can take me at my word.”

Cullen sneers, lip pulled back at the scar. “You realize we caught you with a freighter full of elves, ears docked, with papers declaring them bound for the Imperium. Your ‘word’ is a hard one to swallow.”

“Fair judgment, I can’t fault you when you don’t know the long and short of it. Neither do I, but I know pieces, fragments. I know enough to make me useful.” Servis takes a deep breath, wiggles his fingers. Shakes his head. As he exhales his eyes shut, then pop open, an ignited fire within them.

“My former employer is getting desperate, and you’ve made him so.”

“Have we? How much does he know about us? How deeply have we interfered?” Alistair asks.

“Oh, enough, absolutely. He was enjoying having the run of Gwaren and Amaranthine, but you can only operate so long in places that small. I didn’t oversee the former, but I took care of the latter, and we were gone as soon as the authorities caught wind of us. You can’t play in one spot too long, they’ll catch you without fail.” Servis jiggles his bindings for effect. “Like so.”

“Yet Denerim’s been a hotbed of activity for months. What’s different here?”

“Bigger, easier to be inconspicuous. Val Royeaux was, in truth, the biggest place we set up in, but he found things to be more lax in Ferelden, the authorities easier to fool. There was even a time that he himself was in Redcliffe proper to oversee the shipments, but being away from Tevinter for longer than necessary made him twitchy. His twitchiness is costing him now.”

Cullen leans forward. “You said he was getting desperate. How might that manifest, do you know?”

“You must understand that he’s working with borrowed time. You have me here, which equates to less time he has to do what he needs to do.”

“Which is?”

“Hmm… Immunity would make me feel better about telling you this, right about now. I fear I can’t go back to Tevinter, which is a shame, but I don’t know that I’d rather stay here behind bars either.” Servis taps his lips. “What to do, what to do.”

A guard walks into the interrogation room and delivers a slip of paper to Cullen before exiting. He unfolds it and Alistair peers over his shoulder to get a better look: permission to grant immunity, with caveats, naturally. “We’ll give it to you, and we’ll discuss it further when your lawyer arrives.”

“I’m surprised he’s talking without a lawyer, honestly,” says Alistair, bemused.
“I’m eager to get out and he’s taking too long. I’m trying to expedite the process, thank you,” Servis admits.

“I’m not going to complain.”

“Now that you’re getting what you want, how about a name?” Cullen asks.

“Of course, of course. Gereon Alexius, a magister in the truest sense of the word, not simply ‘someone in the Imperium with magic.’ You stand with a lot to lose when you dabble in blood magic at that position, and he hardly goes to lengths to hide it. People like Nanterius and I pity people like him, I think.”

“Why pity? The source of his desperation, I assume.”

“He doesn’t want power, we know that much.” Servis shrugs. “He’s a touch secretive about the ends to his means, but he wanted that Avernus man from the Storm Age. ‘He’s dead, Alexius,’ we would say to him, but we’d go on his wild goose chases regardless, because the pay was good and our bellies full.”

Alistair grimaces and looks away. “Not once have you cared that you were hurting people, letting people die. Because Alexius pays you well and that’s enough, you sleep well because of it.”

“See?” Servis laughs. “You’re very much ‘good cop.’ You’re not wrong, and you develop a thick skin and a stomach for it when you do it long enough.”

“So even after all this, you don’t know why he needs so much blood, so many elves?” Alistair thinks of the victim they’d managed to save, that Luana took care of for a while. He thinks of when the victims stopped being elves exclusively and they turned to humans, when everyone started looking like a target.

“He’s no closer to his answers, but again, he’s running out of time. He wants more and more and it makes him sloppy, he makes mistakes. He’d asked me to send all those elves out ASAP and I would’ve loved to say no, because I knew this is what would happen.” Servis slumps over, keeps rattling his bindings and flexing his fingers. He starts to sound distant, almost sad as he speaks. “If we’d found Avernus, we might not have needed so many people. It was foolish to hope someone could live through the Storm Age ‘til now, and Alexius’s gone quite cuckoo over it.”

Servis continues. “You look the type to want to be big damn heroes and save the day, and I’d like to have something to eat and stretch my legs sooner rather than later. If you can snag, say, Livius, Alexius is sure to follow.”

“Just like that?” Cullen and Alistair say in unison.

“I don’t know that I can stress the desperation act any further than I already have. He’ll come here, if you’re careful. Livius might still be in Amaranthine. Let me send word to him that I need ‘help,’ you grab him, Alexius worries himself into a coma because he’s no longer getting his slaves and comes here like the bumbling fool he is. Oh, that’d make me a big damn hero too, wouldn’t it? I like that.”

It’s a risk.

Calculated incorrectly, it’s a risk that could blow up in their faces. If “Livius” senses this is a trap, he’ll alert Alexius and he might furiously try to get slaves from someplace else, or lose what he’s working towards and kill people in a fit of a rage. Alistair frowns; he’s seen that type of thing happen and even though it’s an end to the case, they still want to keep the casualties to a minimum.
“I’m going to text Zevran,” he decides. “If we catch Livius, I’ll bet Zevran can help move Alexius into place for us to arrest him. He has a way with words, he could talk the Divine out of her dress thingy.”

“Good plan,” Cullen says, nodding. “I’ll work with the police in Amaranthine to be on the lookout for Livius. Could you describe him to a sketch artist, Servis?”

With an eyeroll, Servis joins in with the nodding. “Unfortunately. I see you’re not letting me go immediately, then.”

“What kind of detectives would we be if we just let you run off to possibly tell Alexius?” Alistair says.

“Right. Silly me.”

What is a liminal space?

Is it Druffy’s at three in the morning, when the dining area is closed but some unfortunate soul is stuck working the drive-thru, and you’re staring down the combos until your eyes cross, druffalo wings sound appetizing, and you thought no cars were ahead of you but suddenly there are? Is it an antiques shop, windows dressed with shattered eluvians, or is it hospital waiting rooms at midnight with no one being seen; is it being in the Market District hours after the stalls are packed up, the canvases flapping in the wind, no one manning skeleton booths?

If those are the standards by which liminality is judged, then it’s safe to say the precinct isn’t one, not normally. At night, as the after-hours crew shuffles in, Alistair feels as though reality has warped, ripping a hole in the fabric of his precinct into the next. A vacant feeling settles into his skin as the fluorescent bulbs hum, casting a light on the emptiness, highlighting spots he’s never noticed, casting shadows into far corners to be forgotten.

When Hadley, Mhairi, and Argent clock out they’re replaced with faces Alistair belatedly recognizes as Amund, Amell, and a withdrawn Chantry reject named Lily. Cullen’s staying late, nesting with his trusty tylenol bottles and mountains of files, barking orders from behind his screens and catching the newbies up to speed.

Livius this, Alexius that.

By eleven-thirty the day’s anxiety catches up with Alistair, his muscles sore, his bones creaky. He’s looked at missives for hours, kept up with all trading manifests from the past month, his eyes have bored holes through dozens of arrest records. Not once has he touched his phone, but he thinks about it. Constantly.

At midnight is when the precinct turns… weird.

“He slashed it like this, I know he did!” Rylen bellows, brandishing a prop sword that he looks overeager to use on Amund, who’s about twice his size. The poor Avvar is forced into the role of the rage demon, while Rylen slips into Cullen’s part in the recreation of “Cullen vs the demon that no one else got to see because somebody couldn’t call for backup.”

“I’m supposed to stand here, look pretty while you cut me down?” Amund grunts.

Rylen baps him in the chest with the prop, air whistling through the wooden blade. “Aye.”
The onlookers cheer until Cullen returns from the washroom, glaring as Rylen adds additional sound effects to his whapping.

“Detective Rylen, you’re better than this,” Cullen says with a palm over his eyes.

“Aye, and I’m tired, too.” Whap, whap. “Call this a lapse in judgment.” Whap.

“Leave Officer Amund alone.”

Whap. “I think I’ll turn in, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Dismissed.”

Alistair frowns. No one had offered to play his part in the recreation.

“Alistair, it’s time for you to go home.”

“What? No, I’m fine. I was just…”

“Sleeping on a pile of paper clips and folders?”

“Um, yes? No! I was reading them, they were very important.”

“It’s three in the morning, go home, get some rest. Let me grab my keys and I’ll take you.”

“You need sleep too, Cullen.”

“After this much coffee it’d be a waste.”

“Luana misses you.”

“I know, but she understands. Now come on, you’re no use to any of us when you’re this tired anyway.”

“Mmmrr.”

Thursday

The following day Alistair comes into work late, not that anybody minds. Everything is as he left it, now with extra brain fog and a headache that could give a hangover a run for its money. When all his hard work and effort amount to nothing but a rainbow of sticky notes for things he can’t do right now, Cullen lobs his keys at him and asks Alistair to pick up something to eat, buyer’s choice.

That’s how Alistair finds himself sitting on the curb by the nearest corner store, petting a cat and licking an orange cream popsicle. It’s not yet hot enough to warrant an icy treat, but that’s the type of day he’s having, he supposes.

When he’d gotten home last night he hadn’t fallen asleep the second he’d hit the pillow, like he had hoped. No, he’d laid awake counting sheep and stars, thinking of silent phones and the day that never was, the meeting that never was. He’d thought about his job and wondered when the love for it slipped through his fingers, if this was a recent development or if the love was lost somewhere along the way.
With another lick to his popsicle he knows it’s a recent development and it’s foolish to lie to himself otherwise. It’s the heat of the moment, pressure cooking him from the inside out. It’s Dog Lord’s influence, unintentional or not. He spreads his free hand out and counts on his fingers all the things he thinks he misses from a time before being part of the police force, while the corner store cat nudges its cheeks against his thumb.

There’s not anything to miss in the old days, not really.

There’s an assemblage of hurts and worries from back then; aging out of the system didn’t equal immediate and total freedom like his starry-eyed fantasies tricked him into believing. Making ends meet had led to hungry evenings, bickering with his roommate, slammed doors, and penning letters to the Grey Wardens, asking them if darkspawn still needed to be killed and if they were interested in recruiting.

The answers were yes and no, respectively.

Following in Duncan’s large footsteps meant trying the next best thing, becoming a cop or a detective, something of merit, something worth mentioning. Alistair clutches his chest as he finishes his popsicle and the cat wanders back into the shop; there’s still a wound he never let close and it pains him to think that now of all times he could stitch it up, but…

A flyer for book signings down at The Crossroads is taped above the nearest crosswalk button.

It’s a sign, right? It’s very much a sign.

Ten minutes later Alistair is pushing through throngs of avid readers with copies of Dan’el Mythril’s new book clutched close to heaving chests, trying to make it towards the back of the store. The beleaguered employees are too busy stemming the tides and begging impressionable women to leave the author alone, giving Alistair opportunity to slip into Morrigan’s office with nary a warning or second glance. Morrigan, upon seeing him however, has many warnings ready to launch.

“I’m sorry,” Alistair blurts, hands held high.

“For which offense is it today, I wonder? Barging into my office? Forcing me to see you at all? It is a favor you want, I assume, but I cannot give you ‘special access’ to Mythril, if that’s what you’re seeking.”

Alistair flinches. *She sure is chipper today.* “No, I—everything I’m going to say is going to sound a bit weird, bear with me.”

“You’ll see to it that I have little say in the matter.”

Morrigan remains seated at her desk with a heavily annotated copy of *Koslun: Philosopher or Tyrant?* before her, a set of highlighters lined up beside the book. Alistair peers over and scans the pages, shrugging. “Bit of light reading while the store is up in arms?”

“State your purpose or go.”

Unsure of how to start his speech—if he even wants it to be a speech—he looks around for a jumping-off point. Alistair’s eyes latch onto a framed photo of Kieran, and his heart sinks.

“How is… How’s Kieran these days?”

Morrigan’s eyes turn sharp, half her face pulls back with obvious repulsion. “You’re here to offer overdue platitudes, then. I have no need of them, so be on your way.”
“Do you have to be so defensive and snappy when I’m trying to have a conversation with you? We don’t live together anymore, you don’t have to go for my throat with every breath, you know!”

“How foolish of me to assume that you leaving once did not mean you leaving permanently. And how foolish to assume that even after all your schooling you do not learn.” She turns a page the way she slams cupboards, doors, the silverware drawer. Alistair’s temper is quick to rise but again he looks to the photo of Kieran and lets the emotions simmer until they dissipate altogether.

Swallowing a deep breath, he forges on. “I came here to talk. To apologize. For a lot of things, though please don’t make me list them because knowing you, I’ll forget everything I’ve ever done that actually got under your skin. And I wanted to apologize for… accusing you a few weeks ago. You were actually a great help to the investigation, I guess, and probably somewhere in the back of my mind I’ve maybe felt bad. Really bad.”

Morrigan is silent.

“And,” he continues, “I wondered how he was doing.” Alistair picks up the picture of Kieran, causing Morrigan to bristle. “I never got to meet him.”

“You chose to leave.”

“I’m sorry about that.” He laughs, obviously perplexing her. “We didn’t even live together for very long and you still hate me for bailing, don’t you?”

“‘Bailing’ seems a rather plain word in your lexicon for what I endured in the months that followed, Alistair.” She watches him set the photo down and snatches it out of his reach, desperate to cling to the one thing that grounds her.

He remembers responding to her ad in the newspaper, looking for a roommate. He remembers the first time he laid eyes on her. He remembers her belly, only just starting to show and the way she, too, was making ends meet after fleeing from the Wilds.

He remembers the day he made the decision to leave for the police academy, and he remembers leaving without warning.

Because she hated him and he hated her, so why bother giving her notice?

He remembers how her belly swelled, on the precipice of giving way for new life. He doesn’t remember regretting it, not back then. The regret is still new, still confusing because it’s Morrigan; her eyes, lidded as they look down, are watching her fingers as they stroke the glass that protects the image of her son. She’s so human, bursting with her own laundry list of hurts and regrets. It makes Alistair wonder how she remembers what they’ve done to each other.

“ Asking what I can do to get you to forgive me might be asking a bit much, huh?”

“It might be.”

He grimaces. “I can’t make you do anything, Maker knows that. I only came here because, well, it bothers me. I can’t say it never sat right with me, because it felt so good to get out of your clutches back then. But now?” When he tries to look again at Kieran, he stops himself, because she’s more than her son, more than a singular excuse to garner pity. “I’m not asking us to start over and become buddy-buddy, anything but that. I came back because you, uh, you deserved an apology. For general shittiness. Because I used to hide your things, because I said everything you did was witchcraft, because I’d eat the food with your name on it. Loads of things. I was upset at the world, but I took it out on you.”
Morrigan looks beyond him, refusing to look at him. She goes quiet again, her face lightly dusted with the most subtle of blush—Alistair can’t tell if it’s makeup or blood in her face, but he thinks makeup. Morrigan? Having blood in her body? It seems a little far-fetched.

“Have I actually stunned you into silence?” He smirks. “Now *that’s* a first.”

“I…” Morrigan finally looks at him, with a pointed glare, no less. “I appreciate what you’ve come to say.”

“No hexes to cast because it wasn’t enough? No gibes about how stupid I look today, or that you think I look like my father when I’m asking for forgiveness?” Before she can answer, Alistair softens his voice. “He’s changed you, Morrigan. For the better.”

“You japes about how evil I am wound me so deeply,” Morrigan replies. “But you do mirror him, maybe in the nose—”

“Alright! Hate this conversation now.”

She pushes back out of her chair and rounds the desk to stand before him. There’s no moment of reflection to think about how small she is, because despite the difference in height, she seems so much bigger. More assured, definitely, and packed with withheld aggression—a wildcat in hiding. If he is to ever forget she’s a mage, she will remind him, sure enough.

It’s a wonder that flames didn’t rain from the sky and reduce him to ash when he moved out of her place.

“Forgetting doesn’t happen overnight, I hope you know.” While she stills sounds severe, some of the edge to her words has been sanded down.

“Didn’t think that it did. Does forgiveness happen over a week?”

“I should think not.”

“A month?”

“We shall see. I don’t understand what you’re hoping to gain, seeking my forgiveness like this.”

“Maybe I was trying to avoid ‘frog time’ in the future. I heard witches are quite fond of their frog time. Gotta get in good before the end of days and you realize I’m overdue.”

Morrigan rolls her eyes and shoos him closer to the door. “Thank you for reminding me why I need to lock this door.”

“Can you lock doors during office hours? Or is that only the front door you can’t lock?” Alistair smiles, extra cheeky and full of teeth. The way Morrigan hates it the most.

She continues shooving. “Out.”

“You really can’t get me an extra minute with Mythril?”

“Out!”

Once he’s on the other side of her door (he hears the lock click almost immediately after it closes) he allows himself to laugh a little louder, a little more freely. It was worth it, he thinks, to say sorry after all these years of bared teeth and overt burning hatred for one another. It feels almost—*dare he think it*—adult of him.
And no, he thinks as the thoughts continue to ramble in his head, becoming a detective was worth it. Despite the ire it earned him from his former roommate, it was the right decision he needed to make to get his life started, even if there were bumps and roadblocks along the way. He wouldn’t go back and undo what he did, even if it meant Morrigan wouldn’t have wanted to kill him on sight for at least two years, even if it meant he’d be doing something else that might take up less of his time.

He’ll make it work.

If only Dog Lord will see it the same way when he tells her.

(19:41) I’m sorry I hadn’t gotten back to you sooner 😊
(19:41) I got home after 3 AM, went to sleep, woke up and went back to work. Then ditched work to do other things, came back and got reprimanded!!! and worked my arse off until just now
(19:41) So, uh, yes. How did your day go? Your yesterday or your today?
(19:43) Long time no see 😚
(19:43) Yesterday was alright, bit uneventful
(19:44) My coworker was sorely disappointed when I didn’t dash away as the clock chimed 3, tearing open my shirt like some superhero to reveal my it’s-not-a-date date clothes
(19:44) But you win some and you lose some. Work really did kick your ass that bad?
(19:44) And then some 😸
(19:45) Same, today felt like I had one foot in the Void and I couldn’t yank it back out. Had to take a bath asap to scrub the sweat and grimy feeling off my skin, almost sent pics. Didn’t want to make you feel weird though
(19:45) Which reminds me
(19:46)
(19:46) Can’t take a picture now because it’s all soapy and soggy but I bought this. To me it looked like cheese, so it was a necessary buy.

(19:47) Oh of course. What’s a home without 💦-related furniture or toiletries? They don’t make cheese chairs, though. Or do they?

(19:47) Tried to look it up. Found loads of recliners with cheese dumped on them. Gonna have to give you a hard “no” on that front, sorry.

(19:47) Ah well.

(19:50) So, again, I’m tremendously sorry that I...I basically bailed. It was because of work, yeah, but it was such short notice.

(19:50) Well clearly we have to try again then.

(19:50) How about Saturday? It’s one of our days off, so it should be good, right? I *would* be working since my coworker is still in Valence, but we have a couple temps showing up. She figured my weekend would be spent hanging out with you anyway.

(19:51) Your coworker has so much faith in this!

(19:51) She’s got faith in spades.

(19:51) She was breaking into my phone because she was sooo positive you and I were talking about things that she needed to be privy to. I don’t know what she intended to do with the information she learned, I only know it made her happy.

(19:51) So she’ll bend over backwards to make this work.

(19:52) Well, you’re right, Saturday does sound good 😊 this weekend will be the equivalent of a vacation for me, if all goes according to plan. I only want to hang out with you and relax.
and be goofy, is that so much to ask for?

(19:52) The Maker apparently asks a lot of His children 😊

(19:52) You’re not even Andrastian, why do you blaspheme so much??

(19:53) It’s hard not to! Everyone says “Oh Maker” whether they believe or not. Force of habit? It’s like nothing else fits except to refer to the Maker and His bride’s bits and things. You might as well ask why people swear so much - nothing else works quite so well

(19:53) I’d heard someone say “Andraste’s knickerweasels” once. Think that guy was grasping at straws?

(19:53) There’s no excuse for that one, tbh.

(19:55) You think she had them though? What’s she doing with weasels down there?

(19:55) Where else would you keep a weasel?

(19:55) 😞

Friday

It comes to him again, the sound of the ocean.

In the bubbling of sea foam and the lapping of waves at low tide, he hears it. Drowning, calming, with sensuous breezes tickling the underside of his jaw; it’s hard to believe this isn’t real, but for a few moments Alistair lets himself be lost in it. Lets himself get carried away, vision flickering like a mirage leagues away. When he’s ready to return to the here and now and his heartbeat has stopped pulsing in a paroxysm of anxiety, the waves bring words back to his ears. To him they say:

“You’re coming in on Saturday.”

And the waves break.

“Captain, please, I have things to do,” Alistair pleads.

Surprise overtakes her bluster, if only for a moment. “Alistair,” she says, blinking, and then her jaw sets again. “If we are to catch Livius Erimond and Gereon Alexius, we will need you at a moment’s notice. Whatever is so important, I am certain it can wait.”

Alistair’s jaw goes slack as he readies himself to say that it can’t, I can’t but she is his commanding officer and Cassandra Pentaghast will make it known if need be. Instead he sulks the entire way back to his desk, ignoring the prying eyes. The eyes don’t abate even as he sits, because there is a hand coming down to hold his shoulder.

The captain had followed him.

“I know you struggle,” she says. “And I am not here to browbeat you into submission. This is your case, Detective Theirin, and I trust that you can see it through.”

“Yes sir,” Alistair mumbles.
“Whatever is waiting for you will be on the other side. If you have doubts about finishing this—”

“I don’t!” His cheeks are warm with guilt and shame. He averts his eyes from Cullen, who watches him, biting back the urge to butt in.

Pentaghast chuckles. “This will be good for the precinct, and you as well. I’ll see you both tomorrow.”

The moment she’s out of earshot, Alistair throws his head into his desk, saving his forehead by planting it into a cushion of papers.

“Were you two meeting tomorrow?” Cullen asks.

“Not anymore!” Alistair pulls his phone out for a second, then puts it away. It’s no use telling her now, no use giving her a bad day at work like the one he’s having. Misery loves company but he loves Dog Lord too much to rope her into this mess.

Wait.

He loves Dog Lord?

Alistair lets out a pain stricken whine, complete with multiple bashings of the head against his desk. No one tries to stop him, there is no stopping him.

The work day continues, terrifying revelations aside.

At lunch, Cullen and Alistair sit in the parking lot of some chain sandwich shop. They forgot to take the tomatoes out of Alistair’s sandwich and he knows deep within his heart that it’s the Maker cursing him for never visiting the Chantry on the weekends and choosing love over faith or something. It’s definitely a curse, though, maybe something Morrigan cast years ago that still lingers, unstoppable even after his heartfelt apology.

Throwing another slice of gloppy red fruit into his bag, Alistair huffs. “What am I supposed to tell her?”

“Hrm?” Cullen forces himself to swallow his bite. “Dog Lord?”

“Yeah. I have to tell her why I can’t see her or she’s going to give up, isn’t she? This clause of anonymity is stupid, I don’t know why I ever bothered with it.”

“What, you’re going to tell her we’re busy luring slavers into Denerim? That’s ridiculous.”

“I could. Don’t know that she’d believe me, but I could. Could tell her that the demon thing is a part of it, since she’s so keen on thinking about it still. I don’t know, I need something.”

Cullen turns to Alistair as far as his seatbelt will allow him. “You’re not going to do that.”

Alistair’s eyebrows fly up. “Why not? She’s part of this, given the whole demon thing, I’d think. It feels wrong to keep secrets.”

“That’s exactly why you’re not going to tell her. I don’t know if you know this but the captain is faintly aware of Dog Lord’s involvement in your work life and the case in general. She knows someone tipped you off, and she knows that someone was important to you. It’s not hard to put the pieces together, Alistair, and I don’t know how much you tell your text friend, but I’d prefer if you
kept a lid on this.”

It’s hard to resist protesting and trying to bargain for even a sliver of information to throw Dog Lord’s way, but Cullen is so firm and serious, just this side of a scolding, that Alistair backs down. He can’t lose Cullen’s trust, either, not after he almost lost it by not trusting him himself with the details of the demon situation.

“I’ll tell her that work keeps rescheduling me, I suppose. Everyone knows what that’s like, right?” Alistair says, trying to work up a laugh.

“Thank you, Alistair. Alexius is desperate, if word somehow gets to him…”

“I know.”

“We don’t know what he’s capable of.”

“I know. And hey, are you going to finish your soda?”

“It’s vitamin water.”

“Of course it is.”

(20:15) Phone call? It’s been a while, I’d like it if we talked.

(20:20) Wait one minute and then call me.

Alistair spends the whole minute gathering his thoughts and formulating the best way to break the news. There are, after all, only so many ways to tell someone you have to cancel on them. Again.

When Dog Lord picks up the phone, he hears the sound of running water and splashing. “You there?” he asks.

“You’re on speaker!”

Her voice in his ear, he’s missed it. Hearing it gives him pause, time enough to close his eyes and imagine it so much closer, without the echoing of bathroom walls and what is possibly a tub faucet. “Are you… taking a bath?” he gulps.

“No. Hessarian—yes, that’s you, naughty boy—got into something in the backyard. Came in looking like rubbish, smelling like rubbish. Fight with a skunk, maybe? Are there skunks around here? Whatever, he smells like he fought a skunk and then tried to bury his entire front half in a hole. Probably because he was so ashamed of how stinky he is.”

Between the sounds of scrubbing and splashing, Alistair laughs. “He was protecting your home, leave him alone.”

“I think I can handle a skunk, don’t you?” He can practically hear how wide her smile is. “Who’s going to protect me from the stench wafting off my dog? If I wasn’t already in my pajamas, I’d ask to crash at your place, dog included. I shouldn’t be made to suffer alone.”

Alistair’s heart leaps into his mouth, making him tuck his hopes beneath his tongue. “Funny you bring that up.”
“Oh yeah?” Hessarian makes a faint boof sound, causing Dog Lord to laugh and splash water at her dog. “It’s nothing, you big lug.”

“About Saturday.”

“Oh no.”

“I can’t make it, again.” He scratches the back of his neck. “You know how it is. Work. Rescheduling. And, well, yeah. Um, it’s very complicated, they don’t normally do this or anything! The timing is all really unfortunate, I think.”

Dog Lord ruminates on this. Alistair thinks he hears a bottle pop open.

“You’re not using shampoo on him, are you? The poor thing, what’s he gonna smell like? Don’t say lavender.”

“It’s not lavender,” she protests. “It’s… It’s apple blossom. Ech, that’s not any better. I’m going to throttle Le—my coworker when she comes back from Valence.” She sighs and scrubs at her dog. “So Saturday is another no-go for us. That’s alright, can’t be helped.”

The knot in his upper back feels inflamed again, the tension tearing at his shoulders. “You sound disappointed.” He stops himself from adding: please, please don’t be.

“Because I am.”

*Dammit.*

“It’s nothing personal,” Alistair promises. “I tried to talk to my boss but she wasn’t having any of it. That’s just life, isn’t it? A series of misfortune and mishaps. That’s what mine feels like, anyway.” When she doesn’t immediately respond, Alistair calls after her.

“Sorry, I was thinking.”

“What about?”

He hears her tub drain and Hessarian shake, spraying water everywhere, if Dog Lord’s groaning means anything. “Us. Meeting. Silly things like that.”

“We can reschedule again, can’t we?”

Dog Lord’s voice gets closer—she must’ve taken him off speaker—sending a shiver down his spine. When she talks it sounds weighted, as though every word, every syllable, must be carried the full distance to him, however far away they might be. “We can. Let’s wait though. Your schedule keeps changing, seems a bit pointless to keep gearing up only to be left flapping in the wind.”

“Right.” He can’t mask his own disappointment. “You’re so very right.”

“Like you said,” she continues. “It’s not personal.”

“No, of course not.” Alistair frowns.

“Next week will be better, won’t it? Let’s plan for next week, but not any specific day. Maybe I’ll text you out of the blue and say ‘you, me, coffee?’ Be ready to drop your shite and bolt, Cheese Man.”

He laughs weakly, his fingers tremble as his heart clenches. All his muscles feel like one sore entity,
frail and paper thin. “I can do that. Just—just say the word and I’m there.”

“After work has its way with you.”

What would the repercussions be if Alistair left work without asking? Would Pentaghast have his head on a spike? Could she demote him to meter maid duty for a fortnight? That sounds almost too cruel but it happened to one of their officers before their transfer, back when Sergeant Vallen was leading the precinct, before he moved to Kirkwall with his wife. If it could happen to Officer Mallorick, it can happen to him.

“If I let it.”

“Don’t go playing hooky on my behalf. I know I said to be ready to leave at a moment’s notice, but I don’t want you in trouble.” Dog Lord sighs. “It’ll happen eventually.”

“Yeah.” Alistair realizes he’s been pacing, and if he paces any harder he’ll surely wear a hole into the floor. “Soon. So soon. So soon that it’ll come up and bite us in the nose and we’ll wonder how we got to Andrastra and whoa, we’re here, we’re meeting! That’ll be nice.”

“Until then we’ll have to keep pestering each other via text.”

“I mean, why stop now? You think we’ll text half as much once we meet, if it goes well?”

“Maybe when we meet I’ll like you enough to buy you a better data plan and you can start sending me photos of things you see when you’re out and about.”

A smile finally breaks onto Alistair’s face. “I wouldn’t be opposed. I see a lot of things that remind me of you, y’know.”

“Ooh, my resolve, it’s hardening. Don’t tempt me when you know I’m loose with my money.”

They laugh together, and his heart clenches even tighter, for different reasons this time.

*Because maybe I like you a lot more than ‘liking’ and I love when you joke and I love when you laugh and I love—*

“I know I should be scolding you, because you *did* spend eight hundred sovereigns on a book once, which he-llo! That’s crazy! My mind is still boggled by it! But you know I’d have to buy you something too, to repay you.” Alistair bites at his thumb as he heads towards his bedroom. His back won’t stop tensing, his body won’t stop thrumming with restless energy. Dog Lord Dog Lord Dog Lord, his brain keeps shouting in discordant tones.

She has no clue, though. “Save your money,” she says, teasing. “Find something important to spend it on.”

“Hah, right, because what could I buy the girl who has everything?”

*A date,* he’s praying she’ll say.

She doesn’t. “My birthday’s in Firstfall, if you’re so determined. That’s plenty of time to think of something. Anyway.” *Don’t go.* “Hessarian’s probably rubbing his wet, stinky body all over my still-new couch. I hear him, he’s having the time of his life! I’m thinking about getting him a fetching little dunce cap, the monster. I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“I’d…” His heart throbs. “Like that. I’ll, uh, be here! Like usual. You can count oooon me. Sorry.”
Dog Lord pauses. “You alright there, Cheese Man?”

“Peachy, like the emoji. Sorry, I’ve got something that requires I go check it out, it’s very distracting.” It’s the sudden onset of arrhythmia but she doesn’t need to know that. “I have to go before my foot meets my mouth.”

“Haha, alright. Goodnight, yeah?”

“Yeah, goodnight.”

For the second time today, Alistair whines loudly, this time into his pillows, until his brain takes pity on him and pulls him into sleep.

**Saturday**

They caught Livius Erimond before Alistair’s alarm went off. Work takes precedence, as it always does, and keeps him late working on confessions and fighting tooth and nail with Tevinter lawyers. At lunch he receives a text from Zevran that has him racing back to Cullen, phone screen shoved in his face.

From: ✉️ Zevran ✉️

(12:13) Good news, my friend. I’ve found your man, that Alexius fellow. A few smart words go a long way, you know, and I think he will find me useful to have at his side.

(12:13) He knows what you are all doing, yet that doesn’t concern him. Odd, no? He is on the fence about visiting Ferelden but those smart words I mentioned? They will convince him to make the right decision.

(12:14) His son is involved somehow. Two arrests in one day, I can hardly contain myself at the thought.

With no care for the clock, Alistair misses when the sun goes down. Worse than that, he misses when his phone rings and Dog Lord’s contact image blows up on the screen; luckily the precinct has been a nonstop noise generator, and it drowns out the frantic cry that escapes him as Dog Lord is sent to voicemail.

“Call her back later?” Cullen suggests. He means well, Alistair knows he does, but his partner lives in a permanent state of expecting a “next time” and knowing that tomorrow is assured, that the dawn will come and all that tripe.

“Yeah, sure,” he snaps. “Later.” He grips his pen so hard while writing an affidavit that the dent in his finger is smooth and sore for hours afterwards. And when he gets home a little after eleven, when “later” has come to pass, it’s too late. Dog Lord doesn’t answer, Alistair gets her voicemail in kind.

He doesn’t leave a message, because all the things he want to say crowd his mouth and leave it dry. “Please don’t hate me,” he whispers as he hangs up before the beep. “Don’t be disappointed in me too.”
“Did you know about this?”

Alistair blinks. “Know about what?”

The second Dog Lord had got him onto the phone, he could tell she was bothered, her words disjointed. Every sentence felt like lightning, fast and striking, never hitting the same spot twice. “Have you been listening to me?” she asks.

“I was!” He shies away, even with nothing to shy away from. “Would you hurt me if I said you were hard to follow?”

“Never.” Dog Lord sighs, undeterred. “In the news, they said they’ve caught a slaver. He looks like he’s from Tevinter or something, no one has facial hair like that in Ferelden. But he’s a slaver, Cheese Man. Weren’t you asking me about blood, shipping it or something? He had loads of it but they couldn’t find all the bodies it must’ve belonged to.”

“That’s… That’s horrifying.”

“Understatement. A Tevinter slaver, walking around here in Denerim like it’s nothing.”

“You said he was caught, though. That’s something, right?”

Dog Lord grumbles and sounds like she’s tossing around in her bed. It’s extraordinarily difficult to remain impassive about the situation, which seems to grate on her, but he promised Cullen he wouldn’t tell her. So it must go.

“I guess! Who knows how long he was here though. All that blood he’s got, he must’ve been here for ages and they only just caught him. What have the police been doing?”

Before he can stop himself, Alistair burbles away from the receiver, fingers rubbing roughly between his eyebrows. Livius was only in the city for a single day when they caught him. For the Denerim PD, that’s some kind of world record! But no, he can’t say that, because Cullen S. Rutherford and his verbal gag order and his ability to make Alistair hamstrung by it.

The S stands for Stupid. He knows it’s “Stanton” but that’s a stupid middle name, he’s decided. Fitting, truly.

“Their best?” Alistair offers.

“It’s been three weeks since I saw a literal demon in an alley, so let’s see how long it takes them to report that.” She all but spits the words, making him wince. “However long it takes must be how long they’ve sat on this slaver business.”

“Maybe,” he replies lamely.

“Did I ever tell you that I moved here the week after my birthday?”

Alistair sits upright in his bed, back straight as an arrow. “It was after Satinalia, I remember.”

“At the risk of sounding like a broken record, my birthday was when Fergus was at his worst with the whole ‘our parents died and no one’s talking about it’ thing. Denerim was supposed to be an escape for me. I sound like some type of rabid manic pixie dream girl, hoping and wishing the big
city was where I was going to make it, where all my dreams would come true, but, y’know. I didn’t want that. I wanted someplace where I wasn’t fretting my arse off every five seconds because crime and flashing lights.”

Alistair tears a piece of his lip’s skin off. “Uh-huh.”

“The point of this rant is that maybe Denerim’s not what I’d expected. At all.”

It’s hard to hear her over the sound of his brain short-circuiting. “Yeah?” He can’t very well sing Denerim’s praises and drown out her no longer latent fears, because aside from that being insensitive, her fears are justified. The duration of Livius’s stay in Denerim isn’t the problem, he thinks, it’s that he was here at all. It’s that damned demon over and over again, circling the drain but never going down.

He still wishes he’d been the one to kill it.

“I’d been looking for reasons upon reasons to leave Highever,” says Dog Lord. “Never thought I’d be looking for reasons to go back.”

“Me?” he counters, hating himself immediately for the brazen selfishness. “I don’t—that’s not—I mean.”

“No, no, you are a reason to stay.” She laughs, but it’s bitter. Icy. “I was really looking forward to meeting you, Cheese Man.”

The clause of anonymity is strangling him from speaking, suffocating his hopeless need to hear his name in her mouth just once. Now of all times, if it’s to be now or never. But his teeth chatter and his stomach churns instead, Alistair’s own name locked between his throat and a hard place. “We can still meet,” he says. “It’s not too late.”

“You say that, but things keep getting in the way.”

“Things got in the way twice.” A hand drags down his face. “Sorry. What do you want me to say? That I don’t want you to leave? Because I don’t. That much is obvious, right?”

“I’m not leaving yet. Or at all. I haven’t decided.” Dog Lord turns away from the phone to whisper something to Hessarian. “You’d be the first to know though. I left without telling Fergus, but I wouldn’t do that to you. Please believe me.”

Alistair tries to swallow but his mouth is as good as the driest desert. “I do,” he says, though he doesn’t. He doesn’t much like feeling fear, but does anyone? He feels like a wobbling top, too ready to topple over, more scared to lose this than anything else, even over Duncan. “You said we’ll make it work. We will, won’t we?”

“I could always buy you a plane ticket to Highever.”

It’s not the same, he thinks. It’s not roses and coffee at Andrastea, it’s not late night drives to sleep on each others couches. It’s not taking Hessarian for walks together or competing to see who can deadlift the most. A plane ticket is no replacement for pub crawls and quizzes, double dates with Luana and Cullen, or trying to skip rocks in the ocean. The road trip could still happen, but what if the distance drives them apart in more ways than one? The reception was so bad where she lived, high up in her decrepit castle with the ghosts of her parents; what if long distance wasn’t for them?

He doesn’t say that, though. He doesn’t say any of it. Alistair agrees because he likes being agreeable, it makes him more tolerable when he doesn’t whine about how he’s not getting his way. It
cost him two meetings with Dog Lord, but it kept him his job and his boss still likes him, so it must’ve been the right thing to do.

“It almost seems like fate is keeping us apart, but that sounds so bloody stupid, right? Pretend I didn’t say that.”

“Say what?”

They laugh together again, muffled and dissonant.

“If I go to sleep early, you won’t hold it against me, will you?” she asks.

“Of course not. I could use the sleep too, what with all my long hours, and, yeah. Text me when you’re up?”

“Yeah. Cheer up, Cheese Man. We’ll squeeze in some face time if worse comes to worst. You’re right, we’ll figure it out. Maybe what I need is sleep to clear my head. Goodnight?”

“Goodnight.” He adds under his breath, “Heart emoji.”

“Right back at’cha.”

It’s one in the morning.

That’s a good time to think about prophecies that seemingly foretell your death, right? Alistair thinks so. Eleni Zinovia always picks the worst times of the night to spring to mind, blanketed in her Old Tevene and nebulous words of wisdom, and he can’t quite kick her out of where she lives in his head.

Something about her bunk “prophecy” stays with him—not necessarily the part with the death or anything.

“You pray there is still time.”

Is this what she meant? Alistair rolls over and extends his arm to where a stripe of moonlight stretches out over the edge of his bed. Somewhere out there is Dog Lord. She’s sleeping, maybe, or maybe she’s thinking about how she wants to leave, or meet him, or none of the above. Maybe she doesn’t dwell on this half as impossibly much as he does. Either way, he is praying there is still time.

Time to meet her, time to change her mind.

The case is almost closed with Alexius on the horizon, likely making his way towards Ferelden as fast as Alistair’s mind and heart can race. Cullen said after this he’d be free, and he wants that with all his might. He’s going to put Alexius away, call Dog Lord up, and only the Maker can stop him from whisking her off her feet, dammit.

He’s never fought for anything in his life before. He could stand to start now, he thinks. He lost his home in Redcliffe, and he only cried, didn’t dig his heels in. He didn’t lash out at the orphanage, only waited for someone like Duncan to come do the rescuing. Duncan grew ill and Alistair continues to work to stave off the inevitable, but it’s a cushy wait, the deadline for the end inconceivable. This is real, and he won’t lose this.

This time it will be different.
asdkdsflgldf and we're back with another unintentionally long chapter! Me? Write an Alistair chapter that is short? can't do it. When I got halfway through I thought "wow I'm about to wrap this up!" and then almost 8k words followed. Typical.

Some important notes to make on this chapter:
- Argent = Quicksilver. I don't know why Alistair felt like using a codename when he never does for Cullen or Rylen, but if your nickname at work was Quicksilver, I think you'd use it!! I don't normally make up names in the fic unless it's an OC, so lmao if you come across someone unfamiliar, you can assume I've either been: A) playing Dragon Age recently, or B) reading World of Thedas too closely.
- I had to go back and edit some of the fic to fix some continuity errors this chapter made. Like previously we'd said Kieran was 10, but with the timeline we've set up that's not possible. So he's about 6 now! He's still somehow in band. He's a child prodigy and I love him. Also Alistair previously said he was 25, but he's not, he's turning 25, so I fixed that too.
- No one's ever asked but I wanted to kind of clear it up why Liv uses Cheese Man & Tiger Emoji sort of interchangeably. In reality I try to write her using "Tiger Emoji" when she's feeling close and fond of Alistair. Cheese Man is a bit more joking and distancing. Tiger Emoji sounds cuter and that's my dumb ~subtle~ way of expressing it. Again, no one's asked, but I wanted to say it!
- If the "clause of anonymity" is killing you, don't worry, it's killing them too. Why do they keep using it? Honestly it's out of some type of stubborn and made-up sense of pride and purity for the way they know each other. Discovering their identity has become a puzzle and a reward for them, and they want the moment they meet to be a huge learning experience. Something that makes the wait worth it. And Alistair is a lil uncomfy with the fact that he's a cop and Liv is like "wow this city sucks now, the cops suck too." Hope she's not mad or anything when she founds out lmao!!
- And yes. I made up the Olympics. They're a thing now.

Sorry this chapter took so long but life is life. Juggling disability and joblessness takes a lot out of you on the reg! But as always we're in it to win it, even if the updates go at a snail's pace. I'm sorry that we've sort of...betrayed you with this chapter, but happy ending! Happy ending! We need to run into speed bumps and potholes to get there, though, unfortunately.

Also thanks so much?? For the incredibly sweet comments on that last chapter? Holy heck. Have I teared up over some of your comments? Quite possibly. Do I read them all whenever I'm sad and feel like I can't write my way out of a paper bag? damn u got me. Seriously though, each comment, big or small, means the entire world to us. We couldn't do this without any of you, and we're eternally honored that you're all still reading <3

Until next time, when we hit you with another helping of heartache and fluff!

Our personal blogs:
Tijigertje
Carouselfancy
And our fic blog, in case you want to talk to us, see cute art, and get periodic updates on the next chapter!
He bails on her again, a week later. She shrugs it off, pretends it doesn’t bother her, just as she had the first two times, but she can’t ignore the sharp pangs in her chest after she hangs up the phone. His texts become increasingly infrequent, and the world feels greyer without the soundtrack of his words.

**Thursday**

(7:15) I hope you're doing okay. I haven't heard from you since yesterday.

(7:25) I'm leaving for work. Hope yours isn't getting you down.

Olivia walks through the doors of the Crossroads that morning with a sense of purpose. Drakonis is here, and with it come the horrors of tax season and, as Morrigan had been warning her for a week, Inventory Day. It’s the time when the store’s inventory list has to be carefully analyzed, every book checked, priced, and catalogued. As the store’s primary appraiser, Olivia’s presence is of the utmost importance, Morrigan has stressed this to her more times than she could keep track of. It promises to be exhausting and thoroughly time-consuming work, and the less time Olivia has with her thoughts, the better.

Morrigan and Leliana are already laying out boxes of books when she arrives, clipboards with rather large stacks of lists attached to them lying innocently on the counter. With a bright smile, she hangs her bag and pulls her hair into a no-nonsense ponytail. Leliana squints at her.

"You are too cheerful," she says flatly. Olivia raises a brow.

"I'm... sorry. I think."

Morrigan pushes a box and a clipboard in her direction. "Ignore her. She always complains about doing inventory. I'm going to have you start with the unpriced books, kill two birds with one stone, as it were." Olivia scoots her box down to the end of the counter to avoid mixing with Leliana and Morrigan's work.

"I don't suppose you've given me anything interesting to appraise today," she remarks, tilting her head to glance at Morrigan through the sides of her eyes. Morrigan looks unamused.

"Perhaps I would if that aggravating elven fool would stop hedging around this deal," she snaps, and Olivia knows she's activated a familiar sore spot. Morrigan has met with a mysterious collector several times over the course of the month, always trying to negotiate a trade for some priceless elven artifact she won't name. Olivia has tried every bribe she can think of to get Morrigan to give her the details, to no avail. When she had asked her who this collector was, she had only said he was "the agent of a wealthy benefactor who has been a thorn in my side for longer than you can imagine."

"So a 'no,' then." Olivia's eyes scan the clipboard. "A shame."
It's unglamorous, copying down titles and marking down prices and stock, but it is a balm for her dizzying thoughts. For a time, there is no dialogue between the three, only the scratching of pens and the shuffling of books and other assorted wares. While Leliana tallies up the puzzle sets they've recently started carrying, Olivia sifts through a bin of maps from the travel section. "Does anyone actually come in to buy these?" she asks, flapping a Denerim city map between her fingers.

Leliana spares a glance. "Someone did, once. We tried to throw the maps out, but any time we did, someone complained about how we don't carry them."

"Have you tried telling them to 'get lost?'" Olivia grins.

Leliana rolls her eyes, though she smiles as well.

One box down, an indeterminate amount to go. Olivia squats down and lifts another box up onto her counter, while Leliana presses a hand to her forehead. "When did we get so many copies of *Wilkshire Downs*? Who ordered these?" She flips through several sheets on her clipboard. "It was me, but I don't want it to be me."

"Does that happen often?" Olivia asks. "I've always wondered, considering the massive pile of Maryden's songbooks we have that never sell."

"Oh, absolutely. It seems I never learn, but at least now there's someone who will laugh at my mistakes instead of glare at me four hours."

"You were lucky I did not blast you with a fireball," Morrigan adds, without looking up from the list in her hands. "I would hardly call ordering one hundred copies of the Chant of Light a 'mistake.'"

Olivia gapes at Leliana, who waves the accusation away. "I told you, that was an accident! I had only meant to order ten and I accidentally added a zero." She leans in toward Olivia with an eyebrow raised. "She made me work on my anniversary," she whispers conspiratorially.

"Is this the same girlfriend you just went to visit in Valence?"

Leliana sighs wistfully. "Yes, back when Lyna was still stationed in Ferelden. Once her clan moved on, she had to follow." She is silent for a long moment, and Olivia can see that she has traveled somewhere else, out beyond Ferelden with her love. Leliana blinks, and catches Olivia watching her. "Oh, but it is not so sad! She and I make time to visit one another as often as we can, and she told me last week that her clan is traveling south as we speak!" Her smile grows huge. "Love is worth any wait, no?"

Olivia doesn't miss her sly wink. She shakes her head, unable to stop her own smile from stretching her cheeks. Leliana's enthusiasm is infectious, and her optimism even moreso.

"I don't know that I could deal with long-distance with half as much grace as you do," she says pointedly.

"You might be surprised at what one can endure for love."

It isn't Leliana who speaks this time, but Morrigan. Olivia gapes at her. Morrigan glances up from examining a book, lifting a brow. Her expression holds something soft in it, but she offers no explanation.

A companionable silence falls over the three of them, with only the sounds of books moving and
papers fluttering. The hours pass surprisingly fast, with happy chatter and grins that might seem out of place given the task at hand. But the work is easy, and methodical, and Olivia is comforted by the light airy atmosphere of the store that has become her home.

Of course, when lunchtime arrives, Morrigan and Leliana argue about whose turn it is to pick up food.

"I have gone three times this week," Morrigan snaps, and Leliana gives her a truly impressive roll of her eyes.

"And I went five last week. You owe me."

"I do pay your salary, is that not enough for you?"

"You always play the salary card, it won't work this time!"

"Are you quite sure? I feel I may as well not bother then."

"Oh, hush! We are equal partners, we agreed on this years ago and you know it! And since it is equal, it is your turn."

Morrigan mutters something under her breath that Olivia doesn't quite catch, but she's sure it's uncharitable. Nevertheless, she reaches for her purse and phone. "Fine, but I will be getting Antivan takeout. Text me your order." She stalks to the door, every movement purposefully haughty, and turns to Olivia just as she reaches out for the door handle. "Olivia, I will send you a photo of the menu so you can tell me what you would like to eat as well." And then she is gone.

Leliana is laughing at her the moment she's out of earshot. "That woman is going to drive me to early retirement, I am sure of it."

Olivia shakes her head, adding another book to her "finished" pile. "How do two women so completely different end up business partners, anyway? No, not even business partners, how on earth did you become friends?"

Leliana rests her chin on her hand, her smile turning soft and affectionate. "Actually, we weren't at first. I was friends with her husband, and she was just a name. He always talked about how once he retired, they were going to start a bookshop that sold specifically anti-Chantry works. I always thought it was a funny notion." Her face drops, sadness creeping into her features like winter. "Morrigan had just found out she was pregnant. She was so happy. And then he was killed."

Olivia bites her lip, trying to imagine a younger, more naive Morrigan with the glow of pregnancy in her features. Morrigan, with the crushing weight of loss in her face. The image makes Olivia's stomach clench.

Leliana hums low in her throat. "Make no mistake, no matter how young or how happy, Morrigan has always been prickly and mistrustful. It's why they were so good together. He brought out the softer side of her. But once he was gone, she didn't have many friends." She shrugs. "I decided I wanted to help."

Olivia grins. "I don't imagine she was very open to it."

Leliana laughs, musical as always. "Of course not! She's Morrigan. But I wore her down. And eventually, when she decided to open their store anyway, I offered to help. And here I am!"

They are both quiet for a moment, Leliana contemplative and Olivia unsure what to say. She looks
around the Crossroads with new eyes; at the lines and lines of shelves filled to the brim with books; at the lounge area that is so expertly decorated with the welcoming, homey feel; at the shelf of collectable tomes Olivia had always thought was too big, too much of a liability. All of this had been accomplished by just two women, one a single, pregnant woman, both forces of nature. She had never felt so proud to be part of this, so proud to call them her friends.

"Here." Leliana's dulcet voice breaks through her distraction, and she holds a printed photo in front of her. Olivia takes it with careful fingers, and a smile stretches across her face. "This is the day we opened the store. One of the rare times Morrigan has allowed me to rope her into a selfie."

In the photo, a somewhat younger Morrigan and Leliana are standing in front of the doors of the Crossroads, their smiles huge and bright. In the background, an unamused-looking man stands with a large box in his arms. She squints closer at the photo, but she does not recognize him.

"Who's this, here? I don't think I've seen him here before." Leliana glances at where her finger points to the man. Olivia grins. "A boyfriend?"

Her hand lifting to cover her mouth, Leliana buries a laugh, shaking her head vigorously. "Goodness, no. He was just an old roommate of Morrigan's. They didn't get along and he moved out not long after."

Olivia scrutinizes the blurry figure and can make out a rather large physique and a shock of red hair, and hands the photo back to Leliana. "Shame. He looks well fit." She wiggles her eyebrows at Leliana, who simply laughs.

(20:17) I'm sorry I didn't text sooner 😐 I don't think I've gotten to sit down more than twice today

(20:17) That's all right. I know you're busy

(20:18) You sound upset 😞 I'll make it up to you, I promise

(20:18) Hey, if I'm upset about anything it's the clear ass mistreatment that goes on at your workplace. Hiney abuse 😐

(20:19) I'm going to speak to the union about it. I'm sure there's a clause in my contract about this somewhere

(20:19) Ass justice!!!

(20:19) I had no idea you were so passionate about Hiney Rights

(20:19) and I can't believe you've gotten me to say "hiney"

(20:20) It's an oft-ignored cause, we just can't get any funding for it anymore

(20:20) 😞 We just need to find the right audience. I'm thinking we go after people who do a lot of squats

(20:20) That's a very specific demographic, however would we know where to put the advertising

(20:21) Gyms! I'm sure there are plenty of squatting gym rats just waiting for a cause to be
passionate about!

(20:21) Ha! Where are these gyms? Because the asses I see are flatter than Queen Anora in high-waisted jeans.

(20:21) Oh 😁 I always thought Queen Anora had a fairly nice ass

(20:21) Oh sweetheart

(20:21) No

(20:22) 😊

(20:23) It feels nice to have something to talk about that isn't work

(20:23) I'm really sorry I haven't been texting

(20:25) It's all right. Just don't forget about me, yeah?

(20:25) Of course not! Who else would educate me on the intricacies of ass shapes?

(20:26) Apparently nobody.

(20:27) I really need to get some sleep. I have to go in at 5 😊

(20:27) Get some rest, Cheese Man. You deserve it. I'll be here next time you're free.

(20:27) Yeah 😘😊😊 Alright. Sleep well, Lord of Dogs.

(20:27) Sleep well, Man of Cheese.

From: Fergus

(20:44) Livvy, for the last time, stop sending me pictures of Hessarian just to avoid my question!

(20:44) I can’t hear you over the sound of my dog in a mini top hat. And here he is in a tie! He fancies himself a businessman!

(20:44) Olivia.

(20:45) For all your posturing and desire to replace Dad, you sure don’t have his sense of humor sometimes. Dad would’ve thought this was a riot

(20:45) I asked you how you were! The most simple question in the universe! I’ve been asking you for days and you’ve become dodgier than when mum caught you in the midst of your brief smoking stint.

(20:45) You’re not a very good brother if you can’t read my mind. Sibling telepathy was an utter lie the Bryland twins sold us.

(20:46) Habren was actually arrested recently, if you haven’t heard. Leonas clammed up about it, but, you know. It pains me to see him so sad about his daughter, even though we’d all seen it coming.
What!! Was it the puppy rumor? It was the puppy rumor wasn’t it. I’d never seen her with the same dog twice and mum nearly gave me a lashing for embarrassing dad in front of all the arls but I KNEW she was doing something to those dogs.

I didn’t want to pry but I’m pretty sure that had something to do with it, yes, among other things.

You can’t trust people from South Reach!

Right, well, anyway. Even if you’re not doing well, at least you’re texting me back.

See, I’m doing just fine. Would the old Liv text back?

For that to be a marker on the scale of improvement, I can’t say I’m overwhelmingly impressed or convinced. I’m going to keep bugging you, as is my Maker-given right.

I don’t believe that that’s true When did the Maker give you this right? Did you have a witness? Documentation? A notary?

If I didn’t have to wrestle my sick, defiant son into bed right now, I would slaughter you. I would come to Denerim and mow you down.

Aww Fergus there you are, when’d you join this conversation?

You’re such a bloody wretch. I’m going to turn Cathaire against you and she’ll be all mine and you’ll never be allowed to ride her again. I’ll tell all the maids and guards to ban you from the premises so you can’t try to rescue her from her reeducation.

I’m booking a flight right now to come kick your ass, brb

Goodnight, Livvy, your horse is mine now. All because you didn’t want to tell me how you were. Such a shame, if only this could’ve been prevented…

I am enraged, that’s how I’m doing, now goodbye!! Hope you catch Oren’s cold!!!

I’m going to mail you his germ-ridden teddy bear and you won’t have the heart to throw it out because you love him.

I’m going to suplex you into the garbage. Don’t you have better things to be doing? I know I do. Hessarian hasn’t tried on this cape I bought for him and if you’re interested in more photos…

Goodnight, Livvy. Stop worrying me.

Friday

The store is quiet on Fridays.

Inventory Day had gone mostly smoothly, though close to closing Morrigan had found a large box of uncatalogued books from the year before and they’d had to stay late to finish.

Fridays, however, are always Olivia's most productive. With so few customers to deal with, she can focus on the books she hasn't had time to finish over the week so she can have a fresh start on Monday.
She loves her work. It makes her feel fulfilled in a way that she could not have possibly imagined back in Highever. She feels at home inside these books. The new ones always smell fresh, like clean paper and ink and glue. The old ones have personality, stories and marks of previous owners. Dog-eared pages can mean someone found a page particularly interesting, or perhaps the book was too boring to finish. Sometimes she finds personalized notes scrawled in the title pages, a note from a gift-giver or a loved one. In the academic tomes, she finds sticky notes, notations of something that needed remembering. Today, she finds a photograph.

The book is old, perhaps fifty years or more, an outdated Antivan-to-Common dictionary. Its hardback covers are well-worn, bleached with age, with multiple dog-eared pages. She is examining the book with careful, meticulous fingers when she finds a faded sepia-toned portrait tucked into the T section, the bottom edge aligned almost perfectly with the phrase, "Te amo."

The woman in the picture is about Olivia's age, and pretty. Her clothes are simple, her hair drawn back, and her eyes stand out like two black pin pricks in the muddied tones. Olivia lifts it from the book with ginger fingers, flipping it over to look for any kind of notes.

Nothing.

It strikes her as an odd thing to leave inside a book. She tries to picture the person who might have put her there, as though to preserve her between the pages forever. To keep her face close. A family member? A lover?

Placing the photo on her desk, Olivia flicks through the dictionary some more, searching for abnormalities or originalities, or some sort of clue to go with the photograph. Other than a few notes in the margins, however, the book is simply old and well-used. She writes out a price tag and sticks it to the spine of the book, replacing the photo carefully on the same page she had found it.

She checks her phone. No new texts, and it's almost closing time. She ignores the way her heart clenches and instead focuses on clearing up her desk, readying it for the morning.

The bell at the storefront chimes happily, and Olivia sweeps up the Antivan dictionary, placing it on top of a stack of other books at the corner of her desk and balancing them in her arms as she makes her way to the front of the store.

To her surprise, she's greeted by a head of fluffy pink hair, bobbing in place as Luana bounces on the heels of her feet. Olivia smiles and lifts a hand in greeting.

With signature excitement, Luana rushes to greet her with a barely-there hug and a reach for Olivia's stack of books. "Liv, let me help you with those!"

Olivia waves her off, easily dodging her. Luana only just passes Olivia's shoulders when standing at full height, a fact that never fails to amuse them both. Olivia places her stack of books on the counter with a nod to Leliana, and turns back to Luana.

"It's good to see you, Lua," she says with a large smile. She finds that Luana has an innate ability to bring brightness to an entire room, and she finds it thoroughly refreshing. Her smile is like a salve on a burn. Luana reaches for a tinfoil-covered plate on the counter and pushes it toward Olivia.

"I wanted to stop by and bring you these!" She doesn't temper her statement with excuses or reasons, and Olivia smiles. Luana never seems to have a reason for doing something generous; it is more like a state of being with her.

She pulls a corner of the tinfoil up, and the overpowering smell of chocolate fills her nose. "Are these
brownies? They smell bloody amazing."

Leliana rings up her pile of books, leaning toward the plate of brownies with a hopeful expression. "Do they have nuts in them?"

A smile crinkles Luana's entire face, disrupting the pattern of her vallaslin. "I left them out this time."

Leliana lights up, snatching a brownie from the pan. "You are my favorite customer," she says with a smile.

Leliana says this every time Luana brings in baked goods, but it makes Luana's face light up with pride every time. Olivia shakes her head, smiling around a bite of an edge piece.

"So," she says, muffled around her chewing, "did you only come to make us all fat and happy, or is there a book I can help you find?"

With a shake of her head, Luana loops an arm around Olivia's elbow. "It's been a while since we did something together, I wanted to see how you were doing. Oh!" She pulls her phone out of her dress pocket, and Olivia wonders that someone so whimsical could be so practical at the same time. "I also wanted to ask you if you have any recipes I can make for you. Something your parents made for you at home, anything, really. Work has been a bit stressful lately and baking calms me, so I thought, I might as well be productive about it."

Her mother's face appears unbidden in her mind, a flour-dusted smile on her lips, untwisting the strings of a frilly pink apron that doesn't sit right on hips that are more suited for pencil skirts. She finds that the memory doesn't hurt her as much as she expected it to.

"Actually, my mother was terrible at baking," she says with a grin. "She always tried to schedule mother-daughter days where we would bake cookies together when I was a child, but I was a warrior and she was a diplomat and neither of us were quite suited for the kitchen." She chuckles at the thought, and Luana tilts her head at her quizzically. "Her cookies always had too much salt, not enough butter," she clarifies. "Hard as rocks and twice as inedible."

"If you like, I can make you a batch of cookies," Luana says softly. "Just the right amount of salt and butter, they'll melt in your mouth."

Olivia wraps an arm around her small shoulders. "I think that would be perfect." She smiles, and she finds she doesn't have to force it.

"Olivia." Morrigan appears from around the corner just as Leliana is bagging Olivia's purchases for her. She eyes the pile with a sharp expression. "You are purchasing another mountain of meaningless tomes, I see."

Luana leans over the counter on the tips of her toes, spying the dictionary on the top of the pile. "Oh! Are you going to visit Antiva? I hear it's lovely this time of year."

Olivia blushes, and she doesn't know why. "No, I just... This book came across my desk today, and I find myself weirdly drawn to it. I can't... really explain it."

Morrigan appears unimpressed. "You are aware, are you not, that you are working for free at the rate you are spending your salary?"

Laughing, Olivia sweeps up her bag of books and plucks a brownie in Morrigan's unsuspecting hand. "You frown too much, Morrigan. Have some sugar." She turns back to Luana. "Dinner on me?"
The two of them don't give her boss time to respond before they are out the door, arm in arm.

Saturday

(10:34) Good morning man of cheese. I hope you slept well.

(10:34) Good morning for you maybe, I've been up for hours

(10:35) Don't you ever sleep in?

(10:35) Sometimes but not on Saturdays. Especially not now, when days off are so rare. So much to do!

(10:35) Somehow this doesn't surprise me

(10:35) I'm really glad you have a day off though. Sounds like you've needed it.

(10:36) You aren't joking. I spent the morning at Andrastea just to feel what fresh air and regular human contact felt like.

(10:36) A wild Cheese Man, sighted out in the world, and I missed it

(10:36) A shame really, I was terrorizing the town and running free

(10:39) Too bad we both already have plans today, huh?

(10:40) Yeah But soon we can terrorize the town together. They won't know what hit em

(10:40) We'll have the run of the place in no time!

(10:40) If you're not careful I'll have you wearing leather jackets and piercing six parts of your face!

(10:40) What makes you think I don't already have all those parts of my face pierced? I could have one of those face donuts, would you still like me then?

(10:41) What???? Lmao! what face donuts????

(10:41) You know! One of those subdermal implant thingies!

(10:41) Are you talking about a bagel head?

(10:43) I googled it to see if that's what I meant and now I regret it because the images made me nauseous.

(10:43) Oh thank the Maker, for a moment I had all sorts of horrible images in my head of what you must look like if you did have a bagel head

(10:43) I don't want to know the procedure for having that done but I can tell you right now I'd never live through that

(10:44) Thank the Maker for that.
(10:44) Do you have any?

(10:44) Face donuts? No thanks

(10:45) No! Piercings.

(10:45) Oh! Yeah, a few. A few lobes, helixes, an industrial, a daith. I used to have a tongue piercing but it's not quite as endearing on a grown woman as it is on a teenager.

(10:45) Maker's breath I have no idea what most of those are. Did you fall into a pit of needles?

(10:46) You sound like my mother.

(10:47) Okay I've googled them and they seem quite nice. Painful, but nice.

(10:47) The tongue was really the only one that hurt. The daith helps a lot with migraines.

(10:47) I don't think I'm going to be letting you near my face 😒

(10:48) Oh come on! One right through your septum, you'd look great!

(10:48) I'd look like a daft bull!

(10:48) Maybe some dermals in your cheeks? Shiny diamond studs!

(10:49) What are you on about?

(10:49) It's a stud they just punch right in your face!

(10:50) No!!!!

(10:50) How about gauges? I hear people are getting their cheeks gauged now, very fashionable.

(10:50) What's a gauge?

(10:50) NEVER MIND NO THANK YOU

(10:51) 😒

(10:51) You're a cruel woman

(10:51) Oh you love it.

(10:51) 😒�

(10:52) I have to go now but please feel free to keep texting me all day? I'd like to take advantage of having you while I do

(10:52) I'll make sure to send you a detailed report of my day. Where you going?

(10:52) The museum! Any suggestions for which exhibits to catch?

(10:53) 😹 Alas, Dog Lord, you have discovered Yelp Man's weakness. Musty old museums
are more your area of expertise.

(10:53) Just for that, I'm going to inundate you with pictures of dwarven fertility statues

(10:53) Seems like a very specific fetish but whatever floats your boat!

(10:54) 🙄

The Ferelden National Museum of History is anything but musty. In fact, it's enormous, with eighteen exhibition halls, three gift shops, and a fine restaurant.

Olivia is in heaven.

She and Dorian had played a raucous few rounds of "rock, paper, scissors" for the right to choose which exhibit they would visit first, and Dorian had won. He had blatantly cheated, of course, playing a loose-handed scissors that he not-so-slyly transformed into open-handed paper at the last second, but Olivia allowed it. She could practically taste his prepared disdain for the Tevinter exhibit in the air, and how could she deny him?

It's worth it. He lambasts the factual plaques, illustrating his corrections with sweeping hand gestures and brilliant tosses of his head. He is passionate about his country, and it makes her smile. When they find a display about Tevinter's use of black magic in place of sound scientific medical techniques, he glowers with genuine anger.

"It's insulting," he growls, squinting over his glasses at the informational near the glass display case. Olivia leans over a display case to get a closer look at a "Tevinter ritual wand," and finds that it looks a lot like a toothbrush.

"Amazing how much petty bias shows up with historians, isn’t it? Did you know there was one in the Blessed Age who traced the bloodline of his rival all the way back to the Ancient Age just to prove that his great- great- great- whatever grandfather had legally married a goat? All to discredit his findings in an older part of Rivain."

"It says here that when one was sick, they were diagnosed with a poison of the blood, and the prescribed cure was to take all the blood out with magic. Can you imagine something so ridiculous? You southerners can be so ignorant."

"You know, I read that back in the Towers age, Fereldans thought that ingesting the blood of a fallen warrior could cure epilepsy." She glances up at Dorian, who is watching her and looking decidedly sulky. "Yes, all right, sorry, what were you saying about ignorant southerners?"

Dorian sighs. "I went to the finest medical school Tevinter had to offer, and I could cut circles around the surgeons in Ferelden. But does anybody focus on that? No. All they care about is that I’m a ‘magister’ and ‘is it really safe for you to be around all that blood unsupervised?’"

Olivia loops her arm through his, steering him away from the display case. "Come on now, you’re the most respected medical examiner in all of Ferelden, clearly there are plenty of people who respect what you do."

With unusually serious eyes, Dorian stops her. "Olivia, why do you think I work as a medical examiner instead of a practicing surgeon? Nobody wants a Tevinter magister having access to their blood, their body. Cadavers aren’t susceptible to blood magic."
Her heart clenches, as do her fists.

“I know it’s not fair,” she says quietly, leaning against him. “But nobody should ever make you feel any less incredible than you and I both know you are. Whether you’re messing about with cadavers or living bodies, you’re an amazing doctor, and you know it.”

A smile lifts the curls of his moustache. “You’re right. Thank you.”

She nods, and tugs him in the direction of the Grey Warden exhibit. “My turn now.”

His brow wrinkles thoughtfully. “Wait, ‘messing about?’ Liv, you know I don’t actually spend my days making the cadavers dance, right?”

Olivia hums. “Didn’t you brag to me that you once brought a murder victim back to life so they could tell you who killed them?”

“Okay, you really must keep your voice down—”

The Grey Warden exhibit is more extensive than she had expected.

The museum is not far from the ruins of old Fort Drakon, and the exhibit contains a painstakingly thorough amount of Warden artifacts. Dorian seems less than enthusiastic about this, but Olivia is enthralled.

When she had been a small girl, her father had regaled her with tales of the Grey Wardens every night before she had gone to sleep. He would act out daring battles on enormous griffons, and tell her the tale of Garahel every time she asked until he had exhausted both himself and her. The order is almost entirely defunct now, with certain pockets still existing in mostly formal capacities, usually guarding something or someone important. The ruling monarchs of Ferelden utilize the Grey Wardens that remain as personal bodyguards and specialized soldiers in wars, though it has been a great many years since the latter was deemed necessary.

Olivia feels strangely drawn to the artifacts in this room, and it has an almost dreamlike aura about it. She feels as though she is suspended in time, reaching out to touch the glass that guards an old, strange sword, glowing blue in the dim light of the case. Starfang. The weapon of a long dead Warden Commander.

“Now why aren’t there absurd, biased stories of black magic here?” Dorian gripes, looking over a large silver chalice with griffons emblazoned on the side. “Suspicious rituals, connections to the darkspawn, that’s blood magic if I’ve ever seen it.”

Olivia blinks, turning away from the strange sword. Her eyes pass over hulking silver armor, plates overlapping in perfect repetition. Warden Commander’s plate. “It does all seem a bit suspect, doesn’t it? ‘Only a Warden can kill an archdemon?’ What, did they have some kind of magic Warden sword?”

Dorian scoffs. “A magic demonic summoning, more likely.”

Olivia laughs, but she can’t help but glance back at the sword in the display case.

They have an overpriced dinner at the overpriced restaurant inside the overpriced museum. Dorian
insists on paying after Olivia orders, citing some need to ‘pay her back’ for the museum fare and last two dinners they’ve shared. She finds the notion absurd, but doesn’t argue with him. She knows better.

Part way through the charcuterie board, fingers pushing the Cumberland cheeses around, she catches Dorian squaring his shoulders as he watches her, eyes focused. “Is something wrong?” she asks, dropping a sliver of meat into the rest of her uneaten pile. “Still thinking about ‘Tevinter black magic?’ Listen, if you want to cause a ruckus, let me in on the plan before chaos reigns, okay?”

“It’s not that.” Dorian hasn’t touched his food much either, aside from collecting his own stash of delicacies, the ones specifically from Tevinter and no place else. “Have you been sleeping well?”

“Me? What are you trying to say about the state of my eyebags, Pavus?”

He scoffs and one of his boots makes a similar sound as it kicks against the parquet flooring. “It doesn’t take much scrutiny to see that you look like a mess of twine, hopelessly unspooled and yet still, somehow, taught and stressed.”

Olivia presses her fingertips to her cheek, expecting the skin to be rough or sagging, or the pads of her fingers to feel like a pumice stone. “In Common, please?”

“Less shine to your hair, the ponytail’s tighter. Your nail polish is horrendously chipped. Your makeup looks slept in—yesterday’s eyeliner is today’s smokey eyeshadow, I’m familiar with the practice. Need I continue?”

Olivia shakes her head. She’s unsure if she should feel grateful that someone notices these things or self-conscious and shameful that she’s not better at hiding it than she thought.

“Walk with me.”

As they clean up after themselves, Olivia wishes it wouldn’t be in bad form to ask to collect the leftovers, as if cubed cheeses and sausage discs could be dinner as well as lunch. But that’s where she is this week, worrying just as much how she’s going to make it to dinner as much as she worries what avenue this conversation is going to sharply turn down. They detour and find themselves spilling into the traditional Ferelden art exhibit hall—a tour guide wedges between them and for a minute they are pulled apart by an excitable group of wide-eyed dwarves, who all seem more keen on observing the domed ceilings than the collections of priceless paintings before them.

Olivia reconvenes with Dorian at the closest window. From here she can see the Amaranthine Ocean and the beaches that cradle it, along with sailboats making the most of the uptick in temperature. It feels like such a short time ago that she and Fergus were standing beside their father at the helm of their own boat, the Mistral, setting sail for one of their vacation homes on Brandel’s Reach. She imagines herself with an arm around her dad’s shoulder, until she remembers that last time they visited Brandel’s Reach she was almost a foot shorter and her fist was forced to grab at her father’s sailing jacket.

“I miss my home too, as shitty as it was and is,” Dorian interjects. “Where else could I wake up well past noon, drenched in sweat because I was too stupid to close the windows at 4 AM from having alternated between studying and drinking all damned night, silks clinging to my skin as a three-course breakfast is snuck in through my door because my parents don’t want to see me, let alone each other? And then do it all again, again and again. Where better to fritter away your youth than home?”

“Despite being rich, I don’t think it was ever half as fanciful as that. Wait, are you telling me they
didn’t hand-feed you your breakfast every morning-slash-afternoon?”

Dorian smirks. “Only lunch, only grapes.”

“I’ll bet you miss that,” says Olivia. “But you stay here anyway.” She pauses to refocus her eyes on the window itself and the walls around it, to pull herself away from the shore. “I’m glad you stay, despite how… good? Tevinter sounds. You could be anything you wanted there, but you’re still here.”

She’s unsure what to make of the quiet chuckle that comes from Dorian, and she can’t parse the Tevene that slips out when he speaks from the corner of his mouth. Olivia hasn’t known him for too long, he’s allowed his secret musings.

“Something’s keeping me here,” he admits, eyes shining.

Olivia’s jaw slackens as it dawns on her, and inside she feels a tickle of warmth, of happiness. “Dorian Pavus, you’ve found love.”

“This is not where I had hoped this heart-to-heart was going to go, but.” She’s never seen him be sheepish before—though perhaps it’s reluctance, fear, doubt just as much as it is anything else. “Yes, I suppose, but that sounds rather tacky.”

“I’d ask who but I doubt I know them, so.”

“They’re a qunari, and—”

“You! In love with a qunari!” Olivia throws her head back and laughs deep, loud enough to startle the gaggle of dwarves into leaving the exhibit with haste. “You’re living the plot of every tawdry Tevinter romance novel. Have you boarded his dreadnought? Are you grabbing life by the horns?”

“Ha ha, have your laughs at my expense.”

Olivia wants to keep laughing and joking but when she stops for a gulp of air, she looks at Dorian, really looks at him and she sees the softening of his snark, his edges. “You’re for real, aren’t you?”

Dorian nods. “I am and I find that I don’t hate it half as much as I always imagined I would.”

He offers scraps of information about his beau; there are predictable things—he’s big, he’s handsome, he’s Tal-Vashoth because how else would it work—and things she’d rather not know, like workplace rendezvous and how time seems to stop when they crack open a bottle of Aggregio Pavali and settle in for a night. As happy as she is for him—and she makes it clear that she very much is happy for Dorian—there’s a little bruise of longing throbbing behind her smile as Dorian’s eyes crinkle closed when he talks about the impossibilities of kissing a qunari and some vague nonsense about spoons, big and small.

They walk back towards the lobby and purchase tiny cups of espresso with which to loiter for just a little while longer, because Dorian has more to say and Olivia relishes in hearing him, even if it hurts. Even if she’s jealous, but this isn’t about her.

“What about you?” he asks over the lip of his cup. “You’ve been here how long and still nothing?”

“It’s complicated,” Olivia replies, slinging back the coffee like a shot as it burns her throat all the same.

As they’re shuffling down the front steps of the museum and trekking towards the parking lot,
Dorian gives her bicep a gentle squeeze. “One might say I’m… emotionally stunted and I wouldn’t deny it, but for what it’s worth, Liv, you can always talk to me. About anything. And if not me, then Leliana, but I don’t know why you wouldn’t prefer to talk to me.”

Olivia flushes at his frankness and waves him away. “I’ll be fine. It’s just—”

“Complicated. Yes, you said that.”

They buckle themselves into Dorian’s car, each of them pressing the buttons for the seat warmers because spring is still in the midst of being sprung. At the first stoplight, Olivia sucks in a breath, still trying to get used to being open, honest, emotional. “We should do this more often. I like having a museum buddy, y’know?”

A sinister look comes upon Dorian’s face, tweaking his smile and bringing his eyebrows together. “Good, because there’s this dreadful museum near the fort and it’s all about Andraste and the unification of Ferelden and I have a few things to say about that—” And the light turns green.

Olivia’s bag falls off her shoulder, the straps rolling down along with the heaviness of the day. That’s not how she’d thought of it in the moment; between exhibits and laughter, the uneasiness she’s been carting around had felt nearly nonexistent, even with the jealousy creeping around the corners. Back inside her home, though, Olivia feels as though she’s returned to a different kind of museum, a gallery full of frames and fear, longing, and disquiet. Habit has her cracking open a can of Antivan Sip-Sip and habit drives her to grab her phone and call someone, but not the usual. Not today.

Fergus picks up on the second ring.

“Livvy? You’re calling me?”

“Pff. You could at least hide your surprise,” she replies, though she’s as surprised as he is. “I needed to talk to you about something. Something important.”

Papers shuffle and move into place, her brother groans in relief as she hears him relax. “What’s the matter?”

“Remember Brandel’s Reach?”

And just like that the siblings are swept up in recollection, their words forming what feels like very real images in their minds. They’re six and eleven, sitting on the back deck of their vacation home, playing wallop together while their parents are flawlessly entertaining friends and family members alike. Then they’re seven and twelve and Fergus doesn’t want to play with Olivia anymore, he’s getting too old to be seen with his tiny sibling, even though they’re the only two kids on the whole of the island and the waves are crashing against the shore with such violence; he saves his sister that evening and they band together to steal sips of wine in celebration. Then they’re older still, aging and growing until they take vacations elsewhere, until the home on Brandel’s Reach is a relic of simpler times.

“Have you ever taken Oren?” Olivia asks.

“No, of course not. I don’t think any Cousland has set foot on the island since granddad passed and all. Why?”

Olivia scoffs. “You’re depriving him of an important formative influence. Let the boy get lost and explore the coves, make some friends with whoever else still camps on that rock. It’ll be summer
soon, we should resume tradition.”

She can tell Fergus wants to protest though there’s no reason not to go, and he relents, admits that he’s thought about it. Oren was too young to go when the possibility crossed his mind before and it’s slipped since then, but now? “I think he’d love having you along for a vacation. He still talks about you since the last time you were here.”

“He could be seeing more of me, if he’d like.”

“Oh?” Fergus’s tone deepens. “Liv, what are you getting at?”

“My old room’s still there, isn’t it?” Olivia begins pacing around her house, anything to keep her body busy. With the phone trapped between her shoulder and her ear, she rearranges her glassware and sweeps off the countertops. Tonight is garbage night and in the weighty pause of Fergus’s response she starts carting the bin to the curb. “Fergus?”

“It… is still there, yes.”

“Because I was thinking…”

“Liv.”

“What if I came back? For a little while. Few months, give or take. It’ll be like I never left.”

As her brother sighs so does the wind, pulling Olivia back into the house; she pokes her head out from between the curtains and watches the sun escape from view, while one of the two moons is already climbing above the clouds. She has expected this response from her brother, can imagine the pinched nose bridge and wrinkling forehead, she expects an exasperated email with a plane ticket attached.

“Your room’s been redecorated and repurposed.”

“What?” Olivia pulls the phone away from her ear and glances at the screen to make sure it’s still Fergus she’s speaking to. “Repurposed into what?”

Fergus’s wicked grin is almost audible through the receiver. “It’s Oriana’s room now—part study, part workroom. She’s been working on an online degree in communications and business management and needed a quiet, out of the way place to do her courses. Before you ask—not that you were going to—she’s not planning on inheriting her father’s business. I think she wants to start her own. I can’t wait to see where she’s going to go with it, she’s going to do incredible things, don’t you think?”

Olivia pulls away from the window and slinks out of her foyer. Retreating to her bedroom and sinks down onto the edge of the bed, she grabs a notepad from her bedside table and stares at it. ‘Pros | Cons’ it reads atop a wobbly cross separating the bad from the good.

“But…” her voice breaks, oddly small as she traces the cons.

“‘You can’t go home again,’ pup.”

“How can you take that fatherly tone with me? You said you didn’t want me to feel like I couldn’t come back! Were you just pitying me then?” she snaps.

“That was before we talked and I saw what good Denerim was doing for you! What, you intend to throw it all away for a passing fancy, as if you really want to spend that much more time with your
nephew? Things are not what you expected and you’re ready to take a dive into the safety net because it’s always been there, so you never really have to try?” Fergus spits back. “You got yourself a job, some friends, a life that wasn’t made for you because of your name and you want to piss it all away? What’s gotten into you?”

She puts him on speaker for the sole purpose of getting the phone out of her hands, to clench her fists if nothing else. “I’ve seen some shit here, this city’s fucked up. You’re safe behind castle walls, you don’t go anywhere.”

“Livvy—”

Olivia hurls the notepad at the wall opposite her. “You have protection, I don’t. People listen to you, they don’t listen to me.”

Without missing a beat Fergus tempers his own anger and voice. “Liv, talk to me. It’s me. What’s been going on down there?”

“It’s ridiculous. It’s bullshit.”

“I’m a politician, I talk to snakes that peddle bullshit every day. Try me.”

At first she tells him about the demon, that thing she saw that lurks at the edges of all her nightmares. She paraphrases Cheese Man and his own dismissals, how people are covering it up to avoid an outbreak of mass hysteria so the perpetrators don’t skip out during the commotion or whatever nonsense conclusion she’s supposed to believe. Picking up the list from the floor, she admits that the job and the companionship are nice, and, well, her heart clenches when she thinks of Cheese Man and how he’s tried to console her while shielding her. “But the crime, Fergus. Big cities are full of it. I’m two steps away from buying a police scanner and being that kind of paranoid nutter, and it’s only a matter of time before things go tits up because of it.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” he replies.

“I might, you don’t know. Come on, Fergus, I’m admitting to you that I actually made a mistake. I dove into the deep end too soon, I should’ve moved to Amaranthine or West Hill. I shouldn’t have left The Coastlands in the first place and it’s come back to bite me. I surrender, okay, so stop being difficult and let me have a guest room.”

“No.”

Olivia scrapes her nails down her cheeks; it’s like talking to a brick wall. “You’re being impossible, you know that right?”

“You’re being impossible,” Fergus volleys back. “If I thought you were in any real danger then yes, I would arrange a flight home for you and all your things. The only danger you’re in is the danger of regressing emotionally and as a person. You’re being stupid.”

“Those therapy sessions really won you over, huh,” says Olivia, blinking.

“They’ve been very good to me, yes. Liv, you’ve told me all about The Crossroads and your boss, Leliana, Cheese Man, Dorian, and so on. You don’t need me to be your conscience here, you could’ve driven up here and run away from all those relationships you’ve built, which is a very ‘you’ thing to do, and I couldn’t have stopped you. You don’t need my permission to run away, but you don’t want to run away. You’re just being stupid and too cowardly to admit that yes, crime happens and crime is how our parents died. But the Olivia I know doesn’t back down from a fight or a piddly little demon, either.”
Her cheeks heat up and her throat closes with embarrassment, though thankfully no tears well up where they’re unwanted. If she fled to Castle Cousland like her daunting list of cons would have her do, it would mean nothing, she knows that. She can’t live in a blissful pocket of time forever where nothing changes, no one can live like that. That’s not even living at all.

“Do you suggest I engage in fisticuffs with a demon? A blob of lava?” Olivia says, this time with a hint of humor.

“Sling a few shots back and there’s nothing foolish that a Cousland can’t do.” Fergus laughs.

She shares in his enjoyment at her expense until the nerves dissipate and she can think clearly once more. “Thanks for being the voice of reason. That’s why you’re the Teyrn and I’m the one drunkenly running away from demons in alleyways.”

“Hold on a minute.” Fergus pauses. “You never said you were drunk when this happened—”

“Thanks again for the pseudo-therapy session, I have to go, Fergus, bye!” Olivia swiftly hangs up and her phone begins to blow up with texts from Fergus, only half of which are about public indecency and drunkenness. He can’t punch her for her mistakes if she never comes home—and besides, home is here. Home is Denerim.

The pros and cons list goes soaring into the kitchen garbage bin, but not before Olivia looks at it one more time, eyes lingering on the biggest ‘pro’ that dominated its column: Cheese Man.

**Sunday**

The first chunk of Olivia’s morning is spent reinforcing just how much she truly has missed Cheese Man. She flips through her sparse conversations with him, rereading and reliving them, laughing at the same texts she laughed at days ago, and wonders if this is exactly healthy behavior or—and this is more likely—the pathetic motions of someone who needs a better hobby. Tired of feeling like she’s living the re-runs of a vapid sitcom with too much will-they-won’t-they and not enough subplots about the rich, supporting cast, Olivia sends out a series of texts to her friends.

To: Dorian

(10:12) I’m borrowing a copy of the Tome of the Slumbering Elders from work even though I don’t work at a library, I work at a bookstore and uh no one ever told me how fucked up the somniari are. Do you know if there are any left in Tevinter? Also how are you

To: Luana

(10:13) I found a recipe for those sweet frosted cookies from the supermarket and if you’re interested we could hang out and make those today, maybe? I bet yours would taste better than the ones from the shops though.

To: Leliana

(10:13) Hey that ex of yours was on the news last night! She got arrested, nice. Also what are you up to? Celebrating??

The responses are… underwhelming, though predictable.
From: Dorian

(10:15) This is The Iron Bull. Dorian’s busy.

From: Luana

(10:15) Ohh nooo… I’m so sorry, Liv! My boyfriend and I both actually have some time off tonight and I was hoping to spend what little time there is with him :( I’m so deeply sorry, I promise to make it up to you! I will make you so many cookies and cakes and pies if you promise to forgive me too! Please don’t be mad.

From: Leliana

(10:19) Oh, Liv, I… suppose that is good news!
(10:19) Also Lyna’s here, say hi!

Something stirs in Olivia, a string waiting to be plucked, as her finger sweeps through the home page of her phone, to the second page of apps, back to home and then one sweep in the same direction, to where the news and weather information is. The wind is letting up today, perfect weather for a jog, and the news is boasting some exciting content: a new breed of Orlesian rat dog has been discovered and recognized.

Dog Lord, Dog Lord, Dog Lord. She reads the news and hears a tattoo of his voice playing between her ears, his breathy laughter at her quips and her own at his, the natural easy fluidity of their snark and banter. Maker, she misses him beyond what their texts provide. The voice, the glimpses of his life via rare photos, the P.O. box drop-offs, the knowledge that they’ve shared a space at different points in time—she briefly tortures herself considering what might’ve happened if she had waited for him at the post office instead of ditching it for the sake of his privacy.

With no warning, no pretense, she opens the keypad instead of opting for tapping his contact info. She dials in his number, knowing she could do it with her eyes closed, in her sleep. Olivia has no clue what she wants to say to him but she knows she doesn’t need a reason to call, and before he even speaks, when she hears him take a sharp intake of breath, she vibrates, the string strummed upon.

“Hi.”

They speak in unison: she, soft with her own tension; he, subdued, as if he is far away from the phone. Silence stretches between them, painfully awkward, and Olivia picks at her cuticles, pulling a hangnail until it bleeds. She hadn’t put much thought into what she might say to him if he picked up, had only followed the staccato beat in her mind - she missed him she missed him she missed him.

“I’m all right.” Probably not. “I just - ‘Missed you, ‘- wanted to see how you’re holding up.” I wish you were here with me.

He huffs a sigh. “Work has been a total nightmare.” Olivia feels the strangest pang of
disappointment that he doesn’t seem to have actually heard her thoughts. If only it could be so easy. “Ca—er, my boss—has been more short-tempered than I’ve ever seen her, and I’m always the one she ends up yelling at.”

Olivia smiles into the phone. “Did you do something to earn said yelling?”

She wishes she could better imagine the pouting that is so palpable even through the phone. “I was only trying to lighten the mood!”

“You are providing a vital service to your coworkers.”

“Somebody has to do it, and I am willing to shoulder the burden.”

Their banter has always come so easy to them, like a rhythm that beat between them as naturally as drawing breath. But she can feel the exhaustion in his words, and she knows he’s forcing it. She wonders if he’d had to force himself to answer her call in the first place.

Since she’d become a teenager and hormones had hit her like a freight train, Olivia would imagine there was a tiny, nasty demon living inside her chest. Whenever she acted on her worst impulses, behaved badly against her better judgment, it was the demon, winning. She would fight against it, to hold it back, but every now and then it would take over and she’d say something terrible.

She feels the demon scratching at her ribcage, and she bites her lip. “I hope your… work thing is going well,” she says quietly. “It hasn’t been the same, not having you around.”

He sighs, muffled, as though trying to hide it. “I’m sorry. You know I’d fix it if I could.”

“I don’t—” She swallows. “You don’t need to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Give me the platitudes. I’m just letting you know your presence is missed.”

“It’s not a platitude.” Is he gritting his teeth? “I mean it.”

“Right.” She feels as though the demon is rattling around in her lungs, strangling her windpipe, furious. “I just hope you’ll let me know when you’re allowed to have a life again.”

That didn’t come out the way she’d meant it at all.

He’s quiet for a long moment. “What is that supposed to mean?” There’s a soft note of warning to his voice, and he sounds like a completely different person. Alarm bells go off in her brain, but the demon is riled up now.

“Nothing,” she deflects. “I’ve just been hanging out with my friends too much, I guess. They’ve all been super coupley lately so I tend to get hung out to dry in the process.”

“I don’t mean to leave you hanging,” he says, so softly she can barely hear him. “It’s just this one thing with work, and I’m so close to being done I can feel it, I just need you to understand.”

He sounds like he’s pleading with her, and her heart clenches. “Look, let’s just drop it. I’m just being selfish. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“I don’t want to drop it.” His voice hardens just the tiniest amount. “We’ve got this thing, and it’s
important to me, but work is important too—"

The demon flares up again. She furrows her brow. "‘This thing?’"

“You know what I mean—”

“Hang on, let me write home to the family and let them know the good news—”

“Stop it.”

She bites her lip so hard it draws blood, but she’s fighting a losing battle. She feels like plywood trying to block a hurricane.

“I guess I just don’t understand why our entire thing has to be put on standstill just because you have a job. Surely you have a few hours where you can meet up at a park, say hello, exchange some actual meaningful information so I know you’re not going to just disappear on me one day!”

“I don’t want to!”

The demon wins.

“Right,” she snaps. “Fine. I get it. You’ve got your priorities. Honestly, joke’s on me for not having my own, right?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

“Then talk to me,” she snaps. “Tell me something real, not some vague bullshit!”

“I can’t!” He’s raising his voice now, and the sound of his words filled with such anger send a shiver down her spine. “I can’t, I literally can’t, I can’t tell you anything because I’m not allowed to, because I want to protect you but you’re not the only person that matters! It’s not all about you! I’m doing everything I can to keep you safe, to keep other people safe, and in the meantime you roam around the city looking for demons like you have some idiot death wish and I’m the one who has to take responsibility for that! For you. So I’m sorry if I don’t have time to think about dinner dates right this second!”

His words feel like a slap. “You know what?” she snaps. “That’s just fine. You do your thing then, and you won’t have to hear a word about it from me. I would hate for you to have to take responsibility for me.”

The silence stretches between them for miles, for minutes, for an age, and the cracks in her armor get bigger with each second that goes by. She’s doing it again, the thing she does so well. Driving people away. Pushing them from her so she doesn’t have to deal with emotions she has no name for. With every word she speaks, she’s losing him more, and the thought causes her to shatter. He’s the one person she’s not sure she could bear to lose.

“You know,” she starts up again, voice barbed, sharp. “It’s interesting how you mention the demon thing, as if I don’t have just as much reason to worry that you might up and never text me again. You’re always going on about saving the bloody planet and I’m the crazy person for thinking you’re a vanishing act waiting to happen.”

“And I could say the same damn thing about you! If I could put it all aside for one measly day and have uninterrupted time with you, I would.” Cheese Man huffs. “But if I had to throw it all away entirely? I couldn’t do that. I can’t. Someone has to keep the lid on the pot. And besides, it has to be special, I’m not going to rush it just because you can’t trust me for a little while longer.”
“It’s always about being ‘special’ with you. All I want is for it to be real.”

“It will be real if you could just wait! Aren’t good things worth waiting for?”

“At the very least can’t we get rid of this stupid ‘clause of anonymity?’ It was cute and funny once but it’s so childish, we’re adults, I’m not a bloody stranger at this point!” She’s beyond tired of the ‘clause’ now and she can’t hold it in; it exists only as a barrier to keep him from her and she doesn’t understand it, never did.

“I’ve said multiple times that I can’t, I have my reasons,” he replies. She can hear that he’s nearly out of breath trying to field her frustrations.

“I could say my name right now and you couldn’t stop me, and where would that leave us?”

He pulls away from the phone for a flash. “What’s got you so impatient all of a sudden? Are you dying?”

Olivia’s vision feels foggy, the ability to see straight beyond the clouding of her rage is gone. “Is that supposed to be serious, or funny?” Each word becomes knives meant to dig, rip, flay. “Maker forbid I want to see you, that I want anything at all. I can’t do this.”

“Dog Lord, wait—”

“This was a mistake.”

The call disconnects.

Olivia chucks her phone into the crevices of the couch, hiding it away because the more she looks at it, the more tempted she is to dial those damnable numbers and speak her mind all over again—a habit that is starting to seem historically dangerous, comparable to dabbling in blood magic on oneself and binging Raider Queen’s Banana Bread before midnight. She clips Hessarian’s leash onto his collar and the two of them march out the front door, the heel of her palm dabbing at tears, now hidden by the wonderful invention that is sunglasses.

The weather report holds up. The temperature is mild and the sky dotted with few bright white, puffy clouds. Olivia gives the leash a little slack and allows Hessarian to plot the course for their outing; she doesn’t care where they go; the farther, the better. A couple streets down and the properties shoot up in value, each yard’s grass neatly trimmed down to specific inches and barrels of flowers adorning doorsteps; driveway lights that still look fantastic, even when turned off, even in the middle of the day; no lawn ornaments because this isn’t Orlais, no one is half as kitschy in this neighborhood.

At some point the sidewalk ends and a lush field begins—Olivia is late in realizing they’ve crossed into a park until she sees clutches of people walking dogs, feeding birds (despite the behest of signs not to), and milling about for no reason other than it’s a beautiful day. The park itself is sprawling, the grounds spilling into a swath of conifers on the other end, leading Maker knows where. In the middle of it all is a sizable lake where children sail paper boats, carried by the breeze.

It’s almost enough to forget what brought them here in the first place.

Leash laws are strict here, but Hessarian is the most well-behaved boy this side of Ferelden, so Olivia tasks herself with finding the most remote corner of the park possible. For his sake, she thinks, not hers. They make it to the fence of trees at the far end of the park and she unclips the leash, firmly pointing at his nose while saying, “Don’t do anything that’ll get us kicked out of here.”

Hessarian looks behind himself, sees a distant cluster of dogs, then sits down knowingly.
“Good boy.”

They wander around together for a while, weaving in and out of the small forest and back into the clearing. Hessarian finds himself a ball and for a time they’re content to play catch and fetch. The rote action of taking the ball and tossing it, however, gives way to regret creeping in. She’d made the right call leaving her phone at home, she thinks as she slumps back against a tree.

Olivia’s been unfair and self-centered and a thousand other admonishments that she’s been saving up for years. Before, she’d never bothered to stop herself and really consider what her words did to others; flightiness seemed an agreeable second skin, and as long as it didn’t hurt her parents enough that she couldn’t come home, it didn’t matter who else she dragged down in the process. And that was okay. People didn’t stick around much in her life, because Highever was sleepy even for a coastside city and they needed to move to places like Amaranthine and Denerim and even Kirkwall, as far from the castle walls as one could be.

But that doesn’t make it okay now.

She knows Cheese Man is doing his best, that he’s painfully earnest almost all of the time, even when it would behoove him not to be. Though he’s danced around the clear-cut truths of things like his job, Olivia has an idea of what it could be that would make him so privy to the inner-workings of the city and its cover-ups, its hang-ups. What would make him so keen and able to take down a demon and how he too abetted that cover-up. Still, Olivia tries to respect his privacy and his wishes, and she tries to believe that everything he’s ever said to her was real and it meant something.

But it’s hard when the thing that’s keeping her here, the thing she cares about more than anything else, more than life itself sometimes, is the thing that makes her want to run.

She doesn’t know how to reconcile that, she doesn’t even know where to begin.

They are friends with such an unspoken ‘and something more’ tacked on that it drives her nuts, and she’s tired of being chained to the uncertainty, of excuses to never meet. She feels like a hostage to fate, forced to accept that it cannot be, they cannot be, because the Maker wills it, the Elven gods will it, this stupid, shitty city wills it and that’s that. That’s not how she or any Cousland operates, yet it is demanded of her, and up until now she has lashed out as it chafes her, because Cheese Man is another thing she can try to drive out and away.

Maybe next he’ll suddenly find a reason to go back to Redcliffe or his childhood monastery, maybe he’ll be relocated to Lothering or some other podunk town that has no airport, no way to fly there and everything will change for him but nothing will change for me and life can cease to be a helter skelter. I don’t have to be anything anymore, I can go back to being me, whoever that was, even if it means “regressing.”

Cheese Man deserves better than who I am today, tomorrow, next week.

At some point she’s started crying again but only notices when the tears have left irritating streaks down her cheeks that are already halfway dried. As she scrubs at her face to drive the sensation away and leave herself feeling more raw, there’s a pulling sensation at her skin, all hair on her arms and neck pointing one way in particular. There’s a snap in the air, a cold vacuum sucking in someplace, vividly reminding her of the chill in the air during autumn. She can almost smell the sticky wet leaves and the slick asphalt, but there’s no actual smell at all, just memories of them.

Hessarian’s hackles stick up, his short fur creating the illusion of a mohawk, something that would be funny if he weren’t asserting his body between her and something that is crunching through the pine needles slowly, with purpose. Olivia dares to stick her neck out and peer behind the tree. Nothing.
She attempts to soothe Hessarian but he is unrelenting, now turning to to protect from something at the front.

Someone.

“Hidden hurts, she licks her wounds, but she reopens them, relishing. She’s never known how else to feel. If she makes herself hurt, if she makes the pain real, she can ignore the rest. No one can take that away.”

They’re muttering, wavering in the wind, and at first all Olivia takes in is their giant drooping hat. They keep muttering as they come closer to her but Hessarian creates a barrier, growling in defiance. This person seems so small, wearing clothes too big for their shaky frame; their pants are split open at the ankle, their shirt is a dizzying mess of mismatched patches and padding. From inside sleeves that swallow their hands, Olivia can see pasty skin, bright pink at the knuckles and at the nail beds.

“Each keystroke tapped with love, love, blossoming, like the black lotus back home. You wish you weren’t so sorry, that it weren’t so easy to make them hate you.”

“Excuse me?” Olivia says, squinting. She is torn between scooting forward and getting up to book it; she ducks her head to peer up under the brim of the hat and sees the person, the young man, underneath. His hair is like straw in color and appearance, his cheeks sunken and as pink as his knuckles, looking like a desperate attempt to prove he’s alive if nothing else. “Can I help you?”

He kneels down to get at Hessarian’s level, and the dog is still suspicious until he catches a whiff of the man’s hands. Hessarian’s tail whips around wildly, now excited and ready to jump, though he knows not to. The young man smiles. “He wants to be a good boy so he only barks at the neighbor when you’re not there to hear him.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t think we’ve met.” Olivia honestly doesn’t want to meet him and is looking for some way to escape the encounter, but her dog is so enraptured with this stranger who is now summoning treats from his sleeve.

“If you’d like, you can forget me.” He doesn’t make eye contact as he speaks, simply continues attending to Hessarian as if she doesn’t exist as much as she wishes he didn’t.

“Um.”

“But.” He finally looks up at her. His hat wobbles. “I hear you, you don’t have to be afraid.”

“I didn’t say anything?”

“Red and blue, over and over, the hot orange of your dreams. They bind you, but you’re not really bound. You’re not a demon. It’s okay to let go.”

Olivia shoots up, making the young man straighten himself up as well. It’s tense, or she thinks it’s tense, because this is how she imagined a stalker situation might go, if she were so unlucky to come across one. It’s him that should feel so unlucky, she thinks, stretching her fingers and readying for any sudden movements. “You know me from somewhere, I take it. You’ve seen me at work or out on a jog and thought you could follow me,” she tests him.

“No, I heard…” He trails off. “I heard you needing me.”

Olivia rolls her eyes. “I’m good, thanks.”

“I’m Cole,” he says, and it almost sounds like pleading. Like he’s begging to be listened to. “I heard
“Listen, kid, whatever you’re trying to sell me, I’m not buying it.” She reaches down and finds Hessarian’s leash and puts it back on. “There are other people in the park.” She looks around. “Somewhere.”

Cole becomes more squirrely, fidgeting with the wrappings around his palms. He face falls and it tempts Olivia into pitying him, because he looks so pathetic and sounds so sincere, albeit immensely creepy. Has he been rummaging through her garbages, or checking her phone? Leaving it at home was a mistake after all.

“He’s sorry,” Cole spits out. “You matter, but it’s not so easy to tell you.”

She blinks. “Cheese Man?” Olivia surges forward. “Did Cheese Man send you?”

“Ears ringing, your voice chiming, a candle in his darkness. With you he can see, but he can’t see you, and he knows it’s all his fault.” Cole’s eyes dart away from Olivia’s prying grasp. “He didn’t tell me to come, he doesn’t know me, but I heard him too. His pain led me to you.”

Something resonates in her, like a shockwave, billowing outward as she stumbles onto the reality that Cole, this thing, he’s not human. “Cole.” She speaks slowly, careful not to alarm him and turn unwarranted ire upon herself. “Are you… a demon?” Her feet feel rooted to the ground, regardless of what the answer might be, could be, probably is. She doesn’t think she could start a fight now but he seems feeble and Hessarian is here to take him, if no one else.

“No!” he replies, a little too forcefully. “I’m here to help, I want to help.”


“Yes.” Cole smiles like someone who has never known happiness, clunky and awkward, lips pulling back but not up. The eyes don’t crinkle. It still, somehow, feels real while being manufactured. “Compassion.”

“I’ll call you Cole, if that’s alright by you.”

“I like Cole better, too.”

Olivia thinks she knows a decent amount about spirits, but recognizes that a lot of her knowledge is based on speculation and studies that are inconclusive but are “pretty sure” they know what they’re talking about. Spirits come from the Fade, there are many types of spirits. If they’re here in our world, then the Veil must’ve been torn somewhere between here and wherever Cheese Man is. Cole is an anomaly outside of her areas of expertise, though, because he doesn’t look half as incorporeal as she was expecting.

Asking if he’s possessing some malnourished kid seems insensitive, though. Olivia doesn’t want to tip him into demonic transformation territory if she can help it.

“Let’s walk a bit,” she suggests. Hessarian follows on her right and Cole tags along on her left, looking past her to direct his mechanical smile at her dog, which excites him like no other. They head towards the lake in the center of the park and Olivia wonders, can anyone else see Cole? Does it look like she’s talking to no one in particular, or her dog?

“They see me,” Cole announces. Olivia shakes her head, feeling stupid that she doesn’t just ask questions while she has the opportunity. “I’m letting them see me like I let you see me. It makes you feel better.”
“Thanks. I think.”
“You’re welcome.”

They skirt the edges of one leg of the lake, away from where the children and elderly alike toss bird seed at ducks. Olivia remembers the stories her mother used to tell her about spirits of purpose and wisdom and how they would guide the greatest minds of Thedas, though she personally preferred the tales of spirits of valor and honor. She’d never heard of a spirit of compassion, only love, but it figures that that’s what Cheese Man would bring into this world. A creature of tenderness and concern from someone who inspires those very same feelings.

Out of nowhere, Cole begins his cryptic musings again. “Blinding, raging, racing. Desperate to end it so he can begin, flourishing. But he’s embarrassed, the secrets strangling him. She can’t know she can’t know, she’ll hate me but I like her I lo—”

“Cole!” Olivia’s eyes widen as she rounds on him. “Isn’t that private? Why do you know these things?” Her face feels like fire is lapping her lips, chin, ears. Her gut drops, her toes curl. Something morbid in her wants him to continue, but it’s not right, these are not his words to tell. “Tell me something he wants me to hear, not… that.”

“But he wants you to know.” Cole stops. “Oh. I think he would like to tell you himself, yes.” He ruminates on this while they continue their stroll. “A split lip and a jagged bone. He throws himself into the wind, for danger, for the sake of giving you a home.”

“Is Cheese Man hurt?”

“Yes? No? He pulls at his pain and sews it up, begs to never let you see him this way. Artful, hiding, he wants to peel back the layers but in his own way, coming clean.”

Olivia’s heart sinks. These are the things Cheese Man can’t articulate but he’s begging her to hear, understand, and she hasn’t been listening. For every line about forgetting the demon and not poking the proverbial bear, he’s been trying to protect her; yes, it’s obvious, but all her life people have been trying to protect her, mostly from herself, and she’s always been fighting it. They protect her because she’s reckless, he protects her because he cares. He can’t stand to see her hurt.

But what good is it if he’s hurt in the process, too?

She’s not good enough for him, she decides.

“No.” Cole says, placing a hand a little too firmly on her shoulder. “Stop. He doesn’t want that, it’s not what he means or thinks. He wants you to be nice to yourself, he wants you to work on it.” Cole smiles again—he’s getting better at it. “He wants to work on things together.”

Olivia files this information into the overflowing stack of things labeled “so fucking obvious, how are you an adult” and laughs a horrible and harsh laugh. How terrible must she be that a spirit of compassion had to come into her life via the man she’s never met but feels deeply for, and tell her that she needs to mature. Her mother must be losing her collective shit at the Maker’s side right now.

“Sea salt spray while everyone else wears black. They go to a better place. You want to go to a better place.”

“I like you better when you’re not digging into my psyche,” groans Olivia, filing that word puzzle into the place that only a licensed professional is allowed to go.

“Okay.” Cole nods.
They begin heading back the way Olivia came and she can see the street she traveled to get here, still lined with crystal grace and butterflies, though it all looks a shade different now. There’s no telling how much time she has left with Cole, and it’s with a selfish twinge that she wants to probe him for more insight on Cheese Man. Something happier, sweeter, if he can even ‘hear’ or pick up on that kind of thing.

Knowingly, Cole grabs at her elbow and looks at it, a little shy. “Freckles that number the stars, he hates the skin, the nose, the eyes. Black sheep, cast out, a mistake. He wants a new name, one that keeps the bile down, one that fills your mouth.”

Olivia wraps Hessarian’s leash around her hand, does her own fidgeting in the way of coiling and uncoiling a few locks of hair. “If you can read my mind, why would you think that was a happier thing to hear from him?” She frowns.

Cole releases her elbow and backs away, and she wonders if this is how he’ll disappear. Walking, walking, walking. She wants to thank him for… whatever he may have done. Woken her up, she supposes? Slapped her upside the head with cryptic obviousness? Olivia grimaces inwardly at how stupid she is, but meeting a spirit was still nice in and of itself.

Finally, Cole says, “He only wants to hear his real name in your mouth before you go.”

Olivia’s heart and stomach collide on their way to her throat as she feels a pang of guilt and desperation. Hessarian senses the urgency and lunges forward, back up the street that led them here and Olivia wastes no time in picking up the pace. She never looks back to see if Cole is still there, watching her. She doesn’t need to know. She needs her damn phone.

Wrestled from the trenches between the couch cushions, Olivia wields her phone, holding it high before clutching it close, a lost treasure now restored. There’s no time to second-guess what she needs to tell him as she dials his number, digit by digit, and lo, he picks up on the first ring.

There’s no hiding the smile she keeps for him at the thought that he has been waiting, regardless of the fact that he has had to wait for her at all. She never wants him to wait again.

“Cheese Man, I—”

“Dog Lord!”

Hearing his out of breath excitement has her heart skipping. “I’m sorry,” she starts.

“No, I’m sorry,” he interrupts. “That dying thing, I never should’ve said that, and—”

“Tiger Emoji. You were right, I—there was this thing that happened to me, but, ugh, I shouldn’t have needed divine intervention to see that I was riling you up, that I was trying to start shit. I’m always starting shit.”

“It’s true, you are.”

“Thank you.” She rolls her eyes but doesn’t have it in her to be annoyed.

“I like that about you, don’t get me wrong. But learn from the best! Sock, meet mouth. It’s saved my life many a-time, believe me,” he chuckles.

“This is an utter roundabout, isn’t it? We keep going in circles, it’s not getting any better or easier,”
Olivia says, rubbing her forehead. “I’ve got to stop taking it out on you.”

“I’m known for my eerie resemblance to a punching bag, I completely understand.”

“That’s *not* what you are to me. I just… I have to know it’s going somewhere, that it will happen, and that’s so hard sometimes. One minute we’re so damn close, we’re on the cusp of meeting, and then magically there’s no time to do it. A girl gets confused! But you mean it when you say it’s out of your hands.”

“Dog Lord, I—” he audibly gulps. “I don’t want to be away from you any longer than I have to. I’m working myself to the bone, day and night. All I’ve got keeping me going sometimes is that you’re waiting at the end of this deep, dark tunnel. Ah, err, that sounded more poetic in my head. It’s true, though. I want to be there for you, there’s just also *everyone else*.”

“Can’t you be kinder to yourself? It sounds a bit like you’ve got a savior complex. Not everyone’s going to die because you’ve let up for a breath. Ferelden’s favorite spy shouldn’t be carrying this much weight on his shoulders, it’s not fair to you.”

“I do it because I want to. I want to protect the people I love.”

Olivia hums in understanding.

“Because…” Cheese Man trails off.

“What was all that about ‘it has to be special?’” She laughs. “Don’t spoil it.”

They each take a breather; Olivia finally starts to feel her breath and pulse even out. Individually they collect their thoughts and she takes the time to putter around, idly narrating what she’s doing so he knows she’s not far. She feeds Hessarian, straights the couch cushions from when she decimated them to retrieve her phone, and sets out the ingredients for dinner.

“Did you work today?”

“Unfortunately.” He’s groaning and if she were to strain her ears, she could probably hearing the popping of tired joints. The sound of a weary hand rubbing at the back of a neck. Shoes being toed off and a body collapsing.

“How was it?” Olivia plucks a post-it note from the fridge with a tiny recipe on it, written in Leliana’s tidy script.

“I can’t say much…”

“I know. Tell me how you are, though. Any good news about bad news? Did Rabbit Emoji show up? Is Cullen still a bit of a tool?”

That gets Cheese Man to laugh, finally, an effervescent sound that, if she’d been any more reckless, she could’ve lost it forever. It’s too often that she has to reflect and think that, she’s so exhausted living life dancing on this edge. She tells him as such.

“You’re not going to lose me,” he tries to assure her. She’s not wholly convinced. “All I have to do is wait for this one person to message me, and then I can go do this thing, and then I do the thing, and then I’m done! I’ll be free!”

“You make it sound so simple,” she says, sticking her tongue out.
“Andraste’s arse, I wish it were.”

Olivia sighs. “If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride.”

“Easy for you to say, you’ve got horses.”

“That’s not—what does that even mean? That’s not remotely what I meant.”

“Such privilege, coming from the lord of dogs. After all this time I’d thought I’d humbled you a bit.”

“You trying to reverse My Fair Lady me?”

“I heard they’re trying to remake that movie, this time with a qunari or an elf instead of a human who doesn’t look like she’s come close to being destitute in her entire life in the first place.” She can hear him tapping his phone, scrolling down the screen as they talk.

“What! That movie’s such a classic, I don’t know why they bother. Though that could be an interesting story if they do it right, there’s some commentary to be made—gods, you love to deflect.” Olivia sets aside all the ingredients, now chopped and placed in superfluous bowls whose sole purpose is for ickle servings of onions, oils, and spices and literally nothing else. You could take Leliana out of Orlais but you could not take Orlais, or any of its stupid cooking methods, out of Leliana. “I should get going, I need to cook dinner and not burn any part of it this time. Can you promise me something?”

Cheese Man doesn’t hesitate. “Yes, of course. I’ll try to, anyway.”

Olivia rests a knife over the sink and steps out of the kitchen, as though trying to hide from prying ears. “Be safe. Wherever you go, whatever you’re about to do, you’ll come back to me in one piece.”

“Can you promise me the same thing?” he asks.

“I’m staying, I promise. Now promise me.”

“I promise I won’t do anything too stupid. But if the opportunity arises to do some sweet action hero stunts, well, I can’t be held accountable for what happens after that.” Cheese Man practically grins through the phone, and she wants to punch what is no doubt a winsome smile.

“Oh you’re useless.”

“You don’t think that.”

“I do.”

“You’re liiiiing,” he sings.

“I’m hanging uuup,” she warbles in return.

He giggles—actually giggles how is that possible and also so cute—but before it grows infectious, she says her goodbyes and hangs up. Properly, this time.

(22:09) We need to talk. Again.

(22:10) Uh oh, should I be worried?? 😒
(22:10) It’s not that it’s bad, it’s more that I didn’t say enough. We always get so distracted talking about other things and if I’m going to be less of a fucking harpy of a person, I can’t let us get away with that

(22:11) You deserve so much better, and I could continue on that train of thought, but that leaves room for you to be *you* and deprecate and act like you deserve to be yelled at or not given the time you need to live your life.

(22:11) Tiger Emoji, do what you’ve got to do. Save those little cheeses. If you need anything from me, whether it’s historical expertise or an ear to listen to whatever you’ve got going on, I will give it to you.

(22:12) I’m going to learn patience, I swear. I don’t think anyone could blame me for wanting this to happen already 😢 but I know that it’s special. To me as well as you. You are worth waiting for. You have to admit that this whole… situation is very confusing though

(22:12) We still haven’t met and this feels so life or death. I’m afraid it’ll slip through my fingers if I fuck up, yet I keep fucking up!

(22:14) Dog Lord, I…

(22:14) I’m sorry too. 😢

(22:14) I’m sorry I called it a thing. It’s a thing! But idk, it’s more than a thing. It’s hard to call it a thing. Thing doesn’t look like a word anymore, wow

(22:15) I can’t stress it enough that you’re important to me and what’s best for everyone is what’s best for you as well. I’m not trying to baby you and act like “bah bah I’m the man I know what’s what!” because hah, can you imagine? Me trying to tell you something like that with a straight face?

(22:15) You could try it, but it’d be the last time you ever did 😅

(22:15) Exactly!! I don’t know everything, I don’t even know everything you’ve ever been through. One day we’re going to sit down together and have a long chat and we’ll… talk about things. Properly. It’s overdue, but so much can’t be said yet.

(22:16) Part of it is because Cullen said I couldn’t! I’ve been sitting on my nice texting thumbs and they’re gathering dust, all because Cullen won’t let me say a word.

(22:16) If I ever get to speak to Cullen, I may have to strangle him.

(22:16) He’s also doing what he thinks is best, you know

(22:17) Okay but sometimes he’s rude to you and it’s bad enough I’m rude to you, but him?? Intolerable!!

(22:18) If I’m… If I indulge that dark part of me that doesn’t know how to comprehend things like Natural Emotions

(22:18) I’ve got to be the bigger person and remove myself from the situation. I say over and over that I can’t keep doing this and then I do it and it’s too cyclical
(22:18) I'll help you break the vicious cycle 😊

(22:19) Because I want to. Not because I have to.

(22:19) I care about you so much and, ha, it’s been touch and go every now and then, hasn’t it? I don’t have a clue what I’m doing!! 😒

(22:19) Can we talk some more tomorrow? I want to get up early and maybe talk to you a bit before work, if that’s alright? I know that I can’t completely neglect you even while this is going on. I don’t want anything to change

(22:20) We synchronizing our watches?

(22:20) 6?

(22:20) Yikes.

(22:20) 6:30? Please, I am but a mortal woman. I know you have an Andraste fetish or something but I can only do so much

(22:21) I’m getting up at 6 either way. Sleep well, Dog Lord, sweet dreams 😊

(22:21) Yeah, sleep well. Get your beauty rest 😊

Monday

(6:01) My alarm was set for 6:30 but I couldn’t sleep that long

(6:01) Did you……miss me

(6:01) 😏😏

(6:01) Absolutely not.

(6:02) Alright, maybe a little.

(6:02) I got up before the alarm because I didn’t…want to waste any time 😞

(6:02) As long as I don’t feel alone in being a bit pathetic 😘

(6:03) Can I just say that I’m still surprised you want to meet me

(6:03) Do you never worry that it won’t have been worth it? We’ll meet up and chat to each other like we’re still strangers somehow

(6:03) 😈 Never!

(6:04) We’re going to show up, I’m going to magically recognize you (sshh, don’t let the templars know I can do that), then I’ll bend my knee and swear fealty to you, the Lord of Dogs.
(6:04) If I ever see you get down on your knee in front of me, I’m going to make sure you can’t ever get back up 😞

(6:04) 😞

(6:05) Not even

(6:05) I mean

(6:05) What?

(6:05) Are you okay? Are you having a senior moment

(6:06) 😘 what’s it to you

(6:06) What if I tore up the clause of anonymity, only to reveal myself as actually being 65 years old? 😘

(6:06) Don’t joke about that, I’ve thought about it, I’ve tried to put those nightmares to bed

(6:06) Besides, you sent me a photo of your hand. That didn’t look like a geriatric hand.

(6:07) Could’ve been someone else’s hand 😘

(6:07) No.

(6:07) 😘

(6:07) I’m going back to sleep.

(6:10) ...you didn’t really fall back asleep, did you?

(6:10) snzzzzz

(6:10) I’ll send you another picture of my hands, to ease your fears and all.

(6:11) snzzz—oh?

(6:11)
(6:12) You will LITERALLY perish.

(6:12) I

(6:12) yOU

(6:12) Senior moment? 😐

(6:12) ANGRY MOMENT

(6:13) It's because I got your hopes up, isn't it

(6:13) Silly me, wanting to see a part of your body again, to know you’re not an evil robot or a 65 year old man trying to worm his way into my heart

(6:13) Silly me, deriving pleasure from knowing you’re a real person and someone I may meet one day

(6:13) We’ll still meet! I’ll go as far as my old joints will take me

(6:14) Nope, I’m never leaving my house again, lest I see you and the rage comes back. The meeting’s off

(6:14) Okay wait I’m joking

(6:14) Begone, old man. Perish elsewhere! Goodbye!

(6:14) Dog Loooord. Also, pleasuuure? 😏

(6:15) I’m not switching gears on this conversation. You showed me old man fingers, there’s no coming back from that for at least 3 hours. I need to rest and recharge and imagine I’m talking to literally anyone else now

(6:15) And to think I thought you were my best friend.

(6:15) I am!!

(6:16) I miss Cheese Man, wherever he may be. He’s lost to me, so far away. Hopefully dead though
because he was a wicked man

(6:16) 😏

(6:17) I just drank from the fountain of youth, it’s okay. I’m back.

(6:17) It hasn’t been 3 hours yet, I’m not ready for the real Cheese Man

(6:18) The Real Cheese Man has to get ready for work, though… So…

(6:18) Interesting.

(6:26) Okay I do have to get ready to get out the door 😞

(6:26) Wait, seriously? This early?

(6:26) My hours are a bit different now, I have to be ready for anything at almost any hour 😞

(6:26) Cullen’s pulling all-nighters, though that’s not anything new. He was kind of born to be in a state of perpetually headache-and-crankiness, so I’ve stopped trying to tell him to go home and sleep it off

(6:27) Be safe. Please.

(6:27) Even if we can’t talk as much, please pop in every so often so I know you’re safe. Even though the demon’s been killed and that slaver was caught, I know there’s something worse out there and you’re preparing to fight it or something.

(6:28) Don’t do anything stupid, even if it’ll make you look cool. Girls don’t love scars half as much as they say they do!

(6:28) I’ll be good, I promise.

(6:28) I can’t keep you waiting forever!

(6:28) I’ll have to send Hessarian out to find you. He’ll sniff all the P.O. box things you’ve given me and he will track you down.

(6:29) I’ll be thinking of you!

(6:30) 😞 😊

(11:33) I’m at lunch, what are you up to? 😏

(11:34) Flipping through this racy novella to see how low the standards are for smut since the last time I peeked at some steamy fiction

(11:34) I want to go on record saying the only time I’ve ever intentionally looked at smut was when I was a pre-teen and I found a pile of this trash under my mum’s bed. Very influential but very misleading!

(11:34) 😏 Shouldn’t you be working?
(11:35) Nah, I finished most of my work already. Didn’t have a lot to do, actually

(11:35) Listen to this one: “his hand crept up her inner thigh, already slick with desire.” She pee herself? Why’s her thigh wet?? My thigh’s never been wet, this is unrealistic.

(11:36) Maybe you’ve never been with someone that could make your thigh wet 😳

(11:36) Oh Tiger Emoji, that someone is not going to be you. Not because I don’t want it, but please, if that’s the kink standard, I’m going to have to become vanilla as all get out.

(11:36) Maker no, none of… that, gods, subject change, Dog Lord, please

(11:37) Maybe her thigh was wet from his tongue? I mean. You never know.

(11:37) Then how was it slick “with desire.”

(11:37) Find another line!

(11:38) “His meat thermometer pulsated, vibrating with lust, ready to take a plunge.”

(11:38) I’m ready to take a plunge.

(11:38) Excuse me???

(11:38) Off the deep end!!

(11:39) Hmm, that could be a euphemism. Unless you really would rather die than endure any more of this 😐

(11:39) As the Orlesians say, la petite mort?

(11:39) Tiger Emoji! Scandalous 😜

(11:40) You know how to say anything else in Orlesian? Ladies rather like when you speak a little Orlesian between their legs, or so I’ve heard

(11:40) I imagine Fereldan ladies aren’t too fond of it though, so I guess we’ll never know 😏

(11:41) You DO know some Orlesian don’t you? I swore I’d never accuse you of being Orlesian ever again, so you’re allowed to say you took it in school for your obligatory language course. I won’t tell anyone if you tell me what you know 😗

(11:41) I know… some things

(11:41) Why would I tell you now when I could surprise you later?

(11:42) It’s your lunch break, go find a bathroom stall and call me!

(11:42) You really hate surprises that much? 😏

(11:42) Obviously!

(11:43) Oh nooo my lunch break is ending so soooon
(11:43) You’re a filthy liar.

(11:44) 😞

(11:45) That’s the problem with you Chantry boys. You’re raised all secluded and it twists you up in unspeakable ways.

(11:45) **I can neither confirm nor deny what my upbringing in the monastery did to me** 😞

(11:46) “Her thighs parted as she sighed into his mouth, eyelashes fluttering closed, tongues and legs tangled in an embrace she didn’t dare escape. Nails raked a path down his bare back, he moaned, she moaned; they rocked together in tandem.”

(11:46) Are they gonna fuck or what? His pants are still on.

(11:47) **Put that book away already!**

(11:47) Or what? What are you gonna do 😞

(11:47) **I can’t say “handcuff you” because that’s what you’d want, and we can’t have that** 😞 😞

(11:48) You’re never letting me have any fun! If I wanted handcuffs, you’d probably bring out real ones instead of fuzzy ones. If I wanted to be tied up, you’d give me twist ties. If I wanted to be spanked, you’d tell me to do it myself!

(11:48) 🖊 mhmm, uh-huh

(11:49) Don’t mind me, I’m taking notes. What do I do if you tell me what to do? Don’t listen? 🖊️ OK

(11:49) I mean

(11:49) You just

(11:52) Oh! Lunch break is actually over now. Thanks for keeping me company, Dog Lord! 😊

(11:53) Any...time…

(11:53) **You really should put that book away and help your coworkers any way you can**

(11:54) You

(11:54) 👉🏼 📚

(11:55) Byeee 👋

(14:00) Alright, now it’s my turn to be on break

(14:00) I considered buying that book but I’d rather save my money
(14:03) I’m disappointed in you

(14:03) Why, for not buying that book? I could write a better book myself, I’ve more talent in my pinky toe than that author does in their whole body 😏

(14:03) No, not about that.

(14:04) I just thought you were unflappable. The unfazeable Dog Lord 😏 Seems I misjudged you.

(14:04) I wasn’t expecting you to play along is all

(14:04) Round 2: Fight 🙊

(14:05) I’m more of a pacifist, personally. A follower, not a leader. You’ll just have to tell me what to do 😏

(14:06) This again

(14:06) I can’t believe any of this is even working

(14:06) You told me to never use pick up lines on people and all I was doing that time was asking a girl if she’d ever licked a lamppost in winter 😬

(14:07) A who in the what now

(14:07) Sweetheart, why. What does that mean.

(14:07) Is that a euphemism? Were you really asking a nice woman if she’d ever done THAT

(14:09) I didn’t mean anything by it! I first heard it in the monastery, during my Templar training, and the boy who said it got his ear boxed by the Sister watching over us. It sounded flirtatious but she didn’t seem to think so…

(14:09) How can you straddle the line of being so naive and so dirty at the same time

(14:10) How could I ever underestimate you

(14:10) It’s all part of my natural charm, I think 😏

(14:11) Nooo don’t use cute emojis while you say these things, it’s too pure

(14:11) I’m a force to be reckoned with 😈

(14:11) Nooo it’s too cute!!

(14:15) Je veux t’embrasser

(14:15) ???

(14:15) What does that mean?

(14:15) My lunch is ending, I don’t have time to google it!
Olivia sits in her driveway for an upwards of twenty minutes, considers the best way to distill the ‘lightning in a bottle’ feeling that’s shooting through her veins. Though her phone is silent, she can still hear and feel the vibrations and text notifications in her mind as though they were happening now; she’s reliving each rush of blood to her cheeks, each twitch of her fingers, the bouncing of her knee in anticipation. The sheer embarrassment she had to endure at the hands of Leliana because she couldn’t bother to use a translation website for simple Orlesian.

Leliana had leaned in close and whispered the words right into her ear, and though it was a feminine voice, Olivia has an active enough imagination to be able to mentally run it through her head and recreate it in his tones.

“Je veux t’embrasser.”

Was this his way of making up for lost time, making it “real?” Perhaps Cheese Man still felt bad for yesterday even though she’s tried to make it clear that it’s not his fault, he doesn’t owe her anything but a fraction of his time every now and then. He didn’t have to go and say *that* to prove himself.

Is it bad, though, that she enjoys it so much?

Confirmation that there’s something there, deep and unexplored and she’s clawing at the surface, eager to break through and identify what it is. Besides the, ah, *obvious*. Olivia’s fingers clench into a fist; she hops out of her car and speeds through her front door, hoping none of her neighbors saw her fumbling with the locks and assumed she was breaking in with her sloppy technique.

The longer she dwells, the more lightheaded she feels, utterly convinced that she’s on the precipice of a breakthrough. Olivia powers through the motions of winding down for the evening; feeding herself, bathing herself, anything to pass the time as she tries to push out the feverish greed for formless things, the daring hope that he’ll show up on her doorstep *right now* and take her away.

That’s silly.

She’s being silly.

Her phone rings, jolting her awake from her daydreams of fingers running through her hair, those freckled fingers—the caller ID reads “Cheese Man.” She snatches it up and scrambles to press the button while demanding that her body stop squirming like a pubescent schoolgirl. Despite her efforts, she’s still smiling like a git into the phone when she says hello.

“I’m calling to let you know I got home safely, in case you were worried.” Cheese Man sounds wheezy, as though he’d run a marathon and had forgone water for the sake of making the phone call at the finish line.

“I, ah—” Shit. She’d forgotten all about her concern that he might randomly ‘poof’ into nothingness, because she was too busy entertaining her *crush*. “Thank you, Tiger, I really do appreciate that. Now you’re to do this every day, come rain or snow.”

“Really?”
“Not really, but I’m not opposed to hearing your voice more often, every now and again.”

With no preparation, Cheese Man launches into a vague recollection of how his day went and Olivia takes the opportunity to sneak into bed and snuggle under the covers. He mentions blood samples, she assumes he’s into forensics or is having an outrageously bad day as a crime scene cleaner; he grumbles about the copy machine being on the fritz and someone borrowing all of his favorite pens but never returning them and she wonders if he’s got an office job where people get murdered every once in a while.

Outside, sirens wail.

In the spaces between daydreams and fantasies, she prefers imagining that he performs the mundane on the regular and only touches of the extraordinary bleed into his work life. The realities of what he’s saying, that people like him really do disappear for a slew of reasons, are horrifying. She wishes he’d be more subtle about it, enough so that she wasn’t able to speculate in gruesome detail whether he sees dead bodies or tangoes with violence or is maybe a bomb squad negotiator.

Olivia draws her knees up as the sirens scream louder and closer.

“I’m sorry for dumping this all on you,” he confesses.

“As hard as it is for me to hear,” she admits, “I want you to be able to confide in me. You survived the day, though, that’s what’s important.”

“Doesn’t feel like I did it in one piece.”

She clenches her skin and leaves fingernail dents in the uneven surface of her knee. “I don’t know what you do.” (But she has a very vivid idea.) “But you can’t let it chip away at you. Think of the future, think of the Thedas Space Program. Think of the vacation time you’re no doubt going to earn from all this.”

Cheese Man laughs, but sounds withdrawn from the idea. “I loved my job—no, I love it, still do. I’ve never really known anything else but what I do. It didn’t use to bother me, but…”

“But?”

“Talking to you made me realize I could have a life outside of work. I never thought anything of the fact that I never have money to treat myself, even though it’s really a choice that I put Duncan up someplace extravagant; I only did that because I didn’t consider that I should have something nice myself. I find that I don’t like myself all that much. Weird, huh?”

Olivia snuggles closer into the phone. “Really? I never would’ve guessed you felt that way about yourself.” She stops for a second. “I wish you didn’t, though. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes.” Someone who is so dedicated to making the world a better place should have the world eating from the palm of their hand. Someone who is never cruel, always gentle should be so blessed. Someone like you may not be perfect, but you don’t deserve to think you’re anything less than.

“No skin off my nose,” Cheese Man chuckles, a bit nervously. “And I’ve got a lot of it.”

“I really doubt it’s as big as you purport.”

“You’d be surprised!”

The sirens die off somewhere out south, letting the newly-birthed crickets have their due. Most birds have gone to sleep but some still carp; in the living room, Hessarian snuffles and scavenges for
crumbs beneath the couch. Olivia is swallowed up by the symphony of spring’s new sounds, though she finds herself more expectant of and lost in the sound of breathing through the receiver. “Can I ask you a question? And you’ve got to be honest with me.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“When we meet…” She steps off the trail of her words for a moment, unsure of how best to phrase it. “What do you want it to be?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we’ve joked about it being not-a-date, and then it was the date that’s still not-a-date, and then it felt like we were leaning into the idea of it being a date, with some trepidation here and there. What are we calling it? What do you want it to be?”

Cheese Man sputters. “What I want?” She lets him take his time, though she fears her silence is pressuring him. Before she can assure him though, he speaks, and his voice is nervous and soft, just like the first time she’d ever heard it. “I do want it to be a date. If—if you do.”

Olivia smiles, wide and bright, her face briefly mashed into the pillow. “Yeah,” she says, sounding collected to mask the swirl of joy inside her throat and chest. “I do. A proper date.”

“Still at Andrastea, though, right? I’ve had my heart set on the place for so long, it seems only fitting that it be there.” Cheese Man affects his familiar sheepish tone. “I could put a rose on the table like I’d always planned.”

“Oh, what, you don’t me to identify you by your hands or your lack of unnecessary appendages?” she teases.

“I’ll tell you I have horns but I’ll reaaally be wearing a headband with plastic horns on them.”

“And I’ll sit down at the table of the first qunari I can find, giving you dirty looks all the while because I won’t stoop to your level.”

“But you’ll really have fake pointy ears on, won’t you?”

Olivia smirks. “Am I that obvious?”

Cheese Man laughs, and she could swear he must be smirking too. “You think you’re above me and my shenanigans, Dog Lord, but you’re a classic case of a rowdy princess who does naughty things for the sake of shirking tradition.”

“A common trope in your templar erotica, I take it. So that makes you the dashing templar who seeks to tame and-slash-or win the princess over despite how uncouth she is, yeah?” Olivia snickers. “Tell me how that trope works out for you.”

“Heyyyyy, I feel like it already has, thank you very much.”

Bless the Maker that he cannot see her as she holds her cheeks in her hands in a pisspoor attempt to make them stop burning.

“It’s my turn to ask you a… stupid question, I suppose.”

Olivia closes her eyes, scrunches up her face. “Is it actually stupid or are you being rude to yourself? Again.”
He huffs. “Well if this is a date, are we… Dating? Do you have to be dating to be on a date, or is a
date the precursor to dating?” He sighs and she hears him clap a hand to his face. “I’ve never done
this properly before, I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“Hmm.” She chews this around in her mouth for a bit; as tempting as it sounds to label it and go out,
guns blazing, unashamed of how nonsensical it would be to call it anything before they’ve met, it’s
just that. It’s crazy. “I hate to break it to you, but I don’t think I can be your girlfriend.”

“Wh—”

“‘Hello,’” she interrupts, imitating a fake, nasally voice. “‘This is my girlfriend, Dog Lord. I don’t
know what she does for a living but this is my girlfriend, Dog Lord. Oh, yeah, Dog Lord? Love of
my life, sure do wish I knew what she looked like.’”

Cheese Man cuts her off, with laughter instead of sharp annoyance. “I get it!” he manages between
snorts. “I thiiink I see where you’re coming from. How is that any weirder than the rest of what
we’ve done?”

“Oh, you mean like the phone sex,” Olivia chirps.

He chokes. “Yes,” he says, sounding strangled. “Like that.” It takes a while for the laughter to die
down, in between more teases of “remember when you said this?” as if it were so long ago, as if
they’d known each other for an Age instead of a handful of months.

“Do you ever stop and think about how funny it is that this is how we met,” Cheese Man says, a little
more somber, the traces of humor gone. “Cullen gave me a wrong number, just because he didn’t
want to talk to me outside of work. No one gave me the time of day when I went home, and I rarely
left the house much.”

“Like I said, I’d like to strangle that man.”

“But ever since we’ve started talking, I’ve been much more social, so it worked out! I realized I have
a lot more friends than I thought. But,” he admits, “you’ve always been my favorite. Even when I
barely knew you.”

“In a way, you still barely know me.” Though she protests, it fills her belly with warmth and her skin
pebbles with goosebumps. “We’ve still got to get physical chemistry sorted before we dive in
headlong.”

Cheese Man fumbles. It sounds like he’s dropped something a little heavy. “What if I’m bad at that?”

“There’s nothing inherently sexual about physical chemistry, if that’s what you’re worried about, you
don’t need to be experienced to feel it. I mean more along the lines of being comfortable around each
other, being okay with hanging out. Before holding hands, we need to be able to string coherent
sentences together and then be able to sit in silence for a good while, without it being awkward.
Which, by the way,” she adds. “It’s going to be awkward at first.”

“You know me so well.”

“No, I know me so well.” Olivia is a smooth operator for the most part, but she’s got a strong feeling
in her gut that she’s going to be a tongue-tied puddle on the ground when she meets him. “We’ll
cross these bridges when we get to them.”

“Now you’ve got me all impatient!” Cheese Man pouts, endearing himself to her even further and
further, even as he whines. “Being a spy is such hard work. Tomorrow I’ve got to fraternize with the
nobility and by sundown I have to stop an assassination plot. Where am I supposed to fit my real life in?"

“Now, now. You said you loved your job, you knew this when you signed up.”

“I suppose, if I get wrapped up in the plot too deeply and I never return—”

“Ah, my greatest fear!” Olivia fakes a gasp.

“—then I must leave you with my name.”

“Oh?”

“It’s…”

“It’s…?”

His voice turns dramatic as she hears him sigh and slump against what she assumes is his bed or a couch. “Thaddeus Gigantus Crumbum the Third.”

Olivia is shocked into silence.

Until, “So you’re telling me you’re actually a stone golem, who is also sixty-five years old and has old man fingers?”

“Mmhmm.”

“I rescind my offer. Cheese Man, I do not want to date you.”

“Aww!”

Olivia curls up in her bedsheets; Hessarian has now joined her and he licks her face as she laughs at her friend’s desperate attempts to win her back over. “I’m giving you the puppy dog eyes, I’m sorry!”

“I’ve got enough puppy dog eyes in my life, do better,” she laughs, narrowly avoiding a tongue down her throat as Hessarian stomps all over her torso. The dog is wrestled off and away, sent to the corner of the bed to sulk at playtime having been ruined, while Olivia takes deep breaths to restore her resting heart rate. A yawn slips out.

“Tired?” Cheese Man asks.

“Ah.” She relents. “A bit.”

“Would you stay on the phone with me while I fell asleep?” Cheese Man catches her yawn and lets out an even bigger one. “Half this conversation I haven’t even been able to think straight. It hasn’t been noticeable, has it?”

“Oh, so all that gibberish was supposed to mean something.”

“Ha, ha. Could you read me something to help me sleep? Not a history book, I’ve learnt my lesson there.”

“I have an advanced copy of The Viper’s Nest’s sequel, if you’re interested.” Olivia pulls Varric Tethras’s latest book out of her bedside table. She hasn’t found time to read it just yet, but now was as good a time as any to start.
“Aww, spooilers,” Cheese Man says inside of another yawn.

“You won’t remember any of this tomorrow, no doubt.” She turns to the first page.

“I haven’t finished The Viper’s Nest in… the first… place.”

“Shh, go to sleep.”

“Goodnight, Dog Lord, I hope you… snzzz well.”

It takes little to no time for him to start snoring, leaving no point in reading to him. Still, she rolls each word slowly in her mouth, gives every adjective a bit more purpose, whispers the verbs as close to his ear as they can get. One day, perhaps, they will do this in person, in her bed or his. It would be innocuous, she imagines, him resting his head on her chest, arm wrapped around her waist. She doesn’t know how it would look, how he looks—she’s never wanted to get her hopes up or imagine someone that is not her Cheese Man—but it would feel right. She has no doubts about their “physical chemistry.”

Olivia plugs her phone in so as not to lose him and puts the book away.

She has one tiny, single regret as she drifts off. She wishes he could have read his text out loud, the Orlesian one, the phrase that has had her insides coiled up all afternoon and evening, poised to evaporate.

Je veux t'embrasser.

She wants him to say it, translated.

I want to kiss you.

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Chapter End Notes

I don't want to make these notes overly long (I don't know how many people even read them, really) because I think it goes without saying that we're very sorry that it took almost a literal year to update. There was no doubt in my mind that it would update, but with life being so... terrible and stressful, I worried that there would be no time. We've gotten an unexpected influx of comments these past 2 weeks, though, and that pushed us into finally dedicating the time to write what needed to be written. We really, truly, could not do this without the support of all the people who read the fic :;

Extra shout-outs go to Kary, Liz, and Nell, and anyone else who donated and made life so much less stressful when we thought we couldn't continue any longer <3

I think we've dragged out their suffering long enough, wouldn't you agree? Not to spoil too much but the ~crime~ subplot finally gets its conclusion next chapter - which I'm very nervous about! In the meantime, we hope you enjoyed them being their usual, emotionally stunted selves B)

(I've been so paranoid that after a year this update will not have been worth it, and
someone did say that it was hard to keep up with a fic that rarely updated, so I'm going to try really hard to get chapter 16 out within this decade kdsjfbshk)

Our personal blogs:
Tijgertje
Carouselfancy
And our fic blog, for updates about upcoming chapters or if you'd like to talk to us! And for extra stuff, like art and playlists c:
Wednesday

From: 🌴 Zevran 🌴

(8:22) I have news for you, my friend.

(8:22) It’s happening. Keep your phone on you at all times.

Alistair freezes. He clicks his phone off and sits at his desk for a long time, burrowing into his coat despite the wall heater clunking away at full blast from where it squats in the corner. Even with all of the build-up, the weeks of waiting, the overtime and increasingly bad diet he’s been adopting, Alistair didn’t expect it to happen. Ever. It’s all felt rather mythical, following the leads of the biggest case he’s ever worked alongside his partner, getting down and dirty, seeing numerous dead bodies that all lead back to one man.

This time last year was the first time Alistair had ever dealt with a murder firsthand. Now, he’s dealt with so many, just hearing the number on its own makes him sick.

He considers warning Cullen ahead of time, but the man is hunched over in his desk chair, crisp cotton shirt wrinkling where it rises and falls over his slumbering chest. Should let the man have his cat naps, Alistair thinks, quietly turning in his chair to face away, as though that makes any difference.

This should excite him, Zevran’s texts. Instead, they make the creases in his palms become waterways, dripping with fear as well as sweat. There’s sweat behind his ears, under his arms. He licks his top lip and comes away with the tang of salt.

An hour goes by and there’s still no news, though the scenery has changed. Cullen is awake now, his pen gliding across forms that need signatures. Rainier has only just sat down and is poring over the emails he’s received since last night. Barris is trimming his miniature potted tree while Mhairi asks him for tips on how to take care of a plant she’s recently received as a gift while bemoaning her lack of a green thumb.

To try to soothe his frantic mind, Alistair heads to the floor’s kitchen and fills a kettle with water, firing up a burner with his other hand. In the time it takes for the steam to eek out and the kettle to whistle, his thoughts have fled to safer havens—the ever present Dog Lord. Carrying his still-steeping tea to his desk, he considers texting her, as he always does when he’s feeling an overwhelming amount of any emotion, good or bad.
But he doesn’t.

He disposes of the tea bag—chamomile with notes of lemon—in his personal desk bin and takes the tiniest of sips. Yesterday she’d texted him about the revolutionary news: all of the nations’ leaders are in talks with the Qunari to allow passage to the famed island of Par Ladi. It’s only been a handful of years since outsiders were allowed into Qunandar, sure, but tensions have been easing ever so slowly and isn’t it incredible? Alistair had gone through the conversation with locked shoulders, gritted teeth, but he never let onto it.

She has her own problems; she doesn’t need to know that, as he grows closer to finding and facing Gereon Alexius, he has been memorizing canticles. Making peace with the Maker and His bride. He doesn’t know what to do and what to expect when facing a magister—they didn’t train him for this. They don’t train cops like they train templars, and though he’s dabbled in templar techniques (against his will, he includes, any time he’s made to mention it), it’s mostly fallen out of practice in his life.

Concentrating, Alistair attempts what they referred to as “dispelling magic.” Reaching deep within his belly and his core, he tries to muster up the sheer willpower to ward away unwanted energies and magics. It feels as though there is a second layer of his self, his being, extending outward, but only barely. There is nothing to push back against, and his experiment fails as the energy sucks back onto his skin.

Cullen slants him a look as Alistair’s finishing the process and gulping down the tea. “What were you just doing?” he asks, not bothering to hide his suspicion.

“Thinking really hard about what I’d like for lunch.” Alistair rolls his chair forward and slots his legs neatly into the space beneath his desk. “All I’ve packed is butter soup, but there’s a new Rivaini fusion restaurant a couple blocks down. I’ve been miserable thinking about it since Thom ordered in. So selfish, it’s like he didn’t even hear my stomach crying.”

The answer doesn’t satisfy Cullen, but he’s too worn out to put up much of a fight. In the past two weeks he’s grown what Alistair and Luana secretly refer to as “the stress beard”—a hot topic amongst them and a couple other cops in the building.

“Cullen?”

“Yes?”

“Is that a grey hair?” Alistair wonders.

Cullen pulls open his top desk drawer and comes out with a pair of everite tweezers. Without the aid of a mirror or any hesitation to consider where Alistair meant, he reaches into his beard with the tool and plucks a single hair out. “No.” The tweezers are placed back in the drawer, the drawer is closed. “O-Oh. Alright.”

Alistair returns to thinking about his mortality, seeing as he just faced Death and somehow came away unscathed.

If today is the day he meets Alexius, will he come away alive? He follows this line of thought at least once a day every day, and there’s no one to dump this line of thought onto. Cullen has always steeled himself for death on any front; the military and the templars do that to you, prepare you for the extremes, the absolutes. Luana, conversely, has made a point of thinking about everything apart from death ever since she fled the Imperium. The Caladrius situation was a black mark on an otherwise flowery and perfectly blank slate, and she still won’t discuss it with anyone besides
Cassandra or Cullen.

Dorian is more of a “life’s a bitch, and then you die” type, so Alistair doesn’t come to him for such plebeian concerns either. And, again, Dog Lord can’t be privy to this.

If he dies today, hands around his throat or firebolt tearing a hole through his stomach or bludgeoned by a staff over and over… What if he never knows Dog Lord’s name? Her visage, her touch, how deep her feelings run; what if all he knows is her voice? Alistair unlocks his phone and opens his browser with the intention of wasting data—if he dies today, then he doesn’t have to pay the phone bill.

The cursor blinks.

He types in “Highever Castles” and presses enter. Immediately he taps the link for Google Images, because already a seed of betrayal is taking root in his heart. As Dog Lord had always said, there were quite a few in a state of disrepair, though he senses that a few of these photos may be of the same castle.

There are sprawling green hillocks that hedge around towering spires; in the near distance are jutting mountainsides and clusters of sheep and goats that follow the curves. In some photos he sees winding rivers that lead into formerly functional moats; bridges that no longer fit the architectural aesthetic of a Ferelden only found in history books. Alistair wonders in which of these many castles Dog Lord once called a home, and even as recently as a week ago she still wished to.

He doesn’t want to die before she takes him there.

The seed of betrayal is blooming into a flourishing flower of shame, because he knows how easy it would be to tap over to the “news” tab or the “all” tab. Dog Lord has mentioned her brother by name, the fact that she lives in a castle, and that she has met a number of influential people in the country many times growing up. It would be so easy to find out who she is, to put this to rest so he could live without regret on what may very well be his final day.

No, stop, I can’t think like that. I’ve got things to live for, and it needs to be special.

Alistair closes the tab and swipes the url from his browser history, if only to fend off temptation. He will catch Alexius, and then he will meet Dog Lord at Andrastea, and she’s going to rattle off facts about her life down to the minutiae of everyday fancy living, and he is going to love it.

From: Zevran

(12:49) You still have your phone on you, yes?

(12:49) I always do, if I can help it. Any news?

(12:49) A quick response! So very eager.

(12:50) He is there, Alistair. If you’re still interested, perhaps you might go after him?

(12:50) How do you know for certain? That he’s here? Are you here as well?

(12:50) Alexius has not be sound of mind this past week, so I can assure you that when he boarded his flight to Denerim early this morning, he did not intend to be anywhere else.
(12:51) I dare say the man has a death wish, and for that I insist you exercise caution, my dear Alistair.

(12:51) With him is a very small entourage of sorts. Despite this, I would not recommend bringing many men with you. Though I’ve had little time to get to know him, I know he has methods of his escape up his sleeve, should he believe he is threatened.

(12:51) You cannot allow him to get away. This is our only chance.

(12:52) Simple. I’ll go by myself.

(12:52) Pardon me?

(12:52) My vision is a bit askew, I’ve been up very late keeping tabs on this man for you, it’s quite hard to make out what you’re trying to tell me.

(12:53) All we need is to figure out where he might be, where his hideout is, and I’ll go by myself. Given what he’s been capable of already, we can avoid mass casualties if we keep the number of infiltrators to a minimum. Alexius would never suspect a lone man to come after him, he won’t see me as a threat.

(12:53) This is very amusing, Alistair. I needed a pick-me-up, so thank you.

(12:53) Perhaps I should be directing this intel to my beloved Cassandra.

(12:54) No!

(12:54) Cass will alert everyone on duty in the city to what’s going on and he’ll find out! You know how much he knows, he’s got to have a clue what we intend for him. He’ll find a way out before we’ve even zeroed in on his location. You said this was our only chance, so we can’t waste it.

Alistair’s phone begins ringing as soon as he starts to compose a follow-up text. He answers it and is greeted by Zevran’s smooth voice, cursing him to the Void and back.

“Brasca!” Zevran hisses, forcing Alistair to hold the phone at a distance for a moment. “Were I in Ferelden right now, know that would I be giving you no special treatment. You would not see the outside of your precinct’s walls ever again.”

Alistair turns the volume down and smooshes his face as close to the phone as possible. “So you’re not in Ferelden, then. Why didn’t you come with him? This would be so much easier if you’d come with him!” From across their adjoining desks, Cullen snaps his attention to Alistair.

“I may have been close to him, but not so close that we could travel together without raising suspicion. Instead I have been tasked with looking after his son, though I can’t seem to find the young man anywhere. I could smell him from kilometers away, but his stench is nowhere to be found.”

“Well, help me figure out where Alexius would be here. Did he give any indication of where he might go, what he might do?”

“If only it were that easy.”

“Yeah, right. This is going to take some backtracking.”
The briefing room is empty, giving Alistair ample time to wheel in the corkboard creation that he and Zevran had spent the better part of an afternoon on. “FaceTime me,” Zevran insists. “Take down some of the string so that I may get a look at what we’ve got.” As he’s opening up his camera during his call, Cullen comes in and takes a seat at one of the tables facing the front of the room. The yarn begins to unravel at his fingertips, orange and yellow strings floating to the floor as Alistair restrings the red trails. The suspects no longer need to be there, so they’re torn down along with the yarn.

All that’s left are a handful of locations haloing Alexius’s portrait in the center. Alistair guides his phone around the photos, describing the options to Zevran while trying to steady his hand.

“There are the Alienage apartments—we’d caught some slavers down there but could only confirm that one of them was working for him. There’s an abandoned hospital, a lab, another apartment complex that’s meant to be torn down in a month, a former warehouse fulfillment center, and the docks where we apprehended his accomplice, Servis.”

“I see, I see.” Zevran taps his chin. The backdrop behind him is deep red, his skin illuminated by a score of candles. There are gaudy dragons wrapping around pillars, hissing down at tables that Alistair only sees briefly as Zevran paces around, constantly repositioning himself within the frame.

“What has Alexius been up to these past few weeks?” asks Alistair. “Your check-ins and reports left a lot to the imagination.”

“If I could have had more time to myself to keep you up to date, I would have. He kept me at arms length, even more so after you got ahold of Erimond. Since then he has done remarkably little talking to anyone, not just myself, though I would not be the best at my job if I did not hear his little whispers. Part of what concerns him so is this ‘Avernus’ he talks about so fondly.”

“Servis mentioned that name too.” Alistair rubs at his forehead. “He said he was dead. I wish I could ask Dog Lord who that guy is, she’d know all the intimate details of a dead guy’s life.”

“He was a Grey Warden,” Cullen interjects. “A mage among their ranks, but that was around 7:5 Storm. If the Battle of Soldier’s Peak didn’t kill him, then the taint surely did.”

“So why’s he still obsessed with him?” Alistair traces the board with a finger, unsure of how this is supposed to add up. What bothers him most, even beyond the mystery of a long-dead Warden, is how they’ve caught so many cronies and still the motivation eludes him. One part of the board lays bare, the place he’d intended to pin up the person or thing that keeps Alexius carting slaves and doing blood magic, but still there’s no certainty. “He’s not planning on bringing him back from the dead somehow, is he? Can he even do that?”

Zevran sits down and relaxes, holding the phone high above his face. “According to Alexius, he’s still alive. Immortality has been known to motivate lesser men.”

“Of course he’s using blood magic to obtain immortality.” Cullen reaches up and runs a hand through his hair, wincing, his lip scar curling. So many lives have been touched by immoral uses of magic, Alistair thinks, even though it’s statistically so much rarer now than it used to be. Mages are no longer imprisoned in Ferelden—even though it’s statistically so much rarer now than it used to be. Mages are no longer imprisoned in Ferelden—instead they are simply registered, the laws that keep mages and non-mages safe are strictly enforced. Magic is by no means inherently evil, but such extensive power always finds a way to corrupt when there’s little oversight in places like the Tevinter Imperium.

“Immortality, huh.” Even though the clock is ticking, Alistair allows himself a moment to think about it. With what he knows about Alexius, it doesn’t add up, chasing a dream like immortality. He leaves the room and quickly comes back with the case file on Alexius, slamming it down on the captain’s podium.
Gereon Alexius. Former magical researcher in the Minrathous Circle, currently a high-ranking Magister in the Magisterium. Has pioneered multiple types of new magics, and is particularly skilled in thaumaturgy. Wife: deceased. Son: still living with him. Uses his position to champion higher education for the “Soporati,” or lower class.

Dorian mentioned once that he knew Alexius, not long ago, but declined to say much more than that. It was a sensitive subject, Alistair knew, too personal for him to work on any longer.

“We’ve had a lot fewer Alienage elves and humans go missing,” Alistair points out. “So I don’t think we’re going to find him at the apartments. He’s not desperate for bodies or blood, he’s trying to finish this immortality thing, or whatever.” He pauses. “What if someone brought Avernus back to life, so he’s trying to do that, but with his wife?”

“Lady Livia,” Zevran supplies. “He spoke of her fondly, enough for me to learn her name, but he speaks of his son twice as much.”

“Did you ever get to speak to the son?”

“Unfortunately no. I never saw him, so I was almost led to believe he did not exist. I was to watch over him today, as Alexius intended to bring everyone else close to him with him on the flight to Ferelden, but he’s not here.” Zevran leaves the comforts of his chair and swaps the camera view, showing Alistair around the cavernous home, with its high ceilings and equally high windows. “There is much to do in Minrathous, he could be anywhere.”

“He might be with his father,” Cullen says. “He could be helping him. If they’re close, if he’s a mage as well, then we’d do well to expect him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Alistair replies. With that out of the way, the three of them return to examining the potential locations. They all agree that with the way Alexius has been acting as of late he will not go anywhere new—in Minrathous he had settled into an obsessive pattern of his own design, going so far as to visit specific rooms for set time limits, and Zevran has no reason to believe that would change here.

“Well, it’s not the docks,” says Cullen. “If there is next to no need for slaves any longer, I’m sure he’s not going to be visiting the harbor for shipping purposes. He could’ve sent someone else to do a menial task like that.”

“My bets are on the hospital or the lab,” Zevran suggests. “I have seen neither, but I would assume they serve similar functions.”

Alistair takes down the condemned lab’s photo and turns it over, revealing notes he took on the day they had discovered the place. They weren’t able to clear the lab when they’d visited it a few weeks ago as wards had blockaded the underground levels, but the fresh blood painting the walls of the first floor were enough to consider it suspect. A team of mages were meant to work on the wards and hazardous glyphs while Alistair and Cullen’s team ran the investigation from the precinct, but with resources spread thin on cases of other kinds, no one was able to spare the manpower and the lab became a dead end.

The hospital, on the other hand, has been abandoned for even longer and has been its own hotbed of criminal activity. From lyrium smuggling to body drop-offs, it seems the obvious choice for doing anything remotely illegal. Alistair would be inclined to have another pass at it, but the building’s equipment has been stripped and sold for parts long ago—if Alexius is working on immortality or necromancy, he would have a far easier time of it putting his work where hoodlums won’t steal it.
He poses this theory to the other two. “Between the wards and how fortified the lab is, he’s got to be there. I think we’ve halted the progress on his experiments by catching all of his men, so he’s coming here to finish the job.”

“And he’ll stop at nothing to get out with his findings or completed work,” Cullen adds.

“Exactly.”

“As you know, he is an accomplished man, one of the most remarkable mages to all that know him. I don’t believe you could handle him alone, even as strapping as you are,” says Zevran.

Cullen shoots up, his fingers splayed out as he slams his hands onto the table before him. “Alistair, you are not going without backup, this will not be a repeat of the demon incident.”

“But—” Alistair tries to fight back, throw his reasonings into the ring before his partner tears him apart, but he’s interrupted by someone coming into the room before he gets a chance.

“Detective Theirin, there’s someone here to see you.” Lily stands in the doorway, no longer working the night shift and no longer doing paperwork but instead fielding visitors and calls at the front desk. She smooths invisible wrinkles in her pencil skirt while trying to keep her eyes focused on Alistair.

“You might want to hurry. I offered to call an ambulance but—but he said no and, well, he looks worse for wear, Theirin. Something’s not right with the man.”

“Cullen, can you keep Zevran company?” Alistair passes his phone off to Cullen before getting an answer, and jogs past Lily on the way to the front of the building.

In the reception area stands a lone young man, whom all other patrons are giving a wide berth. His clothes betray his identity as being well-to-do, with tailored silks clinging to a sunken chest, cufflinks trapping skinny wrists. The clothes are meant to distract with their shimmering golds and rich crimsons, but it backfires, highlighting the ghostly ashen skin he’s clearly trying to hide. Grey veins are spidering up his cheeks and his pupils and irises are blending together in one uniformly dull tone.

Worst of all, it smells like someone has dragged a corpse straight from the graveyard and in through their doors. Alistair has to fight to swallow the shuddering fear and bile that coats his throat.

“Sir,” Alistair chokes out. He looks behind himself to Lily for support. “Could we call you an ambulance, maybe? Please?” Lily holds her deskphone to her ear, fingers ready to dial.

“We haven’t got the time,” the man croaks. “I’m Felix Alexius, and you must find my father.”

“Good and bad news everyone,” Alistair begins, trying to hide Felix with his body in the doorway to the briefing room. “I have confirmation that the lab is where Alexius is right this very second, as we live and breathe. Bad news: his son is here.”

“How is that bad news?” Cullen asks, forcing Alistair to tug Felix forward and reveal the poor man. His age is hard to determine, his sickness wrinkling his greying skin; his eyes look sunken, tired, old, and his posture crooked and hunched. It’s obvious Cullen has questions but most of them are squashed down and replaced with a pitying frown. “Son, are you blighted?”

“Hold me up, I can’t see,” Zevran demands from his prison within the phone. When Cullen grabs the phone and allows him to gawk, Zevran clucks his tongue. “That would explain the smell, yes.”

"Not really the time for that, I think," Alistair grits out. He ushers Felix towards the podium and
stands beside him, a hand clasped onto his shoulder. "Tell us what you know, the sooner, the better. No pressure, but, well, pressure."

"Right, sorry." Felix coughs into his fist. "It's all because of what happened over a year ago."

He looks to Alistair, who nods and squeezes his shoulder.

"I take it you know about my mother?"

Zevran speaks up. "Your family was attacked, she was on the less fortunate side of the encounter."

Felix chokes on a laugh. "None of us were on the fortunate side of the encounter, sir. Mother got the quick, easy way out. And I—" His eyes snap shut. "I've got the Blight inside of me." He looks at his shoulder, where Alistair's hand is still gripping, and looks as though he expects Alistair to wrench it away out of disgust, or fear, but Alistair is steadfast in his comforting.

"You're still with us," Alistair says softly. "How did this happen?"

"My parents had come to pick me up from university—I was studying in Orlais at the time and my parents were living at their estate in Hossburg, and we'd wanted to spend the holidays together. I'd caught a flight some place closer to them and yeah, we were driving back to Hossburg. Then somewhere around Weisshaupt maybe, these things showed up. Hurlocks, people call them.

"We'd taken a detour and there they were, just a handful on the surface. We weren't supposed to be there, I don't think, and they didn't seem to expect us any more than we didn't expect them. They were—they were on us so quickly, ripping Mother out of the car and—I won't go any further on that, but, they got me. Just deep enough for it to matter, before Father could kill them all."

Though the Blights have been declared officially over, at least according to both Divines, darkspawn never cease to exist. The Divine in the south never stops insisting it is as punishment for what the people have done, that killing slumbering archdemons would not be enough to set everyone back on the righteous path in the Maker's eyes; still, people rest easier, believing there will never be an influx, an invasion, like there has been in the past. The drafts and conscriptions are remnants of a bygone era, and Alistair loathes to think what it would be like if he were born in any other Age.

He wishes that Felix had been more fortunate, that it was truly past them.

"When it happened, I wanted to think that what Father did, what he was doing, wasn't his fault. I know he wanted to protect me, and he felt like it was his fault that he'd 'failed me' or something. For a time I couldn't even get away from him, because if I felt faint, if I was sick, he was giving me something to make me feel better. He wanted to do right by me, and sometimes that meant dabbling in 'time magic' and sometimes that meant blood magic. I thought it wouldn't go anywhere, that we could fix it, but everyone thinks like that in the beginning, I suppose."

He wobbles in place, causing Alistair to snatch a chair and put it behind him. Felix slowly lowers himself down and fixes his eyes on his feet, his hands.

"Father was obsessed and there were no answers in the Imperium. What remained of the Grey Wardens was nothing, a shadow of what they were, and they're bloody secretive to boot. Where father couldn't get answers from them in Weisshaupt, he'd decided he'd get them someplace else. There was a man by the name of Avernus, if you've heard of him." He looks up to see everyone nodding. "Rumor had it that he was experimenting with blood magic and the taint, hiding in Ferelden where it wouldn't be so obvious. Father's men said no one goes to Soldier's Peak, so that's where he'd be. Someone said they'd found him, though I never saw him myself."
"When word came back to us that all of our men were arrested or dead or whatever, Father was furious with the lot of you. I'm—I'm not getting any better, of course, it's all a bit of a decline and I asked him to let it go, to let me be me while there's still time. I don't want to worry about the cure anymore. I wanted him to stay home, begged him, but he left anyway and I did the only thing I knew how to. Following in my dad's footsteps has been easy for me, even if I'm no good at magic."

"I was never under the impression that Alexius knew about us," Zevran admits quietly.

"He didn't know who you were, but he never trusted you," Felix says. "But he knows you two by name. I don't think anything was ever going to come of it, but if something had happened to me, I think he wanted someone to blame. Someone that wasn't himself."

"It wasn't his fault in the first place, he should've just accepted that." Alistair clenches his fists tightly; he scans the room for something to grip, but thinks better of it, trying to let his simmering rage morph into something more productive, like determination. "Sorry."

Alistair's mind gravitates towards the closest thing he's ever felt like was his fault and hones in on Duncan falling ill. That wasn't his fault, not by any stretch of the imagination—he knows that now—but he does understand that sometimes there needs to be a scapegoat. He doesn't appreciate being scapegoated by someone other than himself.

Cullen clears his throat. "You said he was furious. What about the situation made him angry enough to come here himself instead of sending someone else? Particularly if it's to come after us."

"You arrested everyone who was supposed to be watching Avernus, and if no one's watching him, he can't work on the cure. There was a lab, I think—"

"I knew it was the lab," Alistair blurts. "Sorry again, continue."

"The first lab is still running, back in Minrathous, but it's been getting no results. Father didn't want to move Avernus and deal with the complexities of moving a long-dead man out of country, and we were going to relocate if we'd heard good news. Then we weren't hearing any news, and then it was bad news. He's come to check on him, but I..."

Felix's mouth flat-lines. He crosses his arms against his chest, clutching at the sleeves of his jacket.

"Felix?" Alistair reaches out for him.

Twisting his shoulder out of reach, Felix shrinks into himself. "Even if there's a cure, there won't be anyone left to cure. There's no time."

Despite his skin, the yellowed nails, the dark bags under his eyes, Alistair doesn't want to look at Felix and think "there's a dead man walking." For all that they've been through, Felix included, he hopes that this Avernus is alive and hammering away at the cure that has eluded Thedas for Ages. Countless lives can't have died for one man's obsessive quest for nothing.

"Please stop him." Felix unfurls his body, feet touching the floor once more. He pulls down his hood and looks up into Alistair's eyes. "If something happens to me—I want him to stay human, if you catch my meaning."

Cullen grimaces. "Unfortunately, yes."

"I want to believe he wouldn't hurt anyone, but," Felix says, rubbing at his eyes. "I don't know Father anymore, I don't know that I know what he's capable of. I thought you'd be the right people to tell."
Alistair crosses over to stand in front of the chair and kneels in front of Felix, peering up and following his floating gaze. "We'll make sure he comes out alive, no matter what. In one piece, as a person and not a... you know."

"Thank you, detectives."

"Alistair, I take it you have a plan for apprehending him?" Cullen asks, standing up from the table.

"There's a... semblance of a plan, I think."

"I'm coming with you," Felix butts in.

"No!" Alistair and Cullen shout in unison, a little too loudly.

Felix is undeterred. "If it gets bad, only I can reason with him. If he's done all this for me, he can do one more thing."

Alistair knows he has a point, though he doesn't like it.

The plan is as loosely strung together as the webs of his suspect board, though the longer he thinks, the tighter together the ideas become. *Get in there, get Alexius, get out of there. Do whatever you can in between. Stay alive, keep him alive. Weapons? Weapons. Do whatever you can.*

"Cullen, do you trust me?"

The laboratory is well off any of the main roads, south of the Palace District, wedged neatly in a space that overlooks Fort Drakon. Whatever its purpose, whoever worked here, they're all long gone now, having left behind a boxy building and a lengthy parking lot. The front entrance is chained up, and the grass that lines the building yellowed and overgrown.

Pulling up a safe distance away and parking neatly in between the faded lines, Cullen cuts the engine off. The three of them climb out of the car and survey the area, unsure of where to begin.

"You can’t come with us,” Cullen says to Felix, a hand pressed against the other man’s chest. "You're in no state to charge in there."

"I thought we agreed that only I could reason with Father," Felix argues.

"We agreed on nothing. Alistair, are you certain we can’t call someone to stay with him? If you’re worried about the captain...” Cullen might as well be rambling now, as far as Alistair is listening, because he’s still formulating a plan, working out the kinks.

"He’ll be fine right here, he can communicate via the radio or a walkie-talkie or something.” Alistair replies absently. Before they’d left he’d taken a quick look at the floor plan of the lab and knows where the alternate entrances are, but he’s not too sure about the underground level from there.

Cullen pops open the trunk and they collect their new armor—a combination of dyed royale sea silk, tusket hide, and serault infused glass—and shields, along with a couple magazines of the new lyrium-infused ammo, just in case. “Here,” he says, lobbing his to Alistair. “I don’t want to be in charge of... this.”

Alistair tucks both of them in a small pack strapped around his thigh.
“I’m thinking we take that entrance, tucked in over there,” he says, pointing. “Argent was the last one here after we packed up, and she said she’d left it open for the mages. No clue if Alexius thought to close it up, but a guy can hope, right?”

Cullen steps aside and tests out his mobility with the shield. “We’ll force it open if we have to.”

“Right, of course.”

As Cullen continues swinging the shield around and bracing himself with defensive maneuvers, Alistair looks between the three of them. Cullen is great when it comes to physical altercations, breaking people up, reading rights and all that fluff. Cullen is still not quite there when it comes to negotiations and talking people down—Alistair’s never seen him deal with someone who has little left to lose, like Alexius, but this man is a hammer and every problem is a nail. He needs to go in there alone.

And then the final part of the plan slots into place.

“Felix, could I have a word with you?” Alistair smiles.

“Sir?”

Alistair swings an arm around his shoulder and pulls him in close enough for a whisper.

“Cullen is a mighty fine man, I’m sure you can tell how serious he is about this whole ‘operation,’” he whispers, one hand doing air quotes around Felix. “But I’ve sacrificed everything to be here today. I have a plan and you’re instrumental in all of it: you’ll negotiate with your dad, but you can’t go in, that’s just asking for a hostage scenario. I need you out here, but I need you protected.”

Felix nods.

“So could you, I don’t know, have a fainting spell? Get a little woozy? Something that will distract him long enough and keep him here so he doesn’t get in the way.”

He worries this makes it sound like he has no faith in Cullen as a partner, and he worries that Cullen might think something along the same lines too, but that’s because no one gets it.

“I could do that, if you’d like,” says Felix.

“Perfect! Thank you!” Alistair releases him and regains his hold on his shield. “Ready, Cullen?”

Cullen and Alistair start to make their way towards the laboratory when Felix lets out a haunting moan, his body swaying and thumping against the car with the full weight of his back. Head lolling, arms quivering, every sound he makes now is quieter but more heartbreaking than the last; he whimpers as though it is time, finally, and his feet kick out at the rocks on the pavement, too weak for his soles to take hold. “Sirs,” he says with a shaky mouth. “I’m… scared.”

It’s tempting to turn back and assist him, even though this is orchestrated, because doing nothing makes Alistair feel callous. At least Cullen is buying it, he thinks, as Cullen drops his shield and flies to Felix’s side, radio in hand to call an ambulance.

“No, don’t,” Felix coughs.

Cullen looks from Felix to Alistair for answers, and Alistair’s response is to book it to the lab.

“Therein!”
“Thank you, Felix!” Alistair shouts as he sprints as fast as his legs will take him. He imagines there is some fist shaking, grumbling, or head shaking taking place behind him, but that doesn’t matter because Phase 1 of his plan worked.

Catching his breath, Alistair finds and steps through the lab’s side entrance, delicately stepping over the mounds of broken glass and needles strewn about the floor. The walls are crusty with peeling paint and dried blood, the floors dotted with coronas of rust and pockmarked from splashes of something acidic. Chest-mounted flashlight flickering on as he ventures further in, where the windows aren’t broken but instead boarded up, he tightens his grip on his shield as a mouse scurries by.

The first few rooms Alistair enters are nondescript; he finds the remnants of a filing room, folders spilling out of broken cabinets, all the labels redacted. There are a few rooms dedicated to equipment, but the tools themselves are absent, their outlines burnt onto the walls as proof they ever existed at all.

There’s something saddening about being here in the picked-apart corpse of what once must have been a thriving institute of research. Alistair knows there’s no time to reflect upon his feelings, but with a gloved hand he traces broken hinges with their stripped screws, hanging doors, and jutting wooden frames. In some rooms he finds moth-eaten bedrolls from squatters long gone; he hopes they weren’t victims, caught in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Through his walkie-talkie Cullen speaks, voice bouncing off the peeling walls, startling Alistair. “I’m not even going to start with you, Theirin, so I’m pretending you didn’t do what you did. Have you reached the underground?”

“Not yet,” Alistair reports, forcing his voice to even out. “No sign of any activity since we last came here.”

“If the wards are still up—”

“Then we call for backup, yes, I know.” Alistair turns a corner and watches his step. “How… How’s Felix holding up? He’s actually alright, isn’t he?”

He can hear Cullen fight his voice for passivity, to resign himself against caring, but to little effect. "If Alexius remains in that lab, you need to find him sooner rather than later. I will keep an eye on Felix as best I can." So much goes unsaid there, with an unspoken countdown placed above their heads.

"I'll hurry," Alistair replies, and he means it.

Groping around the areas where it is darkest, he makes his way to the basement doors. Remnants of glyphs surge and glint, catching his eye, and it grows tempting to wipe them away by hand. It is often enough to simply feel the magical signatures where they rest and to know that they are still active, but these might've been conjured by Alexius himself, and his credentials come to mind. Alistair grabs a long pipe and scratches out the far edges of the glyphs and watches them fizzle and deactivate.

That could've blown up in his face spectacularly, but he doesn't want to dwell on the timeline where that did happen and where he's now in a million tiny pieces, flaming and writhing.

It's somehow darker still down the staircase to the lower level. As he steps down from the bottom stair, however, Alistair finds himself in a sparsely illuminated hallway; veilfire torches adorn the walls, casting circles of light down beneath them, but they are few and far between, large gaps of
absence swallowing the center of the path. It reminds Alistair of games he used to play as a child in the monastery, coming back from the bathroom in the dead of night—stay in the light of the midnight candles and the Void won't take you. It was the same principle here: dash from brazier to brazier and no harm will befall him.

He makes it to the first beacon of light just fine, and notices that on either side of the hallway is a series of doors, though they seem inactive, ajar but empty. At the end of the hall a yellowish light seeps from the crack below a door, parting the darkness that surrounds it. He braces himself to make a quiet and quick dash to the next offering of light when it happens.

The impact is on his side, a sudden strike that throws Alistair at one of the slightly open side doors, slamming him and the door shut with a resounding clatter. His shield falls out of his hand and skids away somewhere out of the veilfire's reach and he hears it join with a pool of water. With the scant amount of light coming from his flashlight, he has enough time to look up and see the face of his attacker before a fist with overgrown fingers collides with his jaw.

It's not human. Not anymore.

Before the hand can wrap around his throat, Alistair tucks and rolls out of the way and back into the light. The creature follows him and the only sounds it makes are from its robes dragging on the floor and the jingling of the metal tassels hanging from the cluster of meat and skin on its head. It might be missing an eye, but it might not be—it's hard to make heads or tails of its appearance; thin ropes of skin stretch over an eye socket, its mouth, and connect to slabs of skin piled onto its shoulders. Only a nose and an eye peek out from the creases and lumps of flesh piled onto its bald head, looking like a child's idea of a human, heaped with clay.

The enraged abomination continues throwing its fists, leaving Alistair deflecting its blows with his arms while scrambling to find his shield. It hunkers down to get to his level and delivers a fist to his side; there's a sharp crack and the sensation of stabbing pressure as fragments of his armor fall away.

There's little time and opportunity to make a decision, but with swift fingers he reaches into the pack on his thigh and rips out the magazine tucked inside, quickly loading it into his unholstered gun. Alistair's never seen the effects of lyrium-infused weaponry, only heard whispers of what they're capable of and why these bullets aren't standard-issue, but no matter. When the creatures bears down on him once more, spindly fingers extending for another reach at his throat, Alistair cocks the gun and points the barrel at its forehead, pulling the trigger.

There's a flash of bright blue light as the bullet pierces the abomination's head. Once it connects, the bullet expands, and its skins illuminates with blue cracks, and Alistair has barely enough time to look away before the head explodes. It collapses to the ground, inanimate.

Alistair collects his shield and continues towards the door at the end of the hallway. On either side of him he hears the fizzle as green embers fall into dark pools of water; the sound reminds him that where his armor is cracked a damp spot grows. He can only hope it is sweat. In the last two beams of veilfire light he sees them—two more abominations—and is thankful he won't be caught unawares.

They don't come at him one at a time, which seems utterly unfair in his mind. As Alistair ducks to avoid the swinging arm of one abomination, the other swipes at his leg, nearly tripping him. Every chance he gets to point his gun in the vicinity of a head leaves him vulnerable and they know it—they're not as stupid as they look, which is also extremely unfair. Soon enough they encircle him, forcing him to hold his shield out on one side while posturing with the gun with his other hand.

The abomination on his gun end slaps it out of his grasp, unamused. "I don't know what I was expecting," Alistair grumbles. He pulls the shield in close to his chest and backs up against a wall,
waiting for one of them to come at him again, then executes a shield bash to topple one of them over. Launching himself onto its chest, he pummels its face as much as he's able, trying hard to stave away the thoughts that this was a man once.

As expected, the abomination that is still standing tears him off its companion and tosses him to the floor. The Maker smiles upon Alistair then, because his gun is less than a foot away from where he lands, and he scrambles to grab it. It happens so fast; the abomination reaches forward for him in the dark and he shoots it in the hand to make it stumble back, then shoots it square in the eye while it's still reeling.

One down.

Alistair picks himself up, leg almost buckling beneath him as a current of pain shoots through his thigh. The last abomination is still on the ground, barely moving but just enough so Alistair knows it's still alive. Most of its body is in the dark, save for the head—atop its head is a crown of green light and it blinks to try to see through it.

"I wish I didn't have to do this," Alistair admits, standing over it. He hates that it is an \textit{it}, that pieces of \textit{it} still reflect the form \textit{it} once had, that \textit{it} had to do this at all. "I wish I knew how to turn you back. Wish I could do anything other than follow protocol." He aims. He fires.

\textit{So much for Alexius's entourage.}

His pulse quickens as he reaches the final door in the hallway without incident, peeling it back to let the golden light from within spill over his feet. There, on the far end of the room, is the man he has been searching for. Alexius is bent over a table with tubes and flasks, concoctions bubbling over portable burners, a heap of devices and supplies stolen away from upstairs and repurposed for finding a cure.

Slumped against a column is a body, withered, its eyes burnt out. Alistair tries not to linger on it for long. Shield up, he steps inside the room cautiously.

"Gereon Alexius," he addresses.

A thousand admonishments circulate in his head, putting a stopper on whatever grand speech he’s had cooked up for this moment. There is \textit{so much} he wants to tell Alexius, so many things that he’s planned to make himself sound cool, look the hero, and all of it would culminate in Alistair Theirin finally saving the day. A way to get out of the shadow of the crown and make a name for himself.

Instead he’s here, stood stock still in the doorway of a condemned lab. His only backup is tending to a dying young man, the SWAT team should be here in his stead, and miles away Cassandra Pentaghast is probably having an ulcer at the mere thought of one of her men doing this alone, if she even knows. This was wrong, every last detail of it, but it’s too late now. Alistair forces himself to swallow his fear but not his pride, and takes another step forward.

"You do not have to say anything," Alistair says as he takes a step forward. Alexius straightens up and swishes a tube of black ichor in his hand. "But it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court," he continues. "Anything you do say may be given in evidence."

He makes it about halfway through the room before Alexius turns and faces him.

Before this happened, before the encounter with the topside darkspawn and the harrowing months that his son has been sick, Alexius may have once been described as genteel. There is a hint of that
still, hidden in how he composes himself, the confidence with which he pulls his shoulders back and cranes his neck up and out. Alistair notices that as Alexius looks down his nose at him, his chin quivers as it juts forward.

“We have been through a lot, you and I,” Alexius states. “And you should know that I have nothing to say to you.”

There is no argument to be had there. Alistair takes another tentative step further, tamping the ground with the toe of his boot, distracted by the sheer amount of energy in the room.

“Go on then. Take me away, put me back in the system that failed me and my son.” The burners’ flames lap at the underside of a flask and then vanish, the liquid growing still. All the self-stirring instruments cease movement.

“What if,” Alistair proposes. “What if I said there was some way to help you? Both you and Felix.”

Alexius leers at him. “I would know you were lying, because the only one who has ever helped us is me.” He pours one tube into another, then flicks it repeatedly, smiling almost fondly at the ringing sound his nails against glass makes. “Do you know what this is?”

Alistair’s eyes flit from Alexius to the tube of black ichor, back to Alexius.

“It’s the cure,” says Alexius.

He passes it between hands as though it were sprigs of elfroot, or a throwing ball, something worthless, replaceable, all while holding his chin high. “Dragons blood. Darkspawn blood. Tainted and untainted blood. The blood of many, blood of people that mean nothing,” he continues. “The blood of people like you and me. It’s all in here, carefully concentrated down to its purest form, and it works.”

Alistair sneers. He takes a step forward. “You inflicted the Blight upon people, just to prove you could cure it? How many people didn’t make it past the clinical trial?”

“Enough.”

“I take it you plan on coming out of here, cure in hand, and it won’t matter what you did to achieve your ends. You think that all we’ve been through justifies your means,” Alistair snarls.

The cure continues to pass through his hands. “You would prefer to be on the wrong side of history, then? The detective who wanted to deprive the world of hope that the Blights were truly over?”

“They are. We killed all the archdemons. What happened to your family was unfortunate but still uncommon, and more people have died from what you’ve done than they have from wandering darkspawn.”

Alexius raises his eyebrows. “So those afflicted don’t matter. My son doesn’t matter to you.”

With a heavy heart, he takes another step. “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.”

The radio’s crackling cuts through their silence, Cullen’s voice unable to be muffled by the shield blocking it. “Alistair? Are you there?” He sounds soft, untethered, almost lost out in the wide parking lot. Alistair sucks in his breath. Braces himself. “He’s gone.”

Their eyes meet.
“Where is my son?” Alexius asks, and Alistair wonders if he knows, how he knows.

He answers with a tightened grip on his shield and gun.

“Where is Felix?”

“Maybe you should’ve—”

Alexius throws the cure on the ground and the tube shatters, the fluid splashing at their feet. From beside himself he grabs a long, wooden staff and in an instant lightning screams towards Alistair, arcing off his shield. He attempts to deflect it, have it bounce away, but it spills over the side of the shield and grazes his cheek.

The entire plan has fallen apart.

Alistair made a promise, though, and he wants to respect that; he moves closer with his shield angled downwards to try to close the distance between them. Alexius hurtes bolts of energy that crackle off the surface, then directs them above and below, giving Alistair barely enough time to reposition and compensate for the barrage.

With the gap closed, Alistair thrusts his shield forward, but it does little more than catch Alexius off balance. He presses into him again as phosphor-flashes spark off the front of his shield and rebound into Alexius’s face. They continue like this, backing up further and further towards a wall, until a bolt hits Alistair where his armor is compromised and his shield arm sags, giving Alexius opportunity to whip his staff across Alistair’s nose. The sound and sensation reverberates through his skull and—oh, that’s broken—lightning creeps up his feet, twisting into his nerves.

“You would never understand,” Alexius growls, cracking the staff over his nose once more, then props Alistair’s chin up with the tip of it. “You took him away from me. You would undo everything I did, all for your pride, your glory.”

“You—” Alistair opens his mouth and receives a fist to the jaw, hard and jagged, as though Alexius’s flesh and bone were made of rocks.

“You have never lost anything of equal value, but I will see to it that you do.”

Alexius steps sideways and is far out of reach, as if the Fade stretched him and the world and put him where he could only be watched. From his neck he rips off an amulet, shining, glowing, the gem in the center catching the light above as it bobs around between his grasp. The glow it emits grows larger, brighter, as Alexius’s brow furrows deeper and he cracks a smile, all teeth.

“I’ve created something just for you.”

Alistair tries to move his legs, his arms, anything, but the muscles are burnt out. His body is a cage, a restless mind left rattling against prison walls. His tongue, swollen and heavy in his mouth.

Magic swallows the amulet, turning it into a ball of pure energy, not unlike the bolts that were just fired at him. It feels like wind, thick and hot as the desert that Felix first died in before he came here and died once more, and it cuts through Alistair. It slices him somewhere between each rib, cuts the webbing of each finger, mangles his broken cartilage and dries the blood above his upper lip. Where his armor was shattered he feels it crawling in and making a home for itself, pulling him out of the opening piece by piece.

“I will find you a new world, one where you are given everything, and there I will come for you to take it all away, as you have taken from me.”
Alistair feels himself slipping, the bindings growing tighter. Surrender sounds sweet. Having nothing, being nothing: bliss. Alistair shuts his eyes as beads of sweat drip off his brow and dangle off his eyelashes. He doesn’t remember having much in the first place.

One last look, he thinks, one last look. He chances a glance at Alexius—a mistake. There is little humanity to be found as he coaxes the magic out of the amulet; his fingers are blackened and his skin cracks, between which is blinding molten light.

_I promised. I promised. I promised._

“Stop,” Alistair says weakly, his teeth shaking in his gums. He steels himself and concentrates on his skin, his feet. Any place left he can feel. “Stop,” he demands. His fingers twitch and register the gun in his hand. “Stop!” he bellowes, his blood boiling. The magic stings him as it engulfs him, but he resists, gnashing his teeth even though they don’t sit right in his head.

Where it takes away from his body, Alistair feels a piece of himself expand—his self, the energy that is still left at his core. He urges it to go outward and clamp onto Alexius, however little it may be. The magic pushes him, he pushes back. Slowly, surely, he extends what’s left of himself towards Alexius and he’s unsure if his body is truly moving or if it’s a spirit, his spirit; has he died? Is this what’s left?

It latches on. Alistair feels the Fade and the energy and the lyrium in Alexius’s body and clamps down, burning it out. He remembers stories of Cassandra, his dear captain, doing this to templars and mages alike, and he focuses hard to be even a fraction like her. The power dims for a second, then comes back twice as hard.

Alistair does not falter.

_I promised._

Alexius wavers for a second and a second is all Alistair needs. He takes back control of his body and stands up, moves forward without thinking, without feeling his legs. The heat in Alexius’s eyes and skin dims; he does not flinch when Alistair wrenches a fist back, poised for a clean blow across the jaw. “Do you worst,” Alexius spits. “Show me that you would do the same.”

Alistair falters for a second, his heart constricting.

He drops his arm, then rushes himself at Alexius, directing all strength to ripping away a wrist from the amulet. The magic fizzles, the amulet drops. Shatters.

All of the magic, all of the light, drains from the room—all that’s left is the flickering golden glow from the swinging lamp overhead. “You are,” Alistair snaps, panting, still sapping the energy from Alexius’s blood and being. “Under. Arrest.”

The blackness drips out of Alexius’s fingers. The fire in his eyes extinguishes. The lava, the burning, it’s all gone.

Begging the strength in his legs to wake up, Alistair gets around to the other side of Alexius and kicks him to the ground, pinned by a knee. There is still _so much_ to say to Alexius, questions that still float around unanswered. But Alexius is nose deep in the black ichor, the wasted cure dripping off his cheek.

Handcuffs trap Alexius’s wrists as Alistair keeps one hand over them, making sure they stay in place. Out of breath he radios in to Cullen, who he hopes can hear him through sharp intakes of air.
“Cullen?”

“Alistair? Are you there? I’ve been trying to reach you!”

Relief washes over Alistair at hearing his partner’s voice—he doesn’t catch the exasperation, frustration, desperation, he no longer cares. Feeling slowly returns to his weakened muscles but his hands still shake as he grips the radio.

“Cullen.”

“Alistair? You’re breaking up.”

“Call the precinct, call a healer, call everyone.”

“What’s happened down there? Are you hurt?”

For a moment he lets go of the radio and wipes a hand down the length of his face, lets flakes of blood crack and break off. He gulps down the silence, the reprieve it brings for as long as he can have it, then brings the radio back up to his mouth.

“We… We got him,” he says. “We got him.”

“What is the protocol?”

They are seated in the captain’s office, blinds drawn tight, her desk a mess. There are plaques upon the wall, newspaper clippings, awards and honors of a job well done. These things and more are all Alistair can focus on, eyes darting around the space, to avoid making eye contact with his superior. She bears down on him again and again, and he imagines the walls of her office curving away to amuse himself, as desperate to get away from her as he is.

“What is the protocol, Detective Theirin?” Cassandra demands once more.

Mechanically, he replies, “Do not encounter or make arrests on mages without an accompanying templar or team of trained professionals. Do not leave the precinct and follow a lead with the intent to make an arrest without authorization.” Alistair sighs.

“Yet you have done both these things,” she says, glancing at Cullen, who sits in the chair beside him. His face is carefully impassive. “Have I coddled you too much, I wonder?”

He begins to study his hands, and then his shoes.

“By not looking at me, you are admitting your guilt.” She paces behind her desk, rubbing at her temples. “I only wish to understand why you did this. You are no simple man, Theirin—you knew this would lead to an investigation, that this could jeopardize the entire case against Alexius.”

“I… didn’t think about it,” he replies truthfully.

With one look from her, Alistair thinks he understands the unparalleled sensation of being impaled. Her glare is unwavering, digging into him, and she stops her pacing to wait for him to reciprocate eye contact. He settles on looking between her eyes and tries to muster up the strength to continue, but loses his tongue somewhere along the way.

“You didn’t think? Whatsoever?” A knot forms between her eyebrows as she scowls. “You will tell me what you were thinking about instead.”
“I know I did the wrong thing. As I did it, it felt like the wrong thing, but Captain,” he swallows thickly, “if we’d called for backup, I have no doubt that Alexius wouldn’t have made it out of there alive.”

“It was preferable that you almost die instead?”

Alistair rubs the back of his neck. “That was… not part of the plan, no. But I made a promise to Felix, I couldn’t go back on that, you have to understand.”

Cassandra doesn’t respond.

“I believed going in by myself would limit casualties, just like I believed fighting the rage demon ourselves would remove public suspicion. I didn’t ask to cover this up, like some—some conspiracy! I followed every other order, I did my job every day as I was meant to.”

“You say limit casualties, but if you had died? What then? Your partner would have been all alone out in the field, meant to clean up your mess.”

“I know, and Cullen, I’m sorry. I just… couldn’t… I…”

“How can you be expected to lead your men when you would rather disobey and do everything yourself?”

“I don’t want to lead anyone!” He scrunches his eyes shut. “Terrible things would happen if I were in charge. We’d all get lost, never catch anyone, or worse. I don’t want… I don’t want to find out what the ‘worse’ is.”

It’s hard to convey, in truth, all of what he means, what he yearns to say. There was pride and selfishness on the line, and for once he had wanted to do something meaningful, something to be praised for. Oh how he’d mistakenly wanted praise. Alistair picks at the scar on his cheek and rubs at his tenuously-reset nose, wincing at the sharp throb that accompanies his agitations.

“You don’t believe in yourself,” Cassandra states.

“Maybe on really good days, but…” Alistair trails off.

“I can’t understand where this all came from. Since you arrived here, you have done nothing but exceed expectations. Yet you sit before me, still second-guessing yourself and getting yourself into trouble because of it.”

“I know, I know, I’ve bungled it.”

“No.” Cassandra scrubs at her face with a hand. “Perhaps the problem stems from me.”

She heaves a deep breath.

“I have not directed you as best I should,” she admits. “This was never meant to be covered up like so.”

Alistair hates that he was complicit in it, but everyone around him kept insisting that it was for the best. There was no arguing when he was so many rungs down in the ladder.

“And perhaps I should’ve passed the investigation onto someone else,” she continues. “Do not misunderstand me by thinking I did not believe in you. I did, and that was the problem. It was singularly your problem, and it was a mistake to have you do it alone.”
“If the alternative was teeming up with Samson and Maddox—”

“No,” she cuts him off. “But you are so inexperienced, it shouldn’t have been up to you to lead.”

“Then why did we?” Why was it all on us?

“I must admit, I saw myself in the two of you. A duty thrust upon you at too young an age, far before you were ready. At the time I did not believe I could handle it either, yet it led me to where I am today.” Cassandra looks away. “The worst of it is that I don’t regret giving you the responsibility, I merely regret that I did not help you when I should have.”

“What will happen to us?” Alistair wonders, his voice small, almost child-like. He packs his pride away, his selfishness, all the things that led him astray. Before, he waffled between loving his job and despising it, because the pressure felt insurmountable and as though people were dying and it was all his fault. The dust hasn’t yet settled but he knows that he doesn’t want to lose this, the saving people, the doing good and the purpose it fills him with.

“Rutherford will be fine.” Cassandra turns her attention back to Alistair. “To please my own superiors, you will be restricted to desk duty for a time. Despite all this, I would not lose you.”

Relief floods his lungs and tickles the fine hairs on his neck into standing up. “Really? I mean, that’s, well, that’s great.”

A small smile peeks out from Cassandra’s otherwise deathly serious expression. “That will be the least of your problems in the coming days, Alistair.” She says his name softly, as if to protect him. “There will be hearings and inquiries, and I can’t shield you from them all.”

“I understand, I do.”

“There is enough evidence against him that I know we will win this, but… We will deal with this another time. There are reports to write, statements to make. Rutherford, you are dismissed. Theirin and I have one other matter to discuss.”

Cullen, still silent, dips his chin in agreement and makes his way out of the office. He hasn’t said much to Alistair, for good or bad, and Maker, even if he comes out of this in one piece, the scariest thing to imagine is Cullen putting in a request for a new partner. Even if he loses almost all else, he thinks, he doesn’t want to lose Cullen.

A minute after the door has closed, Cassandra seeks out Alistair’s eyes again. “Have you been taking lyrium?”

He finally looks her in the eyes.

“No,” he replies, firmly.

“I read the report, what little there was. You said you dispelled his magic, an obvious use of a templar ability—this is off the record, Theirin, so do not betray the trust I have in you.”

“No,” Alistair repeats. “I trained to be a templar once, Captain, but I never took the little vial they give you. I’ve never had the stuff. You don’t need it.”

This is a worn-out argument that he no longer tries having with Cullen. They both at least agree now that the Chantry uses lyrium to leash their templars, but Cullen is of the mind that the lyrium is what gives a templar all their strength. Alistair disagrees, and is lucky that Cullen wasn’t right for once when it mattered most. He understands the suspicion, but resents it all the same.
“We can debate about that another time. I am choosing to believe you, but if your answer changes, you will see me immediately.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“You are free to go home, Theirin. Try to enjoy what little of your day you have left.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

(19:20) Have you got a minute?

(19:22) Of course. What’s up?

(19:22) What are you up to? Right now

(19:23) Recovering. Left work early bc of a killer headache and didn’t have any painkillers, then went out with a friend to some charity shops.

(19:23) Found loads of gag gifts I could’ve gotten you but ultimately nothing worth shoving in the Box

(19:24) Aw nothing? I got tiger slippers from a charity shop when I was younger. They still fit me!

(19:24) Classic Tiger Emoji 🐯

(19:24) Was there something on your mind?

(19:25) I need to talk to you about something.

(19:25) Something important. Are you sitting?

(19:25) I am now. Something wrong?

(19:26) Saturday, do you have it off? You don’t work weekends right??

(19:26) I’m off and free, yes

(19:26) You, me, Andrastea, coffee and rose lemonade 🍵🌹🍋 what do you say?

(19:27) I’m hesitant but intrigued by this offer.

(19:27) Hesitant because we’ve tried this before. Once bitten, twice shy and all that

(19:28) Well you know that work thing? The “project” that’s been eating up all my free time? I completed it! I don’t work weekends anymore! I won’t be working later than usual so I won’t have to cancel! I mean it, with every ounce of my being, that I can be there 🥰

(19:29) I want to trust you. I mean I do trust you, because yeah it’s made me unbelievably sad that this hasn’t happened so far but, like

(19:29) That’s whatever. As long as we’re still trying to make it happen, then I’m up for it!
(19:29) 🐇🐟👣👣👣

(19:30) 1 or 2 pm?

(19:30) Oh hmm…

(19:30) 1? I’m not going to be able to sleep in, I’d rather it happen as soon as possible

(19:31) We could go earlier if you’d like 😊 Anything to make up for how screwy it’s gone in the past.

(19:31) No 1 pm is good!

(19:34) So how was work then? Did your boss like your “project”? 

(19:35) Oh, no, I completely botched the thing. I thought she was going to kill me for getting it so wrong, but she kind of sort of blamed herself in the end. It’s a bit confusing, I’ll tell you all about it on Saturday though 😊 Hopefully my nose heals by then 🧼

(19:36) What’s your nose got to do with this??

(19:36) Oh I

(19:36) Fell and hurt my nose

(19:37) Had to get a healer to come around and put it back together, and I didn’t even get a lollipop or a cute plaster for the booboo. I know she’d had some with kitties on them

(19:37) Was this a work related accident? Or are you particularly prone to tripping and breaking a nose? 😱

(19:38) It doesn’t happen as often as you’d think it would

(19:38) I didn’t think it happens often at all!!

(19:39) Well when your nose is this big it sometimes gets into trouble! I don’t know!

(19:39) There might be a little scar, that won’t make me less pretty, will it?

(19:40) I’m sure you’ll be the most beautiful person in the coffee shop, Cinderella

(19:40) You’re joking but I’m going to take that compliment to heart 💖

(19:40) If you fancy a little eyeliner then yes you will be the most pretty! As it is, I’m sure you’ll be the most handsome. That’s got to be enough

(19:41) I’m okay with either but know that I’m gunning for being pretty 😍

(22:09) I’m so excited

(22:09) It’s not even happening for a few more days but. I’m giddy! There! I said it! I’m very
giddy.

(22:11) I wish I were better at showing my excitement via texting. I hope you don’t think I’m not excited

(22:11) Because I am also veryy excited. Should I bring Hessarian?

(22:11) It would be unfair not to bring him, wouldn’t it? 😊

(22:12) Is that how I’ll know it’s you? The big dog at your side?

(22:12) Surely there will be other dogs there

(22:12) I know what Hessarian looks like though, so I’ve got a leg up on trying to figure out which one is you

(22:14) Ahh I’m imagining it and this is kind of pathetic

(22:14) It is not 👌

(22:15) 😊

(22:15) I want it to go right and make up for the times I’ve failed you

(22:15) I know it sounds silly and everyone tomorrow will laugh at me for getting worked up about it

(22:16) It’s not silly, or funny, and you haven’t failed me. At all.

(22:16) And I will personally come to your workplace and roundhouse kick every single person who thinks it’s hilarious that you’re *excited* about something, Maker forbid.

(22:16) Are they really like that? Do they laugh at you?

(22:17) Well. I don’t know,

(22:17) They must be. I don’t know. Who wouldn’t want to laugh at me, you know? I can be fairly funny sometimes! 🐶 has a friend, 🐶, and I made him crack a smile once because of something I said so I have it on good authority that I’m funny.

(22:18) I know you don’t need protecting but Maker you need a hug

(22:18) How many years worth of hugs have I got to make up for? I’ll have to give them to you in installments or something

(22:18) You don’t need to do that, Dog Lord 😊

(22:19) Maybe they’re not laughing at me

(22:20) Maybe the world’s not always out to get you, yeah? I know it feels that way a lot of the time. I don’t know you half as well as I’d like but I do know that you’re smart, funny, and kind. And unbelievably patient! People are shite at showing that they know this and they care but I’m sure they believe it too
(22:21) Unless, of course, you’ve somehow been faking it this entire time. Don’t make me look like an absolute fool, alright? 😏

(22:21) I wouldn’t dream of it!!

(22:21) I think the same of you, you know 😊

(22:22) I don’t want to undercut your sweetness but my ego is certainly big enough as it is. I’d rather focus on inflating yours 😍

(22:22) When you go to work tomorrow, try to not care so much what others think. Don’t compromise what makes you happy just because some pricks are a little snotty abt it. Again: I will roundhouse kick anyone who gives you a bit of guff

(22:23) Ahh Dog Lord, the indestructible goddess, ready to crush my foes in mortal combat

(22:23) I am so very lucky to know you 💖

(22:24) Since I can’t kick anyone’s ass, you’ll have to do it in my stead. Don’t let me down. I expect a full report tomorrow on how everyone you work with has been utterly decimated

(22:25) I know you don’t know what kind of people I work with but believe me when I say that might be a bit hard

(22:25) All I’m hearing from you is “quitter talk”

(22:25) It’s so obvious you don’t have siblings, the desire to fight isn’t in your blood

(22:26) You’ll just have to fight all my battles then, won’t you 😞

(22:26) Nah, you’ll be a hardened warrior in no time. After Andrastea we’re heading to the gym and sparring. One on one

(22:26) No holds barred

(22:27) I’m honestly a little worried that you could probably pick me up and toss me across the room 🤔

(22:27) Let’s hope it doesn’t come down to that 😞

(22:28) How are you feeling now?

(22:29) A bit better, thank you. I won’t go overboard but I won’t hide my excitement, either. Cullen would be happy for me, I think. I hope.

(22:29) There is something that worries me though

(22:30) You said that maybe it was fate keeping us apart. You don’t still believe that, do you?

(22:30) That was just silly superstition

(22:31) It’s obviously work keeping us apart, that’s plenty normal. It was… easier to blame it on the Maker or whoever though.
(22:31) It’s always easier to blame someone else for your problems, isn’t it

(22:31) Yeah

(22:32) When will we ever learn? 😞

(22:32) Rain cheque for that one? 🙄 It’s much easier to sulk and scream at the universe for cocking things up. I can’t decide which way I want it

(22:33) I wish I could blame someone else for the things I’ve done lately, but it makes me sick knowing it’s my fault and sicker trying to pass the buck

(22:33) It’ll get better, won’t it?

(22:33) I want to believe it will, Tiger.

(22:34) For all our ups and downs, we’ve got each other. I’m sorry it’s been hard

(22:34) But you did your project, it’s done, we’re meeting! Look on that thing people call the “bright side” — you deserve to.

(22:35) Get some rest, alright? You’ve got a long day of ass kicking ahead of you 💪

(22:35) The world won’t know what hit it 😱

(22:36) That’s what I like to hear 😏

Thursday

Alistair passes into the precinct’s side entrance, a feather-thrum of excitement rolling around in his belly. He had arrived to work alone, forced to use a ride-sharing app to make it at all, because Cullen had texted him about unavailability. It was concerning that Cullen still hasn’t spoken to him, but it’s only been a day, he tells himself, and there’s no chance they’ll be able to talk much anyhow, now that Cullen has parked himself on the front steps of the precinct with a crowd of reporters.

That leaves Alistair to slink around in the shadows, pilfering a couple doughnuts as he passes the breakroom, before taking his seat at his desk. Across from him, at Cullen’s space, is Luana and Fenris, chatting away idly.

“You’re later than usual,” Luana points out, turning away from Fenris.

“Cullen didn’t want to give me a ride to work this morning, so I took my sweet time making a real breakfast for myself. Even took the time for a pep talk to get over my fear of riding in a stranger’s car! All in all, a productive morning.” He takes a sizeable bite of a glazed doughnut. “Is he mad at me?”

“He was,” Luana replies. “At first. Mostly because he thought after all this time, you still don’t trust him.”

“I wanted him to trust me!”

“Either way, he had to come to terms with it quickly because of what’s happening today.”
“Huh?”

Alistair peers around the room and notices most of his fellow officers are clumped together in front of a television in the other room. Microphones in his face, Cullen appears on screen, fielding questions with only minimal grumbling and head-holding. Emblazoned on the screen is the claim that he is the savior of the city, the man who caught a magister and lived to tell the tale.

Alistair deflates.

“He took the credit?” he whines. “He doesn’t speak to me for a day and takes it out on me? Like this?”

“I wouldn’t think you’d want the attention,” says Fenris.

This gives Alistair pause. “Well, no,” he admits. “I mean, maybe? I thought I did.” He remembers what went through his head when he laid eyes on Alexius and briefly played with the thought that this would get him recognition. That he wouldn’t always be the forgotten Theirin outcast.

“I know it doesn’t look like it, but he was trying to do you a favor,” Luana insists, all softness and smiles. “There’s an invite to the palace, the king intends to speak with him. He didn’t want to do it, but—”

“He couldn’t have asked me?” Alistair’s head burns, his throat dry. “I… I appreciate what he’s doing, but he couldn’t have asked?”

“It was between him and Cassandra, mostly. She wanted to remove some of the blame by saying he was the one who did it. That maybe if they spun a different story, there would be a bit less outrage. I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t be. It’s not your fault.” Alistair’s gloom warps his enjoyment of his confections, and he sets about to return the uneaten one as Luana trails behind.

“We all know you were the one to do it, even if he takes the credit. It doesn’t matter what everyone else thinks, I promise you that,” Luana continues as she struggles to walk beside him. “He knows how your brother makes you feel. He was always taking that into consideration.”

“What exactly is the problem between you and the royal family?” Fenris asks when they’ve returned to the desks.

Beginning to feel uneasy, Alistair fiddles with his jar of pens. He probes a pencil eraser repeatedly, trying to cast out the memory of his uncle agreeing to the idea that he should be sent away. He remembers learning that his father passed away through belated word of mouth, because no one would tell him directly, because no one considered him family. He remembers being asked to renounce any possible claims to the throne, even though he was a child, even though he hadn’t a clue what that meant, even though he didn’t want whatever they were insisting he couldn’t have anyway.

He remembers being alienated by a family that swore up and down they didn’t know who he was, even though Arl Eamon raised him and the Arlessa neglected him.

He remembers trying distinctly to shove those memories away the second he arrived at the monastery, because there was no point in clinging to such raw and hateful emotions. He remembers sleeping with the hounds, getting trapped in cages, countless birthdays alone, no word from a remorseful father.
Alistair has spent so much time feeling like a dirty little secret, and here was an opportunity to throw it back in their faces. They would have to recognize him as something more than nothing if he had saved the city and then some. But his skin goes cold thinking about how they might’ve ignored him anyway if they knew he was part of this, if that invitation would’ve gone unsent. And if he had had to see his half-brother in the end, what would he have said? Would Cailan have pretended he didn’t know who Alistair was, despite his name?

The tabloids would have hounded Alistair and attacked him for trying to claw his way back into their good graces, which is partially what he wanted. And he shouldn’t have bothered, shouldn’t have wanted it in the first place.

Maybe it was better this way.

“They want nothing to do with me,” Alistair replies simply. “Maric was a good man, a good king. That he would love anyone after Rowan was unthinkable to everyone, even my mother, I guess, so everyone agreed to pretend I didn’t exist. I got to keep my name, though, so long as I kept my head down.”

“Where is your mother now?” Fenris asks.

“I don’t know, actually. I can only assume she didn’t want to be queen, or they wouldn’t let her be, so she left before there could even be speculation about who she was.”

“You don’t know who she is?” Luana’s eyes widen. Alistair shakes his head. “You’re a detective, you could find her easily!”

“I don’t think she wants to be found.” He bites his lip. “There was a time, before I became a detective, that all I wanted to do was to find her. But then Duncan adopted me, and I feel like I’d be betraying him if I still wanted to know who she was. He’s my family now, not her, not anyone who gave up on me.”

“I don’t know who my birth parents are,” says Luana. “I don’t think I could find them, even if I tried to look.”

“Oh, you don’t think it’d be easy to find another elf in this world who has pink hair?” Alistair weakly grins.

“I think we’ve all agreed it’s some kind of defect,” she laughs.

“I know only that my birth mother is dead,” Fenris adds. “And my sister and I do not talk.”

“Wish I had a sister,” Alistair groused. “There were rumors that Maric had fooled around with some maid, according to a woman named Goldanna. They wrote her off as someone trying to get coin from the royal coffers, and I did play with the idea that maybe my mother was that maid.” He laughs. “Back then I just really loved the idea of having a sibling who wasn’t Cailan.”

A lull follows in the conversation, giving Alistair the time to clear his mind and focus on work. He still has to finish a detailed report from yesterday’s events, but he doesn’t want to do a play-by-play on it just yet. Fortunately, Luana leaps at the chance to distract him again.

“I’ve been dying to know,” she starts.

“It’s true,” Fenris cuts in. “She won’t stop tittering.”

“I think we might be scar buddies now.” She traces a thin groove that creeps down her nose, then
does the same motion in the air across Alistair’s face. The healer said his wounds should heal normally, but the cut from the lightning was sure to leave a lasting mark. It’s hard to tell what will become of his nose wounds, as an angry purple bruise is still blooming between his eyes.

“I hope this goes away soon,” he sighs. “I’ve got a date on Saturday.”

That was poor wording and he knows it, with the way Luana fluffs up.

“A date?” she asks. “Dog Lord?”

“You’re still talking to that stranger?” Fenris makes no effort in hiding his disapproval.

“I’m amazed she’s still talking to me,” Alistair says, smiling. “I think she’ll be really happy that she’s got nothing to worry about anymore.”

“Will you tell her on Saturday that this was your doing?” Fenris asks.

“I think so, and I’ll have to hope she believes me.”

“And you think she’ll accept that this is what you do for a living?”

Alistair gulps.

“It’s… crossed my mind, once or twice.”

(A thousand times.)

“She couldn’t possibly reject you for that, she’s not like that!” Luana huffs. “Not from what I know about her, anyway,” she quickly adds.

“Maybe.” He frowns. “Or maybe I’m going to have to live a lie forever.”

“It’s worked well for you so far,” says Fenris.

“Well I don’t want to keep it a secret! There’s never really been a good time to tell her, and I’m afraid with her history it might worry her.”

Luana inspect Alistair’s face with a bit more scrutiny. “I’m going to have to send you home with some poultices, your bruise isn’t going to heal fast enough without them. If you show up to your date looking like this, it won’t matter what you do for a living, she will worry.”

A low whine crawls out of Alistair’s throat. “Well that’s just my luck, isn’t it. Thank you, Lua. I wanted to be excited but now I’m just anxious.”

“You can still be excited! I’ll clean you up later and you should be good as new by tomorrow evening. She won’t ever know! But for now, you look a bit like you got run over. Sorry.”

“Thaaaanks.”

It proves too hard to focus on any tasks at hand. The Alexius case is all the office wants to talk about at any given time, which makes sense, but Alistair wants to put it behind him already. With his report finished, he gets the go-ahead from the Captain to take the day off early, but Cullen still hasn’t shown up before he leaves.
Alistair notices Luana exiting the bathrooms and strides over to her. “You’re still here?”

She nods. “I plan to drive him home when he’s done answering questions, if he ever finishes. He didn’t sleep last night, so I don’t think he’ll be able to see through the headache this is giving him.”

Alistair’s throat constricts. “Well, ah, my ride is here. I’m off to see Duncan since I’ll be busy this weekend, but, uh, can you tell Cullen I said ‘hi’?”

Luana tucks a wisp of hair behind her ears as she looks Alistair up and down, then reaches into her bag for a package. “Of course, and here.” Tinctures and poultices are visible through the wrapping. “This is how you’re spending your night, so don’t slack off!”

He gratefully accepts the gift and tucks it under an arm. “You really think I look that bad, huh. Don’t want to scare Dog Lord away,” he says, laughing.

“She’s going to worry about you either way,” she replies. Luana reaches up and brushes a thumb across the cut on his cheek—he realizes once she’s pulled away that she’s stopped wearing gloves again. “Let’s put her mind at ease for now, though.”

“Right.”

“Send me pictures when you have a spare moment?”

“There’s no way you’re not going to see a thousand pictures.” Alistair gives her a quick one-armed hug and jogs towards the exit, waving his injury kit in the air as she watches. On the way out he catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror and cringes, has to resist the urge to touch the irritable wine red spill over his nose bridge.

*Please don’t scare Dog Lord, please don’t scare Dog Lord, please don’t scare Dog Lord.*

(20:25) **What are your feelings on, say, bruises?**

(20:26) Uh? They sure are bruises? Am I supposed to have an opinion?

(20:26) Ouch?

(20:27) Don’t tell me you’re covered in bruises because you “fell”

(20:27) **Well, you see, when you break a nose, you sometimes have bruises under your eyes and on your 👣**

(20:28) Hm, unsure if you’re going to be the prettiest belle at the ball come Saturday now

(20:28) **No!! It’s fine, 👷‍♀️ gave me something to clear it up. I’m laying on the bathroom floor with goo spread over my nose. It’s very exciting, I’m living what I think is my best life**

(20:29) I’m going to swaddle you in bubble wrap and roll you places so you can’t ever get hurt again. This is ridiculous

(20:29) Next you’re going to tell me you play football in your spare time and it’s fine, you only get a ball upside the ol noggin every OTHER weekend

(20:29) **There’s a pitch at the gym I go to 😃 this could be a new hobby 😊**
I’m not trying to get beat up I swear!!

Oh? I thought you FELL

Why are you getting beaten up??

CHEESE MAN.

Cheese Man you come back here and tell me why are you getting into fights

I am aware that pugilism is your thing but I don’t know how I feel about you actually engaging in it!!

Can I at least know what your technique is, I need to be able to imagine this. And yes I have YouTube open

I wasn’t boxing!! Sorry I had to “properly” remove the goop on my face, and it’s already looking better 😊

I’ll explain more this weekend 😁 there are so many things I want to tell you, but it’s so… hard to explain via text or phone call? I don’t want you to overreact.

Hm. Vague sense of unease

I’ll trust your judgment. Let’s focus on the good things, then.

Yes please!!

included some face masks in my care package, and they’ve got animal faces.

Is she trying to tell me something about my face? When did she have the time to buy these? Why are they so sticky?

Just because you’re a man doesn’t mean you need to have an oily face. She’s doing both of us a favor!! If you don’t introduce me to her, I’m going to be very disappointed, because I clearly need to thank her

I don’t disagree, I’m just baffled! Anyway help me pick an animal face

What are my options

The unicorn one is kind of creepy. Nothing about it tells me it’s a unicorn, it’s just sort of..... Rainbow-y

Half of me wants to say panda, but the other half of me thinks this is entirely unfair because you’re not going to send me a picture of it anyway

I’ll take a picture and show you on Saturday!!

Or better yet, I’ll save the remaining ones and we do them together!! Bonding!!
(20:51) Save the fox one for me, then. You can be the kitty

(20:51) Loser gets the unicorn

(20:52) Loser??

(20:52) Oh I found another one at the bottom of the bag. 🐲?

(20:53) Oh obviously that one’s mine

(20:53) Fine 😏

(21:09) My skin!! Dolphin smooth!! I think petting it constantly is counter-productive but I can’t find it in me to care all that much

(21:10) We’ll spend all of Saturday delicately petting your face

(21:10) Perfect 😎

(22:31) Only two more sleeps!

(22:34) It would be one more sleep if you were sleeping right now 😇

(22:34) Hm, yes, you might be right. I wanted to say goodnight first 😘

(22:35) Are you going to sleep now?

(22:35) Yes. Have to get through one more exhausting work day and could use all the rest I can get 😌

(22:36) I’m watching a show about how things are made, and this episode is all about staves and also glass-blowing. Next episode is about runes. This might be a long night

(22:36) Ohh, well, don’t stay up too late!! Tell me everything you learn

(22:36) We should watch together, I think you’d like it a lot

(22:37) Already making plans for what to do after Andrastea? 😏

(22:37) Aughgh I’m prolonging my bedtime

(22:37) Goodnight, Dog Lord!! Have sweet dreams of chasing cars and bones and such

(22:38) I’m going to send Hessarian in my place on Saturday and you’re going to have to kiss a dog. Have dreams about that

(22:38) 🙃

(22:38) 😘

(22:38) Go to bed!
Friday

Daydreams run rampant as Alistair reclines at his desk; Cullen has returned to be opposite of him, as is the natural order of things, but they’ve spoken little more than pleasantries. In his mind, two different scenarios clash: the meeting of Dog Lord tomorrow and the dinner party Cullen is to attend to with the King of Ferelden. He imagines tables draped in white damask, overlarge silver dinner plates, and throngs of foreign dignitaries all lining up to shake his partner’s hand. Cassandra will be there, parading her star pupil around, and there may even be a glimpse of her elusive wife.

On the other hand, there is Andrastea.

He plans to eschew the cliche of a bouquet of roses and instead sneakily pick one from the magically-tended garden at the storefront, placing it on his table with the intent to have her wear it in her hair. He’ll arrive early and let the indie radio be the soundtrack for his afternoon, all obscure love songs and promises of something greater. The bruises will be gone, his side will no longer sting, and the aching will cease as the bell over the door rings and a woman with her dog will step through.

“Alistair, I think we should talk.”

Cullen is smiling wanly at him from across the desk, no longer typing or holding a pen.

“...Sure.” Alistair painfully extricates himself from his place within his head. “What’s up?”

“Captain Pentaghast intends to come out here to talk to us, or I believe she does. I wanted to clear the air before we have another discussion with her, if that’s fine by you.”

“Are you replacing me?” Alistair blurs out. He blanches, but does not regret it. He needs to know.

“What?” Cullen blinks. “No. Did someone tell you I was?”

“No, but I thought...” Alistair grows quieter with every word. “I know I did bad back there, and I thought maybe you were taking it out on me by taking the credit, letting Cassandra talk you up, and going to the King’s crime-free bash or whatever. Figured it would be just my luck that you would toss me out the other side as well.”

“Alistair.” Cullen winces at the sound of his own voice and takes a minute to collect himself. There’s an opened bottle of aspirin next to his keyboard, as well as an untouched cup of coffee. “I want you to know that I genuinely meant to help you by claiming responsibility. Obviously I trusted what you were doing—I never called for backup, as I should have. I didn’t do a lot of things that I believed were right, because in equal measure I believed you knew what you were doing.”

“Well, uh, thank you for that,” says Alistair. “And you’re okay with... meeting Cailan?”

“It’ll be nothing but fluff and pleasantries, I really don’t care to go. I knew you’d hate it more than I ever could, though.”

Alistair rubs at the back of his neck. “That’s true. I get all twisted up thinking about how it might go, what I’d even say to him. Can you glare at him a little extra for me? When his back is turned?”
Cullen laughs quietly. “I could try.”

It feels as though the conversation is over, but a weight remains firmly planted on Alistair’s chest. “Cullen, I’m sorry.” He wishes he were more apologetic, in truth, because there are many things he’s not sorry for. He’s not sorry that he did it, or that he succeeded, but he is sorry that things didn’t go according to plan, that Cullen had to sit out in the open and wait for a transmission that might never come. Alistair can read the trauma in all of Cullen’s lines and knows that the only betrayal between them was that Alistair might not have ever come back.

“I shouldn’t have let you go in alone,” Cullen replies, voice dark and grinding. “But you did, so we will put this behind us.”

“Next time, I—”

“Pray to the Maker there won’t be a next time.”

If all the cases for the rest of his life were to be uninteresting, as boring as bread and butter, Alistair doesn’t think he’d mind it all too much. He nods in agreement and the matter is settled.

Not long after they finish talking, Cassandra strolls out, her mouth tight and her gait stiff. She hardly breathes before launching into an explanation—in front of everyone, no less—what the future holds, and it is as overwhelming as Alistair expected it would be. He wonders why this isn’t done more privately but there is to be a precinct-wide investigation, just to ensure that nothing was amiss during the case. She glances pointedly at Alistair every other word.

“Proceedings will be soon, some of you are expected to comply,” Cassandra says, pressing her lips into an even thinner line. “Maker willing, he will plead guilty.”

And pigs will fly, Alistair thinks.

To the rest of the room she details what is essentially an itinerary for the coming weeks, then turns on a heel and returns to her office. For most officers, thinks will continue as normal. For Alistair, it’s desk duty until the end of time. He mutters something about wanting to stretch his legs, not realizing Cullen can hear him.

“She did mention to me last night that she has considered us for sergeant positions.”


“It was only a mention.”

Alistair’s heart hitches. Promotion? After all this? Why didn’t she say anything to him? He scratches his forehead; no, she wouldn’t say anything to him, he can’t get excited about the prospect before the trial is over, because if that goes poorly, then there’s obviously no promotion. But promotion? Promotion, promotion, promotion. He mouths the word, tries to get a feel for it, but it’s so foreign—he thought he’d be a regular detective forever, nevermind the fact that he was offered this job much sooner than he should’ve been.

All at once, though, he’s slammed with fear.

He doesn’t want a promotion.

What if he’s moved to another precinct and has to command a team of men and women he doesn’t know? Didn’t he just say that he doesn’t want to command anyone, was she even listening when he said that? Suddenly he wants to stay at this desk—his desk—forever and process DUIs and parking
tickets, not tell other people want to do. He’s terrible at getting himself to do the right thing half the time.

Taking a deep, pained breath, Alistair closes his eyes and counts to twenty.

_Do Dog Lord, Dog Lord, Dog Lord._

_Focus on the near future. The Dog Lord future. Not the inevitable, horrible, terrifying, awful future in which I ruin everything and Denerim catches fire._

His mind goes on vacation to Antiva with the Thedas Space Program, and he doesn’t hear anyone for the rest of the day.

Cullen elects to drive Alistair home, which is a blessing in and of itself.

(He doesn’t want to keep paying strangers to find out where he lives, that’s weird, and he wants to have as much money to spend on his date as humanly possible.)

After collecting his things he sees Dorian across the room—a rare occurrence, given that he always insists his downstairs office has everything he needs. Something about mortals being unable to handle him up here, too, or maybe Alistair imagined that part. “I’ll catch up with you,” Alistair tells Cullen before heading in the direction of his friend. Before he can reach him, though, Dorian is already in an elevator, going down.

Alistair opens his phone.

To: 🤣Dorian

(18:55) I was just about to come say hi to you 😞

(18:55) Haven’t seen you around in a couple days. Wanna talk?

(18:56) I’d rather not talk, if it’s all the same to you. I’ve had nothing but southerners try to tell me how to feel these past two days.

(18:56) Oh, I… I didn’t want to tell you how to feel. Pretty sure that’s not my place. Wanted to know how you were holding up, that’s all.

(18:57) Horribly. Thank you for asking.

(18:57) I didn’t see Felix at all after he’d gotten sick. I hadn’t seen him in years, really. I’ll never see him again.

(18:57) Were you two close?

(18:58) Alexius tutored me while I was in college. Felix was often around, a fair bit younger than me, but smart as a whip. A very helpful young man, as far as I’m concerned. He brought me drinks, snacks, kept me company when his father was too busy for my studies. When I left Tevinter, we kept in touch. When he grew sick, we did not. That was my fault.

(18:59) Tell me, Alistair,

(18:59) How was he? When he died.
(18:59) He was very stubborn. He wanted to be the one to tell his dad to stop, but I made him stay behind. He was even my co-conspirator, helped me keep Cullen back when I needed him to

(18:59) I read that worked out so very well for you.

(19:00) That sounds like the Felix I know.

(19:00) Knew.

(19:00) Thank you, Alistair. I was planning on going out drinking in his honor, if you’d like to come.

(19:01) Ahh, I’m sorry, I can’t. Thank you though. I have to go home and work on my bike before tomorrow. I’ve got a date.

(19:01) Oh, do you? Congratulations are in order, then.

(19:01) Thank you 😊

(19:02) I have to go, I’m making Cullen wait a suuuper long time. He thinks I’m talking to you, which I am, but yeah. Please take care of yourself, Dorian. I don’t have your boyfriend’s number, I can’t tell him to keep you safe

(19:02) I may be turned a little upside down, but I’ll be fine. Hurry along, I know he gets testy if you keep him waiting for too long.

(19:02) And despite what everyone else might say about me or my “allegiances,” I appreciate what you’ve done, bringing him to justice like that.

(19:03) Don’t let it go to your head, big man.

(19:03) And become like you? Maybe next time. See you on Monday, Dorian.

Saturday

(9:30) Gooooood morning Ferelden’s finest!! ☀️😊☀️

(9:30) I’ve been up for two hours now

(9:31) I fixed my ride so I don’t need Cullen to drive me. I’ve showered twice. I used the hideous unicorn face mask so I’m beautifully smooth. Not a freckle out of place, I tell you!!

(9:33) You’ve been up for two hours and you didn’t even text me? I’ve been up for the past two hours too and I’ve been suffering alone

(9:33) 😞 you could’ve texted me too!

(9:33) I was afraid I’d wake you

(9:34) I was afraid I’d wake you! You said the other day you needed all the rest you could get!

(9:34) I wanted to sleep in. I really did. But… excitement. Can’t be helped.
What are we supposed to do now?

Andrastea doesn’t properly open until 10… The drive-thru is open now but, yeah.

My house could use a good deep clean

I could brush my hair a hundred more times 😂

I could take Hessarian on five more walks

You already walked him?

What else was I supposed to do at 7 in the morning?

Good point.

Andrastea is open, you know.

Are we really so impatient that we can’t wait another few hours?

The answer is yes, so maybe let’s bump it up to noon? I still have to get dressed

Can’t sit around in my knickers forever

Noon is good. Noon’s great.

Soo… what did you have for breakfast 😔

Seriously?

Seriously!!

I had a muffin. My iron stomach is weirdly not doing so well with these nerves

Go eat something else! What if you pass out on the way there, or in the middle of talking to me 😞

Then we will have a very romantic date at a hospital. Tiger, I promise I won’t pass out, I’ll be fine.

Alright, but I’m worrying. I’m already worried.

Work still hasn’t called me to come in or anything, so presumably we’re in the clear! They absolutely would’ve called by now. They don’t need me today. Gotta keep telling myself that.

Work did call me, but it was my coworker losing her mind because she knows what today is.

She wants me to bring you round, to see if you’re as cute as she’s been imagining

I hope I don’t disappoint! 😊
(10:47) We still have to figure out what the other person is wearing, so if you want to tell me now

(10:48) So you can tell your coworker?

(10:48) If I don’t give any details, she’s going to be ringing me every five minutes while we’re eating anyway

(10:48) I have reason to believe she might have spies at Andrastea, checking just to make sure you’re not going to kidnap me.

(10:49) So if you’d like to tell me now that you’re part of some assassin’s order or the Crows or the Carta, lemme know so I can pass the info along. I want to give her some heads up

(10:49) Spies?? But if I’m a spy and I’m with you, and she’s got spies and they’re watching us, who’s protecting Ferelden??

(10:49) Oh Maker…..

(10:55) Right. What are we wearing

(10:55) Glossed over that the first time by accident

(10:57) Hm

(10:57) The weather’s nice, gonna say fuck it and wear a skirt. Long grey skirt, bit of a slit for the leg, don’t want to be, like, impossibly fancy

(10:57) Not that you don’t deserve fancy

(10:59) Short white vest top. Sandals. Idk. Trying not to overthink this

(11:00) And the dog, you’ll have the dog! 🐶

(11:00) Don’t imply that Hessarian is a fashion accessory. I’m not Orlesian, and neither are you

(11:00) 😅

(11:05) Alright. I’ll be wearing a dark blue button-up under my leather jacket. Light brown/tan pants, I guess?? Sunglasses, maybe?

(11:05) Oh, what, you get to wear a leather jacket and I don’t?

(11:05) I’ve got loads of them and the ONE time I’m not going to wear one, Maker’s balls

(11:06) Sorry!! I need to wear a jacket and it’s the best one I’ve got that isn’t for suits!

(11:06) Alright. But I’m stealing it.

(11:06) But I need it 😅

(11:07) Oh well!

(11:07) When are you leaving?

(11:08) Very soon. Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa

(11:20) I’m gonna be there early, I know, but I can’t wait any longer

(11:21) I’ll wait a bit, let you get there first. I promise

(11:21) This is really happening, isn’t it?

(11:21) It is!

(11:21) I hope I don’t mess this up. What if you see me and run away screaming?

(11:22) That’s *not* going to happen. Get out of there, go to Andrastea, don’t overthink it. Hessarian and I will be there shortly

(11:22) Our last text conversation…

(11:22) Just kidding, I’m going to text you a lot even afterwards. Asfjskdbk sorry

(11:22) I’m going!

(11:23) I hope I recognize you. Maybe you need to be wearing a crown? Or your Dog Lord shirt? Not too late to change.

(11:23) Go! Or I’ll get there first!

(11:23) Alright, alright!!

(11:24) See you soon, Cheese Man 🧀💙

(11:24) See you soon, Dog Lord 🐶❤️

Chapter End Notes

Finally!! Happy almost-birthday to meeee!!

Some notes:
* The materials that go into the armor they wear were p much just chosen because they're the best common materials that have good magic defense and regular defense (that aren't, like, dragon bone or whatever, I guess). There's some art on our blog of what he's wearing, but try not to...think too hard about what it looks like ^^;
* please suspend your disbelief for so much of this chapter skjbfksjdb

The crime is over, I hope it was at least a little satisfying! As always I'm insecure as hell about my portions of this fic but oh well, I'm putting it out there in the world :'D So so so many thanks to everyone who commented on the last chapter! The response was overwhelming and we're so glad that even after all this time, so many of you are still reading. And thanks to everyone in the Heart-Eyes Emoji discord server for cheering me on! You guys are the bees knees

Our personal blogs:
Tijgertje (come say happy birthday to me on 7/7!!)
Carouselfancy
And our fic blog for update posts or if you'd like to send us a message! Plus extra art and other neat things, along with the link to our Discord server! Until next time <3
Saturday

Olivia drives to Andrastea with white knuckles on the steering wheel.

It had taken her hours to get ready. She was unhappy with every outfit she had tried. After tearing through every outfit she owned, she finally had to call it good enough. She left the casualties of war behind her in a trail of desperation and disaster. Her duvet disappeared under a sea of discarded outfits that didn’t make the cut. Her bathroom vanity was a graveyard of abused concealers, eyeliners, and compacts. Left shoes with no partners dotted the floor—all sacrificed for the greater good.
She has never in her life succumbed to nervousness this way—she's not even sure she has felt it. She has never been one to fret and wring her hands and obsess over what can go wrong, especially not over a date.

*Because she has never cared this much,* she thinks. She cares more about Cheese Man than anything before, and that fact terrifies her.

Her stomach flips when she turns a corner and sees the bright blooming roses of Andrastea. It's a beautiful day, sunny and warm, as though the sky itself is cheering her on.

She tries to picture what he might look like, for the hundredth time. It's always hard to concoct an image based on what little information he's given her. She knows he has a large nose, long-fingered hands, and freckles, though how many she can't be sure. She hopes they will cover his face, stretch across his arms, his back, his—

She knows he works out, but she wonders if he is muscular. Is he lean and tall? Broad and short? She pictures him with kind, lovely eyes and a smiling mouth. Soft hair, strong hands, long legs, and... she has to stop herself from getting carried away.

Olivia parks close to the front entrance, in case she needs to make a quick exit, and she hates herself for it.

As the car slows, Hessarian stands up in the backseat with anticipation, but Olivia needs a moment to catch her breath. She checks her makeup in her rear view mirror and feels a jolt of anxiety as she wonders whether red lipstick had been too bold.

She makes a point of not looking at the patio seating area, in case he has decided to wait for her there.

Forcing herself to keep her back straight as she exits her vehicle, she is glad for the armor of her sunglasses. Hiding part of her face from any who might be looking gives her time to collect herself. Olivia of the past would stride up to him with confidence, stick out her hand, and that would be that. The thought of her past self getting her hands on Cheese Man now makes her feel sick.

She opens her rear door and grabs Hessarian's leash like a lifeline, stepping back to let him jump out of the car with a happy bark.

Andrastea.

Olivia pulls up her sunglasses and lets her eyes adjust to the indoors as she leads Hessarian into the cafe. She walks past the long counter bustling with frothing machines and coffee carafes, her eyes darting briefly to watch a dwarven worker operate two blenders at once. Paper crinkles and tongs clack as someone removes pastries from the glass display case. Dishes clatter and splash in a sink. Over on the corner stage, two elven twins sing a folksy tune about the Dread Wolf as one of them gently strums a guitar.

It's been a while since she's been here, yet somehow today feels like the first time.

With a deep breath, Olivia finally feels ready to look for Cheese Man. She lowers her sunglasses and scans the tables around her. There’s a leather jacket slung over one man’s chair, but his shirt isn't blue and he's already engaging in conversation with two other people. The man she does find with a blue shirt has black pants, and he's focusing on his laptop. Olivia checks her phone for the clothing description again and decides he must not be here yet.

Her fingers flex around Hessarian's leash and she finds herself a table near a window. If she can see
him before he enters the building, she hopes she will have the chance to prepare herself so that she doesn't act like a complete fool.

The customers around her cast worried glances at her dog, as though he is two seconds from springing into attack. Instead, he's sitting politely with his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth, a ducky bandana tied around his large neck. She scratches his ears affectionately and glares at the nearest woman watching him with disapproval. He licks her hand, leaving a trail of slobber behind, and Olivia grins at him.

Someone enters the cafe, and her head snaps to the door.

A woman and three children in matching outfits. Olivia releases the breath she is holding with a sharp pang of combined relief and disappointment. She feels both completely unprepared to see him, and like she has been waiting all her life.

Biting her lip, she checks her phone for notifications. In large numbers that taunt her, her phone informs her the time is 12:13 P.M. She has been here for almost fifteen minutes. With a deepening frown, she taps out a text to him.

(12:13) I think I underestimated how long it would take you to get here!

(12:13) I must have beat you here. I'm at a table by the window. 😊

The soft bass of one of the singers flits around her, soothing her racing heart. She makes a note in her phone of the band's name so that she can look them up later. The line at the counter for drinks has become quite long since she arrived. She debates whether to get something now, or wait until her friend is here to order.

Waiting for Cheese Man gives her too much time and space to get lost in her thoughts. Olivia thinks back to their recent texts, how shamelessly flirty they've become. They'd agreed this was a date, but they hadn't set any parameters for that. He had come so close to confessing something to her, and if she allows herself, she might work out what that was. But does she feel the same way? Her heart beats out a quick staccato at the thought and heat blooms in her face. It's downright ignorant of her to try and deny that she has genuine feelings for him at this point. That she hasn't had dreams about picnics under the stars or road trips to Amaranthine. She has thought of his face; imagined his smile, what it might be as he looks at her. As much as she had fought against the idea of finding romance in Denerim, it seems it has found her. She can't fight against it any longer. She doesn't want to.

It sounds cliche, and her instinct is to resist it, to deny herself something that feels too good to be true. But he has shown her time and time again that he is real, and honest, and open.

For the first time in her life, she is allowing herself to believe in the impossible. She is looking at the glass as half-full, instead of half-empty.

It's very surreal. But she wants to believe in herself as much as she believes in him. She wants to believe she is capable of growth and evolving for the better. She had resigned herself to thinking she was hopeless and not a very good person. Now, she wants to believe she is capable of greater things. It helps that she has a strong support system, something else she had never thought she was capable of. She thinks of Leliana, of Dorian and her brother—even of Morrigan—and feels grateful. She has real, genuine friends. It's a far cry from a group of similar-minded assholes who happen to spend time
together, as she has had in the past.

Her phone chimes, and Olivia's heart leaps into her throat. A wide smile breaks across her face, and she snatches her phone off the table to read the awaiting text.


(12:28) Tell me everything! Oh, or don't, if you are too busy 'spending time together!' Try not to make a scene in public!

Olivia tries not to feel disappointed at the sight of Leliana's words. Her friend's excitement is adorable, and Olivia is grateful to her for all she has done to help her get to this point. But she can't help but wish it was Cheese Man texting her instead.

She looks at Hessarian, who cocks his head in curiosity. She reminds herself that Cheese Man couldn't have come in and missed her. Besides the fact that Hessarian weighs almost ninety pounds, he was the only dog in the cafe, which is not large. His red and yellow bandana sticks out like a bright beacon among the muted decor and patrons of the cafe.

A black hole forms in the pit of her stomach. What if he had come, seen her sitting there, and hated what he found? She imagines him catching a glimpse of her frizzed out hair, uneven makeup, and bright red lipstick, and walking away from the cafe, deciding this meet-up was a huge mistake.

"Because..."

"What was all that about 'it has to be special?' Don't spoil it."

He wouldn't. She shakes her head and pinches herself on the arm, crossing her arms over her chest. He wasn't as shallow as that, she refuses to think that way about him.

She tries to ignore the way her heart clenches in fear, instead summoning as much of her confidence as she can. She curses it for abandoning her at such a crucial time. Why was she fretting like a ninny? This is so unlike her.

(12:56) Where are you?

(12:56) I'm sure traffic is shit where you are, but can you at least let me know you're ok?

Another half an hour passes, and she receives no response.

The line for drinks has waned, and she catches the barista watching her with a pitying look over the glasses he is wiping down. She pulls out her phone and browses her social media timeline, pretending she is only here to use the free Wi-Fi. She comments on a few of Leliana and Dorian's latest photos, updates her status, and feels ridiculous the entire time.

Another hour. The cafe experiences another small rush. The customers are mostly high school-age students picking up coffees after school's let out. Still, he doesn't appear. He doesn't text her back.
Her stomach roils. She ties Hessarian's leash to a nearby dog hitch, more for the comfort of other patrons than to actually prevent him from running off. "Stay here, love. I'll be back." He gives her a soft wuff in acknowledgement and she marches to the restroom, her head held high.

The loo is thankfully empty, and she bursts through the door with a sense of urgency she doesn't quite understand. She wrenches a paper towel from the nearby dispenser and swipes at the red lipstick, needing to clear any sign of it from her face. It smears across her mouth and she pauses, glaring at the mirror image of herself. She used to feel pride when she looked at her reflection. Now she feels only disgust. She looks like a possessive ex-girlfriend, trying desperately to please and to attract, never realizing that she's been rejected from the start. Her hand slows as she finishes wiping the lipstick from her face, and she feels... tired.

Feeling defeated, she leaves the restroom, ignoring the gaze of the barista on her back. Shame prickles at her skin as she returns to her seat, picking up her phone as though she will find something new this time. She continues to sit and wait, though she feels increasingly pathetic.

(15:00) Please be okay

She can't put her finger on exactly why she refuses to give up and leave, except that she has daydreamed too long about this meeting. She tells herself that he had car trouble, that once he sorts it out he'll find a way to get here. She tells herself he will do whatever it takes. She only has to be patient.

Hessarian gets restless after the third hour, so she takes him for a dawdle in the grass out front. her eyes unwavering as she watches the vehicles that pass by. He seems frustrated at her strange behavior, and even more so that he can't run and play.

When she walks back into the cafe, the barista sighs, and waves her over. Begrudgingly, she complies.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asks, his voice light and airy. She prepares to shake her head no, when he adds, "On the house."

With a sigh, Olivia shrugs her shoulders in defeat. "I suppose I'll have a... rose lemonade. In the bottle if you have any left? Thank you very much."

He nods, turning to the cooler behind him and pulling out an elegant-looking bottle of pink liquid. He slides it across the counter and nods toward Hessarian. "Treat for the pup?"

Hessarian barks his happy assent, and she gives the barista a half-hearted smile. "That would be lovely, thanks." She takes a picture of the bottle before opening it and shoots off a text to Cheese Man.

(15:34) I'm going to have to crack open this cold one without you! I actually don't think I've had one of their lemonades yet. If I don't like it, who am I supposed to give it to, since you're not here

(15:34) Hm. Pretty good. Tastes a bit like a flower and a lemon had a baby, but I'll take it
The barista smiles behind his beard, and it's warm and inviting. He pulls a piece of dehydrated chicken from behind the counter and tosses it to her dog. Hessarian catches it with practiced ease and devours it. "He's a gorgeous dog," the barista says, his voice full of admiration as he looks at her mabari. "Purebred?"

She shrugs. "Presumably. I got him from a mabari rescue group in Highever. They take in just about anything with a blocky head and muscular build, but he has the conformation. And the smarts."

Olivia looks down at Hessarian, whose stubby tail is wagging furiously. "Hessarian, say thank you." Tongue lolling, her mabari spins around twice, sits, and barks at the barista. She can't help but grin proudly, and the barista chuckles and applauds.

His eyes flick back to her face, and he picks up a new glass to wipe down with his rag. "What time was your friend supposed to be here?" he asks.

She looks away from him, pursing her lips. "Not sure I know what you mean," she mutters, annoyed.

The barista doesn't stop cleaning glasses. He shrugs. "Don't have to talk about it if you don't want. Just seems a bit daft to me to wait around all afternoon for someone who isn't gonna show."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

He raises his palms. "Didn't mean any offense. Just hard to watch someone sit at a table alone like that."

Olivia sighs. "He'll show. He's late."

The barista nods, but she can feel the pity emanating from him in waves. She hates it. "All right. Let me know if there's anything you need. We, ah, we close at 6."

She glares at him. "I'll be gone before then, thank you."

Even with her back turned to him, she can feel his gaze on her back the entire way back to her table.

(17:30) I waited for you.

(17:30) Five and a half hours I've waited, and you never showed.

(17:30) Or maybe you did and you left. Doesn't matter, either way I feel like a tit.

(17:31) I really thought today was the day. Maker, I'm an idiot.

(17:31) Despite how angry I am at you, Cheese Man, I still hope you have a good reason.

(17:32) I still hope you'll text me.

She keeps her word to the barista, and gives up at 17:45. The empty cafe taunts her as she walks out the door.

Sunday
Sleep evades her that evening. She checks her phone so often, she's worried she'll cause screen burn, but still, her texts to him remain unread.

Olivia tries not to assume the worst, but in the attempt, she manages to do exactly that.

She keeps telling herself that any moment, her phone will ring and his voice will appear on the other end, like a beacon or a lullaby. He'll tell her that work cropped up again and he's so sorry but he called her as soon as he could and everything is fine, don't worry. Her heart hurts with the burning desire to be able to hear his voice. She misses the warmth; that little lilt that sounds like a perpetual smile; the way he speaks as though every word is a physical embrace around her.

Hessarian rouses her from bed not long after the sunrise. His leash dangles from his drooling jowls per their morning ritual. Olivia has always found comfort in running. During her darkest hours, she would run until her legs wanted to give out, and it was a reminder that she would always have the power to carry herself forward.

She swats at him and pulls her duvet over her head, covering her eyes with the palm of her hand. The thought of exposing herself to the world makes her nauseous, and her eyes burn with lack of sleep.

Hessarian nudges the duvet with his nose, insistent, and Olivia rolls over to turn away from him. He gives a stubborn huff of annoyance, and she hears the leash clatter to the floor only a moment before his massive weight settles in full force atop her back. She groans. "For fuck's sake, Hessarian!" she snaps, furious at the elbow pressing directly into her kidney.

She freezes. Hessarian looks at her with big, sad eyes. He whines and flattens his ears against his head, and Olivia feels like weeping.

"I'm sorry," she murmurs, instantly regretful. She wraps her arms around his big head and pushes her forehead against his. "Just because somebody is a rotten catfishing bastard who ghosted me doesn't mean I have the right to be rotten to you." She strokes his head, and he watches her with deep chocolate eyes. She kisses his nose, ignoring the way her chest clenches at her own words, and wriggles out from underneath him. "Come on, mate," she says cheerfully, snatching his leash from the floor. "Let's go stretch our legs."

The day is traitorously sunny and beautiful, even though she feels like a hurricane. She tries to focus on the sound of her own feet hitting pavement, her breathing, the sounds of traffic around her—anything to keep her mind from running away with her.

Her imagination wins.

As much as she has been trying to assume the best of him, she's had too much time to wonder, and her optimism has run out. She has watched her text window with Cheese Man for most of the night, and the longer her texts went without showing a "Read" receipt, the more hopeless she became. She knows it is possible to turn them off, and she can't help but wonder if he has done so to disappear on her without her knowing what has actually happened.

She thinks about all the times they had planned on meeting, only for his "work" to force him to cancel. About his inability to send photos because he was too broke to afford the data plan. It had been his idea in the first place to establish an "anonymity clause," stopping her from looking him up and finding out who he really was.

Her skin breaks out in gooseflesh, and she grits her teeth against the wave of nausea that swells over her. She cannot believe she's been so stupid.
She had felt silly from day one talking to a stranger, someone whose name and face she didn't know. She hadn't taken it seriously at the time, but as they got to know each other better, of course she had considered the possibility that he could be catfishing her. It was a common enough story, so much so that there were even reality shows dedicated to the concept. But she had, for one of the rare times in her life, allowed herself to be optimistic. She had taken him at face value because he seemed so damn earnest, in a way that she had never encountered before.

If one was going to catfish someone, wouldn't it be the best strategy to paint oneself as naive and optimistic, incapable of ever doing anything to intentionally hurt another person?

She doesn't even need to wonder why someone would do such a thing. Her family is the second wealthiest and most powerful family in Ferelden, with no shortage of connections and fame. Everyone with a newspaper had heard of her parents' death. The papers had expounded on the great tragedy of the two surviving Cousland siblings. They had gossiped of the sizeable fortune bequeathed to the surviving children. She had mentioned castles and Highever—she had even used her brother's name! It wouldn't have been difficult for him to figure out who she was. She hadn't been particularly discreet with her funds, either, and she had even told him of her 800-sovereign discrepancy over a rare book.

His phone. She hadn't even questioned his story about losing it, had thought it simple enough for her to replace. She'd been so excited to continue their correspondence that she hadn't thought twice.

Olivia pumps her legs even harder. Her breathing grows ragged as she pushes herself to be faster. Hessarian keeps up with ease, galloping by her side without a care in the world.

She feels raw, exposed. Every nerve in her body is bare to the air, grating and burning and sending jolts of pain across her skin. Hot humiliation churns in her gut, angry and abrasive, like a demon trying to claw itself from her core.

She doesn't know how long she's been running, but her legs burn hot with exertion. She closes her eyes and imagines them growing hotter and hotter, becoming black and twisted and simmering. She sees molten liquid becoming formless and gliding over pavement with ease. The heat travels into her thighs, her abdomen, into her chest and her arms and her face until she is pure fire. She remembers the demon from the alleyway, lurching as it moved, slug-like, reaching for her with arms that drip liquid fire into the pavement below. She embraces it, merges with it, until she herself is the demon.

The fire engulfs her and bursts from her chest, and her legs give out from under her. She collapses in a nearby patch of grass, ignoring the grass stains that bloom across her knees. Her lungs suck at the air, her breathing jagged and desperate. Her muscles burn with exhaustion. The demon disappears, and all that remains is her: broken, angry, and helpless.

Her heavy breaths turn to pants, and she can't seem to get enough air in her lungs. A cry rips itself from her throat and she curls into herself in the grass, terrified.

A panic attack. Hessarian pushes his head against her chest and she grasps for him. She's drowning in air, has forgotten how to breathe entirely. Her breaths turn into sobs. She releases the grief that has been clawing at her chest, and weeps into Hessarian's neck.

Monday

She hates herself for checking her phone when she wakes the next morning. She hates herself even more when she finds nothing.
For most of the previous day, she had tried to continue with her routine—laundry, lunch, oil change, dishes. But every action seemed to exhaust her further and further, until it was all she could do to put herself to bed. Not that it mattered in the end. She found herself entrenched in another almost sleepless night. Morning, as usual, came too soon.

Somehow, she finds the strength to pull herself out of bed. Hessarian is with her every step of the way, his nose nudging at her hand to keep her going. She feels as though she has shed part of herself that she cannot rebuild.

It seems like an act of fraud to walk through the doors of the Crossroads, but she deserves a medal for showing up at all. Olivia makes a beeline for her desk, trying to skirt around Leliana, but to no avail. Leliana perches at the edge of Olivia's desk, looking giddy. Olivia knows immediately that she had been waiting to ask about the meet-up. She makes an effort of giving Leliana some semblance of a smile, anyway. It comes out as more of a baring of the teeth.

Leliana, bless her heart, immediately senses that something is wrong. Her excited face falls into a frown of deep concern, and she pulls Olivia's chair out for her and helps her sit.

"Has something happened?" she asks, sounding soft and careful and sad. Olivia lays her head down against the cool wooden surface of her desk.

"He didn't show," she says quietly. The confession feels raw, and she can't look Leliana in the eyes as she speaks it.

Leliana gasps, so earnest it stings. "How can that be? He seemed..."

"He seemed too good to be true," Olivia bites, filling Leliana's pause. She lifts her head and shakes her hair out of her ponytail, rubbing her face. "He seemed like a bloody fantasy, because he was, and I was too bloody stupid to see it. It's my own fault, Leliana." She feels so, so tired.

Leliana shakes her head. "The times of distrusting every person you meet through technology are over, Olivia. I'm sure he's given you a good explanation and you are being cynical, as you do!"

She stands, a bit too abrupt, and her knees knock against the desk. "No, Leliana," she snaps. "He didn't. He said nothing at all. I got to look like a brainless twat waiting in a cafe for him for six hours, thinking he would actually show! Despite my better judgment, I let myself give a shit, and he has completely and utterly ghosted me. I'm sure he's off laughing about it with his fancy new phone that I bought him, no questions asked."

She feels tears prick at the corner of her eyes and turns away from Leliana's sympathetic face.

She feels Leliana's soft hand on her shoulder, and she shrugs it off. "Please, don't. I want to get back to my life and pretend I didn't have this grievous lack of judgment. Let me know when it's lunch time."

(10:00) Do you want to stop by for lunch today? I could use some Dorian time and I haven't seen you in ages.

(10:30) So sorry, Livvy, but something has come up. Can I take a rain check?

Leliana is radiating pity and sorrow. Olivia can feel it all the way from the front of the store, and it's driving her mad. She tries not to feel resentful toward Dorian for blowing her off. She is self-aware
enough to recognize that she is misdirecting her grief onto him. The thought of spending an entire lunch period with Leliana staring at her makes her ill, but the thought of spending it alone is even worse. Olivia drags her feet to the front counter. Leliana is bouncing on the balls of her feet at the front desk. Her hands weave together and back, her mouth forms and then loses silent words. She jumps at the opportunity to take Olivia to lunch, full of nervous energy. While she doesn't bring up Cheese Man, her unspoken questions are more annoying still. Everything she says chafes against Olivia's skin.

When she snaps at an innocent question about self-help books, Leliana looks so hurt that Olivia finally asks her if she can just go home.

**Tuesday**

She still doesn't hear from him by Tuesday morning. She wishes she weren't counting.

Olivia shoots off a short text to Leliana asking for the week off. Leliana tells her to take all the time she needs.

A week. That is all she will give herself. She will let herself be sad for exactly a week, and then she will snap herself out of it and get back to her life.

She has never wanted to be the sort of person who would let a break-up destroy her, but this feels so much worse than a regular break-up. She doesn't want to wallow, wants to pick herself up and call it done and move on with her life. But every time she looks at her phone, she thinks of him. She thinks of the sound of his voice when he laughed in her ear, of every wishful daydream she had entertained about what they would do when they met, and she feels as though she might choke. The more she wallows, the more angry she feels. At herself, more than anyone else.

She doesn't take Hessarian for their morning run today.

Instead, she lays on her couch watching television. She orders a large pizza, which she eats straight out of the box, using her lap as a plate. She doesn't feel good about it, but then, she doesn't feel good about much of anything, anyway.

She loses track of time. She had closed her curtains to the sun and buried her phone in the couch cushions so that she could stop looking at it every two seconds.

Even still, she can't help but wonder what Cheese Man is doing right now. Is he flirting with someone new? She imagines him sending cheese-related texts into the ether, hoping to catch another wrong number. Or, the beaten-down voice of hope in her head whispers, he's stuck at work thinking of her and wishing more than anything he could talk to her.

"Shut up," she says, to nobody.

She flips through channels, searching for anything interesting to watch beside daytime soaps. Everything she finds is either local news or infomercials.

She flips through the channels so fast she almost misses it. A word, spoken in such a matter of fact tone, but her heart stops cold. "Demons."

She clicks the channel back. A news anchor stands in front of an abandoned warehouse, looking grave.
"—confirming now that the recent series of murders were all the work of one suspect, a Tevinter magister named Gereon Alexius. The police have confirmed that Alexius will remain in custody until his trial."

The defeated face of the Tevinter magister fills her television screen. Olivia stares in shock. The demon. Relief washes over her. She watches the dark-haired police captain speak with the press about the arrest.

So many sleepless nights. So many nightmares about that demon and the danger of the city, and here is the culprit. One man, captured by the police with ease and awaiting prosecution. She can’t help but smile at the thought.

Her phone rings, and her heart leaps into her throat.

It’s muffled, coming from deep within her couch cushions, but her body has been so acutely attuned to any sound or vibration, waiting for anything from her phone, that she nearly jumps a foot in the air. Frantically, she digs through the couch cushions in search of her phone, breathing ragged, until finally she lifts up a victorious arm with a whoop and—

It’s not Cheese Man.

But she recognizes the number.

She had put it in her phone the day Cheese Man had texted her when he had lost his phone.

Cullen? 😪 continues to ring, insistent, and Olivia wants to vomit.

With shaking hands, she raises the phone to her ear, and that’s when she notices the man on the television.

Cullen Rutherford, arresting officer.

Cullen.

"H-hello?" Her voice shakes almost as much as her hands do, adrenaline thundering in her ears.

"Good afternoon." His voice is deeper than she had imagined, and she gapes at the image of the blonde officer on her television. "May I please speak to Olivia Cousland?"

"This is she," she responds, her voice wisp-thin and reedy with emotion.

"This is Detective Cullen Rutherford with the Denerim Police Department. We need to talk."

Chapter End Notes

Fic’s not dead, just like we promised!! Of course this chapter... ended like that... and we’re sorry.

The idea for this chapter and the upcoming chapter has been planned since the very beginning, it was just very unfortunate timing on our parts that made this the update after over a year of silence.
The good news is: **Chapter 18 will be posted in less than a week.** It's already finished, edited, etc etc! We felt immensely bad that we would follow up a cliffhanger with another one, so hopefully a speedy resolution will make up for it.

We're sorry, as well, that it's been so long. So much has happened in the past year, good and bad, and in the back of our minds we've always been determined to return to the fic. It's been almost 4 years now since we started writing it and to those of you who have stuck around for this long, or are brand new, you are incredible and we love and thank you. Thank you to everyone who discovered the fic in its hiatus and commented, hoping for more! You made our resolution to keep going *even stronger.*

And also major thank you to the Heart-Eyes Emoji Discord server! But no thank you guys for the cheese puns. They did not amuse us. At all. (Still, thanks for being our friends and always cheering us on!)

Gorgeous chapter art by the incredible [Alli Ward](#)!

Our personal blogs:
[Tijgertje](#)
[Carouselfancy](#)
And our fic blog for update posts and pretty art, or if you have any questions! There's also a link to the Discord server if you'd like to join (we talk about much more than the fic -- kinda more like everything, really). See you soon!
Tuesday

Quiet.

The busy streets of Denerim pass by as smears in the passenger side window. If she looks closely, carefully, she can see people in their homes and workplaces, having afternoon tea or conducting business. Chatting. Texting. Living their lives while she is gripped by the silence.

Cullen had manifested on her doorstep not long after their phone call and has been tight-lipped since she hopped in his car. He offers little in the way of details, despite asserting that he needed to speak with her. She knows this is about Cheese Man, and she knows there's been an "accident." The phrase would have buckled her knees, had she not been sitting down when he told her. Signs pass overhead directing them to the hospital, and with each kilometer Olivia feels less and less prepared for what she might find.

In any other situation, on any other day, she knows this turn of events would amuse her. She is in Cullen's car— the Cullen, the infamous sidekick, the bane of Cheese Man's antics and livelihood. She's in his car and she's meeting him before she meets Cheese Man himself! A smile starts to form at the thought of how frustrated this must make Cheese Man, how it must be making him whine and thrash in annoyance. Olivia snaps back to reality and reminds herself that he probably doesn't know, wherever he is, probably doesn't know she is on her way to see him. If he knew, he'd never allow it.

It was supposed to be special.

Countless cars cramp the parking lot, with the only vacant spaces located far from the entrance. The first one Cullen finds is near the oncology building, which sends Olivia's thoughts spiraling even further. Cullen clears his throat, pulling her from darkening thoughts of radiation appointments and the phrase "months to live." She nods, and he leads the way in the opposite direction.

St. Havard General Hospital is massive, the biggest the city has to offer, and located right in the heart of Denerim. It towers over the two of them as Olivia cranes her neck skyward, imagining what kinds of people are sequestered up at the top floor, her thoughts desperate to float elsewhere. Automatic doors slide open and Cullen continues to lead the way as he weaves around staff, never needing to look up at directional signs. Is Cheese Man in surgery, or recovering from it? Is he in rehab and they're here to provide moral support? Olivia swallows, though her throat dries as she goes down the list of potential wards. Is he in the ICU?

Cullen slows his pace and watches her over his shoulder. He seems to sense her panic and her desperate, roving stare. "They moved him from the ICU this morning, and they're allowing him to have visitors today."

Olivia nods.

They ride the elevator up a few floors in uncomfortable silence and step off together into a waiting room. Olivia stands around, fidgeting, while Cullen talks to the receptionist.
This is nothing like her last experience at the hospital. The lights here are more yellow and less blinding. The interior walls a neutral but friendly beige, instead of sickly green. No one in the waiting room looks stricken with pain or fear. A family huddles together over one of the magazines, and they have the audacity to chuckle and share stories while they wait. Deep inhale, sharp exhale—Olivia's eyelids clamp down as she tries to force out the memories of last time. No one is pacing. No one is hiding their whispers and rushing around. No one is withholding the fate of her loved ones from her out of fear of how she'll take it. Cullen came to her because he knew she deserved answers, and as he leaves the receptionist and urges her forward, she knows she is about to get them.

Each room they walk by could be his, she thinks. Cullen rubs at the shroud of stubble on his cheeks, already looking so different from his clean, sturdy image on the television. He presses on, trying to accommodate for how slow Olivia is being. She can't help it though. She tries to look through each window, wondering what brought each patient here, trying to prepare herself for what could be wrong with her text friend. She sees a man with his leg in a large cast, propped up on a few pillows, with a woman lounging in a chair by his side. The next room over is home to a man watching the local news, and Olivia catches another glimpse of Cullen on the screen. The television version of him is so well-spoken, his smile so polite. Much less monosyllabic than he is at this moment.

They go farther and farther down the hall, until finally Cullen stops so abruptly that Olivia nearly runs into him. He's facing the room, but she doesn't have it in her to look yet.

This is wrong. Her curiosity is peaking and a bead of sweat rolls down her temple. Inside this room is Cheese Man, Tiger Emoji, her best friend, whatever. It doesn't make it less wrong that she should see him. "Is he awake?" she mumbles into Cullen's shoulder.

"No." He himself looks pained as he turns on his heel and marches towards the closest nurse's station. "I'll be back. I'll see if we can go in."

Why couldn't they? Olivia turns around and her vision blurs for a second, two seconds, until it focuses through the glass window on the person in bed. Her heart clenches as she tiptoes closer, a hand pressed to the window, a gasp strangled in her throat.

He may not be in the ICU any longer, but he is still attached to a few machines. They dutifully read off his blood pressure and heart rate, and other things she can't hope to understand. Strips of thick white gauze encircle his forehead, with the barest hint of auburn hair sticking out from atop them. Purple bruises mottle his left cheek, running down the bone and mingling with a smattering of light brown freckles. As she follows the bruises she sees them on his left arm as well, hiding beneath his hospital gown sleeve. The nasal cannula distracts her from the bulk of his visible abrasions, and she watches him breathe, his chest rising and falling in slow waves.

Cheese Man does have facial hair, and it's not in an Orlesian style. His nose is big, but not anywhere near as big as he has led her to believe. It's hard to get an idea of his actual size, because he looks so small, so inhuman, laying in a bed with a blanket up to the middle of his chest. Who is this man? How can this be him, without a phone in his hand, without a smile on his face, without lights in his eyes and laughter in his throat?

Cullen returns. "We're all allowed in, so long as we behave ourselves."

All? Olivia mouths as she follows him into the room, each step more trepidatious than the last.

Her stomach churns the closer she comes to his unconscious form. Warning bells ring, urging her legs and feet to twist around and move! Run! If only the floor could collapse beneath her right now
and save her the agony of learning he's gone forever, or in a coma, or that he has memory loss. She wishes he would wake up, but a small, hidden part of her never wants it to happen if it means that he is not her Cheese Man any longer. The thoughts pile up inside of her head, a headache blooming as she fights the desire to cry and lash out, when a familiar voice knocks her back into the present.

"Liv?" Dorian blinks at her from a seat in the corner. "Cullen, you brought her here? How do you... Oh, with the week I've been having, this might as well fucking happen."

"Dorian?" Olivia stares back, then looks beside him. She is thankful that her attention is torn from the body in the bed, but her attitude rapidly shifts from gratefulness to confusion. "Luana?"

Luana hesitates before waving from her seat, her eyes dropping to the floor.

"You know him?" Olivia's throat grows drier with each word she croaks out. "Did you know? That we knew each other?" She swivels back and forth to look between them and Cullen. When no one immediately answers, she bites her lip and clenches her fists, burying her nails deep into the skin of her palm.

Luana tries to speak, but the words are small, almost inaudible, buried by a closed fist brought up to her lips. The reflection of the room’s lights sparkle in the wetness of her eyes.

“I—” she whispers around her fingers.

“You knew,” Olivia repeats in an attempt to process. “Everyone knew and it was some kind of sick joke.”

“Could somebody perhaps enlighten me?” Dorian snaps. “I sense I’m being accused of something. Livvy, why are you here?”

Luana points a wobbling finger towards the bed. “They’ve been texting. They’d never met.”

“You? And him? You're the one he's been pining over? You’re his big ‘date’?” Dorian roughly scrubs at his face. “Excellent, and now someone is going to jump out from behind the dressing screen and declare that this is all some prank, yes?”

Ignoring him, Olivia takes a single step towards Luana, putting all her weight into her left foot. Stars are dancing behind her eyes; everything feels red, hot. Her nails dig deeper into her own flesh until she’s forgotten where she is, why she’s here. Everything melts away until the room feels like she and Luana are the only ones here. Luana won’t make eye contact. She won’t stop tapping her shoe against the tile.

Cullen’s hand grabs Olivia's shoulder and pulls her back. “Leave it. Is this even remotely the time and place?”

“I only want to know why,” Olivia responds, eyes locked on those damn shoes that won't stop tapping. The room is full of tapping, deafening her ears. The sound mingles with the beeping of the machines, making Olivia’s head spin, heart race. “I want to know why you lied to me. If our friendship was ever real. Were you spying on me? Were you telling him about me?”

Is this why he never showed up? Did Luana tell him not to meet her?

Is he in the hospital for something unrelated and she’s only here as a courtesy?

The nails keep digging.
“No, it’s…” Luana pauses, covers her cheeks with her hands. “He spoke so much about you, and when I met you I knew it was you. Your tag, it was your tag.”

Olivia snatches her necklace up, if only so no one else can lay eyes on it. This private piece of their relationship, used and abused for secrets.

“You wanted to know me but I couldn’t tell you, no matter how much I wanted to. It was clearly none of my business, so I couldn’t admit why we shouldn’t see each other, and you wanted to know more about me and the Dalish.”

Olivia falls short of growling through her gritted teeth. “You asked me about my tags. You asked me questions about him like you didn’t know, but you knew all along.”

“I know, and I’m sorry,” she replies, trembling. “You were both hurting and I—I only wanted to fix it. It wasn’t my place.”

“It wasn’t your place,” Olivia agrees.

“But I don’t think he would’ve wanted to know. He wanted it on his own—”

“Maybe he wouldn’t be here if you’d told him!” Olivia finally unclenches her fists and slaps her hands over her eyes. “Stupid fucking anonymity clause, stupid fucking ‘it has to be special.’ We put him here, didn’t we? What’s wrong with him?” Her arms drop to her sides. “Why is he here?”

“Liv, it’s not—” Dorian cuts himself off, looks away.

She stands there, the anger ebbing away and replaced with numbness. Confusion. Why were they here? Why wasn’t anyone telling her anything? Where were her answers?

In her moment of silence, Cullen reaches out for Luana and takes her quaking hand in his, leading her out of the room. They stop in the doorway and again, almost inaudible, Luana whispers. “I will make it up to you, I promise.”

As soon as the door closes behind them, Olivia’s shoulders roll and slump forward. The room regains its color, or general lack thereof, and the background noise of the hospital rushes up to meet her ears. Carts rolling, nurses chattering, doctors greeting patients, blinds closing. She takes Luana’s vacant seat and stares at her knees, the energy to feel anything draining out of her.

“You work together, don’t you?” Olivia asks.

“…We do. I didn’t see him often, but he was always kind when we spoke. Always got a good laugh out of me,” Dorian replies.

Her lips thin into a hard line. “Why… why are you talking about him like he’s already gone? What is no one telling me?”

“I… Sorry, Livvy, terrible habit.” Dorian rests his chin in his hand and sighs. “I lost someone, not even a week ago now. Surprisingly hard to stay optimistic when yet another person you care about is a bit unconscious right in front of you, and all you want is a stiff drink and to be hundreds of miles away.”

“Do you know what happened to him?”

“Car accident.”
Olivia’s breath halts. She feels a sudden coldness growing in her chest, spreading outward through her veins. *Was it truly her fault after all?*

“That’s all I know,” Dorian admits. “The severity, what they’ve done to him so far, how long he’ll be unconscious—I don’t know a lick of that. Better that I don’t, because I don’t want to think of him as a patient or what have you.”

Still unable to breathe, Olivia launches herself out of her seat and comes to the end of Cheese Man’s bed. She grasps the frame at his feet and forces herself to look at him: his slightly discolored skin, the purples and yellows, the long eyelashes, the way his mouth is barely agape.

She tears her gaze away and looks down.

*His chart.*

“If Cullen’s not going to tell us,” she whispers, still struggling to breathe. “Then we’ll have to find out for ourselves.”

Dorian leans forward. “Hand it here, I can make sense of it.”

As she twists herself to pass it off, Olivia’s eyes scan the page for a second, though a second was all she needed. The chart is between them, arms outstretched, when she sees it.

> Date of admission: 11 Drakonis, 9:35. *Unimportant.*

> Date of birth: 16 Bloomingtide, 9:10. *Unimportant, for now.*

> Patient name: **Theirin, Alistair.**

The chart clatters to the ground.

“Olivia!”

Again, she is numb. She is frozen in her position, arm reaching for Dorian, back twisting. Her mind alternates between booming questions, each louder than the last, and more quiet emptiness.

Of course.

*Of course.*

He never wanted to tell her who he was because he’s a Theirin.

His entire upbringing was rife with loneliness because he’s a *Theirin.*

Cogs and gears whirl in her head as she tries to fill answers into the blanks of their relationship. Did he think she would be after his claim, despite not having it anymore? She rifles through her knowledge of the royal family, but nothing comes up about *Alistair* apart from the fact that they made him give up any rights to the throne. Why would he keep that a secret? Did he know she was a Cousland, as if any of that mattered? As if she ever cared about who she married?

As she sinks to her knees by the foot of his bed, Olivia wonders how it would’ve been different, if she were still up in her ivory tower, Castle Cousland, and he were still part of his own family, if they hadn’t cast him aside. Would her mother have made them a match? Would they still have met, maybe even lived together? Would they be close, would they be best friends, would they have fallen in love?
She shouldn’t have looked at the chart, she knows this.

_It was supposed to be special._

Olivia cups a hand over her mouth and wills away the tears as her chest shudders and hiccups shake her.

“Liv.” Dorian kneels down and grasps her shoulders. “Liv, you’ve got to get up. I’ve looked at the chart. He’s going to be _fine_. ”

“A—” she bites down hard on her lip, stamping out the name before she dares speak it. “He’s… fine?”

He helps her to her knees, then to her feet. Blood rushes through her ears, and feeling comes back to her limbs; the cold that had reached her fingertips retracts, bringing new warmth as she stands to look at the man in the bed.

The door opens and Cullen returns. A man with blond hair pulled back into a ponytail and an earring in his right ear introduces himself as the doctor. He tells them to simply call him Anders. “You lot don’t look particularly happy to see me,” he laughs, airy and bright. “I understand wanting to shoot the messenger on a day like this, but I’ve got good news, thankfully.”

Anders takes Alistair’s chart from Dorian and flips through it, pacing while he reads. He halts his movement to take a few notes as he goes. As he paces in the small space they’re given like a lion in a woefully underwhelming enclosure, Olivia watches him, trying to figure out why she thinks she knows him. Every time Cullen moves his own body to better articulate a question, Anders pulls up the chart as a barrier. He only puts it down when everyone goes still.

“Right,” he announces, his nerves abating, ”so, it seems like our friend Alistair here is officially ‘on the mend.’ I’d wager he has a few days of rest ahead of him, but after that he should be good as new. No more spirit leakage, or whatever the other doctors are calling it. We don’t really have a medical term for it, but I should think you understand.”

“Excuse me?” Olivia squints. “I was under the impression that he was in a car accident.”

“Oh, he was. But they don’t call spirit healers in for car accidents, do they?” He resumes pacing, but this time he smiles as he retracts his steps.

“I don’t follow.”

Anders looks to Cullen, who nods, and he continues. “I was told that before the accident, there was an altercation of sorts, something magical with a certain Tevinter magister? Magic that draws directly on the power of the Fade, or something stronger than that, has been found to have… _adverse_ effects on a person. We were never meant to touch the Fade without protection, and Alistair’s physical and mental state on Saturday suggests that he was susceptible to severe damage he would not have sustained otherwise.

“Of course a car accident was going to do _something_ to him, but not on this scale, not based on how it hit him,” he quickly adds.

Olivia looks over at Dorian from the corner of her eyes, sees him pale at the mention of his homeland. For lack of comforting words, she snakes her hand into his, squeezing it with as much care as she can muster.

“Was he some sort of ticking time bomb, then?” asks Cullen.
“Mm, yes and no.” Anders strokes his chin. “Enough time away from say, a rift, or the Fade itself, and I think he would’ve healed over time. It’s sort of amusing if you think about it, that he needed to stay away from the Fade but only someone who could pull a fragment of the Fade to him could save him.”

He laughs. No one else does.

“It’s a shame he couldn’t be brought to my clinic. I think with the right resources, he wouldn’t need to spend any time resting and could’ve gone directly into rehabilitation, if he needs it.”

“I apologize, doctor,” says Cullen. "You were the first person I thought of who could help and Cassandra couldn’t see any other way to make it work.”

“No, no, you’re right. I’m not sure that he would’ve made it if he had to be flown over to Kirkwall. Just disappointing that we’re limited to whatever the Chantry is willing to spend on funding a hospital.” Anders stops in his tracks. For a brief second, a jagged line of light appears on the back of his hand, spreading open and revealing something blinding, something blue, with energy crackling in the air. His other hand clamps down on it and with the motion, Olivia sees that his eyes are mirroring the same color, though the image dies out as quickly as it had happened.

“Ignore that, please,” he mutters, sheepish. “I hope that none of you mind if I don’t linger here much longer. They want me for another operation and then I’m to return to the Free Marches. If you have any other questions, please feel free to call me. If I’m not available, I can redirect you to Dr. Neria Surana, who should be on her way to Ferelden within the next couple of weeks.”

“Do all spirit healers keep tabs on one another? Is there a club?” Dorian raises an eyebrow.

Counting on his fingers, Anders looks up to the ceiling. “Well, not sure where Fiona is, to be honest. Regalyan is gone. Hmm…”

“It was a rhetorical question.”

“Oh. Of course.”

The three of them chat, from one former Kirkwall resident to another and one medical professional to another, and all the while Olivia pretends. Pretends she is okay, pretends that the news, albeit positive, does not concern her in some way. Pretends that she is not here, as she recoils into herself, piece by piece.

Looking over at the bed, Cheese Man—Alistair, she tries to remind herself, though the name feels forbidden, the knowledge worthy of exile—is still sound asleep, untroubled by the volume of their voices.

“Will he still be himself?” she asks, more to herself than to the doctor.

Will he still make sarcastic jokes and complain about everyone and everything? Will he still be aggressively opinionated about the most minute things? Will he still talk about templar smut, karaoke nights, coffee dates? Will he remember the sound of her voice? Will he still remember that they were to meet?

*Now that I know who he is, who he has been all along, will he still want to meet me?*

“We can’t make any promises about that kind of thing, we never want to get loved ones’ hopes up, but...” Anders turns from the doorway, half in, half out. A glint of arrogance becomes the puppet master of his features; a rakish smile, fiery eyes, a brief flaring of the nostrils. “Trust me.”
Olivia nods and swallows hard.

Cullen follows him out and down the hallway, for additional questions she assumes, and Olivia feels left with nothing. The answers don’t satisfy her. Not much would, she thinks, as her stomach turns and gurgles.

There is a firm pressure squeezing her hand, a thumb swiping over the backs of her fingers. She looks up and faces Dorian, sees the smile that doesn’t meet his eyes.

“The news didn’t make you feel any better, did it?” he asks.

“Not all that much, no.”

“It should be so easy to think about something else. I could poke fun at the ‘doctor’ and how he looks more like an unwashed sewer rat than a medical professional. Or I could tease Cullen because he’s asking questions like a damn detective, not a concerned friend. But I find that I don’t have it in me.” His face is weary. “We talked about how I could’ve been anything but settled on being an M.E. Truth be told, it is so hard to take care of the living.”

Olivia wrinkles her nose. “The dead don’t seem to recover from illness, though.”

“No, but I’m not a fan of people dying on me, either. Seeing him like this reassures me that I’ve made the right choice. I could remain detached from my patients were they alive, but I think all my loved ones would say I’m detached enough as it is.”

“How is this making you feel?”

“Like I wish I’d done something different, despite having no hand in the affair whatsoever. You?”

“Like it’s my fault, because he was on his way to see me.”

“Liv.” Dorian slips his hand out of hers and cups her face. “You must remember that he is fine. He’s still with us, and though I can’t speak for him, I doubt that he would blame you. Fereldans aren’t known for their driving skills anyway, are they?”

“Dorian!” Olivia hisses, but she finds herself laughing regardless.

“I am simply implying that yes, it was an accident, because your people don’t know what a turn signal is and frequently drive on the wrong side of the road.” He gestures to the bed. “This was inevitable.”

Olivia playfully shoves his shoulder. “Maybe, but you don’t need to say it!”

“If it makes you stop blaming yourself for something so obviously out of your control, then I would happily continue to deplore the drivers of this city, starting with the elderly.”

It’s easier then to shift some of the weight off of her chest, though it doesn’t disappear entirely. Over and over as they banter, Olivia switches between having a good time, thinking it’s getting easier to cope, and then averting her eyes as Alistair continues to sleep.

Eventually Dorian stands, stretching out each leg as he goes.

“I was considering going downstairs to the cafeteria for coffee, but now a nap sounds more palatable. If I go home, will you be alright?”

Olivia grunts, shoving her hands in her pockets with a shrug. *No,* she thinks. *I don’t know if Cullen’s*
coming back and I don’t want to be trapped here by myself. “I’m sure I’ll be fine,” she says instead.

“Well, if you need me, I’ve always got my phone. You know that.”

“I do. Thanks, Dorian. I didn’t expect to see you here—I’m still surprised, to be honest—but I don’t know how I would’ve managed without you.”

“Certainly not very well if your only company was Cullen.”

“He and I didn’t meet under very good circumstances, I think.”

“Oh, he’s always like this. Don’t read too much into it. Goodbye, Livvy. If Alistair wakes up the second I’ve left the building, yell at him on my behalf.”

He’s gone. And she’s alone.

Alone with Alistair.

She scoots her chair closer to bed, nearer to his side. Tantalizingly close to where his hand lays flat on the blanket. If she held it, would he feel it? She’s not sure what being unconscious like this is like, if it’s any different than the times she’s blacked out from drinking. She keeps her hands in her pockets to stave away any temptation. To stop herself from thinking she is allowed to consider touching him.

She looks at him once more, again, a hundred times, and nothing changes. He is still laying there, unmoving save for his chest, each breath as quiet as the last. Olivia lets herself rest a cheek on the bed and finds the blankets scratchy, stiff. Listening to him sleep has always soothed her and she hopes, prays, that this time will be no different. Hesitant, she creeps her hand close to his and shuts her eyes, keeping her ears keen for the sound of a potential hitched breath, a yawn, a shift.

Nothing changes.

It was foolish to hope, she knows, but she still feels the pang of disappointment as she lifts her head and does not find him smiling fondly down at her.

Enough is enough, she decides. She calls for a taxi and leaves without one last look behind her.

Wednesday

From: Leliana

(13:04) I hope that it is not inappropriate of me to ask how you are doing.

(13:04) I promise not to probe, as much as I may want to! You are one of my dearest friends, Liv, and it is natural that I want to know you are okay.

(13:07) I have drafted so many texts to you in the past 3 minutes, and still I cannot find the right words to say.

(13:08) You needn’t reply. You know that. I only want to say that I am here for you. And if you decide that you hate him now, or you still miss him, or maybe if he’s even finally responded to you (?), I have plans for dinner and movies for any occasion.

(13:09) Oh I hope I’m not overstepping my boundaries. Being your boss and your friend is very
difficult!

(13:10) I love you very much.

(14:29) Thank you, Leliana. I love you too.

She doesn’t go to the hospital, and she doesn’t hear from Cullen.

No news must be good news.

**Thursday**

Olivia tried to hide her keys someplace in her house that she’d never think to look.

She tried to circle the parking lot for as long as she could, reluctant to take a space when it freed up for her.

She tried to forget the path to his room, as if she hadn’t managed to memorize it the one time she’d come this way.

For all her efforts to avoid this room, the nurse still gave her passage, and she stands in the doorway, wavering in the air conditioner’s breeze.

He’s still not awake—a blessing and a disappointment—but he looks better, from what she’s able to see. The hint of a sun-reddened complexion surfaces in his cheeks, with darker freckles and fading bruises. The nurses must’ve propped him up a little higher, because Olivia can see that his chest appears broader, and he’s linked to fewer machines.

He could wake up any day now, she hears them say. He could open his eyes right now; the skin would crinkle at the edges, with a dazed but happy smile on his face. The thought is enough to make her consider getting back in her car. She sits down instead.

Decorating his bedside are cards and lavish bouquets of carnations and tulips aplenty. If she leans back far enough, she can see the many colorful signatures of all his coworkers, who suffer from his absence, if the lengthy condolences are any sign. She plucks one of the cards from the table and turns it over to see more messages spilling onto the back side, names he’s never mentioned, everyone wishing to see him soon.

Meeting Cullen confirmed it for her, who these people are and what Cheese Man does. What Alistair Theirin does.

(Should she call him that? Is it permitted? Cheese Man and Alistair Theirin can’t possibly be the same person, yet they are, and her brain continues to do gymnastics trying to understand it. The first tears of the day prick at her eyes and she dabs them away with growing ease. Who is Alistair Theirin supposed to be to her?)

It’s something she’s always tried to forget, or at the very least ignore. Ferelden’s sneakiest spy? That was always obviously a joke. “Saving the little cheeses” clued her in, but then there was the demon thing. He frequently danced around his involvement in the matter and he was positively furious with her when she did her own investigating. Every time he canceled their rendezvous must have been another advancement in the case. He must've spent every hour of overtime slaving over a desk in a
He’s a cop. A detective. Someone who has gotten hurt in the line of work and could get hurt again.

Olivia imagines herself here in the hospital, a year from now, at his bedside. She imagines it as though it were a ritual, or a holiday—another day or week spent waiting by his bedside, begging him wordlessly to please wake up. In each vision he sports a new fashion of wound, losing bits and pieces of himself as the years pile up, until she imagines the bed is empty and he leaves her with nothing to remember him by.

With every second, every modicum of energy that she devotes to thinking about it and imagining what feels like an inevitability, her brain threatens to burst.

Before she can reconsider, Olivia grabs his hand with both of hers, eyes sealed shut. She counts backwards from ten and over again, desperate to anchor herself. The weight of his hand is already committed to memory, so strong, so firm. Much bigger than her own hand, just as she’s always imagined.

“What am I going to do with you?” she laments. She wishes it were anyone else in this bed that she could cry over, because then, at least, she could call him about it. She wants nothing more than to hear light peals of laughter through the receiver as he tells her not to cry, he’ll tell her a story about his bizarre coworkers—also detectives, she reminds herself—and he’ll babble until she dozes off. Olivia misses her best friend, even though she’s right here, squeezing his hand for dear life.

“I want to be excited,” she admits. “But there’s so much about you that I don’t know.”

Olivia averts her eyes from his face and stares out the window, admiring the flowering peach blossoms and the first butterflies she’s seen all year.

“I want to say that I understand why you’ve got so many secrets. I wasn’t any better, I guess, though you’re a pretty shit detective if you hadn’t figured it out by now. Maybe you had and you weren’t telling me. I’ve told you so much and in the grand scheme of things you’ve told me so little. I don’t get why the anonymity meant so much to you.”

Her shoulders slump forward as she tears her eyes away from the window and focuses again on his hand.

“I feel like I’m going crazy and you’re not here to tell me I’m being silly and overreacting. All I know is I don’t want you to lie to me anymore. And I… I need time to think about this. About us. If you can hear me, Cheese Man, then I’m sorry.”

Olivia stands up, lets go of his hand in the process.

“I’ll wait for you. You can come find me.”

She leaves the hospital, hoping to the Maker that she never has to come back.

Chapter End Notes

Okay I know in the last chapter we said "less than a week” and then Amy made the decision to post this exactly a week later :) Either way, a miracle has happened. We updated!
A while ago someone had basically guessed how chapter 17 and 18 would go by suggesting it was like this one particular movie that we’d never heard of before ("An Affair to Remember") -- we were simultaneously panicked and amused, because oh no it's been done before!

Still, I'm glad that some people were able to predict this. And it all serves a purpose in some way!! When Alistair wakes up, they have much to talk about.

Thank you for all the incredible comments on the last chapter! We were stunned to see so many returning readers ;_;

And thank you to the Heart-Eyes discord server for the increasingly bizarre conspiracy theories that were born from waiting. It's true: Hessarian is Dumat. Everything is a coma dream. Alistair is recounting all of this to Liv in hopes of waking her up.

Back to work! See you next time for chapter 19! (It's gonna be something...a little different. We hope it's worth the wait.) (Also happy birthday to vanus @ tumblr!)

Our personal blogs:

Tijgertje
Carouseelfancy

And our fic blog, in case you want to ask questions, look at all the art, catch updates, or join the Discord server! (Everyone is very nice except when they are bullying me with puns)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!