Anyway, Here's Kirkwall (Original)

by ecarius

Summary

“Do you remember anything—from before?”

“I’d bought a rock.”

“A rock?” the dwarf asks slowly, skeptical.

I glare at him. “Like a *decorative* rock. It was volcanic stone or something? Carved up. It’s not like I really, really wanted it, but I was browsing the store with a friend and she saw that I liked it and goaded me into it. It didn’t cost barely anything so I figured—” I shrugged. “Why not?”

“That’s it?” he asks. “You bought a rock? And you somehow ended up here?”

OR

Don’t bleed on items you picked up at the thrift store.

(This fic has been discontinued, but you can find the rewrite (17,000+ words already) here.)

Notes

!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! PLEASE READ !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

This fic has been discontinued, BUT the rewritten version (which is already 17,000+ words)
is here.
Anyway, Here's Blood Magic

Chapter Notes

I didn't realize, but even if you include 'minor' in the relationship tag, it still links to the main relationship tags. So I've removed the relationship tags (as of 8/9/16) to keep this from showing up when people are looking for fics that feature, front and center, Hawke x Anders and Isabela x Merrill.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I don’t open my eyes, mostly because I smell shit. My bedroom, consequently enough, doesn’t smell like shit because I burn a sugar cookie scented candle every night before bed. Hell, it wouldn’t smell like shit even if I didn’t burn the candle.

On to the next troubling detail: I’m lying on dirt, not a deliciously comfortable memory foam cloud. I’m going straight for kidnapping as an explanation, but I have twenty bucks in my bank account. Maybe a hundred in savings. My parents have some money, but they don’t tell anyone they have some money so how would anyone know? And I’m kind of operating under the impression that you have to be socially active in order to attract enemies, but I could be wrong.

There are footsteps. Wood squeaks a ways away. Someone shuffles around in the dirt. I wish I was brave enough to open my eyes, pop up, and say what’s running through my head: What the fuck? But nope, I’m not cut from that cloth.

“It worked!”

They sound so happy. Good for you, asshole, I think. My eyes roll under their lids, and I have to squash the urge to inhale loudly. After the irritation dims a little, I wonder what exactly worked. Of course, I’m just starting to chew on that thought a little when I hear the sound of the door getting torn from its fucking hinges.

“You—”

“Me!”

Someone else is way too fucking happy, and then something sounds like it’s sparking.

I’m out. Electricity kills. My dad has more than enough work videos to prove that, and I’m possessed with enough self-preservation sense to have a really huge damn desire to get away from whatever the hell is happening right now. I open my eyes. There’s a low stone ceiling, nothing much else to say about it, and I glance towards the source of the noises, now not just sparking but sparking, metal and metal clashing over and over, shouting, and whooshing. I hope seeing it will help it make more sense.

I stumble backwards as I observe. From what I can see, it’s four on one. Whatever One got to work apparently didn’t go over well with this war party—which seems to consist of overcompensating (glowing) elf, pyromaniac mage, buff (better dressed) mage, and ginger dwarf with crossbow.

Lovely.
I cover my face with both hands for a minute, considering all this. It’s a bit difficult with the shouting, but my mind’s going straight (ha!) for the notion that I’ve died. I’m in hell, and Satan’s decided to finally make me pay for all the times I lied to my sister about being too busy to LARP with her. Yup, Riza, pretty much every weekend you did your LARPing, I was sitting on my couch in my pajamas watching Forensic Files and eating Greek yogurt. I’m feeling kind of sorry about that considering, you know, hell.

Someone groans, and my hands drop. One’s been stabbed through the chest. I’m processing that fact, sort of. I clench a fist against my own chest, right at the spot where the guy’s been stabbed, and I can’t fucking breathe—which I feel shouldn’t matter in hell. Of course, my anxiety would follow me down here. It probably wouldn’t be a full well-rounded hell experience otherwise.

“Hawke,” glowing elf says, jerking his fucking broadsword out of the guy who is probably one-thousand percent dead. His eyes turn to me. I’ve tucked into myself against the wall. So what now? I’m thinking. I can’t really see well at the moment. I get that way sometimes when I’m freaking out. I just lose the ability to focus. And hey, I think it’s totally allowed considering I just saw someone get stabbed. Where’d One even go then? Another level of hell? Does it get better or worse? How do you fucking die in hell?

“Is it a demon?” My stomach sinks, and I suck in a breath.

“Anders?”

“I don’t sense anything.” There’s shuffling in the dirt. “Hey, we’re not going to hurt you.”

I can’t help it. I start to laugh, and you know, I do that thing. You start laughing, and it’s like an automatic okay for your tear ducts to start running full speed ahead. So I’m laughing for about a second and then it’s just a mess. I’m crying and choking on air. I mean, sure, I’m probably shitty and deserve to be here, but I was hoping for at least a chance to explain myself. Hey Satan, I’m not exactly arguing with you, but if I could just say—

“Oh, shit. I think I’m going to go with not a demon.”

Someone rests a hand on my shoulder. I shudder, but it’s inevitable so I only jerk away a little, just from instinct.

“Are you alright?”

I look up, and it’s the one who’d been tossing around the fire. He looks gaunt, like he’s skipped a hundred too many meals, but he’s smiling at me. I paw at my face with a clenched fist, trying to find my voice to answer. Hell no, I am not alright. I breathe in a shuddered breath and try, but it doesn’t work. I close my eyes.

“My name’s Anders,” he says. I open my eyes and nod once. My voice is still MIA. “You were being held captive by a blood mage named Alfino.”

“W-what?” I croak out, face going hot.

“Looks like he was trying to summon something.”

Anders turns his head from me, but his hand remains on my shoulder. It feels real, and I’m not really sure I want it to. Hell theory is dissolving because this isn’t terrible in the way that it should be terrible. It’s mostly just getting really strange. Which, hey, that’s great—except it leaves me with nothing.
“A demon?” the elf asks, his voice gravelly and disapproving.

“No, actually,” someone replies.

I close my eyes again and try to replicate one of the breathing exercises I learned from my college counselor. I just want my voice completely back, and then I can deal with all the rest of this shit. I can hear papers being flipped through, lots of them.

“Shit.”

“What?” Anders says, concerned.

“I think—I think he was trying to summon her.”

The hand jerks away, and I, immediately, open my eyes. Anders looks down at me with narrowed eyes, and for a second, I swear he’s glowing a little, which I guess isn’t so weird considering the elf was definitely glowing before. It doesn’t last long, and I turn to observe each of them. They’re reaching for their weapons. Shit. I may not be in hell, but I’m pretty sure I’ll be heading there soon. Even so, I find myself pressing closer to the wall.

“She’s not a demon,” the lightning mage adds, leveling his companions with a look. “Or an abomination even.” He sighs, scanning the page in his hands. “It’s very strange.”

“Strange how, Hawke?” the dwarf asks.

“Strange as in this page keeps mentioning time magic like it’s a real thing.”

They turn to me like I’ve got the answer. Jokes on you, kids. All I’ve got is a shit-ton of questions. First one still: What the fuck?

“That’s ridiculous,” Anders says. He looks back at me, and he doesn’t look like he’s ready to fry me anymore. “You’re not from the future, are you?” That’s supposed to be a joke. I get that—but sword. Crossbow. I’m just going to ignore the huge bombshell that is magic because that’s just not happening right now and also not convenient to work into my theory at the moment about all this.

“I don’t know,” I say, wincing. “Where am I? And what year is it?”

“You’re joking,” Anders says.

“Yeah, no. I joke, sure. I’m the funny one. Mama always says so, but I’m way too freaked out right now to joke.” The words leave me in a rush, mostly because I’m afraid I’m going to lose the ability to speak any moment now. “So?” I prompt.

“You’re in Kirkwall. It’s 9:33 Dragon.”

“Are we really entertaining the thought—” the elf begins.

I’m laughing again, and I’m pretty sure they’re just going to think I’m hysterical. I think I’ve got the right to it.

“Shit, she’s not taking this well, is she?” the dwarf says.

“No, she’s not,” I answer. “Look,” I’m starting to think my sister’s just taken one of her pranks too far. That’s literally all I’ve got left as an explanation. I’m ignoring the magic. I’m gonna grab hold of those goddamm straws and hold on for dear life. Hey, Satan. It’s me, master of denial. “Did my sister put you up to this?” I rub at the tear tracks on my face and inhale shakily. “This is the worst joke
ever.”

“It’s not a joke,” Anders says.

“Not to mention it’d be a pretty shitty joke to abandon you in Kirkwall,” the dwarf adds.

“Where even is that?” I ask. “And 9:33 Dragon? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“What year do you think it is?” Anders asks. His voice is so soft and gentle I can barely hear it.

“2016? CE or AD or whatever you prefer.”

Anders looks to the one I’ve identified as Hawke. The dwarf steps closer, hand no longer on his crossbow. “CE?”


“That doesn’t ring any bells.” All their faces are blank, completely uncomprehending.

“What the fuck?” I’d meant to say it with some force, but it just comes out all pathetic. I bury my head in my hands, trying to keep my breathing even.

“Do you remember anything—from before?”

“I’d bought a rock.”

“A rock?” the dwarf asks slowly, skeptical.

I glare at him. “Like a decorative rock. It was volcanic stone or something? Carved up. It’s not like I really, really wanted it, but I was browsing the store with a friend and she saw that I liked it and goaded me into it. It didn’t cost barely anything so I figured—” I shrugged. “Why not?”

“That’s it?” he asks. “You bought a rock? And you somehow ended up here?”

“Well, no,” I admit. “I took it home. I put it on the counter.” I try to remember everything I’d done. I picture my steps through the day. I’d woken up, showered, gone to lunch with Essie, and then we’d gone to the ‘antique’ store. She’d bought a basketful of stuff, and I’d come out, as usual, with my one find. I hadn’t wanted anything really, but she said I couldn’t leave without buying at least one thing (mostly because it made her feel guilty to be the only one with stuff) and made me go back for the rock. I’d gone home, thinking about dinner, and I tried to figure out where to put the damn rock. I’d picked it up, I remember, to get a better look at the carvings. I’d—

“I cut myself on it,” I say. “Pretty bad.” When I look at my hand now, there’s nothing, but I’m pretty sure it happened. I’d gone around the kitchen searching for a clean towel, cradling my hand close to my body. I can’t remember anything else. It didn’t go black. I didn’t feel strange. One second, I was there, and now I’m here.

“ Heard of anything like this before, Blondie?” I think, at first, that he’s addressing the elf, but Anders shakes his head and answers.

“No, but it would make sense. Perhaps it’s a lure?”

“Well, we interrupted,” Hawke says. The others nod, but hey, aren’t you overlooking something? I think.

“That’s great and all,” I say. “I really appreciate you murdering the asshole you stole me out of my
own kitchen for some nefarious plot or other, but tell me those papers have a way to, you know, send me back?"

“Uh,” Hawke begins. “I’d have to look over them a little more thoroughly, but I didn’t see anything about a way to reverse the process.”

“No,” I say. It’s not even like I said it really. It’s more like the word got wrung out of me.

“Such a ritual would call for blood magic no doubt,” the elf says, crossing his arms.

I turn my eyes to him. “Which means what exactly?”

“It means,” he says, shortly, “one would have to call upon the power of a demon to do it.”

“Shit,” I say like that means something to me. It doesn’t sound good anyway.

“Let’s not be too hasty, Fenris,” Hawke says. “Anders and I can look at these. We might be able to find another way.”

“Thank God.”

Hawke sweeps the papers up into a pile. “Don’t get too excited. I’ve never come across magic like this before. I don’t think it’ll be undone easily.” I’m a little too stuck on the possibility of escaping this weird trap I’ve fallen into to feel too downhearted about it. “I’ll run it by Merrill, too.”

“Hawke,” Fenris hisses.

“Just to see if she’s seen anything like it! Maybe the Dalish have a spell like this—or have seen something like it.”

“Do as you will,” Fenris grits out.

“In the meantime,” Anders cuts in. He looks down at me. “You’re going to need a place to stay.”

“She could always stay in your room at the estate,” Hawke says. “Considering you’re never in it.”

Anders flinches a little but frowns. “I’m busy with the clinic.”

“Well, that settles it. She can stay with Hawke,” the dwarf says.

“Thank you, Varric,” Anders grumbles.

“Is that wise?” Fenris asks, eying me with suspicion.

“Nothing I do it wise,” Hawke says to Fenris. “No offense, but if you’re an assassin, I’ll be terribly surprised—and rightly die as I should for letting you fool me,” he says to me. “Without much of a fight even!”

Fenris lets out a huff and turns away from the rest of us.

Anders looks back at me and holds out his hand. I hesitantly take it and use the leverage to stand up. I brush the dirt off my skirt, and it dawns on me how weird I must look. It could be worse, I guess. I could have immediately changed into my pajamas like I’m prone to do when I get home, but instead, I was wearing some of my nicer clothes actually. A casual, black dress, grey leggings, and my favorite red coat. I hadn’t even taken my shoes off yet, so I was still wearing my black boots. Look at me having some semblance of luck!
“Alright,” Hawke says. “Let’s go.” He lets out a bark of a laugh suddenly and says, “Oh, Mother’s going to love this.”

“Might want to keep close,” Varric says, as we pass through what I’ve been informed is Darktown. I nod without complaint because I feel eyes all over me, and I swear I feel someone brush my coat. Lucky for me, I have my hands in my pockets to protect the meager items I have tucked inside. Really, none of it will do me much good. I have a tube of chapstick, about fifteen bucks, half a pack of gum, and a pocket knife.

Everyone we pass looks grimy and gaunt, but they also look wary of the group I’m with. I don’t have to imagine why, and for a second, I wonder if I’m doing the right thing going with them. They could be luring me into a trap themselves.

But what real choice do I have?

We pass another elf, and Hawke stops us at his stall. I suppose it’s a stall. It looks like a bunch of crates stacked up on one another to form a counter of sorts. Hawke gives him some coins, and the elf gives him a few vials of something. Hawke tucks them into his belt.

“Got a new friend, Hawke?” He looks directly at me, and I try to smile. It probably comes off terribly because my face does not do half-hearted smiling.

“Yes, this is—” Hawke stops. “Actually, we didn’t get your name.”

I honestly hadn’t realized. “Manahan, Manahan de la Paz.” It’s weird to see no reaction. I’m used to the oh, are you Spanish? You must be Spanish! No? What are you then? Mana-hAN. What kind of name is that? Thanks, Mom. For the record, I’m Filipino. Half-Filipino anyway.

“Well, any friend of yours is a friend of mine,” the elf says to Hawke. Then, to me, “If you need poisons or such, come to me, and I’ll give you a deal.”

“Thanks,” I say because what else is there to say to a guy saying he’ll give you an awesome deal on ‘poisons and such.’ “I’ll remember that.”

Hawke snorts, and we continue forward. We step onto a rickety lift made of wood, and I see an honest-to-God crank mechanism with rope.

“So, apparently Tomwise thinks you look the poison type,” Hawke says, as the lift begins a shaky assent.

“I’m more of the sitting down, minding my own business type to be honest.”

“Not up for an exciting adventure?” Varric jokes.

“Sorry,” I say. “Already met my quota for the next, say, seven years.”

“Seven,” Anders whistles. “That’s oddly specific.”

“Specificity’s kind of my trade—”

“Oh?” Varric prompts.

“I’m a writer.” I wince, “Okay, well, I’m trying anyway. I want—wanted—to write full time, but it wasn’t exactly paying the bills so I took on some teaching and some transcribing and—well, you get
it. Whatever I could. I did get published a couple of times, so I guess I have the right to call myself a writer still.”

“Two writers on a lift,” Hawke says, laughing. These people are so strange in probably the best possible way.

“Two writers, a Hawke, a renegade mage, and a broody elf,” Varric says, grinning madly.

Fenris shifts his stance and rolls his eyes. “What were you teaching?”

“I taught kids how to read and write, sometimes basic math,” I say. “Really, it turned out to be glorified babysitting half the time.” Fenris stares at me for a long time, and I wonder if I somehow said something wrong.

“Interesting,” he says, finally.

“Varric’s been making a fortune off my life,” Hawke says.

“If your life’s always the level of interesting it was today, I can see why.”

“Let’s just say,” Varric says. “It’s never boring with Hawke around.”

“Oh, Varric,” Hawke says, putting a hand to his chest. “I’m touched.”

“In the head,” Anders mutters, good-naturedly.

“I could be touched in other places,” Hawke says, wiggling his eyebrows. He makes eye contact with everyone—even me.

“Ugh,” Fenris grumbles.

“Don’t deny our love, Fenris. You know how it hurts me.”

“I’m certain you’ll survive it,” Fenris says.

The lift stops, and we exit out onto the surface, onto rough, white stone.

“Welcome to Lowtown,” Varric says. I’m very aware that I’m not going to remember all of this because sensory overload. Also, I probably almost got sacrificed today by a blood mage. Blood mage sounds terrible, doesn’t it? And unsanitary.

“You coming with?”

“To see the lovely Leandra?” Varric says. “Of course. Also, I wouldn’t miss this for the world—you bringing home another stray.” He grins at me, “No offense.”

“None taken.” I look at the sky, “I think.” Sky’s pretty much the same at least.

“It’ll be fine,” Hawke says. “It’s not like we don’t have the room in the estate.”

“Is this going to be a problem?” I can’t help but ask. “I don’t want to be a burden.”

“A blood mage rips you from Maker-Knows-Where, and you don’t want to be a burden?” Anders says.

“It’s fine,” Hawke says, just as I’m about to respond. “It’s just—my mother’s not terribly happy with
me at the moment. It’s nothing to do with you.” He sighs. “I have been bringing home a lot of strays.”

Varric laughs. “There’s Hawke and his mother,” he tells me. “Orana. Bodahn and Sandal. Anders, if he can be bothered to drag himself from his Darktown clinic.” He stops. “I feel like I’m missing someone.”

“Well, it’s not Carver,” Anders says, crossing his arms. “He’s gone to the Gallows.”

“The…gallows,” I say, horrified. That doesn’t sound good at all. In fact, it sort of sounds like he could be dead—or soon to be dead.

Hawke exhaled loudly, “My brother’s gone to become a templar.”

“A worthy path,” Fenris tacks on, smirking at Anders. I’m definitely missing something here.

“Oh, yes,” Anders says, too sweetly. “A worthy path for a jailer.” Somebody tell me what it is?

“I can’t believe,” Hawke practically shouts, “that you forgot Warbrain, Varric!”

“How could I forget?” Varric says, sounded scandalized.

“Warbrain?” I mutter, almost afraid to even say it. Everything’s too weird already.

Hawke grins at me, swings an arm up and puts it around my shoulders, “My mabari.”

“And a mabari is?”

Hawke’s mouth drops, “Don’t tell me you haven’t heard of mabari? Magically bred war hounds?”

“So it’s a dog?”

“So it’s a dog,” he mimics. He removes his arms from my shoulders, and I didn’t realize before but I breathe easier with the weight gone. “Varric, the future’s too scary. I hate it.”

“Now, now, I’m sure there’s a good explanation, Hawke.”

“I don’t want to hear,” Hawke says. “And a mabari is?” he mumbles to himself.

We climb stairs, so many stairs. I should probably pay more attention to the journey, but it’s hard enough to keep up with the conversation and the traveling. I’ve never been great at multi-tasking.

“Hightown,” Anders says.

“Nearly home,” Hawke tells me. “Where we’ll tackle our first order of business—introducing you to a mabari.”

“Fereldan,” Varric says, fondly.

“Terribly,” Hawke agrees. “As much as my mother loathes it.”

We enter a terrace with lots of greenery, and Hawke heads straight for a door framed by two coats of arms mounted on two massive columns. The insignia is red and the symbol’s, maybe, supposed to be a bird? It’s very…abstract.

“Home sweet home,” Hawke says, unlocking the door.

Inside, I understand the use of the word ‘estate.’ From the outside, it looks big, but everything in
Hightown sort of looked the same scale. Also, it kinda became a blur because I really need a nap. I’m zapped. It’s difficult to get a sense of how big the place actually is until stepping inside. There’s a foyer, and from it, I can see a second-floor balcony.

We exit the foyer into another room with a roaring fire. There’s a dog—a mabari—lazing in front of the fire, and he perks up at the noise we’re making. He whines at Hawke.

“Warbrain,” Hawke says. “Did Aveline tire you out?”

The mabari whines, tilting his head to one side and barking once. Hawke pats his head, “They’re smart.” He’s speaking to me, I think, and Warbrain barks. “Well, mostly.” Warbrain growls. “Now, now, don’t be testy.” He tugs an ear gently. “This is Manahan,” he pauses, “de la Paz?” I nod. “Yes. She’s going to be staying with us because some blood mages magically transported her to the shit hole we call Kirkwall. Can you believe it?” Warbrain looks at me, whines and barks twice. It really does, strangely enough, seem that he understands.

“Blood mages again?” someone calls from a nearby room.

“Again and again and again,” Hawke says. A woman with grey hair comes in, surveying us.


“This introduction thing’s getting old already,” Hawke says. “Mother, meet Manahan de la Paz. Long story short, she’s been kidnapped in a manner of speaking, and she needs a place to stay. I offered. She accepted. Warbrain likes her, and Anders’ room is eighty percent free.” Hawke smiles at his mother, looking very much like a little boy. “Oh!” he whirls and turns to me. “Manahan, this is my mother, Leandra Hawke.”

“Amell, dear.”

Hawke’s smile goes a little tight.

“Pleasure to meet you,” I say.

“And you,” she says. It’s difficult to tell if she means that, or if it’s ritual. “There’s no need to put Anders’ out of his room,” she continues.

“Except for the fact that he’s never here,” Hawke grumbles. Talk about a sore point?

“She can take the room attached to the library,” Leandra continues, as if her son hadn’t spoken.

Hawke squints at her, “I thought that was for your friends when they visited.”

“What friends?” Leandra says, tiredly.

They stare at one another, and it’s like seeing one of your friends fight with their mom. I didn’t sign up for this uncomfortable moment, and I want to leave.

“Hawke, I must depart,” Fenris says.

“See you tomorrow, Broody,” Varric says with a grin. He knows Fenris’ is acting on that feeling I’m feeling, the get the fuck outta here feeling. Good for him, but also, fuck him a little.

“Yes,” Fenris agrees, and then he stalks out. It’s actually a little terrifying.

“May I speak with you a moment, Garrett.”
“Fine,” Hawke says. They duck into the room Leandra came out of, leaving me with Varric, Anders, and a dog named Warbrain. I really hope the dog can understand because he deserves a chance to be offended by his own name.

“That went very well I thought,” Varric says.

“I imagine it’s difficult,” Anders says, “to adjust to this after being away from it for so long.”

“Leandra’s a strong woman. She’ll be fine.”

They look at each, nodding, and turn back to me. I’m trying not to be really obnoxious, but it’s hard not to stare at everything. The house is really interesting.

“Doing okay there?” Varric asks.

“I’ll get back to you on that one,” I say because assessing my mental state sounds like a terrible idea at the moment. I will cry, and it’ll be ugly and loud and I refuse. “I’m probably going to wake up tomorrow really weirded out by all of this.”

“You have Hawke and Anders looking into it. Your chances at successfully getting home are…fairly good.” Anders gives him a look. “Alright, alright, they’re decent odds anyway. Daisy’ll help, too. It’ll be fine.” I squint at him because I’ve said It’ll be fine exactly like that many times, and it was always a lie. “Where is home for you anyway?”


“Nothing,” Varric says.

“Of course,” I say, sighing. “I’m really going to need to see a map sometime soon.”

“I’ll bring one in the morning,” Varric says.

I hadn’t meant that he should send one. It’s mostly just me thinking out loud, working through whatever the hell all this is. “I didn’t mean that you—”

“It’s fine,” he says.

“Varric thinks you’re too interesting to leave alone,” Anders hypothesizes, smiling. “He’ll take any excuse he can to be nosy.”

“I take offense to that ‘nosy’ bit,” Varric grumbles.

“Well, you’re all pretty interesting, too. I’d be nosy—or curious—if I wasn’t completely out of my element.”

“For someone who’s been dropped into a place they’d never heard of before,” Varric says, “you’re doing alright.”

“It’s true,” Anders agrees.

Hawke re-enters with Leandra following, grinning from ear to ear. “Alright,” he says. “Let’s get our new friend settled.”

“I’m going to—”
“Head back to the clinic?” Hawke finishes. He crosses his arms and stares Anders down. “Not a chance. I know for a fact you haven’t eaten a decent meal in over a week.”

“Hawke.”

“Anders.”

“Blondie, would a meal really kill you?” Varric asks, laughing. Anders doesn’t look too impressed by the argument. “You’ll be able to go on healing the poor and destitute of Darktown for longer with proper nourishment,” Varric practically sing-songs.

“I’ve been away for too long.” He runs a hand down his face, struggling through it. “But alright, I’ll stay for a little while longer.”

“Ha, I win,” Hawke declares. Anders immediately scowls, and I feel you, buddy. When people say things like that, I tend to get really bitter and do just the opposite because I am a spiteful hell-bound human being.

“I can still leave, you know,” Anders says, though I can tell his heart’s not in it. Looking like he does, I bet he’s up for a meal or ten.

We—Anders, Varric, Hawke, and I—eat right in the kitchen. There’s what I’m thinking is rabbit stew. There’s also bread and fruits that are mostly recognizable. All, after the day I’ve had, taste amazing, and I’m pretty sure I’m half in love with Hawke for letting me stay here.

“So,” I say, as I rip my bread into manageable pieces, “are you a…doctor, Anders?”

“Doctor?”

“Hmm, maybe you don’t use the same word. Physician? Healer?” The bread’s a lot like my mom’s. She always set aside time to make all her bread from scratch. I always set aside time to eat it.

“I’m a healer,” Anders says with a nod, after a spoonful of stew.

“And you use magic to heal people?” I guess.

“Your ‘doctors’ don’t?”

“No one where I come from uses magic,” I say. “I mean we don’t even have magic.”

Anders stops eating his stew and stares at me. “None of you?” He squints at me.

“Not a one—at least that I know of,” I say. “Magic’s just fantasy for us. You know, fiction?”

“Well, shit,” Varric says. “You may hate the future, Hawke, but Fenris is going to be in love with it.”

Anders scowls, “Of course he’d love it.”

“Um?” I try. I feel bad that I’ve started up another debate, and damn, Anders is pushing back his bowl. It’s still half-full. I’m a terrible person, and I should have started a conversation about the weather. “I don’t know if it’s the future.” They look at me expectantly. “Well, if magic was ever a thing where I was from, it would be part of our history, wouldn’t it? There’d be some whisper of it at least in the history books. Same with Kirkwall. Never heard of it. Which, alright, not the best indicators of this not being the past, but I’m kind of big into ancient history and I still haven’t heard
of it. And history might forget the details, but there’d be physical evidence left. Buildings and such.”

“So what could it be?” Hawke asks, stirring his stew lazily.

“No idea,” I admit.

“Mmm,” Varric hums. “It’s damn weird.”

“That’s true,” I say. Anders looks deep in thought, and I slowly push his bowl back to him. Hawke snorts, and Varric laughs. Anders jerks his head up to look at me. “Uh, no offense but I’m pretty sure you’re a stone’s throw away from death, so you should probably finish this.”

“Listen to this one,” Hawke booms through his chuckles. “Right clever she is.”

Anders scowls at Hawke but does pick up his spoon again. I resolve not to talk about magic anymore, at least not over food. Apparently, it has the power to ruin appetites. Hawke, though, he decides to go back for more because he’s apparently got a sadistic streak.

“Without magic, it must be interesting,” he says. Anders casts him a look, and he amends, “I didn’t say better. I said interesting.”

“I suppose?”

“How do you heal people without magic?” Anders says. “I mean, I understand there are other methods, but they don’t tend to work as efficiently as magic.”

“Well, I’ve only been here for a hot second,” Varric apparently likes this measurement of time because he grins, “but I can tell we’re a bit more advanced from a technology standpoint. We have medicines and machines that aid with detecting and preventing illness and disease. We’re also a little obsessed with cleanliness, which really helps prevent the spread of disease.”

“Cleanliness,” Hawke repeats. “You must have loved Darktown.”

“Immensely,” I grumble, eating a chunk of rabbit. I figure it’s pretty rude to say hey, your city kind of smells like shit.

“To have access to these things, you must be upper crust, right?”

“Not really? I’m not poor or anything, but I’m barely middle class—oh, I guess that doesn’t make any sense to you.” I stir my stew, thinking of a way to explain. “Well, your class basically has to do with income, how much money you make, on a most basic level? If you don’t or barely make enough for the basics—food, running water, heat, and shelter—you’re lower class. If you’re comfortable, you’re middle class. You have the basics and then some. If you have a shit ton of money, you’re upper class. There are classes, sort of, between. Lower-middle. Upper-middle. If you straddle the cusp between classes.” I shrug because hey that definitely didn’t sound very smart at all and I don’t actually have a great grasp of what I’m talking about. “It’s not as if we’re assigned a class, but it’s just something we’re all aware of.”

“Huh,” Hawke says. “Not too bizarre and outlandish.”

“There aren’t any slaves where you’re from, huh?” Varric says.

I set down my spoon, feeling a bit ill. “Are there slaves here?” Okay, fuck you, blood mage. Why didn’t you leave an instruction manual for returning really freaked out women you accidentally summoned from Georgia?
“Yeah,” Varric answers. “Unfortunately. It’s illegal in Kirkwall but not in Tevinter, so there’s still activity here.”

“Mmm, but we kill slavers any chance we get,” Hawke says, proudly. “And sometimes more than that if Fenris gets to snooping around.”

“Good,” I say. “Shit, that’s fucked up.” I take a deep breath and cover my eyes with a hand. "This place is really fucked up."

“Don’t we know it?” Varric agrees.

Chapter End Notes

Just a few notes: 1) The Dragon Age games do NOT exist in Manahan's earth, but beyond that, the world is the same as ours. Likewise, she has no idea what's going to happen in the future. I've read some fics that tackle the idea of knowing in interesting ways, but I like having Mana in the dark about what's to come in Kirkwall. 2) I have no romantic pairings in mind atm beyond Anders and Garrett. I'm just letting things flow for the moment.

I'm mostly just here trying to loosen up. I tend to write very serious shit, and I wanted to tackle this project to widen my horizons or whatever. Basically, I just want to have fun. And I hope it's fun to read! Let me know about that. I could be slipping in the darkness again. I hardly notice.
Anyway, Here’s Real Wood Furniture

Chapter Summary

Everyone's got a theory.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I’m exhausted. It’s dark. It’s quiet. I should sleep, but I’ve always had a hard time sleeping in strange places. This, by far, is the strangest place I’ve ever slept. It feels like sleeping in a museum. Not that I’ve ever slept in a museum before but I have a fantastic imagination.

There’s a musky smell to the bedding, and I’d have probably killed for the furniture in this room if I were home. It’s really beautiful and sturdy. Real wood gets me, okay? Everything in my apartment’s made of pressboard.

I flip onto my side, stare out the window at the moon and stars. The sky’s pretty clear here, and the stars are more than the pinpricks they usually are back home. That’s why I left the curtains open a sliver, so I could see. The negatives of my current situation are a little overwhelming, so I’m trying to find a few positives. So far, Hawke and Co. are a plus, though Varric told me there’s more of them, and that they’re all similarly interesting. That’s a bit terrifying, but still, they’ve been great. All things considered. I could be stuck in Darktown on my own, trying to scrape by in this strange possibly-past world. (Yeah, I'm not buying that past thing.)

I’ve never done well on my own. I’d probably be dead by the end of hour one.

I flip onto my other side, shoving that cheerful thought aside. I’m good. All things considered. It’s all out of my hands now anyway. I’ve told myself that maybe ten times since I settled into the guest room. It still hasn’t really stuck.

I flip onto my back, wincing at the noise every shift produces. I hope no one else in the house can hear. I hope I’m the only one awake, too, and I can’t really say why. I just think better when I think everyone else is asleep.

There’s really nothing I can do. That should put me to sleep, but hey, sleep’s still not coming. Go figure. I exhale, rolling my eyes at myself, and grope in the darkness for the parchment I’d found on the table by the bed. There’s a thin piece of charcoal in the table’s drawer. I checked before I blew out the candle Leandra’d given me hours ago. I find the charcoal, despite the darkness, and get up.

I sit in the windowsill, opening the curtains wider, and use the light of the moon to work by. It’s cold as fuck, which jolts me a little further into wakefulness, but despite that and the light, I yawn twice before I even put my charcoal to paper.

I write:

9:33 Dragon (9 = Month?, 33 = Day???, Dragon = CE/AD?)
Kirkwall: Darktown—Lowtown—Hightown
Gallows??? (Is this a place? Why would you name a place this????)
Schools of Magic: Time (maybe)?, Blood, ?????? (touchy subject)
Templars = ??????????????????????????????????????????????? (don’t ask Anders. or maybe do? idk?)
Met: Anders, Varric, Hawke, Fenris, Leandra, Warbrain, Tomwise (discount poison!!)
Mentioned: …lots of ppl living in Hawke’s house besides me, Leandra, Hawke & Anders (sorta), also friends of Hawke+ whose names I’ve forgotten already
Mabari = magical war hound

Need: map, calendar, paper (parchment), quill & ink??? (God. Bless. Pens.)

AND ONE BOTTLE OF VODKA ASAP THANKS

Alright, so I’m a little embarrassed by the emotional outburst at the end. I tried to scratch it out, but I broke the charcoal. And then I rubbed it with my finger, and now it’s just a mess. Good thing I’m still wearing my black dress. Also, this is half question marks, which honestly is my state of mind at this point. I’m a disaster.

This is about the time I start to ask myself: Why me? It’s a little healthier, I think, then my previous question: What the fuck? A little less vulgar, too, which is probably for the best. Leandra doesn’t seem like the kind of mom who’d be cool with it, and I get the feeling I need to stay in her good graces.

The question though. I think it’s just random. It has to be, or else the blood mage really fucked up.

I’m trying not to think about those first few moments I was here. Mostly because they make me wonder if Hawke and Friends are the Good Guys, you know? They’re helping me, and I’m grateful. I could be sleeping in the dirt right now, but instead, I’m sleeping in a bed in Hightown. I don’t feel like people get that kind of lucky break every day. Hell, I usually don’t.

Still, they murdered a guy. Fenris ran him through with a sword, and I saw it. But it’s different here, and maybe I just don’t get it. I don’t think I really want to honestly because, really, what’s even happening in this city?

But see, I’m looking outwards when I’m supposed to be looking in, aren’t I? Why me? God, this is whiny as shit. Go to sleep, Manahan. I inhale and try to think of nothing. I’ve never been able do it because I always end up thinking about how ridiculous that whole concept of nothingness is. How can anyone possibly think of it without their mind drifting off elsewhere?

Eventually, I drag myself away from the window and put the list in the drawer with the broken pieces of charcoal. I go back to close the curtains completely. Then, I slowly make my way back to the bed, reaching out with both arms, hoping that I don’t trip and wake everyone. I manage it, slipping back under the covers. They’re cold. I’ve been sitting at the windowsill wallowing for that long.

“Lighten up, Manahan,” I whisper, staring into the darkness.

I try to slow my breathing. I try counting. I try curling around a pillow. And eventually, I drift off. The next time I wake up, jerking to a waking panic, I see a tad bit of light filtering through the curtains, so I know I slept for a few hours at least. Good. I put my head back down, refusing any thoughts beside sleepsleepleep, and I manage it again.

A knock at the door wakes me the second time.

“Just a second,” I call back, jerking to a seated position.

My mouth, first of all, tastes terrible. I’m definitely going to have to inquire about a few things, I
think. My hair, after a cursory pat down, is passable. Not great because I have a shit-ton of hair but I’ll live. I untangle myself from the bedding and tug on my leggings. I don’t know if bare legs are a socially acceptable thing here (which is a terrible shame).

I open the door.

“Good morning,” the elven woman says. Her blond hair’s pulled up into a bun, and she’s in a dress similar to Leandra’s in style. It’s just made of a less silky fabric.

Her head’s tilted to look at the floor, and I follow her eyes, expecting to see something. There’s nothing.

“Uh, good morning,” I respond.

“Master Hawke went out earlier today to see about some clothes,” she says. “I wanted to let you know that breakfast was ready, if you’re hungry.”

“I’m not really,” I admit. I’ve never been a big eater in the morning. Which, yes, is terrible. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day and everything, but I pretty much eat one thing in the morning, if I do eat, and that’s Greek yogurt (it’s delicious alright and guiltfree). And I’m going to take a wild stab in the dark and say they don’t have that kind of thing here. Anyway, the emotional roller coaster I boarded last night really messed up my stomach. “But thank you.”

“I’m sorry to have woken you,” she says, and, oh fuck, her voice is wavering a little. Shit. Why am I interacting with considerate elven beings before coffee? I’m not even allowed to call myself a person before at least two cups.

“Not your fault,” I say, immediately. Yeah, I think, that convinced her. I try again, “You know what, I think I’ll have breakfast. It’s the most important meal of the day, you know? That’s just science.”

“Oh?” she says. That’s genuine surprise there. I’ve really got to learn to tone down the future Earth shit.

“Yeah,” I say. “Um, I didn’t get your name?”

Her head jerks up for a second, and her eyes meet mine. They’re green, and I know that because I’m observant. Or something. Why am I thinking right now? I should go back to bed and never leave the safety of my covers ever, ever again. I also observe that she could use breakfast herself. She has that same starved sort of gauntness in her face as Anders.

“It’s Orana, Lady de la Paz.”

“Oh,” I say because, like I said, I’m not a person yet, and I have never in my life heard my name said like that unless it was one of my sister’s friends trying—and failing miserably—to get into my pants. “Manahan’s fine—or Mana if that’s too long.” I’d normally hate Mana because the RPG jokes wear on a person, okay? But I don’t mind the idea in a world where people don’t know what an RPG even is. “It’s nice to meet you, Orana.”

Her eyes dart back to the ground, and she flushes a little. “I’ll take you to breakfast now,” she says.

I’m getting vibes, okay? These vibes originate, mostly, from the conversation I had with Hawke and Co. last night, and I’m struggling to work through this. Between the Master Hawke and the aversion to eye contact, I’m starting to get a little worried about Orana. Hadn’t they said they killed slavers last night? Wasn’t that a thing I heard with my own ears over rabbit stew? I rub at the side of my nose with a sigh. It’s too early, and I feel bad for thinking that, thinking that I can just push aside the
possibility that Hawke might be a slave owner, just for my own piece of mind.

Of course, there’s really no way to ask, is there? Not without sounding like a completely asshole. Also not without risking, what, my life? Great, I think I’m really a terrible person. It was mostly a joke before, but I’m starting to really wonder.

I follow Orana down to what is apparently the dining room. Leandra’s sitting with an empty plate at the head of the table, stitching something. She was waiting for me. Awfully nice of her. But this kind of reminds me of the time I came into the kitchen for breakfast when I was sixteen, and my mom had been waiting to ambush me about some pictures she found of me on Facebook. I didn’t even knew they’d taken pictures of me kissing my then-best friend, Alice. Good times.

“Thank you, Orana,” Leandra says, setting her stitching aside. Orana nods once with a smile, and she sits at one of the chairs nearest to Leandra at the table. That eases my mind some, and I sit at the other chair closest to Leandra. I honestly might be able to handle a blood mage right now. So awkward.

Leandra passes me a dish of some pastries, and I take one then pass to Orana. We do this four times in silence, passing dishes of fruit and meat and cheese and bread. All in silence. Then we settle into the meal, or rather, they do. I’m honestly so uncomfortable, I’m concocting plausible excuses to leave like I’m not feeling well or I need to go cry in the room you loaned out to me because you, apparently, have no friends.

“Did you sleep well, Serah de la Paz?”

She stares at me, and I wonder how Hawke can possibly joke with this woman because she terrifies me. Also ‘serah’ is definitely going on my list. “I slept well,” I lie. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Leandra laughs. It’s quiet in comparison to her son’s boisterous laughter. It’s all terribly polite and proper, and I kind of hope I’m like this woman when I get older (who doesn’t want to be a little terrifying when they ‘grow up’?).

“There’s no need to be so formal,” she says.

“No offense,” I say, “but you sort of scare me. So—” Why did I even say that?

She chuckles at that and slices through her pastry in one smooth movement. “So you’re going to lie about how well you slept out of fear?”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

“I heard you get up last night,” she says. “I’ve been having trouble sleeping myself, and I tend to spend my nights in the library. It’s easy to hear.”

“Oh,” I say. Because there’s no coffee, and it’s taking some time to adjust. Wow, I hate this place. “Well, if I’ve been caught, I slept terrible. It didn’t have anything to do with the place, just the fact that I got displaced from my home yesterday and possibly almost murdered.”

“There,” Leandra says. “Was that difficult?”

“Terribly,” I grumble, sawing my own pastry in four pieces. “You’re still scary.” I eat one. It’s just a little sweet, and I figure sugar’s one of those things these people don’t pour on everything like we do at home. Which, really, is for the best.

“I wish my son still thought so.”
“You are scary, Mother,” Hawke calls from the room next door. Leandra sighs and eats a slice of her pastry. I look at Orana, and she offers a small smile. I smile back.

Hawke waltzes in with a bulky bundle tucked under his arm. “Good morning,” he says. “I see Mother bullied the truth out of you.”

“Mmm,” I say. “Resistance is futile.”

“True enough,” Hawke says with a laugh, plopping down beside me. He sets the bundle on the table, and Leandra’s eyes narrow just a hair. He sighs, dropping his hands on the package, and then sweeps it into the empty chair next to him. “Good morning, Orana,” he says. “Did you sleep well?”

“I did, Serah Hawke.”

“Good,” he says. “At least one of us did.”

“Rough night, dear?” Leandra says, and what exactly did I miss last night?

“You really should go see that man down the way, Mother,” Hawke says, sweetly. “I hear he’s quite fond of you.”

“At my age?”

“Ah, age is just a number,” Hawke says, “at least, Varric says so.”

“Well, if Serah Tethras says so.”

They stare at each other across the table until Hawke’s shoulders drop with a roll of his eyes. He reaches over and grabs five pastries, a huge stem of grapes, and grumbles something under his breath I can’t even begin to puzzle out.

Hawke throws a whole pastry in his mouth, chews for about a full minute, and turns back to me. “I’ve picked up a few clothes for you.” He throws back another pastry, chews. I wait without speaking, eating my grapes. “Varric said he’d meet us at Merrill’s later with a map. Hopefully, by the time we go by, Merrill will have gone through the papers.” He shakes his head, “I tried to convince Anders to join us, but he’s—preoccupied.”

“Mmm,” Leandra hums, thoughtful.

“Not listening,” Hawke says, cheerful.

“I didn’t say anything, Garrett.”

“Of course you didn’t.”

I finish my pastry, making a confused face at Orana. She giggles quietly across the table, and I feel badly for thinking badly of Hawke. He treats her like a friend, and he’s treated me like a friend. I really just need to stop trying to find the bad in him—and everything else.

“Well, I suppose you two will be going off to the Alienage?” Leandra says. My plate’s empty save for the stems from the grapes and so is Hawke’s. Orana’s clearing away dishes, and I can tell, just from Hawke’s face, they’re about to have another weird fight that’s not an obvious fight. I stand and help.

She hurries over and tries to take the dishes from me, whispering as not to break into Leandra’s and Hawke’s conversation, “You don’t have to do that.” She’s very fervent.
“It’s only fair,” I say. “I eat. I help you clean up.”

She looks at a loss, and we stare at each other for a moment. I pick up Leandra’s plate, stack it on top of mine. Leandra’s stopped speaking to Garrett to stare at me.

“Orana’s paid to do that, Serah,” she says.

“And I’m staying here rent free,” I say. “It’s the least I can do.” Leandra’s eyes narrow, again, just a touch, but I don’t give. My mom was big on us cleaning up after ourselves, especially after dinner, and I’m honestly a little terrified she might pop up here just to give me a piece of her mind if I don’t help out like a decent human being. I carry our dishes into the kitchen, following after Orana.

“I can wash them by myself.”

“Yeah, but they’re about to fight in there? This is a safe place to hide, and if I hide in here, I might as well help. It’s awkward otherwise, just watching you work.”

“It wouldn’t be awkward,” she argues. “It’s fine if you just watch.”

Okay, how fucked up is that?

“That would make me so uncomfortable. You have no idea,” I say, setting my stack of plates on her stack of plates. I feel like we’re arguing—are we even arguing really?—over an anthill. There’s literally four plates, four forks, and four cups, and a few extra serving dishes.

“Why?” she asks.

“Well,” I say, organizing the dishes like I’d do at home, not because I’m trying to take over this operation or anything, but because I get nervous when I talk about myself and my family. I’m just intensely private? Or shy? I haven’t figured it out, and I ran out of money for therapy. I have to do something with my hands while I talk. “My family didn’t allow anyone to just watch. My mom had a rule. If you eat, you help clean up. If everyone helps clean up, it’s less work for everyone in the long run.”

Orana tilts her head, considering this. I try to stop fiddling with the cups, but I can’t. “Papa used to let me help me with the dishes,” she says. “He’d cook meals for Mistress, and he was supposed to clean up, too. I liked to help him—so he could go to sleep earlier.” Her eyes are very far away. I stop touching the cups. “He made mistakes when he didn’t sleep enough,” she whispers. “Mistress punished him for every one.”

“No one’s punishing you here, are they?” I whisper. And damn, there it is.

She shakes her head, “No.” She drags in a breath, “No. Master Hawke killed my Mistress, and he told me I could live here. That he’d pay me.”

“That’s good,” I say, trying to wrap my head around this. She nods in agreement, smiling.

“If I make mistakes here, Serah Hawke just asks me to try again,” she admits. “I wish Papa was here.”

Oh, damn. She’s a little teary-eyed, but she’s got a backbone of steel. I can tell. I hesitate a second and step forward, “Okay, weird question, but do you want a hug? Totally doesn’t fix anything. Totally an attempt to comfort you but I’m kind of terrible at it—”

“You’re very,” Orana searches for a word for a while.
“Weird?” I offer. Because damn, Orana, I'm sorry, but I am so bad at comforting people.

“Kind,” she decides. I guess I can live with that. “I—” she stops. “I don’t—” She looks a little upset, and her eyes find a spot on the wall and stay there.

“How about,” I try again, “I help you with the dishes?”

She turns back to me. “Thank you,” she says.

“Anytime,” I say, and we go to work on those dishes.

“Merrill, this is Manahan,” Hawke says while I linger in the doorway. “Manahan, this is Merrill.” He clucks his tongue and turns to me, “Your name has too many syllables.”

“Hi,” I say to Merrill, and wow, okay, I might have to kick Garrett in the shins. I also might need to start asking some serious questions about coffee. Merrill darts around her house, attempting to tidy up as she complains about the state of her house. She’s super quick and efficient about it. “You could have warned me,” I hiss at Hawke, while she works.

“What? That she’s Dalish?” He raises an eyebrow at me.

“I don’t know what that is,” I respond. “I meant, you could have warned me she’s really pretty.” And okay, maybe that came out louder than it should have, but I have weaknesses. And they’re being exploited right now.

“Hmm,” Hawke says with a snort. “My apologies.” Oh, good. Merrill didn’t hear, I think. Her first impression of me might not be so terribly horrible. “Seriously. Mana?”

“Sure,” I say. I think I'll just go with Mana, for everyone's sake. I tug at my tunic a little. Hawke’s clothes for me fit suspiciously well. All I need now is something to first, tame and second, tie up my hair. It’s all over the place, and it’s going to be a problem in a few days. I can tell. If I was braver, I'd try and braid it right now, but I'd probably just end up crying in pain from all the tangles.

“There,” Merril exclaims. “That’s most of it. Sit, sit. I’m terribly sorry it’s such a mess. Creators, it’s always such a mess whenever someone comes to visit.”

“It’s fine, Merrill. Did you hear me? This is—”

“Yes, Manahan. She thinks I’m pretty. Hello! Oh, and thank you!”

“Damn,” I say. Dear God, if you send Vodka, I’ll do something awesome for you. Don’t know what, but it’ll be awesome and you won’t regret it. The loose tongue? Not my normal state, I swear. It’s just there’s no coffee, and I haven’t slept well. I’m really not allowed to see pretty women with no coffee or sleep to back me up. It doesn’t end well. (Okay, so it doesn’t end well usually anyway. Fuck me.) I can handle pretty men but the pretty women? They get me every time.

“Don’t tempt me.” I hope there’s a spell that makes the earth swallow you up. That would be convenient.

“Oh, we’re running? I hope not far,” Merrill says. “I’m still a tiny bit sore from our last trip to the Wounded Coast.”
“There’s only going to be one person running, Merrill. You and I? We’ll sit here and wait for Varric so we can give him some delightful material for his upcoming book.”

“I thought we were discussing something important,” Merrill says.

“Later,” Hawke says. He laughs quietly and can’t seem to make himself stop.

I’m saved by a knock on the door. Merrill hops up and goes to answer it.

“Good afternoon, Daisy,” Varric says. “I brought Anders. He’s promised to play nice, but he has to be back at his clinic in an hour or he’ll be in terrible trouble.”

“Ha ha,” Anders grits out.

“An hour?” Hawke says, eyebrows raised. “Ambitious. Think we’ll solve it so soon?”

“I’ve been kindly,” his eyes cut into Varric, “reminded not to say anything rude about blood magic while in this house...and the probability of this meeting leading to absolutely nothing.”

The last part's barely audible.

“Good thing you were reminded then,” Merrill says, and shit, she’s lethal. That sounded genuinely kind, but I can definitely tell she got the passive aggressive whatever that was.

“Hey, Varric,” Hawke calls from his seat on the table. I’m still lingering awkwardly near it, trying not to be nosy, but again, I’m curious about the house. There are books, and the titles are interesting. These people might just be demons, tempting me. Leandra put me in a room right next to the library for God's sake and now this. “Mana thinks Merrill’s pretty.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Varric asks, setting his crossbow by the door.

“Well, that’s true,” Hawke admits. “But it was adorable. You could have warned me she’s really pretty, Garrett!”

I level him with my best unimpressed look, “I don’t sound like that, and I didn’t call you ‘Garrett.’”

“Yet, you’re not denying the rest?” Varric asks with a laugh.

“Too many witnesses to deny it.”

“You’ll have to do better next time,” he says.

“Can we please talk about the spell?” Anders asks, sounding pained.

“Sure, sure,” Hawke says. “But there are better ways to shut me up, you know?”

“Not now,” Anders snaps.

Hawke puts up his hands in surrender. “Fine,” he drags out the word. “What did you make of it, Merrill? I didn’t find anything in it when I went over it again. It seems more of a theory to me than an actual spell.”

“Yes, not a very clever theory either,” Merrill says. “And it’s not blood magic.” She hesitates, “It’s not in the papers you gave me, but the stone you mentioned, it might be something elven.”

“Of course,” Anders mumbles. I don’t really get it, the aggressive hostility, and it’s getting a little
grating. Especially since Merrill’s offering something new, something that sounds like it could be promising. I say that, but hell, what do I know? Magic. I found out it’s a thing yesterday.

“Have you seen it before, Daisy?”

“Well, no, but it sounds like something in the stories. They say, in Arlathan, our ancestors sometimes used a foci to boost and channel power. It’s supposed to allow for some amazing feats of magic.” She shakes her head, eyes sad, “But they were all lost.” She brightens when she looks at me though. “It’s possible you found one. You don’t happen to know where it went, do you?”

“It wasn’t with me when I ended up in Darktown,” I say. “At least, I don’t think it was.”

Hawke sighs, “If it was there and we missed it, it’s gone by now. Scavengers comb Darktown day and night for anything to sell and an ancient elven foci? That’s going to fetch some pretty coin.”

“I’ll look into it,” Varric says.

“If we get it back,” I say, “does that mean I can go back? This is all hypothetical. I mean, this is us operating under the assumption that it came through with me—but, say it’s here, can you use it to send me back?”

“I don’t know,” Merrill says. “I don’t know much about them.”

“It doesn’t sound like Alfino knew much about them either,” Hawke says. “All of this is just speculation.” He gives the papers a little shake, and then he gives me a smile. “Let’s worry about the foci first. If it even is a foci. If we find it, we can work on figuring out how to work it.”

“Alright,” I say. “That’s like a hundred ifs. That’s actually better news than I thought.” I was kinda expecting to leveled with sad looks and a really apologetic, Sorry, you’re fucked.

“I do wonder,” Anders says, suddenly. “Was Alfino even the one who caused you to end up in Kirkwall?” Everyone turns their attention to him. “You said you cut yourself on it. We assumed, since you were in the room with Alfino, you were summoned as a result of one of his spells, but perhaps—”

“Are you saying it’s a coincidence, Blondie, that she ended up in Darktown with a blood mage messing with strange magic?” He looks apologetically at Merrill, “No offense, Daisy.”

“Oh, it’s alright,” she says, waving a hand. “I know better than to tamper with time.”

“But not better than to mess with demons,” Anders says.

“Anders,” Hawke and Varric say within seconds of one another.

“Coincidence,” I practically shout. “Is it really possible that this is just a coincidence?”

“Well,” Merrill says, “blood can be very powerful. If you touched the foci, it’s possible you’re the reason you’re here.”

I blink at that. Okay, that's just—unsettling.

“She’s not a mage,” Anders snaps.

“You said you’d play nice,” Varric reminds him.

“Enough,” Hawke groans. “We can speculate all day and night, but we won’t know until we find the
foci. If we can even find it. If it's even a foci. And if the foci even does what we're speculating it does. We've hit a wall, and it's all up to Varric now. Done! Meeting finished. Everyone go home.” Anders turns to the door without further prompting, and Hawke calls after him, “Home as in home. I want to talk to you.”

“I have patients,” Anders says, opening the door.

“No, you don’t. Not right now you don't.” Hawke grumbles. “We’re going home, and we’re going to talk. Maker, I’m sick of you avoiding me.”

Anders doesn’t reply. Well, alright, he does. He walks out the door. Hawke responds to that by following him. He closes the door gently behind him, and I’m fairly certain I’m the farthest thing from his mind. I’m also more than fairly certain I’m in no way capable of making my way back to Hawke’s estate from here, the Alienage.

“Do you think they’ll make up, Varric?” Merrill asks.

“They will, Daisy,” Varric reassures, sitting at the table. After a moment, I sit next to him. The papers are strewn across the table. Hawke must have just tossed them there. I didn’t notice with all the squabbling I didn’t really understand. “Anders really cares about Hawke, and Hawke’s absolutely moony over the renegade mage. They just need to…talk.”

Merrill remains silent for a moment. “Varric, are you saying—”

“It’s dirty, Daisy.” He shakes his head. “But also sweet because Anders makes Hawke very sweet to the point that it’s almost sickening.”

“Do you really think I’m pretty?” Merrill asks. I wasn’t expecting the question, or any question, so it takes a moment for me to process.

“You’re going red there,” Varric says.

“I do think you’re pretty, Merrill,” I say, glaring at Varric. I’ve never in my life been that blunt, but it’s been a trying day. Maybe I gained some character points or something. I might have a tiny bit more courage than I did yesterday morning. Here's to hoping because I'll look into it suggests a lot of waiting, I think.

“Do you still think so, even though I’m a blood mage?”

“Um, you’re pretty,” I say. Varric’s shoulders are shaking. Rude. “But someone might need to explain to me what a blood mage actually is because I’m still a little confused.”

“Anders gave her the brief introduction,” Varric explains.

“He told you about demons,” Merrill guesses.

“Yes. Demons. I might need someone to explain that one, too. Because we’ve got demons—sort of—but I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing.”

“Demons are spirits,” Merrill says. “Not much of a difference between them really, not a clear difference anyway.”

I wish that was as helpful as she meant it to be, but I still just don’t understand.

“I don’t know, Daisy,” Varric says. “They tend to be a tad bit more murderous than your usual
spirits.”

“Yes but they can also help, too,” Merrill says, “if they want to.”

I’m going to have to buy a book or something because I’ve got the image of what a demon is back home stuck in my head (or what they’re *supposed* to hypothetically look like if, you know, hell is an actual thing), and now I have a strangely vague explanation with references I don’t connect to.

“You have a demon helping you right now,” I guess. Merrill nods. “Okay. So is it a power thing? Or —”

“Oh no,” Merrill says, shaking her head. “I needed information.” She takes a breath, “You don’t know about Arlathan. Oh, I think I have a book tucked away somewhere.” She stands abruptly and goes into another room. I hear paper crumpling, and rummaging.

“I’ve got your map,” Varric says, while we wait. He reaches into his jacket and produces it, unfolds it on the table. He watches me, expectantly.

“Well, that’s not what I remember the planet looking like at all,” I say. I don’t even need to look long. The shapes are just all wrong, and that’s saying something, coming from me, because I’ve always been shit at geography. I really don’t like the implication of the world not looking like Earth, and I give the map a little shove towards Varric. It honestly makes me feel a little sick to my stomach.

“Keep it,” he says. “You may need it.” I may need it, but I really don’t want it. But I slide it back to my side of the table.

“Here,” Merrill says, dropping a book onto the map, preventing me from sliding it any further. I hadn’t even seen her re-enter the room. “Really, I’m not supposed to lend this out of shemlens, but it doesn’t count, does it? If you’re from another world?”

“Another world?” I was getting there. I was. But other worlds? Not something I was prepared to accept today. I was going for my fool-proof tactic of ignoring the problem until it dissolved from my neglect. Also ‘shemlen’? I’ll have to put that on my list, too.

“I’ve got a theory,” Varric pips up.

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Nothing about this world’s recognizable to you, even a little, so you’re not from another time. Next logical jump’s *place,*” he says. "Strange as shit but that's all I've got."

“I suppose that makes sense,” I say. “Maybe? All this makes my head hurt.” Also, it just leaves me with a ton of really weird questions.

“It makes sense to me,” Merrill says. “Which means it’s alright if I let you read this. Maybe. It’s alright. I’m already a blood mage, so it’s alright if I’m a little *naughty,* isn’t it? The Keeper wrote it years ago. It details all that we know about Arlathan.”

“I’ll take good care of it,” I say. I don’t know if I want to touch it. It’s really nicely bound. I should know. I took a bookbinding class in college, and I spent a lot of time just rubbing the expensive book cloths we had access to due to a government grant. This is *nice,* and it’s also apparently terribly important to Merrill. I feel a little nervous already, just touching it. But that nervousness could also just be because I keep getting information dumped onto my head, too.

“I hope it helps,” she says. “I know it must be terribly confusing. Kirkwall’s been so difficult for me
“You’re not from Kirkwall?”

“I’m not really from anywhere,” Merrill says. “That’s what being Dalish means. We have no home.”

A picture’s starting to form. “...because Arlathan was your home?”

“Yes,” she answers, smiling a little. “Now, we travel from place to place, trying to gather what we can to help us piece together the past.” She sinks into the chair besides Varric, who looks uncharacteristically serious. “That’s why I called the demon. My clan found something, but I can’t figure out what it does without the demon. It’s terribly important. I can feel it, but no one will listen. They just want me to stop. They want me to abandon the eluvian even though—” She stops.

“I hope it works out,” I say. I mean it, but I don’t get it. I mean, I sort of do, I suppose. I know shit-all about my mom’s country because she was ashamed of it, and I couldn’t ever find many texts about it because it had been colonized. Chunks of history were just gone or twisted. But I don’t know if it’s the same. Hopefully, I’ll get something, once I read this book. But first, I’ve gotta find a way back to Hawke’s.
“Have you heard of Andraste?” he asks. The way he says it, I get that it’s a loaded question. A test question. I’m really not prepared for this test question.

Varric offers to escort me back to Hawke’s, and I fold up my map and tuck it into the book Merrill’s loaned me.

“Oh, wait! I have twine,” Merrill says, darting back into her bedroom. She emerges seconds later with said twine. I look to Varric for an explanation because there really must be some explanation, or this is just some strange ‘Thedas’ thing I’m going to have to get used to.

“You still have that, Daisy?”

“Of course,” she responds. “Here,” she says to me, holding it out with a dainty hand that can barely fit all the way around the bundle of twine. I tentatively take the offering. “So you don’t get lost,” she explains. “Varric gave it to me, but I hardly ever get lost anymore. And when I do, I’m usually with Hawke, and he can find his way back home from anywhere.”

“Thanks,” I say, squeezing the ball of twine.

“That’s alright with you, Varric, isn’t it?” Merrill asks. “It was your gift to me—”

“It’s completely alright with me,” Varric says with a chuckle. “It’s her you should be asking, Daisy. That’s two gifts to her already. Who knows what that means in Georgia? And she’s already called you pretty. Maybe you’ve initiated an engagement.” He grins like the little shit he is. Fucking unbelievable.

“We’re not, are we?” she asks me, eyes wide and slightly alarmed. “Not that it would be bad to be engaged to you, but it is a bit sudden, isn’t it?”

I’m tempted to pull the map out of the book and hit Varric with it, but instead, I inhale deeply and smile at Merrill. “We’re not engaged.” I try to resist the urge to play into Varric’s game for about two seconds before I add, “That’d take three gifts and a gold ring.” I pause. God, I’m terrible for kind of enjoying this. What am I, five? “I’m alright with silver though. Goes better with my skin.”

Varric laughs. “You’re alright.”

“Wait, was that all a joke? Or is that actually—”

“I’m joking, Merrill.” I shake my head at Varric, “He’s already such a terrible influence on me.”

“Me?” Varric says. “I’ve known you for less than a day!”

“I have to have someone to blame.”
“And you decide to blame the dashing dwarf with the beautiful crossbow,” he says.

“Works every time,” I say, like I know a bunch of dwarves with crossbows. Then, after a moment of thought, I laugh and add, “Are you sure you’re talking about your crossbow?”

“Have you seen Bianca?” he asks. “Of course, I’m talking about my crossbow.”

My mind stumbles over that first part a little because, um, alright. He’s named his crossbow Bianca. Alright. Then I remember I met a mabari named Warbrain yesterday night who understood what we were saying. “Maybe the crossbow’s just a symbol for something else.”

“I’ll have to get you a copy of one of my books then,” he says. “I don’t usually deal in symbols.”

“Varric deals in swashbuckling pirates and bosoms straining against their bodices,” Merrill adds.

“Has Rivani been reading you my books before bed again?”

“Yes,” Merrill says. “She has such a lovely voice, and I sleep so much better when she reads to me.”

“Reads to you,” Varric repeats, slowly. There’s so much disbelief there, and I don’t even know this ‘Rivani’ but I’m also about half-full of disbelief myself. “Well, I’m glad to be of service.”

“I’m sure you are,” I mutter. Varric grins, smug bastard. He does, I suppose, look terribly dashing, but he’s also named his crossbow Bianca and written really terrible porn apparently. I’m trying hard not to be impressed. Okay, I’m impressed, but I’m never telling this guy ever.

“Let’s get you back to Hightown,” he says, still smiling. “Before I get myself into more trouble.”

We wave goodbye to Merrill, and I thank her one more time for the book and the twine. I’m stunned, for a moment, by the sight of the tree in the alienage when we step outside. I’d been stunned when I’d seen it for the first time. It was pretty odd to see in Kirkwall, which for the most time seems to be stone, stone, and heraldry. Sometimes a little greenery but nothing so massive as the tree in the alienage. There are candles around it, and I get the feeling that there’s some kind of reason for its presence here in particular. I’m also not sure I can handle any more information at the moment, so I don’t ask.

Instead, I walk in step with Varric, and I try to focus a little more on my surroundings. The twine was awfully thoughtful, but the very thought of using it makes me feel embarrassed. I can see why it’d be handy though. There’s a main sort of street in Kirkwall, but the side alleys twist and turn and there’s so many huge courtyards. It all blurs together after a while. Welcome to the labyrinth.

“What would you do, hypothetically of course, if you couldn’t go home?”

I stop in my tracks. I really don’t like that train of thought at all, but with all the talk, all the don’t get your hopes up, I’ve let my mind drift there. I just try not to let it stay there because depressing.

“Well, first, my mom will probably rip open the fabric of space and time to find me,” I begin. “Second, I’ll probably cry on you.” I squint up into the sky. There’s the faintest outline of two moons up there. “Varric.” That must have sounded terribly serious because he stops dead, turning to me.

“Don’t start crying yet,” he says, sounding a little alarmed by my sudden turn in mood.

“No, Varric, you have two moons.”

“Well, not me, but yes, there’s two moons.” He says that like it’s something everyone should know
“We only have one moon—where I’m from.”

“Ah, so I was right,” Varric says with a grin. “Well, that’s something.”

“Something alright,” I say, staring at the moons for a few more seconds. I look back at Varric. I mean, we’d sort of talked around the idea of me being from a different world (okay but really, what is this, Narnia?), but it’s still just so difficult to wrap my head around. “It just makes everything that much weirder.”

“With Hawke around, this is fairly standard weirdness,” he says with a shrug. “Look, it’ll be fine. You’re in good hands.”

“Yeah, I guess I am,” I say. Really, this could have turned out to be a disaster. I have enough context clues to know that.

We continue walking. I recognize a little here, since we’re closer to where Hawke’s estate is (I think), but I’m still a little vague on how to proceed to back.

“So your mom,” Varric says with a softer smile. “She prone to ripping open the ‘fabric of space and time’ often or—”

“She’s protective,” I say. I don’t know why it’s hard to talk about her, but it always is. “And we’re close-ish. If there’s a way to get me back from that side, I’m pretty sure she’ll figure it out just so she’ll have the chance to stick her hands in my affairs again.”

“Mmm,” Varric hums. “Close-ish. I’ll have to remember that one.”

“It’s a perfect descriptor.”

“Got a descriptor for a brother you’d like to lower slowly in boiling oil?”

“Asshole?”

“Stronger, I think.”

“A fucking asshole.”

Someone passing us jumps a little, staring at me in horror. Whoops. Varric just throws his head back and laughs. “I’ll remember that,” he says. “I bet you’ve got an even stronger one tucked away in that head of yours though.”

“I think I’ve scared one too many poor innocents with my vulgar language today as it is.”

“Now you have to tell me,” he says.

We may or may not have a very interesting—and lengthy—conversation about expletives. I’m just going to twiddle my thumbs and deny everything if anyone asks.

Hawke’s waiting for us in the foyer when we get back to his estate. “Varric,” he says, before we even have the chance to close the door. “How do you feel about matchmaking?”

“It’s trouble and likely to end in disaster,” Varric answers, immediate like he’s definitely
I contemplated that question before. He grins so I’m fairly certain he’s up for it, and I feel so sorry for the couple this lot puts together. “Don’t tell me you and Anders finally—”

“Not me,” Hawke cut in. “Aveline.”

“Aveline?”

“I went to see if she was up for a ‘patrol’ tonight, and she sent me off with a package for a… Donnie?” Hawke says. “He opens it—and it’s copper marigolds.” Apparently, copper marigolds are not the way into Hawke’s heart.

“Copper marigolds,” Varric repeats, disbelieving. Also not the way into Varric’s heart.

“Maker, you should have seen his face. He was as confused as me! Anyway, I went back and told Aveline, and she, in turn, refused to explain and then had a new duty roster posted. I watched Donnic.” He made a face, “He wasn’t at all pleased with his posting, thought someone was after him in fact. I go back to Aveline.” He shakes his head, “Back and forth and back and forth. Exhausting. She says, in the most roundabout way possible, that she was trying to court Donnic.”

Varric laughs, “No, our Aveline? And you said?”

“I said I’d help, of course. I’m already invested. I can’t give up now.” I don’t know who this Aveline is, but someone really ought to send her a warning about these two. Honestly.

“So?”

“So, Donnic’s meeting ‘us’ for drinks in a few hours at the Hanged Man.”

“Good man,” Varric says, patting Hawke on the arm. “Rivani’s going to love this.”

They grin and both look like they’re little boys preparing to pull off the most specularly evil plan. Poor Aveline. After a minute, Hawke looks at me, “Sorry for abandoning you to Merrill and Varric. I was a bit—preoccupied.”

“Blondie still being stubborn?” Varric asks.

“I can’t tell if it’s Anders or Justice being stubborn,” Hawke grumbles. And who names their kid ‘Justice’? “But it’s starting to grate on my nerves.” He shakes his head. “I’m going to give him a bit of space,” he winks at me, “give him some time to miss me.”

“Good luck with that,” Varric says. “Oh, we’ve basically confirmed it. Different world, Hawke. Not different time.”

“Well, you all were hard at work while I was gone,” Hawke says. “How do you figure?”

“You have two moons,” I answer, crossing my arms. I’m not angry or defensive. I just—I’m very aware we’re lingering in the foyer of his house, and I’m always hyperaware of my body. So I’m crossing my arms because if I don’t I’ll probably pick at my nails or something.

“Oh, well then. That proves it,” Hawke says with a laugh.

“There’s only one where I’m from,” I say.

“Hmm,” Hawke says. “Are you sure it didn’t just…go away?”

I laugh, “I’m pretty sure. There’d be some sort of physical evidence, I think. Maybe. I don’t know. I
could be wrong, I suppose, but it really just struck me that this is really too different from home. It just—it doesn’t seem like the same place.”

He holds up his hands. Maybe I sounded a bit too aggressive just now? Oops. I’m blaming the fact that I still haven’t had any coffee because that’s more convenient than owning up to my own shortcomings, you know?

“Well, that’s…something,” he says. “You want to come along to the Hanged Man? You can watch the epic romance unfold with us.”

“And meet Rivani,” Varric adds. “She’s going to be delighted you like Merrill so much.” They’re definitely never going to let me forget that one, and right now, that’s not really sitting well with me. I think—I just need to be alone for a while. Meeting someone new sounds like a recipe for a disaster. Because, of course, I’m not coffeed up. It’s not that I’m really drained and suddenly feeling really sorry for myself, I swear. I let my hands drop to my sides.

“I think I’ll stay here and read the book Merrill gave me,” I say. “I don’t want to put it off.” Look at me, master of great excuses.


“You’ll be okay,” I say, patting his arm and stepping towards the entrance into the main space of the estate.

“Will I?” he says, pitifully. And then he brightens, “Alright then. Let’s go see if Fenris is up for a bit of matchmaking then.” He smirks at me, “Enjoy the book.”

“See you later,” I say, exiting. I can hear them talking for a few minutes, and then there’s laughter. I try really hard not to think it’s about me, but hey, I’m human and I’m very prone to self-absorption. The book. It should help some, I think.

Warbrain looks at me from his place by the fire. I look at him. “Hello?” I say. Warbrain lifts his head and barks once. He seems to consider, and then he gets up and comes over to me. What’s the etiquette with a highly intelligent war hound, exactly? Can you pet them? I want to pet him because that seems normal, and I could really do with some normalcy. I figure it’s best to just ask. “You okay if I pet you?”

He answers by pushing his head into my hand. I hear the front door shut, and I bend and pet Warbrain for a while.

“Remarkable creatures, aren’t they?” someone comments, fondly.

I nearly jump out of my skin, and I’m not going to lie. I totally hiss, “Fuck.” Getting the shit scared of you does that.

“Pardon me, serah. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I put a hand to my chest, feel my heart pounding quickly under my skin. It’s another dwarf, I see, when I stand straighter and look. “It’s alright,” I say. Warbrain whines and pushes his head into my hand again. I pat him a bit absenty, attention focused now on the person standing near Hawke’s desk.

“You must be Serah de la Paz. Lady Leandra told me you’d be staying here. I’m Bodahn Feddic—and that’s my son Sandal.” He gestures to another dwarf bent over a chest on the other table farther down the wall, working on something. “Come say hello, Sandal.”
Sandal turns and looks at me. “Hello,” he says, waving.

“Howdy,” I say, patting Warbrain with more frequency because he’s becoming pretty damn insistent. He’s definitely taking advantage of the fact that I’m new, and that I’m willing to show him some attention. I know your play, dog. I worked in an animal shelter when I was a teenager. I know. “It’s nice to meet you.” I feel exhausted, and while a second ago, I was content to spend some time to pet Warbrain, I really just want to bail. I’ve got that gut-deep desire to be alone right now. Gut-deep. Does that even make sense?

“It’s terrible how you ended up here,” he says. He seems nice, like a concerned neighbor who’s known you for ten years. The kind that comments every time they see you about how much you’ve grown or something. “But Master Hawke’s very talented in magic, and I’m sure he and his friends will come up with something.”

“Thanks,” I say. Not sure if that was the right response, but—

“Enchantment?” Sandal says. I don’t know if he ever stopped looking at me.

“Enchantment,” I repeat, not comprehending. So he must be a magic dwarf then. Alright.

“I don’t think she needs an enchantment, boy,” Bodahn says with a laugh. “He’s talented, my son. If you ever need anything enchanted, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I’ll remember that,” I say. Now I know where to get discount poison and things enchanted. All in a day’s work. “It was nice to meet you, Bodahn. Sandal.” I offer a little wave and walk towards the library.

Warbrain pads behind me, panting. “You coming with?” I ask in a whisper. He presses against my hand again and bolts ahead of me into the library. I enter slowly behind, mostly because I’m worried about meeting someone new. I can deal with the intelligent dog. That should probably bother me more, but it’s nice to have an animal around. Comforting. I won’t be telling poor Warbrain that I prefer cats.

There’s a fireplace, but I don’t know how to light it. I’d ask, but it seems to be a ridiculous thing to ask for. So I go and sit on a sofa. I place the book in my lap, waiting for Warbrain to figure out how he wants to arrange himself. He plops down right on my feet. Which, honestly, is very nice because he’s basically a portable heater. He rests his head on the carpet, huffing out a breath. After a few seconds, he closes his eyes.

“Comfortable?”

He huffs again, and I laugh a little, quiet because this is a library. I crack open the book and start to read about the Creators.

“Master Hawke’s not here,” Orana says outside. I look away from book and strain to hear the answer. Why do I have to look away to hear? I have no idea. It’s a thing.

Warbrain’s ears flick a little.

“I know,” someone answers. It’s another different accent but someone unfamiliar. “He’s at the Hanged Man. I heard there’s a woman here, a Manahan…? I’d like to speak with her if I could.” Oh, that’s a little unsettling. How do you know my name? I mean, logically, Hawke told you, but that’s weird, isn’t it? But apparently, it’s cool because Orana’s not trying to stop you.
“Serah de la Paz is in the library,” Orana answers. “I’ll take you to her.”

I pretend to be reading, but really, I’m just waiting. They enter the library. Orana first and then a guy…in shiny, white armor. Talk about pristine armor, and there’s a—um, face. On his junk. Alright. Here’s to me not looking at that. “Thanks, Orana,” he says.

Orana hesitates for a moment, looking between us. Warbrain lifts his head, and they exchange a look, he and Orana. She nods and departs after a smile and, “Please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you, Prince Vael.” I don’t think I heard that correctly, did I? I zoned out, and I misheard the ‘prince’ part. Maybe it’s a name? There is, apparently, someone running around here named ‘Justice.’

“Serah de la Paz, I presume?” he asks.

“That’s what everyone’s been calling me,” I say. Serah seems to be a gender neutral term of address. “Mana’s fine. I’m sorry. I don’t know…who you are?”

“Forgive me,” he says, bowing a little. Alright, who even are you, Mr. Weird-Courtly-Manners? “I’m Sebastian Vael of Starkhaven.” Why did no one else declare where they were from? “I’m a friend of Hawke’s. He mentioned how you’d come to Kirkwall, and I thought I might come and speak with you about it. If that’s alright?”

“I suppose,” I say. “Did something happen though? Because from what I discussed with Varric, we decided couldn’t really figure anything out without—”

“Finding the artifact that brought you to Kirkwall in the first place,” he finished. Well, isn’t he well-informed?

“Yes.”

“That’s perhaps true.” Perhaps? “Hawke and Varric have a certain perspective on the matter, and I just got the feeling that it was, perhaps—somehow different then they perceived it.” That made no sense? Warbrain puts his head back down on his paws, huffing again. “Forgive me. That was a little vague.”

“Maybe it would be best to say what you mean outright?” I suggest.

“Have you heard of Andraste?” he asks. The way he says it, I get that it’s a loaded question. A test question. I’m not really prepared for this test question.

“I’ve heard of her,” I admit. “Though, it’s most from skimming the titles of the books in here.” I gesture with a wave of my hand. His face falls. What? I had to set Merrill’s book aside a few times, just because there was so much information, and I didn’t want to wake Warbrain so I just kinda read through the titles of the books on the nearest shelf. “And from here,” I tap Merrill’s book. I’d gotten to the part about the fall of Arlathan, and it started to go into the Dalish’s efforts to recover the past. It mentioned Andraste—and a Chantry. Surprisingly, I understood those things best. It was easy to make the connection between Andraste and Jesus, the Chantry and the Church. It seems very…Catholic. I should know. I grew up Catholic.

“But you didn’t know of Andraste before you came here?” he guesses. “In the future, they don’t know her.”

I’m struck first by confusion. Didn’t Varric tell him, if they were friends, what our new theory was? And then, I think, wow, I’m an idiot. How do I know that I can trust this guy? This guy who literally just waltzed into the library, asking me questions? Here’s an even better question: How do I get rid of
him without being rude because being rude is difficult for me?

“I didn’t,” I admit. He can already guess that’s the truth anyway.

“Maker,” he says, but it’s not blasphemous when he says it. He says it like a prayer. “I had hoped—well, it doesn’t matter. Hawke will see this as an accident no doubt, a mishap of magic.”

“But you see it differently?”

“Perhaps,” he says, “it’s the will of the Maker that you’ve come.”

Oh no. I really don’t like the sound of that. That sounds important, and I’m really with Hawke here. This sounds like an accident. I’m an accident. I shouldn’t be here at all.

He sighs, “You don’t believe that.”

“Sorry,” I say. I’m trying to stick to short answers with this guy in the hopes that he gets tired of me and just leaves.

“It’s alright,” he says. “We’ve only just met, and I imagine it’s been very trying for you.” He smiles at me, and wow, his teeth are kind of perfect. Especially for this place. That’s a good thing, I suppose. Must mean they have some kind of oral hygiene, and hey, I’m all about some oral hygiene.

“But please consider the possibility that you’ve been sent here for a reason. The Maker moves in mysterious ways.”

It’s odd, that. So much of this world is so similar to home. It’s not one-hundred percent different, but different enough to be a terrible shock.

“I’ll think about it,” I offer.

“Perhaps,” he says, examining me. “I could take you to the Chantry? It might help. Grand Cleric Elthina would probably glad to hear your story and guide you.”

My hair stands on end. There’s a good reason for that, I promise. I really do promise, but I can’t even think of it because the thought of going to a church—even one in this weird new place that’s treating me strangely well—makes me feel a little light-headed.

Warbrain whines.

“Could we hold off on that?” I say, voice a little choked. “I’d like to…think about it first.” I really, really need to talk to Hawke about this guy first.

“Of course,” he says, sounding concerned for me. He seems decent, I suppose. Maybe I’ve just met too many people today, and I’m going into overload. “I’ll go, but please consider it. Hawke doesn’t think it’s important, you being here, but I think the Maker moves through you.” He shakes his head.

“Goodbye, Serah. I will be in the Chantry if you wish to speak again. Hawke can show you the way.”

“Goodbye.”

When he leaves the room, the air rushes back into me, but it feels like it’s rushed in too fast. It’s just one thing too many, I think, and I’ve held off so far, haven’t I? I’ve been joking and asking questions and going along with this disaster. But this? I don’t like this at all.

Warbrain puts his head on my lap. My eyes are watering, and I try not to sob because that’ll draw
attention. I really could do without that for the moment. “What do you think?” I ask. I swear the dog rolls his eyes. I pet his head, close my eyes and continue petting him, trying to gain control of my breathing.

“Oh,” I hear a few minutes later—or maybe it’s an hour. Hard to tell how much time passed. “Are you alright, Mana?” It’s Orana.

“I’m fine,” I say.

She steps closer. “Did Prince Vael,” so he is a prince then, “…do something?”

I shake my head, “No. I’m just—tired.” I run a hand down my face. It’s been a while, probably. The tears have mostly dried on my face. “This whole thing. It doesn’t make sense to me at all.”

“It will turn out alright,” Orana says. “Master Hawke will take care of it.” I really misjudged Hawke at the very start, I think. Everyone has so much faith in him.

“Thanks,” I say. “I need just a minute. I’ll get over this.”

“Alright,” she says, stepping back. She hesitates a little at the door. “Would you like to—I mean, that is—” She turns and looks out the door, steps forward.

“Hold on,” I say, trying not to sound demanding, trying to keep my voice soft. “Would I like to—?”

“Wash the dishes with me tonight? After supper?”

“Sure,” I say. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

She blinks in surprise and grins broadly, then vanishes out the door.

I open the book again and work on finishing the last twenty pages as I absently pat Warbrain’s head.

“Sebastian came by?” Hawke asks, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “What for?”

“He wanted to speak with Mana,” Orana answers quietly.

Hawke doesn’t speak for a while after that, eyes darting between me and Orana several times. “Mana, huh?” he finally says, to himself. It’s just us. Hawke, Orana, and myself. Apparently, Leandra does have some sort of friends in Kirkwall. She’s off visiting for dinner. “What did he want with you?” he asks me.

“He was asking about the future,” I say. “He’s concerned because I didn’t know who Andraste was, and he wanted me to ‘consider the possibility’ that I’m not here by accident. He wanted me, I think, to consider the possibility that this is someone’s divine will or something.”

“Did he?” Hawke asks, amused. “Bit underhanded of him. He told me, after I mentioned you at the Hanged Man, that he was going back to the Chantry. Lying bastard.” Though he says that, it doesn’t actually sound like he’s serious. He cuts into his roasted chicken (or something equivalent in texture to chicken at least) and shrugs. “I wouldn’t worry too much about him.”

“He wants me to go to the Chantry.”

“Ugh,” Hawke makes a face. “I wouldn’t. What a waste of a building. I could fit ten high dragons in there—and that’s saying something. You can trust me on that.” He sets down his fork, making a
disgusted noise, “All that space for a handful of clerics—and Sebastian.”

“Is he a member of church’s—” I don’t know what the word would be for them. Is he a priest? Do they have those?

“Is he a cleric or whatever? Not yet,” Hawke picks up his fork again. “If you ask me, he’ll never be. He won’t resist going back to Starkhaven. Eventually, he’ll go back and try to take back that throne of his.”

“So he really is a prince,” I mutter to myself. There’s a lot of history there I could pick at, but I feel like I’m drowning already. Hawke laughs and nods.

“Yup, our holy Prince Vael,” he says. “I’m an Andrastian, but I don’t put the same faith in the Chantry that he does. My father’s ideology, I’m afraid. And anyway, I know magic. He might want to think this is the Maker’s will, but I don’t see it.”

“But he’s alright, isn’t he?”

“Alright,” he says. “Sure. Grating, certainly, but he’s alright. Better than alright with a bow—but I have Varric and Bianca, so what do I really need him for?” Orana giggles at that. “If you want me to take you to the Chantry, I’ll do it, but I won’t stick around to listen to him lecture you.”

“What if I absolutely do not want to go to the Chantry?”

He looks at me, and I may or may not look a little panicked. I also note that I haven’t eaten a single bite since we started to talk about Sebastian. It’s not that I think he’s terrible or anything. He just makes me very uncomfortable, like deeply uncomfortable. I always feel that way around people who are deeply religious, mostly because, in my experience, after a while they normally start to detail the ways in which my very existence is flawed or wrong.

“Then I’ll tell Sebastian to piss off,” he says. “Nicely,” he adds, at my wince. “With lightning if necessary.”

“Thanks but don’t murder someone on my account.”

“Too late,” he jokes. Well, he’s not wrong, but wow, we’re joking about that? Okay. I’m never going to be okay with this world. “You not very religious then? Or is it just that you have different beliefs in your world?”

“Actually, there’s a church where I’m from that seems to be pretty similar. Only the prophet’s called Jesus, and he’s actually seen as three things: God, God’s son, and the Holy Spirit. Well, if you’re Catholic. That’s a sect of the church. A long time ago, the church broke apart due to differing beliefs. There are so many different churches now that believe different things.”

“Hmm,” Hawke says, intently listening as he eats. “So God’s basically the Maker? And the ‘church’ is the Chantry?” He considers, “That’s a lot of things for one person to be.”

“I honestly don’t understand it,” I admit with a shrug, forcing myself to eat. “But those things seem to correlate, yes.”

“And you, do you believe in all this stuff? You sort of sound like you don’t.”

“I’m skeptical,” I say. This topic would have been many shades of unacceptable in my family. Religion made us all very angry at each other. My sister and I always teamed up, and my parents teamed up. And we just tore into each other without really setting out to. It just always ended that
way. “There’s actually this theory that God created the world and then just left it to run on its own, that he doesn’t watch it, or if he does, he doesn’t care too much about intervening.” The theory actually went something like the world was a watch God wound up and dropped, never to pick up and look at again. Or something. I heard about this as a freshman in high school, I think. It was a long time ago.

“Bit bleak,” Hawke says. “But I can see that, especially here.”

“The church always just had these convenient excuses to hate on whole groups of people,” I say. “I hated that. That’s mostly why I stopped going, stopped calling myself one of them. My mom got really pissed when I bailed out.”

“What sorts of things did they hate?” Orana asks.

“Well, if you’re a woman, they sort of hate you,” I say. “And they definitely hate when men and men are together. And women and women. And especially when people like both. Those types also don’t tend to like it if you’re born with skin that’s different, well darker, than theirs either.” I give my arm a little shake. I’m not as dark as my mom, but I’m obviously her daughter. “I sort of fit in all three of those, so of course I hated it.”

“Doesn’t sound so different then,” Hawke says. “Funny that. Here, the worst thing you can be is a mage—well unless you live in Tevinter.”

“Well, look at us,” I say.

“Us fucking assholes,” he says, grinning. Orana nearly drops her fork. “It’s settled then. I’ll tell Sebastian to leave you alone. We’ve all offended the Maker’s sight, and there’s no use trying to guide us back to Andraste’s bosom.”

I can live with that.

“How’d your matchmaking go?” I ask because as nice as our little bonding moment was just now, talking about religion is a bit exhausting.

“Oh, terribly,” he says, sounding tired now. “I thought Aveline had finally committed to the plan, but she bailed out at the last minute, leaving poor Donnic waiting around for about an hour. And leaving me waiting with him! Varric and Isabela spent the night at the bar laughing at me.” He rolled his eyes, “And then at the end, Donnic asks why I can’t just gather my courage and talk to Aveline myself—and stalks out of the Hanged Man.”

“So she’s just giving up on him?” Honestly, that might be the best, I think. Because wow, if it were me, I’d quit. I’d have quit, probably, at copper marigolds. Which, honestly, I thought sounded nice, but what do I know?

“She’s not allowed to,” Hawke grumbles. “She’s arranging a patrol with him tomorrow, and I’m not leaving until she confesses her heart and soul to this Donnic. I don’t care what he says after, but she better pay off on my investment—” I roll my eyes. “Also, I think she’ll be much more manageable with a little…love.” He says love, but I know exactly where his head’s at.

“Good luck with that,” I say.

“Good luck with you book,” he grunts, unhappily stabbing at a carrot.

“I finished that already,” I say.
“Really?” he sounds surprised. “Well, good. Varrie’s got a stack of his romance serials for you to read. Might as well since we’re waiting for his contacts to gather information on the foci or whatever it is—” He stops. “I should warn you that Isabela’s curious about you, especially after we told her the bit about Merrill. She might make an appearance.”

I sigh. I’ve met so many people today and yesterday. I’m a little exhausted from it all and all the information and—everything. Just everything. “Alright,” I say.

“No, I mean she might make an appearance here. As in your bedroom, late at night. Maybe through the window.”

“Um.”

“Yes, I’ve tried almost everything I can think of, but she’s good at breaking and entering. And mother won’t let us nail the windows shut.”

“Well, I’m going to sleep well tonight,” I say.

“You can have Warbrain with you, if you like,” Hawke says. “Though he drools terribly, and even if you command him to the floor, you will wake up with all the weight of a full-grown mabari hound on your legs in the morning.”

“I’ll take my chances with the dog,” I say. “Because Isabela sounds…”

“Got nothing? I’m sure you’ll have plenty of words for her after you’ve met her.”

Chapter End Notes

**EDIT 3/25/16:** I originally made a note here about how I’d never downloaded the Sebastian DLC and how that made it difficult to write Sebastian. I’d like to explain a little. I have never played with Sebastian myself, for reasons that aren’t terribly important, but I have watched playthroughs with him (with a Garrett and a Marian Hawke; Marian so I could see his romance). As with all the other characters, I’ve read through the wiki transcripts of his party banter, and I also listened to it on Youtube for a feel for his speech patterns/intonation/etc. The difficulty really comes from the fact that I didn’t do those playthroughs myself. It’s somehow a little odd to not have the hands-on experience (though watching it on youtube isn’t really that different at all). And I’d never even heard of Sebastian until well after I’d been exposed to and invested in all the others. Still, I have tried to get a good feel of him despite not having the DLC in my possession. I’m not writing him from hear-say as it might have been unintentionally implied with my first note.
Anyway, Here's Isabela

Chapter Summary

In which Isabela lives up to expectations.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It’s my second night in Kirkwall, and I’m proud that I actually go to sleep fairly quickly. It’s all this emotional whiplash, no doubt. Well, and the fact that Warbrain’s curled up on one side of the bed. The warmth really helps.

Of course, go figure Warbrain’s also the one who wakes me up while it’s still dark outside. He’s back on the floor, nosing at my face, when I jerk to waking. I wince at the feel of cold on my skin, and I’m awake. Very awake now because rude.

“What?” I hiss.

He whines and walks to the door, lying down in front of it. He turns his eyes back to me, looks back at the door, and looks back at me. Oh, okay. Normal dog thing. Sure. I should have known. I rise up out of bed and open the door, yawning.

“Hello,” Leandra says, almost as soon as the door opens. Warbrain goes right to her and sits at her feet. I stand in the doorway, processing, before I can even manage the willpower to respond.

“Hello,” I finally say. And a bit, snidely, I think, This is why I like cats. Which is, of course, a lie to some extent because cats will come into your bedroom at night, walk all over you, and expect you to feel grateful for it. Still, I can be pretty grumpy if I’m woken from a deep sleep. “Trouble sleeping?”

“Yes,” she says. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No,” I respond. “Warbrain woke me up.”

“Warbrain,” Leandra mutters, shaking her head. “Did you know Carver named him that?” She shakes her head again, turning her eyes back to the fire.

“Carver,” I say. “That’s your youngest son, right?”

“Yes,” she says. “My poor Carver.”

Okay, Warbrain, I feel you. She’s obviously really upset, and I get the feeling the ‘trouble sleeping’ is a nightly thing. So maybe she needs Warbrain. Those thoughts can eat you up and spit you out, more so if you’re by yourself.

“The others said he’d gone to become a templar,” I say, moving to sit with her on the sofa, because I might as well while we talk. I can’t, very well, linger in the doorway all night. Of course, it might be a bit rude of me to ruin her alone time. “Sorry, I don’t mean to pry.”

“No,” she says. “No, it’s alright. With Garrett, sometimes it’s if Carver’s dead. They’ve always
fought, but Garrett will always see this as a sort of betrayal, no matter what Carvers says.” She
laughs quietly, “How can he not? He’s a mage.” I don’t understand all of this, of course, but I get the
basic sentiment of it all.

“Do you have siblings?” Leandra asks.

“A sister, Riza,” I say. “She’s younger than me by about seven years.”

“It’s the same with them for the most part. Did you fight with your sister much?”

“Oh, sure,” I say. Just a few weeks ago, she’s been by my apartment, and we’d been arguing—okay
maybe not really arguing—and we quickly devolved into biting each other. I’m twenty-five. My
sister’s eighteen. I omit this detail because that’s pretty embarrassing that we still do that. I don’t even
have a defense honestly. “We still do sometimes, but I love her. I wouldn’t ever let anything happen
to her if I could help it.”

“Yes,” she says with a sigh. “Garrett’s like that, too. And Carver! Carver, he wants so badly to
protect all of us, but he says he can’t because Garrett won’t let him. He’s always felt he was in his
brother’s shadow, in his sister—” She stops. Her hands are shaking a little. “He just wants to help,
and this is all that he thinks he has left. He’s got a good heart, my boy, but the templars—I’ve heard
things. Especially now that we’re back in Hightown.”

“It’s really dangerous then?”

She looks at me with disbelief and then shakes her head again, “I’d forgotten you don’t know.
They’ve told you about mages, I imagine? By law, they’re supposed to be in the Circle. The Circle
here is particularly—well fortified. Strict. Carver’s gone to join the Order that maintains the Circle, to
do what he can he said.” She sucks in a shuttered breath, “His father was a mage, and we named
Carver after the templar that helped him escape.”

“Oh,” I say. “He wants to live up to that?”

“Yes,” she says, nodding. She laughs suddenly, “It’s funny. Garrett was the one who found out
about Ser Carver, and for a while, Carver pretended he didn’t care about it. What does it matter? he
said, but when Garrett left him behind during the expedition—”

We listened to the crackling of the fire for a while.

“Your mother must be worried,” Leandra says quietly.

“Yeah, I bet she is.”

“My son’s always been remarkably gifted with magic. If anyone can find a way—”

“I’ve heard that about him a lot.”

She laughs. “All of them,” she says. “They’ve always been so remarkable.” Her smile slips away, “I
wonder, sometimes, if I was right to bring them to Kirkwall. We didn’t have nearly so much in
Fereldan, but at least—”

“I’m pretty sure Varric would have some complaints about that.”

She laughs, “He is rather wrapped up in Garrett’s affairs.” Leandra shakes her head, “Look at me,
pouring out all my sorrows to you. Come on then, back to bed with you.” She gets up, and I get up.
It takes a little while with our sleepy limbs, but we manage eventually. Warbrain whines a little but
gets up, too. I go back to bed with mabari in tow.

It hadn’t exactly been easy, I thought as I settled back into bed, talking to Leandra, but she wasn’t nearly so scary in the wee hours of the morning, worrying over her children. Or, who knows? Maybe breakfast yesterday was just an off day for her, or me, or both of us?

“So, you were kidding about Isabela, weren’t you?” I say at breakfast. Hawke snorts.

“No,” he says. “You didn’t see her last night, but I guarantee she’ll find you soon enough. She’s oddly persistent if Merrill’s involved.”

“She’s not…involved,” I argue.

“You called her pretty.”

Orana looks at me curiously, and Leandra laughs. “She’s involved. Just keep Warbrain with you, and it’ll be alright. It’s not as if Isabela will hurt you. Well, unless you want her—”

“Garrett,” Leandra warns. “Not at breakfast.”

“I certainly hope not at breakfast,” he says, feigning horror. Leandra rolls her eyes.

“I don’t know where I went wrong with you,” she says.

“It’s Varric’s fault. Ask Mana,” he says. “He’s a terrible influence.”

“That might be at least half true,” I say with a shrug. I’m feeling a bit better this morning, more like myself. I’m adjusting I suppose I should say. I’m slightly adaptable, it seems.

“See if I save you from Isabela,” Hawke says.

“I am actually slightly scared about that, you know,” I complain. I’m only half serious. “No need to play on my fears. How cruel can you be?”

“Garrett,” Leandra warns.

“Me?” Garrett says, rolling his eyes with a grin. “Mother, you can’t—”

“Garrett,” Leandra repeats. “Maker knows what happened to the polite boy I raised in Lothering.”

“Wonderful,” he says. “My own mother, turning on me like a—”

“Oh, do continue, dear,” Leandra says, eyes boring into her son. Hawke, wisely, picks up an apple and bites into it. “Manahan, if you’d accompany me to the market today?”

“Um, sure,” I say.

“You never ask me to accompany you to the market,” Hawke grumbles, though he’s not serious about that either. I’m starting to think half the things that come out of his mouth are bullshit.

“Do you want to accompany me to the market?” Leandra asks, leveling him with a look.

“No, but it’d be nice if you’d ask at least. Honestly, mother, etiquette.”

“Oh, how remiss of me,” Leandra says, dryly.
“Terrible,” Hawke agrees. “Orana, you should go with them. A little birdie told me you haven’t spent any of your wages yet.”

“Well, I—” Orana looks at her plate. She doesn’t continue after a few minutes, and Hawke watches her face with a smile.

“I don’t mean to press,” he says. “But it might be good to just look, right? See if there’s anything that catches your eye?”

“Alright,” she says, very quietly.

Leandra nods once. “I assume you’re off on some adventure today?”

“Mmm,” Hawke says. “I might not be back until late. Trouble on the Wounded Coast.” He laughs, “I wouldn’t be going out there if there wasn’t trouble, would I?”

“Just be careful, Garrett.”

“Yes, Mother,” he says with a long-suffering sigh.

I have no money, so I operate as Leandra’s mule. I really don’t mind it, though it seems to make Orana terribly uncomfortable. Already, she’s asked to take things from me three times, and now I think she’s uncomfortable because she’s asked so many times about it. I don’t know how to more clearly express how alright I am with this arrangement. It’s not as if I’m carrying an armful of shopping bags. So far, Leandra’s purchased a few significant lengths of fabric. It’s not too heavy.

Finally, I try, “It’s really fine. I used to do this all the time for my mom and my sister.”

“Oh,” she says. “If you’re sure—”

“I am very, very sure,” I say. I smile at her because I’m basically at last ditch efforts. She smiles back and, after a moment of hesitation, goes back to eyeing things on the table.

It’s all very pretty, I suppose. I’m a sucker for earrings, in particular, but I’m leery of what I’m looking at. I have sensitive ears, and I’ve gotten into the habit of only wearing stainless steel. I’m pretty lucky I was wearing a pair when I came through to Kirkwall. I hear re-piercing’s a pain in the ass, and hey, I’m still operating under the banner of hope that I’ll get home. I’m wearing my pair now, so at least, that won’t be a problem I’ll have.

“It matches your eyes,” Leandra says. She’s holding up a green pendant, and Orana looks at it, turning a little red. She shakes her head. I don’t know if she’ll buy anything. The whole process of shopping for herself seems to make her nervous. Which, you know, is completely understandable. I’m feeling pretty good about Hawke killing the person that owned her because fuck that person.

“It’s Fenris,” Orana says to me, gesturing down the street. She waves at him, and he stares at her—maybe more me—for a moment before waving back once. He comes over.

“Orana,” he says. Leandra smiles at him, and he offers her a, “Lady Amell.”

“Hello,” Orana says. Leandra’s haggling over something, so she doesn’t respond. And I didn’t get a greeting, so I’m not saying anything. Nope. I saw this guy stab somebody. I’m not fucking with that.

“This is the first time I’ve seen you about,” Fenris says.
“Serah Hawke said I should see if there was anything in the market I wanted,” she says. “Since I’ve received some pay.”

“Have you seen anything you like?” Fenris asks. You know, he sounds pretty gruff, but he’s being very nice to her. Which is good because I’d be pretty pissed if he wasn’t, and I don’t know what I’d do about it. Because, yeah, he stabbed a guy. Still not ready to even remotely test that.

Orana worries her lip, “I’m not sure.”

“There’s no pressure,” I say. “I don’t think Hawke’ll be mad or anything.” Fenris is staring at me, and I think he might be able to melt me with his eyes. But, right, he doesn’t have magic. And doesn’t like when people imply he has magic. “I think he just wanted you to at least look? To try?”

Orana nods and smiles at me.

“Fenris,” Leandra says. She’s holding a length of lace? “I see you’re free of my son’s influence today.”

Fenris raises an eyebrow, “Has Hawke gone somewhere today?”

“He didn’t ask you to go? I believe he mentioned the Wounded Coast.”

“In that case, I consider myself lucky to have been passed over.” He glances at his feet and shudders. I glance at his feet, too, really quick. He’s not wearing shoes, and I can put a basic puzzle together. This one goes: coast = sand, sand + bare feet + giant broadsword = terrible, bloody accidents. Also, just the general pain of getting sand out of your clothes. Bleh.

“We’re done for the day, I believe,” Leandra says. “Would you care to join us for lunch, Fenris?”

He looks a bit like a deer caught in the headlights, and he glances around once, “I do not think—”

“It’s no imposition,” Leandra says with the patience of someone who’s definitely had this conversation before. “In fact, unless you have a previous engagement, I must insist.” See, that’s the scariness again, because she knows he doesn’t have any previous engagements.

“Very well.”

“It’s not too heavy, is it?” Leandra asks me.

“Nope,” I say. “It’s completely fine.” I literally have the upper body strength of an eggplant, and I’ve got this. It’s really not a problem. Do I look terribly fragile? Well, I’m sort of fragile. You know, mentally. A little physically. I’m just going to stop trying to defend myself right about now.

“Varric told me his theory,” he says. “Do you truly believe you’re from a different world?” He doesn’t sound like he’s accusing me. He just sounds reasonably confused by the notion. Who could blame him?

“Well, I’m going to be honest,” I say. “I’m not sure what exactly what I think about all this, but that’s the theory that makes the most sense at the moment.”

“I see.”

“I just want to go home.” It’s weird to say it out loud, but that’s the bottom line for me. All the other stuff, it doesn’t matter. I can’t do magic. I can only rely on those who can and hope I somehow can get home with their help.
Fenris looks at me very closely but doesn’t seem as cold as before.

“Leave it to Hawke,” he says.

“I keep hearing that,” I say with a laugh. “Even though Varric’s doing all the work at the moment.”

He cracks a smile. “The dwarf’s impossible if you give him any credit,” he says. “Actually, he’s impossible anyway.”

“That I understand completely.”

“So did the thing with Aveline work out?” I ask. Leandra carried most of the conversation through lunch, prompting Fenris with questions about Hawke’s excursions lately which, true to form, are both illegal and dangerous. I get the feeling that Leandra does this to keep in the loop about her son’s life, and I can’t blame her. She’s worried, and her son seems deeply entrenched in about a million criminal enterprises. But anyway, she went off to visit with a friend just a few minutes ago, and Orana’s managed to strong-arm (in her sweet way) Fenris into staying to hear her play the lute. She’s going to get it now while we wait in the library.

“Hawke mentioned it?” Fenris says with a snort.

“He did,” I say. “Before he left for the Hanged Man yesterday.”

“From what I understand, the patrol is scheduled for early this evening.” He tilts his head, “It might be why Hawke chose to go to the coast today. No doubt the patrol will be there.” He shakes his head, “I don’t want to get entangled in that mess.”

“Smart,” I say. “Matchmaking’s sort of an awful idea.”

“Do you have much experience in that area then?”

I burst into laughter. “Oh God, no.” I break into another fit of laughter, and this time, Fenris looks so unimpressed. “Okay, okay. No, that’s how my parents got together though. Sort of.”

“And it didn’t end well?”

“Oh, no. It ended great for them.”

“I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“Well, it’s like this,” I begin. “It either goes great or it goes to shit. When it goes to shit, who do you blame? Yourselves? Nah, you blame the person or persons who set you up in the first place. Not to say Aveline’s like that—but, even if they don’t blame you, I imagine you blame yourself a little if it goes bad.”

“You have a strange outlook for someone who’s seen it work,” he says.

“Mmm, I’ve seen it both ways. My mom’s got a cousin. Well, she’s not really a cousin. There just comes a certain point where you just call them a cousin because the relation’s so distant, but anyway, my mom introduced her to a friend of my dad’s, one of his sailor buddies. They married quickly like my parents did, without knowing each other.” I sigh because maybe I should have just left this conversation alone. I mean, hello, I’m Manahan, and I obviously have issues with relationships. “When she got pregnant with their second kid, he just took off. Said he didn’t want to be with her anymore. She, ah, didn’t take it well.”
“And?”

“And she abandoned her children with her parents and disappeared. She was ashamed that it fell apart so quickly. I got the impression she thought it was all her fault.”

Fenris’ brow furrows.

“This conversation got a little dark,” I say. I glance around the room, and to my surprise, Orana’s standing in the doorway with her lute. I have no idea how long she’s been standing there. I think she heard a lot of our conversation just now. I really do need to learn to zip it.

“Your parents,” Orana says, sitting on the floor near the fireplace. “What are they like?”

Fenris looks a bit surprised at her question.

“Um, they’re—” I try to think of a way to talk about them. “Well, my mom’s very kind. Too kind probably. She’ll give money to anyone who asks if she has it, and she can’t bear to see anyone in pain. My dad thinks showing emotion’s a weakness, but he loves all of us—my mom, my sister, and me. He’d kill himself to make sure we’re comfortable, and he’s funny. He likes to pretend he’s a kid instead of a grown man.” Fenris smiles just a little, and I’m pretty sure he’s thinking of Hawke. His petulant outbursts remind me of my dad. “They’ve always encouraged me to do what I want, and they don’t always understand me but, at least, they try.”

“They sound wonderful,” Orana says, plucking lightly at the strings.

“Yeah,” I say.

She plays us a song. I, maybe a bit narcissistically, think I’ve influenced Orana into playing a sad sort of song with the depressing matchmaking conversation. Still, it’s very pretty. I feel very lucky to have heard it, to be here. I’m surrounding by people who’ve done nothing but help me. I’m pretty damn lucky.

Orana’s song quiets, stops. She looks up at both of us expectantly, and I can’t help but clap. She turns very red. “Mana,” she says, clearly embarrassed. I stop clapping, but I definitely can’t stop smiling.

“You’re very good.”

“Yes,” Fenris agrees. “It was a beautiful song, Orana.”

“Thank you,” she says. “Would you like me to play another?”

“Only if you want to,” I say. Orana nods and plays another.

Fenris claps with me after the second song, and Orana’s face flares red again.

“Thank you,” she whispers.

“Fenris?” Hawke says. He’s standing in the doorway, looking worse for the wear. He’s got blood on his cheek, and there’s a few tears in his leather armor.

“Your mother,” Fenris says, by way of explanation.

“Ah,” Hawke says. “She’s good at that, but I must say, it’s interesting to see you here without my
mother to pin you to your seat with her eyes.”

Fenris scowls and looks ready to get up. Hawke holds up his hands in surrender. “Oh, don’t leave,” he says. “I’ve got to tell you how well we did with Aveline.” Fenris looks at me out of the corner of his eye, and I shrug. I’m not going to let this thing bother me. I’ve already got enough bothering me as it is.

Hawke looks down at himself, looks at the couch. “I’ll tell after a bath, I think. If I ruin those couches, I think my mother might kill me and put me in one of those wine casks in the cellar. The big ones.” He pantomimes the size of one of the casks and then disappears from the doorway.

Orana fiddles with her lute but doesn’t seem up for another song. I try to think of an appropriate conversation starter.

“So, Isabela,” I begin. “Is she likely to sneak in through my window in the middle night to interrogate me about Merrill?”

“About the blood mage?” Fenris says, looking a bit offended even to have to mention her, even if not by name. It’s like he’s almost allergic to names.

“Oh, you didn’t hear? What a miracle. Yet here I go telling you anyway. I called Merrill pretty yesterday, and apparently, I’m now a person of interest.”

“You think the blood mage is pretty?” Fenris says, flatly.

“You think the blood mage is pretty?” Fenris says, flatly.

“Why are you getting stuck on that part but not the part where someone may or may not want to steal into my bedroom in the middle of the night?”

“Isabela might,” he says. “It’s…likely.”

“You’re kidding,” I say, maybe a little louder than necessary. “I thought Hawke was just fucking with me.” Fenris gives me such a look for the expletive there, and when his eyes shift to Orana, I get it. It’s nice that he looks out for her, I think, even if the ‘fucking’ was appropriate.

“Isabela’s protective of her,” Fenris says.

“Why don’t you like her?” I venture to ask. He frowns, and the frown quickly turns to a scowl.

“She is an abomination,” he says. “Willing to go to any lengths to accomplish her ends. I have seen mages like this before, and they may start, as she has, with good intentions, but it never remains that way. They always fall to the temptation of power.” He grits his teeth. “Always.”

“Oh.” Well, that explains that rivalry then. “Alright.”

His eyes narrow at me, “You should not involve yourself with her.”

Okay, dad, I can’t help thinking. For a minute, I don’t say anything. I could just agree. It’d be an easy out to the conversation, but I’d feel bad about it. Merrill was nice to me. She gave me the twine, and she lent me the book. The book was very helpful. And it’s just difficult to accept someone like her, someone who seemed so sunny, could be essentially evil. Or traveling a path to evil. I mean, Varric calls her Daisy.

“You should not involve yourself with her,” he says a bit more forcefully.

“Yeah, you said that,” I say. “But—”
He thrusts his arm out, hissing, “This is what a mage like that is capable of.” He means the markings. Which, upon closing inspection, are scars. Someone carved him up. Oh shit.

“Okay, that’s fucked up,” I say. I sound sick because I definitely feel a little sick.

To my surprise, he snorts and starts to chuckle a little.

“You have a weird ass sense of humor,” I mutter.

“It’s strange to see someone so repelled,” he says, “by the markings Danarius put on me.”

“There are people who aren’t repelled?” Oh, that sounds like I’m repelled by him. “Not that you’re repulsive. It’s just the idea that someone did that to you is—”

“Repellant.”

“Yeah, that’s putting it lightly.”

“Most are curious,” he says.

“Curious about what?” My voice is a little higher than usual, and Orana looks a little alarmed.

“What they are, how they came to be, how much it cost,” he lists, smirking at the last one. “There’s a fortune of lyrium running through these.”

I open my mouth but no sound comes out. I thought I’d settled, you know, and then I keep getting things dropped on me.

“Danarius,” he begins. “is a Tevinter magister, a blood mage, and he did this to me. He kept me as his pet, parading me around like a prized animal. What do you think Merrill is capable of?”

“Fenris,” Hawke warns. Why do I not notice these people popping up? My observation skills are suffering in this place. That, or everyone here is more stealthy. “You know she wouldn’t—”

“Do I?” Fenris says, viciously. “You are all so certain, but I’ve seen it. She will turn as they all do. How could she possibly resist the—”

“Enough,” Hawke snaps. Then gently, “I understand, Fenris, where this comes from, but she’s harmless. The worse thing she’s done is sneak into the Viscount’s garden to steal flowers. You know that.”

Fenris glares at him, and I think, for this moment, Fenris really hates him. He turns to me and Orana. “I must go,” he says. To me, “Do not involve yourself with blood mages.” Then, snidely, “Or mages of any kind, if you wish to retain your sanity.”

He stalks out.

“Maker’s Breath,” Hawke says when he hears the door slam. “I’ve only had that argument with him a hundred times. You’d think I’d wise up at some point but no. No, of course not. I go for the same shit every time.” He comes into the library, shaking his head. “Well, he’s at least talking to you, I suppose,” he tells me. “We spent a lot of time yesterday discussing whether or not you were a particularly clever demon.” He laughs, “He likes you more than me now even. Imagine that.”

“It’s my fault,” I say. “I brought up Merrill.”

Hawke shakes his head, “We’ve all known each other for a while now. This shouldn’t still be such a
“Was it true? What he said about blood mages?” I don’t know if it’s right to ask without Fenris here, but I add, “And Danarius?”

“There’s a risk,” Hawke admits. “A big risk. My father taught me never to take that risk, but the Dalish—well, no. That’s not fair. The Dalish have cast her out. It’s just Merrill, I suppose, who thinks the risk is worth it. I don’t—I don’t agree. I can’t. Mages must resist demons, and she’s gone and called one up as a teacher. It could…turn bad.”

“How bad?” Again, I’m confused. Spirits were mentioned in the book Merrill gave me. Once, it said, spirits were everywhere, and some of those spirits, if their nature become contested (not sure exactly what exactly that entails), turned darker. The shemlens (humans, I’m guessing?) call them demons, but there’s no actually distinction. Still, this sounds dangerous. But then again, when aren’t things dangerous with this lot?

“She might be possessed, and then we’ll have no choice but to kill her.” He laughs, but it sounds forced. “If I do that, Varric’ll kill me. And that’s only if Isabela doesn’t get me first.”

“She acted like she knew what she was doing,” I say.

“I’m not sure,” he says. “But it doesn’t matter. I’m not going to worry about Merrill. Despite what the others think, she can handle herself. I hope that she’ll come to me before it becomes that bad. We can find a way to…handle it.”

Okay.” I don’t want to argue because I’d like to believe there’s an option that doesn’t involve killing someone I’m already fond of.

“Fenris was a slave,” Hawke continues. “Danarius took a lot from him, his past being the most troubling thing. He can’t let himself trust mages, not even me, but he sticks around because he can’t fight Danarius alone. We try to help as best we can, but it really is difficult, working with someone who’s always working against you.”

He exhales loudly, shoulders slumping. Orana’s completely still, but she’s staring at Hawke, listening closely.

“Now, can I tell you about Aveline? I’m about to burst about this, and if I’m serious too much longer, I might become an abomination myself.”

“You have a terrible sense of humor,” I say. He sits down next to me and then pats the spot next to him. The spot Fenris had been sitting in.

“Sit with us, Orana?” She hesitates but sets her lute aside to sit with us. “Good. Now, it wasn’t easy. It never is with Aveline, but—”

“Shit!”

I jerk awake, and Warbrain growls in the darkness.

“Now, now,” someone says. Alright, am I having another weird sex dream or—? Mmm, nope. Not worth thinking about. Leandra and I stayed up talking again, and I’m fairly certain I’m just having another false alarm about Isabela. I’ve had three of those in the last few days. Not falling for it this
time. I lie back down.


I groan at the sound, flipping on my side. I try to tug the covers back up, but someone tugs them away. You know, it is probably Isabela, but I’m so tired right now. My sleep schedule’s all kinds of fucked up thanks to Warbrain and Isabela and Leandra and fucking Anders. (Two nights ago he made an appearance at the estate, and he and Hawke decided to ‘celebrate’ in the library. Fucking assholes.)

Weakly, I try to wrestle the covers back. “No,” I moan.

“Oh yes,” Apparently-Isabela says, tickled pink because she’s terrible. “Come on then, up up! You can’t complain about me as much as you have and not expect me to show up.”

“What are you? Bloody Mary?” I mutter, sitting up.

“You’ll have to explain that one to me.”

A light flares up in the darkness, and it’s creepy as fuck for the few seconds it takes for her to light the candles on the bedside table.

“Oh, Merrill wasn’t kidding,” she says. “You’re lovely, aren’t you?” Her voice has no right to sound that way, especially not at this hour.

I rub at my eyes, and she sits on the bed, offering Warbrain a few pats. He huffs grumpily, eyes closed. “Be that way,” she says. “Honestly, sleeping at this hour. This is when it gets exciting.”

“I’m assuming you’re Isabela?” Shit, she’s pretty, too. Fuck me.

“You’re assuming correctly,” she says, smirking. “You know, I don’t usually do this sort of thing, but Hawke kept mentioning it while we were running around Darktown, how scared you were that I was going to steal into your room and do terrible things to you.” She leans towards me a little. “I really couldn’t resist, especially since you haven’t come to the Hanged Man once since you’ve come to Kirkwall. Everyone else has met you but me.”

“And Aveline. Also, I avoid Sebastian like the plague.”

She laughs. As in, she throws her head back and laughs. “Oh, I like you” she says. “Varric said I would, but you never know. Men. Sometimes, they don’t really get what a woman’s really into.”

“Ain’t that the truth?” I mutter, rubbing at my face.

“So, I’ve heard it from the boys, even from Merrill, but I’d like to hear it from you. How did you end up here?” She’s leaning closer.

“I bled on a magical elven rock apparently, and I somehow ended up here?” My life boiled down to one ridiculous statement. “We’re pretty sure I’m from a different world? Mostly because you have two moons, and that was really weird to me.” I stop, staring hard into her face. “Are you expecting me to make sense right now?”

“No,” she admits. “But this is all very amusing. And you’re delicious, all sleepy and irritated.”

“If you like me like this, you’re going to love me when I’m awake,” I grumble.

“Oh, I like you already.”
“Oh, good,” I say. “Can I go back to sleep now?”

She laughs again. “Only if I can sleep with,” she teases.

“Sure, okay.” I lie back down, closing my eyes. There’s no response to that for a long time, and I sigh and crack open an eye. “What, too shocking?”

“It must be a very different world you come from,” Isabela says, staring at me as though I’m a puzzle she’s rather compelled to solve. Good luck with that, Isabela.

“Mmm, so I’m told,” I say, scooting over. “Either get in or—whatever. I’d say get out, but this isn’t even my house. And you have knives.” I yawn and hurry to cover my mouth with my hand. “Just, I’m not offering anything. I’m just tired, and it’s whatever.”

“Whatever,” she repeats, amused. I hear something drop to the floor. A knife? Whatever. I want to sleep. Something else drops to the floor. The other knife? After that, it’s cloth and some other heavier items. She blows out the candles, and I can smell the smoke. I don’t even care.

After a few minutes, the weight of the mattress shifts. A cold hand grazes my arm, and I shiver.

“Come on,” I complain.

“Warm me up then,” she says, laughing.

“Warm yourself up,” I grumble. “You’re cold as fuck, and I’m so sleepy I swear—Shit!” A cold hand’s slipped up under my shirt. She puts it on my stomach. “First impression: I hate you.”

“Says the woman, who upon meeting me, invited me into her bed,” Isabela says. Note, the cold hand is still on me. Fucking ridiculous. Absolutely fucking ridiculous. I’m nice, and this is the thanks I get? No good deed, I tell you.

“I’m claiming sleep deprivation in the morning.”

“As if that’ll hold up against Varric.”

“It’ll hold up just fine.”

She scoots in closer, and with some shifting, you know the awkward kind no one talks about when they discussing sharing a bed with someone, we end up in a comfortable position. Really, I’m so sleepy anything’s comfortable as long as it doesn’t involve cold extremities. This current position does, however, have Isabela pressed up against my back. Her face is tucked close to my neck. I can feel her breath on my skin, and you know, that’d normally bother me. I’m just, you know, so tired that I can’t even bring myself to care. Have I said that enough times? Just the once more, I think.

Chapter End Notes

Isabela’s hard to write, but my love for her burns bright like a thousand burning suns. Still, this is not me going for Isabela x OC. Mana’s sleepy and lonely, and she’s basically after one thing: cuddling. It just happens that Isabela’s kinda cool and weird, and hey, we all have our weaknesses, right?
Anyway, Here's Bad Ale

Chapter Summary

In which Manahan really hates double digits.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I can’t believe it,” Hawke complains. “The guard’s looking for men like you.’ I don’t know what Donnic did to Aveline—” He pauses, nose scrunching up like a two-year-old’s does when confronted with something terrible, like mashed peas. “Made her optimistic? Out of touch with reality?” He starts to laugh and begins peeling his apple with a knife. “Can you imagine me in the guard? Honestly, it’s like she’s forgotten all my criminal accomplishments. It’s actually a bit insulting.” He slices off a piece and bites it with more force than necessary.

“Criminal accomplishments,” Leandra says, sighing. It’s amazing how much pure disappointment rests on that word, touched with just enough fondness so you can tell she doesn’t meant it. Completely mean it anyway.

“It’s not as if there are any people who aren’t criminals in Kirkwall.” He pauses, no doubt thinking of someone to list off. “There’s probably someone, but you see my point.”

“What about Aveline?” I ask.

“Aveline travels with me. She’s guilty by association. Anyway, she helped me that once with the smuggling, and she might have frowned the whole time but she didn’t turn me in when all was said and done. Just pulled me aside after and said never again and almost made Varric piss himself.”

“Garrett,” Leandra warns.

“Tell me Aveline doesn’t scare you,” he says. “And that’s just one example. She’s been along on plenty of questionable jobs with me. Maker’s Breath, we basically threw the last Guard Captain out on his ear. Granted he was the corrupt one, but for a little while, she was the one in trouble with the law. And then she was the law, and it was very convenient for me.”

Orana laughs and quickly smothers the sound behind her hand.

“What? I’m not above using my friends’ positions to my advantage. Especially if it means I don’t have to see the inside of a cell in Kirkwall. Aveline took me down to the holding once, just to scare me. Well, more Varric than me, and it was worse than terrifying.” He looks at me. “You’d hate it. Smelled like shit. Might have actually been cov—”

Leandra sets down her fork with a sigh, “Garrett. For pity’s sake—” I’m with her. I can almost smell Darktown suddenly, and my stomach churns in protest. I look at my food and set down my fork. Hawke sees and throws up his hands.

“My apologies,” he says, though he sounds more exasperated than sorry. To be fair, this is the third time this has happened in the last few days.
It’s day nine, and let me tell you, I’m terrified of hitting the double digits. So terrified, I’ve barely spent any time puzzling whether the other night was some strange dream or something that actually happened. I woke up alone, the bed cold save for the spot Warbrain’s claimed as his own. No sign that anyone but me had been there. I’d checked the window for signs of a break-in, but there was nothing. I’m really starting to think I really did dream it up. Maybe I’m that lonely.

But yes, day nine. I’ve spent the last few days waiting for Varric’s contacts to return with information. I’ve filled the days with washing dishes, cooking with Orana, eating, chatting with Leandra, and washing more dishes. Some of Hawke’s friends have been by. (Thankfully not Sebastian.) Anders was here, too, but like I said, he was preoccupied. Varric’s by almost every day, sometimes for a while and sometimes for a fraction of a second with news of some job or other for Hawke. Merrill came by twice, and I returned her book the second time. I wanted some time to reread it and take a few notes (which I’m not sure was allowed but I couldn’t resist). We talked about it a little, and she seemed excited that I was willing to talk with her about it. Fenris hasn’t been back since his fight with Hawke, and apparently, he’s sulking in his mansion, drinking wine.

I might need to go over and talk to him. And see if he’s willing to share his wine. I think I’ll save that for day ten. Tomorrow.

“So?”

“Sorry?” I say. I’ve been doing this a lot the last two days. I can’t help but start dwelling on how long I’ve been here. I feel a lot more at home here, with everyone including me and talking to me and being generally really good about this really messed up situation, and it’s making me uneasy. I don’t want to be here long enough to settle further.

“Hanged Man,” Hawke repeats, eyeing me with concern. “Want to come this time?”

I’ve never been in a bar in my life. Just the idea of them makes me nervous. I hesitate a little, considering it, and he adds, “Come on. I’ll be there. And Varric. And maybe Fenris. You and Fenris get along alright. Plus, who knows? Maybe Varric has something. It’s been a few days.”

“Alright,” I say before I can think myself out of it.

“Wonderful,” he says, grinning. “You can finally meet Isabela, too. I don’t know how she’s held off for this long, but I can tell she’s still curious about you.”

Maybe it really was a dream then? This group, they’re not terribly good at keeping secrets from one another, and it’s been more than enough time for that incident to have circulated—if it actually happened. Wow, did I actually not do something weird like that? Hooray for me!

“Well, let’s go then,” he prompts, tugging me up out of my chair to stand as he does. “Since I’ve ruined your appetite and all.” So petulant. I roll my eyes but don’t protest. He’s like a little kid, so excited with the possibility of seeing his friends. It’s nice, I suppose, that they’re friends. This place is basically some sort of incarnation of hell, but they at least have each other. They may not always agree (at all), but they do seem to genuinely care for one another.

“Oh—but,” I look at Orana. She smiles at me and waves me off. It actually makes me feel terrible because washing dishes has kind of become our thing, and I sort of love it? Even though I hate dishes with a passion usually (my sister and I had a system which involved me doing all the laundry and her doing all the dishes), it’s our time.

Hawke watches me and claps me so hard on the shoulder I stumble mid-step. “I like you,” he says.
“I like you, too?” I reply. He grins, at the question mark at the end of my reply no doubt. “I mean, thanks for being awesome and letting me stay here. I get that—”

“Nope,” he says. “None of that shit.” He guides me with a hand out of the dining area. “Just promise me if I get stuck in your magicless world, you’d put up with my blubbering.”

I snort, “I doubt you’d blubber.”

He laughs, and we head out of the estate. “I might surprise you.”

“First impression?” Varric asks.

“It’s kinda a—” Are there any nice substitutes for ‘shithole’? If not, someone might want to get on that.

“Shithole?”

“Right,” I say. Because, hey, he said it. That makes it okay, doesn’t it? He chuckles so I guess that’s right. “So, any word?” I try not to sound so desperate, but from Varric’s sudden sympathetic look, I figure I’m not doing so well on that front.

“Actually, I did hear something,” he admits. “I wouldn’t get your hopes up too high, but apparently, there’s some talk of a miner in the Bone Pits coming into a little money from selling a pretty interesting rock.”

“Can’t imagine there’s too many interesting rocks just floating around in our fair Kirkwall,” Hawke says, putting a tankard in front of me. Mmm, I’m not sure I’m brave enough to drink that. Or stupid enough. Take your pick. “We’ll look into it. Luckily, I own half of that disaster operation, and the miners like me—generally.”

“That’s what happens when you kill a dragon for them,” Varric says.

“A dragon?” I definitely need to stop sounding so surprised by these things. I really do.

“A high dragon,” Hawke says, plopping down next to me. The ale in his tankard sloshes over a little. “What? No dragons where you’re from?”

“No dragons. High or otherwise—” I crack a smile, and maybe they think I’m joking. But I’m just five years old, and high. I’m a juvenile. I’m taking my kicks where I can get them. Double digits. Tomorrow. I’m definitely not using humor to defend against the terrible wave of despair I sense rolling in. “So.”

“So Hawke and I’ll go over there first thing tomorrow—alright, maybe not first thing—and we’ll see what we can shake loose from the guy. Hopefully, it’s the foci, and hopefully, it’s not halfway to Orlais by now.”

“Tomorrow?” Hawke says.

“Yes,” Varric says with a frown. “Bartrand’s back at his estate in Hightown.”

“Ah,” Hawke says, taking a gulp of his ale. “It’s about time we pay that bastard a visit.”

“I’ll toast to that.”
They both look at me. I want to ask, but that was sort of an intense exchange. They keep on looking at me. “I didn’t say anything?”

“You didn’t,” Varric agrees. “Not at all curious?”

“Oh, I am,” I say.

“Oh no,” Hawke says. “Here we go.”

“I thought you liked the way I tell it, Hawke,” Varric says. “I make you out to be so heroic and desirable.”

“You do,” he agrees, though it came out so much like one of Warbrain’s whining sounds. “I’ve just heard it too many times, and it’s gotten so much worse the last couple times you’ve told it.”

“I think you mean better,” Varric argues.

“No one actually believes I killed three high dragons, you know.” Petulant Hawke strikes again.

“Of course not,” Varric says with a laugh. “But it’s a damn good story, isn’t it? Everyone loves a good story, Hawke. A good hero, fighting the good fight, crawling his way up the mountain of shit.”

“Sounds messy,” Hawke grumbles. He ruins it by laughing. He and Varric bump tankards, and the attention’s back on me again.

“So?” I prompt.

“You want the real story—”

“As real as you can get it with Varric,” Hawke quips.

“—or do you want the fun version?”

“Surprise me,” I say.

Varric grins. Rugged comes to mind. Roguish. “Did Hawke tell you how he got here?” I shake my head. It hadn’t really come up. “He’s from Lothering. Fereldan.” I’ve spent some time going over the map Varric gave me, so I’ve got this. I’m proud I’ve got this. Too many of these conversations have just sort of gone over my head. “Darkspawn pouring up from the south right onto the la—”

“Pouring up?” I ask. That’s a weird turn of phrase, isn’t it? Also, ha! I know what darkspawn are. Thank God for Merrill’s book.

“Writer,” Varric says with a shake of his head. “What do you think?”

“Spreading up? Advancing up?”

“I’ll take note,” he says, dryly. Hawke smothers his laugh in his drink. “Can I continue?”

“Sure,” I say, dragging out the word with a smile. I lift up my tankard and take a tentative sip. Nope. Not drinking that. I stick my tongue just a bit, shuddering. I set it down on the table.

“Right,” Varric snorts. “The fifth Blight had just begun, and Carver abandoned Ostagar, running ahead of the darkspawn advancing up from the south. He gathered up his family, and they fled, picking up Aveline and her husband along the way.”
“But we didn’t flee fast enough,” Hawke says. “And not really in the right direction. And then my mother had a brilliant idea.”

“Is anyone going to let me tell this story?” Varric complains.

“Sorry,” Hawke says. He so doesn’t sound sorry.

“I’m assuming the brilliant idea was Kirkwall?”

Varric throws up his hands and takes a swig of his ale. “Impossible,” he says. “Yes, yes it was.”

“Sorry,” I say. At least I actually sound sorry.

“Why are you sorry, darling?”


“Oh, well,” Isabela says, sitting on the other side of me. “Is that all?” She bumps shoulders with me, winks. “We meet again.”

“Again?” Hawke says. He looks to Varric, and Varric shrugs.

“Oh,” That’s all I manage at first. Isabela watches me with a way too-pleased smirk. “So that was a thing that actually happened?”

“I’ll explain it to you later,” Varric crows from across the table through chuckles.

Ugh, why am I not surprised?

First, there’s the fact that it was a real thing. Second, there’s the fact that this real thing (aka: cuddling) has been twisted into sexual innuendo. Of course. Look, I’m not responsible for myself when I’m half-asleep. Is anyone?

“Sorry, I don’t kiss and tell,” Isabela says, slinging an arm around my shoulders and drawing me in.

“Rivani,” Varric says. “When has that ever been a thing?”

“Never,” she admits. “But this is our,” she squeezes me a little harder, “little secret.”

“Fine,” Varric crosses his arms, “be that way.”

It’s sorta adorable how we all start looking at each other across the table. I look at Varric. Varric squints at me, looks to Isabela, and then makes a face at Hawke. Hawke does much the same. Isabela’s smile just reeks of naughtiness, and oh, she’s enjoying this. I don’t know what I’m feeling. It’s not bad, but it’s not great. It’s lukewarm. Something like exasperation maybe but not quite? Finally, I break the silence.

“Well, it’s not my little secret,” I say, crossing my arms with much difficulty with Isabela’s arm around me. “Turns out you were right, Hawke. Isabela crept into—”

“I hardly crept,” Isabela argues. “You woke up. It’s not creeping if they wake up.” I can’t help but roll my eyes. Also, that’s not creepy at all, right?

“—my room.”
“Why am I just now hearing about this?” Hawke complains. “We ate breakfast together. In fact, we haven’t been apart all this morning.” There’s so much betrayal packed in those few sentences. God, these kids are just a bunch of gossips. Why am I so fond of them all already?

“Because firstly,” I begin, “nothing happened. Secondly, I was half-sure it was a dream.”

“Oh darling,” Isabela says, breathily. Which, okay, that might do some things for me. “Dreaming of me already?”

“Nothing happened,” Varric repeats skeptically. “No one here believes that.”

“Of course you don’t.” I uncross my arms and force myself to take a drink. I can’t get down more than a tiny mouthful. Because wow, disgusting doesn’t even begin to cover it.

“See, this is why I stick to mystery,” Isabela says. Directly into my ear. I shudder at the feeling of breath caressing my skin.

“Good tactic,” I say.

“It’s too late for that,” Varric says, “so might as well share.”

“She came in through the window. I wasn’t really awake, and I said she could sleep in the bed with me. Sleep in the bed, you hellions.” They were snickering before I even finished my second sentence. Assholes.

“Mmm,” Isabela hums. “You should try it my way next time.”

“Yeah,” I say, rolling my eyes at Hawke and Varric. Terrible. “I’ll do that.”

“Come now. Even if you don’t read into that—and who wouldn’t?—that’s still pretty…intriguing,” Varric says. Intriguing. I might have mouthed the word skeptically. “All in one night, huh?”

“I’m not responsible for myself when I’m sleepy.”

“Remind me to get you drunk sometime,” Varric begins.

“Good luck with that. This tastes like shit, and I’m not finishing it.”

Varric makes a face but starts smirking, “Let me guess? You’re like Broody, a wine person?”

“Yup, that’s about it,” I say. “It’s either wine or rum—” Isabela laughs, pleased. “—or vodka.”

“Vodka?”

“It’s clear? Strong as fuck? Over half a bottle and you’re asking for death?”

“Oh, I’ll have to get my hands on some of that,” Isabela says. I’m very sad to hear that because that means it probably doesn’t exist, and that’s an awful shame. I’m not actually a huge drinker, and I’m way too much into control to get drunk. Anyway, I just get really sleepy if I have a bit too much. Still, it’s taking some getting used to, being without all these things I’m so familiar with. But at least they apparently have rum?

I think some of the melancholy shows on my face because Isabela gives me another squeeze. “Well, what happened? With the Hawkes and the Blight?”

“The Hawkes and the Blight, I like the sound of that,” Varric says. “Are you going to let me tell it, or
am I going to have to gag you?”

“Oh, Varric,” Isabela says. “You’ve never offered to gag me.”

“I thought my chest hair was enough for you, Rivani.”

“Anyway,” Hawke cuts in. “This dragon flies in out of nowhere, just as we’re surrounded by darkspawn,” he stops for just a second, eyes a little distant before he smiles and continues, “and transforms into an old woman. A pretty badass old woman though.”

“I’ll gag you, too, Hawke,” Varric warns.

“Promises, promises,” Hawke says, putting his hands up in surrender.

“Is that one of Varric’s embellishments, or did she really turn into a dragon?”

“Nope, that one’s true,” Hawke answers. Varric grumbles under breath. “Alright, alright, shutting up.”

“The woman offered to fly them to Gwaren in exchange for a favor, a deal they accepted because, well shit, they had no choice. From there, they took the ship to Kirkwall. In Kirkwall, Leandra thought there’d be an estate waiting. Her brother Gamlen had, by now, inherited the Amell family home. She’d run away with an apostate in her youth, against her parents’ wishes, but she expected to be welcomed back by her brother.”

“But—” Varric glares at Hawke, and Hawke stops.

“But the estate had fallen out of Gamlen’s hands.” Hawke mutters something that sounds like Because he’s an irresponsible bastard. Varric talks right over him. “And Kirkwall was already full-up on Ferelden refugees. It didn’t want any more.” He drinks some ale, and I look to Hawke, who looks amused to hear his life retold like some sort of twisted fairy tale. “But they didn’t have any more money to take a ship back to Ferelden. And where would they go if they returned? Lothering was surely overrun by darkspawn. They decided to look for alternative means of passage into Kirkwall. Gamlen, being useful for once, sets them up with the smuggler, Athenril. In order to pay back the loan it took to get them into Kirkwall, he and his brother would have to work for a year, and they did.” Varric and Hawke exchange a fond smile. “And after that year was up, he, still being a bit green around the ears, got pickpocketed in Hightown one fine afternoon but, luckily, was saved by a handsome dwarf with a crossbow and a brilliant plan for him to win back his family estate.”

“Not bad,” I say after a minute. Varric chuckles. “What was the plan to win back the estate?”

“No bad, she says. What happened next, she says.”

“We’re going to have to save it for another day, I’m afraid,” Hawke says. “We have to go see to Bartrand, and I know Fenris and Anders will be pissed from here to the Void if we don’t bring them along for our…visit.” He turns to me, “We can escort you back home. Then we can go to Fenris.”

“Oh, go on,” Isabela says. “You’ve been hoarding the poor girl in your estate for over a week. I want her for a while.”

Hawke meets my eyes, eyebrows raised in question. I nod once, though I’m not really sure what more Isabela could want with me. Maybe this has to do with Merrill?

“Just—be gentle,” Varric finally says, standing up.
“I know you’re not talking to me, Varric,” Isabela says sweetly.

“No, of course not. See you later, Rivani. Got a lead for Pebbles’ problem here. Could use your help pursuing it as it were.” Pebbles? Does he mean me?

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Varric shoulders his crossbow.

“I’m up for a jaunt.”

“Hear that, Hawke? She’s up for our adventure at the Bone Pits tomorrow.”

Isabela groans, “Damnit.” I guess the Bone Pits are as awful as they sound.

“Too late to back out now, Rivani.”

“It most certainly is not,” she says, taking a huge gulp of my ale. Well, she’s welcome to it.

“Bye, Rivani,” Varric says.

Hawke laughs, “Just make sure you return her home in one piece.” He and Varric start heading for the door.

“Shoo,” Isabela says. “I know how to take care of a woman.”

“And that’s what we’re afraid of,” Hawke calls back. They vanish.

I turn my complete attention to Isabela and find she’s watching me, a hand propping up her head. I try to smile, but it’s a little odd. Without the group dynamic to prop me up a little. I wish the ale didn’t taste horrible, or I’d drink it to keep from feeling so nervous. As it is, I have nothing to do with my hands.

“So the rumor is, you’re from another world.”

“I vaguely remember having this conversation with you already.”

“You remember that, do you?”

“Sort of?” I admit.

“That’s good then,” she says. “That means we can get to the good stuff.”

“You mean Merrill?” I guess. I try not to sound nervous, but really, I just made a one-off comment. I’m totally not up to anything, but everyone seems to like making a big deal of things like this. Granted, Merrill does seem to garner a lot of ire, so I suppose it’s good that she has people to protect her.

“Mmm, I hear you have a weakness for pretty girls,” she says.

“Can we not talk about my weaknesses? Maybe?”

“She’s a good girl,” Isabela starts, as though I hadn’t spoken. “A good person. Better than us, anyway. You’ll play nice with her, won’t you?” That definitely wasn’t even a question.

“Um, yeah? I will,” I answer even though that question wasn’t really a question but, rather, a threat.
Whatever. I’m just going to…examine the table, so I don’t have to look at her. Because right now? Right now, she’s making me sort of nervous. “But look, I just want to go home. Sure, I have a weakness for pretty women, especially ones that are really sweet and loan me one-of-a-kind books, but I don’t intend to be here long enough for anything—you know.” I gesture with my hands vaguely to illustrate whatever the hell I’m trying to illustrate.

She looks at me, and I swear her face softens just a tad. It’s hard to tell. She’s wearing this really open, flirty expression, but it’s just for show, I think. And she does want me to be wary of her. Which, good job. I’m way past wary. “No one ever intends to stay in Kirkwall,” she says. And well, isn’t that ominous?

We stare at each other for a while, but I’m weak. I look away and start picking at the wood of the table.

“That’s enough of that,” she declares.

“Really?” I breathe. “Thank God.” That’s probably one of the scariest conversations I’ve ever had. Still doesn’t beat, however, that one conversation I had with my mom about the picture of me and Alice that lead into a horribly uncomfortable conversation about my sexuality. Here’s to hoping no conversation ever tops that one.

“Tell me something about your world then,” she says. “I’ve heard things, of course, but it’s never the same as hearing it from the source.”

“That’s a little vague? Anything in particular you want to know about?”

“Tell me you still have pirates,” she says.

“Sure,” I say, “but not as many. And they have scarier weapons.”

“Mmm,” she says. I’m glad she doesn’t ask about the weapons because I really know shit-all about guns. I live in Georgia, sure. The gun-toting South. But that doesn’t mean anything. “What about ships?”

“You do realize I don’t really know a lot about this subject at all,” I say.

“Which just means you can be like Varric and make something up. Aren’t you a writer? Give me some pretty lies,” she says.

I laugh, “And here I thought you were interested in the truth. Okay, well, our ships are made of metal. Almost all the ones in the world are. There are tiny ones, of course, but we also have luxury ships, too. Huge ones. They’re really like cities on the water. Any luxury you can imagine, they have them.” Thank God for Carnival Cruise advertisements on the television. “There’s swimming pools and theatres and places to gamble and places to eat really high class meals.” Isabela makes a face at the description. “We even have ships—well, not ships exactly—called submarines that can completely go underwater.”

“You’re not just pulling my leg?”

“Nope, it’s a thing we have. It was mostly a military thing, I think. We also have machines that can fly, and not just fly for no reason. They’re basically air ships. They can transport people, lots of them, and cargo. Been on one of those. They’re called airplanes, and they can basically get you to any place on earth you want to go. They’re just expensive as hell.”

“An airship,” she says, delighted. “I’d love one.”
“I don’t think it’s quite like you’re imagining it, but with magic, who knows, maybe a flying ship’s possible.” That’s a cool thought. It reminds me of Treasure Planet, and I’d love something like that. Too bad I’m more likely to just see more blood magic or lightning (which, admittedly, is pretty cool now that I’ve thought about it).

“I think we’d better cut this conversation short,” she says, suddenly. I frown in confusion. It had barely started? Her eyes drift from me, and I notice that someone’s gotten pretty close to our table. They’re listening. Oh shit. Well, we are in a tavern, and we’ve just chatting away. I need to be way more observant. The man must have seen me looking because he quickly looks away and calls to someone across the room.

“We’ll have to keep an eye on that one no doubt,” she says. “Come on then. Let’s get you back to the Hawke’s.”

It’s day ten. Hawke didn’t come home last night. Leandra pretended she wasn’t worried about it, but she sat in the library almost all night. I just now convinced her to go to bed, and it’s almost around the time Orana usually starts on breakfast. I don’t—I hate this. I haven’t done anything in over a week. I get that I really can’t. Kirkwall’s dangerous as hell, and it’ll gnaw on me for days and then leave me for the vultures if I step out into it alone. I’d be dead in the first step of an investigation. Still I hate all this damn waiting. I hate not being able to help when I want to, and I’d want to help Hawke. If, you know, I could.

“Mana?” Orana asks. I didn’t sleep much last night either. From what Hawke was saying, it was supposed to be a quick thing. I got the feeling they meant to waltz into Bartrand’s and beat the shit out of him. I also got the feeling Bartrand sort of deserved it. Which, of course, makes me uneasy to admit.

“Good morning. Sleep well?” I barely register that I’ve spoken, I’m so little tired.

She hesitates. She always does when her answer to that question is anything other than yes. After a while, she shakes her head. “I’m worried about Master Hawke.”

“He’ll be alright,” I say. I don’t know that, of course. What do I really know about anything? Also, how many times am I going to repeat that to myself? Of course I don’t know anything. I’ve been here ten days.


“Leandra just went to bed by the way,” I say. “So we’ll be on our own for breakfast unless Hawke comes back.”

Orana nods, and I stand up. We mosey on into the kitchen. It feels like the homiest part of the estate, and I like to help Orana with things. “You said—” She stops when I turn my full attention to her, but after a minute, she continues. “You said your mother likes to cook?” I’d told her that while we were washing dishes one day. (Isn’t it terrifying that I can say one day. I’ve been here long enough to have non-specific days.)

“Oh huh,” I affirm with a smile.

“What sorts of things did she cook?”

“I’d have to write you a book,” I start with a laugh. My mom cooks a lot of different stuff. “But for breakfast, she’d sometimes make us omelets with eggplant.” I tap one of the purple-ish vegetables on
the table that sort of resembles an eggplant. “Or this dish, uh, I forget the name, but’s like porridge, I guess. Or more like a risotto, I suppose. Do you have risotto here?” She shakes her head, very focused on our conversation. “Well, anyway. It’s got chicken and rice and a couple spices, and she’d normally serve it with boiled egg and lemon.” I stop, a little embarrassed. I tend to go on and on about food sometimes.

“Could we try and make something like it?” she asks. I consider. Having worked with her in the kitchen, I know the ingredients available. We don’t have everything, but it’d be pretty close, I guess.

“We can damn well try,” I say.

We don’t just try. We damn well succeed. That’s my first thought after I take the first bite at the dining room table. Second thought. I’m going to appreciate the shit out of my mom when I get home. Also, I’m going to cry on her. Third through, that I’m forgetting as soon as possible, What if I never see her again? I decide to stick to just eating my breakfast.


“I’m glad. It used to be my favorite as a kid.”

The front door opens and shuts. Hawke must have returned. Orana and I set down our utensils so we can go and investigate, but Hawke appears in the doorway before we even get the chance to stand. He looks like shit. I stand up, picking up the empty bowl we’d put in front of his usual seat. I fill it up and set it at his place setting.

He walks in like a guy who knows he looks like shit. “I don’t know what this is, but it looks delicious,” he grunts and drops into his chair. “Fucking Bartrand.”

“Are you alright, Master Hawke?”

“No, not alright,” he says. “Did you know there’s red lyrium? And it makes you crazy if you’re around it too long?” Orana frowns, eyes wide, and shakes her head. “Me neither. And apparently Bartrand didn’t either, unlucky bastard.” He ladles out a spoon of the breakfast…whatever we cooked and shoves it into his mouth. “Your work, Mana?” I sit back down, nodding. “Huh. Maybe Sebastian was right. You could be a message from the Maker. A good, delicious message.” He’s definitely talking to the bowl right now.

“After you eat,” I say, “maybe you should get some sleep?”

“Can’t,” he says. “I just came for a staff. Snapped my clean in two last night, and we have to go to the Bone Pits to see about your man.” I wince because I want him to go, but he also looks like shit. A place like the ‘Bone Pits’ sounds like the kind of place you could die in if you aren’t on your A-Game. Not many people on their A-Game look like shit, you know? “I’ll be fine. It should be quick work, but it should be done quickly. The longer we wait, the farther the foci could drift.”

I nod once, a little unsure if that’s a good enough reason.

“I’m eating, aren’t I? I almost feel human again. What’s in this?” He doesn’t give me a chance to answer, “You’ve been lying this whole time, haven’t you? You definitely had to have made this with blood magic.” I open my mouth to retort, but he just steamrolls on. “I should have kept those damn books I found for Merrill. I’ve missed out on a wealth of recipes.”

“You are not making a strong case for going to the Bone Pits,” I say. “You sound delirious.”

“I used to run for three days straight for Athenril. Sometimes, I think she pushed us just to see how
much we could take before we dropped.”

“It’s—I mean, what could a few hours of sleep hurt?”

Hawke side-eyes me. “You change your mind about Kirkwall?” I really, really hadn’t. “I thought you wanted to go home?” His seriousness melts away, and he laughs. “Isabela change your mind?”

I sigh and turn my attention to my food because here we go again. I viciously retract all my concern about his current state. Asshole.

“It’ll be fine,” he says. “Who knows? We could find this thing by the end of the day, and you’ll be home by dinner.” That’s…really comforting. Well, it is until I look up and see Orana’s face. She doesn’t look happy about it. Damn. I’m going to have to say goodbye to all these people. I’ve known them, gotten to know them, enough for that to be a thing that I should do. I hate goodbyes. I especially hate goodbyes with people I actually like. And I’m sure I’ll hate them even more with people I like that I know I’ll never ever ever see again. Shit.

Chapter End Notes

I went back and added a tiny bit of internal dialogue a few chapters back. I didn't make Mana's ethnicity very clear. She's Filipino not Spanish. Just wanted to clear that up. Also, here there probably be typos. I don't know why, but I always end up writing this at two in the morning andddd typos happen at two in the morning. A lot more than usual. I usually reread once or twice before I post, but you know how it is, you never catch them all.

Thanks so so so much for the kudos and especially the comments! I really love hearing what you all think Mana and the story in general. <3
Anyway, Here's a Rumor

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the great feedback on this story, kids! I got really discouraged early on because I ended up reading some posts on tumblr (my writing blog is ecarius.tumblr.com if anyone’s curious) about people getting sick of the 'Modern Girl in Thedas' trope, but everyone's been so great about this story. I'm going to try hard to keep pushing onward.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The needle slips. “Fuck,” I hiss. Varric starts to chuckle, and I’m tempted to flip him off but I don’t because I’m not sure that’s even a thing here (if not I may need to make that a thing). Instead, I shove my wounded finger in my mouth and wince at the taste of blood. The pain slowly recedes, and I try and dry my finger by waving my hand back and forth vigorously.

“Alright there?” I stop my hand waving and retrieve my needle.

“I’m fine,” I say, maybe just a tad bit petulant, waving him off with my uninjured hand. “I just wasn’t paying attention.” He probably thinks I haven’t caught on, but I know why I’m here. Varric’s babysitting me. To be fair, I probably deserve this treatment. After Hawke came back with the bad news, I sort of crumbled.

It took me a few days to swallow the facts: the lead Hawke and Varric went to investigate at the Bone Pits was a dead end (literally in about three different ways), and I’m not going home any time soon. In those few days, I might not have been a real person. I don’t think I said ten words to anyone, and it may or may not have freaked everyone out. Thus the babysitting. I don’t even want to think about it honestly because it’s a little embarrassing how badly I handled it. Note to self: don’t get my hopes up.

The babysitting thing started with Hawke and Anders. They coaxed me out of my room after about two days of self-imposed isolation (in which I basically laid in bed trying not to cry or think about anything but of course when you don’t try to think of something you just think about it constantly), and Hawke gave me a pep talk. Then he dragged me and Anders to the Darktown for poisons. It’s funny, and I’d never be mean enough to tell Hawke the truth but his pep talk did nothing for me. I’d just numbly followed him to Darktown, thinking about how scared I was to still be stuck in this shitty place.

But the trip did wake me up. Well, it was the smell. It’s completely ridiculous, but after smelling the shit, I got hit with an overwhelming you need to get your shit together feeling. I’m still not even within the realm of okay, but this is Kirkwall so functioning seems to be a normal state of being.

Still, I freaked everyone out by turning into a zombie-esque entity for a few days, and they’ve been taking turns looking after me. After Hawke and Anders, it was Merrill. We spent an afternoon in her house, and she told me about her clan and her brief time in the alienage. She loaned me another book, and I read some to Orana who seems to have taken over watching me in all the times I’m between sitters. Yesterday and today, it’s been Varric.

So far, I like Varric’s tactic best. Yesterday, it was read my horrible, smutty serials. It made it easier
to answer his first question today. *What do you plan to do now?*

I’d spent a lot of time stewing on it while I was basically comatose. Actually, that’s the question that scared me the most. Because I’m not equipped for this world. Everyone Hawke knows, they all fight, and if they don’t fight, they’re sort of fucked? Hell, even if you do fight, you’re fucked more often than not. Everything’s just shitty. It was shitty back home, but I had a foundation. Here? I don’t even know what I could contribute, and I kept getting stuck in this fantasy of me leaving Hawke’s and fucking up and ending up dead somewhere.

I’m still not entirely certain that’s not how it’s going to end.

But! Varric and I talked through it, and he knows a guy who’ll pay me to bind books for him. Which is why I’ve got access to sharp needles now.

It’s not that I don’t appreciate everyone else’s efforts to cheer me up, but the worst part of the last *half a month* has been the fact that I’m just here. I’m always waiting. For good news. For bad news. For something to do so I feel useful. I’ve been useless, and as nice as Hawke’s been about everything, I feel bad about staying in the lap of luxury while everything’s shit. Me? The only reason I’m even semi-okay is because I got lucky with Hawke.

“Aveline might have something for you,” Varric says suddenly. I make sure to stop sewing when I look up. He’s leaning back casually in his chair, grinning at me. I think that’s just his resting face. “It’s about time you met her anyway. I know she’s dying to meet you.”

I sincerely doubt that, and it must show on my face. Varric amends, “Alright, maybe not dying, but she’s curious. Hawke asked her to look into the rock situation.”

I don’t bother asking how that went because I’m still here so obviously it was another dead end, and as much as I’m trying to pretend I’m okay again, I don’t think I could handle hearing any more bad news like that right now. “What kind of ‘something’ are we talking about?”

“You’ve heard about the previous guard captain?” I nod my head slowly because I think I know the basics. He was corrupt, and Hawke somehow managed to get Aveline the job. Something like that. “Well, apparently, he didn’t keep very good records, and Aveline’s interested in hiring someone to help straighten the mess out.” Varric makes a face. “Interested?”

“Yes.” I try not to sound so eager, but that definitely sounds like something I can do.

He exhales loudly, “I feel like I should be worried.”

“We can’t all be exciting rogues with cool crossbows, Varric.”

“Well, yes, but I’m an ideal to strive towards.” I snort and turn back to sewing my signatures together.

I carefully tie a knot along the spine of the signatures. “I appreciate you looking after me,” I say finally, “but I’m going to be okay.” I just have this feeling that the babysitting thing’s going to get on everyone’s nerves soon. They’re basically a bunch of freelance mercenaries, and I’m this mess they have to keep cleaning up.

Varric snorts, “You sure about that?”

“No, not really,” I say with a shrug. “But it’s starting to sink in.”

“What’s starting to sink in?”
“I’m probably not going home.” I inhale and exhale, forcing myself to continue breathing even though I sort of want to die now that I’ve said it. “I get that there’s still hope or whatever, but there’s not exactly a *lot* of hope, is there?”

“There never is,” Varric says. “Are you really alright? Shit, it’s understandable if you’re not.”

“I’m pretty sure my breakdown’s evidence enough of my not being alright,” I say, and I don’t know why but that has me laughing. Varric doesn’t join in, and I try to reign it in. It takes a few minutes, and I’m sure this episode isn’t helping my case but I can’t make myself stop. “Come on, is anyone really alright around here?”

He cracks a small smile, “Got me there.”

“I’ll be okay,” I say, and I try very hard to mean it. “I’ll be better if I have something to do.”

“Oh,” he says, comprehending something suddenly. “You want some distractions.” I nod to that, and he grins like before. “I can do distractions. It’s not like you’re not marketable, Pebbles.” He rubs at his chin, and his eyes seem to shine but that’s probably just the firelight. “How did you feel about my serial?”

“It was raunchy,” I say immediately because, hey, I might have thought about it a lot last night. “With a surprising good story.” I consider it for a moment. “Though you do use the words ‘rippling’ and ‘pulsing’ a lot, and sometimes that makes it…weird.” I make a face, “Also your metaphors are terrible, but I don’t even know if I want you to stop because they’re funny.”

“You’re fired,” he says with a laugh. “‘Pulsing’ just happens to be my favorite word.”

“I noticed,” I say dryly. “What job exactly did I get fired from?"

“I could use an extra set of eyes,” he says. “Isabela reads them, gives me a few ideas, but mostly she steals my manuscripts for her *alone* time.” Varric smirks at me, “Which you are, of course, free to do, but I’d like some more substantial feedback.” He raises his eyebrows, “Interested?”

Through my laughter I’m able to get out my *yes*, and Varric nods. “Good but I reserve the right to protect my artistic liberties.”

Rolling my eyes, I examine the signatures I’ve attached together. I open each to make sure I’d tugged the thread taut.

There’s a knock at the door, and I guess as Varric goes to answer it that it’s Hawke. I’m right. My dad’s basically come to pick me up from the sitter. Lovely.

“Isn’t this domestic?” Hawke coos. As if to illustrate a point, Varric and I roll our eyes and share a secretive look. “I resent whatever you two just said with your eyes,” he says. “Varric, how do you feel about—”

“If it involves that damn ‘investment’ of yours—”

Hawke cuts him off just as he’s about to get going, “I can’t believe this! You’re all *still* complaining about the Bone Pits? That was ages ago.”

“It hasn’t even been a week,” Varric grumbles, “and I’ve had enough of the Deep Roads and the undead for *at least* another week—or fifty.”

“I was going to ask if you wanted to do a job for Aveline,” Hawke whines. “Isabela won’t even talk
to me. Apparently,” he rolls his eyes and inhales, “she still smells like a corpse and blames me even though she probably spent two days in my bathroom giggling with Merrill.”

“Oh, that’s rough,” Varric says with a chuckle.

“It is when I could have been in there with Anders,” Hawke says petulantly. “Come on. It’s just a patrol. Some of her men got really banged up on the Storm Coast by some Tal-Vashoth, and she’s short a few hands.”

“Fine,” Varric says, holding his hands up in surrender.

Hawke turns his attention to me, “We’ll drop you off at the—”

“Nope,” Varric cuts in. “Aveline has a little project she wants done, and I think Pebbles here fits the bill.”

“Throwing her to the wolves already?” Hawke says with a shake of his head. He regards me with narrowed eyes, looking very serious all of a sudden. “You sure you’re up to meeting Aveline right now?” he asks.

“That’s not ominous at all?” I say, grimacing. I probably look a little alarmed because Hawke makes a noise deep in his throat and shakes his head as if he wants to take back what he just said.

“Nevermind,” he says, looking away with a grimace and a shake of his head. As I gather up my things, I try not to think about Aveline. I might run to Hawke’s and lock myself in if I think about it too much.

“Varric,” Aveline says, eyeing him suspiciously. I’m terribly glad I’m not on the receiving end of that look, but I’m pretty sure I’m next. Varric smiles innocently, or he tries to. He looks a little scared to be honest, and he’s holding his hands up in surrender. Which, when it comes to Aveline, seems to be a good tactic, and I’ve been in the room with her for all of three minutes. “If you’re up to something—”

“Aveline,” Varric says, “I would never.” Her eyes narrow just a hair more. “Alright, I would, but Pebbles here is harmless. I swear on Bianca. Just tell her what you want, and I’m sure she’ll be able to help you out.”

Aveline continues to pin him with her eyes and, after a moment of silence, seems satisfied. She turns to me, and I smile as best I can. She’s a little terrifying so it’s a bit watery. After a second I offer a weak, “It’s nice to meet you.”

“So you’re the one Hawke’s been talking about,” she says.

“Probably?”

She sighs, tilting her head to look at the ceiling. I get the feeling she might be counting down from ten or something like that. “Alright,” she says finally, looking between me and Varric.

“Thanks,” I say, though I don’t know if I should be excited because her being okay with Varric’s plan means I’m going to be alone with her, and she’s scary. Impressively scary but scary nonetheless. Also, that wasn’t much of an interview, but this isn’t exactly home. I get the feeling if I can’t do this job, I’ll just get the boot—and a really terrifying look. Or worse. But I’m not here to think about the ‘worse’ right now. Can’t stomach those thoughts.
“Since you’re here, Hawke,” Aveline begins.

“Varric already agreed,” Hawke says with a winning grin. He seems to be the only one not affected by Aveline’s fierce aura. “And I think I can talk Fenris and Merrill into helping out.” Aveline grimaces.

“Remember that you’re representing the guard,” she says.

Hawke turns to the door and waves the reminder off, “Yes, yes. I know.”

“You know,” Aveline repeats with a shake of her head.

“We’ll handle it,” Varric promises with his resting face grin.

Aveline snorts and turns away from them, “I know you will. I just wonder if I’m going to have to kill you when you come back to report.” She shakes her head again, and I get the distinct feeling she’s basically their mom. “There’s no point of putting it off,” she says to me. “Jeven left a mess.”

“Bye Aveline, Mana,” Hawke sing-songs. Aveline rolls her eyes. Varric echoes the sentiment, and the door shuts. I’m alone with Aveline, who’s eying me with a neutral expression.

“A mess as in he didn’t know how to organize or—” I ask when she doesn’t say anything.

“There’s that,” she says. “There’s also more incomplete reports than complete ones, and there are duplicates of everything.” She laughs though there’s no humor in it. “He was decent at hiding his tracks.”

“So we’re trying to put together an accurate archive?”

“If we can,” she says. “I haven’t been here long, but I can help with the more recent documents. Anything before, you’re going to have to do some guesswork, or you could ask some of the guards who have been here longer than I have.” She smiles a little, “Donnic will help if he can, but I’d like to see if we can get the more recent records up to date. I didn’t realize they were in such bad shape until a few weeks ago when the seneschal started to ask about our spending.”

Yikes, I think. This seems like a bigger job that Varric thought. “A huge mess,” I mutter. She looks at me with a raised eyebrow and thinned lips.

“Why did you come here?”

I don’t know if I even understand what she means by that. “Here?” I prod. “Here as in Kirkwall? Or here as in your office?”

“The second,” she answers.

I grimace even though I was a little scared she was going to ask about the whole other world business. Really, either question sort of sucks, but I guess the second question sucks less and is easier to answer at least. “Hawke’s been great,” I start. “But I might be stuck here for a while, and I can’t just sit in his mansion every day hoping something’s going to happen.” I smile just a little, feeling self-conscious even as I do. “Anyway, I hear work’s a good distraction.”

“I’m still looking into it,” she says after a minute. “But it’s good for you to start trying to make your way here. You’ll just make yourself miserable if you keep to yourself.” Well, that’s dead on, isn’t it?

I nod because I don’t trust myself to say anything to that. “The most recent records are here,” she says, returning to the safer topic of discussion. “Most of them should be correct, but some of the
guards have been—” she stops, searching for the word, “resistant to the changes I’ve been putting into place.”

“We won’t know until we look,” I say, and she comes out from behind her desk and goes to the bookcase along the wall. She pulls some paper from a shelf and puts them in my arms, and we get to work.

“You’re hard at work,” Varric says.

“You sound so disgusted,” I say, not looking up. The handwriting on the paper in my lap’s basically incomprehensible unless you squint and tilt your head just the right way, and I’m scared I’m going to lose my spot.

“I am,” Varric says. “Orana’s been making doe eyes at everyone because you haven’t been home in two days.”

I look up and immediately regret it. I groan, and sure enough, when I look down, I can’t really figure out where I left off. I place my hands on top of the paper and focus my attention on Varric. From my cross-legged position on the floor, I have to look up to see his face. “I’ve been home,” I protest.

“Late, I hear,” Varric says. “Which is fine. You’re a grownup.” I roll my eyes at the implication there. “But you’re here working like an honest woman. It’s a little disgusting, you have to admit.”

“You’re the one who got me this job,” I point out.

“Yes but it was supposed to be a distraction not an all-encompassing—Nevermind. Just make sure you get home at a reasonable hour tonight. I can’t handle those eyes, and I can’t be friends with people who work all the time.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, saluting him without thinking. He looks amused, so I guess he gets my meaning.

“Aveline wasn’t kidding about the mess,” he says, whistling. It is, of course, a mess, but he’s only saying that because I’ve surrounded myself with stacks of paper. And there’s piles of scrolls on Aveline’s desk and ink pots in four places in the room. I think I might have ink on my face. I don’t dare try and work too late because I’m scared I might accidentally tip a candle over and set the whole room on fire.

“Thanks,” I say. I don’t think I said it before, and I feel terrible. Varric just laughs and shakes his head.

“You’re thanking me? If I’d known the mess was this bad, I wouldn’t have suggested it at all.”

“It’s not so bad,” I say. “Yesterday, we found a report with a really interesting rendering of the previous guard captain. Apparently, he wasn’t one for actually reading the reports.” I reach across my circle of papers, grabbing the report in question which has essentially been deemed useless. I pass it to Varric.

He takes it, “It’s actually not bad. The scales on his tail are very…detailed. Do you think—?”

“You can’t have it. Nabil has to redo it, and—” I try not to laugh. “I think Aveline wants to use it as an example.”

“I should take this just to spare him,” Varric says with a chuckle, but he passes it back. I put it back in the redo or Aveline’s going to kill you pile.
“If it goes missing, I’m pointing Aveline in your direction.”

Varric pretends as if I shot him in the chest, covering his heart with an exaggerated wince. “I see she’s won your loyalty.”

“She’s scarier than you.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” he mutters. “Don’t let her bully you into staying late.”

I tap at the corner of my eye, “Got it. Orana’s eyes are killer.”

“Where is Aveline?”

“She’s training—”

“Torturing?”

I continue as if he hadn’t spoken, “With some of the guards who just returned to duty.”

“They’re treating you alright?”


Varric nods.

“They’ve been fine,” I answer with a shrug. “I’ve talked to Donnic mostly, and he’s a pretty straightforward guy. He’s easy to get along with, and he’s been passing along my questions without a fuss so.” I shrug again. Really, it’s been awkward, but that’s mostly because I’m new. And I sort of came out of nowhere, so they’re trying to figure me out. Which is, you know, hard since I can’t really tell them where I come from or anything.

“Uh huh,” Varric says, apparently getting that it’s not as fine as I’m trying to play it off as being.

“It’s fine,” I say with a little more force.

“Whatever you say,” he says. “I brought you the newest chapter of Swords and Shields.”

“And you brought it into the Keep?” Still I take it even as he holds it out for me because, damn, it is really funny actually.

“If Aveline kills me, Isabela will never forgive you. She still hasn’t seen this newest bit yet.”

I lean back carefully and tug my satchel to me and carefully tuck the papers inside. “I’ll protect your precious manuscript, Varric,” I smile sweetly, “for Isabela’s sake.”

“You better,” he jokes. I figure he’s said all he wants to say and given me what he meant to give me, so I turn back to my papers. I think what I’m looking at is supposed to be a request for whetstones, but it’s difficult to decipher and doesn’t seem the least bit official.

There’s a knock at the door, and I sigh, putting my finger on the end of the line I was reading. When I look up, I notice that Varric’s still there. I wince at the thought of standing and look for a place to set the papers in my lap.

“I’ll get it,” he says with a smile and shake of his head. When he opens the door, it’s Seneschal Bran. I’d met him yesterday, briefly, before he’d spirited Aveline away to discuss something. They’d probably have stayed in her office if it wasn’t such a mess.
“Master Tethras,” he says. I get the impression, just from that, that he’s not a huge fan of Varric’s. Or it could just be that he wasn’t expecting Varric in A veline’s office. He’s not, strictly speaking, supposed to be in here when Aveline’s away.

“Guard Captain Aveline,” I start, remembering to use the proper tiles, “is in the training yard, Seneschal.” I’m surprised that comes out smoothly to be honest. Lately, I’ve felt eerily calm in the face of strange people, but I know that’s not calmness. I’ve never been a calm person. Right now, this feeling? It’s probably numbness, and it never lasts.

Seneschal Bran regards me, sitting on the floor with papers on my skirts, with a strange look. It’s like he’s trying to puzzle me out.

“Thank you,” he says after too long of a moment. Then, after another pause, he adds with narrowed eyes, “Lady de la Paz, if you could, please do remind your cousin that the city of Kirkwall does not appreciate his meddling with the Qunari.”

“Ah,” I begin. Because very little of that made any sense to me. Usually I’m Serah de la Paz, which I’ve learned is the equivalent to a ‘normal’ polite address. Here in Hightown anyway. It seems like such a silly question, and I hadn’t honestly thought about it that much. There have been other, more important, things eating up my attention.

“I’m sure she’ll pass the word along,” Varric says easily.

Seneschal addresses me again instead of Varric as though I’m not the one that spoke, “See that you do that.” And then he’s gone. The door shuts with a terribly loud noise. And there’s silence. For about ten seconds.

“Varric,” I begin, saying his name slowly. “What the fuck was that?”

“Oh, you know. Hawke’s shenanigans.”

“Right,” I say.

“And,” he begins, with a sheepish smile, “we might have planted a little rumor in Hightown.” He barks out a laugh, “I say ‘we.’ I planted the rumor, but it was at Leandra’s behest. With Hawke’s blessing.”

“What rumor?” I say, feeling sudden tension in my head. Between reading all these papers and whatever this is, I’m starting to have a terrible headache. Or, okay, I at least feel like I should be getting a headache. Mostly I just feel like I’m treading water.

“Well, it started off as a rumor about you being some sort of demon,” Varric says, keeping his voice low, “which is a fairly common rumor in Kirkwall, but since Hawke was involved, some templars were gossiping about it.” He makes a face, “Carver caught wind of it making its way up the chain of command. Hawke’s made some enemies these last few years, and they’d like nothing else than to catch him housing a demon.”

“Oh,” I manage. “Fuck.” I’ve yet to actually meet a templar, and I don’t look forward to it. I get the feeling they’re the stab first ask questions later sorts of people.

“It’s fine,” Varric reassures quickly. “Leandra suggested the best way to combat it was to fan the flames of another rumor.”

“The ‘cousin’ rumor,” I guess.
He nods, “They’ve seen you out with Leandra in Hightown.”

“I’m pretty sure that was only the once,” I say.

“Once is enough.”

“I dropped a few juicy tidbits here and there. Leandra can help you sketch out the details. I told a dozen obviously-wrong stories about you—”

I can’t help but groan. There’s always someone who believes these stories.

“Leandra’s been telling her friends she asked you to come to Kirkwall. You’re from Hercinia. It’s a coastal city, the third largest in the Free Marches. We haven’t decided if your family’s dead or not.”

“Charming,” I manage to get out. “Hercinia,” I try. I don’t remember it on the map Varric gave me, but I’ll look for it tonight when I get back to Hawke’s. I focus on the things I can do. Thinking’s obviously dangerous and prone to make me breakdown.

“It’s east of here,” Varric offers. “It might be easier if you have a dead family.”

“Yeah,” I say. My family basically is dead to me right now, aren’t they? That thought hits me pretty hard, and Varric catches it. I push past the shitty feeling in my gut, shaking my head in the hopes that my thoughts clear. “Let’s just say that. I’ll stick to the truth a little. I had a mother, a father, and a sister. My fingers curl into my skirts. “Here they’re dead.” Varric doesn’t stop me, just listens. “A coastal city? They were lost at sea then.” I laugh, and I almost choke on it. “That’s sort of romantic, isn’t it?”

“Pebbles,” he says quietly.

“No,” I stop him. “I—” Sucking in a breath, I try to go on. “This is better than being hunted down by templars, isn’t it?” I don’t look at him to see if he agrees or not. I’m just going to imagine that he’s in agreement. “Plus it’s not just me. Hawke might get in trouble with them and—”

“That’s good,” he says, cutting me off mid-babble. It’s strange to feel so grateful that he did that. “We can get that out there. I’ll tell Leandra.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I’ll talk to her about the rest of it later.” I turn back to my papers, ignoring the pricking at my eyes. I know if I look at Varric I’m definitely going to cry.

“Don’t work too late,” he reminds me, voice light. “Remember—”

“Orana’s big, scary doe eyes,” I choked out with a laugh. “I won’t stay late.” As if I could with that bombshell dropped on my head.

“Tell me again,” Leandra says. She knows very well that I can’t escape with these pins all over me. Jean Luc, who’s enjoying this too much (as he should since Varric apparently is footing a pretty hefty bill for his ‘services’), clicks his tongue when I shift my weight and inhale deeply.


“Book and paper and?”

It takes me a minute, “Books, papers, and antiquities. Occasionally.” I inhale again and get stuck
with a pin. “Ow, shit.” Leandra makes a noise, and I quiet again. “Alright. They did most of their business in Antiva, leaving me to manage the very modest estate in Hercinia.” They’d wanted me to make myself seem very prominent, but I felt like that was something that could easily be disproven. Anyway, I don’t want the kind of attention that would come from me suddenly being part of the one-percent or whatever.

Jean Luc hums encouragingly, “A beautiful coastal city.” A moment later, “Unlike some cities I won’t name.”

“Right. Well, why did I come to this place then?”

“For family, messere,” he answers, kneeling to pin up the hem of my skirts. He’s enjoying this, the bastard.

“Allright, I abandoned my beautiful homeland of Hercinia for Kirkwall,” my thoughts stutter to a halt, and I look to Leandra for help. She crosses her arms and looks at me pointedly. I know she thinks I’m not taking this seriously, but I’m just exhausted. We’ve been over it again and again.

“I’m related to you through a Geralt Amell, the third son in his family who had a lover from—” It takes a lot not to curse because it’s on the tip of my tongue.

“Markham,” Orana offers when it takes me too long.

“Thank you,” I say with a smile. “Yes, she was from Markham, and she wanted to escape her family there, and he wanted to escape his and be closer to Antiva, closer to opportunities for trade, so they made their home in Hercinia.”

“Be sure to mention the lack of attention Kirkwallers pay to light,” Jean Luc says. “Your house, no doubt, had a brilliant sun room. A small garden.” Glad someone’s having fun at my expense. Leandra just looks pissed though I can’t tell if it’s me or Jean Luc.

“Right,” I say. “My family maintained the successful family business. My sister was meant to the handle it from the Antivan front since she had the disposition for it, and I was assigned the task of managing the things in Hercinia. The house. The Merchant’s Guild. Wouldn’t that cause us trouble if I ever mention it?” Because it definitely sounds like it’ll cause us some trouble. I mean, half the complaints out of Varric’s mouth are about the Merchant’s Guild in Kirkwall. (The other half, lately anyway, have been about the Bone Pit, otherwise known as *Hawke’s Shitty Investment.*)

“It won’t trouble you,” Jean Luc assures, in a flippant *I’ve got you* sort of tone of voice, and not for the first time I wonder how much Varric’s paying him.

“Right,” I repeat more slowly this time. “On a routine journey back from Antiva—wait.”

“To Antiva,” Leandra says.

“Yes, to Antiva,” I repeat to myself. “They were lost at sea in a storm, which are common in early spring. I kept the business afloat for a while, but I had a hard time dealing with grief and managing the business on my own. I was lonely.” The words sound so odd coming out of me, and I try not to sound like I’m feeling anything saying them. “One of Jean Luc’s partners passed through Hercinia to visit, and he mentioned that there were Amells in Kirkwall once more. I wrote to you, but by the time my letter reached you, Hawke had already gone to the Deep Roads and gotten the money to buy back the estate. You asked me to come to Kirkwall to help manage it—and because you worried about me being alone in Hercinia.”

I look to Leandra. She nods. I’m doing okay. “I didn’t take a ship because of my family. Instead, I
attempted a land journey to Kirkwall.”

“A mistake,” Jean Luc says, shaking his head. “Robbers love the coast.”

“I know,” I joke. “They robbed me, and that’s why I was so confused when I reached Kirkwall. And also why I came with very little. And why I—” There’s something else probably, but I can’t for the life of me remember what it is.

“I wouldn’t go around telling it to everyone,” Leandra says, “but it should hold well enough.” Her eyes sweep up and down my body, “Especially once Jean Luc dresses you like a Hercinian lady.”

“Clothes make the lie very convincing,” he says around three pins that are sticking out of his mouth. Now that all’s said, I feel the urge to argue about the clothes again, but Leandra had been very stubborn about them. I don’t have the money for them obviously. Yes, Aveline and Varric paid me (and the bookseller though I’ve only made a little over a dozen books for him), but it’s not enough to pay for a wardrobe of a lady. Leandra waved it off. ‘We’re family,’ she said. I think she’s forgetting we’re only a fake family, and though I do appreciate it, it makes me feel like before. Which is ridiculous considering I just managed to start doing some things for myself. I start to open my mouth, but Leandra raises a hand.

“Don’t say it,” Leandra says. “I won’t hear another word about the money.”

“I just—” I begin.

“Hercinians avoid heavy or stiff fabrics,” Jean Luc cuts in, casting a glance at Leandra’s gown. She’d had me wear one like it to the Keep, and it was pretty heavy. I was relieved, at least, that what I was wearing now was lighter. It felt sort of like chiffon. “They’re in love with drapery. Gold and silver embroidery on the bodice and around the waist. Most keep plain skirts.” His lips twitch upwards, “There’s a tailor in the First District who once wrote a small book about the sanctity of plain skirts. Something about the movement of them mimicking the sea.”

I snort at that because it sounds like something I might have written while I was in college at three in the morning after two pots of coffee. Which, fuck, I miss coffee.

Jean Luc continues, “Blue is, of course, the single most popular color of clothing. Hercinian blue is greener than the Orlesian blue, but they, too, favor gold. White, too, though it’s the most expensive.”

He stands, putting a finger at seam between the bodice and the skirts. “This is traditional. A high-waisted and close-fitting bodice.” He tugs at the fabric of the skirt just once, “A million miles of blue fabric for the skirt. A beautiful wave when in motion.” The way he says the last bit, I bet it’s a quote from that book he was talking about. “A pale blue’s appropriate for one your age, and we’ll see about getting some gold embroidery applied to the bodice.”

I wince at that. It screams expensive. “Isn’t this light blue a little impractical?” I ask. “It’s going to dirty easily.”

“I’m working with what I have on hand,” Jean Luc says. “I’ll have some different colors shipped from Hercinian as soon as possible.” He glances at Leandra again, and to my horror, she nods. At least, I note she doesn’t look pissed anymore. “Good,” he says to her agreement. “We’ll discuss the rest of the lady’s wardrobe when the fabric arrives. In the meantime, you should wear this for a day at the Keep.” He laughs, “It’ll make an impression.”
This chapter was difficult, and I can't say I'm completely happy with it even now. But I'm happier with this version than the last three I've written so you can have it. And hopefully enjoy it! Also, I'm so sorry about the mistakes in the last chapter. I reread it a little while ago, and I noticed a bunch of typos. They should be fixed. Mostly. This chapter will probably be much the same. I never notice until all the mistakes and the chapter's been up for a while. That being said, anyone interested in being my beta?
Anyway, Here’s Tea Time

Chapter Summary

Mana has tea with Sebastian, and Hawke and Co. stumble across something really strange in the Fade.

Chapter Notes

I wanna give a HUGE shout-out to Senei for agreeing to beta for me and for being generally awesome. Thanks so so much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Lady Amell’s taught you well,” Sebastian says after a particularly long moment of awkward as hell silence. I’m not great at idle chatter, and I’m not even remotely okay at it when dealing with people who give me bad vibes. Which, alright, that’s probably not fair, but I don’t know how else to describe the sort of vibes I get from Sebastian. Mostly he just makes me so uncomfortable I want to dissolve, and the atmosphere of the Chantry isn’t really helping.

I set the teacup carefully on the saucer, turning it so the handle’s angled to the right. I don’t know why I bother considering I’ve literally just been called on my bullshit. Well, I won’t claim all the credit. The blame for this, by now, can be cut how many ways? Four? There’s me, Hawke, Leandra, and Varric. Well, never mind. Five. There’s also Jean Luc who apparently has decided his fake business associate fee now includes lessons on high class social etiquette and what he calls the intricacies of the Game. What is the Game (caps intended)? I wish I knew. Oh wait. No, I don’t.

Sebastian chuckles, eyeing my teacup. His eyes quickly return to my face. “You're doing very well,” he says.

“Thank you,” I say primly. I got some mixed messages about how to handle Sebastian from Leandra and Hawke. Leandra seems to like him. She goes to service a few times a week, and they’ve chatted. On some level, that surely has to do with her keeping tabs on her son, but I do actually think she genuinely likes Sebastian. Hawke though? He told me we could certainly go lightning on Sebastian’s ass if I wanted. Leandra wouldn’t hear of it, especially now since I’m a lady and everything.

I didn’t want to stir up any more trouble, and it’s just tea, right? Plus I have my fool-proof tactic of talking around things and generally being so uncooperative he’ll get sick of me.

“I can understand why you’ve chosen to go along with this, but you have nothing to fear,” he begins. “You are neither a mage, nor a demon, and the templars would have known this within moments of their investigation.”

“I’m not,” I agree, tapping lightly at the rim of the saucer. It’s not an etiquette thing. It’s just one of those Mana needs to do something with her hands to center herself things. “But how are you so sure of that?”
He regards me calmly, taking a sip of his tea. It's easy to tell he's not the slightest bit self-conscious about any social missteps. Anyway, if he did commit one, I doubt he'd really care. And, alright, I wouldn't exactly notice if he did misstep, would I? At the moment, I've very knowledgeable about the etiquette of tea with nobles, and yup, that's about it.

"As much as I disagree with Hawke, I know he would never harbor a demon in his own home, and if you were a mage, you would have revealed yourself by now." My nose wrinkles at the last part because it just doesn’t sound right, but I quickly try to readopt a neutral expression. Sebastian smiles, and I know he caught it.

"Why did you really call me here?" Jean Luc would be so ashamed at my bluntness, but I can see this tea party going on and on and on. I’d rather not deal with the on and on and on if I can help it.

"You didn’t come to the Chantry," Sebastian says. "I thought you ought to see it."

"I’ve seen it." He doesn’t respond, looking at me expectantly. Finally, I add, “It’s very beautiful.” It is, even though the enormous statue at its heart is terrible unnecessary and just a tad bit frightening. Also, who’s the poor asshole who has to clean that thing? Bet nobody ever considers that poor kid.

"That didn’t sound like a compliment."

"Hawke did tell me it was opulent, but I hadn’t expected—"

Sebastian laughs, “Did he truly use the word ‘opulent’?” He sores up quickly, and before I can answer, says, “Perhaps it is that, but we are proud of our devotion.”

I wince at that. I don’t buy that at all. I mean, he sounds like he believes that’s the reason, but in the end, I think the reason’s pretty obvious. I don’t have to be from this world to understand the huge statue’s a show of power. I mean, that’s probably the reason this place scares me so much. It’s raised above everything else. It’s rich red everywhere. It just oozes wealth and influence. Which, you know, is a little shitty when places like Darktown and Lowtown exist.

"You don’t agree?" he prods, after I remain silent for too long.

"Where I’m from, pride’s sometimes considered a deadly sin, did you know?" Maybe I’d win back a few points with Jean Luc for being vague with that where I’m from bit. Probably not many, but every little bit counts, right? “Prince Vael,” I begin, “I don’t doubt your faith. I really don’t, but I don’t understand—” I stop because I know there's something going on here that I'm definitely not getting, but to me, it's really just coming out as hey you gotta have faith and believe just cause. My mom pulled this on me a lot before I moved out, and she always meant well. Still, that didn't make it any easier for me to swallow.

“I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” he says. That’s a nice sentiment. Really, it is. Thanks, man, for acknowledging that. Alright, so I might be hoping that admission means I can now leave. “I also don’t mean to make you feel as though I’m trying to make you believe as I do.” That’s exactly what’s happening right now, and I can hear the but even before he says it. “But I can’t shake the thought that you being here is the Maker’s Will.”

I sigh, and yes, it's terribly bad manners here and back home. But look. We’re back exactly where we were when we met the first time. Wonderful. “Alright,” I say. “That’s your belief, and you’re welcome to it.”

“You won’t even—” He stops, shakes his head. Neither of us has taken a sip of tea since we really started talking. “Might I ask what it is you do believe?” he asks.
“I don’t know if that’s a conversation one has over tea.”

“It’s a conversation we might have over tea,” he says, kindly.

I hesitate because there’s a tiny voice that sounds a lot like my high school humanities teacher saying *you’re not supposed to discuss religion at social gatherings because it’s a Terrible idea and also a hundred percent inappropriate.* “I believe there’s a God—a Maker,” I say, though I know I shouldn’t, “but I’m not certain he gives a damn about us.” He opens his mouth, eyes a little wide, and I continue, “As for prophets and such, I couldn’t say. I don’t put much faith in holy men or women.”

He sort of inserts himself in my spiel before I can say more, and boy oh boy, I want to say more now that I’ve gotten started. Well, maybe *want* isn’t the right word. I feel compelled to say more mostly because it’s hard to stop once you’ve gotten started. It’s funny. We both seem pretty desperate right now - me to explain my side and he to explain his. Though there seems to be more of a sense of urgency to his desperation, like something bad might happen if he doesn’t somehow get *me* to at least consider his viewpoint. This isn’t just him trying to convert some random person, I don’t think. But what do I know? This whole conversation’s just so awkward and maybe I’m overthinking. Anyway, he swiftly inserts, “Is the world such a bleak place to you?”

“Yes,” I say immediately. Then I start laughing because I’ve shocked him completely. I amend, “No, I guess I don’t. I mean, don’t get me wrong. I think this world is fairly terrible.” I inhale deeply, shaking my head, “Slavery’s still a huge problem, and no one seems to care at all about the suffering of anyone who’s not a noble. But there’s hope, I suppose.” I try not to sound as though I think I’m superior because it’s not like that at all. It’s gotta be nice to have faith, and I can see how it helps some people. But that’s not me. I guess I’m too much of a downer to believe in much of anything.

“Where do you see that hope?” his voice is very quiet, and he’s focused very intently on me.

“In people like Hawke,” I say. I laugh because it's pretty ridiculous. “I know that he doesn’t do it exactly because he’s trying to be *good*, and I know that he doesn’t exactly take anything seriously. But if someone asks for help, he just goes for it. Then, when the job’s done, he doesn’t ask for more than they can give. Me? I can’t give him anything, and he keeps helping me. Him and Varric and the whole lot of you actually.” I shrug without thinking, “This place is beautiful and all, but I don’t see it doing anything for anyone who’s not already devoted to Andraste.” The name does not come out of my mouth easily, let me tell you.

Sebastian picks up his teacup and takes a sip, “I see.” I don’t know if that’s a good or bad *I see.* I don’t bother with the tea. I knew from the moment Leandra passed me his invitation that it was going to be something like this, but I have to say, it's not as bad as I thought it'd be. Though, honestly, I would have much rather skipped this whole thing all together even so.

After he sets his cup down, I expect him to say something, but he doesn’t. I put my hands on my blue skirts, smoothing at the light fabric. “So, am I disappointing you yet?”

He laughs, “It’s actually quite the opposite.”

I blink. Really, I was sure he’d be done with me after the whole *God’s basically gone and our only hope’s a criminal mastermind and his dwarven sidekick who may or may not have named his crossbow and also all Hawke’s other weird friends.* “Next time, we can meet somewhere else,” he says.

I guess there's going to be a next time then. Huh. Okay.
He smiles and sets his cup in the saucer, turns the handle to face the right. I might be so shocked by the assumption of a future meeting that I stare a little too long. I catch myself, face hot, and focus my eyes on the pattern on the cup. I think it might be little sea creatures chasing a chalice? Maybe?

“I’m sorry,” he says. “It’s rather presumptuous of me to assume you’d like to do this again.”

“No, it’s fine,” I say, and I actually believe it when I say it.

He smiles, and he looks radiant all of a sudden, a lot less burdened and a bit boyish. “Good,” he says. He opens his mouth, a little noise escaping, and closes it again. He rests his palm flat on the table, “I did mention you to the Grand Cleric.”

I'm not sure how I feel about that, but I'm trying very hard to keep an open mind. Paranoia's there though, but again, trying really hard here to be cool with this. I don't want to flat out ask how much he told her because I'm not certain how much he himself knows, so I have to stick to the basic, "What did she say?"

“We're both of the same mind about you, that you have a purpose here that's yet to be revealed. I think it must be good - from what I've seen and heard of you so far.”


“Thank you, Lady de la Paz,” he says with a smile.

Orana plucks at the strings of her lute, trying to create a tune for one of the songs in the book Merrill loaned me. It's a collection of Dalish songs, and as interesting as they are, I know they'd be better if I could hear them sung. Orana’s of the same mind, though I do think she enjoys inventing her own tune for each even though she refuses to sing. She’s asked me, and I’ve refused twice. If she asks me one more time, I’ll probably feel enough compulsion to do it.

“Mana, please,” she says. There it is. The dam’s breaking. Fuck.

“Alright, alright,” I say. “Let the record state that I am not a great singer.”

Orana snorts at that, and I’m so happy that she does. I’ve been a little worried about her since I’ve been away from the estate a lot more lately. I still work with Aveline and Varric, and I now have a few ‘social engagements.’ Really, I’d rather be with Orana, but it does help, I think, to be busy. I don’t have as much time to feel sorry for myself.

She starts to pluck at the strings, testing a little and then falling into a melody she likes and thinks will work. I try and jump in, cradling the book in my lap, “Tighten the rig with the Hearthkeeper’s knot. Topsail, staysail, and main. The traces tie—Merrill!” The tune abruptly dies, and I wish I could go with it.

Merrill’s come into the library, grinning. “Oh, that’s not how it goes at all, but it was very lovely.”

“Can’t we just pretend you didn’t hear that?” Why is this becoming a cycle with me and Merrill? An insidious part of me adds, Why have I been here long enough to start having cycles with anyone? I pointedly ignore that shitty thought. Fuck you, bad vibes.

“Nope,” Merrill says cheerfully. “Orana, did you make that up?”

“I did,” she says, smiling softly. Her cheeks turn a little pink.
“It was wonderful, wasn’t it?” I say.

“Yes,” Merrill agrees, “and your singing, too. I didn’t know you could sing.” Merrill’s definitely being generous because my voice cracked at least twice. I mean, I can hold a tune, but I’m not signing up for American Idol anytime soon or anything. (Well, of course, I’m not, but ugh. Not thinking about being stuck here. Not doing it.)

“Could you show us how it goes?” I ask.

Merrill makes a face, “Oh, you don’t want me to sing it. I’m terrible.” Then she smiles a little and sits next to me on the couch. “This was Tamlen’s favorite song. He always managed to ruin something when he actually tried to help with the aravel’s, but when they asked us what we wanted to sing while we worked, he always begged, “Passing by! I want to sing Passing by!” She shakes her head as if to clear it, “I haven’t mentioned Tamlen, have I?”

“You haven’t,” I say, quietly because it seems like this moment calls for quiet voices.

“He was a member of my clan,” she says, though I think she knows we figured that out. Neither Orana or I say anything. “He went missing in Fereldan.” She stops, staring ahead but not really seeing. “Everyone’s sure he’s dead, but I have the eluvian he touched. Mahariel survived the Blight, and Tamlen’s nine times more stubborn than she is.” She looks at me and seems startled to see me sitting next to her, “Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to go on like that.”

“You really miss him, don’t you?” Orana says.

“Oh, yes,” Merrill says. “He and Mahariel were the only ones brave enough to tease me. Everyone else, they were nervous because I was studying with the Keeper, and Mahariel, she’s a Grey Warden.” The next part’s said almost too quietly to hear, “They were my friends.”

“I hope you find him,” I say, though it doesn’t feel like enough. “So, you know, you can introduce him to the friends you’ve met in Kirkwall.”

“He wouldn’t like you much at first,” Merrill admits, “only because you’re human. But you’re always so willing to read about the Dalish, I think he’d come around eventually.”

“What’s your favorite song?” Orana asks, after we’ve settled into a peaceful silence for a little while.

Merrill considers, “Mir Da’len Somnair.” She laughs, “I don’t think it’d be as hard to sing for you in Elvhen.” She shares a smile with Orana. “I can hum it first, and you can—” She motions with her hand, and Orana gets what she’s saying.

After a few tries, they manage it, and Merrill sings. I don’t know what it is about the moment. Maybe it’s because Merrill poured her heart out to us. Maybe it’s because she sang for us. Maybe I’m just having another moment. But regardless of the reason, once Merrill starts to sing, I begin to tear up.

Merrill and Orana are too focused on their music to notice, and I try to be stealthy, dabbing at my eyes lightly with the back of my hand. I’d used the fabric of my clothes, but considering the cost…

When Hawke finds us, we’ve moved on from music. We’re discussing my new least favorite topic: my new identity as Lady de la Paz, so when he comes in, relief floods in.

And true to form, Hawke draws the attention to himself without meaning to. “Merrill, what a
surprise,” he says. Then, with an out-turned lip, “How is it that you’ve never come to visit me?” He looks like a little kid being denied his favorite candy, and I don’t feel the least bit sorry for him.

“I never know if Anders will be here,” Merrill points out. Hawke makes a face. “It’s not that I don’t like him, Hawke. I just don’t want to be starting any fights between you. You always take sides, and —”

“Fair enough,” Hawke says with a wave of his hand. “But you ventured up here today. Any special reason?” From his tone, I know what special reason he’s thinking. Honestly. Why must we always —Right. Why am I even bothering to ask that question?

“Leandra won’t let me go to the Alienage,” I say.

“Oh, yes,” Hawke says. “Bit bad for appearances and all that.” He snorts and shakes his head then comes and plops down next to Orana. “Mother, sadly, is right this time. If you go into Lowtown, especially dressed like that, you’ll be up to you eyeballs in trouble before you could blink. Which would be a shame for the dress, so it’s best to not risk it.”

“I’ll keep that in mind, cousin,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“I love how you made that sound so disapproving,” he says. “Do it again.” Orana chuckles quietly, shaking her head at us.

“No can do. It’s a once-a-day sort of thing. Else you’ll get spoiled.”

“Fine, fine. Ruin my fun,” he grumbles, rubbing at his chin. “So you invited Merrill to the estate?” For the first time, I realize how rude that was of me. I mean, again, I’m living a lie here, and I don’t really have any right to invite people over or basically anything. It’s just that Leandra was so firm about me not going to see Merrill in the Alienage, even though I’d done so a few times already.

“Mana,” Hawke says suddenly, exasperated, “it’s not a problem. If you can’t go to her, have her come here.”

“Right,” I say.

“Yes, I am always right,” he says.


“I did come because Mana asked me to,” Merrill says. “But I also meant to talk to you, Hawke.” Orana stealthily rises, eyeing us for a moment with a little smile, and goes for the door. She gives me a little wave before she disappears completely. It’s about the time she usually starts dinner, I think.

“Oh no,” Hawke says. “What about? If it’s about the patrol, I didn’t do it. Aveline can put me to thumbscrews, but I won’t admit to anything.”

“I’m fairly certain she won’t need thumbscrews to make you admit anything,” I point out. He sticks his tongue out at me. Juvenile.

“Traitor,” he says. “My own blood, betraying me.” He fakes a sob, and without thinking, I toss one of Leandra’s embroidered pillows at him. He, of course, being a seasoned warrior with kickass reflexes, deflects. “And look!” he proclaims, standing, “More betrayal!”

“Oh, sit down before you strain something,” I say.

“Are you sure you two aren’t related?” Merrill pips.
We all laugh. “Dear God, I hope not,” I say.

“I resent that,” Hawke says. “We’ll continue this later.” He winks at me, and I can’t help but shake my head. “Sorry, Merrill. What is it that you wanted to talk to me about? Though I do stand by my comment about Aveline.”


“Oh?” Hawke says. “I thought he was doing well with your clan.”

“I did, too,” Merrill says, “but the Keeper was in the Alienage this morning. She was talking with Arianni.”

“Feynriel’s mother?” Hawke asks.

Nodding, Merrill continues, “I didn’t hear anything or ask, but Arianni came by my house later and gave me a letter she wanted me to pass to you.”

“Let me guess,” Hawke says dryly, “you may have peeked at said letter?”

“It was only a little peek!” Merrill says. “I’m sorry, Hawke. I was just curious to know what was going on with the clan.”

“Merrill, I’m not at all upset about it,” he says. “Though you might want to be careful about opening my mail. Some things I get are… well. I forward them to Varric for inspiration if that’s an indication.” He holds out his hand, “So can I see this mysterious letter?”

Merrill jerks into motion, slipping her hand into a pouch secured around her waist. She produces a crumpled letter and puts it in Hawke’s hands.

Hawke, without comment, smooths it out a little and opens it. He hums and makes faces as he reads, and I get the impression the show’s for us. Finally, he looks up, “So they think he’s having trouble with demons?” Hawke takes in a deep, exaggerated breath. “It’s always demons,” he mutters to himself. “Why can’t anyone have a problem with kittens? Or getting things off really high shelves?”

“We’re going to help him, aren’t we?”

“Oh, of course,” Hawke says, flippantly, as though no other thought had occurred to him. “Best not mention this to Fenris.” Yeah, even I know that, and I’m the newest new kid on the block.

In the morning, Aveline and I begin the tedious job of cataloging the first section of reviewed documents. We’ve gone through each and every page, confirmed their legitimacy, and now it’s time to make a list of them, put down some basic details, and finally put them away on their shelf.

Aveline tells me the information. I write it down. She puts it away. Our system works, especially once we’ve both gotten into the rhythm of it.

Which is why we’re both especially irritated when there’s a knock at the door. I swear Aveline mutters unhappily to herself, *Probably the seneschal.* I get the feeling that she sort of hates him at the moment. He’s eager to see us finish reorganizing everything, and he can’t understand why it’s taking us so long. Of course, since I’ve started dressing like a lady, he’s taken to saying that as passive aggressively as possible. But hey, passive aggression, that’s a language I understand completely.

It’s not, in fact, Seneschal Bran. It’s Hawke, and he looks a little rough around the edges. Which it to
be expected. He left with Merrill yesterday, saying he was going to get Varric and Anders, and he
didn’t return home that I know of. It’s not exactly alarming to me anymore. Sometimes his ‘jobs’
keep him out all night.

“Hawke,” Aveline says.

“You’re looking lovely today,” Hawke says.

“And you’re looking like shit,” Aveline says, bluntly. “What are you up to?”

“Me?” Hawke says, offended. “Currently nothing. I’m just pursuing a curiosity.” Curiosity is
definitely not the word he meant, and I admit my interest’s piqued even though heaven knows I
should stay as far away from Hawke’s affairs as possible. You know, for my personal health and all
that.

“Well, could you pursue it elsewhere, Hawke? We’re in the middle—”

“Sadly, I can’t,” Hawke says. “It’s important.” He gives Aveline a look, and whatever Aveline sees
in his face makes her give.

“Fine,” she says. “We can finish this tomorrow, Lady de la Paz.” She’s in on it, too, just for the
record. “Maker preserve me,” I hear her mutter as we exit the room.

I’m trying very hard not to think about this because I can already feel my hopes rising, and it’s a bit
ridiculous that I’m still falling for this same trap. So, I ask Hawke, “What’s going on?”

“Something happened last night,” Hawke says. “It was very weird, and I have to ask you strange
questions now. Sorry, it’s not about the—” He glances around and wiggles his fingers. “Let’s not
discuss it here.”

My brow furrows, and I can’t help but cross my arms. Because that was vague, and I can’t imagine
how I’m involved with anything.

One of the newer guards, Lia, steps over tentatively “Is there a problem?” she asks, looking between
Hawke and I.

I wave her off with a smile, trying to seem very sure of myself and calm even though, yeah, calm.
Still not my thing. “No, everything’s fine,” I say. “There’s just a personal matter I have to attend to.”
Now, doesn’t that sound like I know exactly what I’m doing with noble self? As soon as Lia gets far
enough away, Hawke snorts.

“‘A personal matter’,” he repeats in disbelief.

“You’re such a dick,” I grumble. “Come on.” I nudge him towards the door, impatiently, because I
don’t like where this is going, but I also don’t like not knowing. How is it that I’m still hoping a little
even though he said it didn’t have to do with the—well, he didn’t actually say what it didn’t have to
do with, because he can’t. Still, I knew what he meant. Yet. Here I am. Still hoping a little. I’m
ridiculous.

When we enter the foyer, I immediately know something’s very off. There’s a crowd waiting by the
fireplace, and there are two faces I don’t know. There are a few I do know, of course. There’s
Varric, Merrill, and Anders. Also, as soon as we got inside the door, Hawke put his hand on my
back and propelled me forward. Does he think I’m going to run? Better question: should I be
running? I think I might just need to be.

Still, I put on my brave face, or whatever and go along with it. This is Hawke, and if Hawke was going to kill me, I’m assuming he would have done it already. Key word: assuming.

So I’m cataloging what’s wrong here, right? There’s a weird crowd, unfamiliar faces, a hand on my back. Last straw? One of said unfamiliar faces, an elf with a hella strong jawline, looks really fucking shocked to see me. I know I throw expletives around like nobody’s business, but honestly, this time it’s necessary. He looks fucking, drop-dead, spank my ass and call me Susan shocked.

“All right,” Hawke says. “So she is the one you were talking about?”

“Yes,” the elf says over Hawke finishing his question. He does flush, embarrassed by his quick response. Me? I’m so confused, and everyone’s staring at me so intently, I sort of want to curl myself in a ball and throw myself into the fireplace.

“Allright,” I say, mimicking the way Hawke’s started the conversation. “How am I the one you were talking about?”

“She’s not a mage,” another elf says. Her accent’s a lot like Merrill’s, and she has vallaslin on her face.

“I told you she wasn’t, Keeper,” Merrill says. She sounds a little hurt, and though that certainly upsets me, it upsets me more that I have absolutely no idea what I’ve stepped in. Whatever the hell it is, it feels huge, and I want out.

“What does it mean then?” Hawke says, exasperated, looking at Anders.

“Why are you looking at me?” Anders replies, crossing his arms.

I inhale, exhale, and do the logical thing. I count down from fifteen. I’d have counted down from ten, but I can’t even begin to tell you how much of a difference those five seconds make.

“Allright there, Pebbles?”

After I finish counting, I turn to him. “If you tell me what the hell is going on, I’ll be closer to alright.”

“I saw you in the Fade,” strong-jaw elf says. I stare at him, slowly squinting to see if I recognize him. Of course, I don’t.

“Right,” I say, finally. “Who are you exactly?”

It’s silent for a moment, then Varric’s laughing. Anders jabs him with a shoulder, and because of their height difference, ow, it looks like it caught him in the neck? I mean, it was…sorta fair but still. While this isn’t a time for laughter, it certainly isn’t the time to jab your friends in the throat.

Let it be known that I might take that back shortly depending on how this conversation goes.

“Well she doesn’t have a clue about it, Hawke,” Varric mutters, looking at Hawke.

“Whoops,” Hawke says to me, seemingly not hearing Varric’s mutterings. “This is Feyniel. And Keeper Marethari.”

Well, the picture’s slightly clearer. These are the people that Hawke was doing a job for last night. I probably should have figured that out, but stress.
“Nice to meet you,” I say. I’m met with blank stares, and though unnerved by the response, I press on, ignoring the fact that they’re eyeing me like a bomb that’s ready to explode or something like that. I don’t know these people. I don’t know what their odd glances are trying to say. “So what’s going on exactly?”

“Well,” Hawke says. “It’s like Feynriel says. He saw you in the Fade.” When he doesn’t continue, I squint at him a little. He puts his hands up in surrender. “Oh Maker, this is such a mess. Alright, so us mages? We draw power from the Fade. The Fade’s…complicated, but almost everyone has a connection to it. Even you, apparently, though I wasn’t sure considering—” He trails but, when he opens his mouth to continue, he’s cut off.

“Considering?” Keeper Marethari prompts.

Apparently, she caught onto that last bit. Though it wasn’t as if it wasn’t obvious.

“Considering she’s not from this world,” Anders finishes. Keeper Marethari’s gaze quickly turns to Merrill, and Anders, strangely, rushes to add. “She’s not a demon! She’s from a different world than this one, than the Fade. There’s no magic there.”

“Yes, yes,” Hawke says, impatiently. “She’s not a demon. She’s from another world. As I was saying, the Fade. Mages are sometimes feared because when we draw our power from the Fade, it sometimes attracts demons. Apparently, Feynriel’s particularly good at this.”

“He is somniari, a dreamer,” Keeper Marethari says, though she’s looking right at me. “He may enter the Fade at his digression, and he has been attracting increasingly powerful demons.”

“He’s at greater risk in other words than your average mage,” Hawke explains. “That’s why we went to the Sundermont, because the Keeper was concerned about confronting Feynriel without support.”

“They thought he was possessed,” Anders adds.

“But I wasn’t,” Feynriel says, petulantly.

“Yes,” Varric says with a snort. “You’ve made that very clear, kid.”

I’m still not seeing where I fit into this, and I feel like we’re nearing the end the explanation. Which means, of course, I’m included in the finale or something like that. And I’m so not excited at all.

“We needed to be sure,” Keeper Marethari says. “I cannot risk the clan.”

Feynriel nods once, sharply.

“So we went on a merry jaunt into the Fade,” Hawke says. “And can you guess what we found?” He waits for a reply, but I couldn’t open my mouth and speak for anything right now.

“You have to remember,” Hawke says. “We entered the Fade late in the evening. By the time I pried Anders away from the clinic and fetched Varric, it was late.”

By now, everyone’s staring at me. There’s a sort of pressure in the air, and maybe that’s what compels me to reply. “Right,” I say, nodding.

“You must have been asleep,” he begins. “When you sleep, sometimes you drift into the Fade.”

“You saw me there,” I guess. I feel disconnected from my body.
Hawke regards me with a tilted head, “We did.”

“It was like when I met Justice,” Anders says. Honestly, I only have a vague understanding of Anders and Justice and their history. “There was a mage who managed to create a barrier in the Fade, trapping a town’s worth of souls.” He looks at me seriously. “You’d done something similar.” He winces, “Not the trapping souls bit but—”

“Me?” I choke out, before he can go on, because I’m stuck on the idea of me being able to do anything at all with the Fade much less trapping the souls of a town. Hell, I only have a very vague idea what the Fade even is. “I’m not a mage!”

“Yes, it doesn’t make sense,” Hawke says. “For a moment, I thought you’d managed to trick us.” He looks a bit apologetic to say it but quickly continues. “But when we were in the Fade, you didn’t notice us at all. You were terribly boring, I’m sorry to say. You sat quietly. You stared into the mirror. You looked out into the distance off your balcony. Really, the most interesting thing was the architecture.”

“It was Elvhen,” Merrill says. I hadn’t noticed, but she hasn’t spoken in a while. “The mirror, an eluvian.”

“I’ve been borrowing your books,” I point out. Because I must have simply dreamed it all up. That’s literally the only thing that would make any of this make sense. I’m so confused about all of this that I don’t even worry about the fact those book exchanges were supposed to be our secret.

“It wasn’t my eluvian and—”

“I know you want answers, Merrill, but let it be for a moment,” Hawke says. Merrill looks furious at the suggestion but nods.

“Alright,” I breathe out. “I created a weird space in the Fade.”

“Not just a space,” Anders says, gently. “I meant what I said. It was almost just like before, only more impressive honestly. You created a city, more elaborate than the last barrier I saw, and—and it was cut off from the rest of the Fade.”

“See, that’s the issue,” Hawke says. “Sort of.”

“There was a door,” Feynriel says. “I was…running from the demons. There’s one of sloth that keeps following me, Torpor.” He looks into my face as though searching for something. “I was trying to resist, but it keeps finding me. He always finds—found me. When I came across the door to your city, I banged on it for hours.”

“Well—” Hawke begins. Feynriel glares at him. Hawke quickly explains, “Time and space and, well, all of that, it doesn’t matter so much in the Fade. He says hours, but—nevermind. Shutting up.”

“Torpor found me,” Feynriel says. “I thought—I wanted to give up, because it’s probably the hundredth time he’s found me, but the door opened. You were standing there, staring at me like you couldn’t see me. I thought you were a spirit. Then you waved me inside. I went in, and I thought Torpor would follow, but he didn’t.”

“Feynriel can come and go at will now,” Anders says. “And us, too.” He pauses, “We didn’t actually have trouble getting into the city in the first place.”

“Well, I am family,” Hawke says. He looks at me, and I must look unsteady because he puts his hands on my shoulders. “I don’t know that it’s alright, but—you don’t need to look so scared.” Do I
look scared? I can’t puzzle out what I’m feeling at all. “I do need to ask you to come through with
us. You weren’t exactly aware last time, and I’d like to see what happens when we bring you into
the city while you’re awake.”

I laugh a little, even though I feel seven-thousand shades of unsteady, “So I’m just doing this to
satisfy your sick curiosity?”

“Something like that,” he says with a smile. It drops after a few minutes, “It’s just very odd, what
you’ve managed to do. I’m not entirely sure it’s safe for you, but then again, I’m not sure how you’re
even doing it in the first place if you’re not a mage.”

“If you go in, maybe you’ll sense something,” Merrill says. She no longer looks angry. “It is your
city.”

My city. Right.

Chapter End Notes

I should say I brought out my copy of World of Thedas 2 for this chapter and pulled
some lyrics from some Dalish songs. Not the entire songs, of course, because I didn’t
see the point of including the whole thing, but the lyrics that do appear here are just as
they appear in WoT. Also I, like Mana, find the Fade and theories of magic a little
complicated, so I’m happily and purposefully winging it when it comes to the facts
about magic, etc. Just a heads up. And finally, it should be noted that unlike in the game,
Feynriel (who has traveled down the Dalish route) never returned to the Alienage. He
was at the Sundermount, at Hawke says, and never left the clan. He was confronted
there and then went straight to Hawke’s estate to meet Mana.
Anyway, Here's the City

Chapter Summary

Mana's Fade adventure and the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

Thanks again to Senei for being an awesome beta.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When I appear in the Fade, I appear alone, and I’m in a room with glittering mosaic on the ceiling and the door. There’s this weird yellowish sort of tinge to everything, like a film’s been dropped over my eyes. But, you know, I mostly notice that I’m alone.

I can’t call out immediately. My mouth just doesn’t want to cooperate or whatever, and I have to close my eyes and try one of those breathing exercises. I inhale and hold and exhale. I still feel like a mess of nerves, so I do it again. And again. Finally, I croak out, “Hawke?” I clear my throat and try again, louder, “Hawke!” I wait for a response and get none.

I try Merrill. I try Feynriel. I wait and cycle through their names once more and get nothing. Again. I do it one more time before I feel really pathetic and embarrassed. I stop, considering what I should do.

It sort of occurs to me that I should be paying a tiny bit more attention to the surroundings. Everyone kept making it seem as though I had some great influence on this place (I’m just sort of sidestepping the idea that it’s mine, I guess), and it really felt like they were hoping something would happen to me if I appeared here awake. I strain my ears, squint, and attempt to figure out if I do actually feel anything.

It’s a bit hard to gauge honestly. I feel wired, but that’s mostly nerves. I was scared by the conversation before, and I was doubly scared appearing here, all by my lonesome. It’s just impossible to judge my emotional state, and as for the rest, I don’t really know what’s usual for the Fade. I mean, there’s the weird yellow tinge to everything, and the air feels strange, but is that a me thing or a Fade thing?

I groan and rub my hands down my face, feeling frustrated. I had sort of secretly hoped nothing would happen when I appeared here, but now that I’m here alone, I sort of wish I did have something. Preferably an innate sense of this place that would lead me straight to Hawke and Co.—that or wine.

I’m not going to lie though. There’s a part of me, the itty bitty part of me, that really wants to chill here and check out this place. Because it is pretty cool, and there’s still a little bit of an adventurer in me yet, and this is not at all like anything I’ve ever seen before. Which makes sense. Merrill did say it was Elvhen.
Sadly, that itty bitty part of me’s just going to have to deal with disappointment. First order of business is very obvious. I’ve gotta find my people. I don’t know how to get out of the Fade without them, and as neat as the architecture is, this place is a little creepy. Some of the furniture in this room, for example, is floating. Not just hovering in the air but drifting slightly, too. I try to get it to stop with my mind, you know because I'm supposed to have influence or something, but the chair keeps on drifting.

Gravity, apparently, isn’t a thing. Which, alright, *that’s* kinda neat. But it’s odd because it doesn’t seem to apply to everything here. *I’m* not floating, thank God. The chair’s floating but not the table it’s paired with.

My brow furrows for the second I spend trying to puzzle it out, but I give up pretty quickly. Hawke. I’ve got to find Hawke.

I practically run to the mosaicked door to open it. The room opens to a hallway, decorated only by a line of lanterns.

“Hawke,” I call, cupping my hands around my mouth to help project my voice. I consider a direction to proceed now that I’m out of the room. *Left*, I decide when I call again for Hawke and don’t get a response. All I’ve got to go on right now is luck. I head left, calling periodically for everyone.

“Merrill? Feynriel?” I snort, mutter to myself in a higher pitched voice, “Anybody?” This really, at its core, is like the beginning of every horror movie ever.

I open every door I come across, but all the rooms are empty. Well, empty of people. Every one I’ve come across so far has been well furnished, as if the occupant had just stepped out for a moment.

Eventually, I do manage to find a staircase up, and it seems as good an option as any, I suppose. It’s definitely meant to impress, and for about half a second, I feel a little bad for criticizing the opulence of the Chantry at tea with Sebastian. This staircase? Proof that I’m apparently very into opulence. But the Fade’s basically a dream world, right? So I feel like I can let myself off the hook.

“Hawke?” The sound echoes, but the rhythm of the echoes are odd. I shudder at the sound and start climbing. Of course, no one answers.

When I reach the first landing, I realize it’s just that. I’m not on another floor. It’s just a landing, and I’m already feeling tightness across my chest. My calves, too, don’t seem to like this, and I can’t wrap my head around the fact that my bodily limitations are still a thing in the Fade.

I feel like if I can make a city in the Fade—without realizing it even—I should be able to handle stairs in said Fade city.

After a few minutes, I start on the next set of stairs and thankfully reach the next floor. It’s when I start down the corridor, that I hear it.

A door closes.

“Hawke?” I say, tentatively. I wince, “Oh, Mana. You are so the first person to die in this movie.”

“Hello?” someone calls. Feynriel peeks out from a door and then relief flashes across his face. Me? Alright, I sort of feel so much relief that I run over to him without thinking. It feels like it’s been hours since I’ve seen someone. I know in the Fade time’s not the same, but whatever.

Of course, relief gives way to reality, and I realize I’m basically right in his face. I take a step back. “Sorry,” I say, holding my hands up in surrender because that seems like a thing I should do. “It’s
just really nice to see another person finally.”

“Have you been wandering around this whole time?” he asks, skeptical. And maybe with a little touch of horror.

“Yes?” I say. “I’ve been calling for Hawke and Merrill—and you. But no one answered. I just sort of picked a direction and started looking around in the hopes that I’d bump into someone.”

Feynriel opens his mouth, eyes widening as he looks at me, before he closes it again. He crosses his arms, “Right.”

“Have you seen Hawke or Merrill?”

He shakes his head, “I’m not sure where they ended up. I appeared at the lake and made my way here.” He makes it sound so logical, but I’m not entirely certain where here is. Also, apparently there’s a lake?

“Where is ‘here’ exactly?” I ask. I feel a little bad to be hounding him with so many questions, but I can’t see any way around it.

“I can’t believe you don’t—” he begins right away. “Nevermind. We’re in the palace.” How big is this city exactly? Palace sort of makes it take on some enormity, and I had figured the city was a couple of buildings, some bushes, and maybe one main road. You know, a one post office, one fire station, one big building to handle important administration shit sort of city—or, I suppose, more accurately, I was thinking this place was more of a town than a city.

“The…palace,” I say, slowly. Okay, Sleeping Me, why did you build an Elvhen city with a palace? I ask this, but I’m really starting to bank on the idea that I didn’t make this place at all. What need would I have for a palace?

Feynriel turns red in the face.

“Well, that’s what I’ve been calling it. If you could see it from one of the towers, you’d say so, too.” Oh, look, he’s petulant, too. I hold up my hands in surrender.

“Allright,” I say. “You’d know better than me.”

“We should make our way to the eluvian,” he says, though he sorts of trips over the word ‘eluvian’ like he’s never used it before. “That’s what we came here for.” Is it really? I thought this was basically an exploratory mission.

“Do you think Hawke and Merrill can find it?”

He considers, “I’m not sure. They managed to find me last night, but I don’t know where they started from this time. It’s easy to get lost in here.”

I nod, biting my lip. I turn the information in my head and decide it’s best to continue to the eluvian. I feel like it’ll just end in disaster if we go on a hunt for Hawke and Merrill since we have no idea where they might be. Also, Merrill’s very excited about the eluvian, so hopefully she makes it there through pure force of excitement.

“Let’s just go to the eluvian,” I suggest. Feynriel looks at me for a beat too long before he nods. He starts heading further down the hallway, and I follow, glad that I no longer have to navigate.
The eluvian’s basically a mirror. Not even basically. It is a mirror. A giant one with a lancet arch. It’s also set in an utterly, ridiculous stone base. There are carvings in said base that I’m assuming are lyrium. They shine blue even through the yellow-green tinge of the Fade. I’ve seen lyrium in potion form because Hawke’s a mage and, more importantly, a very unrefined noble. He’s always dropping things on the dining room table he’s not supposed to.

I’m a little scared to touch it, honestly, because this. I can sort of feel something. Not a big something, but it’s like the air in this room is charged. It feels a lot like it does right before you shock yourself after you’ve build up too much static electricity. Not too pleasant of a feeling. I’m leaving it alone for now.

Stepping away, I go to check out what else there is to see in this room. The room itself is round with a really great balcony area, the kind I would have killed for back home, and the furniture’s nice and lends itself to the idea that this is a sort of reading room. Or maybe a room for entertaining guests. I feel like I should know, but even being here, I still have nothing.

“Hawke’s been here,” Feynriel says, picking up something from the table across from the eluvian. “He left a note: If you find this, stay put. We’re out looking for you, but knowing our luck, you’ll find your way here while we’re out searching. Merrill says you should see if you can figure out what the thingy on the table does. The table in the balcony, mind, not this table which obviously only cradles my loving missives to you. Obviously by you, I mean Feynriel because if I gave loving missives to Mana that might be…well, how far removed are we as cousins again?” Feynriel ears pink, and as soon as he’s done, he drops it on the table.

For his sake, I suggest we go to the balcony to go see about this ‘thingy.’

From the balcony, I can see the lake. Also, there’s apparently a pretty substantial hunk of rock floating in the air, from which a waterfall is pouring water out into the open air. Damn, that’s actually really cool but also ridiculously surreal.

“You like to sit up here,” Feynriel says suddenly. I turn and see that he’s standing by the table with the ‘thingy.’

“I do?” I say, vaguely aware of what he’s said, as I approach the table. I’m a little distracted by my examination of the odd ‘thingy.’ It looks sort of like a globe, only it seems to be made of a dark metal, and there’s no landmasses painted on it. Instead, there’s some delicate carvings. And also something sticking out of it from an odd angle, another hunk of metal. I brush my fingers along the gold base, which seems the safest part to touch.

Figure 1: Why Mana Should Never Trust Her Assumptions.

The whole thing flares up with a bright green energy, bursting outward and then retracting. The size of this green aura (not sure at all what to call it) fluctuates a little and starts to spin around an invisible axis. It doesn’t disappear. Rather, it hums and continues spinning, intent on staying…active. I slowly retract my hand, a little afraid it might do something else. I look at Feynriel’s face. He seems as shocked as me, and let me tell you, I’d thought the time for hardcore shocking was over for me. Kirkwall keeps topping everything it throws at me.

“Whoops?” I say, quietly, more to myself than to him. “Tell me it’s done that before?”

“No,” he choked out. Then, with narrowed eyes, he adds, “You’ve never actually touched it before.”

And thanks for warning me, Other Me. It really feels like I’ve fucked up, but I don’t see an off switch on this thing. So here I am, stuck with my mistakes. Wonderful.
“Can you tell what it’s doing?” I ask.

“You don’t know?”

“I really don’t,” I say, and I’m trying very hard not to be annoyed. It’s not really him I’m annoyed with. If he’s seen me here before, of course he thinks I should know where things are and what these strange glowing magical objects do. Hell, to some degree, I feel like I’m supposed to know, too. But I don’t. It’s very frustrating to know I’ve somehow been leading a double life. Another one! As if being Lady de la Paz wasn’t hard enough.

Also, it’s frustrating that this double life’s been taking place in a place significantly quieter than Kirkwall—and, from what I’ve seen so far, less dangerous. I haven’t meet a single scary thing here.

Not to say I’d really rather stay here in the Fade. I like the sun very much, thank you. And as much of a pain as gravity is, I can count on it, you know?

“It’s…doing something,” Fenyriel says. No kidding?

“No kidding? “I don’t know.” He lips thin to a line, “This is your city.”

“Is it?” I ask, finally starting to voice the thought that’s been forming since I got here.

“Darling, I’ve returned!” Hawke calls, bursting through the door. No, honestly, it sort of sounds like he kicked it in.

“Hawke,” I say, relief basically dripping from my voice.

“So how many times removed is it?” he says, coming out to the balcony. It takes me a while to realize he’s talking about the note he left, but I don’t even have to answer because he quickly notices what I’ve done. “Oh,” he says, stopping. “Andraste’s Knickers. What did you do?”

“Oh!” Merrill says, zipping past Hawke to come up close. “You’ve activated it.”

“You know what it is?” I really hope that she does. I’m full-up on mysteries at the moment.

She looks at me and shakes her head, still looking pretty joyful despite not knowing. “I don’t,” she admits. “But if it’s here, it must be Elvhen, and you’ve gotten it to work.”

“So none of us know what the glowy Elvhen thing does?” Hawke says slowly. “That’s definitely not going to be a problem in the future.” The last part is muttered in disbelief, and I’m prone to agree with him.

“I didn’t mean to,” I say weakly. “I just touched it.”

Hawke shakes his head, pats me on the shoulder, “Well, we’ve all touched things we shouldn’t have.”

“Really?” I grumble, but I ruin it by laughing. Merrill’s brow furrows.

“Was that supposed to be dirty?” she asks.

“Don’t be fooled,” Hawke crows. “She may look like a lady, but she’s got a mind like a Hawke.”

“I think you just insulted yourself,” Feynriel points out.

“Did not,” Hawke argues. “I wasn’t insulting her. I was just pointing out the facts.”
“Here’s a fact for you,” I say, trying to put us back on topic. I mean, talk about an elephant in the room. This one? It’s green and spinning. “I turned on something magical, and I feel like I shouldn’t be able to do that.”

“You shouldn’t,” Hawke says. “You shouldn’t have a city here, either, but it’s here.” He grins, “Here and humongous. I’m glad we ended close by rather than out at the gates. It’d taken hours to hike back from the outer parts of the city.”

“Hours?” Feynriel says, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

“What do you want from me?” Hawke whines. “It would have seemed like hours anyway. No time in the Fade. I know, I know. Are you going to make me qualify everything now?”

“I might,” Feynriel mumbles.

“Do you think you can activate the eluvian?” Merrill says. “If you can do this, surely—”

“Is that safe, Merrill?” Hawke asks, seriously. Merrill and he exchange a heated glance, and Hawke amends, “I didn’t say anything. We just don’t know anything about this place. It’s weird. Even you admitted it was weird. We can’t be sure it’s safe.”

“We can’t just leave it here,” Merrill says. “Mine’s still not fixed, but maybe, if I see this one working, I can—”

“If you, no Mana, can get it working—”

“I can try, too,” she says.

“No,” Hawke says. “You can’t call on the demon here.” Merrill doesn’t like that, and I can tell they’re about to really get into it.

“Hold up,” I cut in. They stop and stare at me. “I’ve got some concerns.”

Hawke snorts, “I’ve got like thirty.”

“This isn’t a competition, cousin,” I shoot back. “Anyway, concerns.” I lick my lips, considering what all I wanted to lay out. “I don’t think I made this place.” Feynriel opens his mouth, and I quickly continue, “It doesn’t make sense. I’ve never seen architecture like this before, and I don’t have magic. Also, I’ve only been here—well Kirkwall—for a little while. How is this even possible in such a short time?”

“Well,” Hawke says, “it is the Fade. So time.” He shrugs. “But the architecture’s definitely a mystery.”

“You activated the artifact,” Merrill says, excited again. “I touched it before and nothing happened.”

“You knew where everything was before,” Feynriel says. “You never spoke to me, but you’d just start walking to places, expecting me to follow. You never took a wrong turn. I know you knew where you were going.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” I say. “There’s no Fade on Earth.” I mean, at least that I know of, but I feel like that’s not a thing. Right? Oh fuck. Here I go questioning everything I know about everything, even my own home. “Time or no, could you do this with the magic you have?”

“No way,” Hawke says. “Not even sure how you got the barrier up.” Feynriel looks grumpy, and
Merrill looks like she’s very deep in thought. Hawke sighs. “Look, it doesn’t matter.” Merrill’s head shoots up. “Hear me out,” he says, holding up a hand. “We can talk in circles, but we’re never going to figure it out without some more clues. Maybe there’s something here. It’s a city, and from what we’ve seen, it’s actually made to be functional. There could be records or—something. We can look later.”

“We can?” I ask. Oh great, more research. As if finding the foci wasn’t task enough.

“Well, we can,” he amends. “Mages are more aware when they dream. We’d have to pull you through like this again if you wanted to help. Or find a way to wake you.”

“Right,” I say, not sure if the second option is a great idea.

“Can you at least try to get the eluvian to work, Mana?” Merrill asks. Oh, shit. She went over Hawke’s head to ask me, and he’s giving me a disapproving look. I hate this.


When I touch the eluvian, I’m expecting a shock, but it doesn’t come. In fact, nothing happens at first. Merrill steps closer, putting her hand on it and begins muttering to herself. Hawke, I can see in the mirror, comes closer with his eyes narrowed. After another moment, it’s clear nothing is still happening.

I pull my hand away, and that’s when I feel it. “Ow,” I mumble, jerking my hand away.

“What?” Hawke says, alarmed.

“It—” I try to think of a way to describe it. “I don’t know. It felt like I was stuck for a minute, and then when I pulled away, it tried to pull me back.” I shake my hand to clear the pain.

“Don’t touch it again,” he says.

“Hawke,” Merrill says, clearly disapproving.

“She said ‘ow’!” Hawke says. “That doesn’t sound very good to me, and I don’t like it. No more for today.”

“Oh, just let me try it again,” I say. Mostly because of Merrill’s face. Also, a little because I’m now also curious to know what this thing does. Merrill talks about it often, and I feel a little obligated since it clearly only wants to react to me for whatever reason.

I feel silly, but I try really hard to focus on it working. Intent’s a thing with magic, right? Maybe. I don’t try to pull away for a while, and it’s Hawke that finally grabs my arm and pulls me away from it. Nothing’s changed about it. Merrill’s hands drop to her sides, and she looks disappointed.

Me? I take one step away from the damn thing, and I feel like I’m about to drop from exhaustion. Which, ha, aren’t I technically sort of sleeping?

“You alright?” Hawke asks.

“I don’t know what it did,” I say, “but I’m pretty sure it did something to me.”

“Of course it did,” Hawke says. “I should have made Varric come. He’d have talked you out of this. Shit, Pebbles, you think touching the magic mirror that hurt you the first time a second time’s a good
“Maybe you should sit down?” Feynriel suggests, maneuvering to my free side. He and Hawke help me to the sit by the table with Hawke’s note. I feel a little light-headed.

“Mana, are you alright?” Merrill says. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think you’d be hurt. I just—”

“I don’t know that I am hurt,” I say. “I just feel tired. Really tired like I could sleep for a hundred years.” Even as I say this, my eyes droop against my will, and I have to struggle very hard to stay awake.

“Well, you’re not doing that,” Hawke says. “You’ve got to wake up, so we can lecture you. Anders is going to be pissed. I told him he should have come along, but he said we’d be fine.”

“Why didn’t he want to come in the first place?” I hadn’t really gotten a chance to ask before. Varric declared he didn’t want in, looking uncomfortable, and then Anders and Hawke went off in a corner for a few seconds to discuss it. When they returned to the group, Hawke said it would be us and Merrill and Feynriel. I was a little too freaked out to ask about the arrangement.

Hawke hesitates, “In the Fade, Justice comes to the surface more easily, and Anders doesn’t particularly like for anyone to see him like that.”

I rest my head on Hawke’s shoulder which isn’t actually that comfortable, but I’m that tired. “I still don’t get that,” I mutter. “Justice is a spirit, right?”

“Right,” Hawke says, patting my arm. “He managed, somehow, to get stuck in a body. He wanted to go back to the Fade but couldn’t. Then he had to… evacuate his body, and he had nowhere to go. I think Anders was afraid of what might happen to him if he was bodiless on the wrong side of the Veil. He offered to take Justice in.”

“Mmm,” I hum, to indicate I’ve heard.

“Stay with me, cousin,” he says. I’m trying but it’s an impossible task just keeping my eyes open.

“How are we going to get out of here?”

“The spell eventually wears off,” Hawke says. “I can actually feel it a little, the pull. It'll break soon.” He doesn’t sound very reassured, and me? I don’t feel a pull or anything like that.

“What else is there?” I ask, turning my head a little to look at Feynriel. God, I really want to sleep, but I don’t want to disappoint Hawke. And I feel like sleep is a terrible idea. Very terrible. Do not do it, Mana.

“To the city?” Feynriel guesses. “It’s got everything. There’s baths by the lake, a courtyard with gardens in the east part of the palace—”

Hawke laughs, “This is a palace?” He jostles me a little, “Well, look at you. Maybe you are a lady after all.”

I barely hear it. The conversation, to my ears, sounds very slow. I close my eyes for a second because the odd yellow-light isn’t doing it for me. Just for a second, I tell myself. Just a second and then I’ll open them and soon the spell will—
weight on my legs. I lift my head a little, and sure enough, Warbrain’s curled up over me. His ears perk up at my movement, and he jerks his massive head up and stares at me. He barks once.

“Hey hey hey,” I say, putting my head back down. I hear him jump from the bed, and he comes up to the head of the bed, putting his face right up next to my face. Dog breath. Also known as one of the reasons I prefer cats. Still, he’s a sweet little bugger, and it’s nice to see someone so excited that I’m awake.

“How long have I been asleep?” I ask, patting his head.

He barks three times.

“Three days?” I guess.

He barks again, and I pet him, deciding that might have been a yes. I’ll have to ask a talking-person to confirm, but I don’t doubt that Warbrain knows what I was asking.

The door bursts open, and Feynriel almost falls inside. “Hello,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck, before turning and glaring (or I’m assuming that’s what he did) at Hawke. I try and sit up with some difficulty and see that Anders is also with them. They all come inside the room.

“So was it three days or is my mabari a little rusty?” I ask.

Hawke grins, “Nope. It was three days, and guess what, you’re still in trouble.” He winces, “Beware of mother. She’s not terrible happy about it. Though I should say she’s mostly angry at me for even letting you go into the Fade in the first place.”

“I still can’t believe you let Merrill—” Anders begins, coming over to the side of the bed. He shoos Warbrain away and puts his hands out over me, concentrating. It feels sort of tingly, but I don’t protest. “Still fine,” he says, pulling away.

“I was fine before?”

He looks hard at me, “There wasn’t anything wrong with you.”

“But you wouldn’t wake up,” Feynriel says.

“Yes,” Hawke agrees. “And he refused to leave.” He jerks a thumb in Feynriel’s direction.

“You didn’t exactly go anywhere either,” Anders points out.

“Neither did you. And I live here!”

“Children, children,” I mumble. “Please be quiet..er.” I rub at my temples. I don’t exactly have a headache, but there’s definitely some tension there. “Oh,” I say, thinking suddenly of Aveline and our project, “I haven’t been to the Keep in three days.” Strange that that’s the first time that came to mind, the first worry I have.

Hawke throws his hands up, “That’s what you have to say?” I offer him an unimpressed look because I don’t know if moving my head is a good idea right this second. “Don’t worry. I sent out word that you were sick.”

“Even though there was nothing wrong with you,” Anders adds.

“Do you remember—?” Feynriel trails off.
“I remember going into the Fade, and everything right after I touched the eluvian and conked out.” He nods.

“I’m going back to the Sundermount then,” he says. He hesitates, “I’ll see you.”

“Bye,” I say to his back as he disappears out the door. “Um? What was that about?”

“During those three days?” Hawke says. “You appeared once in the Fade. We were watching out for you, but it was like before. You didn’t hear or see or speak to us, it seemed like, and then you walked very purposefully into a chamber in the bottom level of the…palace. And locked the door.”

“That’s weird,” I say. “Sorry, I’ve got nothing else. I don’t remember dreaming anything at all, not that I did before.”

“No kidding,” he says. “I think Feynriel was worried you wouldn’t even remember your ‘waking’ time in the Fade.” He grins, “He’s pretty fond of you.”

“Oh don’t say it like that,” I say.

“I say what I like,” he says, “especially to cousins who don’t know better than to touch weird Elvhen artifacts that hurt them.”

“Why did you touch it a second time?” Anders says, crossing his arms.

Okay, so it seems very stupid now, in hindsight, after being asleep for three days. “It didn’t hurt that much the first time,” I say. “And Merrill really—”

“I wouldn’t exactly be taking lessons in personal safety from Merrill,” Anders cuts in.

I don’t really like that, and I frown and try to figure out what to say in response. “I just wanted to see if I could help her,” I say. “Wouldn’t it be better if I could give her some answers? Rather than a demon?”

“Ha!” Hawke says. “She’s got you there.”

“Are you agreeing with what she did?”

“No? Of course, I don’t. I advised against it.” He stops. “Well, I might have offered a significant don’t you do that look, but she’s the one who ignored it.”

“I did,” I admit. I’m adult, and I can own up to my actions. “It didn’t hurt that much the first time, and I honestly didn’t think it would work.”

“What did it feel like, the second time?”

“It didn’t hurt,” I’m quick to say. “I actually didn’t feel anything until Hawke pulled me away. Then I was just really fucking tired.”

Anders doesn’t speak for a while, seeming lost in thought. “If you were a mage, I’d say it was feeding off your energy.”

“She’s not a mage, and I say it did,” Hawke says. “One minute she was standing. The next she was asleep in my arms like a babe—”

I groan. “Tell me I didn’t.”
“You did,” Hawke says, gleeful.

“And you managed.” Anders starts over us, “to activate that artifact on the balcony? The one Justice was interested in?”

“I did,” I say.

“Has Justice figured out where he remembers it from?”

“No,” Anders says. “Ever since we… came together.” Hawke snickers, and Anders elbows him in the side. “Ever since we joined,” he glares at Hawke who’s obviously struggling to hold it in, “it’s been more difficult for him to keep things like that straight. I don’t think he thought it was important before, so he just sort of let the knowledge fade from his thoughts. He had no use for it.”

“Great,” Hawke says. “Well, more research then.” He leans and plants a big, fat kiss on my cheek. He laughs when I make a face and immediately go to wipe it off. “Love you, lover,” he says to Anders. “Love you, cousin. I’m going to run to the Hanged Man to spread the news—and also to escape mother’s wrath.” He leaves.

“Better you than me,” Anders says as I continue to scrub at my face. Which, ew, gross. I say this, and I used to do this to my sister all the time. I’m struck by the sudden though that I may never get to do that again, but I shove that aside. “Honestly, I think he hasn’t actually slept more than a few hours all this time, so he may be a little delirious.”

“He’s always at least a little like that,” I complain, finally letting my hands rest.

“True,” Anders says. He worries his lip and, finally, sits on the bed. “I actually—I meant to ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t know if you’re read my manifesto,” he says. “I’ve left a few copies around the estate—”

“I’ve read it,” I say. “I did when you left it on the nightstand that one time.” That was probably a week or so ago? Maybe. I’ve already started to lose track of the time I’ve spent here. It’s too painful to continue counting each and every day.

He looks surprised. “That’s good. Thank you.” It takes a minute for him to continue, “I’ve been thinking about this since we went into the Fade for Feynriel. Your city, it’s cut off from the rest of the Fade.” It sounds like he’s practiced his speech, and I guess he might have. I’ve been asleep for three days. He's certainly had time to think and prepare a speech - or proposition. Which is what this sounds like.

“Uh huh,” I say, trying to follow where he’s going. Hopefully nowhere too strange because I might just throw the covers over my head and try to sleep for another three days.

“I don’t know how to ask,” he says. “Or if I even should. Especially now that you’ve just woken up. It’s just—in the city there’s no risk of demons. Feynriel says he’s been there for weeks, and he hasn’t sighted anyone other than you. It seems to be a protected space, and I—I wondered if we could bring other mages in, to protect them from demons?”

“Oh,” I say. That actually sounds very practical. “I’m not sure what I can do about it? I’m fine with it. It sounds like a great idea, actually. I’m just not sure I’m up for going to the Fade again—well awake anyway.” I really really really don’t want to go back into the Fade right now if I can avoid it. That was enough weirdness for a while.
“I actually thought,” Anders says, “that maybe you might let them in the city if one of us allowed them in? We didn’t even have to pass through the gate like Feynriel did the first time. Maybe if we willed it, you would allow it?”


His eyebrows shoot up, “That’s it? No questions about my intentions, or worries about possessed mages?” He shakes his head, “Sorry. I’m used to everyone questioning me about the manifesto. I usually always have to fight to get them to listen.”

“Except for Hawke,” I point out, gently.

Anders smiles, “Except for Hawke.” He squeezes my arm, “I’ll try it. I have a few friends in the mage underground, ones I can trust. I’ll see if I can let them into the city.” He looks giddy at the thought. “Imagine,” he says, eyes very bright. “A safe place for mages in the Fade. That would give the templars - everyone - one less excuse, wouldn’t it?”

Chapter End Notes

I hope it doesn't bother anyone that I don't answer comments? I love and read each and every one, but I'm actually a little uncomfortable with writing back. Mostly because you're all so nice in them, and I don't ever feel like I respond in a satisfactory way to compliments. But thank you so much for your feedback! I always keep what you all say in mind while I plot out future chapters.
Anyway, Here’s Saemus

Chapter Summary

Mana meets Saemus Dumar and goes to tea.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by Senei.

“I’ve been informed Seneschal Bran has unearthed some more papers for us,” Aveline tells me when she returns to her office. I’ve taken up her desk with the reports from half a year ago, and I can tell by her mournful expression she would definitely like her desk back soon.

It was easy to get back to the routine after what I like to call my Fade Sabbatical, and I’ve really come to understand the nuances of Aveline’s expressions. “How are the reports coming?”

“Terrible,” I answer, “per usual. Some of guards from that time are gone, too, so getting these reports straightened out might be—” Aveline sighs, rubs at her temples.

“Yeah, that’s about how I feel about it, too. There’s also a problem with the guards who have been here since then. They’re having trouble remembering things this far back.”

“We’ll just do what we can,” Aveline says. “The seneschal wants the last year neatly cataloged as best as we can get it. The rest, he says,” her lip curls into an unhappy smile, “isn’t as important to him.”

“Right,” I say slowly. “Well, I’ll get what I’ve sorted put away, and I’ll go see about those papers Seneschal Bran found for us.” Aveline doesn’t seem happy about it but nods. I finish making my notes on a patrol report and begin the tedious work of taking the stacks to the shelves. Aveline jumps in and helps when I go to pick up the second stack.

“Are you alright?” she asks.

It’s a bit of an odd question. It wouldn’t have been a week ago when I was fresh out of the Fade, but Aveline never mentioned it. Never scolded me. Never asked about it. She just told me what I’d missed in my three days sleeping, and we picked up where she’d left off. It was quite refreshing, let me tell you. I made a very long list of people upset with me about the Fade thing. Okay not that long, but Leandra counts for like the first ten people on the list.

“Mana?”

“Oh, sorry,” I say, realizing I’d stopped completely. I slide the papers into place and answer, “Yeah, I’m alright.” Aveline raises an eyebrow. “You mean am I alright after the Fade thing, right?” She nods once and waits for me to continue. “I am, I guess. I won’t say it wasn’t weird, but I can’t go back without doing whatever ritual we did that first time. And so, at least, I can prepare if I have to.
go in again. For now, I’m alright. Here. Not in the Fade.” I wince because that sounded terrible. But hey, it’s all I’ve got, okay?

“In other words,” Aveline says, “you’re not thinking about the problem?”

“Right,” I say, not even bothering to deny it. It doesn’t last long, “It’s like the foci thing. I can’t really do anything about it, so I’m trying not to worry about it. Because honestly? It makes no sense, any of it.” Really, this is only half of the truth. I try not to worry about it. I really do. But when I’m alone? I worry about all these things a lot.

“I can understand that,” Aveline says. “But you can’t ignore the truth forever, Mana.”

“I know,” I say, though I’m sure prone to try. Ignoring things is sort of my strategy in cases like these, not that there have ever been cases like these in my life before Kirkwall. “But what is the truth exactly? They—Hawke and Anders—they think I managed to make a city in the Fade? It’s just—” I make a vague hand motion now that all the papers have been put away.

Aveline looks at me for a moment, seems to consider, and then gently, “I’ll let you go get those papers.” I’m glad she’d changed the subject because my mind’s already starting to mull, despairingly, over how long I’ve been here, and I’m starting to feel embarrassed about the Fade again. What was I even thinking attempting to do anything in that place? And this is me not thinking about it anymore.

I nod and leave the room, pausing outside the closed door for a second to gather myself. There are a few guards checking the roster, and they offer me a wave. I wave back with a smile and then head out into the main public area of the Keep to find Seneschal Bran.

“Ah, Lady de la Paz,” Sareth Talwain says, before I can even get to the stairs. We’ve had tea twice, and she’s pretty fond of Garrett (and by extension me and Leandra) because he returned a seal to her. “It’s good to see you up and about. I’d heard about your illness.”

“Thank you, Lady Talwain,” I say with a smile, trying to remember to appear calm, casual, and ladylike. It’s a lot harder than it seems, but then again, every little thing been hard lately. “I’m just not quite used to Kirkwall’s climate, I’m afraid.”

She smiles at that, “Yes, I imagine Hercinia’s quite different.”

“Quite different,” I agree but not at Kirkwall’s expense. At least, I hope it comes off that way. “Have you been well, Lady Talwain?”

“Oh, I’m doing very well,” she says. “My husband, on the other hand, he’s all up in arms again about the Qunari. But I’m sure it’ll pass, as always.” She shakes her head with a roll of her eyes. “Do come for tea again, Lady de la Paz. My husband and I would love to hear more about Hercinia. We’ve been dying to travel ourselves, but with the way things are in Kirkwall now, my husband refuses to leave the estate. Do say you’ll come.”

“Of course,” I say though I don’t feel up for it. I didn’t feel up for it the first, or second times either, but I know I really have to agree. Leandra’ll be mad with me if I don’t. Madder than she already is anyway. She’s been giving me the cold shoulder since the Fade Sabbatical, but Hawke says she’s just worried I’ve gotten dragged into his ‘lifestyle.’ I can’t imagine how much worse it could get if I turned down tea with a ‘friend’ of ours. Though I shouldn’t be unkind to the Talwains. They are decent. It’s just really hard to think of them as friends when I’m lying so actively to them about where I come from and who I am.

“Wonderful,” she says, smiling brightly. “Is tomorrow too soon?”
I open my mouth to reply, but she shakes her head. “Oh, go on and ask your cousin if she’ll be free, and send word. If she can’t make it, do come anyway if you can. We wouldn’t mind having you to ourselves.” Well, that sounds mildly frightening. It’s even more so when she offers a little wink, but I nod and smile despite myself.

“I will, Lady Talwain,” I say. I glance at the spot where Seneschal Bran normally stands during this hour, but he’s missing. I frown. “You wouldn’t happen to know where Seneschal Bran’s gone, do you?”

“Still running errands for the Guard Captain?” she says, amused. She doesn’t even give me time to answer, “Between the new climate and your work in the Keep, no wonder you fell so ill, Serah.” She chuckles. “I’m not certain where he’s gone off to. Perhaps he and Marlowe are away dealing with something. They left hours ago, and I’ve seen no sign of them since. Been causing a spot of unrest with the merchants, I hear.” Her family’s always been close to the Viscount (so says Jean Luc), so they address him by name. “I think, however, that Saemus is in his father’s office. I’m certain he’d be willing to help you.”

I don’t like that tone of voice at all. Nope. That’s the oh honey I know the cutest boy and you just have to meet him voice, and I am so not here for that.

Still, I smile because all I seem to do now is smile and try my hand at this weird thing called the Game. “Thank you, Lady Talwain,” I say, trying to add as much affection as possible to the address. “I’ll see if Serah Dumar will see me.”

“He will,” she reassures, waving me off.

I climb the stairs, feeling very much like I’m going to my execution. Strange how that feeling’s becoming very commonplace in my life. I wonder if that’s just how it is for people in Kirkwall in general.

The guards stationed in front of the Viscount’s office are, of course, familiar to me. Lia smiles, and Wright offers a little tilt of his head. “Viscount’s not in,” Wright says, in the way people do when they’ve been asked a question a thousand times.

“I know,” I say. “Senschal Bran sent word that he had some papers for the archives, and I’d hoped that they were clearly set aside for us. I just want to pick them up.”

“What a nightmare,” Wright mutters, shaking his head at the mention of the archives. We’re all of the same mind in the guard barracks about the archives (which are more often than not described as the Damned Archives). Basically, they’re a disaster and fuck Jeven. Also, fuck Seneschal Bran a little for constantly pesterling everyone about it. “Don’t suppose Messere Dumar will be too upset about having to poke around the office for them.” He knocks on the door.

There’s a muffled come in, and Wright pushes open the door. He and I go inside.

I’ve never met Saemus Dumar. He never seems to be at the Keep when I am, and when I’m not in the Keep, I’m usually at the Hawke estate, or socializing in Hightown. I’ve never seen him in either of these places, or, at least, I don’t think I’ve ever seen him at these places. He doesn’t seem to be very social (which I can very much respect), so I’ve never seen him at the handful of parties or gatherings I’ve attended.

To be honest, he never piqued my curiosity much. I’d heard the rumors, of course, about him fucking with Qunari. Some say literally and others say...metaphorically, guess? I’d never really cared. I can barely keep up with the happenings in my own life, thanks.
“Messere,” Wright says, “this is Lady de la Paz.” Saemus looks a little alarmed at the introduction, and I think immediately of my brief conversation with Lady Talwain. “She’s been helping the Guard Captain with the archives.”

“Oh,” he says, looking relieved. “You’re here about these papers, then?” He gestures to an alarmingly tall stack on the desk. Wright and I exchange a terrified look.

“We could burn it?” he mutters to me. “The Captain would never have to know.”

“Maybe just a few of them,” I say, approaching the desk. I don’t honestly even know if I can lift all these papers by myself. “Or else I’m never going to be able to carry them to the barracks.”

“Get rid of half and you’d have no problem,” Wright says, hopefully. I shake my head, and he exhales. “Alright, I’ll carry them for you. Lia can man the door by herself for a few minutes.”

“It’s alright, Guardsman Wright,” Saemus says. “I’ll help Lady de la Paz take them to the barracks.”

Wright hesitates, looking between us. I shrug a little in assent, not at all like a lady should, and he nods and goes out the door. I look mournfully at the papers.

Saemus hefts way more than half of them into his arms, wincing at the weight of them. I watch him with a grimace. “I could take some of those,” I say.

“It’s only a short walk to the barracks,” he replies.

“So you say,” I say, taking the rest of the papers. “Just don’t be afraid to tell me if they get too heavy on the way there.” A walk always feels so much longer when you’re lugging around heavy things, and also, when you’re constantly passing people giving you really odd looks. Is it because I’ve got the Viscount’s son carrying papers? Or is it something else? The more important question is do I have the energy to care right now? Nope. I don’t.

We pass Lady Talwain when Saemus asks, “Are you feeling better?” I don’t answer right away because we haven’t even been introduced exactly, and he’s already asking if I’m feeling better? Odd. “Hawke and I spoke a little while ago, and he said you’d been ill.”

“You’ve discussed me?” I ask, trying not to sound too weirded out.

“Serah Hawke only mentioned you the once,” Saemus defends. “He was escorting,” his brow furrows just a little, “me back to the Keep, and I asked about his family.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling silly for thinking it was anything more than that. “I’m well. My body, I suppose, is still adjusting to Kirkwall.” I love when I get to partly stick to the truth.

We approach Aveline’s door, and I knock. “That’s good,” Saemus says, awkwardly as Aveline calls enter. We go inside, and Aveline glares at the papers in our hands.

“Aveline mutters, rubbing viciously at her forehead. “Within the next week?” Saemus repeats, shocked.

Aveline puts down her hand and regards him calmly. “Yes, messere. Within the week.” She shakes her head and looks at me, “We may have to take some of this home.”
“That’s fine,” I say. “Anything to finally be through with this.”

Aveline offers me a grim smile, like we’re about to go to battle together (which we sort of are), and then turns to Saemus. “Thank you for helping Lady de la Paz carry these, messere.”

“Would—” he begins hesitantly, regarding Aveline with a bit of unease. Aveline raises a brow. Saemus finally takes in a breath and says, “Would an extra pair of eyes help?”

“An extra pair of eyes and hands,” Aveline says.

“Alright,” Saemus says. “You have them.”

“Boring as usual,” Varric announces, coming into the library where I’ve camped out for the evening to work through the reports I’ve brought home.

“Hello, Varric,” I say without looking up.

“Tell me you’re almost done. You’re making me itch just looking at you.” I glance up for a second, just long enough to see him plop down on the opposite sofa.

“I just have a few more,” I say, flipping through the papers to confirm. I have about five pieces left to review, and they’re not as difficult as some of the trade manifests which are basically charts of really confusing figures that don’t always add up because, as I said, fuck Jeven. These just deal with the injuries that required the services of Circle healers and, of course, more importantly the cost of their services. The guard can request service from the Circle, and in return, the city pays the Chantry. There’s reports of the specific injuries and the specific treatments. Names in all the right places. But not a number to be seen. Just the same paid to the Chantry in full on every sheet. Talk about shady. I’ll definitely have to point it out to Aveline in the morning.

But as for now, I set the papers aside.

“So, what’s up?” I ask.

“What’s up?” Varric repeats, considering the strange phrase.

I sigh and try again. “I just mean, what’s going on?”

“Does something have to be going on for me to come and see you?” Distantly, I can hear the front door of the estate open and close. It’s probably Hawke, back from his trip down to Anders’ clinic.

“No, but that’s usually how it goes, isn’t it?”

“Don’t worry,” Varric says with a grin. “I don’t think I can top the Fade.” Then he grimaces. “Which, for the record, was weird even for me, Pebbles.”

I hear Hawke laugh and Warbrain bark happily in response, so it’s really only a matter of time before Hawke becomes nosy about our conversation.

“You’ve said, but why don’t I believe that?”

“Believe it or not, that’s definitely one of the weirdest trips Hawke’s ever taken me on,” Varric says. “It wasn’t really the Fade. That place has weird by the shit loads, but you in the Fade? That’s what made it really fucked up.”
“I got that,” I say. I mean, I’m the one who can’t even remember all these supposed trips I take every
night, and it’s like I’m this completely different person or something. At least that’s the impression I
get from everyone anyway. “Is that what you came here to tell me? That I was weird in the Fade?
You’ve already told me that. You, and everyone else.”

“Yeah, you know that already,” Varric says with a grin. “Actually, I meant to warn you that Fenris
isn’t taking it so well.” He winces a little. “He’s back to thinking you’re a demon, I think. Though
Hawke might have talked him down from that one by now. But he, at the very least, thinks you’re a
mage.”

“A mage,” I repeat slowly. “Wouldn’t I have done something magic by now if I was a mage?”

Varric levels me a look. I’m tempted to roll my eyes because he wasn’t even there for that. But, of
course, word travels very fast in this group.

“Does that even count? I didn’t do the ritual that got us into the Fade, and the thing with the…thing.”
Varric snorts. “The artifact that glowed or whatever. I literally just touched it.”

“Merrill told us that. But you’ve got to admit, it’s odd that it only worked for you. Then there’s the
whole eluvian episode that Merrill’s deliriously excited about.”

“Sure, it’s odd,” I say. “But is it any less odd than me being here at all?” I’m just bypassing the
mention of Merrill because I like her, but I’m also scared she might ask me to go into the Fade again.
And I can’t right now. I’m dying for some answers to the whole mystery of the city, but I also know
myself enough to know I’ll probably do something stupid again if I go back there. Also, I’m trying to
focus on my main concern which is going home.

“I’ll get back to you on that one.”

“Is there any way to definitively prove I don’t have magic?” I ask. And briefly, I stop to ask myself
why that’s even a question I have to pose at all. “I mean, either way it would be nice to know.”

“I usually leave the magey stuff to Hawke and Anders,” Varric admits.

Hawke, as if summoned by the mention of his name, peeks his head in the doorway. “You leave
everything to me,” Hawke complains.

“See if I ever do anything nice for you again,” Varric mutters with a grin.

Hawke steps fully into the doorway, hands on his hips. “Sure, threaten me. What ever happened to
our love, Varric?”

“It died when you dragged me into the Fade.”

“Says the guy who bailed out on our second go at it.” He finally lets his hands drop and comes into
the room, sitting on the sofa with me.

“I’m a dwarf, Hawke. What would people say if I went into the Fade twice in two days?”

“Why you’d surely lose your dwarfhood,” Hawke responds, not missing a beat. “But it was for
friendship! For family!”

“Dwarfhood,” Varric mutters under his breath, thoughtfully. I have a terrible feeling that’s going to
end up in a chapter of Swords and Shields soon. Lucky me.
“Alright, so we’re here today to discuss Fenris,” Hawke says, slinging an arm around my shoulders. “He’s agreed that you’re not a demon, but sadly, he’s not bending about you being a mage. No matter how many times I tell him Anders, Merrill, and I have looked you over.” He winks, and I cross my arms with some difficulty.

“So it’s basically proven? And he’s just not believing you?”

“Well,” Hawke says slowly. “I suppose it’s possible you’re hiding your power somehow. I mean, if you’re the one who made the city, then it’s possible you’re hiding your magic.” He shrugs. “I mean, it’s possible, but I don’t really see it. You’d have done something by now.”

“There’s really no way to prove it then?” I ask.

“Beyond having a templar have a go at you? Not really.” Well, I guess that’s an idea. “Oh, no. That was not a suggestion. Varric, tell her that wasn’t a suggestion.”

“She’s your cousin, Hawke,” Varric says. “I’m just the dashing rogue who keeps following you to the damned Bone Pits.”

“Now we’re back to the Bone Pits,” Hawke mutters. Then he looks at me, “No. It’s a ridiculous idea for about a hundred reasons. One: if you do happen to be a mage, the templar in question will cart you to the Circle as soon as you’re incapacitated. And they will incapacitate you if you are a mage. Two—”

“Yeah,” I say. “But—and don’t get mad—your brother’s a templar, right?”

Hawke paws at his face with his hand, “Mother told you, didn’t she? Damnit.” It's funny actually. I'm fairly sure it was Hawke or Varric or Anders or Fenris (someone that first day) who mentioned that Carver was training to be a templar.

“Well, she’s got a point,” Varric says. “Carver wouldn’t take her in if she was a mage, and he’d go easy on her.”

“You sure about that, Varric?” Hawke says. “Who knows what he’s getting up to at the Gallows. Maybe he’s decided he likes the way they do things up there.” He shakes his head. “It’s not worth the risk, alright? For you. Or—it’s just not worth it. I don’t want to hear any more about it.”

“Fine,” I say. Mostly because he sounds so serious, but also because I’m having second thoughts about the suggestion now that Hawke’s laid it out for me. If, somehow, I am a mage, I don’t want to put myself at risk like that needlessly. I’ve been reckless enough for a lifetime, I think. It might just be best for this whole thing to remain a mystery honestly.

“Good,” he says. “Don’t worry about Fenris. In time, he’ll see I’m right. As usual. And he’ll come and visit and gossip with you about Merrill again.” I make a face.

“I heard Saemus Dumar’s helping with the archives,” Varric says, a bit too casually. I mean, thanks for changing the subject, but also screw you for being a dick.

“Don’t start,” I groan. “Lady Talwain’s going to ask me about it tomorrow and that’s bad enough.”

“Oh, yes,” Hawke says, gleeful. “I heard mother’s abandoning you to the wolves this round.”

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it,” I say. “I ought to drag you along since you’re my cousin and all.”
“To tea with the Talwains?” Hawke says. “I would,” he says, dragging out the words before quickly finishing, “but I definitely have to go zap people in Lowtown tomorrow afternoon with Isabela, so you’re out of luck.”

“That’s not right,” Saemus says, taking the papers and flipping through them rapidly. I’m very tempted to roll my eyes, but I refrain. He seems to come back to himself. “I apologize,” he says. “You said that. I just can’t believe Jeven managed to get away with so much under my father’s nose.” He stops and something flashes across his face. He says nothing else, and I look to Aveline but she looks uncertain about it as well.

“I’ll inform the seneschal about the discrepancy,” Aveline says.

“He’ll just tell you to take it up with the Circle,” Saemus says, “or the Revered Mother.”

Aveline scowls, “Getting an official audience with the Revered Mother’s nearly impossible at the moment.” That’s a little odd, I think. Sebastian pretty much offered to introduce me to her during tea. At least, I think that's who they're talking about.

“I can inquire at the Gallows,” Saemus says.

Aveline squints at him a little, and Saemus fidgets slightly. Finally, she asks, “You’ll go there and come straight back?”

Saemus scowls, “Did my father ask you to chain me to the Keep?”

“No,” Aveline says, “but the last thing I need is for the Viscount’s son to slip my watch to go down to docks or, worse, the Wounded Coast.”

“I’ll go straight to the Gallows,” Saemus says, voice clipped. “You can even send a guard with me if you’d like.”

“I will,” Aveline says, standing. She goes out the door to, presumably, pick an escort. I stand awkwardly by the desk, pretending to be very entranced with the papers. Here’s to me not involving myself.

“Did my father send you?” he asks. Or, you know, not.

My head snaps up, and I look at Saemus in disbelief. I’m not sure how I got dragged into this mess. “No,” I say. “I just came for the papers, and I would have let Guardsman Wright carry them but you offered so. That’s it.”

He obviously doesn’t really believe me.

“I don’t understand why I’m not allowed to see the Qunari,” Saemus mutters. I’m not sure he’s even speaking to me really. “They’ve been in Kirkwall for over a year, and they deserve, at the very least, our respect.” His jaw clenches. “I just listen,” he says, “while the others won’t.”

“Is—” I stop because I’m not sure I should even ask anything at all. Saemus watches me, guardedly. “Nevermind.”

“The Qunari aren’t savages,” he says, sounding a little furious. I’m not sure, exactly, where that came from.

“I didn’t say that they were,” I counter. “I honestly don’t know anything about them really, but—.” I
hesitate. I feel like I’m really about to reveal my true hand here, talking like this, but Saemus’ eyes really urge me to continue, unwavering and cold as they are. “But I don’t think it’s right to call them - or anyone else - savages.”

“You—”

The door opens and Aveline reenters with Lieutenant Harley Casimi, who as per usual has dark circles around her eyes.

“Let’s go then,” Saemus says. “I’ll return as soon as I’ve asked about the papers.” There’s some bite to the words, but Saemus stalks out of the room before anyone can say anything. Poor Casimi has to practically run to catch up.

I don’t ask about anything, feeling a little too weird about the conversation with Saemus, and return to the papers. Aveline does the same.

It takes a little while but the tension eases, and I feel at peace again, working in quiet.

“He should have returned by now,” Aveline mutters, after the appropriate amount of time’s passed, setting her quill aside. She doesn’t, however, make a move to go inquire after him. “I’ll give him twenty more minutes,” she says. I get the feeling that sentence, in Aveline’s head, ended something like and then I’m dragging him back to the Keep on his ass.

Luckily for Saemus, Casimi returns with an explanation.

“She won’t let him see the corresponding records in the Circle without confirmation that I’ve sent him?” Aveline says, slowly.

“That’s what she said,” Casimi says with a little wince. “Then she said, No need to have the Guard Captain trouble herself. Just have her send Lady Amell with a sealed letter, and I’ll grant access.”

Aveline frowns, “She mentioned Lady Amell?” Casimi nods and doesn’t seem to get it, and I have to resist the urge to share a glance with Aveline. This? This sounds very bad because we both know she most likely means me. I absolutely do not want Important People being interested in me. “Very well,” Aveline says. “I’ll write a letter, but you’ll be the one to bring it to the Gallows.”

Casimi grimaces, obviously not liking the idea of being locked in a feud between the Knight-Commander and the Guard Captain, but she nods.

We watch in silence as Aveline scribbles a letter with pursed lips and seals it in red wax with the Kirkwall City Guard’s seal. Casimi takes it and heads out the door.

“Tell Hawke the Knight-Commander’s up to something,” Aveline advises me. “And don’t travel anywhere alone, even Hightown. She might have caught wind of the Fade nonsense.”

I’m tempted to ask what exactly she might do about me, but I’m a little too scared to ask. Instead, I point out the sad truth, “I’m going to have to travel alone. I have tea with the Talwains this afternoon.” Aveline sighs and looks at me like I’m a small child in need of a basic lesson. “Don’t look at me like that,” I protest, weakly. “Leandra will murder me if I skip it.”

“I can send word—”

“I’ll be careful,” I say. “It’s not exactly far from here, the Talwain estate. And they’re hardly going to kidnap me in broad daylight, are they?” Look at me trying to sound reasonable. Really, I’m super
terrified, but I can’t very well hide forever, can I?

Aveline hesitates, “You’re right. They wouldn’t do that—but be careful all the same.”

“I’ll walk you,” Saemus says when I announce that I have to leave. He’d, just for the record, offered no special insights about the Knight Commander when he returned from the Gallows, but he’s been wearing a frown since he returned. Aveline doesn’t raise a protest, and I can tell by her face she’s actually happy about it. Despite agreeing with my assessment of the situation, I can tell she’s still worried about it. I won’t lie. I’m still worried about it, too. I’m also, though, worried about why Saemus is so eager to walk me.

Of course, he quickly reveals himself as we’re heading out of the barracks. “Have you met any Qunari before?”

“I haven’t,” I say. “I’ve never even seen one actually.”

His brow furrows, “Don’t you ever leave Hightown?”

“I don’t,” I say. “Well, I went to Lowtown a few times when I first came to Kirkwall to meet Garrett’s friends, but Leandra didn’t like it so I stopped.”

“I see,” he says. “And there are no Qunari in Hercinia?” Oh look, a question I haven’t been trained to answer. The day’s come. I’m either going to really fuck this up, or I’m going to BS like a boss. With my luck lately, I’m going with the fucking this up.

“A few, I’m sure,” I say, trying to keep in mind the map of Thedas I study periodically. “But I’m afraid I was a little isolated in Hercinia, working to keep up our family’s business.” I feel really bad but I play the grief card to draw attention away from everything I’ve just said. “Until they died, I—” I just stop, and strangely, that old grief, the real one that usually bubbles up at the thought of my family. It’s just not there right now. I’m sure if I think about it enough it’ll come back, but luckily, I have Saemus who looks uncomfortable with the turn our conversation’s taken.

“Forgive me,” he says. “I just—you said before you didn’t think they were savages. I only wanted to thank you for saying so.”

“I don’t think you should thank me,” I say, tentatively. I’m glad we’re finally out of the Keep, even if we do have to climb down a million stairs. “I’m only trying to be...fair.” That’s not the right word, but I’ve got nothing better to offer for the moment.

“Fair,” he repeats, as if tasting the word. “You know about me, don’t you?”

I wince at that question, not sure I want to touch this. Maybe I really should have insisted on going to tea myself. Honestly, how scary can the Knight-Commander be in comparison to this really awkward conversation?

“You mean do I know about you and the Qunari?” He nods once, sharply, and he’s looking at me, not ahead like he really ought to. But I suppose, being the Viscount’s son, he can do as he’d like. “No, I don’t really.”

His brow furrows.

“Your business is yours,” I say.

“It wasn’t some torrid affair,” he says, sighing. “I made friends with a Qunari.”
“You did?” I say, not at all surprised by now because literally all he’s spoken of since we’ve met is the Qunari. He’s very protective of them, so it’s no real leap to assume he made friends with some of them.

He blinks at the response and continues, “Ashaad was willing to tell me about his people and the Qun.”

“Is that why everyone’s worried about you ‘escaping’ the Keep? Because you keep going to see Ashaad?”

“I don’t,” Saemus says, shortly. “He was killed. There was a reward to bring me back to the Keep when I left the first time, for good I thought back then, and some mercenaries took it upon themselves to rescue me. Then your cousin killed them and took me back to my father.”

“Oh,” is all I can manage. Because that was fucked up from start to finish. Great to know Kirkwall keeps cranking out the hits. Then, eventually, I can’t help but ask, “Why are you telling me this exactly?”

He doesn’t answer right away, and we reach the end of the ridiculously long walkway leading to the Keep. For once, I don’t feel that winded having walked it, but it has been nearly a month now since I came to Kirkwall. Here’s to me not having a breakdown over that thought.

“No one lets me talk about the Qunari,” he says. “As soon as I begin, it’s always Saemus, don’t you understand the terrible burden you’re putting on your father’s shoulders? or they want to convince me to abandon everything I’ve learned from Ashaad.” He shakes his head, “I cannot.”

“That’s understandable,” I say. I mean, he’s got firsthand knowledge of how Qunari culture works. Why should he have to abandon that?

“That’s why,” he exclaims, causing someone we’re passing to crane their head to look at us. I think that’s Comtess Dulci de Launcet, but I’m not certain. Leandra usually avoids the de Launcets, and she’s never told me why. “You’re actually listening to me.”

Don’t take this the wrong way, Saemus, but you have very low standards, I think, but that’s not remotely acceptable to say. Also, it was a bit mean of me. So, instead, I try again, “It’s only fair.”

“You’re ridiculous,” he says, with a short laugh. “Are you just trying to appease me, or are you actually trying to be ‘fair’?”

“I only try to appease people I think are trying to kill me,” I joke, “so yes, I am trying to be fair.”

“I—”

“Oh, this is quite the surprise,” Lady Talwain says. I’d barely noticed we were so close to her home already, and she’s apparently been waiting for us. I wonder if I’m late, but she seems much more interested in Saemus so I don’t get a chance to ask. “Saemus, I didn’t realize you were coming for tea as well.”

“I was just escorting Lady de la Paz to your estate,” Saemus answers gracefully.

“Surely you’re not busy at this hour? I must insist you join us,” Lady Talwain says, “since you’ve walked all this way.” She offers me a wink like we’re co-conspirators, and I have to really smother the urge to wince at that. Because this sort of smells of disaster? I mean, it could just be the general terrible smell of Kirkwall, but somehow, I doubt it.
“If you insist,” Saemus says, managing to hide his suffering quite well. I guess this is how friendship works in Kirkwall. You find people to suffer with. You suffer things like tea with them. Then you profit?

I mean there is cake at these things, so that’s something like profit. Sort of.

Mostly it feels like our cake’s about to be our last meal because that execution feeling’s definitely back in full force as we stroll inside the Talwain estate.

“Tell me you haven’t been overworking yourself already?” Lady Talwain says to me, patting the seat next to her in their dining area. I sit, carefully arranging my skirts which are Kirkwall (or Amell if you ask Leandra) red.

“I’m not, I promise,” I respond. Then, after a second, I add, “Serah Dumar’s offered to help us with the archives, so I haven’t had to work so hard.” Saemus makes a little noise in the back of his throat, and yes, that was probably a little mean of me. But there’s no way I’m shouldering the brunt of the conversation here.

“How kind of you, Saemus,” Lady Talwain says.

“It’s the least I can do,” Saemus says, “considering the archives should not have gotten to this point in the first place.” Lady Talwain and he share a look, which eventually has Lady Talwain laughing a bit awkwardly.

“You’re always so hard on your father,” she says.

“Only as hard as he is in return, I assure you.”

Lady Talwain sighs, turns to me, whispering exasperated into my ear, “Men."

“I did hear that,” Saemus mutters, picking up his tea.

“You were meant to,” Lady Talwain says. “You and Marlowe are too stubborn.”

“I’ll concede to that.”

“It doesn’t matter if you do or not. It’s the truth.”

Saemus rolls his eyes, “What do you want me to say?”

Lady Talwain pats my arm, “We’ll discuss that later. We don’t want to scare off our dear Lady de la Paz. She’s only just gotten used to Kirkwall, I think.”

“With a cousin like Garrett Hawke, I’m sure she’ll manage,” Saemus says lowly. I can’t help but laugh despite the fact they’re talking over my head.

“That’s exactly why we need to talk,” Lady Talwain says, and I do wonder how close they are exactly because she’s definitely starting to sound like my mom does when she’s about to lay into me about something. “I can’t believe—”

“It’s alright,” I say, picking up my own cup. “Garrett wouldn’t take offense.”

“Still,” she says with a shake of her head. “Oh, I’d forgotten to mention that my husband won’t be able to join us this afternoon. He’s—” Her eyes cut to Saemus, and she finishes very quickly with a vague, “busy.”
Saemus snorts into his teacup, but I’m not touching that one. Lady Talwain spares only a second to glare at him. And that’s that.

“I’m very glad you two have become acquainted,” Lady Talwain says. “It’s very rare of Saemus to associate with people his own age, and I liked you from the moment I met you. I think you’ll be a good influence on him.” I can feel my face heat as she says these things, and she smiles, happily. Which, you know, makes me feel bad. I’m blushing partially because that was really nice of her to say, but I’m also embarrassed because, hey, I’m lying. Not a lady. Not an Amell. Probably not a great influence on nobility.

“Well,” I say after the heat seems to plateau, “thank you.” I may or may not hide behind my teacup for a few seconds.

“It must be difficult for you,” Lady Talwain begins, “with all your friends in Hercinia.”

“It is,” I say because this is something Jean Luc and I’d discussed. Also, I do miss my friends. The real ones on Earth I may or may not see ever again. “But I was mostly friends with my family’s associates and their families, and we haven’t lost touch.”

“Ah, yes. Jean Luc can hardly go a moment without mentioning you these days,” Lady Talwain says. I try not to read too much into that statement. “He really ought to have that boy of his come to Kirkwall to help with his business, but I hear he’s quite enamored with Antiva and refuses to leave.”

I do actually know a little about Laurent. After Jean Luc had taken Varric’s first payment, he’d had his son send me a letter to establish my backstory beyond Kirkwall. It had been written as if we’d known each other from childhood and had revealed quite a bit about the man. My reply, at this very moment, has probably reached him by now.

“Laurent’s a bit in love with danger,” I say with a laugh. Which, let me tell you, isn’t even a lie. He apparently has a thing for Antivans that threaten him (just a little he says).

“Well, there’s certainly plenty of that here,” Saemus points out. Fair enough, that.

“Yes, but in Antiva, I hear it’s all very romantic. Well, at least, that’s what he keeps telling me.”

“Haven’t you been?” Saemus asks, politely shaking his head at a servant offering cake.

“A few times,” I say, “but mostly when I was a child. When I was old enough, I stayed in the city to handle business while my parents were away.” I pause, as if I’m thinking about my parents. Really, I’m thinking about how sweaty my hands are at the moment and how tired I am. I really don’t want to think about my very much alive but a world away parents right this second.

“From what you’ve said of Hercinia, no wonder you didn’t want to leave,” Lady Talwain says. I smile, declining the cake because my stomach feeling a little uneasy at the moment with all the attention on me. “How is Laurent doing?” she asks. “I think it’s been almost ten years since I’ve seen him.”

“He seemed happy the last time he wrote to me,” I reply. Hey, that’s not a lie. Go me. “Antiva suits him, and he’s free to tackle the challenge of the business with his father here in Kirkwall.”

She cuts through her cake with a thoughtful expression, “He always was a smart boy.” She turns her attention to Saemus, “I don’t remember if the two of you ever met.”

“We did,” Saemus says, “at one of your parties.”

Her nose scrunches in thought, just a little, “Was it for winter or spring?”
“It was ten years ago,” Saemus points out. “I don’t remember.”

“It must have been winter,” she says. “They left to go to Wycome right before storm season. I remember.”

“All I can remember is that Emile de Lancet knocked over your tower of punch glasses,” Saemus says, “and your husband started to cuss his family in Orlesian.”

“They were expensive,” she says. “But I’m afraid I felt no great loss when he broke them. Orlesian glasswork isn’t terrible practical. It took the servants days and days to clean them all.” With both of them more engaged in the conversation than me at the moment, I can sort of step back and examine how completely surreal this conversation is to me. The constant and casual mention of servants still blows my mind. “I’ve heard Hercinia glassware’s quite beautiful.”

And there goes my moment. I nod, because Jean Luc’s brought some to the estate to show me since I’m supposedly part of a merchant family and should have been exposed to such things, “It is, but it rarely leaves the city. It’s too delicate to ship in large quantities.”

“Such a shame,” she says. “I do love Hercinian craftsmanship. Your clothes, especially. I think you might start a trend here in Kirkwall, you and Jean Luc, with these dresses of yours.” She smiles slyly at Saemus, “Don’t you think so?”

Saemus rolls his eyes, sensing the trap, “No doubt they will. The Amells have become quite popular as of late.”

Lady Talwain sets down her cup with a definite click. “You’ve been so disagreeable lately,” she says. “Certainly Lady de la Paz deserves your respect.”

Saemus opens his mouth to say something, but he stops. Instead, he tilts his head at me and says, “My apologies.” I nod, accepting it.

Our host seems appeased, and there’s a little bout of silence. We sip our tea lazily, and I definitely don’t try and calculate how long I have left before it’s socially acceptable for me to make my excuses and leave.

“I was thinking of having a little party,” Lady Talwain says eventually, “to welcome you to Kirkwall.”

“Oh, that’s not necessary,” I say immediately.

Saemus lets out a bark of a laugh, “By I was thinking of having a little party, she means it’s all but planned. She’s just finally gotten around to telling you about it.”

“Saemus, honestly,” she says. “I only thought of it just a week ago.” To me, “While you were ill. I just thought it must be difficult for you in a new city, and it’s not just for you. Leandra’s barely involved herself with her old circles, and I think she’s under the impression she’s unwelcome.”

“It’s really alright,” I say. “You’ve been more than welcoming, Lady Talwain.”

“And I may have already begun the preparations for it,” she concludes. Saemus gives me a didn’t I tell you? sort of look, and there’s nothing else I can do but ask when she’s planning on having said party.
Anyway, Here's Card Games

Chapter Summary

Mana deals with pre-party nonsense and teaches the Kirkwallers how to play Egyptian Ratscrew.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by Senei.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“I hear it’s hard to practice dancing lying down,” Varric says. I flip a page slowly and deliberately, and he laughs. I’ve already read this chapter of Swords and Shields, of course, but it’s different reading it after it’s been published somehow. Also, anything’s better than practicing my dancing alone in the library, or alone anywhere really. I always start blushing and muttering to myself and, inevitably, someone walks in and catches me making a fool of myself. “Don’t tell me you’re offended that I kept my one ‘pulsing’ in there.”

“It was a well-used ‘pulsing,’” I say, finally looking up. It’s always very hard to ignore Varric for whatever reason.

“Maybe I could be a little edgy and use two next time,” he says. He comes over the couch I’m lying on, and I scooch down a little to make room for him to sit next to my head. He watches, amused, and sits when I’ve cleared enough space. We may or may not have to spend a few seconds prying some of my hair out from under him.

I hum, “Maybe.” I tilt my head back to get a better look at him. “If you’re good.”

He grins, looking down into my face, “I’m never good, Pebbles.”

“Right,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“You don’t believe me?” he asks, feigning hurt.

“It’s a bit hard to believe a guy who’s constantly funding all these ridiculous things to keep his friends out of trouble,” I say. I’ve been keeping a mental list. There’s me, of course. He’s paying Jean Luc to be my business associate, my tutor, and now my family friend. He might even be paying Jean Luc’s son since Laurent’s pretending to be my childhood friend. Then there’s the guards getting paid not to mention Merrill’s trips to the Viscount’s gardens (one of which is Nabil, who thinks the whole damn thing’s hilarious). He also picks up Isabela’s tab at the Hanged Man, and he takes Orana to the market sometimes to pick up food for Fenris, who apparently lives in a mansion with rotting corpses (which, okay, that sort of does scream that he can’t be trusted with the task of keeping up his own health).

“I don’t think Jean Luc would appreciate you calling him a thing.”
“Varric.” I’m channeling all my disapproval into his name.

“What? I’ve got money. Anyway, what else would I spend it on?”

“Hmm,” I begin, considering. Varric sighs and waits for me to come up with something. “I don’t know, a house?” I’ll never understand why he lives in the Hanged Man. I really, really won’t. And I’ve only visited that place once.

“Got one of those,” he says, answering almost immediately. “It’s haunted.”

“I thought that was your brother?” I ask. I wince because that was terribly insensitive. I’ve just gotten so used to talking about it flippantly with Hawke. I think he’s rubbing off of me—or maybe it’s just this place in general. “Sorry.”

He waves it off, looking unperturbed. “Even with him gone that place scares the shit out of me,” he says. “I could buy a new one, but there’s nothing like writing seedy romance novels in an equally seedy tavern.”

“Equally?” I feel like whoever owns the Hanged Man should feel insulted.” It’s really easy to talk and joke with Varric. I suppose, in some part, because I know he’s basically the fixer of the group. So even if he is a killer like the rest, he’s still basically a marshmallow inside. See? I’m compartmentalizing. It’s the only way I’ve managed to be sort of okay with living here.

“Shit, that smarts,” he says, acting as though I’ve physically wounded him.

I stick out my tongue on instinct but quickly, feeling a bit childish, retract it. Varric just raises an eyebrow at the display. “You could buy some buttons,” I say, trying and failing to sound innocent, “for your shirt.”

“Is my chest distracting you, Pebbles?”

“Don’t you ever get cold?”

“My chest hair keeps me warm.”

“Oh, silly me,” I mutter. “Maybe, then, you could buy a new comb to groom it.”

“You might just be on to something. I’ve been neglectful of one of my greatest assets. I really should treat it with more respect, get it a comb all its own.” He hums thoughtfully, and I’m ninety percent certain he’s staring down at his chest right now.

I can’t help but snort. “Do you need a minute alone with your chest?”

“Only a minute? I think you’re underestimating me.”

“Overestimating, I think.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be practicing?” Rude, Varric. I groan loudly and throw an arm over my face. He laughs, and I may or may not whine a little bit. “Maker’s Breath, you and Hawke really are playing up the family thing, aren’t you? That was uncanny.”

“I hate dancing,” I say. It’s not really true exactly, but I certainly hate the kind of dances I’ve been learning for Kirkwall high society. There’s so many steps, and I get so nervous. My hands start to sweat, and I’m always looking at my feet. I get all hot and flustered because I never know where to look. And I always end up muttering the count under my breath. Then I think of how much worse
it’ll be dancing with a bunch of strangers who’ve been doing this for their whole lives.

“Hawke’s still trying to wiggle his way out of it,” Varric says with a laugh.

“Over my dead body,” I say. I grimace at the phrase, which seems all the more inappropriate in Kirkwall, and continue on. “I know Leandra’s mostly doing this to punish us both for the Fade, and there’s no way in hell I’m suffering my punishment by myself.”

“Not sure whose punishment will be worse,” he begins. “You’re the guest of honor, of course, so you’ll be dancing with everyone and their mother. They’ll want to gossip with you about Orlais, pearls on silk shoes, and ungrateful elven servants.” I make an unholy face at that because, yes, that sounds about right, but ugh, did he have to lay it out like that? It makes me want to run and hide under the covers. “Hawke, though. They’ll surround him and start demanding favors off him. The nobles always have plenty of dirty work they need done.”

“They’re going to get Leandra, too,” I say. “Lady Talwain kept saying she wanted to make her feel ‘welcome’ again. She was adamant that I not tell Leandra she’s inviting the Comtess Dulci de Launcet. She wants them to reconcile.”

“Tell me you told Leandra,” Varric says, sounding just a tad bit desperate.

“Of course, I did,” I respond. “I’m in enough trouble as it is, and I get the feeling she has a good reason for avoiding her.”

“Considering she’s married to the man Leandra was supposed to marry, I’d say so.”

“Oh. Huh. That makes sense then.” I rub at the bridge of my nose. “That just means it’s going to suck even more, and Lady Talwain keeps trying to set me up with Saemus. It’s so awkward.”

“What is going on with you and that kid?”

“You just came here to gossip, didn’t you?” It’s actually sort of a relief to just sit and gossip with someone all lazy like. My sister and I used to do this kind of thing a lot. Not to say Varric’s anything like my sister because he’s really, really not.

“I’m gathering inspiration,” he amends.

“Gathering inspiration’ my ass,” I mumble. “There’s nothing going on. At all.” I let that sink in for a minute before continuing. “He just likes hanging around me because I listen to him when he talks about the Qunari.” I shrug, though it’s a little difficult since I’m lying down. “I get the impression he’s just trying to pass the time while he figures out a way to escape Hightown.”

“He’s trying to pass the time by working on those shit archives?” he says, skeptical.

I take major offense to that. “I’ll have you know they’ve been downgraded to the damn archives now.”

“My mistake,” he says, not at all apologetic. Though he certainly should be. “I don’t know about that kid,” he admits. “I can’t actually tell if he’s just being rebellious, or if he actually has a thing for the Qunari.”

“I’m going with him having an actual thing for the Qunari,” I say. “He almost never speaks to me unless he wants to talk about them. Other than that, he just asks me to pass him papers or ink wells. He sort of talked to me at the Talwain estate that one time, but I mostly think that’s because Lady Talwain’s basically his aunt, or something, and goaded him into it.”
Varric makes a face, “Just be careful with that one. Hawke’s had dealings with the Arishok, and more and more lately, he’s been looking like someone pissed in his porridge.”

“I’m not exactly allowed to go beyond Hightown,” I say with a sigh. “You know, Leandra’s orders.”

“I’ve heard,” he says. “Daisy’s heartbroken about it.”

“Me too,” I say. “She hasn’t been by in a while.” I haven’t seen her since the Fade thing actually. Of course, I actually might be wrong about that. I’ve been spending tons of time at the Keep, and I might have missed her. I amend, “Well, I suppose she might have come by. I’ve been stuck at the Keep.”

Varric shakes his head and says, “She’s been wrapped up in her mirror. Hawke hasn’t been able to pry her away from it since the Fade.”

“Do you know if she’s gotten it to work?”

“I think we’d definitely have heard by now if she had.”

I hum in agreement.

“You’re not going pull that shit again, are you?” I frown and tilt my head back to look at him. “Touching weird shit in the Fade?”

I do actually try not to roll my eyes, but I don’t succeed. “Varric, I’ve gotten this lecture a hundred times already.”

“I’m not lecturing,” he protests.

“Fine,” I cave. “I know it was a terrible decision, and I don’t plan on doing it again. Hell, the longer I can avoid the Fade, the better in my opinion.”

“Well, that makes two of us,” he says. Varric actually shudders a little as he says it, and I put my head back in its resting position again. “You should still be careful of the Viscount’s son.”

“Yes, dear,” I mutter, indulgently. He sighs. “I will, Varric. He’s obviously planning his escape, and even though he’s intent on turning to the Qunari, he’s also pretty politically savvy. I totally get that he and Lady Talwain are in on something together, and they’re trying to drag me into it.”

“Did you figure that out, or did Jean Luc tell you?”

“Rude,” I say, just a tad bit offended by that. It was my overthinking, thank you very much, that made it all click. “I figured it out after tea, when I started mulling over it. They kept mentioning Leandra’s fall from grace, or whatever. They didn’t say it quite like that, of course, but it was heavily implied that I’m the one who’s supposed to redeem the family.” I chuckle. “Little do they know…”

“Bah, politics,” Varric says. “But hey, you fit in nicely with all your secrets.”

I shrug. “This party’s going to be a disaster. I can already tell someone’s going to ask me something, and I’m not going to know what to say and we’re—” And there’s the insecurity coming out.

“Or,” Varric cuts in, before I can really get started, “you could giggle and say oh we shouldn’t discuss that here, serah.” I do not even sound like that, Varric. “Or you could claim your cousin’s getting himself in trouble again.” Likely to happen, that.

“Varric, are you writing a book about this?” I ask, attempting to sit up, so I can pin him nice and
good with my disapproving stare. All of that came out in the same way he talks about future plots for his raunchy novels.

“If those don’t work,” he says, watching me in amusement as I juggle glaring at him and smoothing down my hair, “or you burn through them, you could always say I have some business to discuss with you. And we can gossip about those silk shoes in some corner with some of the better Orlesian wine.”

“You’re coming?”

He raises an eyebrow and smirks, and I just roll my eyes. “Despite what you may think, I am a fairly decent businessman.” Then, he taps the ring on his finger. “This, of course, helps. The nobles of Hightown really respect a good, old-fashioned signet ring on a dwarf. Well, that and a ‘good’ bloodline.”

“Can I see?” I’m always too scared to touch the jewelry they sell in the stalls in Hightown, mostly because Leandra watches me like a hawk (ha!), and I already owe her so much already. I really don’t need her buying me anything else just because we’re ‘family.’ And anyway, everything just looks pricey. But this is Varric, and I feel fine asking him.

He slips it off his finger and drops it into my hands. It’s still warm, and I turn it in my hands, examining the crest and the quality of the metal. “Interesting?” he asks, raising an eyebrow, after I’ve spent a few minutes looking at it.

“It’s a ring,” I say, shrugging and handing it back. A pretty neat one but way too chunky for my taste. The family crest is the most interesting part, but I don’t feel like Varric’s one to wax about his family history, so I don’t ask. “A very heavy ring.”

“It’s handy for punching people,” he says as he slips it back on his finger. It’s still so odd to me how flippant those violent comments are here. I mean, I used to say things like that all the time. I’m going to kill you. I could stab somebody. It’s just completely different when you know the person’s actually going to go out and hurt somebody at some point. “And getting invited to swanky parties.”

“Don’t be surprised if I take you up on your offer,” I warn.

“I’ll make sure to set us aside a bottle of their finest,” he says, grinning at me.

“Is there a reason you’re all the way over here?” Hawke asks, raising his eyebrows at me. I have to physically fight against the urge to cross my arms and send a significant look at Leandra and Jean Luc who, I assume, are still arguing about our party outfits at Jean Luc’s stall.

“I’ve been banished over here,” I respond, peeking around Hawke bulk to see who he’s with. I spy with my little eye a Varric, a Fenris, and an Isabela. Fenris, typically, is the first to catch sight of me, and I offer a wincey sort of smile and a little wave before standing up straight again. You know, out of sight. It’s not as though I think he’d try to hurt me in public, but I’m not exactly certain how he feels right this second about me considering the Fade stuff.

“Oh?” Hawke says, giving me a significant look. His traveling party comes forward and forms a little semicircle in front of me, obviously curious about our conversation. So much for hiding. “Did you do something naughty?”

“Do tell,” Isabela goads before I can even think about offering a response to that. “It’s been a while,” she adds. “You owe me something juicy.”
I cross my arms and try very hard not to sound petulant, “You’re all terrible.”

“All?” Fenris says. “I have nothing to do with this.” Which is fair enough.

“Fine,” I amend, very relieved that Fenris sort of joked with me just now. I was sort of operating under the impression he was gearing up to murder me or, at the very least, interrogate me. “You’re all terrible—minus Fenris.” Fenris nods, pleased with the amendment.

“Well?” Varric says, after we stand around grinning at each other like a bunch of middle schoolers for a few seconds. “If you’re going to throw those kinds of cruel words around, Pebbles, you better give us some reasons.”

“Sure you have the time for all that Varric?” I counter.

“Ow,” Varric says, putting a hand to his chest.

I roll my eyes and sigh, uncrossing my arms. “It’s just party stuff,” I say. And just as I expected, Varric and Hawke groan in understanding. Isabela looks amused, and Fenris just snorts, shaking his head a little at us. I’m fairly certain all of Hawke’s friends know about the party by now. It’s been over a week since Lady Talwain told me about it, and the date of the party’s fast approaching. At the estate, Garrett complains about it fairly constantly, and I’m certain he’s been taking all those complaints to ‘work’ with him.

“We should go with our plan,” Hawke says to Varric. “We could—”

“You mean your plan,” Varric says, cutting him off and throwing his hands up.

Hawke makes a disgusted sound, “Don’t tell me? You’re afraid of mother, too?”

“You aren’t, Hawke?” Fenris says, crossing his arms with raised brows.

I can’t help but jump on the train. “Yeah,” I say, crossing my arms again and looking at Hawke expectantly. His look? It basically screams why are you all ganging up on me? I can almost hear the Warbrain-esque whine already. Really, Leandra hasn’t really said anything scary, but she’s really good at that ‘stern mom’ look. The one that makes you feel like a disappointment, so you try extra hard to please her.

“Oh,” Isabela says, laughing. “This is all too precious.”

“Betrayal isn’t precious,” Hawke grumbles.

Isabela winds her arm around his and gleefully teases him, “You big baby.”

Hawke submits to the treatment. “It’s not like they want to go,” he complains, gesturing between me and Varric.

“It’s true,” Varric admits with a shrug. “But I do have my serials to promote, and you’ve got a mother to please.” He laughs. “You can’t always get your way when you bat your pretty eyelashes, Hawke.”

“Well,” Hawke says, “I can damn well try.” Isabela laughs again and pats his cheek with a shake of her head. “If I had a little support,” he glares at me and then Varric, “maybe—”

“Support with what, Garrett?” Leandra says, approaching us with her arms crossed. She looks at Isabela with slightly narrowed eyes and then turns her attention to the rest of us. She doesn’t exactly
look happy, and when she turns to Garrett, he tries very hard to look innocent. Isabela releases him and bumps Varric’s side with a smirk. Varric grins back at her.

“Nothing,” Hawke says.

“We’ve finally decided about your tunic for the party,” she says, but I get what she means by the seemingly innocent declaration. *No way in hell you can back out now, kid.*

“Wonderful,” Hawke mutters. He glances at me, looking quite pitiful.

“Yes, quite,” Leandra says. “Are you all heading to the estate?”

Hawke winces, “Maybe?”

“I imagine everyone’s hungry,” she says. “You haven’t been home for days, and no doubt, you’ve been dragging them around with you all this time.”

“He has,” Isabela confirms. “Been running us up and down and up and down the Coast for *days.*” She laughs and steps closer to Fenris, who regards her with suspicion. “I think Hawke’s worn holes in Fenris’ feet.” Fenris cracks a smile at that, glancing down at his bare feet.

“How neglectful of me,” Hawke says, flatly. I feel like I just saw their friendship die. I mean, not really, but it seems like it was a near thing.

“The least we can do is feed you,” Leandra says, smiling.

*The very least,* Hawke adds. “Come on then. We’d better get you lot feed before you wither away.” Leandra snorts quietly and turns, leading the way. And, of course, as soon as her back’s turned Hawke looks at all of us and mouths ‘Traitors!’ before pouting and following her.

“Were you actually doing things on the Wounded Coast?” I ask, as we follow behind. I wouldn’t be surprised, for instance, if they’d been hanging out at the Hanged Man for the last couple of days.

“Yup. If there’s one thing the Wounded Coast’s not short on, it’s Tal-Vashoth,” Varric says.

“And sand,” Fenris adds, sounding a little disgusted. With his bare feet, it’s not difficult to understand why. After another moment, he adds a third thing, with more disgust, “And slavers.”

“Caves,” Isabela adds, cheerfully. “And spiders.”

“Alright, alright,” Varric says, “so the Wounded Coast’s not exactly short on a lot of things.”

Unluckily (or maybe luckily), Isabela changes the subject completely. “You look all nice,” she says, plucking at the sleeve of my dress. She basically purrs the word ‘nice,’ but really and truly, it’s mostly the compliment itself that has me blushing.

“She looked all nice before, Rivani,” Varric points out, mimicking the way she said ‘all nice.’ My skin feels really warm all of a sudden. I mean, I know it’s mostly because I grew up on Earth where I got regular meals and healthcare, but it’s still nice to hear.

Isabela waves him off, and exasperated says, “You know exactly what I mean, Varric.” She leans closer to me, examining my face closely. I feel my cheeks get even warmer under the scrutiny.

Fenris coughs. “I’m certain Leandra will have something to say if you do something *sordid* to her cousin in public,” he says.
“Do you think she’d mind if I did something sordid with you?” Isabela asks, drawing away from me to wiggle her eyebrows suggestively at Fenris.

“Yes,” Hawke answers. He’s stopped a few feet ahead of us with his arms crossed, tapping a foot to indicate his impatience.

“You’re ruining all of our fun today,” Varric says.

“You just want new material for your serials,” Hawke accuses.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” Varric says.

We’ve caught up to Hawke, and he walks with us now. “How did you even get to sordid acts?” Varric and I turn, at the exact moment, and level him with a look. “Right,” he says with a snort.

“We were just complimenting your cousin’s dress,” Isabela says. She looks to me again, “Well, more your cousin.”

Hawke puts an arm around my shoulders, looking scandalized. “I didn’t hear any compliments. I heard,” he lowers his voice, eyes very wide, “depravity.”

I give him a little shove, rolling my eyes, “You’re all a nightmare.” I’m not exactly doing so great in the comebacks department today, am I?

After a late lunch, Leandra goes off with Orana to, presumably, arrange more things for the party. We’re left at the dining room table to chat. And it’s typical. For once, I feel semi-comfortable because everyone at this table knows I’m not a lady, and there’s no real expectations. I don’t need to cling fast to my knowledge of Hercinia or repeat my fake history to myself. But, of course, like I said it’s typical that I’m feeling all at peace.

Because we quickly hit a bump.

“How can we be certain?” Fenris presses. We’re on the mage thing again, the Fade thing, and I went from wow I’m feeling strangely okay to stress in about two seconds.

“How are we not certain?” Hawke says. “You’re friends with a bunch of mages, and we’re telling you she’s not a mage. How is that not certainty?” I’m being nice and not pointing out that a little while ago he admitted there was no such thing as certainty in this instance. Mostly because they don’t exactly sound angry yet, but I can tell we’ll be getting there fast. I’m not helping this argument along. Fenris definitely made a little face at the suggestion that he was friends with a bunch of mages, and I refuse to be the one to make this worse.

I glance at Varric, hoping he’s got something, but he’s looking between Hawke and Fenris, intently listening. So is Isabela, though she looks, honestly, a little bored by the turn of the conversation (just a minute ago we were talking about Fenris’ recent Wicked Grace winning streak).

“I trust your word,” Fenris says. “But I can’t trust anyone else’s.” He means Anders and Merrill, I suppose. “And you are only one mage, Hawke.”

“So you think she’s deceiving us?” And here we go again.

Fenris hesitates, and this time, I’m more intent on him than anyone else because I am curious to know if he thinks I’m this weird super mage who’s gearing up for their big, bad evil reveal. “No,” he says. “I don’t think that.”
“Good,” Varric says. He looks at me, “No offense, Pebbles, but you’d make a terrible villain.”

“Hey,” I protest, just on principle.

“Cousin,” Hawke says, looking at me in that oh honey sort of way that’s mildly grating, “you hate anything to do with violence?”

“Just the thought of slavery made you physically ill?” Varric adds, before I can get a word in. “And when I talked about punching people, you made a face. And not a how uncouth lady face, but a I’m mildly disturbed that you, on occasion, resort to violence face.”

I sputter at being pegged so easily, and all I manage to get out in response is a high-pitched, “On occasion? Really?” There’s about a second delay, and then we all—minus Fenris—burst into laughter. “Okay, fine. I’d make a really shitty villain.”

“You could still be a mage,” Fenris says, though it’s not as if he’s trying to be mean. He actually sounds very reasonable.

I shrug, unable to really protest that point, “Would it matter?” He frowns at the question, and I rush to amend, “I just mean that I apparently have this weird city in the Fade? And there’s no demons there that we know of, which is the risk with mages, right? So, if I am a mage, somehow, risk factor is relatively low, isn’t it?”

“If you completely and utterly ignore the fact that Kirkwall’s crawling with templars,” Hawke says, “then yes.” I was actually ignoring that fact honestly.

“If we cannot find the foci, or an alternative way to send you back, what will you do?” Fenris asks. My noses scrunches up as I consider the question, which seems, at a glance, to be quite off topic. Then, ah, it doesn’t seem so random.

“You think,” I begin, slowly, “that I’d go and find a demon for answers.” From the look on Fenris’ face, I can tell I hit the nail on the head. And okay, that’s a pretty fair conclusion.

“Mages bargain for less every day,” he says. I consider the possibility and try very hard to be honest with myself. I won’t lie. It’s, of course, tempting. But you know what’s stronger? My absolutely fear of the unknown. Just the thought of hypothetically speaking to a demon scares the shit out of me. It scares me so much that I actually feel queasy.

“I’ve got a great policy about this actually,” I say, finally. Everyone’s eyes are on me. “I don’t see the point in fucking with things I don’t understand.” Varric’s lip quirks up, and Fenris waits for me to continue, not really understanding where I’m going with this, I think. “Back home, supposedly, there are people who do magic. Like curses and fortunetelling and such.” I shrug because I honestly don’t even know where I’m going with this now that I’ve started, but this part isn’t the point. “Calling up the spirits of the dead.”

Isabela hums, “Sounds like Rivain.”

I file that little tidbit away and continue. “My mom’s always believed in that stuff to some extent, and I was always on the fence about it. But I didn’t mess with it. Because it’s better safe than sorry. Demons are basically the same thing, I think, for a mage. This weird unknown factor that I’m not even remotely interested in fucking with.” I shudder and then shake my head, “Does this even make sense?”

“You’re not interested in taking risks,” Fenris says. He looks at me as if he’s searching very hard for some indication of something. I’m not sure if he wants something good or bad. A sign of weakness?
A sign of truth? I have no idea.

“Not these kind of risks,” I say. “If—” I have to take a deep breath before saying it because it’s one thing to say this to myself in the middle of the night, and it’s another to tell a bunch of people, who’ll remember and remind me of it in the future. “If we can’t find the foci, I guess I’ll just have to get used to this place.” Ugh, it sounds wrong to even admit that.

“You say that now,” Fenris says, “but—”

“We don’t even know if I am a mage,” I say, trying to keep my tone even despite the fact that I’m getting upset now. Not really at Fenris, but just as my general situation again.

“Can you imagine her making a deal with a demon?” Isabela says, her tone deceptively light. She pauses, leaving room for everyone to imagine me fumbling my way into a deal with a demon. She chuckles. “Or using blood magic?” I make a face at that because it still sounds so unsanitary. And anyway, I can barely even handle doctors pricking my fingers for a little blot of blood. I really can’t even imagine me slitting open my hand or anything like that. I’d probably just throw up.

Varric snorts, adding, “In one of her dresses? Maker Forbid.”

Fenris’ face doesn’t change at those comments, but after a few seconds, he exhales. “Very well,” he says.

I feel compelled to add, “If I’m ever a danger to anyone, you’re welcome to put me out of my misery.” I meant it to be sort of lighthearted, but it definitely didn’t come out that way. It was definitely sort of martyr in the worst, self-deprecating sort of way. At least, that’s what it seemed like to me. I’m wincing all over the place. I don’t think I should say much more.

“No one’s putting anyone out of their misery,” Hawke says, firmly. He’d kept out of the conversation for a while, letting us all talk our way through it, but apparently, I said the wrong thing. He sighs, looking unhappy.

Isabela says, “Why don’t you just get your brother to come and do an examination?” Even though Hawke talked me down from it last time, I admit I’d really like to put this issue to rest already, and Carver seems like the best option.

“I don’t think the kind of examination you’re thinking would help anyone, Rivani,” Varric says with a snort.

“It would certainly help Mana,” she says, giving me a look. “You need to relax a little. Don’t let Fenris infect you with his…broody spells.” Fenris’ eyes narrow at the last part, and I can’t tell if it’s the ‘broody’ part or the ‘spells’ part that he’s hung up on.

“I do not br—”

Hawke exhales loudly, and everyone shuts up and looks at him.

“Will everyone shut up about this if I get Carver here?” Uh oh. He actually sounds a little annoyed.

“Well, you have the perfect excuse,” Varric says. Hawke turns his attention to him, looking as if he needs further explanation. “The party.”

“I don’t think the templars give time off for parties,” Hawke says.

“And templars give time off for their recruits to go the Blooming Rose?” Isabela points out.
Hawke scowls, “He hasn’t exactly jumped at the chance to come down and visit, has he?”

“Uh,” I say, realizing too late I’d drawn attention back onto myself. Hawke and everyone else, of course, waits for me to continue, and after a few moments of silence, I feel compelled to just say what I’d been thinking, “Maybe he hasn’t come back because you guys fought?” I tried to put it nicely? I’m not sure if that worked.

Hawke glares at the table for a few minutes before sighing. “Fine,” he says. “I’ll get mother to write him a letter about the party. She’ll find a way to worm in our request, I’m sure.” He considers it then. “There’s no way we can have him smite her at the party,” he says, snorting immediately at the suggestion.

“It wouldn’t look too unusual for you to invite him back to the estate after,” Varric suggests.

“For family time,” I add, gently. “I mean, I haven’t even met my other cousin yet.”

“Family time,” Hawke repeats, obviously finding that notion ridiculous. “A whole night with my brother,” Hawke mutters. “I’ve forgotten what that even feels like.”

“You’re actually good at this,” Isabela says to me. Hawke’s made his excuses and left. I have the distinct impression that he’s upset with me. It’s fair. I am the reason for the party no one wants to attend, and now I’m the reason he’s got to see his estranged brother again.

“Good at what?” I ask, and even to my own ears, that sounds very tired. I sound like that sometimes when I’m upset and drained.

“This lady thing,” Isabela says, waving a hand in the air. She smiles, propping her head on her hand, “I got bored with it myself, started to claw at the walls and everything.” I must have made a face at that because she bursts into laughter. “What? Too shocking?”

“No,” I say. It was more the clawing at the walls thing that got me. I’m starting to feel that way myself a little. “So you’re a lady-turned-pirate?” It sounds like an interesting story to say the least, and it’s not actually that hard for me to imagine.

“I’m a nobody-turned-lady-turned-pirate,” Isabela says. She clicks her tongue once, and when she smiles this time it’s not very happy, though I think she’s trying to cover up that she’s being semi-serious, “Remind me to tell you about my mother sometime.”

That sounds like it’s a depressing story, and I have nothing else to say beyond, “I don’t think you were a nobody.” I’m pretty sure we should all know by now how terrible I am at comforting people.

“I was,” she argues, but she’s amused now. “I was just a little thief—and not even a good one. Not for a long, long time.”

“Some might argue she’s not a great one now,” Varric says, trying to lighten the mood some I think. “You gave Merrill back all her coin yesterday.”

“And you still haven’t managed to steal Aveline’s headband,” Fenris points out.

“If either of you can manage it,” she begins, looking at Varric and Fenris pointedly, “I’ll eat my boots.”

“Careful, Rivani,” Varric teases. “You know where those things have been.”
“If I died, it’d serve you right,” she says.

“Oh, but who would unabashedly admire my chest hair?” His eyes turn to me and Fenris. Fenris holds up his hands and shakes his head. “What? Not even a little, Broody?”

“It’s like having a nice handle,” Isabela says, trying to sell it. “Can’t you, at least, appreciate the convenience?” She looks at Fenris expectantly, but he’s suddenly very interested in the décor of the dining room. His ears are going a little pink.

“Convenient,” Varric says, scandalized. “There’s much more to my chest hair than convenience. Why, in fact,” he looks at me with sly grin, and here we go, “Pebbles and I were just discussing a purchase I should make. For my chest hair.” He doesn’t even finish. Why? Because he’s an asshole.

“For your chest hair,” Isabela repeats. She starts to laugh, no, cackle, and she looks between me and Varric, obviously thinking things.

“I hate you,” I grumble to Varric.

“You don’t,” Isabela crows.

“I do. A little,” I say.

“I don’t know what disturbs me more,” Fenris says. “That you discussed his chest hair at all, or that you discussed a purchase for his chest hair.”

“Curious, Broody?”

“No,” he says, very sure in his answer. At least someone here’s learning, I guess.

“But it doesn’t need anything,” Isabela complains. “It’s just so nice the way it is, all thick and curly.” And off we go.


“But Varric,” Isabela whines, breathily.

“No buts,” he says. “At least Pebbles treats my chest hair with some respect.”

“I do?” I mutter, bewildered.

“She does?” Fenris echoes, snorting.

Varric waves off our skepticism, “At least you remember there’s a person attached to all this lovely hair.” We all chuckle at that, and then there’s a lull in the conversation. A nice one. Not too awkward or anything.

“Have you ever played?” Isabela asks, after a while.

“Wicked Grace?” I guess. She nods, and I shake my head. “I’d never even heard of it until I came here.” Varric and Isabela look mildly upset at that, so I quickly amend. “But I’ve played other card games. Poker, blackjack.” I consider and, after a second, start chuckling to myself. “I think you’d all like Egyptian Ratscrew.”

“Ratscrew,” Isabela says, making a face and then laughing. “Sounds promising.”

“Well, it involves some small, well usually small, amount of violence, so—”
“Tell me you have your cards,” Isabela says to Varric, looking excited even with so little information about the game.

Varric, of course, has his cards.

“I don’t know what you’re all playing, but I’m not healing any injuries any of you get as a result of this game,” Anders says. The ones still in the game (Isabela, Fenris, and Orana) don’t even look up, too focused on one-upping each other. Anders rolls his eyes and sits with me and Varric. “What in the Void are they even playing?”

“Egyptian Ratscrew,” I answer. “It’s a game from back home.”

“A vicious game,” Varric says. “I’m starting to think we’ve been given the wrong impression about your people, Pebbles. I think Isabela punctured my hand.”


“How are you?” I ask Anders. “You haven’t been by in a while.”

Anders grimaces at the reminder and runs a hand through his hair. “It’s been busy at the clinic, and I’ve been working on,” he glances over at Fenris, and finally finishes with a quiet, “our project.”

“I figured,” I say.

“Project?” Varric says. “You never mentioned a project, Blondie. I’m hurt.”

Anders fidgets a little, “It’s just something for the mage underground.”

“Something for the mage underground involving Pebbles?” Varric prods, eyebrows raised.

For a minute, Anders seems to struggle with himself, and finally, he admits, “I’ve been bringing mages into the city in the Fade.”

“Is that safe?” Varric asks, immediately.

“So far there’s been no trouble,” Anders says. “I’ve been keeping an eye on it, and Feynriel has, too.”

“So it’s going well?” I ask.

“Yes,” Anders answers. “I wanted to say thank you for agreeing to it in the first place. The others, too, wanted to extend their thanks.” He starts to reach for something in one of his pouches, and I’m very surprised when he drops a coin pouch in front of me on the table. I reach for it hesitantly.

“What’s this for?”

“It’s not a lot,” Anders says, “but it’s the least we can offer—”

“Ah, no,” I say, holding it back for him. “I haven’t done anything, and you can use this more than I can.”

“It’s not just me who wanted you to have it.”

“Well, I’m giving it to you.”
“You can’t give it to me!”

“Why not?”

“Because the others chipped in and it’s for you.”

“No, I can’t take this.”

“I can’t bring this back. I promised I’d give it to you.”

“You gave it to me. I’m just…giving it back. Right now.”

Varric starts laughing, and I use the distraction to my advantage and shove the coin purse down the front of Anders’ tunic. He sputters in response.

“You can’t just—”

“She just did, Blondie,” Varric says, chuckling.

“Mana,” Anders says, firmly, retrieving the pouch with some amount of difficulty. “Please take it.”

“For what?” I protest because I literally haven’t done anything, and I don’t need it. Leandra won’t let me pay for anything, and I do have work. I’ve just been saving all the money I’ve been getting from Aveline, Varric, and that one book merchant I can never remember the name of because his name’s Orlesian and ridiculously long.

“Mana,” Anders says again, holding it out for me. We stare at each other, and I feel compelled to take it just so we’ll stop this back and forth. I don’t though, because I’m trying to be a decent human being right now.

“Oh for pity’s safe, take the money,” Varric says. “Anders will out stubborn you, I promise.” Well, I’m super determined to out-stubborn him now, Varric.

“I just want to know,” I say, trying to be reasonable, “why I’m even being given money in the first place.”

“Consider it rent money,” Varric suggests. That’s pretty damn ridiculous honestly.

“Mana,” Anders says again, holding it out for me. We stare at each other, and I feel compelled to take it just so we’ll stop this back and forth. I don’t though, because I’m trying to be a decent human being right now.

“Oh for pity’s safe, take the money,” Varric says. “Anders will out stubborn you, I promise.” Well, I’m super determined to out-stubborn him now, Varric.

“I just want to know,” I say, trying to be reasonable, “why I’m even being given money in the first place.”

“Consider it rent money,” Varric suggests. That’s pretty damn ridiculous honestly.

“Yes,” Anders agrees, a clear thank you for Varric in his voice. They both stare at me expectantly, eyes basically boring holes into my soul.

“Fine,” I say, taking it and feeling very much defeated. For the record, this isn’t over. Anders’ smiles at me, looking relieved. I set the money on the table in front of me and try to forget about it. “How many people are in the city now?”

“A little over two dozen,” Anders answers, “including myself and Feynriel.”

“Good,” I say, though I’m not certain if those are good numbers or not. “There was no problem getting them in the city?” Anders shakes his head. “That’s good,” I say again, not sure what else there is to say about it.

“Feynriel’s been looking into the artifacts you activated,” Anders says. “But he says he’s had no luck. Most of the records are in elvhen, and even Merrill’s having trouble translating them.”

“You’ve been working with Merrill?” Varric asks, impressed.
“It’s mostly Feyrniel,” Anders admits. “He’s been keeping an eye on everything, and he’s been keeping me updated about their research.” He stops. “Ah, I meant to tell you that he brought the Keeper into the city.” He waits to see, I suppose, how I’m taking that.

“It’s fine,” I say.

“She’s been helping. The archives are extensive,” Ander says. He hesitates, but then suggests something I’ve been dreading, “You should come back and take a look.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say, with the full intention of putting it out of my mind until I’ve survived the party at the very least. Luckily for me, Anders just nods in acceptance.

“I think that’s everything I meant to tell you,” Anders says. He looks sheepish. “I’ve probably forgotten something. It’s been hectic between the clinic and the city.” He blinks, “Oh, right. What do you think we ought to call it?”

“The city?” He nods. “I haven’t the faintest idea? I’m sure it had a name before.”

Anders shrugs, “There’s been no mention of it yet in the archives, but it’s not terrible urgent. The others were just asking about it.”

“Well, if you all reach an agreement, feel free to name it for me,” I say.

“ Might want to be careful about that,” Varric says. “Anders once had a cat named Ser Pounce-a-lot.”

I laugh, delighted at the information, “Really?”

“Really,” he says, sniffling at Varric’s teasing. “And it was a perfectly respectable name for him. He fought darkspawn with me and everything.” He shakes his head, “We’d never name it without your approval, considering it’s yours.” I don’t argue that point, and instead, nod. Mostly to ward off the coming headache.

There’s a mournful cry from our card players, and when we turn, Isabela’s throwing up her hands. Fenris is shaking his head with a smile, and Orana’s sweeping up a pile of cards.

“Orana won?” Varric says, amused.

“She’s sneaky,” Isabela says. “Someone really ought to teach her the way around a knife. I’d bet she’d be amazing.”

“Of course, by someone—” Fenris begins.

“I mean me,” Isabela finishes, winking at him.

Orana taps the deck against the table, flushing at the comments, and stands, bringing the cards to Varric.

“Congratulations,” I say, smiling at her. “Tell me they didn’t wound you?”

“I’m fine,” she says with a laugh, showing her hands. They’re a little red on top, but that’s all. “It was fun.”

“I can’t wait to show Hawke,” Isabela says.

“Just don’t break each other’s hands,” I say, sighing.
“What’s the fun in that?” Varric asks.

“Where is Garrett anyway?” Anders asks.

“I thought he’d gone to see you actually,” Varric says.

“He’s getting fitted for his tunic,” Orana pips up.

There’s a chorus of ahs and ohs.

“Tell me it’s some Orlesian monstrosity,” Isabela says, standing. She starts to stretch, reaching her hands above her head. “It’d pay good money to see that.”

“It’s Hercinian,” Orana says, almost apologetically. “To match Mana’s dress.”

Varric snickers a little, “Oh, that’s perfect.”

“Matching clothes,” Isabela coos. “It almost makes me want to go.” She looks suddenly to me, “Would you mind terribly if we crashed the party?”


“Oh, is that all?” she says.

“Oh, is that all?” Varric and Anders say, mockingly, in perfect unison. Fenris chuckles, and then when everyone turns to him, smothers it in a fake cough.

“I think they’ll look very nice,” Orana says.

“They will,” Varric agrees, grinning.

“Do you think Garrett will be home anytime soon?” Anders asks.

“He should be,” Orana says. “It’s almost dinnertime, and he and Lady Amell said they’d be back before then.”

“Is it really so late?” Fenris asks.

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” I say.

“So it seems,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the kudos, bookmarks, etc.! And the comments! The comments have been such a joy to read. I’ve never been so pumped in my life to write a fic. You're all wonderful beyond words.
Anyway, Here's Intrigue

Chapter Summary

A letter arrives from Jean Luc’s son, Laurent, and there's more pre-party shenanigans.

Chapter Notes

It's been a while - but here's chapter 11!
Betaed by Senei.

My Dear Mana, Laurent’s letter begins. Bodahn passed it off to me just now as I was heading to breakfast, a breakfast prepared solely by Leandra according to Hawke. Orana and Fenris have some sort of ‘thing’ going on this morning, and yeah, Hawke has as much a clue about what that thing is as I do. Which is actually nice? I mean, I’d like to think Orana’s finally comfortable enough to take some time for herself, and that’s good, isn’t it?

It’s just a little weird here at the table without her, so I’m glad to have the letter as a sort of distraction.

Hawke’s making a great show of reading over my shoulder, even after Leandra raises an eyebrow and glares at him. We’re ‘family’ (and I don’t really actually mind), so I don’t take offense.

I’m pleased, of course, to know you’re well. Bandits on the road! Mysterious illness! Tea parties!

Hawke snorts and mutters something, but I ignore him and read on.

It’s a miracle you’re well enough to wander the streets of Hightown, but I am glad that you are. Antiva is much the same as the last time I wrote. But there is a bit of interesting news to share. I know you hate when I speak of the Crows and have never shared my fascination with them, but I must tell you about this. Someone’s been ruffling their feathers as it were. One someone, if the rumors are to be believed. They’re saying he means to take control of the House, even if he must destroy it first.

Jean Luc had told me a little about the Antivan Crows, but I mostly got that they were assassins. Really deadly assassins. It was honestly so surreal I didn’t really retain much of the information he told me about them. I mean, I know Earth has assassins, but of course, it’s not nearly the same. Everyone around here knows about the Antivan Crows, and they’re very much out in the open.

There’s some talk he was even a Crow himself, that he has some connection to the warden that ended the Blight in Fereldan, and some talk still that he acts on order of the Fereldan crown. Unlikely, that. King Alistair hardly seems the type. They say he’s soft – softer than his wife at any rate – but that’s hardly the point. The point is ‘The Black Shadow’ is making his mark, and it’s making people very nervous. It’s the Qunari most of all. ‘Invasion’ has been the word on everyone’s lips nowadays.
I stop momentarily, considering the world map that’s nearly seared in my brain. Antiva is bordered by the Imperium and Rivain and the Free Marshes. Seheron’s to the north-west. Par Vollen to the north-east. I wrinkle my nose. I suppose, I can sort of see it?

“The Qunari have a strong presence in many regions of Rivain,” Hawke says, as if guessing my confusion about the distance. Leandra’s brow furrows.

“Laurent was saying that someone’s been causing trouble for the Antivan Crows,” I explain, for her benefit. “He thinks the destabilization of the organization’s making people antsy. They’re—”

Hawke starts laughing.

“What?” I think his petulant tone’s catching.

“All that practice for the party’s going well, I see,” he says, after he manages to get hold of his senses again. “The destabilization of the organization—” He bursts into laughter again before he can finish mocking me.

“You’re a dick,” I say, going to poke him in the arm with my fork. Physical attacks are always pointless against Hawke, of course. His reflexes are too good, and within a matter of seconds, we’re fighting for control of my silverware and making faces at one another.

Leandra clears her throat, and we return to our appropriate places. Hawke, the bastard, keeps my fork, and I side-eye him really hard. He, in turn, twirls my fork between his fingers and smirks.

“Really,” Leandra says, sighing. “I know you’re both on edge about this party but—” She shakes her head, and I do actually feel a small amount of shame. Only a tiny bit though because I’ve been subjected to so many lessons and talks lately. I feel like I should be allowed to have one play-fight with my ‘cousin’ at the table, especially since it’s out of sight from anybody that really matters.

I mean, all these people know who I really am – which is nobody really.

“It’s probably more to do with Kirkwall than the Crows,” Leandra says, dropping the matter.

“Probably,” Hawke admits, putting my fork on the table purposefully and sliding it my way.

“Why is it so odd that they’re here?” I ask, taking my fork back and stabbing a tiny tomato with a bit more force than necessary. Hawke makes a little face, play-alarmed at the violent display, and Leandra ignores our antics. “Saemus said they hadn’t been here long, but he hasn’t mentioned why.”

“No one knows why,” Hawke says. “That’s part of the problem. The Arishok – their leader – won’t say why they’re here, and it’s pretty obvious they’re here for a very specific purpose.” He eats a bit of his bread. “He hates it here, thinks we’re a shit city. He wouldn’t stay here if he had a choice about it.”

“Well, it is kinda a…” I say, trailing off with the laugh.

“Oh, he’s right of course, but if he’d just say what he wants, it would make things easier,” Hawke says. “He asks me to do errands for him every now and then.” He makes a face. “I say asks. He points things out, and I investigate and always find something horrible. Still, it’s never that horrible thing he needs so he can leave.” He sighs and rolls his shoulders. “People have noticed how impatient he’s been lately. I suppose anyone would be if they were stuck in his position, but it’s putting everyone on edge.”

“He’s coming to his breaking point,” I guess.
“Exactly,” Hawke says, as though the word satisfies him.

“We’re all leery of an invasion,” Leandra picks up. “Which makes people think it’s the start of a trend. An invasion here, an invasion in Antiva…”

“Oh,” I say. “Is that actually what’s happening here?”

Hawke shrugs.

“Maker only knows,” Leandra says, shuddering a little at the very thought.

That doesn’t sound very reassuring, but I can see there’s no point in discussing it further. Again, I’m reminded of just how different Earth is from this place. Things like invasions and war happened, of course, but they never touched so close to home. I was always a safe distance away from it, on the other side of a computer screen or television. The threat here’s down a couple of tiers, at the docks, and there are plenty more threats just outside the door.

Still, there’s nothing I can really do about it, is there? Except for keep vigilant and stick to Hawke. It’s such a copout, but it’s really the only way I can keep my sanity.

I continue my letter on that note, but Hawke doesn’t seem interested in reading over my shoulder anymore. He focuses, instead, on his bread.

I doubt it’ll come to that, and I don’t want to burden you with dreary thoughts of war.

I have **better** news anyway. Actual news that might interest you (and certainly father!). I have met someone, a **someone** someone if you catch my meaning (and I am certain you do). From Hercinia in fact. I owe you my thanks for it actually. He came by the shop looking a bit homesick, and he asked after some Hercinian fabrics as if he wasn’t expecting me to stock it. We do stock an impressive collection of it, of course. This is Rialto! But still, he was not happy. ‘Hercinians,’ I said, ‘They’re the only ones who miss home so much.’ And of course, he asked what other Hercinians I knew, and I told him about you, said you’d gone to Kirkwall and had a horrible time about it. He was very sympathetic, very sweet. He visits me every day now, and I’ve managed to convince him to dinner even though he says he couldn’t ever have imagined he’d have ended up liking an Orlesian (even one who sounds as Antivan as I do). I know, I know. You’d say, ‘Ah, but you’re Antivan at heart!’ Anyway, it is going very well I think despite my unfortunate tie to ze empire.

I know I do not need to remind you to be careful in Kirkwall, but I feel I must. Also, do not hesitate to go to father if you find yourself in trouble. He’s more Orlesian than I am, of course, but of the trustworthy sort if there is even such a thing.

**Wishing You Health, Happiness, and Great Wine,**

Laurent

It’s very strange, the feeling the letter conjures up. I know it’s a fake relationship, and I know that Laurent’s probably just playing it up because he probably finds it a bit fun. But even so, it makes me happy. It’s a bit ridiculous, and I immediately feel stupid for feeling like that. Like almost everything else, it’s just a sham. What’s there to actually be happy about?

“Your face is doing things,” Hawke comments, amused. “Exactly how much did he fit into that letter of his?”

I flush a little at being caught having an emotional freak-out. “He was just telling me he’d met somebody,” I say.
He grins that boyish grin of his, delighted at the opportunity for gossip. It’s a funny thing with Hawke. He loves his gossip. Doesn’t really matter who or what it’s about, he’s always really intrigued. And the more ridiculous the better with him.

“Because of me apparently,” I add. “The man he met is Hercinian.”

“He used you,” Hawke says, scandalized. He puts a hand on his chest as if to slow the racing of his heart, and I roll my eyes, folding up my letter and slipping it back into envelope. “All the way from Antiva,” he adds, still with a touch of that scandalized-tone. He hums, then nods. “Impressive.”

Leandra and I, in unison, snort at that. Hawke smiles innocently, batting his lashes.

“Garrett,” Leandra says, after the lash-batting goes on a bit too long. “Jean Luc’s expecting you in an hour for a—” Garrett groans and drops his head to the table.

“You’re very theatric this morning,” I mutter. Really, he’s always theatric.

He only manages another groan in response, a loud one. Warbrain seems to understand it at least because he barks twice in the foyer, as if agreeing with the sentiment.

“He told me you’ll be able to take everything today,” Leandra says, face a bit pinched. She’s so not impressed with either of us this morning. Hawke stubbornly keeps his head down though he groans a little more quietly than before. “For goodness sake, this will be the last of it.”

“How is it,” Hawke begins, speaking into the table, “that Mana’s only been to two fittings? ’s not fair.” I think Hawke’s been to maybe four fittings? It might actually have been more. I’m not certain. But I am certain that it’s fair. I might not have to go to all the fittings, but I’ve had to take etiquette lessons and culture lessons and basically how to pretend how to be a Hercinian lady convincingly (fancy party edition) lessons from both Leandra and Jean Luc.

It’s damn fair.

“He’s made nearly a half dozen dresses for her already,” Leandra says. “He’s just more familiar with her measurements.” Hawke snickers and then full out laughs. Yup, he’s a twelve-year-old boy.

“You shouldn’t swear,” he says, sounding very much like a petulant twelve-year-old. “It’s not very ladylike I hear.”

Leandra throws her hands up. “Maker knows why I try.” Then, of course, she turns on me, and despite myself, I straighten a little in my chair. “You’ll be going to the Keep and then straight home today. You, too, Garrett. Fitting and then home. We’re having a dancing lesson this afternoon.”

“But—” Hawke, who’s decided to perk up off the table, and I begin on top of one another. Leandra pins us both with a very displeased stare and plucks the napkin off her lap, sets it on the table beside the left side of her plate. Proper etiquette that.

“I don’t mean to make trouble,” I say quickly, hoping to save myself from getting in trouble. “But I meant to drop some of the books I’ve finished off with Varric. And he said he had a new chapter coming for me.”

“Coming for you,” Hawke mutters, flatly. I kick at him under the table but mostly I just hurt myself.

“I’ll send word to Varric to meet you here after you’re done at the Keep,” Leandra says. I swear I hear Hawke mutter nice try, but Leandra continues so I’m not sure if that’s what he said. It seems
likely he did. “Garrett, I won’t hear any excuses from you.”

“What?” he blurts. “That’s—”

“Garrett.”

“Fine.”

Leandra: 2. Mana and Garrett: 0.

Saemus—who’s spoken all of fifteen words to me all day—suddenly perks up when I start gathering my things so I can return to the Amell Estate (however reluctantly because ugh dancing lesson) and, to my surprise, starts to rise and put his things away, too.

“If you’re heading back to your family’s estate, I’d like to escort you,” he begins, not even slowing in his movements, “if it’s alright with you.” That last bit, I think with eyes narrowing, was definitely an afterthought.

“Of course.” I mean, it’s not as if there’s any polite way to refuse him, and I do like the idea of an escort. That’s terrible of me to think that (makes me feel very selfish honestly), but this world is scary shit. I’m starting to acclimate to that, but it’s hard to completely set aside the idea that I’m pretty much dead meat in this world without Hawke’s support. And there are people, apparently, who might be out for my blood personally at this point. So there’s that.

Aveline looks up from her papers and looks as if she wants to say something, but she doesn’t for a bit. Saemus and I continue putting up our things in silence, and just as we’re both about finished, she says, “Lady Talwin’s party is attracting a lot of unwanted attention. Be careful.”

I can’t tell if that’s a warning about the Knight-Commander or the coterie (which is some sort of gang I think) or what, but the event certainly warrants that kind of reminder so I nod. We won’t be seeing Aveline again until after the party either, so this is her chance to give us wise words about it.

“We will be,” Saemus says, heading for the door. I stand there blinking for a moment, and Aveline gives me a look and raises both her eyebrows meaningfully. I mouth the words to myself—and a little to Aveline—but still, I don’t get what it means. We will be, he said.

“And please keep Hawke out of trouble,” she adds, prompting me to move to follow Saemus.

I huff a little, “I don’t know what I can do about that.”

“Likely nothing,” she replies, resigned.

I laugh myself out the door, and Saemus—who apparently missed that tiny exchange—looks at me questioningly. “She was hoping I could keep Hawke out of trouble,” I explain.

“Ah,” he says, and if my eyes don’t deceive me, he relaxes just a little. He’s also completely disinterested in the topic of Hawke. Usually he at least has one disparaging comment to say before he lets the topic of my ‘cousin’ go. “Shall we go?”

“Yes,” I say. Really, he’s acting as distant as ever (with that tiny little hint of warmth because of my willingness to listen to him work through his thoughts on the Qunari), but today, there’s something else. Really, it might be best for me to pretend there isn’t whatever else, but it’s a bit hard to ignore. He keeps looking at me with more frequency than usual, and he’s making a bunch of odd little faces. It’s not terribly obvious. I mean, the expressions appear for about a second and then vanish. Which, I
suppose, makes sense. He’s been playing the Game, probably, since he was a child.

The weird vibes are confirmed when, just as we’re about to enter the main hallway, he stops. Naturally, I stop too.

“Is something wrong?” I ask after an entirely too long pause.

His jaw clenches, but still, he takes a moment to consider his words. Then he does the oddest thing. He offers me his arm, like we’re in some sort of Jane Austen novel. “You would honor me—” He won’t even look in my eyes as he says it. He’s totally staring just left of me, at the wall.

“I’m sorry,” I can’t help but blurt. “But who are you exactly?”

His jaw clenches again, and his brow furrows a little. I get the impression he’d very much like to drop his arm, but he doesn’t and keeps it held out even though we both know I’ve pretty much insulted him just now. Finally, though, after a painful silence, he sighs. “Please just take my arm,” he says. And he seems almost himself again.

Really, what would I know? I mean, I’ve been here too long sure, but as much as I think I know him from working with him in the Keep, I’m sure there’s plenty of sides to him I haven’t seen. Plenty of sides of everyone I haven’t seen yet actually.

Hesitantly, and after a long moment of contemplation, I slip my arm through his, and of course, we’re forced closer together. And being closer together, it’s clear he’s tense as all hell and clearly not enjoying the proximity. For that matter, I’m certain I feel much the same.

We continue on, and I don’t say anything though I desperately want to. It’ll have to wait, I know, until we’re at least out of the Keep. There’s always people listening in, especially when the Viscount’s son is involved.

Strangely, no one says a word to us as we make our way to the entrance of the Keep, and I briefly entertain the thought that Saemus did it for that reason. Especially with the party almost here, there’s been little peace for him, or for me, and maybe he just wanted a little quiet. It would be understandable—except I know for sure it’s not that. Saemus is a bit too smart to make such a public move like this without a really good reason.

For the record, I’m scared as hell about this ‘good reason,’ and I wonder if I made a mistake participating in whatever this is. No matter what it is, I doubt I’m going to like it. And everything’s a mess enough as it is.

We pass out the front entrance into the exterior walkway, and a pair of nobles discussing something by one of the huge columns fall silent for a moment, mesmerized by the sight of us. I force myself to casually look away though I’m as baffled as they are.

“It’s a secret,” he says quietly, as we walk. “The de Launcet sisters have asked my father for permission to put together a little party for Summerday. It’s to be hosted in the Keep.” I’m trying very hard to follow, but I don’t get it. I mean, I get it. There’s another party close on the horizon. Is this a warning? I mean, I dread parties, but— “I told them I’d be unavailable.”

“Oh?” I prompt him when he takes a bit too long to continue.

“You hate this as much as I do.”

“I do,” I say, slowly. I’m pretty sure I understand where he’s going with this. Sorta. “Am I to understand you implied…something about us…being unavailable together?”
He grimaces but recovers quickly, “It pleases my father at least.” There’s that bitterness of his. Strange, it’s very comforting to know nothing’s really changed between us. For a minute, I thought I’d become the star of another drama (not to say this isn’t a drama… but at least it’s not a romantic one). “I realize it’ll be an imposition, but I thought you might like the opportunity to excuse yourself from a second engagement.” Well when you put it like that, Saemus. “If—”

“It’s a good plan,” I say. He relaxes a little but he quickly tenses again, as if sensing there might be a but quick to follow. “And I’d like to agree straight away, but I have to discuss this with Leandra.”

“Of course,” he says, a bit stiffly.

“I’ll try to get her to see it our way.”

He nods and we continue on in silence for a little while. I think mostly of how to bring this up to Leandra. Briefly, I consider lying about it and faking some interest in Saemus, but Hawke—Garrett—would call me on it. And so would Varric. And probably everyone else in their group. And probably Leandra herself. It’s not really that I want to lie. It’s just that I don’t know how she’ll feel about putting up with him during a holiday. Just because he (and I) want to avoid another party. And I don’t really have the right to ask for things like this considering I’m not, you know, actual family.

“You realize,” he says after a while, “people will talk.”

“I took your arm, didn’t I?” It comes out a bit meaner than I’d intended, but to my surprise, his lips quirks up just a little.

“I still don’t really know why you did,” Saemus admits.

I have another retort there on the tip of my tongue, mostly because I definitely feel like I’m being reprimanded, but I’m a bit stumped, too. I really shouldn’t have taken his arm. I knew it would imply things, and already, I’m sure the damage is done. Still, I did it without much thought. I wince a little at my naivety. Sure, blind trust hasn’t ruined me yet, but it will. Eventually. Probably sooner rather than later if I keep doing things like this.

“Why did you?” he prompts.

I carefully consider my answer because I might as well carefully consider something today. “It’s ridiculous,” I admit, “but I do trust you.”

“That is ridiculous,” he says. His face changes then and this time the cooler, contemplative expression remains for a while instead of vanishing as it tends to do. “I would like to say your trust in me is well-placed, but—”

“But?”

“I’ve aligned us together,” he says, apologetically. “Dumar and Amell. And whatever trust we have in one another will mean nothing in the face of the enemies we now both share.” I know I should have seen that coming, but I didn’t think taking some guy’s arm would mean this much. I feel cold all over, mostly because I’m going to have to speak to Leandra about this. And Jean Luc, who’ll no doubt use the opportunity to lecture me about the Game.

I’m not entirely certain I don’t deserve it. Fuck, I hate this place.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I admit I wasn’t thinking clearly about this. I—Truly, we were already considered allies of a sort. Ever since I offered to help with the Guard Captain, they’ve spoken of us together.”
“I thought it was clear—between me and you at least—where we stood.”

“I’m still—” It’s like the words just got all caught up in his throat and he can’t continue.

“Saemus.” I try very hard to tap down on my irritation. We’re clearly talking in circles, and I’m feeling worse and worse about this whole thing the more we continue. I hate that a popular thought in my head’s I wish I’d never met you. I don’t think I really mean that, but he’s giving me such a headache. I realize now he’s always been manipulating public opinion—since the first time we met probably. Not maliciously, I don’t think, but still. Trying to figure out what he really means or wants is just hurting my head. “I trust that you have a good reason for all this.”

He snorts. “A good reason,” he repeats, as if tasting the words. “My father and I may not see eye to eye, but I don’t want him to end up like his predecessor.”

We’re nearing the estate, and there’s a note of finality to the statement. I try to get a bit more information, but he offers nothing else, falling quiet.

“I am sorry,” he repeats, and then he goes.

I wish I could say I was mostly concerned with the matter of me and Saemus and how I was going to explain it to Leandra, but I’m stuck on that last, chilling statement: My father and I may not see eye to eye, but I don’t want him to end up like his predecessor.

Why am I two-hundred percent sure said predecessor met a messy end?

To my surprise, Jean Luc and Leandra share one meaningful and prolonged glance and then wave off the entire matter. They don’t even really answer when I ask what I’m supposed to tell Saemus about Summerday, and when I open my mouth to protest, Hawke grabs me by the waist to spin me in a circle. Then another and another and another.

“If I throw up on you—” I warn, clinging helplessly. I’d hit him, but I’m likely to do more damage to myself than to him.

He quickly puts me down and steps away. I try to glare but mostly I focus on trying to stay upright and eventually the dizziness fades, and I’m normal again. Immediately, I turn my attention back to Jean Luc and Leandra.

Leandra looks as exasperated as she did this morning, but Jean Luc’s scrutinizing me. I feel a sudden chill come over me, and I get the distinct impression his perception of me’s somehow just changed. It must be because of the thing with Saemus because Hawke and I’ve acted like this before in front of him, goofed off in the way of cousins (though these last few days he’s treated me more as a sibling than as a cousin really). No matter what it is, it’s not a comfortable feeling. At all.

“Where did you say she was from?” he asks Leandra, almost too lowly for me to hear.

I blink at that, but before I can think about it, Hawke’s got me in his grasp again. “I swear to God, Hawke if you—” I begin, but when he doesn’t start spinning me like he’s some sort of human carnival ride, I don’t continue the threat. Instead, he does a bastardized sort of version of this Orlesian dance Jean Luc taught us before. It’s clear he’s using it as a sort of excuse to keep me close—and distracted. Too bad I see through this action from the very start. “What?” I hiss.

“Just let mother handle him,” he says. “You are a horrible liar. No offense.”

“What are we lying about?”
He spins me out very dramatically and throws his free arm out way too far, draws me back in with a bemused expression. “Mana, what do you think Jean Luc knows about your circumstances?” he asks, slowly.

I’d sort have been operating under the impression that they’d told him the truth. Hawke’s expression sorta says wow yeah I figured that’s what you thought but wow, and I feel a bit foolish. Truth is starting to feel like the rarest commodity in Kirkwall, and sadly, I didn’t really have that great of a grasp on that until…well. I don’t think I still completely understand. I mean, I never thought myself too trustful, but here, it’s at a whole other level. I’m starting to realize that just how distrustful everyone is.

“Well, where does he think I came from?” I ask.

Hawke regards me for a second. He looks very serious and then his eyes get wider and wider, and it’s obvious he’s struggling to keep a straight face. Clearly, he’s not very interested in telling me and would prefer to mess with me.

“Garrett,” I press.

He fake shudders and leans heavily on me as if on the verge of fainting, “Messere, you mustn’t say my name like that.”

I pull away from him, feeling pretty triumphant when he loses his footing (even if it’s only for a fraction of a second). Leandra clears her throat, and we return to dancing a bit more orthodoxy—though Hawke makes faces. And I do, too, but not because of the dancing.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says. “It’s working out nicely.”

“What though?” I say, immediately. My voice is a little louder than I intended, and I continue on more quietly, “What’s working out nicely exactly?”

“People believe you’re a lady,” he says, wiggling his eyebrows. “Especially cause of Saemus.”

“Didn’t they before?”

“Sure, sure,” he says, carelessly.

“Then why is Jean—”

“Mana.”

I resent his tone. I really do. He’s acting like I’m being irrational, but I have no idea how long I’ll be stuck here. If I fuck things up now, I’m pretty sure I’m going to have to live with the consequences. And I just want a little—

Someone’s drumming a song out on the front door.

“That’s likely Varric,” Leandra says, passing us to get the door no doubt. Orana must still be out if she’s going to get it, and I briefly wonder about her until Hawke grabs my attention again.

Hawke grins, pleased at the interruption, and then pats me on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it,” he instructs, punctuating each word carefully. Easy for you to say I think, but I give up for now. He really is as stubborn as all hell, the bastard.

“Mana,” Jean Luc calls, and Hawke takes that as his cue to exit stage left—no doubt to go gossip
with Varric. I reluctantly go to him.

“Yes?”

I get that feeling that I’m like a specimen trapped under microscope, but his expression changes after a few seconds after a shake of his head. “It works out in your favor,” he begins, “that Messere Dumar asked to take part in your family’s private Summerday celebration. Another party so soon—”

I wince, and he seemed to think that’s punctuation enough and stops that train of thought.

“Your son wrote back to me,” I say. It’s not a terribly subtle change of subject, and I’m not sure why I’m bothering. It’s just, I suppose, out of respect to Hawke. He clearly doesn’t trust Jean Luc completely, and at the end of the day, bottom line, I’m at his mercy. I live in his house, eat his food. I don’t really know what my combined salaries are good for, but I highly doubt it’s anything as lavish and comfortable as what I have here.

And anyway, I do like it here. Generally. Mostly when Hawke’s not spinning me in circles and when I’m not thinking about the home I’ve been away from for—how many days is it now?

“Leandra mentioned it,” he said. “I hear he’s well. Busy, too, with business and the lot.”

“Yup,” I say, with a little smile. Thankfully, I hear Varric and Hawke speaking outside, and sure enough, they enter quickly enough that the potential awkward conversation between Jean Luc and I’s put on hold.

“Pebbles,” Varric says, “why is it that you’re never actually practicing this dancing of yours when I come by?”

I roll my eyes, “Hello to you, too, Varric.”

“Ouch,” Varric says in a stage whisper to Hawke. “Should I start running now?”

Hawke bends and mutters something into Varric’s ear with a shit-eating grin on his face, and I go to grab the books I’d finished for the bookseller. When I turn around to move back towards them, they’re staring at me. “I really wish everyone would quit looking me like that,” I mumble, shifting the books in my arms.

Varric steps forward at that movement and I pass them to him as he asks, “Quit looking at you like what?” Bastard. He knows already. I can tell by the tone of his voice.

“You know what.”

“You’re right, of course,” he says, grinning. “Best gossip of the day—”

“I’m afraid these two really have to get back to their dancing lesson,” Leandra cuts in. Jean Luc makes a noise of agreement. Varric, if possible, looks even more amused.

“Well then. I wouldn’t dream of interfering with their education,” Varric says, much too gallantly.

“I’ll remember this till my dying day, Varric,” Hawke threatens.

“Hawke, you can’t even remember what you had for breakfast this morning,” Varric says with a laugh.

“I can! It was—” Hawke stops and must consider it.

“Garrett,” Leandra says, shaking her head.
“Oh, I do have something else,” Varric says. Hawke perks up, probably thinking it’s some sort of job. “For you, Leandra.” Hawke looks so betrayed right now. “Carver’s sent word from the Gallows that he’ll be free the entire day of the party. Apparently the Knight-Commander felt terribly—”

Hawke snorts here, very loudly, and Leandra doesn’t even scold him for it. “—that he hadn’t seen his family in so long.” Varric pauses for a second and little bit more gently adds, “He asked if he should seek accommodations for that day or if he’d be—”

“Welcome here?” Leandra finishes, her voice sharp and distressed. “Of course he is. Varric—”

Varric holds up his hands, “Just the messenger, Leandra.” He smiles at her. I’d even call it a sweet smile this time. “I’ll tell him he was an idiot for even asking.”

“You do that,” Leandra says, fervently. “And I’ll certainly tell him myself when he arrives. Honestly.” She shakes her head for a long time after that, and we all sort of stand there a little too afraid to say anything. Varric quietly sneaks out, lucky bastard.

Finally, she exhales loudly and claps her hands once, giving us a look that wills us to move and do what we’re supposed to be doing.

Hawke and I share a look and go back to our lesson.
Anyway, Here’s the Long-Awaited Party, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Mana meets Carver, and the Hawkes - both real and fake - finally attend Lady Talwain's party.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by Senei.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Well, how do I measure up?” Carver says, raising an eyebrow. His lips steadily quirks down the longer it takes me to answer, but I don’t want to go with my first response: Well, you’re not what I was expecting. I feel like he might be able to read my mind though because he’s scowling now. Full out. So I scramble for a response that’s at least semi-appropriate.

“Your…jaw’s a little ridiculous,” I finally say.

He squints at me and raises a hand to his chin – and then slowly feels up his jawline. “What’s so ridiculous about it?”

“It was a compliment,” I say. Carver narrows his eyes further, and I have to wonder if he can even see me at this point. I continue, “I mean it. You have a very strong jaw. It’s…nice.” I can feel my face flushing red, and I take a deep breath, count to five. Let’s try that again. “Hi, Carver. It’s very nice to meet you.”

Carver opens his eyes fully again but doesn’t respond. Instead, he peers around me to look at Garrett. I don’t turn in time to catch what Garrett does in response, but Carver rolls his shoulders and turns his attention back to me.

“So you’re Mana de—” He stops abruptly.

“—la Paz,” I finish for him.

“No,” he says. Subconsciously, his hand drifts back to his chin as he goes on, “I guess it’s better than comparing to me to that one at any rate.” He jerks his head in Garrett’s direction.

Kid’s got a complex then. Okay so ‘kid’ isn’t the right way to describe him (even if he is supposedly only nineteen or so). I’m pretty sure this guy could bench-press four of me without breaking a sweat. But yeah, complex. I sorta had the impression Carver had one – just from what Leandra and Garrett told me – but it’s pretty clear right now just how much of one he has.

It’s probably warranted really, with a brother like Garrett. But I have to say, Carver’s got a presence all his own that’s pretty impressive. I mean, it might just be his shiny, silver armor, but I’m pretty sure it’s just a general Carver thing.
Carver drops his hand suddenly, as if he just realized what he’d been doing, and scowls. “Don’t suppose I could get some breakfast before we start getting right into it?”

“Of course,” I say quickly, angling myself slightly so I can see the door to the main room of the house. Really, I should let Hawke – Garrett – answer, but there’s a sort of tension in the air and it seems like it’s just aching to explode between the two of them. Lots of bad blood there, and it’s certainly going to take more than the day we have to straighten it all out. “I think your mother and Orana are setting the table now.” I go to take a step but both men seem rooted to their places.

“They are,” Garrett confirms, sounding a little like I’d stolen the wind out of his sails. I get the feeling he really wanted to start something just now, and hell, he still might.

Carver chuckles – though not happily. “One minute, we’re scraping a living off rocks in Lowtown – and the next you have servants.” I did not miss the way he went from plural to singular just now, for the record.

“I keep telling you,” Garrett says. “You’d have hated the Deep Roads. Moldy, dark…full of creepy crawlers that want to eat you. Why, it’s like a perfect blend of Underbelly Kirkwall and Ostagar – Ostagar of the Blight era mind – and we all know how much—“

“Good to know you still don’t know how to shut up.”

“He doesn’t,” Leandra says, fondly. “I hope you’re not lingering in the foyer just so you can discuss Garrett’s flaws.”

“Why not?” Garrett says. “You want a turn, mother?”

“Maker knows I deserve one,” she responds, not missing a beat.

“And I wouldn’t want to deprive you of it,” Carver says.

“Of course you wouldn’t,” she says, stepping into the room and moving right up to her youngest son. “You’ve gotten taller, I think.” She places both her hands on his face and looks over it carefully. Carver endures it for a second or so without complaint then fidgets under the attention, especially when he glances past his mother at me and Garrett. “Varric said you didn’t think we’d welcome you home.”

“Home,” Carver tries and then shakes his head. “The only reason you wanted me here was because of her,” he says, jerking his chin in my direction. “So no, I didn’t feel particularly welcome.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t—” Garrett starts.

“Well, if I recall correctly you were the one who up and joined the templars, even knowing—”

“You’re still free, aren’t you? I told you I’d—”

“Enough,” Leandra says, shutting them both up. “Carver, if I thought you’d have come home, I
would have called you here ages ago. Oh.” She stops. “Maker Above, I should have done this ages ago. You’re always welcome here. I mean it. Your brother means it too – even if he’s too pigheaded to—”

“My head looks nothing like a pig.”

Everyone – including Carver – rolls their eyes.

“Oh, that’s just not fair,” Garrett complains. “You can’t all gang up on me.”

“You’re always welcome,” Leandra continues, ignoring her eldest.

Carver opens his mouth, closes it, and eventually settles on a slightly stilted, “Thank you, mother.” Then his stomach grumbles in the silence, and Leandra pats his cheek, fondly. He’s quick to say, “I still attended sparring this morning.”

“Well, there’s plenty of food,” Leandra says, drawing away.

“Better eat well now,” Hawke says. “Lady Talwain’s husband likes Orlesian cuisine, and you know how they are about portions.” He pantomimes the tiny portion in his imagination and shudders. Carver looks distinctly unimpressed, and he and Leandra start moving towards the dining room.

Hawke loops his arm through mine unexpectedly, and I’m forced to follow with him. I give him my own impressed look, and he quickly raises an eyebrow and says, “What? It’s fine for Saemus Dumar to do it, but your own dear cousin—”

I try to elbow him in the side, but he blocks. Our minor scuffle, of course, draws Leandra’s attention, and she immediately looks from Carver to us to Carver. “They’ve been like this for weeks.”

Carver mostly seems annoyed – though whether at us or the delay I’m not sure – but then something flashes across his face. Pain, I think. He looks away, and I’m fairly sure he employs a similar tactic to me. He focuses his eyes on Hawke’s writing desk for a few minutes and says nothing.

Leandra frowns but doesn’t comment on it. Instead, she speaks to me and Garrett, “Get it out of your systems now. At the party, you both—”

“Must be upstanding citizens who do no wrong at anytime anywhere,” Garrett finishes, straightening like a soldier at attention. Still, he doesn’t release my arm.

“Just don’t drag Mana into your shenanigans,” Leandra says. “You might have a terrible reputation, but for the moment, she does not.” She levels him with a soul-piercing stare, “And I’d like very much to keep it that way as long as we possibly can.”

“I shall try my best,” he says.

Leandra doesn’t look at all convinced, and I can’t say I blame her one bit. Still, we’re all unlikely to get a serious response at the moment, so we just let the conversation die to spare us the headache – and we continue on to breakfast.

“Bit heavy-handed, isn’t it?” Carver mutters to Leandra, and I can feel his eyes on my back. I wince a little, and Garrett must see, or just notice my general growing anxiety, because he loops his arm through mine again – why does everyone keep doing that! – and speeds his pace. I’m still able to catch something about feathers before my attention’s completely and utterly consumed by the entity that is Garrett Hawke.
“I have shorter legs than you,” I remind him, struggling to match pace with him. He slows (maybe) just a hair, offers me what I’m sure is supposed to be a winning grin. I elbow him lightly in the side after a while. The pace is still a bit much. I’m sweating enough from emotional stress and don’t need to be sweating from physical strain on top of that.

“The feather thing is nice,” Garrett says, slowing even more. He plucks at one of the silver feathers that make up the bodice and top of my sleeves – all fake thank God – and smiles. “In fact, I’m thinking of getting Anders to convert.”

I can’t help but smile at that, and I wonder aloud, “Where does he even get his from anyway?”

Hawke tilts his head in thought and then shudders dramatically instead of speculating, “I’m converting him. Bead feathers are probably a hundred times more…sanitary.” He’s partly joking, but I actually think he’s probably right on this one.

And I don’t really have the heart to point out just how much these beads probably cost. Jean Luc had decided on a feather design for the bodice very early on – as a tribute to the Amell family crest – and went through several mock ups of fabric and beads and embroidery. Despite being the most expensive option, Leandra went straight for the beading. So I’m basically wearing an expensive-ass-hell mass of silver bead feathers up top. And okay, despite my misgivings, it’s not as uncomfortable as I thought it’d be. The beads are all tiny and delicate and surprisingly lightweight. The skirt of the dress is pretty much the same as all my others, too, which are all terribly comfortable. The only difference is the color. This one’s a sort of a…pale peach color (that I’m honestly not that fond of but hey I didn’t exactly get much of a say in this).

Physically, it’s comfortable sure—but Carver’s right. It’s a bit much. I feel a little like I’m on the set of some cheesy fantasy movie with a ridiculous budget. I mean, the beaded feather thing just got so out of hand. At first, it was just a little belt. Then it was suddenly up to my bust. And now I’m just…feathered. All up top. I really think we could have been a bit subtler about the whole Amell connection honestly.

“Maker, you’re thinking really hard about these feathers,” Garrett says, fondly.

“Well, they are kind of everywhere,” I’m quick to defend. I eye his shoulders meaningfully. He’s managed to get away mostly unscathed, but there are some of the same feathers on the tops of his shoulders.

“I can’t believe you’re insulting my highly functional, protective shoulder guards,” he gasps.

“If someone takes a sword to you, you’ll be picking glass out of your shoulders for months,” I mutter, feeling just a tad bit vicious. Garrett pouts, and I do feel bad pretty much instantly. He wiggles his eyebrows and smirks, “That just means I have a perfectly reasonable excuse to have Anders nurse me for months.” He says ‘nurse’ but it’s clear what he means, and I roll my eyes and that guilt I felt two second ago? Completely gone. “It’s a wonderful plan. Admit it.”

“It’s a decent plan,” I admit after a while. “But only if somehow this party ends in violence.” He mouths ‘somehow’ to himself considerably. “Don’t even think about it.”

“Yes, mother,” he says, immediately.

“Yes, Garrett?” Leandra calls, and they’re definitely a lot closer than I remember them being a second ago.

“It’s nothing,” he says, waving his hand. “We were just discussing the artistry of Jean Luc’s
beadwork.” I’m almost a little impressed he’s able to say that with a straight face. Carver makes a noise of disbelief behind us, and Leandra sighs audibly.

“Of course you were,” she mutters.

Then she’s suddenly at Garrett’s other side. “Mana, why don’t you and Carver...acquaint yourselves with one another,” she says, staring at Garrett as if challenging him to imply something naughty about the way she worded her request. Garrett’s lip twitches a little, but he doesn’t actually comment. Point to him for that. She sighs again and Garrett – like an obedient puppy – links arms with her.

“It’s not that I don’t love you, Mana,” he begins, dramatically. I roll my eyes and step away immediately, resisting that ridiculously strong urge to stick my tongue out at him.

“Maker knows how we’ll make it through the night with the two of you,” Leandra says.

As I fall in step with Carver – who’s wearing a really complicated expression on his face – I hear Garrett say, “Mother, you shouldn’t lump me in with the likes of her.”

They bicker all friendly-like as we continue on, and even though Leandra told us to ‘acquaint ourselves,’ me and Carver sorta just putter on in a semi-awkward silence.

“You do know you aren’t actually related to us,” Carver says, very quietly after a while. His eyes go straight to Leandra and Garrett, and I get the feeling he's trying very hard not to catch their attention. For a second, I wonder what exactly he knows about my situation, but apparently, he knows enough to know we’re not actual relatives. I guess Leandra or Garrett must have given him the lowdown while we were all getting ready.

“I’m aware,” I say, smiling a little because duh. The smiling doesn’t last long though. He turns to me and nails me with his look, and it’s clear there’s something really bugging him about this. “I am aware,” I say, more seriously. “Your family’s been really nice—”

He snorts and rolls his shoulders a little. The words get lost in my throat, and I just don’t continue.

“We had a sister, you know,” he says. I did know. A little. Leandra almost always stopped immediately after she mentioned her, and I think I’d only heard Garrett say her name once. It was Bethany, I’m pretty sure.

He stares at me silently for a moment, and I feel compelled to nod, slowly. I feel a bit like a baby rabbit about to get run down by a veteran hunter. “She was killed right before we got out of Lothering,” he continues. “By an ogre my brother and I were too slow to kill.”

I wasn’t actually in that great a mood before. Joking with Garrett is just this natural thing I do nowadays, and it makes me feel a tiny bit more calm and at peace. And I need calm and at peace right now, considering we’re about to basically go face the firing squad of Kirkwall. But that hint of a good feeling? It’s gone.

Not to say I blame Carver or anything. This is Kirkwall, and this kind of talk isn’t exactly abnormal. And technically, we are a family – a fake one be that as it may – and I probably should know something about Bethany.

Plus, at the end of the day, I’m the intruder here, so it’s not as if his feelings about me are unfounded, are they?

“While we were living in Darktown, my mother talked about her all the time,” Carver says. “She was always blaming us for letting it happen or just reminiscing about how everything used to be.
when she was alive.” His jaw clenches and he takes a deep breath. “She hasn’t mentioned Bethany at all – not in any of her recent letters and certainly not today. I’m guessing…not since you ‘appeared.’”

Everything snaps into place.

“I’m not…trying to replace your sister,” I say, feeling bad even as I say it. Not that feeling that way helps anybody or makes it better. Clearly, he doesn’t think so either because he just scowls at me – and then the backs of his mother and brother.

“It doesn’t really matter,” he grits out.

“I think it really does,” I say, and it comes out pretty pitiful. I definitely can’t sound like that later at the party, and isn’t that great that I can still think of the party during a heartfelt conversation like this? For a second, I’m struck by that gut-wrenching homesickness that gets me in flashes every now and then. It’s always brief – but always terrible. I feel the tell-tale pricking at the corners of my eyes, and I quickly try to regulate my breathing as covertly as possible.

Luckily, Carver doesn’t seem to notice.

Instead, he stares ahead at his family and says, “It only seems to matter to me.”

“I don’t think that’s…quite right,” I say delicately. Thankfully, the homesickness has mostly passed, and now, I’m just feeling that need to defend Leandra and Garrett. Carver’s jaw clenches again. “I’m not family,” I say. “But I’ve been around yours this whole time, and Leandra – and don’t tell her I told you – spends most nights up late and worrying about you.” Now that I’ve started, I can’t stop myself from continuing, especially since apparently that last revelation seems to have gotten to Carver a little. “It’s always something new, too, like she spends her days coming up with all the scenarios for you, all these problems you’re probably facing now that you’re training to be a… templar.” Now, Carver looks like he wants to cry a little. “And I know she still looks to the past. I think it just might be easier now? Because she has so much to distract herself with—like me. That’s what I really am basically, I think. A big, terribly-invasive, sort of all-consuming distraction?” I try to smile, but it’s a pretty pathetic attempt.

Anyway, it doesn’t seem like Carver’s exactly paying attention to my face. At the moment, he’s staring ahead, but unlike before, it seems more like he’s seeing past his family and maybe not seeing much of anything.

“Let’s just…get through this party,” he grunts, and we both ignore how raw his voice is, nod, and continue on in silence.

Luckily, it seems neither Leandra or Hawke heard any of that. As it is, they seem to still be having another play argument. ‘Play’ on Garrett’s side of things and ‘argument’ on Leandra’s.

As soon as we enter the Talwain estate, the four of us are separated – strategically I’d say.

To my horror, it’s Comtess de Launcet that nabs Leandra and quickly leads her to a quiet corner where it looks like the rest of her family might be waiting, but we don’t have much time to worry about it because we’re all soon facing our own greeter. For me, it’s Sareth Talwain herself who’s very intent on introducing me to everyone who’s arrived so far.

I am escorted to the visiting room where we usually have tea, and we find a large portion of the attendees arranged around two men—Linden Talwain and a man I’ve never met before. He’s wearing a crown though, so I’m going to go out on a limb and assume he’s Viscount Dumar.
“Saemus is talking with Redmund Cavin in the ballroom,” Sareth says into my ear before announcing me. I feel my face go a little hot at the utter knowing in her voice. There’s really nothing to know, Sareth. But there’s no time to respond. She’s already saying, “May I introduce our main guest of honor, Lady Mana de la Paz.”

All conversation in the room halts, and I offer as convincing of a smile as I can as she goes around the room. “My husband, Linden, of course whom you’ve met. Our dear Viscount, Marlowe Dumar’s there next to him wearing—”

“The heaviest crown in all the Free Marches on his head,” someone pips.

There’s a bit of chuckling at that, but I’m able to insert a, “A pleasure to finally meet you, messere” before Sareth continues onward with her introductions. Unsurprisingly, that gets a few chuckles, too. Linden and Sareth even make eye contact and communicate something no doubt troubling with their eyes. I try not to think about it too much. I’ve only been here for probably three minutes, and there’s no point of freaking out here at the beginning.

“Same to you, Lady de la Paz,” the Viscount says. He looks right into my face and smiles a little. It’s a pretty tired smile, and I can’t help but notice that he and his son have the exact, striking blue eyes. It’s a strange line of thought that I immediately drop.

Sareth nods and continues. Marlein Selbrech was the one who made the comment about the heaviest crown, and Seneschal Bran’s here, too. And the Comte de Launcet and Lady Elegant (Garrett was actually pleased to hear she’d be in attendance when he’d heard). I actually know most of their names already because of Jean Luc, but this is the first time I’ve put a lot of these names to faces.

“For what it’s worth these days,” Marlein says, after all the tedious pleasure to meet yous are out of the way, “welcome to Kirkwall.”

Comte de Launcet snorts right into his wine but recovers quick enough to say before Marlein can continue, “You’ll scare the poor girl right out of the city with a welcoming like that, Marlein.”

“I’m sure in the time she’s been here, she’s heard worse,” Seneschal Bran retorts.

“They’ve only been here for ten minutes, and they’re already onto such dreary topics,” Sareth says to me. That’s her strength as a host, I think. She always talks to you as if she’s conspiring with you and only you, and I admit it’s an effective technique.

“Bit difficult not to—” Marlein begins.

“Sareth’s right, of course,” Viscount Dumar says.

“Yes, give it a few hours at least,” Lady Elegant quips, and she winks at me. I can’t help but smile at that, and Sareth must notice the moment of camaraderie.

“Why don’t you sit with Lady Elegant,” she says. “I must return to the front room and see to the arriving guests.” I nod, but as I’m moving across the room to sit next to Lady Elegant, she says, “Of course, I’ll be sure to tell Saemus you’ve arrived.”

There’s really nothing else to say to that besides, “Thank you.” And as soon as I say it and everyone smothered their laughter, I regret it a little even though it was the right thing to say.

As I settle, there’s a bit of an awkward silence, but luckily, Marlein breaks it by chuckling. “Sareth says no more dreary topics and suddenly we have nothing to say to each other.” Everyone laughs, and the awkwardness dissipates some.
“Leandra came with you, didn’t she?” Linden asks, in the spirit of the renewed atmosphere in the room. All eyes – which honestly hadn’t turned far from me – return to me with a vengeance. I try not to sweat too much about it, but it’s not exactly something I can help. I’m not big on being the center of attention.

“She did,” I answer. “I believe she’s speaking with Comtess de Launcet.” Comte de Launcet makes a little face at that, though I’m not sure what to make of it. I go on, “My cousins, Carver and Garrett, are also here.”

“An impressive pair of young men,” Linden finally says, diplomatically. Marlein opens her mouth to say something, but Linden looks at her and shakes his head exactly once. I’m not sure if that was about Garrett or Carver, or both, but I get the feeling it wasn’t a good thing.

“Forgive me,” Comte de Launcet says, standing abruptly. “I’ll return…momentarily.”

He’s just outside the room when Marlein says, “Maker’s Breath. How many years has it been?” I’m fairly certain she’s talking about the Comte-Comtess-Leandra ‘situation’ – if it even deserves to be called that because, yeah, it’s been a while.

“Let’s just hope it doesn’t end in blood,” Linden says.

“Speak for yourself,” Marlein says. I think she’s joking, but I’m not sure. “So Garrett Hawke’s here,” she reaffirms. She doesn’t wait for me to answer and continues on, “And his templar brother.”

“Dreary topics,” Lady Elegant almost sing-songs, side-eying me.

“It’s not, strictly speaking,” Marlein says, “a dreary topic.” She sounds exasperated, and her face is pinched a little. I get the impression she’s actually annoyed that everyone keeps thwarting her attempts to steer the conversation, and I get that everyone’s doing that on my behalf. I think maybe they’re not sure if they can trust me. Which, hey, fair enough. Finally, she sighs and rolls her eyes, “You look very beautiful this evening, Lady de la Paz.”

Bran snorts – assumingly at her over-sweet tone but I guess it wouldn’t be far-fetched for him to be laughing at the comment in general or me. He doesn’t seem to like anyone really and certainly not me or my ‘family.’

“I was actually being sincere,” Marlein adds.

“Thank you,” I say, hoping to defuse another mini-argument. I’m about to attempt to form some sort of response, but luckily, the Viscount saves us from that experience.

“Your cousin’s still a recruit, isn’t he?” he asks. There’s no hint in his phrasing or his tone of his feelings on the matter, and I keep that in mind as I respond. Being as neutral and vague as possible seems like a good idea.

“Yes,” I say. “He joined at the end of last year, I believe.”

“How does he find it?” Marlein asks, and with her, it’s clear she disapproves.

“I think it’s best if I let him answer that,” I say, apologetically. Marlein accepts that but makes a tiny little face.

“I’ll do that,” she says, and I have no doubt that she intends to follow through with that…promise? That sounds an awful lot like a threat.
“I hear the Guard Captain Aveline’s been making great progress on the Guard’s records,” Viscount Dumar says. “She told me she’s employed you as well as my son.”

“She has,” I say. “It’s been keeping all three of us busy.” I wonder how much longer these short, clippy responses will hold up.

“I must say it’s nice to see that you’re interested in our politics,” Linden says. “Bit clever of you, too, to come in from the angle you have. But I suppose, it’s because of your cousin’s association with Guard Captain Aveline?” His expression becomes more serious the longer he looks at me. “You’re welcome, of course, to offer counsel more openly. I’ve told Leandra—” He sighs and shakes his head.

“I’m afraid I’m not familiar enough with Kirkwall’s politics to offer any sort of counsel,” I say. That’s the truest and probably most ridiculous thing to come out of my mouth so far. “And I’m hardly experienced enough—”

“It’s not as if Hercinia’s that different from Kirkwall,” he says, chuckling. Marlein raises an eyebrow at him, and he amends, “Politically at least. Anyway, I’m sure Marlowe would be delighted if you discussed politics with him. Even if it was just for the sake of learning.”

“I wouldn’t want to—”

“It’s not often people your age are interested in such things,” Viscount Dumar says. I’m starting to think he just always sounds and looks a little tired, but I guess that’s the price of ruling anything much less an entire city. “It wouldn’t be an imposition.”

“Might as well,” Marlein says to me. “Saemus has shown a sudden renewed interest in politics lately, and Maker knows he needs someone other than his father to talk him down from his more extreme leanings.”

“Quite,” Seneschal Bran says, dryly.

Viscount Dumar, on the other hand, watches me very closely. I’m struggling between the desire to defend Saemus and the gut-reaction to not defend him because of how that’ll appear to these people. In the end, I just stay silent – mostly because it feels like the safer option. Saemus, I reason, is an adult and can defend himself just fine.

As his ‘friend’ – which I suppose I consider myself that now – I do feel guilty about it though.

“I forbid talk of the Qunari in my house,” Linden says, sensing the territory we’re toeing into.

“Linden,” Marlein says, rolling her eyes. “You’re already gearing up to talk about it now. You always are.”

“You did bring it up,” Lady Elegant says, at Linden’s offended expression. He looks a bit sheepish – and boyish as a result – and chuckles.

“Still, my wife would have my head,” he says, weakly.

Again, Marlein rolls her eyes.

“Is there any news about what they want?” I can’t help but ask. I mean, there’s always a chance I can wring something useful out of this that might help Hawke.

Linden looks a bit surprised at my question and turns immediately to the Viscount. Then he turns
right back to face me, “I forget you live in the same estate as Garrett Hawke. But no, as far as we know, the Arishok still refuses to tell anyone why he’s still here.”

There’s a pregnant pause, and Marlein finally sighs and gives in. “Go on,” she says. “Let’s talk about a potential invasion. We might as well.” She looks at each person in the room meaningfully, “No one mentions this to Sareth, agreed?” Everyone either nods or verbally agrees – save for Bran – and Linden looks about ready to burst.

“Well,” he finally says. “It’s obvious, isn’t it? A bit of an Orlesian tactic, really. They’ve placed an army right—”

“It’s hardly an army,” Marlein disagrees, sounding bored.

“In Qunari terms, it certainly is,” he argues. It sounds like they’ve probably had this argument many times before. “And they say the ‘Tal-Vashoth’ hiding all along the Wounded Coast aren’t ‘of the Qun,’ but certainly, it’s a possibility that’s not true. With the troops he has in the docks and the men all along the coast combined, we could be looking at an army—a small one be that as it may.”

“Guard Captain Aveline’s upped the training of the guards,” Bran comments. Dare I say, that sounded a bit like a compliment.

“They’re stretched too thin as it is!” Linden exclaims. “We’ve already been invaded by refugees—no offense meant to your family—” he says this last bit to me. “They can’t even handle the day-to-day crime in Hightown let alone the whole city. What do you think happens if the Qunari—”

“We call on the templars,” Marlein says, almost gleefully. And then she folds her hands in her lap and smirks. It’s like she struck the match and lit a stick of dynamite, and now we’re just all waiting with bated breath for it to explode.

To my surprise, it’s not Linden who responds to that comment though, but Viscount Dumar (though make no mistake Linden has a lot to say about it, that I can tell by the look on his face). “They wouldn’t come,” he says. “Not, at least, under any terms I’d accept.”

“Like I said,” Linden says, voice not as strong as before, “we’re an invasion waiting to happen.”

“There’s nothing that can be done,” Bran says. “We’ve tried to reason with them.”

“You’d think if they meant to invade,” Lady Elegant says, “they’d have done it by now.”

“Everyone knows the Qunari are more patient than Orleansians,” Linden sniffs.

“That’s exactly how this argument ended last go around,” Marlein says, at me. Again, everyone’s attention zeros in on me and this? This is why being the guest of honor is the worst. The attention might drift from you every now and then, but somebody always remembers hey you’re the guest of honor and puts the spotlight on you again.

“The Circle’s very much a city all its own, isn’t it?” I say.

“The Circle and the Chantry both,” Lady Elegant adds.

“It’s a miracle Marlowe—”

“I don’t mean to interrupt,” Saemus says, and of course, we all turn to look at him there in the doorway. He’s in a formal, navy blue tunic with ridiculously intricate silver embroidery, but his hair’s a mess as usual which is comforting.
“By all means interrupt,” Lady Elegant says. “We can’t stop talking about depressing things in here.”

“My fault, I’m afraid,” Linden says. Saemus offers him a polite smile and quickly turns his attention to me.

“I was hoping I could have a moment with Mana,” he says, and of course, that starts the meaningful glances all around the room. I struggle to tamp down my irritation. “ Alone. ” Oh, fuck this.

“Of course,” Linden says.

I stand and follow him out, and of course, this asshole has to say, within hearing range of the visiting room, “ You look lovely tonight. ”

“So do you,” I say back, just a bit mockingly while giving him what I hope is a really pissed off look. Because fuck.

“I did mean it,” he says, offering his arm. Even though I’m more than a little bitter, I take it. “ Lord Talwain gave his usual spiel about invasion, I take it? ”

My eyes narrow considerably, but I don’t suppose it’d be polite to call him out on spying. Instead, I say, “ Yes. ”

“Do you understand then?” he wonders.

I actually do. More than I did before the party, anyway. It’s not as if Marlein or Linden were being subtle in their conversation about politics, and I’ve heard and seen things myself in my time in the city. It’s pretty obvious that, even though Viscount Dumar has a crown on his head, he’s not the one in power, or at least, he doesn’t have nearly as much power as he should have. And it seems like his main competitor’s Meredith – if I interpreted that whole ‘not, at least, under any terms I’d accept’ comment correctly and all the stabs made at templars in general.

The issue is...I don’t understand where I fit into this. Because I don’t fit. I mean, I know that I’ve sorta unintentionally thrown the whole Amell/Hawke lot in with the Viscount, but that doesn’t exactly translate into power, does it? Leandra – as much as I respect and like her – isn’t exactly respected, and I’m just a nobody. I mean, fake me is from a well-off merchant family, and we’re ‘nobility.’ But still. I’m politically nobody – real me and fake me. At least, that’s my understanding of the situation.

Saemus sighs, and just before we reach the ballroom, he pulls me into an alcove – to presumably talk. What are the odds that nobody passes us while we’re here and assumes something scandalous? I’m gonna bet those odds are pretty shitty at best.

“You don’t understand,” he guesses.

“What can you possibly gain from this?” I wonder.

For a second, he looks furious. Like one-hundred-and-ten percent furious. I’m stunned by it for a second, but I quickly get hold of my senses and step back from him. The movement seems to put his senses to right, too, because he calms. “This isn’t about gaining anything,” he says, and the anger is still clearly there, then he grimaces and considers. “My father thinks it is. There’s power in numbers and old names. But it’s also—” He looks so frustrated, and I’m still a little leery of him lashing out. “I’m trying to protect you.”

“Protect me?” I echo. Oh my god, should I faint now or what? Seriously, why do I always end up feeling like some kind of tragic heroine when I’m around Saemus. It’s terrible, and I hate it.
“Meredith,” he says. “I don’t know why she dislikes you so much, but she does.”

“It’s probably just because of Garrett,” I try, wincing.

He eyes me with disbelief. “Partly, sure,” he agrees, but I get the feeling he’s just humoring me. “But I spoke to her that once, do you remember? When I went to the Circle on behalf of the Guard? She’s focused on you—just as much as she’s focused on my father’s crown.”

“It might be because you started to ‘show interest’ in me,” I snap. I might as well have slapped him, I think, and I feel bad about it instantly. He looks so guilty, and really, I know it’s more to do with my shady past and the rumors, probably, than Saemus. “I’m sorry,” I say, after a moment of silence. “That was unfair and probably untrue—”

“Probably untrue,” he echoes, laughing though without humor. “It, at least to some degree, is my fault.”

“Just—” I struggle to find the right way to phrase what I want to say. “Why can’t we just—” I wave my hands in a vague motion.—do this whole ‘oh Saemus and Mana are clearly trying to become a thing’ …thing?”

He looks a bit baffled by the wording – or maybe just my inability to convey…whatever it was I was trying to convey – but after a while, he shakes his head and offers me a half-hearted smile. “You don’t know about her,” he says. “Before my father, Perrin Threnhold was Viscount. Do you know what happened to him?”

“He’s dead, I imagine.”

“Right,” he says, taking a deep breath. “Meredith – on the day my father took office – sent Threnhold’s severed ring finger as a gift – with his signet ring still attached.” It’s amazing that that doesn’t make me physically ill. It would have at the start of my time here, but right now, it just feels sort of surreal. Meredith, the Knight-Commander, sent the current Viscount a severed finger in a box, and this same person apparently doesn’t like me, is focused on me.

Saemus hesitates but adds, “I think she still does it. My father still receives packages, normally when he’s pushed his ‘boundaries’ too far, and almost always I’ve noticed he immediately drops the issue.” He pauses, “Sareth noticed it as well.”

“I’m really not a threat to Meredith,” I say, and her name doesn’t sit right in my mouth. Mostly because it seems so normal. I even had a friend on Earth named Meredith, and now, ‘Meredith’ was apparently synonymous with people who kept dead bodies around to keep political leaders in line.

Saemus scoffs, “You are. That’s—”

We hear voices coming down the hall, and Saemus clearly struggles for a second. I can’t even think about what to do, can’t even bother with worrying about what happens if we’re caught in some remote alcove together. I’m pretty sure I’m about to have a panic attack. The severed finger thing, yeah, it’s just starting to sink in.

“Mana,” he says, urgently. The voices are getting closer and closer. “I am partly to blame for this, but they’re right. There is a certain power in numbers. Your cousin’s certainly strong, I won’t contest that, but—” He looks a bit panicked. “May I kiss you?”

“What?” I hiss, feeling as though I’d been doused in cold water. “Isn’t being here—”

“Mana.”
“Saemus, I swear to God,” I mutter. Really, by now the people walking should have reached us, but one of the speakers is Sareth. She must be walking slowly on purpose, and I can’t help but think she and Saemus planned this part as well. “No,” I say.

“Just your hand then,” he says, grimacing. “That…should be enough.”

“Saemus,” I say. I realize I haven’t often used his first name, and boy, what a time to start. He stares at me, and I exhale and nod. “Fine.”

And he picks up my right hand and kisses it. On the top. It takes everything in me not to jerk away and wipe the spot on my dress. It’s not that I feel gross exactly. I just feel used and entirely too many shades of done. Because apparently, somebody in this city personally wants to murder me. For what? I’m still not sure I understand, and I’m starting to think nobody here does either.

“Oh,” Sareth says. “Pardon us, Saemus. We didn’t see you—and Mana.”

Saemus doesn’t drop my hand, but he does blush a little. I wonder, a bit snidely, if he can do that on command. “Lady Talwain,” he says. He gives my hand an obvious little squeeze which will no-doubt be read as affectionate, and I slowly take my hand back. “Serrah Benoit.”

I don’t recognize the second name, and to my surprise, when I turn, it’s Jean Luc standing with Sareth Talwain. I’d never heard anyone say this surname before.

It takes everything in me to remain calm, especially in facing him. He doesn’t look terribly surprised, but he’s good at hiding his facial expressions.

“I was just escorting Mana to the ballroom,” Saemus says.

“Of course,” Sareth says, smiling. “We were going there ourselves. Shall we head there together?”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t know if anyone cares, but I was inspired by some specific Paolo Sebastian dresses while write this chapter (just search through the 2015-2016 S/S Collection if you really want to see). Originally, the feathers on Mana’s dress were going to be just fabric or embroidery, but I found some high res photos of the PS feather dresses and I noticed it was completely beadwork. So that happened in this chapter.
Anyway, Here’s the Long-Awaited Party, Part 2

Chapter Summary

The Talwain party swings on and then comes to a close. Somewhere in between, Garrett attempts knife tricks, Mana meets the infamous de Launcets, and there’s...dancing.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by Senei.

I almost – to my horror – cry on Varric when I catch sight of him by one of the doors leading to the Talwain’s small outdoor courtyard, and it must show. He catches my eye and immediately looks alarmed. I slow my pace a little, and he must be making his excuses to the two women he’s talking to because they quickly disperse when I finally get to him, muttering amongst themselves. I’m almost certain it’s about me, but I’m too frazzled to even worry about it too much.

“I hope you snagged a bottle of something,” I mutter.

“I didn’t snag anything,” he says. “Didn’t need to. Fenris donated a bottle of his infamous Tevinter red to the cause, and I’ve got a flask filled of it here in my coat.” I nod, relieved even though I’m not sure I actually want any. It’s just nice to know it’s there, you know? “The nobles?” he guesses.

I glance around, attempting to be covert about it. Nobody seems to be especially interested in me right this second – save for Sareth and Saemus but that’s a given at this point.

“Did Dumar do something?” Varric asks, probably noticing where my gaze was lingering.

“Do you think Meredith’s out to kill me?”

Varric makes a face, and it’s not terribly reassuring. “Think Lady Talwain will sick her servants on us if we pop outside?” It’s funny that he mentions servants. I haven’t seen a single one tonight, so I shake my head. And we go and slip outside, sitting at a quaint little table the Talwains have set up in their exterior courtyard.

“So?”

“Probably?” he answers, looking a bit uncomfortable. I’m not sure if it’s the train of thought or my general panic about the thing. He fiddles with his jacket, and I get the distinct impression he’s itching to go for the wine. Whether for me or for him, I’m not sure. “Look, Pebbles. Hawke and I can handle Meredith.”

“Saemus seems to be under the impression you can’t handle her on your own,” I say, my words coming out in a rush. “And not to be mean or ungrateful—cause I’m really, really not—but you guys aren’t always here. I don’t mean to sound selfish, but what if she tries to off me while you’re away?
And what if she goes after Leandra, too? It seems like we all come as a package deal nowadays.” It suddenly strikes me who’s most vulnerable. “Or Carver who is literally—"

Varric puts his hands up, “Alright.” He inhales, probably considering my rant and processing. “Let me guess then. He wants to offer you his ‘protection?’"

It’s the way he says it that has me laughing a little. Saemus, when he said it, made it sound completely believable, but Varric’s making it sound so ridiculous. Saemus hasn’t ever shown a sign of being any sort of warrior. “It wasn’t just him;” I say, eventually. “He made it seem like there’s a significant anti-Meredith faction willing to...back us ‘Hawkes.’”

“Eh,” Varric says, shrugging. “There’s a few families. A lot of the Merchant Guild’s fonder of Dumar than Meredith…for what that’s worth.” Varric makes it sound not even the least bit impressive, and I really have to wonder if I’m being played by Saemus.

Probably.

“Everyone thinks we’re—” I make a face. I sigh. I’m so out of my element here, but it seems like there’s no way of concretely knowing anything, at least not at the moment. And clearly, I’m distressing Varric. “There’s really no point, is there?” Again, he looks a little alarmed, and I’m quick to amend, to fix the damage I’ve done during this conversation, “I just mean, there’s no point in trying to figure this out tonight?”

“If you really want, I could try a little something,” Varric offers. “But this story – with you and Saemus - has pretty much written itself.”

“Right,” I say. I try not to feel bitter about it.

“It’s not all shit,” Varric tries, offering me a familiar smile that has me relaxing a little. “I guess he can offer…some measure of protection while we’re away. And the Viscount’s got connections. We could use some in our hunt for this foci.” I grimace, trying to figure out how I could possibly bring that into casual conversation with Saemus, or Marlowe Dumar. “Just tell him you’re building a collection of ancient elven artifacts.”

“I guess that’s…something.”

“Of course, it’s something,” he says, mock-offended.

“Thank you, Varric,” I say, dutifully.

“What’s the saying? ‘Make the most of the mess’?”

I snort but can’t help but chuckle a little, at his comment and the absurdity of the situation. I’ve been here for all of a snap, and I’m already up to my eyeballs in trouble.

“Have you seen Garrett?” I ask.

“Oh, ‘have I seen Hawke?’” he chortles, clearly relieved at our change of topic. “Last I saw, he was betting Seneschal Bran’s kid ten sovereigns he could beat him at a tiny cake eating contest.”

I shake my head, but I’m smiling. Good ol’ Garrett.

“And Carver?”

“Carver? Apparently one – or maybe both – of the de Launcet girls has really taken to him. They’ve
talked him into five dances? Nevermind that he doesn’t know the steps.”

I want to ask whether or not he’s safe in the Circle, with the other templars and Meredith, but it seems like a pointless question to pose to Varric. I also doubt Carver would like it much if I asked him myself. I’ll have to think about it, I decide, and if it bothers me enough, I’ll just have to bring up after the party.

Preferably after Carver smites me.

“I feel cheated,” Varric says, breaking the silence that’s fallen over us.

“You…do?” I only have a second to try and figure out what on earth – or Thedas rather – he could feel cheated about before he continues on.

“I haven’t seen you dancing once,” he says. I roll my eyes. “Not for practice and not here.”

“The night is young,” I respond, blandly.

“That’s code for ‘Varric, I will never—’”

“Why do you always do my voice like that?” I cut in, rolling my eyes again.

“Please stop attacking my artistic freedom, Pebbles,” he says, pitifully. “It’s bad enough you do it with my writing, and now you’re moved onto—”

“I wasn’t even that mean about your last chapter.”

“Ah,” he says triumphantly, straightening up in his seat. “But you admit, at some point, you’ve been mean about it.”

“It was deserved.”

“I disagree. And we’re now at an impasse. Again.”

“We wouldn’t be an impasse if you weren’t such a—”

The door from the ballroom opens, cutting my sentence off. That certainly didn’t take long, did it?

“You were going to say ‘irritatingly handsome dwarf,’ weren’t you?” he says, quietly. I don’t think I’ve ever rolled my eyes so hard or so many times in such a short span, but I’m pleased to say I’m relatively calm again. Which is great considering the one who’s interrupted our conversation is Saemus.

“Is everything alright?” Saemus asks, approaching.

“Just discussing a bit of business,” Varric says, cheerfully.

“I see,” he says. He clearly doesn’t, and he looks at me. I get the feeling he wanted me to answer that myself.

“We really were discussing some business,” I reassure. “And I’m fine.”

“Good. Sareth was wondering where you vanished off to. She wanted to introduce you to the de Launcets.” Varric discreetly makes a face at me. “I can come back if—”

“Oh no,” I say. “Varric and I can discuss this later.”
“So long as you at least attempt to see it my way, my dear editor.”

“That’s likely,” I mutter, getting up. I don’t even so much as blink when Saemus offers his arm, and I take it with only a second of hesitation. When I glance at Varric, he just sighs and shakes his head.

Saemus and I go inside, and I spot Sareth right away, speaking with Carver and presumably the de Launcet daughters. We make our way over to them, but about halfway to them, Jean Luc stops us.

“If I could borrow Mana for a moment,” he says, politely to Saemus.

Saemus hesitates, but I offer him a winning smile. “I’ll be along in a moment. Go ahead.” Again, he hesitates but does as I’ve bid.

Jean Luc waits a few seconds, watching the distance between us and Saemus grow, and when that distance is enough, he rounds on me. “After, I want you to tell me what’s happened,” he says, sternly. “Right after. You’ll forget the details otherwise, and you’re still not skilled at—” Once again, I’m set on edge. There’s a certain urgency to his words, and I hate to say ‘no’ to people but in this case I have to because I have an appointment tonight to get smited. And who knows how it’ll go?

“I have…business right after,” I say, wincing.

“Business,” he says, flatly. So much disbelief there. “What sort of business?” The ‘are you really a mage or not’ business, Jean Luc.

“I can’t say.”

He squints at me but gives. “In the morning then,” he says. “I’ll come by the estate.”

“Alright,” I say because I can’t exactly argue.

He nods and then plucks at my sleeve, “It does look lovely on you.”

“Thank you,” I say. Somehow, from him, the compliment means something more. “I’ll see you tomorrow then—”

“Don’t get caught alone with Messere Dumar like that again,” he says, giving me a look.

“I won’t,” I say, exasperated. I almost called him ‘dad’ but managed to hold back. He continues to stare at me, and I repeat it again, more sincerely. He nods and waves me off, and I go.

“Forgive me,” I say, when I arrive at where Saemus, Carver, and the de Launcet sisters are standing. Sareth, I notice, has vanished. She probably went to visit with other guests. “Jean Luc just wanted a word—”

“Oh, it’s beading,” one of the girls says, stepping forward to examine the dress. She straightens almost immediately and blushes. “Sorry! We haven’t even been introduced. It’s just that we’ve been arguing all night about your bodice, since we saw you walk across the ballroom, and Carver couldn’t remember what it was made of—sorry. I’m Fifi de Launcet.” She smiles at me, and I can’t help but smile back. At least, this is a safe conversation. “My sister,” she says, gesturing to the woman standing closest to Carver, “Babette.”

“A pleasure to meet you both,” I say.

“Did Jean Luc do the beading?” Fifi asks now that the introductions are out of the way.

“He did,” I say.
“He’s been doing some on his newer dresses,” she says. “The Hercinian-style ones he’s started selling here in Hightown. But I don’t think I’ve seen something with this level of beading.” My gut-reaction is to bring up the cost, but I don’t. Because Jean Luc taught me better than that, and I’m already in enough trouble as it is because of the ‘Seamus/alcove incident.’

“Oh,” I say, chuckling. It’s an easier topic to discuss for me because I do know about it first-hand and it’s not a lie, but it’s still awkward and nerve-wrecking. “He wanted me to make a good impression, I think, and got a little carried away.”

“I don’t think he got carried away,” Babette argues. “It’s very beautiful. We were actually hoping he might be able to do something like it for our Summerday dresses.”

“I’m not certain how long it takes,” I admit, though I know probably longer than the week or so left till Summerday. “But I’m sure he’d appreciate your patronage.” The two girls smile at that.

“Saemus told us you’d be celebrating privately,” Babette says, and Carver definitely gives me a look now. I swear, I need to make a chart about who knows what. Carver, though he knows about me being from another world, apparently doesn’t know about my complicated ‘relationship’ with Saemus Dumar. “But we didn’t—”

“We will be,” I say. “With my family.” I pray in my head that Carver doesn’t explode at that, but to my surprise, that comment doesn’t so much as produce a frown. Then I frown. “Carver, I didn’t ask if you’d be able to make it.” It seems pretty rude of all of us not to have asked.

The remark catches him off guard, but he quickly recovers. “Twice in one week?” he says, grimacing. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh, but you should at least try,” Fifi says.

“We’ll be having a little party at the Keep,” Babette says, mostly to Carver. “It’ll be closed off from the public – the whole Keep – and we’ve invited everyone here and a few more. Some of our family from Orlais will be here.”

“Some of my distant family will be in from Ostwick as well,” Seamus adds. He’s started to drift closer to me, and we’ve clustered quite obviously. It’s Fifi, Babette, and Carver on one side and me and Saemus on the other.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Carver says. The girls – mostly Fifi – seem hopeful about it. “But if I am free, I’d like to spend some time with my family.”

“We wouldn’t dream of making you pick,” Babette says. “If you could just stop in and visit for a tiny bit, that would be wonderful.”

He smiles a little at their enthusiasm, and when he says “I’ll try” this time it sounds like he means it more.

“Isn’t it terrible?” Fifi says, suddenly.

“Isn’t what terrible?” Saemus asks, frowning.

“The dance floor’s empty,” she says. “Barely anyone’s been dancing tonight except us. They’ve practically been holding council in Lady Talwain’s visiting room. As usual.” She sighs and looks between me and Carver, “I’m glad you’ve all come to Kirkwall. Saemus is hardly any fun at parties, and Redmund’s only fun after at least three glasses of wine.” She makes a face. “Otherwise he’s just a giant – pardon my language – shit.” It takes me a second, but I remember that Redmund’s the first
name of Seneschal Bran’s son.

Saemus coughs.

“What? It’s true, isn’t it?”

“He takes after his father,” Saemus says diplomatically.

“You didn’t actually disagree,” Carver points out, lip quirking up a little.

“There’s nothing to disagree with,” Babette says, sagely. “Now, who’s going to dance with me? I bought this dress because it looks gorgeous when I spin, and someone better put it to good use.”

“You look gorgeous in it now,” I try. And that’s true. Her red hair compliments her green dress very nicely.

She smiles sweetly at me but it has a bit of an edge, “I appreciate that, Lady de la Paz, but I know exactly what you’re trying to do. Saemus does the same thing.” She scoffs and turns on him. “Did you tell her to say that?”

“No,” he says, and he rolls his eyes in a very un-Saemus gesture.

“I don’t believe you. Carver, you look well rested. Come on then.” Carver looks like he wants to put up a fight, but he takes her hand and goes out onto the empty floor. When they start dancing, it’s clear Carver has no idea what he’s doing, but they quickly look like they’re having fun with it.

After a while, he spins her in circle after circle, and they both keep eyes on her skirt, clearly enthralled by the way it flows as she moves.

“He’s just a recruit, isn’t he?” Fifi says.

“Yes,” I answer, turning away from the sight of them on the dancefloor.

“I was under the impression,” she begins delicately, “that you’d only just met, but you both seem comfortable enough with one another. Maybe you could…speak to him? Have a little heart-to-heart. Preferably before they put him on lyrium.”

“I’m not sure he’d appreciate me meddling in his affairs.”

“Men never do,” she mutters, and damn, I can’t help but laugh at that. Saemus, bless this kid, looks a little…concerned? “You’re his cousin though, and I can tell you don’t like it any more than we do.” Her cheeks pink and she quickly adds, “By ‘we’ I mean, us in general—” She waves her hands around in a wide arch, and I think she means ‘us’ as in nobles. “—of course. It’s hard to watch one of our set go to the Order, especially the one here in Kirkwall.”

“I’ll see what I can do about it,” I say, much like Carver had that first time.

“He might be angry,” she continues, “but it’ll be worth it if he abandons the Order.” We watch Carver stumble a little. He’s clearly a bit dizzy, and Babette helps steady him with a laugh. Fifi chuckles, too, and she’s quiet for a minute. Then she says, “Alright, go on. You’ll both regret it if the first dance you both get’s on Summerday with your family watching the pair of you like, well, hawks.”

It takes a second and a significantly unimpressed look from Fifi, but Saemus and I step onto the floor.

“Competition,” Babette crows. “Do your worst, Dumar.”
“Nobody’s competing,” he says, sounding a bit tired. The music – which is being played by a group of musicians in the north-west corner – slows. Saemus and I assume a formal stance, and we do a traditional I-forget-what-it’s-called. I should definitely know, but understandably, my brain’s a little fried at the moment. But hey, I remember the steps.

“Oh, who’s not competing?” Babette crows.

Saemus deviates from the dance and spins me out, calling back, “Nobody.”

“Always knew you were a nobody,” she grumbles, loudly. “Now spin her again. It was pretty.” He looks at me, and we mutually agree – with our eyes – to go along with it. He spins me again. Babette claps, delighted. “The beads catch the light just so. It’s really lovely.”

“Careful with this one,” Carver warns. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to see straight again—and I still feel wobbly.”

She smacks his arm, “You’re fine.”

“Ow.”

“What did I say?” Fifi says, joining us. “Men are babies.”

“You don’t have a partner,” Babette says.

Fifi grabs Carver’s hand and drags him – or attempts to – a little. Saemus and I come to a halt to watch.

Babette scowls, “Thief.” But she doesn’t look too upset. “I’ll just ask Serah Tethras if he’ll dance with me.” We all watch, mystified, as she stalks off. Varric, watching us from near the door to the courtyard, talking sorta absently with an older man I don’t recognize, looks surprised to see Babette walking his way, then mildly horrified, and then he’s on the dance floor. It’s amazing how quickly it happens really.

“Did Lady de la Paz put you up to this?” he asks, as he dutifully spins her in a circle. Babette’s main concern tonight seems to be getting spun in circles, and I have to say, I don’t blame her.

“Should she have?” Babette asks.

“Yes,” I mutter.

“I didn’t realize you knew each other,” Fifi says, as she and Carver dance – badly – past us. “Well, I know you must know of each other through Garrett Hawke. But I didn’t think you knew each other.”

“We have business,” Varric says, winking.

“What sort of business?” Saemus asks, actually sounding rather curious about it.

“I make journals for an associate of his,” I say, pinning him with a look. Of course, who am I kidding? This is Varric. If he sees an opportunity like this to reveal non-lethal yet slightly embarrassing secrets, what’s he going to go?

“She’s my editor,” he says.

Babette halts mid-step, and Fifi and Carver give up the pretense of dancing and just sort of flit our way.
“Swords and Shields?” Babette says. Varric nods, and I start to wonder how much better I’d fare in the ‘council meeting’ taking place in Lady Talwain’s visiting room.

“The quality did go up,” Fifi says to her sister. “I suppose that explains it.” Babette nods in agreement.

I manage to hold in the laughter right up until the point where I see Varric’s utterly betrayed face, and then I can’t help it. Saemus actually has to let me go because I’m laughing so hard. And I try my very best to reign it in but laughing at Varric’s expense is too great.

“I’m concerned about our business relationship,” Varric says to me, when my laughter dies down a little. “I’m thinking I should get a formal contract drawn up.”

“What? Will ‘Mana can’t laugh at me in public’ be the first term?”

“No,” he says. I wait for it, and sure enough, he continues after his dramatic pause, “It’ll be the second. The first will be ‘Mana can’t under any circumstances question the use of the following words: pulsing, throbbing—’ Saemus turns pink in the face and actually backs up a step.

“I thought you were writing about my brother,” Carver says, horrified.

“We’re talking about Swords and Shields,” I try and reassure him. He still looks horrified but not as much.

“Though when I finally get around to publishing your brother’s story, she’s not allowed to comment about those words in that one either.”

“It’s alright, Carver,” Fifi says, patting his arm. “If you pretend it doesn’t exist, it can’t hurt you.”

“Right,” he says, slowly. Then with more conviction, “Right.”

Babette snorts, “Seriously, you should keep her. The last few ones were so much more polished.” Then she looks at me again, looks me up and down. “I thought you were just like Saemus,” she muses. She turns to Saemus, “Don’t suppose you have a secret love of—”

“No.”

“Well,” she says with a shrug, “one of you has an adventurous side at the very least.” Oh God, I really don’t like the implication there. (Varric, on the other hand, does from the stupid little smirk on his face. Asshole.)

Luckily for me, Saemus decides now is as good time as any to resume our half-serious dancing, and he puts quite a significant amount of distance between us and them.

After dance four, we – Saemus, Varric, and I – make our way to the dining room – where we find Garrett and, presumably, Redmund Cavin attempting knife tricks with Lady Talwain’s butter knives. We left Fifi and Babette in the ballroom to talk with a family friend that had just arrived.

“I’m dutifully reminding you that your mother’s going to kill you if she sees you doing that,” I say.

“I’m dutifully,” he mimics, pausing to curse when the knife clatters to the floor, “acknowledging your ill-timed reminder.” He sighs after two more tries and watches Redmund try it. Bran’s son doesn’t have that much more luck with the trick. “Carver, Mana, Varric,” Garrett says, “this is Redmund Cavin, son of the ever popular Seneschal Bran.” Redmund waves with the knife in his
hand, and I’m really starting to wonder why we spent so much time on etiquette when no one seems
to care at all. “Redmund, this is my brother, Carver, my cousin, Mana de la Paz, and my—“

He stops, and Varric smiles. “Take your time there, Hawke.”

without-the-sex?” Carver and I glance at each other and make faces, and Hawke starts. “When did
that happen?” Carver scowls, and Hawke turns to Varric, “Varric, when did that happen?”

“We were dancing,” Varric says, seriously. Too seriously.

“Dancing?” Hawke repeats. He mouths the word as though it’s a completely foreign concept.

“He’s Varric Tethras,” Carver cuts in, jerking a thumb in Varric’s direction. “Just in case Garrett
takes all the rest of the year to tell you.”

“He does seem the sort to talk you to death,” Redmund says, brushing a hand through his hair.

“Hey,” Garrett complains.

“Have you seen Leandra?” I ask.

“No?” Garrett says. “Should we attempt a rescue mission?” He looks positively giddy at the
prospect, and thus, I must absolutely not say yes.

“No,” I say. “You have to work on that knife trick. I’ll handle the…rescue mission.”

Aw, he looks absolutely crushed, and maybe I feel the tiniest bit bad about that. Maybe. I’m also
terribly surprised he just goes with what I’m saying. There’s really nothing I can do to stop him if he
really wants to go on a ‘rescue mission.’

“Oh, give it here, Hawke,” Varric says. He takes the knife and demonstrates.

“Huh,” Garrett says at the same time that Redmund does. They look at each other and stick out their
tongues, like they’re twelve.

I shake my head, and I look to Saemus, “Do you think they’re in the visiting room?”

“Probably,” Saemus says. “When my father’s here, everyone tends to congregate in there.”

“Alright. Please behave,” I feel compelled to say to Garrett. He, of course, immediately drops the
warning onto someone else.

“I’ll make sure Carver behaves,” Garrett says. Again, Carver scowls.

“Nevermind you. Varric, Carver, you have my permission to use bodily force to subdue him if he’s
about to do something utterly ridiculous and no-doubt damaging to our family name,” I amend. I feel
ridiculous even saying it, but Varric lights up, grinning. And after a second, Carver’s smirking, too.

“You can count on us, Pebbles,” Varric says.

“To hurt me maybe,” Garrett complains.

“That you can definitely count on,” Carver mutters.
The second go around in the visiting room – which is indeed where a majority of the guests have congregated - is much like the first, except everyone speaks more openly with one another. That might be on account of the wine they’re probably at least a little drunk, but it also might have something to do with the ‘alcove incident.’ I have absolutely no doubt they have all heard about it by now.

“We’ve done it again,” Comte de Launcet says, when Saemus and I stand at the fringes. There’s really no place to sit this go around, and anyway, we both sort of insisted on standing. “We’ve barricaded ourselves in this stuffy little room all night to talk politics.”

“Did you think it was going to end any other way?” Marlein wonders. She laughs, “You’re getting a bit old for dancing anyway, aren’t you?” Really, nobody in the room looks that old, but I suppose the life expectancy here’s much shorter. In fact, I’m certain it’s shorter – with the way Kirkwall is.

“One’s never too old for dancing,” Sareth says.

“Mmm,” Marlein says, and then under her breath, just loud enough for everyone on our side of the room to hear, “Tell that to your husband’s knees.”

Sareth must, at least, get the sentiment because she levels Marlein with an unimpressed look while she sips delicately at her wine. “I really should apologize, Mana, Leandra,” Sareth says. “I did mean for us all to be more sociable, but I’m afraid we’ve all clung to our old habits.” Leandra smiles at her apology and shakes her head. Sareth looks to Saemus, “Tell me you at least offered to dance with her?”

“Of course,” Saemus says, and the Viscount raises a brow. Saemus, I notice, doesn’t look at his father at all and keeps focused on Sareth.

“Did you really?” Marlein asks, raising a blond eyebrow.

“He did,” I confirm on his behalf. I don’t mention that we hadn’t exactly followed our steps or that we actually danced for quite a while. Both seem like they’d definitely work against me in the end.

“Imagine that,” Marlein mutters. “Well, that’s as good an indicator as any that I’ve had enough to drink for the evening.”

“Oh, leave the boy alone,” Linden says, grinning.

“Yes, yes,” Marlein says, waving her hand dismissively.

“We were just discussing Summerday,” Lady Elegant prompts.

Bran makes a face, probably hoping not to return to the topic, but too many people sudden look struck by the same ‘oh that’s what we were talking about’ expression.

“I don’t know why we have to have a party at the Keep,” someone I don’t recognize says.

“Maybe to keep us from repeating this evening?” Marlein guesses. “If we have something here – no offense of you Sareth – we always end up stagnating while the children amuse themselves.”

“'Stagnating’ might be going a bit far,” Comtess de Launcet says, though she sounds like she doesn’t even believe what she herself is saying.

“Summerday’s supposed to be a celebration,” Linden says. “And it’s good of Fifi and Babette to put something together for everyone on such short notice.”
“Surely, we can all behave well for one day,” Comte adds.

“One whole day?” Lady Elegant says with a laugh. It’s quite infectious and most everyone in the room’s laughing. “You’re asking for a miracle.”

“I hear you’ll be celebrating privately this year?” Comtess asks Leandra, though not unkindly.

“Oh, come on, Leandra. Don’t become a recluse on us again,” Marlein says. “I can hardly drag a decent conversation out of this bunch anymore.”

Leandra smiles and shakes her head, “You’ll be seeing plenty of me, Marlein. Just not on Summerday.”

“Just take care of Saemus, won’t you?” Sareth interjects, no doubt purposefully drawing attention to our…’relationship,’ and Saemus sighs just a little. “This will be the first time we’ve celebrated without him.” She and the Viscount look at each other.

“He’s in good hands,” the Viscount says, looking between me and Leandra. I wonder if he’s conveniently forgetting that Garrett exists. “I hope you don’t mind if I stop by for a little bit, Leandra?”

“Not at all,” Leandra says.

“Will your youngest be celebrating with you?” Linden asks.

Leandra hesitates but eventually says, “I’m not certain if he’ll be able to get another day off so soon.”

“He said he’d try his best,” Saemus says. Leandra – and others – look pretty shocked to see Saemus insert himself into the conversation to announce such a thing.

“That’s a good lad, then,” Comte says, smiling. “At least, he wants to celebrate with his family. My girls.” He shakes his head. “Half the reason they want to host the party at the Keep’s so they can have their fun away from us.”

“They’re young,” Marlein says.

“You’re only what? Seven or so years older than them?” Lady Elegant says.

“It’s mostly a lover’s holiday,” Marlein amends, rolling her eyes. “And as I’ve said a million times, I’ve no time for those.” Linden looks about ready to open his mouth (and probably insert foot), but Marlein cuts him down with a commanding, “Don’t.”

Linden sputters but quickly recovers. He decides to steer the conversation in a whole other direction – at my expense. “Well, we’ve exhausted politics for the evening. Tell us about Hercinia, Lady de la Paz. It’s criminal of us not to have asked you yet.”

And so, there’s nothing left for me to do but spend the next significant chunk of time regaling Lady Talwain’s guest about a place I’ve never so much as visited much less lived.

I shouldn’t be relieved that my stilted conversation about my family (mostly with Seneschal Bran) has been cut short by party crashers. I especially shouldn’t be relieved because as soon as the frantic servant comes in shouting something about said ‘vagrants’, I think immediately of Garrett’s friends.

Even without having this information confirmed, I feel a bit grateful. I mean, I don’t think I was doing completely horrible, but we were going into dangerous, gray areas. Just ten minutes ago or so,
Bran said he thought he vaguely recalled my mother, and I’d been so shocked by in the insinuation – obviously wrong for obvious reasons – that Jean Luc had to jump in and save me.

“It’s quite possible,” he’d said. “Agrippina was known to visit Ostwick quite often.” Agrippina, I’m sad to say, was my actual mother’s actual name. My mother’s one of six children, and they were all named after saints. Saint Agrippina of Mineo was the patron saint you ‘called on’ to protect you against disease and infection. Particularly leprosy, I think. And I remember reading in a book – or more than likely on wiki – that she was also supposed to ward against evil spirits and thunderstorms. Never let it be said that Saint Agrippina offered shoddy coverage.

Luckily for me, mom didn’t inflict a saintly name on either of us kids.

But yeah, it was weird to hear it. I’d told Jean Luc her name only once, and I honestly hadn’t expected him to remember. Maybe it was so weird that it was hard for him to forget. The real test is if he can remember my dad’s name which is the blandest of the bland: John. (Though maybe not so bland in Thedas?) Also, coincidently enough, meant to be Biblical.

I’m saved from further musings by, of course, Garrett, and I can’t help but turn my attention to Leandra. I wonder, a bit guiltily, if Marlein’s about to get that bit of blood sport she’s been clamoring for – subtly – all evening.

Leandra looks strangely calm, maybe a little bemused, but I have strong feeling this is the calm before the storm. Then again, I doubt she came into this with her blinders on. I mean this is Garrett. I’ve known this kid for what’s really – in the grand scheme of things – been a brief time, yet I sorta knew this was going to happen.

“Lady Talwain, Lord Talwain,” he says, putting a hand on his chest in what’s supposed to be this great sincere gesture. “I’m afraid a few of my friends have came by with some business.” Well, suspicions confirmed.

To her credit, and really everyone else’s, no one looks all that shaken by the news. Jean Luc shakes his head a little and sighs, but he’s really the only one who shows an outward reaction. I’m wondering if the people in Kirkwall are just used to this kind of thing. (What do I mean by ‘this kind of thing’? Not really sure myself.)

From Jean Luc’s lessons, I thought I was going into a party straight out of a Victorian novel, but so far, they’ve all been pretty unfazed by much of anything and significantly less formal than I was expecting. This has actually been more like a party back home than I was expecting it to be. Sure, there’s a certain level of formality, but we did the thing. The ‘kids’ and the adults separated, and we all ended up gossiping in our separate little pockets. Actually, I’m not sure why I’m so surprised. It’s just a people thing, I guess.

Lady Elegant addresses Hawke first. “Good,” she says. “I’m assuming that boy of yours is here, then?” There’s a sort of fondness there, and Hawke doesn’t miss a beat. He grins and nods, looking very much like his usual twelve-year-old self.

“He’s lingering awkwardly in the dining room with Varric,” he says. “I’m sure he’d be delighted to talk to you.”

Lady Elegant stands, and a few seconds later, there are others standing as well, taking Elegant’s lead.

“Well, lead the way,” Lady Elegant says, while everyone stretches their stiff muscles. “About time you put those manners Leandra’s been drilling into your thick skull to good use anyway.”
“All that stuff,” Hawke begins, holding out his arm to her in a dramatic gesture, “bounces right off me. You know that.” Leandra looks so exasperated, but most who’ve heard the comment just smile and shake their heads. I guess they see him somewhat as a kid. I can see it, especially with the way he acts a lot of the time.

“Indeed, I do,” she muses. They exit, and there’s a bit of a spring in both of their steps. It’s a bit odd for Lady Elegant to be interested in Anders, I think, but it’s also odd for Anders to be here at all, isn’t it?

Also, is it really party crashing if the hosts don’t even seem to care?

“Well, I think I’ll take my leave,” Bran says.

Marlein smirks, rolling her shoulders. Then she reaches by the settee and retrieves her sword, straps it to the belt around her waist. I totally hadn’t noticed that was there, not in all the time I’ve spent in this room. “What? Hawke’s friends make you nervous, Seneschal?”

“No offense meant to the remaining Hawkes,” he says, dryly, “but yes.” He doesn’t look even the slightest bit apologetic, and I don’t fault him for that.

Leandra looks a bit sorry she even came but a little relieved, too. Probably about the casual acceptance of our eccentricities. She sighs and immediately apologizes, “I’m very sorry about this, Seneschal, Lady Tal—” Lady Talwain waves off her apology.

“He’s young,” she says. Leandra clearly doesn’t buy that excuse. Sareth laughs, “Leandra, really. We all knew what he was like when we invited him.” Leandra really can’t argue with that, and I guess Garrett’s as notorious as he and his friends make him out to be.

“It’s late anyway,” Lord Talwain, reassures. “And Bran always starts everyone leaving.”

“Some of us have engagements in the morning,” Seneschal says with a snort, and the Viscount gives him a rueful smile.

“Many engagements,” the Viscount adds, and somehow, it doesn’t seem like just some excuse to get away. “But I hope you all don’t leave on our account.”

Still, they don’t hurry about it. Which is very much what I’m used to back home. When everyone said they were leaving, it would usually be an hour or so before they actually left.

Bran exits the room, to go find his son he said, and the Viscount lingers in the visiting room to chat with the guests. Saemus and I remain seated for a bit, not really speaking. He looks at me though, and it’s a little uncomfortable. I mean, I don’t think he’s looking at me any particular way, but it’s clear from all the glances our way that everyone else thinks he is. And it’s making me self-conscious in a way all the casual grilling didn’t. Funny, I almost prefer the semi-invasive questions to this.

Luckily – or perhaps unluckily – Sareth comes over to us, after giving Comtess de Launcet a hug and leaving her to Marlein.

“I hope you don’t think we’re too boring here in Kirkwall,” she says.

“Oh,” I say, unable to keep myself from laughing. “There’s nothing boring about Kirkwall.”

Saemus makes a vague noise that sounds like agreement, and Sareth laughs, too.

“Certainly the truth,” she admits. “But I imagine you were expecting something quite a bit more
formal.” Her eyes slide down my dress a little, and I really hadn’t noticed but no one looks especially different tonight. The de Launcet girls were wearing fancier dresses, but everyone else just looks… typical. For Kirkwall nobles anyway. I actually look a bit out of place, I think, and I flush at the thought.

“I was,” I say. Not much else to do but admit the truth when you’ve been caught. “But I’m not disappointed. Actually, I’m quite relieved.” She smiles at that admission.

“Good,” she says. “We try, of course, to keep to traditions, but it can be tedious here. And I’m afraid none of us have much patience with it.”

“Yet,” Saemus interjects, “she still drags out the good silver—”

“Saemus,” Sareth says over him, scandalized. She gives him a good glare, and he huffs and goes quiet, even leans away a little as if to prove his conviction not to continue embarrassing her. “Honestly.” She turns her eyes back to me. “There’s no other time for me to do it,” she explains, looking a bit sheepish. “And I might as well offer my guests the best, even if they’re too—” She considers for a moment, trying to find the perfect word describe her old-time friends, then sighs. “I hope you know you’re welcome amongst us. I thought we might try and impress you and Leandra a little, but I also felt that we might as well be honest.” She laughs. “Leandra already knows what we’re like. She might have been gone a long time, but we really haven’t changed all that much since we were younger.”

Saemus doesn’t say anything, but he moves his head and turns his gaze to the wall. Sareth pauses for a beat too long maybe, looking wistful for a second, but quickly recovers and goes on, “I’m very glad you’ve come to Kirkwall.”

“Thank you,” I reply, and I try not to sound so awkward saying it. Mostly, I think it comes out a little lost, and I suppose that’s fine. She just smiles at me, all sincere and sweet.

“Well, I’d better see about these new guests,” she says, with an amused expression. I wonder if she’ll actually treat them like guests or politely coerce them into leaving. She gives my shoulder a little squeeze before she departs, leaving me with one finally request, “Do take care of our Saemus, Mana.”

I nod, of course, and promise, “I will.”

Saemus snorts.

I’m right. Even after an hour, Bran and the Viscount are still present. They’ve been saying their goodbyes, but the goodbyes have typically turned into lengthier conversations. Pretty typical, honestly, and it’s so familiar to me that I start to feel a bit homesick.

This always used to happen at my house when a party came to a close.

I’m saved, though, from my bout of homesickness by Isabela – who’s apparently come to gatecrash with Anders and Merrill.

“You look disappointed,” I say, observing her swirl a wine glass lazily. Sareth had apparently gone the ‘treat them like legit guests’ route.

“Of course I am,” she says, pouting. “It’s no fun coming uninvited if you’re treated like you were invited.” She shudders. “But of course, we can’t leave now or she wins.” I’m assuming she means Sareth.
“How’d you convince Anders to come?” I ask. I can see Merrill going along with it—she’s got quite a mischievous streak—but Anders is practically glued to Darktown, or The City (from what I’ve heard lately anyway).

“Easy,” she says with a laugh. “I told him that the Silent Sisters had gotten word of the party—and really who hasn’t? - and were planning on ambushing Hawke and maybe even some of the other guests. Hawke doesn’t have a staff tonight, and he’s got you lot to worry about.” She grins, still swirling her wine, “Best part is that it’s true. So really, it was good of me to come tonight.”

“It was very good of you,” I say. I’m being completely honest, and I’m trying very hard not to think about these ‘Silent Sisters’ Isabela’s brought up.

“Of course it was,” she says, bumping shoulders with me teasingly. “Merrill thought it’d be nice to see Carver anyway. It’s been a while.” As we speak, Merrill chats with Carver, but I notice that neither seems particularly engaged in one another. Carver’s attention is constantly drawn away by the de Launcets, who stand as a family now, and Merrill’s constantly looking our way.

Eventually, they must wrap up whatever it is they were talking about because she makes her way to us.

“Feathers,” she declares, plucking at my dress excitedly.

“Isn’t that what you planned on naming your griffin?” Isabela muses.

“Yes,” Merrill says, “if I had one and they weren’t extinct.” I want to ask, but she runs her fingers over some of the feathers on my sleeves, continuing, “It’s a shame Varric calls you ‘Pebbles.’ I like ‘Feathers’ better.”

“You could always call her that,” Isabela says, and Merrill lights up at the suggestion.

“Can I?” Merrill asks me. “Nicknames are so much fun, but Varric normally swoops in and names everyone before anyone else gets a chance.” That sounds so much like Varric.

“Sure,” I say, amused. There are worse things to be called than ‘Feathers,’ and it’s really difficult to say no in the face of Merrill’s excitement.

“We should come up with one for Isabela,” Merrill says.

“I keep telling you, Kitten,” Isabela says. “You can call me Captain.” I snort at the lilt in her voice and try to cover it with a cough. Isabela’s grin widens.

“That’s not a nickname,” Merrill protests. And technically, she’s right. It’s more of a title. Isabela, rather than responding right away, simply stares at her for a moment with such a level of fondness that I feel compelled to turn away. They look like they could use a bit of privacy, honestly, but I’ll draw their attention if I actually leave.

Instead, I survey the room. We’ve all migrated into the front rooms of the estate and clustered. Carver talks with the de Launcets, and Garrett talks to an exasperated Anders and a clearly amused Lady Elegant. Bran and Redmund stand closest to the front door talking with the Talwains.

It takes me a moment to locate Saemus, but I do eventually spot him speaking with his father and Marlein in a darker corner.

“Oh?” Isabela says, leaning and speaking directly into my ear. “The seneschal’s kid said you and Saemus had been caught in some dark corner together——”
“Isabela,” I hiss, clapping a hand over my ear with a shudder.

“Oh?” Merrill echoes, tilting her head and considering. “I didn’t know you liked Saemus. He’s…”

Isabela smirks – probably at me and Merrill’s struggle to come up with a decent descriptor. I resist the urge to run away from this conversation but only barely. Instead, I take a deep breath and say, “I’ll tell you about it later.” Isabela raises an eyebrow, and I sputter. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“What?” Merrill says. “With her eyes?” She makes it sound so innocent, but there’s that little glint in her eye. She’s definitely at least…half as terrible as Isabela.

I glare half-heartedly at both of their smiling faces but eventually give up, turning away. Isabela makes a tiny little noise of triumph, and finally someone opens the front door to leave. It’s Bran, followed closely by his son and Marlein.

And from there, the process speeds up significantly. After Bran, people start to depart in groups fairly rapidly, and Leandra comes along to collect me – and by association Merrill and Isabela – then Carver, then Garrett, Anders, and Varric. I suddenly feel quite a bit better about the whole ‘we might get ambushed’ situation.

Carver looks a bit resentful to be included in the hoard, and when we get underway (after another brief round of last words from Sareth and Linden – and Saemus for me), he hangs back from everyone, looking distinctly uncomfortable. I slip away from Merrill and Isabela – who are having an involved conversation about leather armor – to join him.

“Are you alright?” I can’t help but ask.

It’s almost as if we haven’t made any progress at all. Just like before the party, his jaw clenches, and he looks unhappy. No one seemed to have minded Garrett’s friends invading, but I hadn’t paid much attention to Carver’s reaction to them. Maybe there’s some tension there?

“It’s nothing,” he says. I don’t ask again because I’m pretty sure it’d send him over the edge, and we walk next to each other in silence. Eventually, he asks, “Are you ready?”

I wince a little at the blatant reminder, and just the sheer number of people about to witness what’s about to go down. I’m pretty sure they ‘crashed the party’ just so they could invite themselves home with us honestly. Still, I try not to show how freaked out I am.

I say, “Maybe? I don’t actually know what…this entails.” I really want to ask if it’s supposed to hurt, but I don’t want to look like too much of a wimp. Not that they – Hawke and Co. at least – don’t already have me pegged.

Carver looks a little uncomfortable, “I can’t exactly go easy on you.”

“That’s reassuring,” I mumble. “Just—it won’t be permanent, will it? If it works on me, I mean.”

“It…shouldn’t be,” he says. “But from what my brother’s told me, you’re not exactly a typical…whatever you are.” He grimaces and makes a face. “Sorry,” he adds gruffly.

“No, it’s fine,” I say, smiling weakly. “That’s pretty accurate, isn’t it?”

Everyone in front of us is a bit giddy – minus Leandra but even she seems to be in an indulgent mood – and they’re laughing and carrying on. Sure, they’re clearly keeping their eyes out for trouble, but they seem relatively at peace with themselves. I try not to resent them for it, especially because I know they all have their own issues too, but it’s difficult. I’m tired, from the emotional whiplash of
this party but mostly from the sheer weirdness that’s been my time in Kirkwall.

And here I am about to see if it gets even weirder still.

*I want to go home.* The desire rings clearly through my bones, but now, it just feels so hollow. I want to go home, but it feels very much like an impossible dream. And instead, the most attainable ‘dream’ I have is this: *please don’t let me be a mage.*

I feel bad – especially having heard Anders speak about mages – but I just don’t think I can take a revelation like that. I really don’t.

But then again, I hadn’t thought I’d have lasted as long as I have without losing myself.

And here I am.

Carver reaches up and squeezes my shoulder, “It’ll be fine.” I know he doesn’t believe that exactly, but I smile anyway. I guess that’s Kirkwall. You really *should* think worst case scenario, but to keep sane, you don’t.

“It’ll be fine,” I repeat.
Anyway, Here's Weirdness

Chapter Summary

Carver smites Mana, and as a result, Carver realizes something terrible about the templar order.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by Senei.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Anything?” Garrett says – or rather – wheezes. It worked very well on him, it seems, and though I can’t say I’m completely unaffected by whatever it was, I didn’t exactly double over like Garrett or Anders did or grimace quite so badly as Merrill.

“I feel…like something passed through me?” I try. “Like a shock wave?”

Carver squints at me, and then he looks to everyone. Everyone looks puzzled, and Leandra – who maintains eye-contact with her son the longest – looks particularly concerned. Clearly, that was not the correct response to being smited. “Should I try it again?” he asks, eventually.

“No,” Garrett pleads. Anders grits his teeth but doesn’t offer his opinion, and for a second, I see a flare of blue. Justice? Gosh, that’s never not going to be weird for me, I think.

“Go ahead,” Merrill says over him. Isabela looks mildly concerned about that, scanning all of us and analyzing, probably, each of our statuses (which honestly aren’t good for the most part), but she says nothing.

Garrett sighs and nods. Varric, sitting beside him, winces and pats him on the back like a good buddy – or like a good ‘lover-without-the-sex.’

And Carver does it again, and this time, knowing what to anticipate, I’m able to focus more on the details. I see a faint shimmering in the space around Carver, like there’s a huge invisible balloon expanding and distorting the air slightly, exploding out and out in a rush. It reaches and passes through me again, but I don’t get hurt like Garrett or Merrill do again. Really, it just feels like I’ve been ‘hit’ with a puff of air – and not even a terribly strong puff of air at that.

“Alright,” I say, a little concerned about the lasting damage on Garrett and Company. “That’s enough. I think—”

“Thank the Maker,” Garrett says, punctuating each word.

Varric looks on sympathetically and asks the question I’m sure is on everyone’s mind at this point, “This isn’t…normal, right?”

“Not in the slightest,” Anders says.
“Wonderful,” I say. I think I’d have been happier knowing one way or another, yet here we are in limbo again. I’m like a walking Thedas mystery, and I don’t appreciate it at all.

“I don’t know what you lot are griping about,” Carver says.

“She should either feel nothing or—” Garrett starts.

Carver’s having none of it. “No,” he says, then he gets a bit red in the face. “Well, yes. But the important thing is if the Knight-Commander sends somebody after her, they can’t take her in for being a mage, can they? That smite would have done in any inexperienced mag—”

“Been out smiting many of those?” Anders says, and there’s a bit of a blue flare then, too.

Carver puffs up, indignant, and just as I open my mouth to say something, Leandra cuts in.

“Carver’s right,” she says. “This is good news.” Anders looks like he still wants to argue but after a second he sighs and sinks back into the cushions of the sofa. Then he starts massaging his temples. Garrett rubs lightly as his arm in comfort and eventually just grabs his hand. Carver, who’d been staring at them, looks away.

“No offense, Pebbles, but this weird stuff with you’s getting…weird,” Varric says.

“And that’s helpful,” I grumble.

He waves that off, “I didn’t say anything about helpful, but it’s true, isn’t it?”

“There must be something in the city about this,” Merrill says. “We should go back – with you I mean. Feathers.” She smiles at my hopefully.

“Feathers?” Varric cuts in, with that betrayal thing again.

“A woman’s allowed more than one nickname, Varric,” Isabela says, teasingly.

“Since when?” Varric says, indignant. “It’s my thing. You can’t make it your thing. It’s not allowed! This is theft, Riviani.”

“Pirate,” Isabela sing-songs, all too happily. Especially for a person who hadn’t even given me the nickname in the first place.

“Mana should go back into the Fade,” Anders cuts in, putting us back on topic. I feel bad that I resent him a little for it. I much preferred the impractical and playful conversation about nicknames to ‘Fade talk.’ I mean, I had agreed at some point that I’d go back into the Fade after the party, but I’m…not feeling it. It’s clearly the source of the weirdness with me, and I’m not sure I want to know. I mean, I do but only if the truth is something I can handle. I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess that it’s not.

Still, I can’t say no. Not with the way he and Merrill are looking at me.

“Allright,” I say. “I guess we’ll have to do it.”

“No,” Leandra says, surprisingly.

“No?” Garrett says, just as confused at me. His nose wrinkles in his confusion. “Why do you—”

“Summerday is in less than a week,” Leandra says, looking between me and Garrett as though she can’t believe we didn’t think of it. I’m with her. How did we forget this exactly? “What if something
happens like before? She was unconscious for days.”

“What does it matter—” Anders begins.

“After Summerday,” Merrill agrees, eagerly. When Anders turns to her, looking a bit pissed about it, she adds, “It’s less than a week away. We can wait, can’t we? It’s not so long really.”

“Great,” Varric mutters, not sounding at all pleased. He looks rather cross about it, too. “More Fade shit.”

“You don’t need to get involved,” Anders pointed out. This time he doesn’t sound irritated. He’s just pointing out a fact. “You passed the last time.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I passed on Fade time, and what happened? Pebbles here went around touching things she shouldn’t have—” Isabela snickers. “And none of these miscreants – sorry Daisy – stopped her.”

“I am capable to stopping myself you know,” I say, petulantly.

“But…you didn’t,” Carver points out. I turn to him and nail him with the best betrayed look I have tucked away in my arsenal because thanks, cousin, thanks.

“Exactly,” Varric says. “I’m going. You all clearly need a good – okay better at least – minder.”

“We can talk to Feynriel, too,” Merrill says. “I haven’t had much of a chance to speak to him in the last few days. Maybe he’s learned something new – or maybe the Keeper has.”

“I can check with my contacts, too,” Anders says.

“Good. That’ll keep you all busy until Summerday,” Leandra says. Everyone sorta nods and falls into their own inner thoughts, and it’s Leandra who breaks the silence again. “Carver,” she says. “Are you really going to ask about Summerday?”

His cheeks pink a little, and he crosses his arms in a defensive gesture. “I was going to,” he says. The way he says it, I get the feeling he’ll retract his promise to ask about it if he’s pressed too much.

“Alright,” Leandra says, letting it go. Maybe she senses the fragility of the moment I did.

Varric – also probably sensing the fragility of the moment – yawns extra loud. “Well, it’s late, and you’ve all tired me out with your dancing and your—”

“You didn’t dance with me,” Garrett says, scandalized.

“My apologies—”

“Or me,” I add, sounding more confused than offended. How had I gotten through the party without dancing at least once with Varric? I’m suddenly feeling cheated myself.

“Or me,” Isabela says. And then it’s Merrill and Anders and Carver. Leandra starts to crack up when Merrill does it, probably because she says it so innocently. But like I said, I’m not buying it. She knows exactly what she’s doing.

“Fine,” Varric says, putting up his hands. “If that’s how it’s going to be, I’m definitely going.” He stands and makes a show of grumbling about a complete lack of respect and betrayal and how you can’t trust anybody much less your friends because they are the worst betayers of them all.
Isabela leans in my direction, towards where I’m standing beside the couch, and in a stage whisper says, “How long do you think it’ll take him to leave?”

I shrug. “A year maybe? Two if he’s really rearing to air out all his grievances—”

“I think we’d die before then,” Anders says.

“Tonight, I’ve questioned many things,” Varric says, over all of us. “My friendship with all of you criminals—”

“Ha!” Garrett shouts, much too loudly. Varric and Anders – the closest to him – wince at the volume.

“Goodnight,” Varric says, a bit primly. “You all better appreciate me more in the morning.” Even though he’s already standing, he makes no move to go, and while he stands there, I have the sudden feeling I’m forgetting something.

I try – despite my better judgment – to recall each step of the party. I’d talked to someone and there was something…

“Oh, I forgot,” I say more to Leandra than anyone else. “Jean Luc said he wanted to talk to me… about things. He’ll be by in the morning.”

Leandra rubs a hand over her face and nods. “Carver? Are you staying the night?”

Carver hesitates but nods. “I’ll have to go early in the morning,” he says. “Very early.”

“Wake me,” Leandra says. “I’ll make you something before you go.”

“Are we turning in?” Garrett whines. “It’s so early.”

“You’re welcome to join me at the Hanged Man,” Varric says, “granted you treat me with slightly more respect than you did five minutes ago.”

Garrett pretends to consider then agrees, stands. He looks to Anders, and I notice they haven’t stopped holding hands. “You coming?”

Anders smiles at him in fond exasperation and shakes his head. “I want to get some sleep. If I’m going to start going around asking questions, I’d at least like to do it on a little sleep. And I have patients to tend to. I should see a few tonight before I—”

“Sleep here,” Garrett says, and it feels very much like an intimate conversation. “Go to the clinic if you need to but come back and sleep here in a bed.” Anders looks about ready to protest, but Garrett squeezes his hand and adds, “It’d make me feel better. Also, if you play your cards right, you might talk me out of joining Varric at the Hanged Man.” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“You’re killing me here, Hawke,” Varric complains. Then to himself – only really to all of us - he says, “At least, Bianca loves me.”

“I think she loves me a little, too,” Merrill says, cocking her head a little. “She likes it when you lean her against my wall.”

“Daisy, have you been making passes at Bianca?” Varric says, putting his hand to his chest and looking about ready to faint. Isabela and I share a look and smile.

“Only once or twice,” Merrill admits. “And only because she looked so especially pretty those
times.”

Garrett and Anders talk quietly amongst themselves, too quietly for anyone else but them to hear, and Carver watches all of us. He seems both amused and irritated, and I can’t help but think about the warning from the de Launcet sisters – and the off-hand remarks from everyone else.

I’ll have to talk to him before we all scatter – or at least some point before he leaves.

“All right,” Garrett says, at last. “I’m escorting Anders to his clinic, and then we’ll be back.” He smiles apologetically to Varric. “Sorry, dearest.”

“You’re not forgiven,” Varric says. “Rivaini?”

Isabela considers but shakes her head. “Mana promised to gossip with us tonight,” she says.

“And you didn’t invite me?” Varric says, eyebrows shooting up.

“You’re invited,” I say, and Isabela snorts. “Though you already probably know most of what happened already.”

“Stories always get better the more you tell them,” Varric says, and he sits back down. Leandra shakes her head at all of us but says nothing about what’s probably going to turn into an impromptu slumber party at her house.

Instead, she just says, “I’m going to bed then. Mana knows where the linens are if you’re all planning to stay here.” She waves and exits the library – which seems to have become the number one meeting place since I’ve come to live with them.

“All right, we’ll be off then,” Garrett says, rising. He and Anders are still holding hands, and I’m starting to wonder if something’s happened. Now’s not really a good time to ask, though, so I don’t. “I would say we’d be back but we have plans…for later,” he says, smirking.

Carver shudders and gags.

“Bye, brother,” Garrett says, cheerfully.

“I’ll come by if I hear anything,” Anders says to me I think. It’s difficult to tell who exactly that was aimed at with the speed at which Garrett drags him away.

“And then there were five,” I say.

“Four,” Carver corrects. “I’m about to go to bed, too.”

“Boring,” Isabela says.

“Don’t you want to hear what happened with Saemus?” Merrill asks. She grins. “I certainly do. Mana made it seem so…scandalous when she hinted at it earlier.”

“I don’t remember doing that,” I mumble, mostly to myself. But really, it’s hard to make it sound not scandalous at this point. Strangely, Merrill’s argument seems to sway Carver a little. He’s considering it. I can tell by the look on his face, the scrunching of his nose. He’s really considering it.

“And we hardly see you now,” she continues, driving the nail into the coffin. “Since you’ve become an ‘upstanding member of society’ as Varric says.”

“I was quoting Aveline,” Varric says, blandly.
“Fine,” Carver says, not looking at all happy about it. “Maker knows I’m going to regret this in the morning at drills.”

I excuse myself for a second to grab some blankets for everyone, and I must be tired because it takes me a bit to notice that Merrill’s followed after me.

“Are you alright?” she asks, and I stop mid-step. It’s the kind of question that really gets the thoughts going, and I try to force out an I’m fine but it just won’t happen. She cracks a little smile at me, touches my arm. “I didn’t think you were honestly,” she says. “It is…very weird.” ‘Weird’ comes out a bit breathlessly, and she chuckles a little - but she’s not making fun of me though. I know Merrill well enough by now to know that.

“Very,” I breath. And that’s like turning on a valve. I start to blabber: “I just wish it was a clear-cut answer, you know? I didn’t really want to be a mage – no offense – but being one would be better than being…stuck. In the between. Or whatever this is.” I sigh, shake my head. That's all there is to do about it, shake my head and sigh. Over and over. “It’s so weird.”

She squeezes my arm, and I put my hand over hers, grateful for her concern. What state would I be in if I had to deal with all this weirdness on my own? “It’s a bit exciting though, isn’t it?” she tries. “I think—I really do think this has something to do with my people, and there’s so much we’ve lost. And the city—” She stops, and I know she’s thinking about it intensely. I hear they’ve found all sorts of interesting things poking around in the city, and it seems very much like it’ll take more than a lifetime for them to go through everything.

“If this is the price to be paid for you and everybody to get access to the city,” I begin, “I guess it’s worth it.” Her face lights up, and the tension in me eases. I’ll just have to remember that, won’t I? The weirdness isn’t really hurting me, or making my life here too difficult (yes, I’m ignoring the people who are apparently maybe trying to kill me), and it’s given the Dalish something. And Anders’ mages, too.

I know these things are great, and thus, I shouldn’t complain. I really really really shouldn’t. But still. I’m human, and this sucks and I still very much want to go home.

“Let’s get those blankets before Isabela sends a search party,” I say, moving again. And Merrill asks why Isabela would bother, with us just looking for blankets, and also because she’s a good enough tracker herself and wouldn’t need a search party in the first place – and I forget all about the self-pity that tries to resurface.

I have a dream – a vivid one – where I’m in the Fade. But unlike before, I know exactly where I am. This is my room, beyond that locked door from before, and I’m waiting for something. Impatiently waiting. My skin itches, that’s how sharp the anticipation is, and I’m sick of it. Sick to death. All I seem to do is wait and wait and wait, and always, it’s something bad that comes of all the waiting.

I’ve tried everything to occupy myself. I know it. But I try again, going to the table by the room’s only window. I’ve left a notebook open there, and I can see that I’ve already written something on the page that it’s flipped to. It’s the same thing over and over but I can’t focus enough to read the words. But as I sit, the words come to me and I start to write them down:

There are no gods. There is only…

When I wake up, I’m leaning against a sleeping Merrill, and Carver is stoking the fire. Across the way, on the other sofa, Varric’s also asleep. He’s snoring very quietly actually, and I can’t help but
smile at that.

I feel a bit lightheaded, probably from sleeping on the sofa at an awkward angle, but instead of trying to go back to sleep, I just sit there, drifting into wakefulness. I never did get a chance to talk to Carver last night, and he’s probably getting ready to go back to the Circle soon. There's only a small window of time to address my concerns.

But I don’t call out, mostly out of fear of waking the others, and instead, I watch with half-lidded eyes as Carver works. He’s taking his time with it, poking at the fire almost lazily, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say he was reluctant to go.

Eventually, he does though.

He sighs a little to himself and rubs his face and quietly leaves. I quickly rise and go to follow, and luckily, nobody so much as twitches when I do.

I catch him right outside the library, muttering to Warbrain with a lopsided smile on his face, and he looks surprised to see me.

“Did I wake you up?” he asks, his voice gruff. He's smile's already gone.

I shake my head – and for a second I think of that strange dream. It passes though, and I say, “No. I wanted to talk to you for a second.”

“Yeah?” he says, confused.

Now that we’ve reached this point, I’m not sure how to even go about starting the conversation. But I’ve got to try something, don’t I? “Carver, why did you become a templar?”

Irritation passes across his face. “Did my brother – no I bet it was Anders, wasn’t it? – put you up to this?” When I shake my head, he tries again, wrinkles forming on his forehead. “Was it my mother?”

“No,” I say. “Actually, it was the de Launcets who asked me to talk to you.”

That stumps him a little, and he flushes and looks away. “Well, I’m fine with where I am. I chose this path for myself, and I’m—”

“Carver, you’re great, you know?” I say. His face gets redder, and it looks like he might start shouting. I feel sorta sleepy still, and honestly, I’m not even aware of what I’m saying. The words are just leaving me. “Garrett—” he winces “—thinks this is about petty revenge or rebellion, but you’re really taking the most dangerous road to do some good, aren’t you?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” he mumbles. Then he looks very tired and goes on, “I’ve seen exactly what he has, the ass. If Bethany—they hate mages there. Maybe not some of the newer recruits, or some of the lower ranked, but they don’t—everyone of higher rank, they all think we’d be better off if we had less – or no – mages to guard. I want—if it were Bethany here, I’d want—” He can’t finish it, and his eyes are wet. He clears his throat, clearly done trying to speak on the matter.

“You can protect them from outside the Circle,” I try.

“How?” he snaps, shifting his weight and crossing his arms. “By joining up with Garret and Anders?”

“You can’t help them if you’re dead.” It’s odd how easily those words leave me, and I don’t even feel emotionally connected to it. I must be more tired than I thought.
He flinches but straightens quickly, “I can take care of myself.”

“And if Meredith doesn’t have you killed, she’ll leash you,” I go on, as if he hadn’t spoken. “If lyrium existed in my world, it would be illegal. Without a doubt.” I pause but the next sentence is already waiting there on the tip of my tongue. “And worst of all, you don’t need it.”

Carver frowns, says slowly, “What do you mean ‘I don’t need it’?”

I frown, too, not sure myself, but the words regardless, “I’ve heard what templars are capable of, and lyrium isn’t necessary.”

He grabs me around the shoulders, “Are you a demon?” Warbrain gets to his feet and growls lowly, but I’m not sure if he’s growling at me or at Carver.

And the world clears right up. I blink. “What?”

He doesn’t let me go but hesitates. He’s staring at me so intensely, and he's not blinking. I stare back for a few seconds but quickly turn away. “Do you know what you just said to me?”

“I said…I knew what templars were capable of, and…lyrium wasn’t necessary.” It comes out as a whisper.

“How do you know that?” he asks, baffled. “That can’t be true.” He lets me go and backs a step. “Why would they give us lyrium if we didn’t need it?” I look back at him, grimacing, and even though he’s asked, it’s clear he knows. “Fuck.” He covers his face with a hand, and I can hear his sharp intakes of breath.

“Carver?”

“If you were a demon, you’d definitely have reacted to the smite,” he says, to himself. Then he says it again. And again. It becomes a mantra.

“I’m not a demon,” I say, feeling a bit petulant. And frightened. I don’t know why, but even now, I’m absolutely certain about what I said. There's not a single ounce of doubt, only regret that I said it. Why hadn't I thought about it more before I'd said it? “I just know,” I try. The explanation feels inadequate - because it is. “I don’t know why.”

“You just know that the Chantry’s using lyrium to ‘leash’ us templars?” he says, chuckling. It’s such a terrible sound.

“I guessed that part I think,” I say, gently. This part I have to muddle through myself. It doesn't just 'come' to me, whatever that actually means. “I just know you don’t need to lyrium to dispel or resist magic, so it must be a form of control.” I don't know why, but my pulse jumps at the thought of 'control.'

“I shouldn’t believe this,” he mutters, “but fuck, it makes sense, doesn’t it?” He sounds so angry.

“I think the de Launcets knew already,” I say. Now, I’m feeling too much. As opposed to before when I felt detached. “Maybe not that it doesn’t help with your…talents. But they do know it’s about control.” He says nothing, but he’s breathing rather rapidly. Warbrain comes and puts his head right under my hand, and I pet him absently. We both watch as Carver struggles with the information I’ve dumped on him, not knowing what to do. At least, I don’t know what to do. I guess I can't speak for Warbrain.

“Carver?” I try after a while.
“What?” he grunts.

“Are you…” I almost ask if he’s alright, but it’s such a stupid question I stop. “What are you going to do?” I ask instead.

He starts to laugh, “What am I going to do?” He still sounds pretty pissed, though I don’t think it’s me he’s mad with. Not entirely at least. “I’m resigning my fucking post,” he says. “And then I’m going to Darktown to pick a fucking good fight.”

I wince at that, hating the idea of it, hating the idea that I’d be the cause of him going to such extremes, and his face clears again. He starts thinking hard about something.

Leandra, of course, picks this moment to pop in. “Carver, Mana? Is something wrong?”

Carver, again, laughs, and the sound scares Leandra. Even having heard it before, it even scares me. “No,” he says, once he stops himself laughing. It’s a bit creepy actually. He’s laughing and then he’s not. Then he’s lying and deathly calm. “I’m sorry, mother. I can’t stay for breakfast. I have—” He glances at me. “I’m looking into this. That’s all I’m saying for now. Don’t—” His eyes flicker meaningfully to Leandra, and I nod. He doesn’t want me to talk about it to his mother.

“I’ll…see you,” he says to his mother, and then he’s gone.

“What was that about, Mana?” Leandra asks, frantically. I shake my head, not wanting to betray my non-verbal promise to Carver, but Leandra’s not having any of it. “Mana, tell me what he said. What you said. What happened?” This is the woman who keeps in contact with Garrett's friends to keep tabs on her eldest, the woman who stays up late almost every night worrying about Carver, the woman who's always remembering her dead child. This is the woman who's been helping me so much, vouching for me.

“We were talking about templars,” I admit. “He’s thinking of…leaving the Order.”

“That can’t be all he said.” Her voice doesn’t sound quite right.

“It wasn’t,” I say, hesitantly. “But he didn’t want me to say.”

She clearly doesn’t want to let that slide either, but our voices must have carried. Varric opens the door to the library and looks to us with both eyebrows raised, “Everything alright?”

Leandra hesitates but then sighs. “I suppose, for now.” The last bit is clearly directed at me. “Carver’s already left, so I’m going back to bed.” I know for a fact she’s not. She’s probably going to mull over this until it’s the appropriate time for breakfast, but I’m not about to call her out on it. Instead, Varric and I watch her go.

And when we hear her door close, I turn to Varric, “Can I ask you for a favor?”

“Oh,” he says, smiling, “you can ask whatever you’d like, Pebbles. We’ll see what I can do about making it happen.”

I don’t roll my eyes like I usually would. It all still feels too serious to joke about. Varric’s smile lessens a little. “Could you look into lyrium for me?” He blanches, but I just go right on because I’m afraid I'll lose my nerve. “Specifically, I want to know if it’s necessary for templars to do…whatever it is they do.”

“Pebbles…” he says, slowly.
“I know,” I say, tiredly. “A weird request piled on top of me being weird is weird.”

“Funny, you saying that makes me feel a bit better about the whole thing,” he admits. “Is this about Carver?”

“Yeah,” I say. “And—it’s about me, too. I guess.”

“Uh oh,” he says, making a face.

“I knew something I shouldn’t have just now,” I say, squinting into the distance. I’m trying to figure it out. Had I read it somewhere? I know I hadn’t, but it’s the only logical explanation – not that logical explanations count for much of anything around here.

“Like ‘I overheard this somewhere and shouldn’t have’ something I shouldn’t have known or ‘mysterious shady knowledge’ something I shouldn’t have known?”

It takes a minute to work all that out, but I offer a sheepish smile, “Mysterious knowledge.”

“Great,” he says, wincing. “Well, I’ll give you this. It’s never boring with you around.” He grins at me. “I usually reserve that one for Hawke, but you’ve been winning the weirdness competition around here lately.”

“Glad to know I’m winning something,” I say.

He reaches out to squeeze my arm, “That’s the spirit.”

Almost as soon as Jean Luc leaves, looking much more pensive and thoughtful than he should have considered how thorough I was in telling him what happened between Saemus and I, there’s another knock.

“Busy around here today,” Varric comments, scribbling on his paper. He and Isabela have decided today’s as good a time as any to do some workshopping on his new book. About Hawke.

Merrill left after breakfast, saying she wanted to go to the Sundermount to talk to Feynriel and the Keeper, and she took Hawke with her. Anders, apparently, snuck out sometime between Carver and me ‘conversing’ and Jean Luc’s interrogation. And Leandra hasn’t left her room since the ‘Carver incident.’

Firstly, I have too many incidents. I really do. Secondly, she’s mad at me I’m sure, and I hate it.

“Leandra!” someone – no doubt the one who knocked on the door – shouts. It’s not a voice I recognize. He talks a bit more quietly for a second – perhaps talking to himself.

“Uh oh,” Varric says, wincing.

Again, the man shouts, “Leandra, I know you’re here. I can’t—”

“Yes, I’m here, Gamlen,” Leandra says back, though it’s not quite a shout. Close but not quite. “What’s happened now?”

I can’t help but think that was a jab aimed at me, but it could just be me being paranoid.

Their voices quiet a little, but they’re still quite loud. And being loud, I can tell they’re talking about me.
“Just ignore him,” Isabela says. “This is much more interesting,” she adds, tapping the paper. “Varric’s making some notes about the party.” She raises her eyebrows and grins at me until I turn my attention back to them.

Varric and I are trying to agree on the baseline events that took place last night – no there wasn’t any sword fighting anywhere at the party last night Varric - when Gamlen starts shouting again.

“Well, I’ve never heard of her, have I?”

“I didn’t realize you’d studied our family tree so extensively before you lost our home in some bet —”

“Oh do climb down from your high horse, Leandra, before you—”

Orana opens the door to the library and slips in, looking a bit pale, and I get up immediately and go to her. I don’t touch her though. When she’s dealing with feelings like this, she’s hinted that touch makes it worse. “You alright?”

She nods but doesn’t speak.

“Is it the shouting?” I try. Again, she nods, and Isabela’s lips set into a thin line.

“I could stab him for you,” she offers. “I doubt Hawke would mind.”


“Definitely not Carver,” Isabela says.

I shake my head and roll my eyes. With these kids, violence is always the answer. I'm proud I don't completely freak out at the mention of Carver. All day, I've been thinking of what I said. I regret it, but I don't. Mostly, I just want to understand what the hell is going on. I mean, I still don't to some degree, but I'm tired of feeling like I don't know anything about myself. That's what it feels like right now, that I'm starting not to know myself. Which, alright, I've always sorta struggled with my identity but this? This is a whole something else. “You can sit with us, if you’d like? I can read to you,” I say. Isabela chuckles a little, and I exhale. “Not anything of Varric’s, Isabela.”

“What’s wrong with my work, Pebbles?”

“It’s depraved,” Isabela says. “Just the way I like it. Oh, you should make Hawke shirtless for the party.” She points at something on the parchment. “The fans would love that.”

“For no reason? What would Mana say?” Orana snorts and sits right beside me.

“That it’s weird that you specifically made him shirtless in this one scene?”

“Here’s an idea,” Isabela says, acting as though the idea she’s putting forth is so horribly reasonable, “you make him shirtless for the entire book.”

“What is it with you and chests, Rivaini?”

She leans in very close and practically purrs, “They just Call to me.” I feel like there’s a joke there, but for the life of me, I don't know what it is.

Varric snorts but scribbles something down on the parchment – hopefully not notes about Garrett being shirtless – and says, “Of course they do, Rivaini.”
“What’s this disbelief I hear in your voice, Varric?” she asks, and they launch into a completely non-sensical conversation about chests and calling. I stop listening and focus back on Orana.

She’s smiling a little, which is very good.

“What’s this disbelief I hear in your voice, Varric?” she asks, and they launch into a completely nonsensical conversation about chests and calling. I stop listening and focus back on Orana.

“She alright?” Varric asks. I shrug slightly, not sure myself. I want to say she’d probably be much better if Gamlen – who is still shouting and talking loudly with Leandra – left, but this morning reminded me that, despite the fake family situation, I’m not. Family, that is, and I don’t have the right to be asking for them to kick out actual members of the family. Even if they’re making Orana nervous. In addition to worrying about my weirdness, I’d always been worrying a little about Leandra. She was within her rights to kick me out.

I’ve been trying very hard not to pursue that thought further, and for the most part, I’ve been doing a good job of ignoring it.

“That’s it,” Isabela says suddenly, standing. She stretches a little and smiles at us. “I think I’ll go say…hello to Gamlen.”

“You’re a menace,” I say, laughing.

“Well, yes,” he agrees. “But you didn’t answer the question.”

“It should be Seneschal Bran,” I say, and Varric claps a hand to his chest with a wide grin. “Just keep Garrett’s shirt on – for mine and Carver’s sake.”

“Well, if it’s for Carver…”
she even pulls away from my arm and looks at me.

“Can you read to me?”

Again, I have a flash of thought. I’m sitting there in the Fade, writing. I can only remember the first line now: *There are no gods*. But it slips back and becomes less important because Orana’s there, and really, I’m completely alright with that. “What would you like for me to read?”

She shrugs.

“There’s a book of dwarven poetry over here,” Varric suggests. “Though Maker knows where it came from.” He doesn’t even look up from his writing.

“Alright,” I agree, and he pauses for a second to grab and pass me the *The Noladar Anthology of Dwarven Poetry*. For an anthology, it’s rather thin, but still, the prospect of dwarven poetry is pretty interesting. Orana, from what I’ve noticed, finds pretty much all books interesting - though she does seem to favor books by or on the Dalish.

I crack it open and Orana leans back into my arm as I begin, “The undead exhumed—”

“That’s cheery,” Varric says. Well, I can’t fault him for the comment. What a way to begin a book.

“Borne from the shallowest graves—”

“And doesn’t rhyme.”

“Menace,” I say, exasperated.

“I won’t answer to that, you know?” he says. “Calling you Feathers is bad enough, but since it’s *Daisy*, I’ll let it slide.”

“Varric,” I say, *more* exasperated.

He sighs and shuts up, and from there, he *mostly* keeps quiet about the poetry. Except for one about fried mush and nug (ew?). He has a *lot* to say about that one for whatever reason, but I guess anybody would. I would, if I knew what a nug was. I'm too scared to ask honestly.

About ten pages from the end, Orana puts her hand on a page, right on top of the horrible sestina I'm reading, and I think she’s examining a line but then she says, “Could you—” She stops. I wait, and after a second, she tries again, “Could you teach me to read?”

I wasn’t expecting it, and it takes me a moment for it even to permeate. “Yes, of course,” I say, because that’s all there is to say to that.

She nods and moves her hand away and we finish the book.

It ends with a truly terrible limerick about a miner, and Varric says we should set the whole damn thing on fire to save anyone else from the experience. Orana agrees, and so do I.

*Chapter End Notes*

I don’t know if I should bother noting what’s canonical or not (cause we’re about to go
AU pretty hard soon), but I thought the bit about lyrium might need a note. It *is* based on canonical things. Alistair was suspicious about lyrium and its effectiveness (in Origins I’m pretty sure), and Cassandra – though her powers are so similar to templars – doesn’t need lyrium. She just had very specialized training.
Anyway, Here's Samson

Chapter Summary

In which Mana meets Samson and concrete plans are made for the next Fade escapade.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Varric keeps his hands on the manuscript – the first chapter of a new untitled project as opposed to more Swords and Shields - and stares at me. I slowly reach out to take it from him, but when I pull, he doesn’t let go. I raise an eyebrow but then wait. There’s just something in his expression that keeps me quiet.

“I think,” he finally begins, “I found you a man who might be able to answer your templar questions.”

“Yeah?” I’m not sure I’m excited about this news or not, but at least, I’m (maybe) getting answers about something.

“He’s an ex-templar,” Varric explains. He finally lets the manuscript go. “And he said he was willing to talk to you.”

“But?”

“But,” Varric repeats, sighing, “he wants his money upfront, and he refuses to come to Hightown.” He says it like I should have expected it, and in hindsight, yeah, I probably should have. “So, what do you say?”

“Carver’ll want to know,” I mutter, absently. Then I purse my lip, really pondering if I really want to know.

He chuckles and then shrugs, “Probably, Pebbles. But what do you want? The sort of questions you're asking...you’re asking for trouble.”

“Answers,” I correct.

“Answers, trouble,” he says. “It’s all the same really.”

Again, I know he’s right, so I hesitate and begin to second-guess myself. Maybe I should wait. It seems fairly reasonable to. I mean, Merrill and Anders are looking for answers to...things now. Maybe they could find an answer to this. Hell, I’m wondering if this is even as big a deal as I’m making it out to be. Sure it was weird, what I said, but—

“I'll go with you, of course,” Varric says. “And Hawke’ll come. And probably Merrill. And—well. Take your pick, Pebbles.”

I wince. “I don’t want to—”

“Oh, please. This is what we do, and anyway, we’ve dealt with Samson before. I don’t think he’ll be
the issue. I just can’t help but wonder if—” He stops, makes a face. It looks like he doesn’t know a
good way to phrase it.

I try and guess, “I really want the answers?” He winces comically, and I know I’ve nailed it. “Yeah,
I wonder that, too.”

“But you still want to do it.”

“‘Want’ may not be the right word,” I mumble. “I’m just tired of not knowing things, Varric, and if I
can get just one answer right now, I think I’d be happier.” He snorts. “Yeah, ‘be careful what you
wish for’ and all that.” I try to smile even though I know I’m being completely ridiculous,
investigating this.


“And you’re terribly sensible,” I can’t help but tease.

“Always,” he says, grinning – very roguishly, I might add.

“So we agree then? That we’re both very sensible,” I say, then I pause all dramatic like he and
Garrett tend to do before adding, “so let’s go for it.”

He laughs, “Sure. Why not?” I laugh, too, even though this isn’t really very funny if you really
think about it. “We’ll have to put you in a disguise, of course. Leandra’ll have my head if I let the prim
and proper Lady de la Paz run around the docks asking after beggars.”

“Of course,” I agree quickly, shuddering at the mention of Leandra. She’s been a little off with me
ever since the thing with Carver, and I really don’t want to get on her bad side.

“I’ll go see who I can round up then,” Varric says.

“Now?” I ask, a bit surprised.

“Got any other plans I should know about, my lady?” I roll my eyes at the way his voice lilts when
he addresses me by ‘my’ title and shake my head. “Might as well then. It’s a perfect way to kill time,
running around in ill-conceived disguises, asking strange questions.”

“Of course it is,” I mutter.

The armor’s awkward as all hell, mostly because it doesn’t fit, but it serves its purpose, I guess. So
far, we’ve reached Lowtown without so much as a second-glance my way.

“Alright there, Guardsman?” Garrett says, laughter in his voice. I’m tempted to elbow him.
Normally, that’d do nothing, but I’ve got a lovely, hard outer shell that’s sure to do some sort of
damage. But I’m not Mana and I’m certainly not Lady de la Paz. And thus, I’m totally not allowed to
act familiar with Garrett – ah - Hawke.

“Leave poor Guardsman Acnaib alone.”

There’s not an ounce of sincerity in Varric’s tone, and I’d like very much to elbow him, too. I don’t
do that either.

Isabela, at least, isn’t so outrightly amused. “Well, Acnaib,” she says, cutting her eyes to Varric. “I
hear we’re off to interrogate some ex-templar.”
“Yeah,” I say, quietly. I’m way too nervous about getting caught, even though Varric assured me nobody would think twice about a guard traveling around with Hawke. And most were smart enough, too, to leave any guard traveling with Hawke alone. Being with Hawke means being on business, apparently. And no one would ever suspect it was me.

I have some doubts about that, but I’ve already agreed to this and I want to see if the knowledge I ‘have’ is right. Hawke says he wants to see if I notice anything about Samson - something like I noticed with Carver. It’s the only real reason why I’m tagging along. Also, I sorta want to hear it straight from the source whether I’m right or not.

And apparently, Varric went through quite a bit of trouble to get this uniform. I feel like I should have asked, but I don’t want to be that much of an accomplice. (Though I doubt it’ll matter much to Aveline when she finds out.)

“Well?” Isabela prompts. “What’s this that you want to know about the templars?”


Isabela wrinkles her nose at the nickname, and Varric elbows him. It’s very satisfying to watch.

“What’s going on with everyone and the nicknames?” he complains as we begin to descend the steepest staircase I’ve ever seen. “Aren’t mine good enough?” he says, loudly. He slows a little as we begin to descend, so that I can keep up. And everyone else follows suit. I flush a little in embarrassment. “Aren’t I good enough?”

“Good enough at what exactly?” Isabela asks.

“Well, it’s not cards,” Garrett pips. “That’s for certain.”

“I’d say shooting, but—” Isabela winks at me.

Varric sputters and reaches out to pat Bianca. “She doesn’t mean it, darling.”

“Oh, I wasn’t insulting Bianca,” Isabela says. “She’s perfect, of course. Didn’t you say a paragon made her?”

“And lost her,” Varric grunts, squinting at Isabela.

“Hawke,” Varric says. “Whatever happened to cohorts?”

“What? Was lover-without-the-sex too much?”

Varric makes a face, but it’s Isabela who answers. “That wasn’t really funny the first time, Hawke.” Garrett looks just the slightest bit put out to hear it, but as usual, he bounces back quickly.

I stifle a laugh, mostly to conserve much-needed energy.

“Just stick to zapping things, Hawke,” Varric says, sympathetically. “Leave the nicknames to me.”

“Alright there?” Isabela asks me, kindly.

“Ugh.” It’s all I can manage at first, and we stand for a moment at the base of the stairs, waiting for me to catch my breath – which apparently got left behind at the top of the stairs. Normally, I don’t struggle so bad, but they were going a bit faster than I’m used to. And the stairs were - according to Varric - a straight shot from Lowtown to the Docks. It was a long drop. “Yeah.” I exhale loudly, inhale. Exhale, inhale.

“Good,” she says, chuckling. “I’d hate for you to die before we reach the dangerous ex-templar you’re planning to interrogate.”

“I’m with you there,” I finally manage. I feel almost normal again. “How far, exactly, are we from Samson?”

Varric chuckles. “Not far, Pe—Acnaib.”

“Thank fuck,” I mumble. Varric laughs, probably because I've cut down considerably on the 'fucks' since I 'became' a lady. “Let’s go.”

And we do, and thankfully, it’s mostly flat terrain.

Unfortunately though, it smells very much like fish. Fresh fish, rotten fish, fish. There’s also that garbage smell still layered on top of it. The people, though, are interesting, and I really have to keep from craning my head when I catch sight of my first Qunari.

It reminds me of Saemus of course - but not for long.

I spot Samson pretty easily, mostly because when he catches sight of us, he makes a single, jerky head movement and practically sprints away.

“Well, that didn’t happen before,” Garrett says, and we start after him.

“It didn’t?” I ask. I thought this was just the way Samson worked. I mean, in Kirkwall I can see why that’d be a thing.

“Nope,” he answers, and we dodge into an alleyway. Samson’s not there, and we continue on, slowly. Isabela takes out her knives, Varric gets his crossbow in hand, and Hawke does this spinny thing with his staff.

Clearly, I made a mistake today.

“Just stay behind us,” Varric instructs, probably compelled by the horrified look on my face.

I don’t argue. Hell, I can’t even speak. My mind’s screeching danger on repeat, and sure, I knew it was dangerous when I agreed. But it just didn’t quite sink in until now.

“I’m unarmed, you idiots,” someone – presumably Samson – says. And the screeching dims just a hair.

We stop – but nobody lowers their weapons. Down the way, I can see that there's an another alleyway or something branching off this one, right ahead.

“No, you’re not,” Varric calls back, snorting. He sounds a little amused though, which I suppose is understandable. I don’t buy that a shady guy who arranges for shady meetings with Hawke in some dark alley at the docks isn’t armed either.
“Right,” Samson says. “But I’m not about to stab somebody who’s about to pay me ten sovereigns for—”

“We agreed on five,” Varric says, hefting Bianca. You can hear, clearly, that he does it, and I’m positive he did it on purpose. Samson, however, doesn’t seem very threatened if his next response is anything to go by.

“I’ll take eight – but otherwise I’m not talking.”

I’d brought fifteen, without having been advised about the proper amount…to pay somebody off, but I don’t say anything.

“Six,” Varric says.

“Seven’ll buy me enough lyrium to last maybe a month,” Samson says, instead.

“Deal,” I say. Because we’ve haggled to the middle ground and because there’s something about what he said that moves me to speak.

Samson steps out, hands up. Then they’re out. “Upfront – or I’m—”

“No talking,” Varric finishes. He – to my surprise – reaches into a pouch at his belt and pulls out seven sovereigns. He goes forward to Samson and drops them into his outstretched hand.

Samson doesn’t count them. Instead, he closes his fist around them and exhales. He steps forwards.

“How long has it been since you’ve last had some lyrium?” Garrett asks.

Samson – who already looks waxy and ill – scowls and suddenly looks ten times worse.

“Could you smite me right now?” Garrett asks, and I understand. He’s not just asking. He’s testing the theory. Inside, I regret that term as soon as I think it. It’s not a theory but a fact.

A waves passes through us, like before with Carver, and Hawke braces himself against the wall. “I hate it when they do that,” he complains, hissing in pain.

Varric clucks once, “Carver’s not going to like this.”

“What’s with the dark alley meeting?” Isabela asks.

“I didn’t agree to answer any of your questions,” Samson says, and he tosses the coins in his hand a little.

Isabela grins and starts to spin her knife. Samson – to his credit – looks entirely unimpressed, but he eventually sighs, “I’ve been talking a few people in the Order. They’re desperate for recruits, and I hear I might be able to…beg my way back. Maybe.”

So in other words, he doesn’t want to piss Meredith off by associating with us. All roads lead back to the Knight-Commander, it seems.

“For fuck’s sake,” Garrett says, disgusted.

Samson stares him down. “I won’t for now. I have seven sovereigns.” Then he turns to stare at me.
I notice his pupils first. They’re relatively small, probably normal actually. He was right when he said it’d been a while since he’d had lyrium then. Then, for whatever reason, his eyes remind me of singing – and it’s not some romantic notion. It just...is. Singing. I squint at him a little, just a hair, and he turns away, looks at Garrett instead.

“Well?” he says, finally. He shifts his weight as if uncomfortable. “What’s all this about?”

“You already answered my question,” Hawke says, shrugging.

“Yeah. What are you going to do with that, I wonder?”

Hawke throws his arms out carelessly and offers no explanation, and Varric offers Samson a little reassurance, “We’ll keep quiet about this.” He means the meeting in general.

“Right,” Samson says, clearly not sold. But he turns abruptly and continues on down the alleyway without waiting for further reassurance.

And we return to Hightown.

I sit down and write up a page of notes before going to bed, with Warbrain looking on curiously. Can smart, magically-bred war dogs read, I wonder. Somehow, I doubt it, so I read aloud as I write, explaining a little here and there about my thought process. Warbrain listens carefully, responding in little huffs and grumbles.

Talwain Party – Smiting x 2 – Nothing (well, slight something)
Dream – Fade - “There are no gods.” Coincidence? Ha. Right. (Connection to smiting??)
Carver – Templars – No Lyrium needed (confirmed via Samson smiting?) - CONTROL
Samson – singing (?) – 7 sovereigns = month’s worth of lyrium
Lyrium =

I start to write ‘drug’ after lyrium, but I know that’s not correct. In fact, I know that’s utterly wrong, and not just wrong, it’s almost unforgiveable – in my head – to write it off as a drug.

So I just leave it blank - hating that some part of me knows exactly what belongs there on the page next to ‘lyrium.’

I go to bed and fall asleep, grateful for the warm weight of Warbrain beside me.

I don’t sleep much, and in the end, after waking suddenly for the fourth time irrationally panicked, I simply get up and go into the library. I get a fire going, too, because I know how to do that now. The sun hasn’t even risen.

I’ve decided to draft a letter for Laurent. I’d been meaning to, but with all the excitement surrounding the party, I’d kept putting it off. And now seems as good a time as any.

Sitting with Laurent’s last letter spread out beside me, I start to write.

My dear Laurent, I begin. I smile at the paper even though I don’t feel very happy at the moment. How could I? I know entirely too much about lyrium and God knows what else. I confess I was a bit intrigued by the news about the Crows, or rather, the Crow. Singular. It’s been a little while now since you wrote. Is he still alive? I can’t help but hope so.
I stop and reread Laurent’s letter. He’d mentioned the warden and the King of Ferelden – Alistair
The-something I think – and gone on to talk about invasion.

*I think you’re right, of course, about the ‘Ferelden connection’ there. What ever would they do with
the Crows? Certainly, assassination, but it hardly seems very Ferelden. They’d be more likely to use
their mabari – and I mean that with the utmost fondness.*

I should go on and say something about the invasion, about war, but I can’t bring myself to do it. It’s
like I’m too raw about it – which, like everything with me lately, makes no sense at all.

Instead, I ask about Laurent about his beau.

*You certainly do owe me, Laurent. Luckily for you, I enjoy being paid in information. Tell me,
what’s he like, your Hercinian? Sympathetic and sweet are hardly satisfying descriptors. He must be
something, to have gotten entangled up with you. Honestly, an Orlesian. What is he thinking?*

It’s all very short, I think, but it’s sort of nice, too. To write as someone else. But I don’t have much
more to say. I frown at the paper, only about halfway filled with text, before sighing and moving to
the conclusion.

*Your reminder wasn’t remiss. Nor will it ever be, I think. As for your father, I think I might have
disappointed him. It seems Kirkwall’s not nearly as strict about tradition as I’d – we’d – thought,
and I sort of fell into their habits at a recent party despite your father’s advice. Hopefully, he won’t
completely wash his hands of me now that I’ve been assimilated into the Kirkwall fold.*

**Wishing You Health, Happiness, and Great Luck with Certain Hercinians, Mana**

I try not to fuss with it too much before I fold it and slide it into an envelope, sealing it with the
Amell crest in red wax. It’s such an odd thing to do, and at any other point in my life, it’d have been
fun for me. But, of course, it’s not at the moment.

After I set the letter aside on the couch, I just sit there.

I try not to think, but I also try not to sleep. If I sleep, I know I’ll dream. It’s clear to me now that
smiting must have something to do with the dreaming, and I don’t like it. I know that it’ll be like
before – with Carver – and I don’t want to feel like that again. Hazy and not myself. Hazy and
suddenly imbued with knowledge.

As if the city isn’t bad enough.

Sighing, I bend and cover my face with my hands. Breathing’s tough all of a sudden. I know I’m
thinking myself into a corner, panicking without any real, specific cause, but I can’t help it.

I hear a door open – though I’m not sure if it’s mine or the door to the main part of the house – but I
don’t look up. I’m too busy trying to get my breathing under control, to *stop thinking.*

“Mana?” It’s Leandra.

I shake my head, unable to answer. My shoulders start to shake, even before I start to actually cry,
but it doesn’t take long.

She sits beside me and places a hand on my back while I cry quietly. It’s nothing like when my mom
usually does it. My mom, she’s restless about her comfort. She’ll rub circles on my back and then my
arm and then she’ll pet my hair, my cheeks. With Leandra, it’s like setting down anchor.
Strangely, I prefer the way Leandra does it, but still, I cry for a while.

“Did something happen?” she asks.

“I don’t know what’s happening anymore,” I mumble. It’s true, but I hate the way it sounds, all pathetic like. I shake my head and look at her. She mostly just looks concerned. I’d thought she was probably still upset with me. “Did you know that lyrium isn’t necessary for templars?” I don’t see the point in keeping it from her now that almost everyone else probably knows.

She nods, sighing. “Garrett told me. And he’s set to run off to the Gallows tomorrow to speak to Carver about it.”

I frown at that. Garrett hadn’t mentioned it after we’d returned to the estate, but then again, we’d returned and then he and Varric had run off in a rush to ‘return’ the armor we’d ‘borrowed.’

“Mana,” Leandra says. I think this is the most time she’s said my name in a single conversation. “How did you know that? I’ve heard people speculate that it’s used to control templars, and I’d always thought so myself. But I always thought it was just a side-effect of lyrium that the Chantry had taken advantage of. I’d never questioned its usefulness.”

“I don’t know,” I say helplessly, and I’m sure it comes off a bit defensive. Already, I’m thinking about lyrium. What she’s said isn’t entirely accurate. I’d phrased it precisely before, and I can’t help but repeat it, to correct her misconception. “It’s useful,” I mutter. I don’t quite like the word ‘useful,’ but it comes out nonetheless. “Just not necessary.”

She stares at me, and I close my eyes, head dropping into my hands again. What the hell?

“Does it just—” Leandra stops, not sure how to go on.

“It’s just…there,” I say. “I just know. Like an instinct or something like that.”

“I see,” she says, and we both know she doesn’t. Hell, I don’t.

My breathing’s a little labored, but it’s something to focus on. In and out. In and out. The rhythm’s all off, but throughout it all, Leandra’s hand remains on me to anchor me.

Finally, she says, “Thank you.”

“Thank you?” What the fuck?

“After Carver speaks to Garrett, he’ll leave the Order,” she says. “And I have you to thank for that. I’d written him when he first went to the Gallows begging him to come home, but he was adamant.” This time, she gives me a little pat before going still again. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” I mumble, but I don’t feel any better about anything.

Garrett leaves before breakfast the next day and returns – in the middle of my first reading lesson with Orana – with Carver. And nearly everyone else. I immediately feel too crowded and self-conscious of my puffy eyes.

Also, I have a terrible post-crying headache.

“Garrett,” I say. “We’re kinda in the middle—” I gesture at the papers in our laps and jerk my head to the door.
“That’s how you welcome your dear cousin home?” he says, scandalized.

I’m not really in the mood for games, but I look Carver in the eye and give him a weak smile, “Welcome back, Carver. It’s wonderful to see you again.”

Varric starts to laugh, and Garrett immediately starts to complain.

Fenris steps away from them – as if afraid to be associated with them – and bends a little to examine our papers. His brow furrows.

“Are you learning how to read?” he asks Orana.

“Yes,” Orana says, simply. “Mana’s teaching me.”

“Ah,” he says. And he stares at me for a second before looking away. Then he looks back. “You are not a demon. So I’ve been informed.”

I start to laugh, which honestly, is better than crying. This time, Orana’s the one who touches my arm and anchors me when I go silent and drop my head in my hands.

Hawke’s friends mutter, but I barely make out exactly what they’re saying.

When I lift my head back up, finding them all staring, they all – in one massive movement – turn away. I huff out a laugh again, but this time I don’t lose it. I count my breaths in my head and try to think of the appropriate thing to say.

I don’t come up with anything good and instead examine everyone who’s shown up. There’s Carver and Garrett, of course, but they live here. Well, Garrett does, but I’m certain ‘quitting the nefarious Templar Order’ means coming home, to here. There’s Varric. Given. But there’s also Fenris and Isabela and Sebastian.

Sebastian, actually, is the first to turn back and look at me. Quickly followed by Isabela – then everyone else.

“Where’s Merrill and Anders?” I don’t ask about Aveline. She’s at work, as she always is this time of day. Now that I think about it, she’s the only one of them with an actual ‘nine to five’ job.

“Investigating,” Garrett says. “Also we were scared to tell them about yesterday.”

Varric shudders. “You know where we’d be right now if they knew?”

“You don’t have to go, you know,” Isabela says, rolling her eyes.

“No one here’s making any more bad decisions without me present,” Varric says.

Fenris snorts.

“That means you, too, Broody. You’re not excluded.”

“Noted.”

“Are you alright?” Sebastian asks.

“Uh, loaded question there, Choir Boy,” Varric says, lowly.

“Choir Boy?” I repeat, wincing. That’s just…no. Also it’s yes. Anything’s better to focus on than
what they’re clearly here to talk about.

“I would mostly prefer to be called Sebastian,” Sebastian says, blandly. “Or Prince Vael. ‘Choir Boy’ is Varric’s…thing – though you could ask about borrowing it.”

“I’ll pass on that, thanks,” I say.

“Oh, good,” he says, smiling. “You didn’t answer my question. Are you alright?”

Varric sighs. “What’s the point of trying to get her mind off it if you’re just going to bring it up two seconds later?”

“No offense,” I cut in. Orana gives my arm a little squeeze. “But you’re all crowding me and clearly rearing to talk about it. So let’s just talk about it.”

“Alright,” Carver says, cutting straight to business. “What else do you know about lyrium?”

The question surprises me. It shouldn’t, because what else are we here to discuss but that, but I’m stumped for a moment. “I told your mother last night,” I begin. “It’s not necessary for templars to dispel magic.” I’m about to add the but, but Garrett jumps in.

“Clearly,” Garrett says with a grimace. No doubt he’s remembering the smiting session with Samson.

“They told us the effectiveness of smites decreases with time, that lyrium was the only way to ensure —” Carver begins, in a low murmur, before he starts cursing. I’m not sure why. He was the first person to know about this, but I guess he's still working through his anger.

“It is useful for it, I think;” I mutter. The word ‘useful,’ again, trips me up. “It’s just not necessary, and considering what it does to your brain, I—“

“Is it possible,” Sebastian says, gently, “that they just don’t know…what it is Mana clearly knows?”

Garrett and Carver snort at the same time.

I start to rub at the bridge of my nose, not at all wanting to think about the political or whatever implications of all this information right now.

“Is there any other things you ‘just know’?" Carver asks.

I hesitate but tell them about Samson. I’d know he'd been off lyrium for a while but more importantly his eyes had made me think of singing.

"Nobody say it," Garrett commands.

Fenris huffs, "She is clearly not a demon."

"Clearly," Garrett repeats, staring at Fenris for a moment in disbelief. Fenris just stares back, as if challenging him to comment. Garrett turns back to me, "Mana, that's a normal thing.” He winces a little. "Well, not really. But lyrium sings. Anders says spirits hear it more clearly."

"It's not really the lyrium that sings," I mutter. I don't want to correct him, but it's wrong. I feel like I have to set him right. Not to be mean, but because he just needs to know the truth.

"Can we please stop asking her about lyrium now?" Varric asks, clearly disturbed.

"What do you mean," Garrett begins, eyebrows furrowed, "'it's not the lyrium that sings'?"
I consider. It's like I know but it won't come. Like a word that's right there on the tip of the tongue but you just can't make yourself think of it. It's that sort of feeling. I sigh and shake my head. "When you say things about it that are clearly wrong, I know, but beyond that, it's—I don't know." I bite my lip. "It's not as if I have access to this huge mysterious bank of knowledge all of a sudden."

"Bank?" Fenris repeats.

"Like a river bank?" Isabela guesses, looking to Fenris. They both look confused as to how it could relate. Because that’s not what I meant. Damn cultural differences.

I shake my head. "Nevermind." I’m really not up to explaining it, and it’s not that important. “I just mean I don't have a bunch of answers for you. I don’t know how or why this is happening. I—” I stop talking, unable to come up with an adequate explanation. I shrug.

"We have to alert the Chantry," Sebastian says, brow furrowed. "Not about Mana perhaps – but at least about the lyrium."

He looks like he wants to continue, but Isabela asks, "You really think that they don't know?" She raises her eyebrows.

“I know Grand Cleric Elthina,” Sebastian says. “If she knew about this—”

“It doesn’t matter if she knows about it or not, Choir Boy,” Varric points out, though kindly for Sebastian’s sake. “We’re really talking about Meredith Stannard here.”

Sebastian sighs, and nods once, “You’re right, of course.” He doesn’t look very happy about it, but nobody really is.

“Of course, I am,” Varric says, grinning.

“No one’s telling anybody,” Carver says. “They’ll ask how we figured it out, and they’ll want more than a single test on a disgraced lyrium-addled templar. They’ll want a source, and knowing Meredith, she’ll look straight this way.”

“Isn’t she already looking ‘straight this way’?” Garrett asks. Carver makes a noise in the back of his throat.

“What could have caused this?” Fenris says, looking to me. Then, of course, everyone looks to Garrett. Probably because he’s the mage. Orana takes the opportunity to draw my attention, and she gives me this look that screams are you really alright?, and I nod once - though I’m sure we both know how I really feel.

We turn our attention back to Hawke, who’s quite indignant to have us all looking to him for answers. “This isn’t anything I’ve ever encountered before. And don’t bother Merrill or Anders about it either.” Fenris makes a little noise at that, maybe a little disgusted at the suggestion. “We’re all in the dark here.”

“So all we’ve got is the Fade,” Varric says, cringing.

“Well,” Isabela says, “it’s that or we find this mysterious ‘foci’ Merrill keeps mentioning lovingly. Any progress on that front?”

“You’re welcome to help, Rivaini,” Varric grumbles.

Clearly, we’ve reached the end of our tether. We do that a lot, I’ve noticed. Really, now that I think
about it, these conversations about me always seem to run short, and they’re rarely very productive. But what can I say? I’m an enigma.

“I’d like to go with you, when you go into the Fade,” Sebastian says. He smiles, reassuringly. “I’m curious to see what it’s like for myself.”

Varric snorts, once again disgusted, with a shake of his head.

“We’re to be searching for information – for answers – correct? More eyes can’t hurt,” Sebastian continues.

“You’re welcome to it,” Garrett says. “Though I’m really questioning how much this venture’s going to cost me…”

“I’ll pay,” I cut in. I know there’s some form of processed lyrium involved, expensive stuff, and I haven’t touched the money Anders gave me – or even most of the money I’ve been making from my work with Varric and Aveline. “Whatever you need for it, considering this is mostly for me.”

“Mm,” Garrett says, dismissively. I frown. It’s like the thing with Varric earlier. I’d meant to pay him back for the thing with Samson, but he’d waved his hand and dashed away, using the armor as an excuse to go. “What’s this then? Varric, Sebastian—” He pauses, humming to himself. “Merrill and Anders, of course. Feynriel and Merrill’s Keeper.”

“Pebbles,” Varric points out, amused he’d forgotten me.

Garrett snaps his fingers, “How could I forget Mana? Right. Mana.” He inhales and squints. “I dread to ask, but is there anyone else?”

Fenris hesitates and nods, “I will go.”

“Me,” Carver says. Garrett makes a noise in the back of his throat.

“Me,” Isabela says. “And you might as well ask Aveline. She’ll feel left out otherwise.”

“Somehow, I doubt it,” Varric mutters.

That’s literally everyone, I think. And that sounds like a monumentally bad idea. “Not that I don’t appreciate it, but maybe it isn’t the smartest idea for all of us to be in the Fade all at once?” Garrett blinks and then makes a ‘oh fuck you’re right’ face. “What if something goes wrong?”

“‘What if something goes wrong?’ she asked,” Varric mutters, shaking his head.

“Shouldn’t it be some of the mages who stay behind?” Carver points out. “If it does go wrong, they’ll really be the only ones with the power to help – from either end.” Thank God for Carver and his sensible suggestions.

“Feynriel knows the city best,” I say. “He’ll need to be there, and Merrill’s well-versed in Elvhen… everything really.”

“Are you counting me out?” Garrett says, pretending to blink back tears. “And Anders, too?” With the second part, he does actually sound pretty serious in his disapproval.

“He does have Justice,” Isabela points out.

“The Keeper should know as much – if not more – than the blood mage,” Fenris says. There’s a little silence after that. Mostly because we have a split between people who clearly love Merrill and
people who have…issues with Merrill. My head throbs a little, and I try to think what’s just logically
the best combination. It seems we’re shooting for two on the outside. Which seems fair.

Everyone, of course, is looking to me to make the final verdict, and no matter what I chose, I know I’m going to be pissing somebody off. Joy.

“Feynriel,” I say again. “And Marethari and Anders.” Isabela looks a little irritated at that, and I add, helplessly, “I just...prefer to have Merrill on the outside rather than Marethari. She’d be better at thinking outside the box if something went wrong.” I hesitate before saying, finally, “I trust her.”

There’s a mixed reaction to that statement, but Isabela relaxes, “I’ll just have to tell her all about it when we return, then.”

I nod.

“First,” Varric says, “we have to survive Summerday. I’m not crossing Leandra.”

Fenris frowns, “Nor will I.”

I don’t even think he knows really what we’re talking about, but I feel him.

“Does it make you uncomfortable?” I ask Orana. We’ve gone back to the reading lesson, and almost everyone’s dispersed – to have a round at the Hanged Man, I think – and I’ve noticed that Orana’s been rather quiet since the ‘Post-Summerday Fade Escapade Conversation.’

“No?” Orana tries, confused.

I smile a little, and clarify, “The things with me and the Fade and whatever else. Does it bother you?”

“It bothers you,” she mutters.

“Yeah,” I confess, though it’s not much of a confession. I think everyone knows just how well I’m handling the Fade stuff. “But what about you?” I hesitate to bring up anything to do with her past, but I don’t want her to put up with me just because she feels she has to.

“I don’t like that it bothers you,” Orana says, and I sigh just a little. She reaches out and squeezes my hand. “But it doesn’t bother me. There’s really…no comparison between you and them.”

I nod, still a little uneasy.

“I mean it,” she says, and it’s the most forceful thing I’ve ever heard her say.

“Alright.”

“It doesn’t bother me at all,” she repeats. “If anything, you remind me more of Sandal than you remind me of any magister.”

“Sandal?” I ask, completely confused about the connection.

“He’s like you, I think,” she says, after a while. She looks very reluctant to continue, but I can’t bring myself to stop her. Even though I probably should. “He sometimes mentions an old woman whispering things in his head.”

Usually, I’d immediately go straight to asking about his mental health, but I’ve literally been spewing things I absolutely should not know – so I don’t.
“Did he mention anything else?” I can’t help but wonder.

Orana thinks about it, pursing her lip, before she says, “Your brother betrayed you, he said.”

That’s—

“I don’t have a brother;” I whisper. My treacherous brain, though, protests. Which is *ridiculous* - and terrifying. Could Hawke be wrong about a demon? But then, do demons even have siblings? I feel a little queasy at the train of thought, and I squeeze Orana’s hand. I feel suddenly the urgent need to put some safety valves in place. “If I do anything strange, you have to go to Hawke or one of the others, alright?”

“Mana?”

This feels so melodramatic, but the last thing I want is to hurt anyone. Especially Orana, who’s been hurt enough as it is.

“Will you promise?”

“I promise,” she says. “But I don’t think it’s a demon.”

I wish it was comforting to hear her say so, but I’m not sure. “Do you know anything about what it’s like to be possessed by a demon?” I ask.

“It’s not like this,” she says, shaking her head. “Usually, you just become an abomination.” She shudders as if remembering something but takes a deep breath after a moment and goes on. “But I’ve heard that powerful demons and willing hosts can come together in a body without...changing it.”

Neither sounds like my situation at all.

“I don’t suppose,” I begin, “you have any idea what it might really be?” She shakes her head, apologetically. “It’s okay. We’re all on the same page then.”

She *still* looks apologetic but decides we should get back to our lesson.

Chapter End Notes

The thing about Sandal hearing a voice is canon btw. ;)

The end.
Anyway, Here’s Invitations

Chapter Summary

In which Carver settles into the fold, Saemus and Mana have a heart-to-heart, and everyone braces for Summerday.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by Senei.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Leandra comes into the dining room, she drops a stack of letters on Garrett’s plate, and Garrett stares at them for a moment, looking completely baffled by their existence. He starts to tilt his head slowly in a very Warbrain-like gesture then asks, “What’s this?”

“They’re invitations, Garrett,” Leandra says, like she’s speaking to a small child. Which, well, she sort of is. “For your friends.”

“To what?” Garrett mutters, picking up the invitations like he’s scared they might bite him. He starts to thumb through them, and he gets to maybe the third one and starts chuckling and shaking his head. “Master Tethras? Really mother?”

Even Carver snorts at that, from his place across the table beside Orana, but then he scowls a little. I don’t think he likes agreeing with Garrett on any level whatsoever.

“For Summerday,” Leandra says.

He blinks, “…for Summerday? You’re inviting my friends to Summerday at the estate?” I don’t think he could sound more skeptical if he tried, and I can’t help but smile a little. Things feel almost normal again.

Leandra stares at him, then sighs. “They are your friends, and they are practically family, Maker preserve us. I think Varric spends more time here at the estate than you do.”

“That’s cause he’s always visiting Mana, giving her his scandalous manuscripts to ‘review,’” Garrett says, and I make eye contact with Carver and roll my eyes. Carver seems to appreciate the gesture, and we share a tiny smile.

Garrett turns to me, abruptly, and thrusts the letters at me once. “Varric was my friend first.”

“Noted,” I say, dryly, and I turn back to my breakfast. Carver snorts again.

Garrett rounds on him. “She,” he jerks his head in my direction, “was my friend first.”

“Noted,” Carver grunts, looking pissed.
I roll my eyes again. They have all these deep issues with each other, but they always seem to pick such childish fights. Well, that’s not fair. Garrett picks the childish fights, and Carver just sort of glares and huffs out his disagreement. I wonder, did they learn to fight from mabari? It’s all very… doglike.

“Mana, if you would, I have an invitation for Jean Luc,” Leandra says. She taps the table, where she’s set a letter down somehow without me noticing. I must have been distracted by Garrett. No surprise there.

As for Jean Luc, I’d honestly like to avoid the man, especially after our last stilted conversation, but I just nod. I still have the letter for Laurent, too. Might as well.

“Is there anyone you’d like to invite, Carver?”

“Any templars you mean?” Carver says, eyes cutting to Garrett. “I’m sure you’d all appreciate that.”

“What, you didn’t make any friends in the Gallows?” Garrett says, sweetly. “I hear they’re all so very charming and noble.” He bats his eyelashes, and it’s actually a little painful to watch. I like Garrett very much, but this passive aggressive bullshit’s been going on since Carver came home – and shows no sign of stopping.

I think Garrett’s mad that the reason his brother left was because of the lyrium, not because of some big epiphany about the Order’s principles. (Which, alright, I question the principles, but I don’t really think that’s Carver’s problem either. Carver’s problem starts with a ‘G.’)

“Garrett,” I warn.

He stops and sighs. “Fine. Let him invite his templars. Just let them know they’re not welcome to anything from my wine cellar.”

I didn’t even know this place had a wine cellar.

“Oh, your wine cellar?” Leandra challenges.

“There isn’t anyone,” Carver cuts in. He’s still angry, but I think – on some level – he always is. He opens his mouth to add something else, no doubt something jabbed at Garrett, but he stops himself and goes back to his breakfast.

Garrett abruptly shoves away his plate, “Well. I’m done, so I’ll just off and deliver these.”

He gives my shoulder a little squeeze as he goes, then practically runs out of the room. We all continue eating in silence until we hear the door slam, and then Carver sets down his fork and says, “I can find another place.”

“No,” Leandra says, immediately.

“Mot—”

“No,” she repeats.


“Yes?” I say, jumping a little at my abrupt inclusion in the conversation.

“You’re going to the Keep, aren’t you? I want to talk to Aveline,” he says. He flushes a little and looks away, as if he’s embarrassed. “I’ll walk with you.”
“Alright,” I say. I consider bringing up the invitation I have for Jean Luc, but with Carver as on edge as he is, I decide against it. I’ll just handle that after I’m done at the Keep. “We can go right after Orana and I are done with the dishes.”

Carver’s brow furrows, “Right.”

“If you help them,” Leandra says, reasonably, “you’ll all be done quicker.” She folds her hands in her lap and looks between me and Orana with a smile.

“It’s alright,” Orana rushes to say, but Carver just stands up with his plate in his hand.

“I’ll help,” he says, brow still furrowed. “Might as well.”

“You’re really throwing our system,” I mumble, the fourth time Carver and I bump into each other. Orana makes a little noise at my complaint, so I add a little, “No offense.”

“Sorry,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Do you both do this every day?”

“Yup,” I say. “Now just stand there.” He halts. “I wash, Orana can rinse, and you can dry - and we might just get through this alive.”

“Yes ser,” he says, dutifully. “Maker, you sound just like—” He stops and makes a face.

“I promise I won’t flay you if you mention a templar,” I say.

“Well, if you won’t flay me,” he says with a snort. “No, really, you won’t appreciate the comparison – and anyway you don’t really sound like her.”

“Did you just compare me to Meredith?” I ask, leaning forward so I can look at him on the other side of Orana while I wash the plates. That should probably freak me out some, even if it is a joke, but it doesn’t bother me. I can’t tell if it’s that familiar numbness or not.


“I’ll remember this, Carver Hawke,” I say.

“She will,” Orana informs him. “She’ll probably even write it down to be sure.”

Carver balks and so do I. Orana, after a moment, flushes and focuses on the plate she’s washing. Then I say, a beat too late, “She’s right, of course. I keep good notes.” I stand on my tip-toes and glare at him over Orana’s head. Orana giggles, but there’s a touch of nervousness to it.

“I’m scared already,” he says, then he lets out a little laugh. Which actually sounds genuine. Good. “Maker, you’re weird.”

“Rude,” I mumble. He snorts. “So what do you want to talk to Aveline about?”

That, unfortunately, sobers him right up, and he scowls at the cloth and the bowl in his hand as if it offends him. “I’m going to see if she’ll let me join the City Guard,” he says. He doesn’t sound especially hopeful about this plan.

“Do you and Aveline have a problem with each other or something?”

“No,” he says, right off, but he grimaces with a little inhale that sounds like a hiss. “Not exactly. She thinks I have problems with authority.”
“This is Kirkwall,” I say. “Doesn’t everyone have some problem with somebody in authority?” I even fit the bill here. I have my ‘little’ – extremely weird – problem with Meredith despite the fact that I’ve never met her in person.

“I—right,” he says. “But it’s Aveline. I don’t have a problem with her authority.”

“Okay,” I say.

“Okay?” he says, irritated. We’re nearly done with the dishes now. Honestly, it almost went too fast, but that’s what you get when you have three people helping. “What? You think I—”

It irritates me a little that he’s being so pissy about it, but I also sort of get it. My sister and I talked about the different way our parents treated us all the time. And he’s got Garrett as an older brother. I imagine trying to wring a serious conversation out of him’s a lot like trying to herd cats. “You’re a younger sibling,” I say. “And you’ve lived with Garrett your whole life.” He opens his mouth, and I glare at him. “First of all, congrats. For developing the level of self-control you have.” One corner of his mouth twitches up a hair. “Second of all, I dunno—you’re more of a leader? Or you want to be one obviously. So.”

“So?” he says, though he doesn’t sound as angry. Orana watches us warily. “What am I supposed to do about that? Ask Aveline to step aside?” He snorts, and I snort because ha never happening.

“Or you could talk to the de Launcets,” I say.

He gets all red in the face and starts sputtering, “What do they have to do with anything?”

“Well, not much of anything honestly,” I say. “And then everything.” He looks so confused. All I can say is this: thank God for Jean Luc’s lessons. “They all have connections, Carver, and you’re smart. You have things to offer, Ideas. Muscles. A keen sense of justice.” His faces scrunches up for a second. It must be the ‘justice’ part – or maybe it was the muscles. I shake my head and go on, “I’m sure, after a while, you’d come up with something to do that’s all yours, something that you could be proud of.”

“You’re telling me to go into politics,” he says, horrified.

“You could?” I try, gently. Orana looks more comfortable with the direction of the conversation, at least. “You could do it, I think.” He stares at me in disbelief. “You’ll figure it out.”

“Right,” he says, shaking his head. “I’ll figure it out.”

“Anyway,” I say, rolling my eyes. “You should talk to the de Launcets because you like them.”

“I don’t,” he says, immediately. “They’re Orlesian.” He wrinkles his nose as he says the second part, and I can’t help but laugh. Orana chuckles a little, too.

“You do,” I say, through my laughter. “I do, too. They’re fun – and they like you.” I don’t mean it romantically so much. Garrett’s got his friends, and I feel like the de Launcets could be Carver’s. He got on so well with them at the Talwain party.

“They’re—” It’s clearly another protest, but he just sort of croaks at the end and falls silent. “Fine. I’ll talk to them.”

“Good,” I say.

“What about you?” he says, in that way people do when they want to turn things back on you. “And
Saemus Dumar?”

“Ugh,” I say, going to dry my hands.

“Thought so,” he says, smug. “Garrett was trying to make it sound like you were—” He makes a
tace. “I didn’t buy it.” I try not to take that the wrong way, but unfortunately, it’s difficult for me not
to. I shouldn’t even be remotely worried about such a silly thing but— “It’s not you,” he hurries to
say, looking alarmed. “He has that Qunari thing.”

I exhale, “You’re right.”

He exhales, took, looking relieved. Then he looks a little concerned, “What’s he want with you
then?”

“It’s politics,” I say, sighing. I consider how to begin explaining the situation, but he puts up his
hand.

“Save it,” he says. “I’ve agreed to talk to the de Launcet girls but that’s it for now.”

“Alright, alright,” I mumble. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I’ll still talk to Aveline, but after, I think I’ll stop by the de Launcet estate.”

“Sounds like a good plan, don’t you think, Orana?”

Orana smiles and says, “Yes.”

Carver smiles, too.

“You and Saemus Dumar, huh?” Wright says. He sounds entirely too smug. I’ve left Carver to talk
to Aveline in private, crossing my fingers that it goes well for him, and in the meantime, go to catch
up with the guards. “Guess you have me to thank for that?” He raises his eyebrows meaningfully.

It takes me a minute, but I remember that Wright was the one who let me in to the Viscount’s office
that one day. I’d met Saemus, and then he’d started helping in Aveline’s office.

And now we’re a ‘thing.’

Lia looks put out and pips, “I was there, too.”

“But I opened the door,” Wright says. “Literally and figuratively.”

Harley Casimi rolls her eyes and catches him in the side with her elbow. Somehow, even with the
armor, it seems to hurt him. “Wright, really.”

“You just like to say ‘Wright, really,’” he accuses.

“I do,” she says, bluntly. “Mostly because there’s no point saying more. Your head’s as thick as the
Keep’s walls.”

Lia snickers but quickly covers her fact with her hand.

“He did - sort of – introduce us,” I try.

“Sort of,” Harley agrees with a little snort. “You’re too nice, messere. Give this one,” she jerks her
head in Wright’s direction, “a kind word and he’ll be after you like a dog.” She winces after a second. “No offense to Hawke or that mutt of his.”

“I’m telling Warbrain you said that,” Wright threatens.

“Go ahead,” Harley counters. “I’ll tell him what you said about the fleas.” I’d almost forgotten that Warbrain does drills with them or something like that.

Wrights gapes. “You wouldn’t! Casimi, you wouldn’t!”

“What?” she says, viciously. “Worried you won’t be his favorite anymore?”

“Yeah,” he says, immediately. “He’s a very sensitive ma—dog. Fereldan.” He frowns. “Mabari.”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Harley says, patting him on the shoulder.

“Ah, there’s your man,” Wright says, much too loudly. He’s just relieved to be free of the embarrassing conversation. “Messere Dumar, good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon,” Saemus says, moving to stand beside me. He brushes his hand against my arm in a decidedly intimate gesture, and I feel an uncomfortable pricking along my skin. I don’t know if I’ll ever be comfortable with him touching me. It’s just so difficult, knowing he’s only doing it as a sort of performance.

“Is—” Saemus begins, just as Aveline’s door opens.


“Well, that was quick,” Wright comments. “And a bit short, if you don’t mind me saying.”

Despite myself, I say, “He’s just in a hurry to go see the de Launcets.”

“Oh, really?” Harley says. “Carver Hawke?”

“Yes,” I say, a bit defensively. “Carver Hawke, my cousin.”

“Carver Hawke your cousin the ex-templar?” Wright says, raising his eyebrows.

Harley snorts, “I’m sure that’s the one.”

“Probably,” Saemus say. Which was a joke. A definite, real joke. “Well, we should get to work, I think.”

“Right,” Wright says, lip quirking up. “Work.”

This time, Lia elbows him.

“Dinner?” Saemus asks, as we’re putting things away.

My eyes are a little blurry, from all the reading we’ve been doing, and I’m too tired to really comprehend what exactly he’s asking.

“Use your words, messere,” Aveline suggests, blandly. She doesn’t even look up from her reports.
Saemus makes a noise in the back of his throat. “Mana, would you like to go to dinner with me?” He completely ruins it by looking back at Aveline, as if seeking her approval. Or maybe he’s just proving he can use his words. I don’t know.

“Sure,” I say, trying not to sound too tired about it. Then, thinking about Orana and Leandra, “Oh, I should probably—”

“I’ll send word to the estate,” Aveline says, waving a hand. She smiles a bit crookedly at me and Saemus but quickly looks back at her reports.

Saemus and I finish putting everything away, then he slips his arm through mine, we say our goodbyes to Aveline, and he leads me out of Aveline’s office and into a part of the Keep I’ve, of course, never entered before.

It’s the Viscount’s residence.

“The servants are probably still working on dinner,” he says, looking ahead. He starts to frown. “We can sit in the library.” I can’t help it. I snort. “What?”

“Oh,” I say, patting his arm with a shake of my head. He starts at the touch and I immediately stop, pissed at myself for being so familiar with him. I make a face before I continue, “It’s just we always end up crowding into the library at home all the time.”

He opens his mouth, brow furrowed, closes it, and then finally says, “I thought you’d like the books.”

I hate that I actually get excited about that, but I reason it’s just me and my love of books. It can’t possibly be that Saemus was thinking about what I might like, and anyway, even if it is, it’s because it’s just nice – in general – when people think of you like that.

“Well, I do like books,” I mutter.

He snorts, shaking his head, before leading me to the library.

It is more impressive than the one at the Amell estate, and I can’t help but pull away and go browse the titles. Saemus huffs out a laugh and watches. Maybe. I don’t pay much attention after a certain point.

Of course, the avoidance tactic can only last so long, and we’re finally sitting there with nothing else to do but talk to one another.

“I assume it was your doing?” he begins. I don’t answer right away, trying to figure out what he means. “Your cousin’s hasty exit from the Order.”

“It wasn’t just me,” I say. That’s not true, really, but as far as Saemus knows, I’m a normal, somewhat strange Hercinian noblewoman. No weird Fade business here.

“Fifi and Babette,” he says. Really, it sounds like I should have known.

“Something like that,” I say, tapping my fingers along the arm of the chair.

“Well,” he says, somewhat pained. “I wish him luck.”

“I’m sure he’ll appreciate that,” I say with a snort.

“I’m sure,” he says, dryly. “You seem more…” He spends some time searching for the right word
before choosing, “…at ease.”

He means with Meredith, I suppose. Well, of course he does. He doesn’t know about everything else. Really, I’m not at ease at all, of course. I’ve just decided the Fade’s a bigger and more immediate issue.

Also, it’s fairly easy to ignore the threat of Meredith because firstly, I’ve never met her and secondly, I’ve never really felt the threat. Not really.

It’s not a very smart plan, exactly, but it’s all I’ve got.

“I’ve accepted it,” I say. He raises an eyebrow at me. “For the most part,” I amend.

“I see,” he says. “You also understand that this is…political then?”

“Yes,” I say, with force, and he flushes a little. “But I do have a question,” I begin. He straightens up where he’s sitting. “What exactly is your father and the rest planning to do about Meredith?” Jean Luc would be so ashamed to hear me just come out and say it, but I’m really starting to understand there’s really no correlation between how they do things in Orlais and how they do things here. In Kirkwall, they like a certain amount of bluntness – and so do I.

He scowls then, and I can’t help but make a face. What are we supposed to do then? Keep up this charade indefinitely? Hopefully, I’ll find a way home before I have to suffer a huge chunk of that indefinitely. Otherwise—nope, not going there.

“Right,” I say.

“No matter what evidence we bring to the Grand Cleric, she remains unwilling to involve herself – and unwilling to pass the information on to someone who might. Sareth wishes to go straight to the Divine, or to the Seekers of Truth.”

I’ve never heard about the Seekers of Truth, but I feel like it’s something I should know so I can’t ask, not Saemus at least. The organization’s name, at least, has a certain appeal – but I doubt it’s as promising as it sounds.

But the Divine, I know she’s basically the Thedasian (is that a word?) equivalent to the pope.

“But why would any of them side with my father? When Meredith runs the city to their liking,” he says, disgusted.

It’s starting to sound like there’s really nothing to be done, and I’m starting to see why he’s turned from the Chantry to the Qun. The Chantry seems to be the root of many problems around here, and it’s easy to see why. They’re basically the Old Catholic Church, hungry for power and blood. Yay.

“Marlein likes the idea of an outright revolt,” Saemus goes on, “but the likelihood of a win is low, and even if we succeeded in pushing out the templars, the Chantry would certainly want to involve themselves then.”

So, it’s a no-win situation. Lovely.

“What would you have done if my cousin hadn’t taken you back to the city?” I ask. I don’t mean to, but it seems like the right time to ask. And I wonder about it a lot. At the moment, even laying out just how little options ‘we’ have, he still seems grimly determined to push forward. He really seems to care.
“I would have stayed among the Qunari,” he says, shortly.

“I see.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” he says. “I could try a thousand times, but I would always come to the same result – thanks to people like your cousin.”

It’s refreshing to have him be rude to me.

“Fair,” I agree. “But you could also just flee the country, couldn’t you? And find Qunari elsewhere – and join elsewhere.”

He looks furious, face pinched, for a second, and then it’s just like I’d devastated him. I sort of regret what I’ve said, especially when he looks like he might bury his face in his hands or cry, but at the same time, this is the truth, isn’t it?

“You love your father,” I guess.

“He’s certainly not easy to love,” Saemus snaps as a defense.

“Did you love the Qunari from before?” I wish there was a gentler way to ask, but there isn’t. But still, I feel compelled to ask.

His head snaps to me, and for a second, I think he actually does hate me for asking. But he must see something in my face because his expression changes. Then he just stares at me for a moment, then whispers, “What does it matter?”

“It matters,” I say, immediately. It’s eerily similar to the time I talked to Carver about his sister, and I can’t help but wonder if everyone here in Kirkwall’s lost someone like this. It seems likely, and it makes me sick to my stomach. He sucks in a breath, gearing up to speak, and I add, “To you—and to me.”

“It doesn’t bother you, Lady de la Paz?” he says, bitterly. “Everyone wonders about us, you know. About me and whether I’ve told you about my proclivities.”

“It doesn’t bother me that you loved someone,” I say. “It bothers me that you lost them, and you never had the chance to deal with how – pardon my language – shitty it was.” He laughs a little, but it turns into something like hiccups.

“I would have joined him,” Saemus mutters. “I meant it.”

“I believe you,” I say.

“It wasn’t just Ashaad. I believe in the teachings of the Qun – most of them.” He sucks in a breath and turns to look at me. “What do you believe?”

*There are no gods,* that’s my first thought. It’s often my first thought nowadays. Yet, I can’t say it. “What do I believe?” I repeat, considering. “I don’t believe much in the Chantry,” I say honestly, because with Saemus it doesn’t feel as if there’s any danger in saying it with him doubting so much. “Or the Maker really. I mean, some sort of deity probably maybe exists—”

All that has him laughing, and he actually does bury his head in his hands. “My father’s wrong about you,” he says, snickering. “A good influence.”

“Well,” I say, dryly. “I don’t like starting relationships on lies.” He snorts, and I should snort, too,

“No,” he says, to my relief. “I think I understand.”

“Good.”

“I was glad,” he says, after a little while. “After Ashaad died…and Hawke took me back. For a long time, I couldn’t hear ‘Ashaad’ without—” he stops, takes a breath. “I would have had to hear it used among the Qunari every day.”

I’m struck with anger that people have made fun of him for this, for *caring* about the Qunari. For loving one of them.

“Mana, this probably won’t end well,” he says. “I should tell you that.”

“This is Kirkwall,” I respond with a half-smile. “That’s pretty much a given.”

He laughs, a bit brokenly.

“‘What’d he say?’ Garrett says, learning forward with a spark in his eye. Now that I think about it, it might be an *actual* spark – considering how much he likes his lightning.

I roll my eyes, “He said *and I quote*: ‘I didn’t realize we had company, Saemus. Dinner’s ready.’”

“Mana,” Garrett whines. “That’s can’t be all.”

“It was all,” I say, rolling my eyes. “The Viscount ‘caught’ us – sitting on different couches in his library – and told us that dinner had been prepared and set out on the table.”

“Boring.”

“You didn’t talk about anything over dinner?”

“He didn’t eat dinner with us,” I explain. “He said he had work to do.”

“Boring,” Garrett repeats, accusingly.

“What did *you* do today, Garrett?” I counter.

“Delivered letters to our favorite people in Kirkwall like I was supposed to,” he says.

“Damn,” I hiss. The letters for Jean Luc are tucked away in my bag. I’d forgotten all about it. “Do you think tomorrow would be too late?” We’re literally days away from Summerday.

“For Jean Luc and *his* manners?” Garrett says, rolling his eyes. “Yes.”

“If you want to go out and deliver it now, I’ll go with you,” Carver says.

“Thank you, Carver,” I say, smiling brightly at him. A little to piss Garrett off.

“I’ll come—” Garrett starts.

“I’ve got it,” Carver snaps over him.

“What did you get up to today?” Leandra cuts in before they can start arguing again. “You never did
say how it went with Aveline.”

“I just stopped in to ask how things were,” he says, flushing. “She said to tell you,” he glares at Garrett, “and Varric that she knows all about the armor that went missing out of the armory a few days ago, and she’s not at all happy about it.” Read: Aveline’s going to kick our asses. “And she also said you could pay her back by doing a sweep of the Wounded Coast. Tonight or tomorrow.”

Garrett groans. “Fine. Have fun delivering your invitation and make sure you remember me, me getting sand in my boots and chunks of dead spi—”

“Garrett, really?” Leandra says.

“I’m going,” Garrett says with a long-suffering sigh as he practically leaps up from the couch. Before he goes, he points at both me and Carver saying, “Remember me!”

“No, thanks,” Carver says. But Garrett’s already gone. “Let’s go then?”

“Carver,” Leandra says, “you never did say what else you got up to today.”

Carver, who’d already risen, turns purposefully towards the door, probably to hide his reddening face, “I just went…visiting.”

“Visiting?”

Carver squares his shoulders, “I went to see the de Launcets, alright?”

Leandra’s eyebrows shoot up, “Oh.”

“Mana suggested that I go,” he says, and of course, Leandra’s eyes shift my way. Thanks, Carver.

“You weren’t exactly that reluctant to go,” I mumble.

Carver glares at me.

“Was it a good visit?” Leandra asks.

“It was,” Carver mutters. He coughs and turns to me abruptly. “Mana, it’s getting late. Let’s just go.”

“You didn’t have to say anything,” Carver complains, as we’re heading away from the estate towards the market.

“You brought it up.”

“I—fine. I did bring it up.”

“You did,” I say, trying not to sound so smug about it. “And it’s fine. Leandra’s probably just happy you’re—”

“Carver,” someone calls.

“Shit,” Carver hisses, but he schools his face and manages to look relatively un-phased by it.

“Commander Cullen, good evening.” When I follow his gaze, I see the speaker ahead.

“…good evening,” Cullen repeats, stepping up to us. He’s wearing bulky armor, with the symbol of the Templar Order across the chest, and his hair, well, it’s pretty much an exact replica of Justin
Timberlake’s circa 1995. “Carver, I wanted to speak with you for a moment. In private,” His eyes cut to me, and I can see it. He’s clearly on lyrium, and it’s obviously not doing well by him if the dark patches around his eyes are any indication.

“If you have something to say, you can say it in front of my cousin,” Carver says, gruffly. I’m touched, honestly, but also a little freaked out. There’s just something about Cullen’s eyes that frighten me – and it’s not just the lyrium.

“All the same,” Cullen says.

Carver crosses his arms and shifts his weight. “Either say it or we’re leaving,” he says.

“Very well,” Cullen says. “You’ve abandoned the Order, and I’d like to know why. You have potential Carver, and you’re thr—”

“Throwing it away?” Carver guesses, bearing his teeth. I really do think he learned to fight from mabari. “I’ve heard that.”

“It’s the truth,” Cullen says.

“It’s not,” he argues. “I’ve made my decision.”

“Have you?” Cullen says, taking another step towards us. Carver twitches, and I think he’d very much like to go for his sword.

“What are you on about, Commander?” He hisses the word ‘Commander’ through gritted teeth.

“Have you made the decision?” Cullen says, eyes cutting to me.

Carver puts a hand on my back, saying sharply, “I have.” I’m not sure the contact exactly helps his point or not.

“I’ll vouch for you,” Cullen says, eventually with a sigh. A disappointed sigh. “If you wish to return.”

“Thanks for that,” Carver says, coolly. “But it won’t be necessary.” And he gives me a little push.

We walk on, past Cullen, and continue on to the market.

“Shit,” Carver says, once we’re out of range. He doesn’t remove his hand off my back, and I wonder if it’s for his sake or mine. Either way, I’m a little glad for it.

“Yeah,” I say.

We continue on in silence after that, and Jean Luc must be able to sense our somberness when we arrive at his stall because he doesn’t mention Summerday preparations or anything like that. Instead, he just smiles and says, “Good evening, Mana, Carver.”

Carver tips his head but doesn’t speak.

“Good evening, Jean Luc,” I say. “I know it’s a bit late for an invitation, but here.” I pass him the invitation and the letter for Laurent. “There’s also a letter for Laurent.”

He, to my surprise, seems most intrigued by the letter for Laurent. “You wrote him again,” he says, reaching up to stroke his beard a little with his free hand. “Did he say much in his last letter?”
“Yes?” I say, brow furrowing. He’d written more than me at least, and there was plenty to respond to. “He wrote me some about the Crows and the general political situation in Antiva.”

“I see,” he says, glancing between me and the letter. It’s like he wishes he could read through the envelope. “Did he say much about…Rialto itself?”

“He seems happy, if that’s what you mean,” I try. I think I’ve completely misread their relationship. In fact, it’s clear that I have. “He said he’d found someone.”

“Did he?” Jean Luc says, as if he’s trying very hard not to sound overly eager for more information.

“A Hercinian,” I add with a nod. “Sympathetic and sweet, he said.”

“They met thanks to you, wasn’t it?” Carver says.

“Something like that.” My cheeks get a little warm.

“I see,” he says, faintly. Then, like a switch, he’s done with the topic. “Tell Leandra I’m honored to have been invited. I’ll be there.”

“I will,” I say. “See you then.”

“See you,” he echoes, but he’s already turning away to stare at the letter from his son some more.

Chapter End Notes

I was talking Mayamelissa, and I realized that my timeline’s a little off in regards to the inclusion of Lia as a guardsman. It wouldn’t be till closer to act three that she joins the City Guard in canon, probably, but it’s not a huge part of this story so I won’t be going back to change it – at least not for the moment.
Anyway, Here’s Summerday

Chapter Summary

Mana celebrates Summerday with her new family.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by Senei.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Pebbles, you and I need to talk,” Varric says, unsmiling. I buy it for about a second before I notice him trying really hard to keep from cracking a smile, and he goes on with one of his usual shit-eating grins plastered across his face, “You never told me you could make apple pastries.”

So that’s it.

I’d made a little batch of pastries as a gifts for each of the guests and the ‘fam’ and Orana (who’s basically family too) and Bodahn and Sandal (who’d been given the day off). I’d also made a special journal for Saemus in addition to some pastries, considering he’s my fake…whatever he is.

“You never asked,” I point out.

“That’s such a cheap answer,” he accuses. “You realize, you owe me months worth by now.”

“I hadn’t realized,” I say. “Thank you so much for informing me, Master Tethras.”

“Oh,” he says, eyes brightening. He smirks, and I regret saying his title immediately.

“Don’t even—” I say, pointing at him in warning.

“But you’re the one who said it!” he says with a laugh.

“I’m taking it back,” I say. “Now.”

“You should,” he says, winking at me. “Or your boy might get the wrong idea.” His expression changes as he says it, becomes more thoughtful. Then he asks, “What did you do to that kid anyway?”

I frown, “What?”

“He’s been social,” Varric says, horrified and shuddering. I roll my eyes at the dramatics. “With Hawke. And he smiled at me. Granted, it lasted about three seconds but—”

I hadn’t really noticed that big of a difference in Saemus. Sure, he’s seemed a bit lighter tonight, less tense maybe, but I still thought he was a little standoffish with everyone.
“We talked the other night is all,” I say. I trust Varric, probably more than almost anyone else I’ve met in Kirkwall, but this feels like something for just me and Saemus so I try to stay as vague as possible. “And we reached an understanding.”

Varric squints at me, “An understanding or an ‘understanding’?”

“An understanding, no quotation marks.” I say, rolling my eyes. “Really, he hasn’t been that different.”

“Sure, sure,” he says, waving hand in the air carelessly. He’s not buying it, it seems. Not that there’s anything to buy. “It’s because you can’t see it. He keeps looking at you like you’re a puzzle he’d like to solve and—”

My nose wrinkles, “Bit of an overused metaphor that.” It’s a nitpicky comment, and I’m definitely not trying to divert the conversation or anything.

“Now you’re onto my metaphors,” he bemoans, putting a hand to his forehead like he’s ready to faint. He keeps that pose for way longer than necessary before he straightens and continues, “I’m being serious, Pebbles. He’s looking at you all funny now – and so is Jean Luc for that matter. Which means you must have done something.”

“Jean Luc?” I say, confused. Where is Varric getting all this from? Ah. “Varric,” I try, raising my eyebrows, “how much wine have you had exactly?”

He makes a little noise in the back of his throat, “Not the point here and it was the ale.” He shakes his head. “It’s not just me. What do you think Isabela and I’ve been gossiping about all night?”

“That new project of yours,” I say. “I feel like she’d have plenty to say about Donnen.”

“Shhh,” he says, glancing around. No doubt, he’s keeping an eye peeled for Aveline. He should, considering ‘Donnen Brennokovic’ is clearly meant to be Aveline and Donnic’s fictional child. Honestly, it’s a little weird, but if you ignore that part, it was pretty good. Very intriguing. And very familiar. Some mysterious organization searches for a mysterious – possibly elven – artifact. I wonder what that could be about.

“My lips are sealed,” I say, pantomiming clamping my mouth shut.

“Rivaini’s mad that I’m starting something new when Swords and Shields isn’t finished,” Varric says, returning to previous topic of discussion. “She won’t even talk to me about my writing anymore as some form of bizarre protest.”

“So instead, you both gossip about me?”

“I don’t care for the judgement in your tone, Pebbles,” he says, though he doesn’t seem bothered at all. Typical of Varric.

“Funny, I don’t care. Period.” We stare at each other, straight-faced, before we both start chuckling. I don’t know why. It wasn’t really that funny. I blame the wine – and the ale. “Alright, fine. Maybe you’re right.”

“Maybe,” he scoffs.

“Hey, that’s all you get out of me,” I say. He surrenders, and we enjoy a nice moment of quiet…er companionship.
Shortly after, we go back into the dining room, and we’re just in time to watch Donnic and Hawke sit down at the table opposite of each other…to arm wrestle.

“Five silver on Hawke,” Isabela says, resting her head on my shoulder.

“Five silver on Donnic,” Aveline says, coming forward with a glass of wine in her hand. It’s very strange to see her without her armor on. Still, I have no doubt that she could go out right now and go Guard-Captaining. (Actually, I know for a fact almost everyone left a weapon or two - four in Isabela’s case - in the entryway and is ready for a fight.)

“Aveline,” Varric tsks, “you’re awfully eager to part with your silver, aren’t you?”

“You tell her, Varric,” Hawke crows, and sure enough, he pins Donnic’s arm the first round. It’s not that surprising considering the size of his arm muscles, which are ridiculous. I mean, I throw that word around a lot, but in this case, it’s one-hundred percent true.

“Hawke,” Aveline warns.

“Sorry!” Hawke says, whimpering much too pitifully. He makes eye contact with Varric and winks.

Then there’s a loud thump under the table, which has Hawke cursing with a hiss, and Donnic pins his arm.

“Hey, wait a minute. Aveline, did you see that?” Hawke whines. Aveline takes a sip of her wine. Hawke looks between Donnic and Aveline, gaping. He pulls away to gesture under the table before thrusting a thumb in Donnic’s direction, “Cheating in front of the Guard-Captain of Kirkwall. In my house! How dare—”

“Varric, did you see anything?” I ask, feigning confusion.

“Nope,” Varric says, popping his ‘p.’ He turns to Isabela, eyebrows raised and grin much too wide. “Did you Rivaini?”

“Looks like Hawke’s been into the cups,” Isabela says, shaking her head.

“Hasn’t everyone?” I mumble.

“That’s a tie then,” Aveline says, as if she doesn’t care either way. Donnic grins at her, and Aveline manages to maintain her composure for a few seconds before she’s smiling back. Hawke looks between the two of them, disgusted and betrayed.

“That’s it,” Hawke says, crossing his arms. “Party’s over!”

“Garrett,” Leandra calls, from where she’s standing a little ways away talking to Sebastian and Jean Luc.

Garrett just waves his hand to show he’s heard before muttering, in a stage whisper, “Fine, stay then. But I’m onto you lot.”

Honestly, I do think he might have had a little too much to drink. It’s either that or it has something to do with him and Anders disappearing for fifteen minutes before dinner. But I don’t like thinking about it because he might not be my cousin, but he’s really starting to feel like my cousin. And that’s just way too weird.

“I’m going to find Anders,” Garrett continues. “He loves me.”
“That he does,” Varric says, with a fond smile. Garrett brightens a little at that before pouting, as if Varric somehow tricked him, and then he goes to find his lover.

“Maybe someone ought to send Hawke to bed?” Aveline suggests, watching him go.

“And deprive ourselves of the entertainment?” Isabela says.

Aveline considers, staring into her wine before shrugging, “True.”

Isabela laughs and bumps shoulders with her.

“My father’s here,” Saemus mutters, jerking his chin towards the door. And sure enough, when I turn my head just a little, I see the Viscount greeting Leandra and Jean Luc and Carver with a tired smile.

Laughter erupts out of the dining room – again.

Maybe thirty minutes ago Isabela called for a game of Ratscrew, as she’s taken to calling it, and nearly everyone had gone to participate. From the shouting, it sounds like Merrill’s doing well.

“Are you alright?” I ask. I’ve refrained from asking all night, but it comes out this time without me really thinking about it.

“Yes?” he says, brow furrowed. Then he sighs, shrugs, “I am well enough.”

“In Kirkwall,” I can’t help but add, “that’s particularly reassuring.”

He snorts then asks, with a curious expression on his face, “Do you miss it? Hercinia?”

“Yes,” I say. I sigh and try to come up with an honest-yet-vague reply. “It’s just…very different in Kirkwall. Like a whole other world if I’m to be honest.” I wince even as I say the last bit. It’s not really anything, but it feels like I’ve given away too much.

It’s in moments like these that I feel especially bad about the lying. He’s being nice about it, and sure, it’s not completely a lie. I miss home. I miss Earth (I never thought I’d ever have to say that). But I can’t help but wonder if he’d care so much if I wasn’t ‘Lady de la Paz.’ Knowing Saemus, he might, but I doubt our paths would have crossed quite like this – and, thus, he wouldn’t have had the chance to care.

I’m overthinking it really.

“Do you intend to go back?”

“Not anytime soon,” I say. I wouldn’t know what to do with myself in Hercinia, and it’s looking like I won’t be going home in the immediate future. I don’t really know what I’m doing with myself here in Kirkwall, but I’m adjusting. Somewhat.

“I see,” he says. “That’s…good.” Saemus sounds like he means that, and I can’t help but smile.

Then I feel a presence behind me which I can only presume is the Viscount.

Saemus confirms it when he inclines his head and says, “Hello, Father. How was the party?”

“As I left it, still at its peak,” the Viscount says, amused. “Fifi and Babette outdid themselves.” He steps so he’s facing both of us and greets me, “Lady de la Paz, good evening.”
“Good evening, Viscount,” I say. “Are you well?”

The Viscount winces a little before sighing. “I am well enough,” he admits. Saemus looks to me – alarmed no doubt by the fact that they'd answered the question exactly the same way – and I can’t help but smile. The Viscount looks between us with his eyebrows raised, smiling. “I’m glad to see everyone’s in good spirits.”

“It’s nice to have everyone together,” I say. And that’s not a lie. Hell, it’s even nice to have Saemus here, especially now that we understand one another better.

As if sensing my thoughts, he reaches over and brushes my arm. The Viscount notices, and I, without even thinking about it, turn and smile at Saemus. We exchange a look, and it feels very much like sharing an inside joke.

“I’m happy for the two of you,” he says. Saemus stiffens and his eyes become guarded. The Viscount continues, with a certain amount of gentleness, “There is no shame in being happy, Saemus.”

“I’m not ashamed that I’m happy,” Saemus protests. And that’s probably true, but he’s too flustered to make a decent argument.

The Viscount waves it off, smiling almost brightly I’d say, and turns to me, “I hope that my son makes you happy in return, Lady de la Paz.”

It’s my turn to flush, because fuck this sappy fake conversation and how guilty it’s making me feel, and after a big pause, I manage to finally say, “Just Mana, messere.”

“Very well,” he says, laughing. For both our sakes, I think, he changes the subject, “Leandra looks better.” There’s an unsaid comment there about Carver’s return, and I try to come up with a vague-yet-somehow-satisfying response.

In my mind, like a flash, I see that templar’s eyes from before, and with that flash of remembrance, any of the embarrassment about my fake relationship with Saemus vanishes. And the answer of a ‘satisfying’ response comes.

“She’s happy to have us all together,” I say, eventually. “We all are.”

He nods once in agreement. “Your cousin is a fine young man.”

“He means, of course, Carver,” Saemus mutters. The Viscount gives Saemus an exasperated look.

“Probably,” I agree, to save Saemus from the impending scolding.

The Viscount stares at the two of us for a moment but then gives us both that same exasperated yet fond look.

“Maker preserve us,” he says, shaking his head.

“How did it go at the party?” I ask. Saemus and his father have gone to talk alone for a moment, and I haven’t spent that much time mingling with anyone else beyond Saemus so I’m taking the opportunity, of course, to hound Carver some about the party at the Keep.

He doesn’t seem to appreciate it if his scowl’s any indication.

“What? Didn’t you ask the Viscount?”
“I did,” I admit with a shrug. I don’t continue but instead just wait for him to continue on. He usually does after a while.

After maybe a minute, he crosses his arms and narrows his eyes at me before saying, “The de Launcets were fine.”

“I didn’t say anything about the de Launcets.”

He snorts and uncrosses his arms. “It really was fine,” he says. “It was a party. With food and dancing just like Lady Talwain’s party. Really, it wasn’t any different.”

“You have new vambraces,” I say, pointing. I’m proud that I even know the actual word for them.

Carver thrusts his hands behind his back. “Mana,” he hisses.

“What?” He scowls. “I’m not making fun of you.” His scowl slips a little.

“It’s just a little gift,” he says. “I’ve given gifts to girls – and boys – on Summerday before.” I don’t say so, but he sounds very much like Garrett, all petulant and huffy.

“Did you give them a gift?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Okay,” I say, dropping the matter. He’s lucky I have restraint because I’m actually very curious to know what he picked out for them. “I hid your pastries from me in your room by the way. I was scared Garrett might eat them before you got to them.”

“Varric’s more likely to do that,” Carver mutters.

“Mmm,” I hum in agreement. Varric’s love of pastries – particularly apple – had been a running ‘joke’ all evening.

“Did Saemus give you anything?” Carver asks.

“No,” I say, shrugging. I hadn’t even really thought about it much. I’d passed out everyone’s gifts at the same time, and I’d been a little overwhelmed by all the thank yous and hugs. I’d wanted to just move on as fast as possible after that, and I hadn’t really even thought about the fact that Saemus hadn’t given me anything.

Carver frowns.

“It’s really not a problem,” I reassure. Because it’s not.

“Considering everyone was wondering whether you two would elope today, I think it is,” he argues.

“Elope?” I squeak. I didn’t even know my voice could do that.

“Well,” he says, smiling – no smirking - at me. “The night’s not over yet.”

I swipe at him, and he jerks back, instinctively. I don’t bother trying again, because it’s pointless, and he’s free to continue his smirking at me. I open my mouth, close it, and finally ask, “Is that really what people thinks? We haven’t even known each other long.”

“What?” he says. “You’ve never heard of a ‘whirlwind’ romance? I thought you were editing Varric’s serials.”
“I can’t believe you’re comparing my life – and yours partly – to Varric’s serials,” I mutter.

“I can,” he says. “It’s more ridiculous than one of Varric’s serials, and Marlein’s *betting* on it. Said the Viscount married his wife after less than two months of knowing her.”

I don’t know what to say to that. Marriage wasn’t – and isn’t – a concern of mine. It shouldn’t be one either, for that matter, considering I’ve only been here a few months.

Carver, after my prolonged silence, looks around us before asking, “Shit, is there…someone? Back home?”

I blink and start to laugh. Carver immediately looks like he regrets asking, and he gives me a look that sort of screams *Why do I even try and be nice to you?* “No,” I say, shaking my head. “It’s not that.”

His shoulders sag a little in relief.

But I’m not relieved. I can’t help but be worried about Saemus. As far as he knows, I’m here forever – or at least indefinitely. What if he *does* get it into his head to marry me? It seemed ridiculous before but now it seems…semi-likely. And that’s *terrifying*.

Marriage has always been this bizarre, abstract concept to me – mostly because I’d never trusted anyone to the point where I’d started to think maybe we could make it work forever. And to have to worry about it *now*, it’s just—no. *No*, thank you.

“I don’t think he’ll ask,” Carver says, though he winces.

“Let’s just not,” I say. “You’re freaking me out.”

“Sorry,” he says, actually sounding apologetic. “You could always just say ‘no’? He—”

“Carver, please,” I beg.

“Right.” He goes silent, then tries, “Want to try and save Sebastian from mother?”

I snort, “Does he need saving?” He might, now that I think about it. All night, Leandra’s sort of stuck close to him. I think it’s because he’s not exactly as close with the others, and she didn’t want him to feel excluded.

Carver shrugs, “Mother’s just worried considering—” He trails off and shrugs again.

I can’t help but ask for clarification, “Considering?”

He squints at me, “You don’t know?” Again, he glances around before lowering his voice to continue, “His family was murdered.”

All the thoughts in my head halt.

Carver frowns. “A while before my brother went into the Deep Roads, we took a job from the Chanter’s Board. Sebastian posted it. He wanted somebody to take out the mercenary group that had killed them.”

“Did you?” I find myself asking.

“Yes,” he says. There’s no inflection there, and it reminds me very much of the type of world I currently live in. He goes on, completely unaware of my discomfort, “He went back to Starkhaven
right after, to deal with ‘matters of succession’ or whatever they call it, but he came back to Kirkwall not long ago.”

I suppose that explains why he’s the outsider in the group; he hadn’t been around for as long.

“Said he’d found out who hired the Flint Company in the first place.”

“Oh.” It’s all I can manage for a while as it all processes.

Carver stares at me while I collect myself, his expression unfathomable.

“He wants justice,” Carver says, and it sounds as though he approves, at least a little. ‘Justice’ sparks some sort of something in me, but all that surfaces, of course, is Anders and Anders’ Justice. That’s not quite it though, that spark.

He scowls and adds, “My brother just thinks he’s running away from his responsibilities.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” I mutter. He grunts an affirmative. “Garrett probably doesn’t either, but you know how he is.” I don’t think Garrett has too much patience, or sympathy really, for nobility. ‘Real’ nobility anyway.

Carver snorts.

“Well,” I say, feeling a bit guilty for gossiping about Garrett. “Let’s go see if he needs saving then.”

---

He doesn’t, in fact, need saving. When we find him in the library, he’s speaking to Orana about the Chant of Light, and she seems enraptured. He seems in good spirits, too.

When Carver and I enter, he turns and asks, “Do you have a copy of the Chant?”

“Leandra does,” I answer, having spent such an overabundance of time browsing the library, “but I’m fairly she keeps it in her room.” Leandra sometimes read it in the library late at night, when she couldn’t sleep, but she always took it with her.

“Ah,” he says. He turns back to Orana, “I will bring you one then.”

Orana flushes, looking to the floor, “It’s alright.”

“It’s no trouble,” he reassures.

Orana looks to me, and I smile. Sebastian seems a little surprised that I do, and I can’t blame him. I’ve never expressed any positive feeling about religion, much less his. Still, I’ve never seen Orana look so interested in something, and it’s not my place to try and sway her either way.

In fact, it’s no one’s place but hers.

After a moment, she smiles back and says to Sebastian, “Thank you. I’d like that very much.” To me, she says, “I could use it? To practice reading?”

“Of course,” I say. I’m not excited about the prospect of reading it myself, but I suppose I should. I still don’t know how long I’ll be stuck here, and the Free Marches – from what I can tell – are a predominantly Andrastian society. I should know these things.

“Did you win?” Carver asks, after a silence falls over us. Orana blinks, confused. “You were playing with the others, that game Mana taught everyone. The violent,” he gives me a look, “one.”
“No,” Orana says, just as I’m opening my mouth to defend myself. “They’re still playing though.”

“Still?” he asks, raising a brow.

“As I understand it,” Sebastian says, amused, “it can go on indefinitely.”

“It can,” I say with a nod. “Or, well, until their hands get too sore.”

“Aveline slaps very hard,” Orana whispers, though there’s humor there.

We all chuckle and Carver says, “She does. Donnic bowed out after he lost all his cards the second time.”

“Sensible,” I say. Carver snorts, but I just continue on. “Especially with how many people they have playing.”

“You realize they’re just using the game as an excuse to hit each other, right?” Carver says.

Sebastian huffs out a little laugh, and I roll my eyes, “Unsurprising.”

“Has Messere Dumar left?” Sebastian asks, raising a brow.

Carver – for my sake – answers with a shake of his head, saying, “No. Saemus and the Viscount are both still here.”

He doesn’t ask any more about them, but I think he’s thinking about it. I wonder if it bothers him, knowing how much we’re lying to Saemus and, by extension, the Viscount and the nobles and everyone else really. I mean, it bothers me, so it’s likely it bothers the most upright member of Garrett’s gang.

Still, he doesn’t comment, and I’m grateful for it. My stomach is still queasy from the marriage conversation with Carver - and the conversation about Sebastian’s dead family.

It seems like I was right though. This world’s taken something, violently, from just about everyone.

That night, I dream of the murder.

Sebastian’s family – somehow unnumerable – are shapeless and faceless, fleeing across an endless, stone courtyard from their attackers. The attackers are not people though but wolves – or something shaped like wolves.

One by one, they take Sebastian’s family members. They snag a sleeve, a leg, an arm; they knock them down, all while the people screech and beg and cry. Quickly, the wolves’ teeth and maws become bloody. The sound of their gnawing and chewing makes me feel sick, even in my dream.

Then there’s a familiar cry, a battle cry, echoing off the stones and reverberating through me. And I know the wolves will die.

The arrows – bright and glowing – pierce the air. There’s one for each of the wolves, hitting one right after the other, and soon, the wolves are dead.

Chapter End Notes
Summerday (for young human adults anyway) is something like – at least in my mind - the Catholic rite of confirmation where you go through a ceremony to become an adult member of the church, but it’s also seems to just be a general holiday for joy (and marriage). As everyone here’s already an adult, they’re just celebrating (cause it’s Kirkwall so celebrate when you can, yeah?). Also, this is Kirkwall, so they’re not going to handle the holiday with anywhere near the same formality as, say, Orlais.
Anyway, Welcome Back to the Fade

Chapter Summary

In which Mana ventures into the Fade for a second time and surprise surprise weird things happen.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by Senei.

“I see how it is,” I tell Varric as I pass him the plate.

He’s super early for our jaunt into the Fade, and I know it has nothing – well maybe a little - to do with the Fade and everything to do with these pastries. Apparently, he’d already polished his share off last night.

“You’re only here for my pastries.”

“Not only,” he says, with a chuckle. He takes the plate in hand and slouches against the preparation table. “But I’ll admit, it’s a deciding factor.”

“Mhm,” I hum, unimpressed. I put a pot of water over the kitchen fire, so we can have some tea.

He bites into a pastry and moans.

I’d say it’s for show, but honestly, I think it might be a genuine reaction.

I try not to feel so happy about it, but well, he ate one of my pastries and moaned. That’s a pretty high compliment I think.

When he eats a second one, he does it again though, and I laugh and roll my eyes, convinced now it’s at least a little for show. “Varric, do I need to leave you two alone?”

“Maybe,” he mutters.

I roll my eyes.

“So,” he says, rubbing lightly around his mouth to get rid of any crumbs, “you’re not married.”

“Varric,” I hiss, and my face starts to get hot. When did this become my life?

“She said angrily to the dwarf,” he mutters, and now it’s no wonder why Garrett’s always so annoyed when he does that. Especially when he grins all cheeky while he says it. “Come on, Pebbles, it’s funny. Laugh.”

“It’s not funny,” I respond, as he reaches for another pastry, and I’m sure I sound exactly like one of
the Hawkes – or Warbrain.

“You’re right,” he agrees, much too quickly. He examines the pastry. “It’s tragic.” I’m scared to see where this line of commentary goes and sure enough: “The rest of us almost lost our chance with you, Pebbles.” He ruins what might have been a sweet comment by staring at the pastry.

“So tragic,” I agree, huffing out a laugh. “What if - Maker forbid - Saemus didn’t even like pastries?” I fan myself with a hand and pretend like I might faint from the horror of it all.

“Bite your tongue,” he says, scandalized. It doesn’t even sound like fake-scandalized this time either.

“Really, you all couldn’t have warned me that…was a thing he might do?”

“Well, it was mostly a rumor at first,” Varric says.

“At first,” I prompt, going to prepare the tea.

“I keep telling you, he was weird last night,” Varric says, dusting off his hands. “It was the way he was looking at you, and then,” he looks at me and raises an eyebrow, “he gave you that bracelet.”

I pass him a cup, and he stares at it with a frown. I don’t think Varric’s much of a tea person. Neither am I really but I’ve never really bothered to ask about the coffee, despite my initial desperation for it.

“I didn’t know you’d seen that.”

I realize, in hindsight, that doesn’t exactly help my case here.

He just snorts. “I didn’t. But somebody did and they tattled.”

“Clearly.” I wonder who it was that did see. Carver? Isabela? Aveline?

“Don’t be upset,” he says. “We were just…concerned.”


I mean, I know they care about me and vise versa, but in this case, I think it has more to do with them being a bunch of gossips honestly.

I should say it’s all ridiculous that they were even thinking it was a possibility, but before he’d left last night, Saemus had given me a bracelet. His mother’s bracelet to be exact.

And now I’m not at all sure where we stand. I thought we’d had an understanding - as in I one hundred percent believed that he and I were completely cool with our fake relationship – but I have a feeling I could be a little wrong about that. Maybe.

Really, I don’t think I understand much of anything that’s going on right now.

“What am I going to do?” I mutter.

“Say ‘no’ – if he does get it in his head to ask that is?” Varric tries. He makes it seem simple.

And I guess it is.

I mean, sure, someone’s out to kill me (maybe), but it doesn’t mean I have to marry anybody. Protection isn’t worth entering into an arrangement like that, I think. (I feel like there’s a fifty percent chance I’m wrong about that one.)
And anyway, Saemus’ protection’s a bit…ify at best. Really, it’s more likely he’ll be more useful—and that’s a bit of a mean way to think of him—in finding the foci, what with his connections and all.

I exhale, “You’re right.”

“Of course I am.”

I roll my eyes, and he grins.

And then we both take a sip of our tea and grimace.

Once again, I appear in the Fade alone.

And, of course, I’m not just alone in the Fade in some random room like last time with spinning chairs and floating items.

No, instead, I’m in the room. The one I dreamed of.

My—The journal’s even on the table, flipped open. There’s a familiar quill there and a familiar inkwell, and I know, before even going over to the table, that the words will be familiar too. Everything here is already feeling much more familiar than it did last time, and there’s a sense of rightness being here that’s very…uncomfortable.

“There are no gods,” I mutter.

Somehow, it’s like the air—the magic in the air more accurately—agrees. As ridiculous as that entire notion is.

And as ‘luck’ would have it, that’s exactly what’s written on the page the book’s opened to—that and a lot more.

I slump into the chair and read beyond the only phrase I’ve been able to remember. It reads very much like a manifesto, and as soon as I start to read, it feels more like remembering than reading something completely fresh.

It sort of goes without saying that it freaks me out a little. Or, you know, a lot. Still, I have to read it, to know.

‘There is only the subject and the object,’ it says, after the firm declaration that ‘there are no gods,’ and I find myself nodding despite myself.

‘The actor and the acted upon.’

I wince at the feeling of rightness I get reading this, the remembering, and I find myself wanting to reject it all out of spite.

I actually have to stop for a moment; the words start to blur and the room starts to spin and it has nothing to do with the makeup of the Fade and everything to do with just me.

Closing my eyes, I focus on breathing. I try not to think about whether or not that’s really necessary in the Fade. I try not to think about the words written on the page…in my handwriting.

It doesn’t work. There’s a pricking at the back of my neck that all but commands me to continue on reading.
‘Those with will to earn dominance over others—’ it begins. I feel – like I often do now – a little tug of feeling at that, as if I should know exactly who ‘those’ are, but no answer surfaces. ‘—gain title not by nature but by deed.’

The next sentence is incomplete, and it’s not difficult to understand why.

‘I am—’ it says, and after that, there’s three fat drops of black ink as if the writer wanted to continue but couldn’t.

As if I wanted to continue but couldn’t.

I want to deny that I wrote it, but even though this is the Fade, and I’m usually only here in my dreams, I know it’s still real. And it’s my handwriting.

But why, if it is me writing this, did I hesitate to finish the statement ‘I am’? Was my dream-Fade-self confused by the dual roles I’m playing in Kirkwall?

That seems…unlikely.

Once again, I’m thinking demon. The ‘pricking’ which almost seems sentient at this point rejects the idea, but that seems the sort of thing a demon might do, doesn’t it? To confuse its host?

But I’m thinking Earth demon, too. Like Satan-and-all-his-little-minions kind of demon, and Orana had already told me she didn’t think it was that, Thedas demons that is. I trust her judgment and everyone else’s, though I’m not sure how I feel about the alternative.

Whatever the alternative actually is.

‘Your brother betrayed you,’ Sandal had said to Orana...about me. And the information feels as correct now as it did when I’d first heard it.

That leaves me with, still, nothing.

I close the book and rub at my face.

I want to hide it because I don’t like how well it lends to Orana’s theory that I’m…something else entirely. Something beyond demon, something unknowable by ‘modern’ Thedas standards. But it might be the key to going home, and I need to go home.

(I ignore, with a vengeance, the line of thought that wonders if going home will even make the weirdness stop. It seems worse, somehow, to think of being stuck back home with this…entity or whatever in me.)

When I stand to go, I hesitate for only a moment before tucking the journal under my arm.

The room itself seems ordinary. There’s a bed, a wardrobe with delicate little carvings, the writing table I’d been sitting at and its accompanying chair, and two large, wooden chests that match the wardrobe – one by the door and one at the foot of the bed.

There’s nothing of interest in them, not for now anyway, and I know it.

I hate that I know it and practically run from the room.

When I close the door, I slam it, and it eases the tight feeling in my chest some.

We’d all agreed to meet in the room with the eluvian if we appeared in different locations, so after
taking a moment – a long, long moment - to collect myself, I head in that direction, trying to ignore that fact that, this time unlike the last, I know the way. Somehow.

“Oh, good,” Merrill says, as she catches up to me on the landing.

She’d argued fiercely to be included in the trip to the Fade when she’d arrived at the estate earlier, claiming Hawke could easily handle any trouble that arose outside the Fade, and I’d, having to argue with her face-to-face this time, caved. Probably three seconds into the argument, if it’s even worth calling it that. Isabela, when Garrett had complained about being abandoned, had agreed to stay behind to keep him company.

I must look a bit rough because she takes one good look at me and says, “Are you alright?”

I open my mouth with the reflexive *I'm fine* at the ready, but I quickly close it again. Then I take the book out from under my arm and pass it to her.

She flips through it and squints, “It’s in elvhen.”

Again, I open my mouth then close it, feeling all the breath and words leave me in a rush.

I try to picture the words in my head, but I can only *hear* them repeated in my own voice. When I picture the writing, I can picture all the details of the *process* of writing. How it feels to sit at in the chair at *that* table. How the quill feels between my fingers. The right way to dip the quill to get just the right amount of ink. The sound of the quill as it touches the paper.

But the words, I can’t picture them.

“Mana?” she wonders. “Where did you find this?”

“In…the room I appeared in,” I answer, after a moment of thought. My voice sounds strange to my ears. “Can you make out anything of what it says?”

“‘There are no gods,’” she tries, and I can’t look at her while she says that. I’m not sure why, but it feels like there’s an actual reason this time, beyond my usual awkwardness in the face of conversations that are even a tiny bit rough.

“The rest is *difficult*,” she murmurs, and I can hear her shifting the book in her hands, turning pages. “It’s the same thing over and over. Hm. I see ‘dominant’ here and I think this last part is something about ‘gaining…something by nature rather than deed.’”

“The other way,” I whisper. My stomach rolls at the way the phrase has been flipped, even accidentally, and it feels like someone’s pressed an old wound that’s never quite healed.

She makes a noise, prompting me to explain.

“Merrill, I can read it.” I still don’t open my eyes.

There’s a pause, a significant weighty one, before Merrill finally asks, sounding eager, “What does it say?”

The words, now, are at the tip of my tongue, and I tell her – with my eyes closed. I know from now on I’ll know them. I’ll never forget them again.

“I am what - or who rather?” she asks, when I’m finished. “Do you know?”
I have a sense of the answer but...I don’t even want to try and explain it, not yet. Finally, I open my eyes and say, “Let’s find the others first. It’s…” I make a vague hand motion, hoping she’ll let the matter drop.

Merrill hesitates, clearly wanting to pursue the matter, but nods, closing the book and tucking it under her arm. Then she climbs a step, and I stare at her, unable to move.

“Mana?” she asks. After a second, she cracks a smile and says, “Or rather, Feathers now, isn’t it?”


“Oh,” she says, looking to the book. “Here.” When she passes to me, the relief must be obvious because she smiles, a little crookedly and says, “Better?”

I nod and am finally able to move again.

I want to check the words, see if they really are in elvhen with my own eyes, but I resist the urge, trusting Merrill’s observation.

I just hold my journal tight and press on, to the eluvian.

Feynriel’s angry when we arrive, standing beside the table in the eluvian room which is now laden with so many books and papers there’s not an inch of tabletop to be seen.

Only he and the Keeper have made it to the eluvian out of everyone – and now myself and Merrill.

“The stories name Daern’tthal as a Forgotten One,” Keeper Marethari says with a sigh, eyeing us as we enter. It sounds as though she’s said so many, many times before.

The pricking starts up again.

“And there is a clan in Orlais that worships ‘him,’” Feynriel snips, eyes flickering to us as well. “But I’m telling you the writings suggest Daern’tthal is not a god at all. It’s…the city.”

He’s right, but I don’t say so. I just can’t bring myself to butt into their argument, and I’m tired of knowing things I shouldn’t and feeling compelled to share the knowledge that comes time and time again.

“There is too much here that we can’t translate,” the Keeper protests, and again, her eyes drift to us rather than Feynriel. I can’t help but wonder what she really thinks of me. I don’t think she’s got a favorable opinion of me at least, and it’s honestly a relief? For whatever reason? “And you’ve only just begun your training.”

“He’s to be her First,” Merrill says, lowly to me. There’s clear heartbreak in her voice, and I give her arm a little squeeze.

Feynriel huffs but offers no other argument.

“Mana can read elvhen,” Merrill announces, to my horror.

But the Keeper just stares at me, eyes narrowing little by little with each passing moment, before she says, “Is that so?” It’s a much more subdued reaction than I was expecting.

“Well, she found a journal written in elvhen,” Merrill explains, “and she can read it, so it seems to me that she must be able to.”
Feynriel must believe straight off because he lunges at the table, shoving aside a stack of papers to retrieve a leather-bound book. He flips through it with a pinched expression and then practically shoves it into my hands when he’s found what he was looking for.

I almost drop my journal, but Merrill catches it.

I feel an instant pang of anxiety to have it out of my hands, but Merrill immediately offers it back. “Why don’t you let the Keeper have a look,” I say, feeling tense even as I say it, and I open the book Feynriel’d given to me.

The words immediately make sense, but with a little hyper-focusing on the actual text, it’s clear it’s not actually in ‘English’ aka the common tongue. It’s elvhen, and it’s *ridiculous* how heartbreakingly familiar the sight is to me.

“Can you read it?” Feynriel asks.

“Yes,” I mutter, still focusing on the words. Even clearly focusing on the difference, the meaning is clear, as if the knowledge of the language is something I’ve had ingrained for forever.

It’s another journal, what he’s handed to me.

“‘I have come to Daern’tthal, the place of Memories,’” I translate, assuming that’s what Feynriel meant for me to confirm. He makes a triumph sort of noise, and I start to feel a little sick.

“We’ve been arguing for weeks,” he says.

“We may argue for weeks yet,” Keeper Marethari says, and when I look to her, she staring at me with the same intensity as before. She probably doesn’t believe that I can read it, and who can blame her for doubting?

“Has anyone seen the others?” I ask, instead of pursing the topic further. I close the book, and Feynriel opens his mouth, looking ready to shout at me.

He doesn’t. Instead, after his shock at me closing his book passes, he says, “Anders said there was something he wanted to show Fenris.” I frown at that because I can’t imagine that going well.

And also, what can he possibly have to show Fenris?

Feynriel winces, too.

“Prince Vael and Varric offered to go with them.” To keep them from killing each other, no doubt. “Hawke’s brother—” He pauses, trying to think of Carver’s name.

“Carver,” Merrill supplies, helpfully.

“Carver then,” he says, huffing a little, “went to look for you not long ago,” he finishes. “I told him to wait, that you’d find your way here, but he went anyway.”

I nod and then examine the book in my hands. The leather had been dyed green at some point, but the color has been distorted by time. Either that or the lighting of the Fade itself has distorted my perception of it. It looks a bit of a sickly color now. How fitting.

“While we’re waiting for them,” Feynriel says in a rush, “could you translate some of it? It’s—”

“There might be something in one of the libraries about the foci,” Merrill says, and *that* draws my attention. “If I’d known you could read elvhen, I’d have brought you here *ages* ago.”
Before hearing that, I’d have said I was a hundred and ten percent satisfied with my decision to stay away from the Fade, but now, I’m not sure at all.

“But this one’s clearly about somebody who was visiting the city,” Feynriel points out, “and there are catalogs of information all throughout it. It could maybe help you find the books on the foci. So let’s start with this one.” It’s like he doesn’t trust me not to vanish before I get the translation done which…that’s fair considering how keen I am to get home. Especially right now.

“You’ll have to check to make sure I’m not lapsing back into elvhen when I copy it,” I tell him, stepping over to the table.

I’m not sure how the language thing works for me. It’s an unconscious thing as far as I can tell, and copying, too, is sort of an unconscious sort of task. I feel like I’m likely to switch between the common tongue and elvhen.

Still, it’s clear how much he wants this done, and I can’t resist in the face of his desperate excitement. I’m weak against that, I’ve noticed. People being excited about learning.

“Of course,” he says, gathering an armload of papers and taking them to the table on the balcony, the one with the glowing green globe thing I’d activated on accident.

With those papers gone, there’s enough space for me to work, and I locate a clean sheet of parchment wedged in another book, and Merrill locates an inkwell for me. I set about writing, with her watching at my shoulder.

This, too, feels familiar.

It shouldn’t. Before, I’d have felt uncomfortable with someone watching me so closely while I worked, but I feel…exasperated instead. As if I’ve been in his position before with…students. Yes, that feels right somehow, even though I know I’m not thinking about my students back on Earth.

When Feynriel comes over, he comes to stares at our arrangement, clearly attempting to figure out where he might arrange himself so he can see what I’m writing. He could sit at the other side of the table, but it’d probably be way too difficult to read upside down.

“Why don’t you pull up a chair,” I say, “and sit next to me.”

“Alright,” he says eagerly, taking the chair on the opposite side of the table and dragging it to us.

It seems unfair to make Merrill stand so I say to her, “You could get one of the chairs from the balcony?” I vaguely remember one or two being out there.

“I’ll be alright standing, I think,” she says.

I hesitate but nod eventually and go back to the writing.

“Of course, you’re here,” Carver gripes, “and writing.” I dimly hear him, but I’ve been focusing on the words so long, on the soft murmur of conversation between Feynriel, Merrill, and occasionally even the Keeper that it’s difficult to focus on anything outside that.

“She’s translating,” Feynriel corrects.

“Translating what?” Carver asks. Before Feynriel can answer, Carver hastily says, “Nevermind. Tell the others when you see them. I’ve seen and heard enough as it is. Bloody Fade shit.”
“Was it the floating chairs or that creepy statue that did it for you?”

When I hear Varric’s voice, I close the journal. Feynriel gasps, and I’m sorry I did it so abruptly but I feel...floaty after reading the journal so long - which I take as a bad sign.

But at least I haven’t fallen asleep against my will like the last time.

“It’s this whole place,” Carver mutters. “All of it.”

Of course, I totally feel him, but I have a new respect for the Fade now considering it may be the key to getting me home. I mean, it always was, but I never knew I could read elvhen and actually utilize the key for myself.

“Where’s everyone else?” I ask, turning to them.

Varric snorts and starts to shake his head, “They’re where we left them over an hour ago and surprise: they’re still arguing.”

“Arguing? Did Anders take them to that building? The one with the painting—?” Feynriel asks, gesturing in a wide circle. Somehow, I understand what he means. I can picture it in my mind even. It’s my favorite place in the city.

I go cold at the thought. Because, wow, how can I have a favorite place in this city? Especially since it’s place I’ve never visited before. Fuck.

“Yes,” Carver says. “They’ve opened a door, somehow, and now Anders keeps going on about destroying the phy—”

“What?” I say, standing in a flash.

I realize I’ve shouted the question much too late, but I don’t exactly regret my strong reaction because he can’t do that. I don’t really know ‘what’ Anders means to destroy, but at the same time, I have this strange feeling, like I do.

I can picture it: a circular chamber with high ceilings filed to the brim with little dark vials. Little important vials.

Just the thought of him smashing them makes me feel sick all over again.

“Pebbles?” Varric asks.

“He can’t do that,” I repeat.

“No one’s letting him do anything,” Varric reassures, gently. I flinch under the weight of his stare. He looks…afraid? Worried? It doesn’t matter; I hate the expression on him, I hate this. “I told him not to touch anything, and Sebastian and Fenris will make sure he doesn’t.”

That eases some of the worry but not by much.

“I want to talk to him,” I find myself saying.

Carver and Varric share a look, clearly opposed to the idea of letting me go to Anders. I understand – in a vague sort of abstract way – that I’m acting very strangely, but any worry surrounding that comes secondary to the issue at hand.
I’m not exactly clear on what exactly the vials are, but I just know that he can’t destroy them. I know I have to go down there and check to make sure they’re still intact.

“I’ll take you,” Feynriel says.

“Kid,” Varric protests.

“If she says he can’t destroy something, he can’t destroy it,” Feynriel says. I’m grateful even though I know – logically – that he should not be agreeing with me right now. Really, Varric’s right to be so freaked out.

“We won’t touch anything,” Merrill says, smiling at Varric.

“Daisy, don’t look at me like that,” Varric complains. “Carver, tell her not to look at me like that.”

“Because that’ll work,” Carver mutters. He squints at Varric, “I thought the whole point of you being here was to keep her out of trouble?” He jerks his chin in my direction, and I find myself puffing up a little because I’m right here. But I’m too worried to keep it up. My heart’s racing, and I feel too antsy.

“There are three people looking at me with pleading eyes, Junior,” Varric says. He’s smart enough, at least, to exclude the Keeper from the group; I don’t think she’d appreciate being lumped into our lot. “I’m one strong, steadfast dwarf but even I’m not that strong.”

Carver snorts and crosses his arms. We continue staring at him, and he shifts his weight and uncrosses his arms, sighing. “You – none of you – get to touch anything,” he commands.

“Yes, Carver,” I say, dutifully.

“Don’t be smart,” he snaps.

“Yes, Carver,” Merrill adds.

Carver just grunts and steps aside so we can leave the room, and as we file past him out into the hall, he stares at us, his eyes narrowed.

Varric looks like he has a headache.

We find a group of unfamiliar people lingering outside ‘that’ building, as Feynriel called it, their eyes following us as we walk along.

It takes me a moment to figure out who they might be, but eventually, I realize it must be some of Anders’ mages, members of the mage underground. They’re staring, wide-eyed, probably impressed by Hawke’s friends.

“Still here,” Carver mutters.

“They want to talk to Mana,” Feynriel says.

“Me?” I ask, though my mind’s not fully focused on the conversation.

“Of course,” he replies, brow furrowing. I suppose he’s right. I’ve put off the Fade visit for so long, and it’s obvious that they’d want to speak to me as the ‘owner’ of the city – or whatever it is they think of me.
“She wouldn’t have to touch anything,” Merrill quips. “And they don’t mean any harm. They just want to meet her…mostly.”

*That’s reassuring.*

“Mostly?” Varric echoes, as if he’s plucked the thought right out of my head. “I’m scared to even ask what else they want with her, Daisy.”

“Nothing **bad**,” she reassures. “A little…weird perhaps but not bad.”

I feel a duty to them, somehow, but I don’t think I can handle any of the small talk that usually comes with introductions, at least not until I speak to Anders. Not until I check the chamber.

“I want to see Anders first,” I say.

“Maker’s Breath,” Carver breaths. “Why did I agree to come here?”

“Because you’re a good cousin?” I say, looking up at him with what I hope is a grateful expression. For a second, I’m able to focus all my attention on him and let go of the anxiety about the chamber.

After suffering a moment under my stare, he flushes.

“Nice try,” he says.

“I think she succeeded actually,” Varric says. Carver’s ears are going red now, and Varric looks at me with a slight smile on his face. I try to smile, but the anxiety’s already returned. “And that was strangely reassuring, somehow.”

“Shut it,” Carver snaps. He runs a hand through his hair, “Let’s just stop Anders from doing… whatever he’s about to do, *for Mana’s sake*, and hopefully it’ll be time to go.”

We enter into the building shortly after, into a round room with only one furnishing in it: an altar smack dab in the center of the room under a giant skylight. The only other interesting feature is the walls, where a colorful fresco’s been painted all the way around. It’s a meant to tell a story.

Directly across from the entrance, in line with the altar, is a door that…shouldn’t be open.

I approach without really thinking, not at all aware of where my companions are anymore, and very quickly, I hear the arguing coming from inside the room.

Anders stops speaking when I enter, and everyone else turns to face me.

I survey the room, taking in the all-too-familiar sight of vials, before my gaze settles on Anders. There’s a vial in his hand, and I instantly feel hot and cold all over. I feel like I’d die if he broke it.

“Put it back,” I tell him.

His brow furrows and *he doesn’t move.*

“Anders,” I say, stepping forward again. Behind me, I can hear the others muttering and hissing amongst themselves, but it sounds muted. It must be the blood pounding in my ears. “Put it back. Now.”

Reluctantly, he does, and I immediately feel less tense. But I know I’ll only feel a hundred percent comfortable when they’re all *out of this room.*
And still, even being in the room, I’m not exactly sure what it’s for and what the vials are, but I just know – deep down to my core – that this is important. So so so important.

“Do you know what these are?” he asks, looking a little angry and staring at me. I know he’s about to explain to me, and I don’t want to hear.

Instead of answering, I ask a question of my own. “How did you even get in here?”

Anders flinches and turns his angry, dark-rimmed eyes to Fenris, who looks very uncomfortable to be in the chamber at all.

He also looks perfectly right, standing there against the backdrop of dark vials. And unlike Anders, he’s standing at a respectful distance from the shelves.

“On the fresco,” Sebastian explains, when it seems no one else is willing to tackle the task, “there were some figures that looked like they had the same markings as Fenris. Anders was showing them to us.”

“I only passed the door,” Fenris says, defending himself.

“It must be the markings,” Sebastian says. “The paintings seem to suggest they’re the markings of some…ancient order of knights.” Fenris flushes when our eyes are drawn to him. “They flared up a little when he passed, and the door…responded.”

“Does that sound right?” Merrill asks me.

“Yes,” I say, without really thinking. Heads swivel to look at me, and I suppose the shock’s on account of how sure I sound. I hate it, how I can be so sure about things without really knowing. “Please, can we talk about this in the rotunda?” I don’t really know what else there is to talk about, considering I don’t have clear answers, but they can’t stay in here.

I don’t tell them I feel like they’re threats with the way they’re handling themselves in this room.

“The rotunda,” Carver mutters, scoffing at the word.

“We can’t just leave these,” Anders says, waving a hand with a determined look on his face. “These phylacteries—”

“Not yours,” I grit out. The word ‘phylacteries’ means nothing to me. “Dirthara-ma.”

“Pebbles,” Varric says with a grimace. “Shit, can this get any weirder?” I suppose it’s a good thing we didn’t mention that I can read elvhen – or that I’ve been copying out this strange manifesto-esque thing while I’ve been sleeping and dreaming or whatever.

“Please don’t say things like that,” Carver mutters.

“Shit,” Varric says by way of agreement.

“What is it you said?” the Keeper asks, eyes narrowed at me. I’d almost forgotten she’d come along with us.

I rub my hand along the side of my nose and take a deep breath. “I just meant…you shouldn’t act so rashly, Anders. You don’t understand.” I try to puzzle out the best way to translate it because the feeling behind the words is right there at the forefront of my mind but there’s no simple way to explain it. “Dirthara-ma,” I repeat. “May you learn.” It’s all in the inflection. It’s not exactly a kind
way to prompt someone to think about their actions.

Anders frowns and then there’s a sudden flash of recognition and he looks more thoughtful. At last, he nods. “I…trust you,” he says, eventually. “Let’s discuss this,” his eyes flicker to Fenris, “outside.”

I exhale and nod.

Slowly, they trickle out, and I can tell they’re waiting on me but I’m going out last. All my instincts demand it of me.

Fenris lingers, too. I’m alright, dare I even say comfortable, with his presence here.

“Is it the markings?” he asks, stepping towards me. He sounds like he might be angry about it, and there’s a war going on in my head.

Part of me, the Mana part, is still disgusted by the markings – or rather how they came to be on Fenris. And the other part, the mysterious unknowable (possibly demon) part, feels like it’s some kind of honor. And there’s a certain amount of joy that part feels about Fenris’ existence in general.

It makes no sense at all. Of course.

“Yes,” I answer. I rub at my nose again. “You are…trusted.” There’s formal words there, at the tip of my tongue, but I try to stick to the common tongue, for my sake and everyone else’s.

I don’t know why I keep resisting the weird at this point. It seems futile.

“Trusted.” He tastes the word.

“What does Anders think this place is?” I ask.

Fenris scowls, probably at the very mention of Anders’ name, but answers, “Templars can track mages through their blood. As I understand, the samples are held in a chamber much like this.”

“It’s just…blood?” I ask, nose wrinkling at the thought.

“Are these not the same?”

“No.” It feels very much like the old adage: comparing apples to oranges. Even though I can’t pinpoint what the apples – the vials on the wall – actually are, even now.

His brow furrows.

“Pebbles, you’re worrying everyone,” Varric calls from the rotunda.

“Coming,” I shout back, but I don’t move. I keep staring at Fenris, who’s thinking very hard about something.

Then again, what’s there not to think about?

“The knights,” he begins. “What were they called?” From the way he says it, I think he suspects he knows the answer.

It’s like the longer I stay in the Fade this go around, the easier the information comes. This answer’s right there, as if I’d known it forever, “The Emerald Knights.”

He shifts his weight and stares down at his arms, his hands, at the markings. He stares at them, as if
he no longer comprehends what he’s seeing, and then goes quiet.

“Andraste’s Tits, really worrying,” Carver shouts.

Fenris starts and takes a step towards the door, turns to me. I nod, and he goes right out. I follow close behind, only able to breathe normal again when I hear the chamber lock.

After I’ve introduced myself to Anders’ mages, a bit awkwardly, I can feel our time’s almost up. There’s just a feeling that comes with the ‘waking,’ just like Garrett said - and I don’t like to think about what it means that I can now feel the signs of that waking.

While we wait, most of us eagerly, I examine the fresco.

Fenris does, too, though he lingers around the portions with the knights. Sebastian seems to sympathize with the internal struggle he’s working through because he remains close to Fenris and mutters to him every now and then, smiling encouragingly.

Anders, the only other one willing to remain in the building, lingers near the altar.

For a while, it’s like Fenris, Sebastian, and I are planets orbiting the altar and Anders.

“You put the phylactery here,” Anders mutters, at last.

I tear my eyes away from a particularly beautiful depiction of a dragon and turn to him, tilting my head in question.

“The Warden-Commander,” he begins, smiling slightly, “told us a story once. She’d found a… phylactery in some elven ruins, and there was a ritual involving an altar. Ever since then, she could speak elvhen.”

“Elvhen ruins?” I ask.

He shrugs with a little wince, “It was during the Blight, she said, so they must have been in Ferelden somewhere. She wasn’t a big sharer, the Warden-Commander. Not when it came to words anyway.”

He reaches up and brushes his ear, winces, and drops his hand.

“Did she say anything else about them?” I ask.

“I asked if it was just language,” he says. “She didn’t answer, but I always thought there was more to it. She… might have talked to Velanna – she was a Dalish warden recruited around the same time as me – more about them.”

“Do you understand?” I ask, after he’s fallen silent again. It’s a funny question because I’m sure I don’t even understand. Fenris and Sebastian are watching.

He starts to nod but quickly starts to shake his head, brow furrowing. “They’re not phylacteries,” he guesses, and I nod to that. Apples to oranges and all that. “They’re— They’re the same as what she found, aren’t they?” It feels right, so I nod again. “But why are there so many here? And—” He stops.

I think he meant to ask what they really are, but for whatever reason, he stopped.

I’m glad he did because I don’t know.
“—grew jealous of the life,” Orana says, tapping each word on the page as she says them. “They could not feel, could not touch. In the blackest—” She pauses, mouthing the next word, figuring it out. “Envy?”

I lean closer, and she taps the word in question which is indeed ‘envy.’ I nod.

She starts the sentences over, “In blackest envy were the demons born.”

The hair on my arms stands up, but I ignore it, smile. “That was great, Orana,” I say, and she smiles, too, from ear to ear with her cheeks slowly turning pink.

“Thank you,” she says, leaning into my side just barely before she straightens up again and focuses her attention back on the book. “Can we try Exaltations 1? Prince Vael—” The pink splotches along her cheeks go a bit red. “Prince Vael said it was one of his favorites, and he told me I’d probably like it.”

“Sure,” I say, trying to match her enthusiasm for the task. There’s something about reading the Chant that makes me tired. It’s not that it’s boring. No, it’s just supremely unsettling for, as usual, no real reason at all.

Orana flips to Exaltations 1 and takes a deep breath. “Lady of—” She frowns at the next word, and after a few seconds, she tries it, “Per…pet…” Frowning, she trails off, “Perpet…ual.”

“Perpetual,” I say, and we repeat it back and forth until she gets the hang of the way it sounds.


I make a comical face if her chuckle’s any indication, and I mull the word over for a bit. I’m never completely sure that my definitions of the harder words are correct (I’d probably kill for a dictionary at this point), but in this case, I’m…fairly certain I can come up with a decent definition at least.

“Endless,” I offer. “Eternal?”

She nods, humming and considering, and goes on, “Lady of Perpetual Victory, your praises I sing. Gladly do I accept the gift…invaluable…invaluable—” When Orana repeats ‘invaluable’ once more, she taps it twice as though it irritates her. We’ve come across the word a few times in our reading, and as with lots of words with double vowels, it tends to give her some – though not that much now - pause. “Gladly do I accept the gift invaluable,” she says again, and it comes out smooth. “Of your glory. Let me be the vessel,” she stops, frowning.

I’m frowning too with goosebumps coming up all over my arms. It’s the word ‘vessel’ that I reject wholeheartedly, and while it’s certainly in some part some kind of Daern’thal-elvhen thing, it’s also a me thing. (I think.) Really, it’s not that different from anything I’ve heard before in church back
home, but somehow, it seems *more* eerie somehow.

Still, I don’t say anything. As always, I remind myself that this is for Orana, not me.

“Let me be the vessel,” she repeats, more quietly than before, “which bears the Light of your promise to the world ex—” She sighs and grinds her teeth a little, working her way through the word. “Ex… pec…ect…expectant.” She exhales and says it all again, sounding a bit *angry* about it, “Let me be the vessel which bears the Light of promise to the word…expectant.”

“That was wonderful,” I say, just as she starts to say, “’Expectant’ has something to do with ‘expecting,’ doesn’t it?”

“Right,” I say with a nod. “It’s the adjective form, I’m pretty sure. But whenever I’ve ever heard ‘expectant,’ it usually means that you’re excited for something that’s likely to happen. Ah,” I wince, not sure that made any sense. “It’s like the expression ‘waiting with bated breath’? You’re—”


“Me?” she squeaks, and after I nod, she bends her head and rereads the passage, mouthing it to herself.

We’d never really, in all the handful of times we’d read from the Chant, discussed what we thought it meant.

Finally, she says, “I’m not sure either. The Lady of Perpetual Victory is Andraste. I think. And it’s a prayer. Maybe? I’m sorry.” Her ears go pink, and she looks away, embarrassed.

“Orana, it’s okay,” I say, alarmed at the shame she’s suddenly radiating. “I don’t know what it means either, and I don’t think anybody really does the first time they read it, or when they read anything for that matter. I was just curious to know what you made of it.”

“Oh.” It’s all she says for a while, and she takes a few deep breaths that has me thinking she’s a stone’s throw away from crying.

“I don’t want to be a vessel,” Orana whispers, eventually. “It sounds—” She shudders, and I can only imagine what she’s thinking about.

“Completely understandable,” I whisper back, and I wish I could offer something else, something more substantial, but I can’t think of anything. I want to say I wholeheartedly agree, but it just doesn’t feel appropriate. It’d be too close to trying to steer her towards my beliefs.

“Is it okay if we stop for now?”

“Of course.”

She exhales, relieved, and after staring at the passage for a moment, closes her copy of the Chant. “What did the people of Daern’thal believe?” she wonders. “They came before Andraste, didn’t they?”

“Yes,” I say, with that familiar certainty.
I’m chewing on the matter of Daern’thal’s belief system when she leans her head against my
shoulder and squeezes the book in her hands. “Was it like Arlathan?”

“Somewhat,” I find myself saying, and because that doesn’t feel like enough, my oh-so-helpful brain
supplies me with more, “But Arlathan was founded by elves.”

There’s a great pause before Orana says, “Who founded Daern’thal?”

“I—” This time, I resist whatever knowledge it is that’s bubbling up in my head, and more than ever,
I want to be home. I’m so tired of this knowing thing. I’m so—

“Mana?”

I can’t breathe, and dimly, I can hear Orana speaking to me. She sounds scared, and I try hard to
breathe but it’s just not happening. It’s like my lungs have frozen solid, and after a while, I get caught
in the cycle of thinking one single thought: I want to go home.

After what feels like a hundred years, I’m finally calmed enough to say, “I’m sorry.” Orana, who’d
finally just taken to squeezing my hands, squeezes harder still and shakes her head. I feel compelled
to say it again, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry,” she says, and we stare at each other and burst into quiet laughter. When we’re done she
says, somber once again, “Are you alright?”

“No,” I say immediately, but I regret it as soon as I say it and try to do some damage control,
especially when I see the concerned pinch to her face. “I’ll be alright. It’s—it’s all just so much.”

“Is it—” Orana begins before quickly stopping herself and looking at me with a frown. I think she’s
worried I’ll have another panic attack, and I’m not certain that’s off the table at this point. Really, I’m
surprised I’m functioning at all anymore.

“It’s okay,” I say. “What were you going to ask?”

“It’s nothing.”

“I—okay. But you can ask if you want. I’ll try my hardest not to…freak out again.”

She looks alarmed, but after giving my hand a firm squeeze, she asks, “Are you scared?”

The question hits me hard, but I count and breath and count, working through the feeling. Then I
say, weakly, “Yeah.”

“Are you worried…about going home?” I’m a little surprised at how even the words are, but mostly,
I’m trying to keep a lid on all the, you know, soul-crushing despair inside of me.

“Yeah,” I say, again. It takes me a long while before I’m able to continue. “Aveline and Varric are
still looking for the foci, and there might be something in the library, the one in Daern’thal, that I
could be able to find but—” It’s frustrating. It’s weird. It’s scary, and worst of all, it feels futile.

I feel like I might spend my whole life here, combing through the books and waiting hopelessly for
Hawke’s friends to bring me news, any news at all. I feel like I’ve already lost everything. It’s been
so long, and all these things keep happening. What happens if I end up staying so long that all the
knowledge buried inside of me bubbles to the surface? What would be the point then? Going home
when I’m not even the same?
And the questions go on and on, unceasing day and night. I think of all the what-ifs all the time. I know I shouldn’t, but I do.

I take in a deep breath, exhale. “It’s just everything. This, Saemus, everything.” I feel stupid saying it.

“It’ll be alright,” Orana says, smiling weakly. I don’t think either of us believe that, but it’s a nice thought.

“Thanks, Orana.”

"Mana," Saemus says, placing his hand on my arm. I start, even though I watched him do it, and his frown becomes more pronounced. "Did you hear what I said?"

I smile, though it's more of a wince, "No, sorry."

Sighing, he regards me for a long moment before saying, with a touch of impatience, "The de Launcets invited us for dinner. Your cou—Carver said he’d be there, and I asked if you wished to go." His eyebrows climb as he speaks, and I wonder just how many times he’d asked before he finally had to reach out to grab my attention.

"Sure," I say, grimacing even as I say it. I just don’t know if I’m up for this kind of thing right now.

"Mana," Saemus says, and it sounds like a sigh this time. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I say, because it’s a reflex.

"Right," he says, disbelieving. He opens his mouth to say more, but Aveline re-enters her office, scowling, and he, thankfully, closes his mouth and focuses his attention on her. "Problem?"

Aveline sighs, "There was some unrest in Lowtown that needed some attention." Her eyes flicker almost imperceptibly to me, but she says nothing more about the matter and it doesn't seem like Saemus caught the subtle glance my way because he doesn’t ask any more questions.

"I see," he says. "Mana and I've finished going through those ship manifests." He gestures to the neat stacks we’ve left on her desk for her to review.

This time, she sighs with relief, "Good. Thank you."

Saemus nods, and he lets go of me. I'd almost forgotten his hand was on me in the first place. "We'll be taking our leave then," he says, and Aveline nods, waving us off.

We - Saemus and I - gather our things and prepare to go, but just as Saemus reaches for the door handle, Aveline stops us or rather, me.

"Mana, could I speak to you for a moment?" I nod, and of course, Saemus hovers, waiting and listening. "Alone, messere," she says to Saemus, and he stares at her with an unreadable expression before exiting.

Aveline waits a few minutes, probably for Saemus to clear away from the door, before she says to me, "You need to be more careful." I straighten my back but resist the urge to scowl, but before I can get out any sort of response, she adds, "'Daern'thal.' There's talk of it all throughout the undercity, and there are people – including templars - asking all sorts of questions."

I wince, and the anger bleeds out of me. My temper’s all over the place nowadays, and I know it’s because I’m in the process of having a breakdown.
"What sort of questions?" I find myself asking, absently.

"The kind," she begins with a huff, "that gets everybody turning their heads, looking for Hawke."

I open my mouth but no sound comes out, and eventually, I just grimace and close it again. I hadn't meant to make trouble for Hawke, but then again, I hadn't meant for any of this. Period. It’s not fair. I almost say it out loud, but I manage to refrain from making such an embarrassing statement. Thank God.

"I know you want answers," she says, "but be careful."

"I will," I say, though it sounds a bit hollow. I doubt being careful’s going to get me home, and I really really really need to go home.

Aveline snorts and reaches for a paper on the top of the nearest stack. She does this without breaking eye contact, and her eyebrows start to climb up her forehead.

"Is there something else?" I ask, trying to keep any of the annoyance from showing. I’m not sure what I’m annoyed with or why, but I’m annoyed. And tired. And just done with everything to do with Kirkwall.

Her eyebrows rise a little higher, and she gives me a look. I flinch. She sighs in response. "Hawke mentioned that you were planning on making regular trips to the Fade," she says, unimpressed with the idea.

I know at the volume we’re speaking that no one outside the office can hear what we’re saying, but still, I glance at the door, feeling a bit paranoid. Then I say, "Yes. I have to."

"You have to?"

I hate that I feel like a child getting chastised, especially when I do have to. "I’m the only one who can really read any of the books," I point out, trying and failing to keep my voice even. I throw the bulk of my hair over my shoulder and, despite myself, start pacing a little.

"Mana," she says, firmly.

"Aveline," I cut in. "I have to go. Saemus is waiting for me." Without realizing, I’ve started to turn the bracelet around my wrist. I stop pacing, too, and instead, close my eyes for a second and take a deep breath. "I’m sorry. I don’t—"

She stares at me for a long time, what feels like forever, and it’s so awkward I want to melt into the floor and cease to exist.

Instead, I say again, "I’m sorry. I am, but I need to go home."

Sighing, she drops a heavy hand onto the paper she’d been holding up. "I hope you find something," she says, and she stops. I know she wants to go on, and I can hear the ‘but’ there clear as anything.

But she doesn’t go on, and I say, "Thank you." And I leave before we can argue about the matter further.

“Alright,” Carver says, on the way back to the estate after dinner. “Out with it.”

“Out with what?” I ask, staring ahead. I resist the urge to shout the question, or better yet, just plain scream. Screaming sounds like a sound and reasonable response to everything.
Carver grunts and scowls, all displeased. “You frowned all night,” he says, “and you’re—” He gestures vaguely around my person like it’s a satisfactory answer before inhaling mightily and exhaling and rolling his eyes. “Is this about the...?”

We both know what he means, and again, I find myself irritated.

“Yes,” I say, blandly. What else would it be about, if not the Fade?

“Did you,” he pauses, probably thinking for the precise way to put it, “remember something?”

“No,” I say, though it’s not technically true. In talking with Orana, I’d said a little about the founding of Arlathan and—nope. Not going there. “Can we please talk about this when we get back to the estate?”

“Are you actually going to talk with us about it, or are you going to go to your room and mope all night?”

At that, I feel the tell-tale signs that I’m about to start crying, and I hate it and it’s so not happening so I purse my lip and keep walking.

“Shit,” Carver says, sounding somewhat apologetic, and he grabs my arms and stops me. It makes the whole feeling worse, and I don’t look at him. I know I’m about to cry, and there’s just nothing to do about it.

I can’t say anything, not without getting the whole crying thing going, so I wait for him to say more. He doesn’t. Instead, he sighs and lets me go. “Let’s just…get home,” he says.

Carver restarts the conversation almost as soon as we close the door, right in the foyer. “Alright,” he says, “what’s going on with you?”

There are entirely too many sarcastic answers on the tip of my tongue, and it takes me too long to come up with a legitimate answer. “I’ve been here for months,” I say.

“Yeah,” he agrees, brow furrowing. “And you want to go home. I got that.”

Really, I don’t know how to explain what’s wrong with me. It’s not a simple thing. It’s not even something I’m sure about myself. I just feel bad about this whole thing. I hate it. I hate myself for being so wound up about it. I always am wound up about it, but I’ve finally reached a boiling point and I can’t hide the distress anymore.

“Look, I’m sorry I’ve been grouchy,” I say. “I’ll try not to be so—” I wave around my head like he’d done “—next time I’m around the nobles—”

“I don’t give a shit about that,” he says, sounding a little pissed.

“Then what do you give a shit about?” I snap, without thinking, and I flush, embarrassed. “I’m sor—”

“Shut up,” he says, and he actually sounds a little pleased about it, just a little. “Is this about the Fade shit?”

I can’t help but squint at him, and I know I’m getting redder and redder by the minute. I’m embarrassed that I’m so upset and my heart’s racing the longer we talk about this, but my adrenaline’s going and I can’t help myself from saying all the things I’ve been bottling up these last
“Right,” he says, unsurprised. “Well, what do you want to do about it?”

“I have to search the library for an answer,” I say for what feels like the millionth time.

“Alright,” he says. “You search the library. Varric looks for your foci. Good plan.” I can’t tell if he’s being sarcastic or not. “Good plan…but you’re moping?”

“I’m not moping,” I grit out.

“You are,” he says, crossing his arms and glaring at me.

“I’m not.”

He opens his mouth, no doubt to continue the cycle, but then just shakes his head. “Maker,” he says instead. “What are you upset about? Merrill said the library was a good bet – a better one than you lot’ve had in the months you’ve been here – and you’re acting like we’ve told you to give up on it. Like it’s all over for you.”

I run a hand over my face, taking in shuddered breaths. My heart’s still pounding, but it feels louder now. “You haven’t mentioned—” I can’t even bring myself to say it anymore.

Carver sighs, “The weird shit? Yeah, I figured.” He uncrosses his arms. “Look, when I met you, you were saying weird shit, and I’ll admit, the things you said in the Fade were weird, but it wasn’t really anything new.” Taking in a deep breath, he crosses his arms again and says again, more firmly, “So what about it scares you so much all of a sudden?”

“All of a sudden?” I mutter. “I’ve been like this the whole fucking time! And all this—” another vague wave around my person—“just keeps getting worse and worse. You all keep saying I’m not possessed, but what is it then? What the hell is going on? What—?” I choke and stop talking, covering my mouth and focusing on just breathing.

“What if what?” he asks, frustrated.

I’m crying, and I shrug, struggling to regain control of my voice. Eventually, I shake my head and manage to speak again, after another shrug, “What if I start changing, really changing. It’s all benign for now, but what if I start—” I shrug, unable to really put my thoughts to words. Then, “And what if I do go home, and this doesn’t stop? What if whatever this is…takes control of me? What if—?”

“Mana,” he says, and it sounds a little bit like ‘shut up’ to me. “I smited you. Samson smited you. There’s no demon.” It’s a little comforting to have it reiterated, but not that much.

“Then what is it?”

He runs a hand through his hair, “I don’t know.”

“That’s it,” I say, sounding a bit triumphant even though I feel so tired. “It’s always more questions and more and more and more.” I only stop because I run out of breath.

There’s silence for a while, and strangely, I do feel better about the whole thing. I don’t feel great about it or anything or even good, but it feels tolerable again. Barely.

“Oh,” Carver says, finally, and then he’s alarmed, “Is it getting worse? The—” He waves in what’s now becoming the universal hand motion for Mana’s Problem.
“Not yet.”

“Not yet,” he repeats, and he narrows his eyes. “I—well, what do you want to do about it then?”

I can’t help it. I throw up my hands, frustrated with the round-a-bout conversation, and I find myself practically shouting, “I want to stop it.”

His frown deepens, and I can’t tell if it’s because I’m shouting and near hysterical now or because the answer didn’t make sense. I get stuck on that last bit for a while myself, and I start to question the answer I’ve just given.

“Mana,” he says, and I patiently wait for him to go on. He doesn’t but instead steps closer and opens his arms up for a…hug? I think. His face starts to turn pink, and he grunts once before I go and get my hug. Which, though awkward as hell, is nice, too.

Leandra finds us like that when she comes into the foyer, frowning something awful and looking between us like we’ve gotten caught in the middle of doing something extra bad.

“I heard shouting,” she says.

Carver grunts and shrugs but, thankfully, doesn’t point any fingers my way. Instead, he just releases me.

“It’s nothing,” I say, even though it’s weak, and really, I suppose it is nothing. I’ve thought myself into a corner again and started to freak out about nothing. Nothing new anyway.

Everything’s pretty much as strange as it was before that second trip into the Fade. Not that much has changed.

“Oh, really?” Leandra says, looking between us and crossing her arms in the exact same way that Carver does, cocking out her hip and everything.

“Yes really, mother,” Carver says, rolling his eyes, and he nudges me to get moving out of the foyer.

I go, if only to escape further questioning.

“What are you looking for?” Feynriel asks, as I flip through a stack of papers I’ve already been through several times before.

“My—” I pause, briefly and stare at a spot on the wall. Then I continue, “The journal I had before. I can’t find it.”

“The one about Daern’tahl?”

“No,” I say, starting on the stack of haphazardly stacked books on the table. It’s a stupid, pointless exercise. I can tell just by glancing at them that they’re not it. “The one I brought up here. Plain leather—”

“I thought you took it with you,” Feynriel says.

“Nope,” I say, throwing myself into one of the chairs and pressing the heels of my hands into my eyes. I feel like an overheated computer, ready to shut off to recover and, maybe in a hundred years, reboot. I’m a mess. And I’m so tired of all this.

“Mana,” Feynriel says, approaching slowly, “are you alright?”
I take a very deep breath. And another. Then I remove my hands from my eyes and offer him a weak smile and lie (and don’t we both know it), “Yes.”

He stares for a moment, frowning, before he returns to the matter of the missing journal, “Have you asked Merrill about it?”

“She told me she hadn’t removed it from up here,” I say, gesturing to the top of the table. I suck in a deep breath and stand, a bit abruptly if Feynriel’s startled jump is any indication. “Fuck it.”

He makes a little confused noise, and I rifle through the papers one more time, collecting as many blank or nearly-blank sheets as I can. “Do you mind if I borrow—” I frown. “I mean have these?”

“No?”

“Thanks,” I say, and I briefly wonder where the blank paper is stored in this place. And what happens if we run out in the process of cataloging the library? Look at me, asking the real questions at long last. I snort, and Feynriel makes another noise.

He looks more than a bit concerned about me and, no doubt, my mental health. (Prognosis is very grim, I’m afraid, Feynriel. Very grim indeed.)

“Are you—” He stops, reconsiders, then tries again, “What are you doing?”

“I’m making a list of all the books in the library.” I shuffle the papers in my hand, glancing between them and Feynriel. “I figure having a list of the translated titles will make it easier to research.”

I’d planned to put the list in my journal. It seemed safer that way for whatever reason, but of course, the damn thing was missing. And of course, I’m freaking out about it. I’m freaking out about everything now because nothing is going right and nothing make sense.

“Oh,” he says, and his shoulders relax. I’m sure he’s going to ask to help (because he loves book), but instead, he says, “Have you asked the Keeper?”

“About making a list of the books in the library?”

Sighing, he shakes his head, “No. The journal.”

Though she was the only other person to ask, I don’t want to. She’s a bit…intimidating, and I don’t know if I can deal with the stress of approaching her about his, especially at the moment.

But on the other hand, I feel uncomfortable and unhinged (well moreso anyway) without the journal. I want it, and I want to be able to write my list in it. It’s such a little thing, but I think I’d feel at least fifty percent better about my life if I just had the journal back in my possession.

Where it belongs.

“I can ask her if you want,” he adds.

“Oh,” I say, blinking, and then I smile, relief rushing through me. “Could you? That’d be amazing.” And I realize I sound…ridiculous, all breathless and adoring, but I do sort of feel that way. And oh look, he’s nodding. It’s a Christmas fucking miracle, and sure, I’m a terrible person for foisting it off on him but I’m still going to run with it. “Thank you.”

“She’s not here now,” he says, face turning a bit pink, “but I’ll ask her later.”

“Thank you,” I say again.
"I can get more—" Feynriel says, once we’ve run out of parchment, but I shake my head. I’m thoroughly discouraged with the whole thing, though I know we’ve barely made a dent in the task of cataloging the library.

“No, that’s enough for today,” I say, and I’m very disappointed that I don’t feel the usual pull that comes with waking. But really, I shouldn’t be surprised. I don’t think we’ve been working very long on the library (even though time is apparently meaningless here in the Fade), so the spell or whatever Hawke used to put me in the Fade isn’t anywhere near breaking.

“Alright,” Feynriel says, slowly, and I stand. Together, we reshelved the books we’ve already gone through, and I, after a moment of hesitation, shove the catalog between the section we’ve finished and the next section to be cataloged. Hopefully, it doesn’t go missing like my journal.

With my luck, I’m not really that hopeful, but I think I’m being clever about it. If it does go missing, it must mean someone’s moving things on me on purpose.

Maybe. I have to admit, there’s some margin of…whatever with this being the Fade.

“Mana, are you alright?” Feynriel asks.

It’s terrible that my first immediate thought is that I really need my journal back so that I can start tallying the number of times I’ve been asked that question. Then, of course, I feel bad. I’m being an idiot, so it’s no wonder everyone keeps asking. But even so, I feel smothered by all the concern, and irritated.

But this is Feynriel, who’s never done a single thing wrong by me, so I say, “I’ll be alright.”

“Oh which means you’re not,” he says before wincing and looking away. His ears start to go a bit red at the tips.

“I’m not,” I agree, feeling tired and, worse, pathetic. I wish I could bounce back from things, but as always, I’m making a visit to the land of self-pity and despair and freaking out and ruining everyone’s good time. “But I’ll get over it.”

“Get over what?” He turns back, confusion written all over his face.

I feel even more tired, faced with task of having to explain everything all over again, and in the end, settle for a simple, “Don’t worry about it. I’m just…processing everything.”

“I—alright. Sure.” He scowls, and I keep grimacing until I can’t take it any longer.

“Thank you for helping me with this,” I say, nodding towards the shelves.

“I like it,” he says, shrugging and glancing up at all the books on the shelves. “Before yo—” His whole face goes pink, and he coughs “—Daern’thal, I meant. Before Daern’thal, I’d never seen so many books, and I don’t have to worry about demons for once in my life and—I like it. I wish this place was—” He gestures towards the door before, makes a wavy motion, before finally saying, “You know? I wish it was real.”

I nod, only because I wish it was ‘real’ too if only so I didn’t have to go through the complicated process of getting here every time, but I do actually feel a little peace about it, the city. Feynriel looks so pleased with it. It’s hard not to feel at least a little happy for him.

“How often do you come here?”
“Ah,” he says, looking sheepish, “well.”

I snort, feeling a bit more like myself for once.

“The Keeper doesn’t mind,” he says, shrugging. “It’s part of my training as her First, and because I don’t have to worry about demons, it’s been easier to practice magic.”

“Oh, really?” I find that I’m curious despite myself.

“Yeah,” he says. “My connection to the Fade’s…better now, and it makes casting easier. The Keeper noticed it, too.” Feynriel stares at me unblinking for a moment before hesitantly asking, “Is it —”

“I’m not sure,” I say, before he can ask anything that might trigger any sort of remembering. Then I try to move the conversation away from me, “What else do you do as the First?”

“Get lectured,” he mumbles, looking embarrassed. He clears his throat a little and goes on, “Mostly, I practice magic and help the rest of the clan with whatever I can. I listen to Paivel’s stories.” His face takes on this boyish quality, and he says, “He knew the Hero of Ferelden, and he talks about her sometimes.” Again, the conversation turns to me, though it doesn’t bother me so much this time, “Anders said he was trying to get a letter to her…for you?”

“Yes,” I say, nodding. “Since she might—” I try to figure out the precise way to word it “—be like me.”

He nods, looking delighted about it. I don’t know if it’s because of the city or because of the Hero of Ferelden. “Do you think she remembers this place?” he wonders, glancing about the room. “Or—you know what I mean.”

I sigh, and he deflates in an instant. I hate it, that I did that. What’s wrong with me? Still, I can’t even come up with some token comment to soften the blow I’ve dealt him. I just can’t. “I’m sorry,” I say, eventually.

Feynriel frowns. “I—” he stops, closes his mouth. After a while, he tries again, “My mother hates this place, too.” He grimaces even as he says it and as soon as he’s said it, he quickly goes to add, “She’s glad of it, because it saved me from—it saved my life, but she thinks—she’s scared of it. She’s heard things, and she thinks—” He shrugs, and I frown. The comparison is…weird and slightly uncomfortable to bear.

“I don’t hate this place,” I try, after a while.

“Really?” he says, disbelieving.

“I don’t,” I say again, and I find myself getting irritated again. “It’s what this place has done to me that I…hate.” I sigh again and rub at my face. “I don’t really hate that either. I just—I’m the wrong person for this.”

“What?”

“Feynriel,” I say, firmly. “I’m a disaster. Always have been, at least for as long as I can remember. I’m the most ill-suited person for this—” I wave carelessly in the air around me.

“I don’t think so,” he says, with his voice all small and pained. “You helped me.”

“I don’t think it was me who helped you,” I point out. I still don’t remember letting him into the city.
I don’t remember any of the times I’ve slipped into the Fade while sleeping, even now.

“You translated that passage for me,” he counters, and I can’t help but smile. He’s trying so hard. To what? Make me feel better about myself? The city? It’s nice even though I don’t really get it. “And it helped me prove to the Keeper that the city’s Daern’thal.”

“That’s not much at all.”

“It is,” he says.

It’s a stupid argument we’re having, but even realizing that, I can’t stop myself feeling this way. But I don’t protest anymore, mostly because I can’t. My voice seems to have vanished, probably to save me from embarrassing myself further by arguing more with Feynriel.

Feynriel looks done with the argument as well, or rather, so frustrated with me that he looks about ready to walk away. I don’t blame him.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and not sure exactly what I’m apologizing for anymore.

Chapter End Notes

The quote at the beginning is from the Chant of Light, Erudition 2 (Canticle of Erudition) and Exaltations 1 (Canticle of Exaltations), both quoted as they appear on the wiki.

Also, I’m terrible about answering Ao3 comments (mostly because ya’ll are so nice and it makes me all warm and fuzzy, so much so that I get flustered about responding), but if you have dire questions or comments you REALLY want answered, hit me up on tumblr: ecarius.tumblr.com.
“Question,” I say, passing back Varric’s newest chapter of *Hard in Hightown*. Garrett frowns, probably wondering why the question’s being directed at him rather than Varric, but I quickly move to pose my question. “According to Varric – who is apparently an expert in the realm of Kirkwall real estate—”

“Of course,” Varric interrupts, grinning.

I pause, just so I can roll my eyes at him, but Garrett takes the opportunity to cut in, too. “I’m scared of any statement that starts with ‘According to Varric,’” he says.

(Which, alright, fair enough.)

“Anyway,” I say, glaring at the both of them. They’re two rotten, fucking peas in a pod, and I’ve almost forgotten what I was going to say. “Does the estate have a hidden entrance? Or is that something Varric made up?”

“Hidden entrance,” Garrett repeats, grinning and grinning, and I wonder why I’d bothered. Varric, to give him a little credit, does look a tiny bit sympathetic.

“Yes, Pebbles,” Varric says, after it’s clear Garrett going to chortle to himself indefinitely. “There’s a”—he grins widely—“hidden entrance to Hawke’s estate.” He nudges Hawke with his elbow, and Garrett tries – key word ‘tries’ – to sober up. “The real question here, I think, is why do you want to know?”

“I was just curious,” I say, though that’s not really the truth of it. At all. Of course.

Varric levels me with a knowing look.

“Mana,” Garrett says, adopting that scandalized tone of his, “are you planning…mischief?”

“No,” I say, flatly.

He slaps a hand across his chest and fakes a cry, “She’s crushed my dreams, Varric.”

“Watch it,” Varric warns, “or it might be more than your dreams she crushes next time.”

Garrett grimaces for real and straightens back up, with that awful little glint in his eye, “At least let me—”

“Ugh, stop,” I say, waving him off. It’s hard to listen to any sexual innuendo because he’s feeling more and more like my actual cousin these days.

He pouts, and Varric stifles a laugh. Before, I’d have laughed. That’s what I’m thinking, and it’s
stupid and depressing, but I’m thinking it. Because I’m not laughing. But I’m also not annoyed for the moment, which is a bit surprising. Mostly, I just feel…dead about it and everything.

I try to smile though, to keep them from asking my favorite question: “Are you alright?”

“Well, if you’re looking into the secret entrance—” Garrett whittles.

“It’s not really a secret—”

“Varric,” Garrett whines.

Varric just laughs.

“Fine, if you’re looking for the not-so-secret secret entrance to the house, you must be thinking of doing some sneaking, and I’m more than a bit, hm, curious should I say?” Varric snorts when Garrett looks to him as though seeking some kind of confirmation. “Why would my dear, sweet, inno—”

“Oh, shut up,” I grumble.

“Yes, Carver,” Garrett says, with a snort and a roll of his eyes. “Come on. Tell me!”

“I’m not planning anything,” I say, and it’s true. It’s just that as soon as I knew such an entrance existed, it seemed important – imperative even – to know where it is. It’s just a feeling, as much as I hate to admit. “I really was just curious about it.” I shrug with a grimace. “Blame Varric. His manuscript got me thinking about it.”

Garrett rounds on Varric, hands on his hips, and Varric holds up his hands in mock surrender. It doesn’t last very long, of course, considering this is Garrett and Varric I’m talking about.

“Come on,” Garrett repeats, and he proceeds to throw himself in my lap and hug me round the neck. I, to my embarrassment, let out a shriek. Which is more than understandable considering Garrett’s heavy and, worse, sharp.

“Ow!” I complain, shoving at him helplessly. I’m fairly sure a significant portion of the people he’s gone against died just by throwing themselves on the pointer bits of his armor. “Off! What the fuck, Garrett?”

He nuzzles my hair and whines, “Mana, tell me.”

“Are you drunk?” With a bit of maneuvering, I manage to turn my head to look at Varric, and I sound super out of my depth and borderline hysterical when I ask Varric, “Is he drunk?”

“Nope,” Varric says, chuckling. “That’s just Hawke.”

“Helpful,” I sneer at him, and I give Hawke another shove.

“What?” he says, squeezing tighter. “Carver gets a hug but not me?”

I go still, and there it is. That familiar old feeling of irritation which has become something of a best friend to me lately. Because this is a sibling rivalry thing, and it’s ridiculous, and more importantly, I don’t want to deal with this right now.

“Maybe if you’d asked,” I grit out.

“Did Carver ask?” he complains, in a babyish voice.
“No,” I say, grimacing, “but he didn’t jump on me either.”

He sighs and says, “Ah, you’re mad.”

Varric mutters something that might be “No shit” or “Oh shit.” I can’t really tell, and I’m too busy being pissed at Garrett for not respecting my personal space.

“Why are you mad?” Garrett asks, sounding remarkably adult all of a sudden. “I mean, I know why you’re mad, but you’re mad.”

Sighing, I refrain from spitting out the first answer on my mind because I know it’s not fair to pin all the blame on Garrett because this really isn’t about him at all. But thankfully, he takes my silence as a cue to get off of me, and he goes to stand awkwardly beside Varric, watching me with a hurt little boy sort of expression on his face. I chew on my answer even more.

“It’s not about you,” I say, eventually. He snorts, and I add, “Not really.” I shrug and start turning the bracelet around my wrist, the one Saemus had given me for Summerday. “I’m just working through things, and I’m…touchy as a result, alright?”

“Ah,” he says, and he doesn’t get it. I can tell. “This is about the Fade thing?”

Varric sighs and starts to rub at his forehead as though the very mention of the Fade’s given him a headache.

“Probably,” I say, shrugging again. “I just need space, and time.”

“No offense,” Garrett says, “but the last time we gave you time and space you—” He stops and makes a sour face, and I grimace, thinking of that first breakdown I’d had in Kirkwall.

I mean, he’s right, but it doesn’t make me any less annoyed.

“I know,” I say, and it pains me – almost physically – to say it. “But I promise I won’t sit in my room moping this time.”

After a bit, he says, “So you’ll…sit outside your room moping instead?”

Varric drops his hand over his eyes, as if he’s scared to watch.

“What?” I snap, despite myself.

Garrett stares at me for a moment before shrugging carelessly, “Yeah?”

He’s right. I suppose that’s why it hurts so much to hear it, but I don’t know what to do. I can’t not feel like this, like I’m drowning and dying everyday I’m stuck here. It’s overdramatic. It’s terrible. And I don’t know how to stop it. To stop me.

“Hawke,” Varric mutters, lifting his hands off his eyes and giving Garrett some kind of significant look.

“What?” he says, crossing his arms. Then he turns to me, “It’s not any different than it was before.”

“I don’t know how to stop it,” I say. “It’s just how I feel.”

“Okay,” Garrett says, not unkindly.

“We’re doing all that we can,” Varric points out, not unkindly either.
“I know,” I say, and I hate how sharp it comes out. I repeat it, more calmly, “I know that. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I understand that but”—Garrett glances at Varric before continuing—“what does this have to do with me, well, smothering you? You let Carver hug you, and you didn’t get mad, did you? Mother’d have said.” He’s pouting a bit, and I think he’s trying to lighten the mood. Maybe.

“You’re treating it like a competition,” I find myself saying even though I know I should just shrug it off and get him to drop the whole matter. This isn’t a big deal. In fact, it’s nothing really, just me being nitpicky and irritable. “You’re always like that with Carver, and I’m just…not up for it right now.”

Garrett frowns, really frowns, and I regret it all. I’m going to cry if this keeps up, and I refuse.

Varric looks so uncomfortable with the growing tension in the room.

“I’m sorry,” Garrett says, after a while. “It’s—well.” He huffs and shakes his head. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be too sorry,” I say. “I told you. It’s not really you that I have a problem with. I’m irritable, and I’m being a bad guest, and—” I stop before I can ramble on.

“You’re not a bad guest,” Garrett protests, with a small smile, and when I smile back, his gets where it’s almost normal again. “You wash dishes and everything, which is more than I can say for some people.” He gestures to himself.

I can’t help but laugh at that.

“What happens if it doesn’t work out?” I find myself asking almost as soon as the laughter’s done.

“Mana,” Garrett says. “It’ll work out.”

I can’t stop myself from thinking, No, it won’t.

Garrett comes into the office after a jaunting knock and curt permission from Aveline, asking, “Have any of you see Fenris?”

“I haven’t,” Aveline says, not pleased. It might be that it’s Garrett, or it might be because he’s interrupted Archive time, or it might be some combination of the two. (The last seems most likely.) Saemus briefly shakes his head.

“He’s with Carver,” I say, surprised I’m the one with the answers.

“With Carver?” Garrett mutters, confused. “What for? Are they drinking?” He grins, delighted at the idea he’s conjured up out of thin air. “At this hour?” I open my mouth to respond, but he chatters on, “Oh, or are they playing Ratscrew? Or both maybe? Are they betting? Is—”

“Hawke,” Aveline warns.

He puts his hands up in surrender, still smiling, and Saemus snorts and returns his attention to his paperwork, apparently deeming the conversation none of his concern. Though I don’t think, by a long shot, that he’s stopped listening.

“They’ve gone down to the Bone Pits,” I say, slowly. I’m a bit surprised he doesn’t know this. “To inspect the mines?”
Garrett makes an ungodly face, “You’re telling me they willingly went to the Bone Pits?” He laughs one of his rarer, boomy laughs. “Mana, are you sure that’s what they’re doing right now?” He wiggles his eyebrow, and I roll my eyes and turn my gaze back to my paperwork as some form of protest.

“Come on,” he whines. “Tell me.”

“Hawke, some of us—”

“Are boring and have paperwork,” he finishes with flourish, waving his hand dismissively. “Yes, yes. I understand, Guard Captain.”

I turn away from my paperwork again to look at him and hopefully finish the conversation. “Carver’s interested in improving the condition of the mines,” I say, after a moment. “Or at the very least preventing…certain ‘tragedies’ from repeating themselves.” There’s so much more to say about the matter, but I think—no, I know Carver’d rather explain himself.

Garrett pouts, “And he dragged Fenris into it?”

I open my mouth to explain that Fenris went willingly, that Carver promised him a salary for accompanying him on the inspections, that Carver had been more than a little mad about the way the mine had been run before and since Garrett gained ownership over it, but instead, I say, “I’m afraid so.”

“Bah,” he says, disgusted, and he rounds on Aveline. “Don’t suppose you’re up for a jaunt, Aveline?”

“What sort of jaunt?” Aveline says, suspicious.

Garrett, to his credit, does straighten and adopts a more serious expression, “Sebastian finally wants to—” He stops, casts a glance at Saemus, and his eyebrows furrow. Then he says, “I’m sure you can guess.”

Saemus mutters something under his breath, but it’s too quiet for me to catch it. He probably has an inkling, I’d guess, about what they mean to do. And they mean to, from what I’ve gleaned from conversations as of late, confront the family responsible for the murder of Sebastian’s family.

“I see,” Aveline says, and she sighs and pushes back her chair.

“Oh, good,” Garrett says, pleased by her nonverbal agreement to come along.

“Glad to know I’m your second choice, Hawke,” Aveline says, as a sort of reprimand, and I smother a laugh at her delivery. Garrett deflates and starts sputtering excuses, all the way out the door following after Aveline.

Saemus and I continue our work as if Aveline’s still here, though I do eventually take over Aveline’s seat so I have a better work surface.

“I assume they’re going after the Harimanns?” he says, at last.

After a moment of hesitation, I nod once. It seems pointless to try and conceal it when he’s guessed correctly, and it’s not as if it’ll remain a secret for long with this being Kirkwall and all.

He hums to acknowledge me, and I’m almost completely certain he’s done conversing with me when he says, “You’ve been quiet.”
“We’ve been working,” I say, and I know I sound defensive.

“I—” He stops writing and turns his full attention to me. I wish he wouldn’t, but he seems intent on a conversation. “I don’t mean just now. You’ve been quiet for a while, Mana.”

For a while, that comment stands. I don’t know what to say to it, and I don’t think he knows what else to add to it, what to ask. It feels like there’s a question to be teased out in there somewhere, even though I certainly don’t want it. (I’m pretty sure the question in, well, question is, “Are you alright?” And I really might scream if I hear it.)

“Mana,” he says, “what’s happened?”

“Ah,” I say, because I hadn’t expected that particular question. Then a beat too late, “Nothing.”

His eyebrows shoot up, and for a flash, he wears an expression of pure disbelief, and after that, he looks a bit irritated with me. “Mana,” he says, before pursing his lips. No doubt in an effort to keep from saying something unsavory about my person (however understandable such a statement would be at the moment).

“It’s really nothing.” I say, trying to sound more sure of myself this time. It is, in some way, the truth. “I’m just...homesick, I suppose. I’m sorry I’ve been irritable lately. It’s not—”

“That’s not nothing,” Saemus points out, but his face has softened. He looks sympathetic, and I feel bad. It’s not quite a lie, but as with all things involving the nobles of Kirkwall, it inherently is. Because he’s thinking of Hercinia and my dead noble family while I think of Earth and Georgia and my hopefully very much alive family, a world away.

“I appreciate that,” I say, feeling distant from it even as I say so. I don’t want to talk anymore. I just want to finish this work and leave, to mope even though I know I should be done with it by now.

Saemus stares at me, unblinking for a long while, before saying, “Is that—is that the only thing troubling you?”

No, I think, even as I say, “That’s about the gist of it.”

He frowns, and I find myself wishing I’d just stuck to a simple and firm, ‘Yes.’ But it’s too late. As usual.

“About the gist of it you say,” he points out, and I feel that same flash of anger flare up.

“It is,” I say, trying to keep my irrational anger in check. “The gist of it.” I take in a shaky breath. “Really, Saemus. You don’t need to pick apart my words. When I say I’m homesick, I mean—”

“Forgive me,” he says, wincing. He starts to run a hand over his hair. “I was just worried about you.”

As usual, the anger leaves as quickly as it’d come, and I’m left only with the guilt and shame of my outburst. “I’m sorry,” I say, and I can feel myself reaching for an excuse but stop myself and instead say again, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright,” he says, slowly and a bit wearily it seems to me. “You haven’t been—“ Saemus stops and shakes his head. “Nevermind. Just, you can tell me. Whatever’s bothering you about being here rather than Hercinia, about anything. You know and keep my secrets, and I hope you know that I’d keep any of yours.”

My throat closes up and for a moment, I can only stare at him, right there on the verge of tears, and
after a while, I manage a small, sort of squeaky, “Thank you, Saemus.”

And we say no more about it, or anything else, and slowly return to work, though I know both of our minds aren’t fully engaged with the task anymore.

“Lady de la Paz,” the templar in our foyer says, and he’s smiling to greet me, and it’s truly a terrible sight. He knows it, too. It’s that sort of smile, unpleasant and somehow slimy, like he’s leaving something physical behind on me just by looking me up and down. “Good evening. I understand you’ve just returned from the Keep?”

“Good evening,” I say, and I’m surprised how even the words come out. I’m decent at that now, I suppose. “And you are?”

I didn’t think the smile could look worse, but it becomes more sinister somehow. “Otto Alrik,” he says, and the introduction’s punctuated with a crash and a round of growling. Alrik chuckles at the sound, as though it amuses him. “I’m afraid your mabari hasn’t been terribly cooperative, messere.” He says ‘messere’ like it’s some sort of joke, and I feel my pulse jump.

I’ve always been in danger here, but the danger’s never felt quite as sharp or deadly as it does now.

Still, though my heart’s racing so fast and loud – so much so I’m sure he can hear - I manage to ask, “Cooperative with what, if I may ask?”

“You may,” he says, and he exhales, still with a smile. Whatever he sees in me, I don’t like it. Mostly because it’s not so unfamiliar, that predatory look. “We’ve been investigating a group of apostates. Perhaps you’ve heard tale of them, messere? They call themselves the mage underground?”

“I’m afraid not, Ser Alrik,” I say, after an appropriate pause.

“Well,” he says, and I hear Leandra say something through the wall. She’s not pleased, and despite that, I’m a little pleased to know I’m not alone in the house at least. Though obviously, I’m still terrified to be facing down this templar alone. “Our information, I’m afraid, led us straight here, and your cousin, is it?” He doesn’t wait for a response, just goes on. “Lady Amell gave her permission for us to do a search.”

I very much doubt she had much of a choice, and isn’t that lovely?

“I see.” I think immediately of all the things in the house that could potentially get us in trouble, and off the top of my head, I can think of entirely too many items. My journal, kept in my bedside table. Lyrium for the trips to the Fade, kept somewhere in Garrett’s room. The numerous copies of Anders’ manifesto. Pretty much all of Garrett’s things now that I think—

“It’s for your safety, messere, as well as the safety of Kirkwall,” he says, and it almost sounds genuine. “I’m sure you understand.”

“I do,” I say.

“Good, good,” he says. “My men are searching now, with the help of your cousin…and your dog, and I’d hoped to catch you—” He pauses for a moment, and again, it’s this great little joke to him. “I have a few questions, if it wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“No trouble,” I say, though I want to run, and I force myself to look into his face, his cruel eyes. “Though I must tell you, Ser Alrik. I’m not sure how I could possibly be of any help to you.”
“You might surprise yourself, messere,” he says, and I don’t bother answering to that comment. And so he begins his interrogation. “You come from Hercinia, I understand?”

“Yes,” I say.

“I see.” I’m not sure what to make of his tone, but I don’t think it’s good. “And your mother was… Agrippina?”

“Correct.”

“Forgive me, messere. I mean no disrespect to the dead,” he says, in response to my tone no doubt. “And you had a sister? And no other siblings? And none were mages.”

“Yes,” I say.

“To which question?”

“To all of them,” I say, and I know I’ve made somewhat of a misstep, showing a full burst of my irritation. I take a breath, offer a smile, and add, “I had a sister and no other siblings, and none of my immediate family were mages.”

“And your sister’s name?”

“Riza.” It feels wrong to give him my sister’s name, like this terrible violation...even though she’s not here.

“Agrippina, Riza, and…” he repeats before he trails off.

I find myself fed up with his preoccupation with my family. It’s a bit of a sore spot at the moment, and I decide, though it’s ridiculous of me, to be a bit reckless. I convince myself that it’s because I’m playing the part of a proud noble and not because I’m scared as hell of this line of questioning, particularly where it might end. “Ser, I fail to understand how this might be of any help in regards to this…mage underground or whatever it was that you called it.”

I see it then, the shimmering along the air. The fucking asshole’s trying to smite me.

Which is fine. Sort of, considering that whole thing doesn’t work on me. Still, my pulse jumps, and I feel cold all over.

“Ah,” he says, after the pulse bursts through me and does nothing. He becomes more serious, and I can’t read his expression, can’t guess what he’s taken away from that. “I—”

“Knight-Lieutenant,” another templar interrupts, coming in from the main room of the house. Unlike Alrik, he wears a helmet – an ugly bucket-looking thing – that obscures his face. “We found this.”

He passes Alrik a copy—no, two copies of Anders’ manifesto.

Shit. Is that illegal?

Knowing our luck? Probably. Fuck.

Alrik receives them and flips through without really looking. I get the feeling he’s probably come across it before and knows exactly what Anders’ has written about the templars and the Chantry. Terribly flattering stuff. Fuck. “A curious thing to find here,” he says, gaze flickering to me. “Where did these originate from, Lady de la Paz?”

“My son brought them into the house,” Leandra says, coming in with a growling Warbrain. “I
imagine he thought it’d be a great laugh.”

“These are dangerous papers, Lady Amell,” Alrik says, actually sounding sincere this time. “They shouldn’t be taken lightly.”

“I’m afraid my cousin takes everything lightly,” I say, and Leandra nods.

“Is this all?” Alrik says, turning his attention back to the other templar.

“I didn’t see anything else noteworthy, ser,” the other responds, looking between Leandra and myself. “But Jerran’s gone to search the wine cellar.” Leandra’s lips thin, and when she smiles, there’s teeth and danger.

Alrik hums and flips through the manifestos again. “Why are there two in your possession?” he asks.

Leandra crosses her arms. “I’m afraid you’d have to ask my eldest,” she challenges. “I didn’t realize Garrett had one much less two of them.”

He seems completely unperturbed by Leandra’s cold demeanor and turns his attention back to me, ignoring the mention of Garrett completely. “Have you seen these before, Lady de la Paz?”

I shake my head and attempt to look disinterested, “No, I haven’t.”

“Please take a moment to consider the question, messere,” he urges.

“Ser Alrik,” Leandra warns. “My cousin’s answer isn’t going to change simply—”


“Very well,” Alrik says, and there’s a disturbing touch of disappointment there. He looks at me, and the hair on my arms starts to stand on end the longer he examines me. Thankfully, it’s not long before he says, “We shall depart then.” He taps the papers, “I will, of course, be confiscating these.”

“Very well,” Leandra repeats back at him though she’s most certainly saying something more along the lines of ‘fuck you,’ and sure enough, as soon as the door closes and the moment of terror lessens about a notch, she says, “Shit.”

“Right,” I agree. I take a deep breath and go one, “And while that was awful, I have to say…two manifestos? That’s it? What about—”

“We missed them,” Leandra cuts in, rubbing at her forehead, and it takes me a while to realize she means ‘they’ missed the manifestos. “Orana and I—” She gives me a meaningful look. “We took care of the rest.”

“My journal?” I guess, wincing, and I’m already considering destroying it as soon as I get it back, though I don’t really want to. Because this? Shit. I feel like I’ll never feel safe again.

“Yes,” she says, sounding more and more tired by the second.

I exhale loudly and start to rub at my face, too.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Wait,” I say, when a certain thought catches. She stops rubbing at her face to stare at me. “How did you know they were—”
“Orana said a man stopped her on the way back from the marketplace,” Leandra explains with a 
frown. “He wouldn’t give a name, only said the templars were coming to search the house within the 
hour.” She curses under her breath, then mutters with a shake of her head, “To think, it’s come to 
this.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, though I should probably express a little gratitude for the mysterious man who 
saved us from some real fucking trouble. And more than a little for quick-acting Leandra who’s 
saved us from being arrested. (Or, you know, potentially killed.)

I hate this place. I hate it I hate it I—I need to go home.

“Bastards,” she says, by way of agreement. Warbrain barks, and when we turn to him, he growls as 
if he’s remembering something of the raid himself. I don’t speak mabari, but I think I get the gist of it. 
And I agree.

It’s fucking shit.

“We haven’t made dinner,” Orana says, sounding surprised with herself, and Carver raises an 
eyebrow at the strange proclamation, then glances at Leandra.

Then I think he understands, at least to some degree.

“What happened?”

“A few templars came to the house,” Leandra says.

“Raided the house,” I mumble, and it’s clear I’ve been heard because Carver whips his head to stare 
at me, and Fenris, too, looks perturbed.

“Raided?” Carver repeats, as though he can’t believe it.

Leandra sighs but doesn’t disagree, and Carver turns his attention back to her. “They did search the 
house,” she says, “but we were able to hide Garrett’s things in the cellar before they arrived. They 
only managed to find a few copies of Anders’ manifesto.” The last bit is said with a touch of 
exasperation.

Fenris’ brow furrows, maybe because of the raid but probably more because of Anders, and he asks, 
“How did you know to prepare?”

“There was a man,” Orana says, quietly, and she flinches a little when everyone’s gaze turns to her. 
It takes her a moment, but she’s able to go on to explain further, “He said he knew Hawke and that 
the Knight-Commander was sending men to the estate.”

“Did he say what his name was?” Carver asks, and Orana shakes her head.

“You said he was tall,” Leandra prompts, and Orana nods, biting her lip.

Then she adds, “He had brown hair—” She traces along her face to illustrate something of the 
length, and I’d guess she’s trying to convey that he has sideburns. “He looked very tired, and I—” 
She stops.

We stand in silent, looking between each other and pondering the information, before Carver finally 
says, very gently, “Was there something else, Orana?”

She hesitates, but says, “He smelled like fish.”
“Fish?” Carver asks, skeptical at first, and then his eyes clear. Fenris makes a disgusted face at the mention of fish, and it’s completely not appropriate for the moment, but the expression is great. “You think he came from the docks maybe?”

Orana nods.

“Do you think you’d recognize him if you saw him again?” Carver asks, and again, Orana nods. Fenris frowns.

“Surely, you’re not thinking of dragging her down to the docks,” Leandra says, disapproving, and I find myself nodding along without thinking because I remember what it was like down there when we went to meet Samson and—

“Samson?” I mutter.

“Samson?” Carver repeats, turning to stare at me, and his gaze wills me to explain.

I grimace and shrug, very self-conscious of my theory, “I don’t—well, maybe. I could be wrong though. I’m not sure why Samson would want to—”

“Raleigh Samson?” Carver says.

I nod. “I’m probably wrong.” I’ve only been down there once, and Garrett probably knows plenty of men from the docks, plenty who are tall with brown hair. It’s not as if—

“One way to find out,” Carver says, grimly.

“No,” Leandra says. Though really, it’s more of a shout.

“Mother—”

“No,” she says again.

“Mother,” he says again, exasperated.

“Oh, I know you’ll investigate it one way or another, but you’re not to go off alone. It might be what they want, and—”

“I will go,” Fenris offers.

Leandra sighs, “Two of you is hardly better than one.” Both straighten a little at that, as if a bit insulted, but she pins them both with a stare and goes on, “It’s too dangerous. At least go in the daylight, with your brother.”

Carver’s lip curls, “Of course. You want—”

“I want my sons to stand beside one another,” she snaps. “Yes, Carver. That’s what I want. And I want you both alive.” Whatever he sees in her stare then makes him pale and look away, and he says no more.

It’s none of my business, but I can’t help but think, briefly, of Bethany.

“I will go,” Fenris says to Carver, “whenever you chose to investigate.”

“Thank you,” Leandra says on Carver’s behalf when it’s clear Carver’s checked out of the conversation. Then, “Maker’s Breath.”
Chapter End Notes

The conversation at the beginning refers to Chapter 6 of Hard in Hightown.
Anyway, Here’s Truth

Chapter Summary

“It was about the Dread Wolf,” I force myself to say, even though the words don’t want to come out.

Chapter Notes

Betaed by Senei.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Garrett returns, he looks like hell. There’s something dark, not quite blood, splattered across the front of his armor, and throughout Carver’s brusque explanation of the day’s events, he keeps rolling his shoulders as though they’re paining him.

But he doesn’t take much, if any, convincing.

After Carver puts forth our theory that Samson is the man who tipped off Orana, Garrett nods, accepting the hypothesis without question.

“Into the fray,” he grumbles. He rolls his shoulders one final time, takes a deep breath and adds, “Anders said it’d probably take him a while to heal Sebastian, so we should leave them be for tonight. And Aveline’s probably home and—” He smiles tiredly and makes a pitiful attempt at wiggling his eyebrows. “By now.”

“Fenris said he’d come,” Carver says, rolling his eyes at Garrett’s childishness.

Garrett raises an eyebrow, probably thinking about the whole thing with the Bone Pit, the inspections, but he doesn’t outright ask. Carver offers no explanations. Finally, Garrett huffs and says, “We can go get Varric.”

Carver nods to that. “What about the estate?” He tries to discreetly sneak a look at Leandra, then at me and Orana. When he speaks next, his words are nearly inaudible. “We can’t leave it unguarded.”

“There’s Warbrain,” Garrett points out. Carver says nothing, clearly unimpressed, and Garrett adds, after a bit of thought, “Isabela’s probably—” he makes a face, corrects himself. “She’s hopefully in her room at the Hanged Man. We can get her to come and watch the estate.” He shrugs. “And if she’s not there, we can go ask Merrill.”

Carver nods, then he turns to Leandra, who looks the tensest I’ve ever seen her. “It’ll be alright,” he says to her, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

Leandra lets out a little, humorless laugh before reaching out to touch his cheek. Her hands are trembling. She opens her mouth but doesn’t say anything for a while.

It’s difficult for me to watch them, so I turn away to give them some privacy. Garrett, too, turns from
the sight of them. He comes over to stand with me and Orana.

“Are you alright?” he asks, looking me in the eye. He’s uncharacteristically serious.

“Yes,” I say.

“Liar,” he says.

He cracks a smile and, eventually, so do I. We’re all clearly not alright.

“Promise you won’t let Isabela talk you into Wicked Grace,” he says, reaching to put his hands on my shoulders. “You’ll lose all your coin in a go with her.” He winks. “Though with a face like yours, I’m sure you could convince her to give it back.”

The joking soothes me a little, but the feeling only lasts for so long. Then I feel compelled to say, “Promise you’ll be careful.”

“Um,” he says, rocking back on his heels and squinting at me. “I’m never careful. That’s my thing, Mana.” He offers me a big, cheesy grin. “Being careful’s boring.”

I snort. “Just this once.”

“That’s how it starts,” Garrett whines. He gives my shoulders a little squeeze before letting go, dropping his arms back down to his side. “I’ll try and be...slightly less reckless than usual.”

“Alright,” I say, sensing that’s the best I’m going to get. I try to remind myself that he’s gone to do scarier things, that he’s scary himself, and it works somewhat.

The templars have really fucked up my sense of safety though, and I know I’m going to worry terribly until they get back. There’s just nothing to be done about it. “Alright,” I say again, firmer.

“Alright,” he repeats, grinning. He looks and sounds more like himself as the time passes. “Keep an eye on mother and yourself. That’s your thing, Mana.” He offers me a big, cheesy grin. “Being careful’s boring.”

Orana nods with a little chuckle.

“Agreed,” Carver grunts, joining us. He smiles, though more sedately, but the expression quickly drops away. He turns his full attention to Garrett and says, “Ready?”

They go, leaving us to wait for our guard.

Merrill shows up maybe thirty minutes later, looking concerned. “Oh, good,” she says, looking each of us over carefully. “You’re all in one piece.”

“We are,” Leandra says, amused. Whatever Carver said to her seems to have eased her anxiety some. As soon as she’s done speaking, she shakes her head – I’m not really sure at what - and declares, “I’ll make us some tea.”

She heads in the direction of the kitchen.

“Orana, if you want to go to sleep—” As soon as I say ‘sleep,’ she shakes her head, and I stop. “Are you sure?”
“I don’t think I could sleep,” she admits. I wince, understanding that feeling all too well. I don’t know if any of us will be able to sleep peacefully for a while. After a moment, she adds, “I’m… afraid.”

“I’m here,” Merrill says, smiling.

“We can read some,” I suggest.

After a moment of consideration, Orana nods, and we relocate to the library.

Orana vetoes the Chant of Light right off, maybe on account of Merrill being present, then browses the shelves for a long while. Nothing seems to catch her interest, but I don’t press for her to make a selection. There’s no rush, firstly, and secondly, I have a lot to think about in the meantime.

Eventually, Merrill puts forth a suggestion, “I could tell a story, if you’d like.”

Orana, who’d been brushing the spines of the books with her fingertips, drops her hand and nods immediately.

We settle in front of the fire rather than on the couch tonight, all eager to be as close to the warmth as possible, and shortly after we start to settle there, Leandra comes in with tea on a tray. We spend a few minutes distributing the cups, then Merrill begins, tracing the rim of her cup, “I always liked the stories of Fen’Harel most when I was a child.”

Once second, I feel warm and toasty. The next, I’m cold all over. Shivery. I have to close my eyes to ground myself, but the conversation that follows still seems somehow distant even though it’s taking place less than a foot away from me.

“Why?” Orana asks, in a whisper.

I grip the cup of tea tight, trying to absorb some of its warmth. It doesn’t really work all that well.

“He was clever,” Merrill explains. My throat closes up. “No matter what situation he landed himself in, he managed to work himself out of it again.” She sounds fond when she goes on, “Hahren Paivel said we weren’t supposed to speak of him too much.” There’s another pause, and in the silence, I can clearly hear the pounding of my heart. It’s beating fast. “It gives him power. Draws his eyes.” Another pause. “He has six of them.”

“Six?” Orana repeats, surprised.

I frown with my eyes closed.

“Well,” Merrill says, chuckling. “That’s what Mahariel always used to say. She said Ashalle told her so.” As with before, Merrill’s voice takes on a wistful quality. “She came from another clan, the same one Mahariel’s father came from, and they say the Dread Wolf has six, red eyes.”

“Useful,” Leandra comments, probably thinking about Carver and Garrett and all the trouble they get into. I open my eyes, though I’m sure even as I do it that I’m going to regret it. The light of the fire seems too bright, but I don’t close them again. I look to Merrill.

“I think they’re just meant to be scary,” Merrill says, grinning. She takes a sip of her tea, grimaces. It’s probably still too hot. She seems to get lost in her thoughts.

“Fen’Harel,” Leandra prompts. “He’s… a wolf?”
I grimace.

Merrill nods, “The Dread Wolf.”

“The Dread Wolf,” I repeat, unable to help myself.

When Merrill nods this time, she keeps her eyes on me, and I understand. She’s watching for something in me. It’s understandable, considering my track record post-smitings, but still, I feel cold in the wake of the realization. I turn to stare into my tea cup.

“Do you remember the story, Mana?” Merrill prompts, gently.

“Yes,” I say, dimly. The word tastes sour, more and more so as I struggle to recall what I’d read of him. It’s like picking at a scab—no. It’s more like jabbing a knife into an already gaping wound.

“Mana?” Orana says. She scoots closer to me, setting her cup aside.

Do you remember the story, Mana?

“Please don’t tell her that story,” I whisper. Really, I’m not sure what story I mean, and I start to feel physically sick trying to puzzle it out. I feel trapped and heavy and cold.

Without thinking, I struggle to my feet.

I feel like I’ve left my stomach there on the floor, but I can’t imagine sitting back down. I want to crawl out of my skin. I want to stop thinking.

Do you remember the story?

“I—”

“Mana?” I don’t know if it’s Merrill or Orana or Leandra who’s said it.

I close my eyes, struggling to control my breathing. I feel myself starting to tip sideways, and I try to focus, try to balance, try to stop thinking, but the question keeps breaking through.

Do you remember the story?

They’re talking around me, and by now, I’m well aware of what’s happening. The smite from earlier’s shaken something loose, again – why am I surprised? am I surprised? not really. I’m just resisting, as usual, no matter how pointless it is to resist - and Merrill’s question…opened it up inside of me.

Do you remember?

I fall asleep or into a waking dream or maybe into the Fade. Whatever it is, I just know it’s not real.

I’m in Daern’tthal, in a hall I haven’t visited before, but it’s all achingly familiar: the mirror-like floor, the glittering mosaic doors, the lancet windows, the sconces throwing firelight all over everything. It’s a party room, a place of gathering. Though, there’s no one gathered here now.

There’s an ache in my chest when I realize I’m alone.

It’s not that I’m alone for the moment that gets me hurting. It’s…they’re gone. The people from before, when I was whoever I was before, are gone.
They’re gone, and it’s wrong.

So many things are wrong. Me. This place. The Fade. **Fen’Harel.**

I hear it then. First, it’s the quiet murmur of distant conversation. On top of that, moments later, the clatter of utensils. There’s a burst of laughter. Someone claps someone’s shoulder. I hear footsteps—no. Someone’s dancing.

“Sister,” someone says.

It’s like someone’s cast a spell.

Something was wrong, but I can’t remember what. I decide it’s not important. Nothing is more important than dealing with whatever trouble my brother’s landed himself into this time.

“Solas,” I say, without thinking. The weight of his name is strange on my tongue this time when I say it, though I’ve said it probably more than any word in my vocabulary. I blink, confused with myself, but the feeling passes.

Solas squints at me, just so. There’s a length of green silk thrown carelessly across his shoulder, and there’s something too familiar about the sight.

It’s so strange.

“Something wrong?” he asks, raising a brow.

“Is there?” I counter, suddenly filled with familiar suspicion. The answer is comfortable. I’ve said it many, many times before.

He gives me a toothy grin, and I sigh. “Ask me no more questions, and you shall hear no more lies,” he teases.

I’m torn, as usual. I should move to steer him from trouble, however pointless the steering will prove, but ignorance has its appeal.

I say, with just a hint of disapproval, “Solas.” It’s a nice compromise. Not a question but certainly not approval.

He waves off my concern, “I only went walking. When I returned, I found you as I always find you: frowning. Did the apprentices misshelve the Memories again? Or should I be concerned?”

The answer’s there, familiar and comfortable and begging to be voiced. I should say, ‘I only have the one apprentice, Solas, and if I recall—’

Instead, I say, “Fen’Harel.”

“Yes?” he answers, not missing a beat, but after a while, he raises both his brows at me. “I should be concerned,” he decides. “What happened while I went walking, sister?” His lips turn up into a sardonic smile, “Has Anaris started a war?”

It hurts. It’s wrong.

His face smooths out. “Forgive me,” he says, though he sounds unrepentant. “I dreamt a strange dream.”

The two statements don’t quite connect, so I ask, “What did you dream?”
He waves it off as unimportant, even as he answers, “I dreamt a war.” When he looks at me this
time, he grimaces a little though he tries to hide it. “One that bloodied even your hands, Geldauran.”

His use of my name halts my thoughts, but he goes on. I quickly forget what it is about him saying
my name that was so interesting.

“I dreamt that I destroyed the world,” he admits. There’s a little flicker of a smile, “It was surprisingly
easy.”

“Solas,” I begin.

“It was a dream,” he says, firmly, but he goes on, “I ended the war. The world as you and I know it
—it was gone. In its place, a shadow of this.” He waves to indicate the room, the city, but I keep my
eyes fixed on his face. “There were no others like us—” He pauses just for a moment, as he always
does when using ‘us.’ I frown, but he leaves no room for me to engage in that old conversation.
“There were none like us ever again, and the ones of us who existed, they were never the same.
They became twisted. They could no longer take shape.” He rolls his shoulders, agitated. “I ruined
magic.”

“It was a dream,” I say.

“I couldn’t understand what happened to you,” he says, sounding too serious. “I could find no trace
of you anywhere.”

I frown. “Solas—” There’s something off about this conversation. It’s too—

“If there were a war,” he begins. “If it threatened the city itself, your body, where would you hide
your Memory?”

“It was a dream, Solas.”

“If it is just a dream, there’s no harm in answering, is there?”

Eventually, I do because he’s right. There’s no war, and there’s no harm in answering. “There are
places I might hide it…in the Void.” I shrug, uncomfortable with the conversation. “I visited many
places before you were born. Some are—” I hesitate, because this is wrong. Because something is
off. But I feel compelled to finish my statement, “Safe.”

He nods once.

“Is there a particular place you’re fond of, sister?”

“Are you thinking of starting a war, brother?” I ask, feeling sour.

“Not today,” Solas says, offering me what I imagine is supposed to be a charming smile.

“Yes,” I say, answering his question.

“Hmm. Interesting.”

“Interesting,” I repeat, shaking my head. “Dream something more pleasant, and I might find it so.”

He smiles more sincerely…and I notice it.

The noises have stopped.
There’s no distant, muted chatter, no laughter. Nothing. The hall, as it had been at the beginning, is empty.

Somehow, I’d forgotten that. I’d—

I am—

It takes too long for me to answer myself, to remember and return to myself.

I am Mana. Manahan de la Paz. (But I’m not, not quite.) I don’t have a brother (but I do). And this is wrong. The conversation I’ve just had with my ‘brother’ is wrong.

“Who are you?” I grit out, taking a step back.

Solas smiles, all teeth again.

“Who are you?” I repeat, trying to sound more demanding. I sound more afraid than anything. ‘Show yourself,’ is there on the tip of my tongue, but even to me, it sounds ridiculously campy. Instead, I try, “Why come to me like this? Why…trick me?”

“Trick?” they say, at last. They raise their eyebrows at me. “You did this to yourself. You brought yourself here, thought of him.” They gesture down Solas’ body. “I only played along.”


“I couldn’t say if you were foolish or clever, hiding your Memory in the Void,” they go on. “I’m certain Mana leans towards foolish.”

I mean to say something to that, but the words won’t come out.

“Who are you?” I choke, though there are probably a million better questions to ask. It’s just the only one I’ve managed to cling to.

The illusion – at least, I think that’s what it is - drops.

Keeper Marethari stands in front of me, smiling with hands clasped behind her back. They don’t give me any time to process before they announce, “I am Audacity.”

“I was known as something else back then,” they say, breezily, “but I am Audacity now.”

I open and close my mouth a few times, struggling. Just struggling.

“I’m not Geldauran.” I’m surprised at myself, that the words came out. I’m half-surprised, too, that I don’t quite believe them.

“You are all that is left of her,” Audacity says.
“It’s not the same,” I argue, voice almost inaudible.

Audacity laughs, “All of us were changed. The Keeper and I live together here”—they gestures to their chest, their heart—and even Mythal wanders this world as a shadow of her former self.” The mention of Mythal zaps any humor out of Audacity, and I feel on edge just at the mention, too. “She is like you.” They pantomime tying a string. “The remains of one grafted to another.”

I close my eyes, but I know it’s true. It’s true it’s true it’s—

I take a deep breath and open my eyes again.

Audacity’s clearly been watching me through the whole thing, and they remain amused. “Mala suledin nadas,” they say.

To my horror, I start to cry. I open my mouth to reply, to reject what they’re implying.

Now you must endure.

Now you must stay, they mean. Now you are changed, they mean. I open my mouth to say, No. No, I refuse to accept it. But all that escapes me is a wounded sounded, and I cover my mouth to muffle it. I can’t bring myself to say the words.

I know Audacity is right.

“What do you want me to do?” I whisper.

“I’m not your keeper,” Audacity says. Again, a joke. “But I would ask that you not mention me. Spirit or demon. It’s all that we are to them now.”

“That’s it,” I mutter. It seems like there should be, that Audacity should want more, or maybe it’s just that I feel so lost right now. I want direction. I need to know what I’m supposed to do now.

…now that I’m stuck here. For good.

The tears well up again, but I force them back.

Audacity comes and wraps me in their arms, squeezes me too tightly. They warn me again, “Mala suledin nadas.”

“Good…afternoon?” I guess, coming into the dining room. Even though I’m sure I technically slept for hours and hours, I feel exhausted. I have a terrible headache, probably because of all the thoughts knocking around in my head, but the worse thing is the sense of dread in my stomach. I don’t want to face everyone. Anyone. Ever, though I know that’s impossible.

“Good afternoon,” Carver echoes, squinting at me. Orana sits on one side of him and Merrill on the other. They both look surprised – maybe it’s more relief? - to see me up.

As usual, Leandra sits at the head of the table, but something’s different today. She doesn’t glance my way, not once. Instead, she looks from Garrett to Carver before looking back at her plate. She picks at her food, but even though she seems disinterested in eating, she won’t look at me.

I swallow and resist the urge to retreat.

“Sit, sit,” Garrett says, waving me over before patting the chair next to him. Just as I sit, he tells me, “We found Samson last night.”
“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he echoes. “I don’t know why you were so worried. We found him. He confessed. Honestly, it was boring.”

Carver snorts, “Until we tried to make our way back to Hightown. The Undercuts were out last night.” He scowls. “We haven’t been back long.”

“Meh,” Garrett says, shrugging. He stabs at a tomato with his fork, but it doesn’t quite work out. The tomato shoots across the table, dropping off between Merrill and Carver. “Whoops,” he says. He waves his fork around before finally pointing it at me, squinting, “I hear you”—he glances, for a fraction of a second at Merrill—“had a very un-boring night. Pray, tell.”

“Mmm,” I hum, fiddling with the placement of my fork beside my plate. I want to spill everything because it might make me feel better, but I know, more likely it’ll just make me feel like an idiot. And Audacity. I don’t know what to do about Audacity yet. I shrug. “I didn’t feel well last night. That’s all.”

“Uh huh,” he says, clearly disbelieving.

“Did you remember something else?” Carver prods, also glancing towards Merrill. I wonder what she told them, what Leandra told them.

“No,” I say, trying to convince myself that it’s not a lie.

“Mana—”

“Was that all?” I cut in. “Samson just confessed, and that was it?”

Garrett huffs, looking amused. Even now, Leandra doesn’t look at us as we talk.

I start to feel nauseous as a thought solidifies in my head. I still feel lost, still feel like I’m drowning in the enormity of everything, but Leandra’s avoidance is putting at least one, clear path in front of me.

I have to leave.

“He seemed interested in you,” Garrett says, slowly. He’s watching me very carefully. “But he wouldn’t explain why he helped us.” He chuckles. “He seemed to think we were ungrateful about the whole thing. I don’t think he’ll be in a hurry to help us again.”

“Do you think the templars will come back?” Merrill asks.

Garrett shrugs, and it seems to be a pretty obvious answer.

Yes.

Leandra glances up, meets my eye for a second. She’s done. I can tell. And she has every right to be. Despite the lies we’ve built up, there are no ties between us. I’m not their cousin, and worst of all, I’m probably the main reason the templars have come down on them. I’m the reason they’re a target.

And it’ll only get worse from here, if I stay.

After taking a deep breath, I offer Leandra a tiny smile. She frowns in response, and it propels me to speak. “I’m going to look for another place.” Everyone’s eyes stare into me, and I clarify, “To stay, I mean.”
“Oh, but nothing happened last night,” Garrett says, mockingly. He slams an elbow onto the table, and everything on the table quakes. Orana jumps, and he throws her an apologetic smile before turning back to squint at me, “Explain.”

“No,” I say.

“No?” He blinks, stunned by my blatant refusal.

I’m surprised, too, but I still don’t feel like myself right now. It’s starting to sink in that I might never feel like myself again. I might—no, I will just have to get used to feeling this way.

“Mana,” Carver cuts in, gruffly. “Is this about the templars?”

“You’re not leaving,” Garrett says, almost right on top of Carver. His voice is getting louder and louder. Scoffing, he asks, “Where will you even go? The Hanged Man?” He laughs. “You going to move in with Saemus?”

“Garrett,” Carver hisses, and there’s a thump under the table.

“Mana,” Orana says, in a tiny voice.

It hurts to hear it, and it takes me a while to force my voice out again.

“Garrett,” I say, trying to be firm. “It’s over.” His eyebrows furrow, but the words have already been said. I regret the way I’d phrased it, but there’s no going back and changing it now. So I go on, wincing as I do, speaking too quickly, “I’m not going home, and I can’t stay here forever. I—”

“Stop,” he commands, leaning forward into my space. I instinctively lean back. “What do you mean? ‘It’s over’?”

“What in the Void happened last night?” Carver asks, and when I look to him, I see that he’s directed the question at Merrill rather than me.

“It was nothing,” I say, just as Merrill answers, “I was telling a story.”

“A story?” Carver repeats, frowning. Garrett’s frowning, too, and Leandra’s turned her gaze to Merrill. There’s a very complicated expression on her face.

Merrill looks to me, hesitating.

“It was about the Dread Wolf,” I force myself to say, even though the words don’t want to come out. “It was weirdly familiar. That’s all.”

“No, it’s not,” Carver says, glaring at me. “Mana, what did you remember?” I turn away, and he makes a disgusted sound. That hurts, too. When he says it again, it’s a demand, carefully punctuated, “What did you remember?”


“There’s nothing to tell,” I say, and because there’s nothing else for me to do, I take some grapes and set them on my plate. I take my time plucking each off the stem.

Garrett makes a series of noises to illustrate his disbelief, and Carver sighs and throws his hands in the air. Merrill’s eyes narrow just a little at me.
“But what’s over?” Garrett complains. “Mana.”

When he’s done dragging out my name, Merrill jumps in. “Mana, please—”

Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. It doesn’t help. I don’t know what I should do. I want to tell, even though it’s reckless, but I don’t know where to begin. And there are secrets now to keep.

“Yes,” Garrett says. “Please, Mana. Please, please, please. Mana, Mana, Mana—”

When I close my eyes this time, it’s all annoyance that drives me to it.

“Shut up,” Carver snaps. “Mana—ah. Just tell us, alright?” He’s gruff but sincere. “We’ve probably heard worse—er, weirder.” Wincing, he reaches up to rub at his jaw. “Shit.”

“Good job,” Garrett teases, clapping twice. He snickers and mutters, with a shake of his head, “‘Probably,’ he says.”

“Shut. Up.” Carver’s blushing when he says it. It’s a nice distraction for a second or two, but soon, the attention’s back on me again.

“Even if you find the foci, I can’t go home,” I admit. I offer them all a weak smile, and the statement has its intended effect. There’s a lot of grimacing and grimacing. Then Carver throws me a sympathetic glance.

Garrett asks, his voice soft, “Are you sure?”

“I am,” I say, honestly. I feel terrible for…manipulating – it’s really hard to admit to myself that that’s what I’m doing - but I really do need to learn to exercise more caution.

This is, I tell myself, for their sake as well as mine.

“Shit,” he says. “Okay. Fine. You’re stuck here.” He chuckles, though there’s a hint of nervousness there. “Makes you the same as the rest of us.”

“Yup,” I agree, shrugging.

Carver and Merrill exchange a look. I’m not sure what to make of it.

“You don’t have to move out,” Garrett says. “We like you here. Right, mother? Orana? Carver?”

Orana nods right away, and when I meet Carver’s eye, he nods once, too. He looks very serious when he does it.

Leandra, though, hesitates before she says, “Of course.” Then, after a beat, “But—”

“No, no, no,” Garrett says, sounding more and more like a little boy. “No buts! Mana stays!”

“Garrett, she’s a grown woman,” Leandra protests.

“From another world,” Garrett argues. I sigh and reach up to rub at my temples. They’re starting to throb. He starts to wave his fork around again. “So what if the templars raided the house.”

Carver snorts. “I mean it. They didn’t find anything. Alrik, himself, smited Mana and nothing happened. What can he do about her now?” He sets down his fork, too hard. “Nothing.” He whips his head around to look back at me. “I don’t see what the problem is here.”

“Garrett,” I say, just as Leandra does.
“Okay,” he says. “Could you all stop with the ‘Garrett’”—he mimics the way we say his name—“please? You’re hurting my feelings here.” He nods once, as though we’ve accepted that. “I mean it. You can’t go home. That…sucks.” He makes a little face. “But you can stay here. I’d like you to stay here. See? Everything’s fine.”

Again, Carver snorts.

“I love you, too, Carver,” Garrett grumbles. “This is fine anyway.”

“I’m not actually your cousin,” I point out, gently.

“Nope,” Garrett says, though not to my statement I think. He stands. “I’m done talking about it. You’re staying. Eat your grapes. I’m going to go…drink an early dinner at the Hanged Man.” He waves, smiling cheerfully as he practically runs for the door. “Bye!”

“Idiot,” Carver says, after he hears the front door slam. We all smiles to ourselves, but it doesn’t last long. He looks to me eventually. “Mana, he is right.” He doesn’t seem too happy to have to admit it. “You should stay.”

“I really shouldn’t,” I mutter.

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to say thank you to everyone who's read/commented/kudoed during this past year. All ya'll's support has really made writing this story a joy so far, and I remain excited about this project going into 2017. <3
“Have you slept at all these last few days?” Leandra asks, and to my surprise, she seats herself right next to me. She looks impeccable considering the hour, all wide-awake and calm and— “Mana,” she prompts firmly. “Have you slept?”

“A little,” I say. I wince at the sound of my voice. I’d tried to sleep—I always try—but I’d ended up muttering to myself for hours, trying to work through…everything. “A couple of hours maybe.”

“I won’t pretend to understand—” She stops, shaking her head for a moment, then starts over, “You need more than a few hours of rest.”

I feel a little flash of irritation at that because I wish it was as simple as she’s making it sound. I reason through the feeling though. Leandra, of all people, would know what it’s like to worry about things so much that you lose sleep.

Not to say our circumstances are that similar.

“The de Launcet girls asked after you today.”

“Oh?” I ask, a little ashamed that I don’t sound terribly interested. After the templar raid, the nobles closed ranks, and it didn’t take long for their concern and sympathy to start to feel…smothery.

“They seem to be under the impression that you’re thinking of returning to Hercinia,” she continues. “Garrett’s doing, I’m sure.”

I snort, unable to help myself, and Leandra smiles at me, for a second anyway. It’s almost like before.

“That explains Saemus,” I mutter. The comment wasn’t really for Leandra. I’ve just been talking to myself too much lately, and it’s become something of a habit. She raises an eyebrow, and I sigh, reaching out instinctively to turn the bracelet around my wrist. “He’s been…odd lately. I thought it was because of the templars, but even now, he’s—” I gesture vaguely in the air to illustrate my point, trying to find the words. Eventually, I shrug and say, “He keeps asking if I miss home.”
“If the de Launcets have heard, everyone has,” Leandra says. She stares into the fire for a long while. “The Talwains asked about it as well.”

I frown, because ‘everyone’ usually includes the Talwains. If anything, they’d probably been some of the first to have heard the rumor, so I’m not sure why Leandra specifically mentioned them.

“Mana, they asked me if you were Revka Amell’s daughter.”

“Oh,” I say, though I’m not really sure of the significance of the name. Clearly, Revka’s a relative of Leandra’s, but—

“I was sorely tempted,” she says, folding her hands in her lap, “to tell the truth of it, that you aren’t related to us at all.”

I wince but say nothing. She’s obviously not done, not by a long shot.

“It’s not—” Her voice cracks, and she looks surprised with herself. She clears her throat and goes on, determined and honest, “I don’t know what to think of you. If you’d seen your face when Merrill spoke of the Dread Wolf—” She shakes her head. “But you brought Carver back to us. You’ve become a friend to Orana, to my sons both. *I owe you a debt—*”

With a grimace, I cut in, “I’m pretty sure—”

“I told them you were,” Leandra says, raising her voice a little.

I’m stunned by both the statement itself and the volume and find I can’t respond.

“When Revka disappeared – it was sometime after my father died - she left everything behind. Her husband, her children, her belongings. As I understand, the rumor was that she couldn’t bear the thought of seeing any of her other children go to the Circle.” She grimaces, as she often does at any mention of the Circle. “They’d taken her firstborn, and it’s likely most, if not all, of the rest of them were mages. Maybe even her husband, too.”

At this, she stops. A funny little smile spreads across her face. “Sareth thought she might have been pregnant at the time and fled to protect her unborn child.” Leandra gives me a significant look.

“You didn’t have to do that,” I say quietly.

“I did,” she argues. “It’s difficult for me. I hope you remember that.” I nod when she looks to me for a response, and after nodding once in return, she goes on, “It’s difficult, but you *have* done us all a lot of good. Carver wouldn’t be here if not for you.” She smiles at me, and it’s a dangerous sort of thing. “It’s never been easy to be part of this family.”

“I could just go,” I say. She raises a brow, and I’m reminded too much of Garrett’s responses to this idea. “If I left Kirkwall—”

“Where would you go? You never answer when Garrett asks,” she says, giving me a pointed look.

I feel a sudden, burning need for the map tucked underneath my pillow. Sometimes, on these sleepless nights, I trace my fingers over it, looking for anything familiar to Geldauran. Looking for possibilities. Looking for escape.

“It would be my problem.” And it is just that, *a problem.* Even after hours and hours of studying the map, I have nothing. Sure, I recognize some things. A few names, landmarks, etc., but it’s been a long, long time since Geldauran. And she’s the only one with any sort of ties to this world, and those
ties are…questionable at best now, considering it’s been thousands of years.

Leandra nails me with a decidedly unimpressed look. “Do you know what I truly believe?”

“No,” I say, confused at the turn in conversation.

“I believe the Maker sent you to us,” she says, and when she catches my grimace, she sighs in disappointment. “I don’t believe it was an accident, at any rate, that you crossed paths with my son. I don’t believe in coincidence anymore. Once, I crossed paths with a mage here in Kirkwall who would become my husband. By all rights, we had no business being together.” She smiles that dangerous smile again. “We ran away to Fereldan, to Lothering of all places, so that we could be together, and with him, I had three children.”

She takes a deep breath, looking pained.

“When the king called for men to fight the darkspawn, Carver went, and because of him, we were able to flee Fereldan before Lothering was overrun.” She stops, taking in another breath, and seems to decide to cut ahead, right to the point. “None of it could be an accident. We were meant to be here, back in Kirkwall, and you were meant to meet us.”

It does seem like there must have been some sort of divine intervention involved when she lays it out like that, I suppose.

“You’re family,” she says firmly. “My cousin’s daughter.”

“Alright,” I say, sealing the matter for good though it doesn’t exactly feel good to do so, and this time, it actually feels real. And I guess I do feel…relieved.

“You smiled at me,” Garrett says, eyeing me suspiciously. He stops writing and pushes back from his writing desk. “You haven’t smiled at me in weeks.”

“I’m sure I have,” I argue, and I am not, for the record, smiling now.

“I’m sure you haven’t,” he says, squinting. “But I’ll let you have this one. Just this once. Even though you’re clearly wro—”

“Garrett.”

“You’re smiling,” he says again, “or you were anyway.” This matter clearly vexes him something awful. “Why were you smiling? Have you finally killed someone?” He raises both eyebrows. “Did you kiss someone?” His expression sours and he sticks out his tongue. “Tell me it wasn’t Saemus.”

I turn on my heel and start for the kitchen, which was my original destination in the first place. I’d meant to make some apple pastries for Leandra as a peace offering slash thank you gift.

“Wait,” Garrett calls before I can go even two steps forward. “You’ve got a letter.”

“A letter?” I say, reluctantly turning. “From Laurent?”

“Not unless Laurent’s joined the Grey Wardens since last you heard of him,” he says, waving said letter back and forth in front of his face. “Must be the Warden Commander writing back to you about that foci thing you no longer need.” He pauses, giving me a meaningful look.

I ignore the obvious opening.
“Or the memory thing you refuse to talk about,” he prompts, jerking the letter away when I reach for it. “Mana,” he whines, ignoring my glare, “I’m dying. It’s been weeks. You can’t not tell me things for weeks. I start to languish, and worse, I start to get ideas.” He makes a horrified face and, again, when I make a grab for the letter, he jerks it away.

I take a deep breath and stand stiffly, crossing my arms in an attempt to show how unwilling I am to play along at the moment.

Of course, this is Garrett, so he ignores me.

He goes on, “Varric’s making up stories. Merrill’s sulking. Anders is overworking. Fen—”

I roll my eyes and cut in, “Anders is always overworking.”

He winces, and his tongue pokes out of his mouth. He takes in a deep breath of air and says, “Point.” He exhales. “Merrill, Mana. You’ve gotten her all worked up. It’s cruel and unkind, and there will be blood if you don’t do something about it soon.”

“Fine,” I say shortly. I didn’t slept last night, despite Leandra’s prompting, but only because the conversation with her made things feel clear again…or clearer, I suppose I should say. Speaking to Merrill was on the top of my list of things to do. “I’ll talk to her.” Really, I should have spoken to her right away, but I was just…too messed up over it all. (I realize, that’s really just an excuse. A poor one at that.)

Garrett jerks back in his chair, squinting at me suspiciously again. “You will?” His eyes narrow further, so much so that they’re almost completely closed. “About what?”

“Can I have my letter?”

“Answer my question,” he says, suddenly serious. “And while we’re at it, tell me why you’re”—he gestures in a wide circle around me—“all of a sudden.”

I roll my eyes. “I have some information about her eluvian that might help.”

“Right,” he says slowly. “Information. Fine. What about the smiling?”

“Garrett—” He makes a face, and I stop. I don’t really know why I’m deflecting. After the talk with Leandra last night, I should be good to speak with Garrett. We’d only been fighting lately because I’d been so adamant about leaving.

I had really wanted to protest them from this. That’s not an excuse. I think. I just…I realize now can’t do this on my own. I suppose I never wanted to admit that to myself.

Anyway, he’ll be glad to know I’ve decided against it, and he’ll also, probably, be glad to know about the Revka rumor.

I guess we’ve just been squabbling for so long, I’ve defaulted to deflecting.

I take a deep breath. “I talked with your mother last night.”

“Oh,” he says, more confused than ever.

“She’s told the Talwains I’m Revka’s daughter.”

“Oh,” he says, a little less confused.
I agreed to it, and I also...I’m not going anywhere,” I say, though it’s not easy. A triumphant grin breaks out on his face, and I try not to feel pissed about it. “For now,” I can’t help but add.

He waves his hand as if dismissing the ‘for now.’

I stick out my hand. “Letter.”

Grinning even wider, he places it in my hand. “I’m glad mother was able to reason with you.”

Unable to help myself, I snatch my hand and the letter away, grumbling.

Garrett remains in good spirits though. “About the eluvian…” he says. I’d be tempted to say the words are tentative, but it’s Garrett.

“What about it?” I say, breaking the seal on the letter. The crest on the wax seal, two griffins, must be the symbol of the Grey Wardens and must be how Garrett guessed who it was from.

“Do you know how to fix it?”

I shrug, too focused on the letter to form a real answer.

The Warden Commander’s letter is relatively brief:

Manahan,

First, tell Anders I am glad to have heard from him. Truly.

If we are discussing what I think we are (Anders, of course, was vague about your predicament), then there certainly is much to discuss.

Unfortunately, I am unable to meet with you at this time, but I can arrange a meeting with one of my associates. Send word back with the messenger, and I will arrange the meeting.

P.S. Anders, more letters are always appreciated.

—Warden Commander Mahariel

“Mana,” Garrett sing-songs.

I wave my hand, urging him to shut up.

There’s a faint shimmering right below the Warden Commander’s signature, and sure enough, when I pass my hand over the spot, the elvhen reveals itself.

Who are you?

My skin itches with anticipation, or maybe it’s excitement, but either way, I feel hurried. I have to get a reply out. ASAP.

“Mana?”

“A messenger delivered this?”

“Yes,” he says, dragging out the S. “Why?”

“Paper,” I say, going right up to the desk. Garrett leans out of my way but not before plucking the
letter right out of my hand. I grunt, annoyed, but let him have it, keeping to my search for paper so I can write a reply.

“You’re going to say yes,” he guesses unhappily, after he’s done reading. He squints at the paper, probably mostly at the elvhen.

In the meantime, I find my paper and a quill and an inkpot. I’m just going to dip the quill when Garrett grabs my arm to stop me.

“You just said you were staying.” He stares into my face, unblinking. “Just said, Mana. Not two minutes ago.”

“It’s just a meeting,” I say.

“Just,” he scoffs. “What’s this mean here?” He jabs a thumb right in the middle of the final question, and I try to calm my heart, my thoughts. “Mana.”

“I need answers,” I find myself saying, eventually.

“About what?” he says, almost on top of me. “What does it say?”

I hesitate to say because I know it’ll only spark more questions, and if there’s one thing I’m tired of, it’s questions.

“Alright,” he says, rolling his eyes. “We’ll come back to that one. Tell me about the eluvian. What is it you think Merrill can do to fix it?”

“I don’t think it’s broken,” I mumble. “From what she’s told me, it sounds like she’s already fixed it.” He opens his mouth, probably to point out the obvious, that it doesn’t work still, so I rush onwards. “There’s a pass phrase.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Oh.”

I grimace. “I don’t think the one I know is going to work though. It’s—” I struggle for the right word before settling on the unsatisfying, “Old.”

Garrett snorts. “Old, huh? How old?”

“Really old,” I say flatly. Really, it’s still so hard for even me to believe. “I don’t know if there’s anyone—” I stop.

“Anyone who?”

I grimace and try to steer the conversation away, “If I write a reply, could you find the messenger for me?”

“Mana,” he says in that long-suffering tone of his. “You know I’ll believe you, right? Whatever it is you’ve remembered.” He chuckles. “After Daern’thal—” He shrugs. “I’ll believe you. I have to.”

“No, you don’t.”

He chuckles again. “Fine, I don’t, but I will. You know I will.”

Honestly, no, I don’t know that he will. I have Geldauran’s Memories. They’re here in my head as if they were my own. They’re mine, really, in all the ways that matter, and still, it’s hard for me to accept the truth that’s been revealed to me.
In the end, he resorts to whining again, “Tell me, Mana. Please. Please? Please.”

“You’re a menace.” I didn’t mean for it to sound so fond.

“Is that a no?”

“No,” I say, jabbing at his cheek with the less pointy end of the quill.

He lets me, though he does make a face. “Is that a no? Or a no no?”

I give him one more, good jab. “It’s complicated.” So complicated, in fact, that I still haven’t figured out how to summarize it. So complicated that I’m still reeling from all the implications and questions and—

“Ha,” he says loudly. “When isn’t it?”

“Ha,” I say, though not as enthusiastically. “When I say old, I mean… old, Garrett.”

“Old,” he says, mimicking my tone, “as in Carver’s favorite pair of socks? Or, Maker forbid, older than that?”

I take a deep breath. “Older than that.”

“Older as in—”

“Garrett, can you fuckin—”

“Mana,” he says, scandalized, putting a hand to his chest.

“Forget it,” I say. He opens his mouth, looking more somber suddenly, but I shake my head, saying, “You can come with me when I go to Merrill’s, if you wan—”

“I want,” he says seriously, but he ruins it by wiggling his eyebrows. Then he slaps his hands on his knees, saying, “Alright.” He smacks his lips. “Where’s this letter you want to get out? I hear it’s important, so you must be done with it by now.”

As usual, he sounds like the most annoying little boy. I give him a little shove, then I start on my letter.

Garrett and I find the messenger in the Hanged Man, sitting alone and taking each sip of his ale with a grimace, and I pass the letter to him without a hitch. He seems glad for the quick response, if his expression is any indication, and he departs from the tavern quickly, muttering something that sounds like, “It had to be Kirkwall.”

The exchange goes so quick, in fact, that Garrett convinces me to stop in for a ‘quick’ visit (read: drink) with Varric.

Garrett, probably the second Varric closes the door, tells him the latest Amell family news in one fell swoop, “Mana’s staying, thank the Maker, and she’s Revka’s daughter now. That makes us—” He stops, nose wrinkling. “Second cousins? Third cousins?”

Varric’s eyebrows go up, but he just grins at the both of us and rolls with it. “Revka was Leandra’s cousin, wasn’t she? Wouldn’t that make Mana Leandra’s second cousin?” He looks to me as if looking for an answer, and I put my hands up in surrender.
“Mana,” Garrett whines, hip-checking me. “You should know these things.”

“You don’t know these things,” I grumble, moving out of his reach and dropping into a seat at Varric’s table. After a moment of thought, I look to Varric and say, “Hello, Varric.”

“At least someone has manners,” Varric says. He winks at me before giving Garrett a significant, overly disappointed look. Then says, with a little chuckle, “Hello, Pebbles.”

“Hi, Varric,” Garrett says, rolling his eyes. “Tell me you have that Antivan red from—”

“Ah,” Varric cuts in. “I see how it is. You come in here wanting me to answer your questions and to give you my wine—”

“Well, you didn’t really answer my question, so the least you could do at this point is give me wine —”

There’s a sudden silence, and for a moment, Garrett and Varric stare at each other, stone-faced. Then, after what seems like hours, Garrett breaks the silence with an exaggerated whine, “Varric. Wine. Ale. Something. Please.”

Varric winces, probably at the volume, but goes to retrieve a bottle from his bookshelf along with three tankards. “Alright, alright,” he mutters. “Maker, Hawke. The lungs on you.”

“Please save them for Anders,” I add, more for myself than for them.


“I’ll have you know Anders is the one—”

“Oh my God,” I say, scandalized, just as Varric says, “Oh? Anders a—” He wiggles his eyebrows, smirking. I’m not sure what exactly he’s asking, but I’m sure I don’t want to know. I know too much as it is.

Garrett wiggles his eyebrows back, which seems to be enough of an answer for Varric, and Varric pours us all a drink.

“It’s a bit early in the day for a drink,” Varric says, though he makes no move to stop pouring, “even for you, Hawke.”

“Mana had to deliver a letter,” Garrett says, shrugging. He sits and throws back the contents of his tankard in two gos, and I make what I imagine is an utterly horrified face. “And it’s never too early for a drink.” I almost don’t catch the next part. “Not here.”

Varric frowns and looks to me. We do some kind of back and forth thing with our facial expressions, communicating our mutually concern for Garrett. There’s also some confusion, mostly on my part.

I hadn’t heard of anything happening lately.

I wince at the thought. I’ve been a little…wrapped up in my own thing these last few weeks, so it’s not difficult to imagine I’ve missed something, somethings.

“Garrett—” I begin.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says, a bit brusquely. He leans over the table and nabs the bottle, pours
himself another tankard. “I saw Emeric in Hightown this morning.” He glances at me. “Right before your messenger found me.”

Varric grimaces. “He find anything new?”

Garrett gives a sloppy wave then swirls the contents of his tankard, carefully though because it’s nearly full to the top. “He thinks there might be more murders than we originally thought.”

“Murders?” I say, surprising myself.

“You haven’t heard?” Garrett says, sounding so unlike himself, so bitter. I realize, suddenly, that he’s dropping fast. I realize, too, that this is a side of him I’ve never been privileged to see before, and though it’s hard to watch him fall into his dark mood, I’m...glad of it in some way. Glad’s probably not the right word. “Aveline’s kept it quiet then, just like she wanted.”

I frown, stomach churning a little at the implication of what Garrett’s revealed.

“Hawke—”

Garrett shrugs and hunches over. “I don’t understand it,” he mutters, and he takes a long draw of the wine. “I really don’t understand it.”

“Does he need our help again?” Varric asks, gently.

“Emeric just said to keep an eye out,” Garrett says, shrugging again. His words aren’t slurred but slow, deliberate. Low. “The killer started with women from Darktown, then moved onto women from Lowtown, then—” Varric and I wince, and Garrett doesn’t finish the sentence. Instead, he finishes off his second tankard and reaches for the bottle again, saying, “And then, he said to keep an eye out for Alrik.” He dumps the remainder of the bottle into his tankard. “He’s up to something.”

“Alrik?” I ask, though it’s silly to ask for clarification.

“Who else?” he mutters sullenly. “Something’s going on. The mages in Daern’thal, they’re—” He sighs, slumping further, and when he lifts the tankard this time, it’s almost as if it’s too heavy for him to bear. He doesn’t drink this time. He just lifts the tankard, and after he’s struggled with the weight of it for a while, he sets it back on the table.

“Maybe you should take a nap, Hawke,” Varric says, giving Garrett a sympathetic look.

Garrett waves a hand but drops his head onto the table and closes his eyes. All of him feels so heavy. He hasn’t passed out or gone to sleep though because he says, not too long after he’s put his head down on the table, “I don’t understand it.”

I reach up and give his back a rub, with some difficulty on account of his armor, saying, “It’ll be alright.”

He snorts, and I turn to Varric, who looks uncharacteristically pensive.

“You can take the bed,” Varric says, “provided you don’t drool on my pillows again.”

Garrett doesn’t move right away. He keeps his head on the table, breathing in and out unevenly, then after a while, he mutters with a little smile, “No promises.” He slowly unfurls and gets up, and he shuffles off to Varric’s bed, mumbling to himself.

Varric and I keep quiet, listening to the sounds of Garrett settling, and we remain so even after it goes
completely silent.

“Strong stuff,” Varric says finally, tapping his tankard.

I think we both know it wasn’t really the alcohol.

“Does he do this a lot?” I ask in a whisper, unable to help myself. I cast a glance in Garret’s direction even though I can’t really see him from where I’m sitting.

“Every now and then,” Varric says, reassuringly. But he winces after a second and adds, “He’s got a lot to worry about now.”

“Yeah,” I say, unable to keep myself from worrying my hands. I know we’ve decided that I’m to stay here, that I’m an Amell ‘officially’ as it were, but still, I can’t help but feel guilty for my part in all this.

“Pebbles,” Varric says. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Oh, I know.” And I do know that; it’s just impossible not to feel guilty about all this, even though the feeling doesn’t serve anyone. “What did he mean about Aveline?”

“She kept the murders quiet.” After a weighty pause, he says, “I think her exact words were, ‘This investigation reflects badly on the Guard.’”

“Really?” It’s so hard to wrap my head around it, but I suppose I don’t really know Aveline that well despite having worked around her for months now. Our relationship’s pretty much been strictly professional, and even then, I don’t know that much about how the Guard works. “That’s—”

“Politics,” Varric mutters unhappily.

There’s a moody silence then, but despite the temptation, I don’t drink any of my wine. Instead, I trace patterns in the woodgrain, thinking. About politics, of course. About Garrett. About Geldauran. About—

“What’s this about a letter?” he says, and the question lightens the mood some.

“The Warden Commander wrote back.”

I see his eyes spark with interest. “Good news? Bad news?”

“She’s going to set up a meeting for me with one of her…associates.” He makes a face, and I add, a bit defensive, “Anders trusts her.”

“Uh huh,” he says, not exactly impressed. “What’re you hoping for?”

“Answers.” The response comes out of me immediately, and for once, it’s clear that this is what I want now. Really, it’s what I’ve always wanted.

The truth.

Varric whistles. “That’s a tall order, Pebbles.”

“I know.” I hate how small my voice sounds, but I’m being honest. This is what I want. This is what I need now. “I just have so many questions about—”

“About?” he prompts, after it’s clear I’m not going to finish my sentence, eyebrows shooting up.
When I don’t answer right away, he says, “Is it—?” He wiggles his eyebrows, and somehow, I get what he means. The elvhen thing.

“There’s that,” I say.

“Well, I’d love to help but—” He makes a face, probably thinking about the Fade or something along those lines.

I can’t help but laugh. “Varric, you’ve done nothing but help since I got here.” He shifts a little in his seat. “I really appreciate it. Thank you, Varric. I—”

“Pebbles, are you trying to make me blush?” he accuses.

“I don’t know. Is it working?”

“Maybe,” he grumbles, rubbing his chin a little.

“Pull back that dashing rogue persona, and you’re all soft and squishy inside,” I say, fondly. Varric, no matter the situation, always seems to be able to set me at ease.

Varric grumbles, “There’s no need for insults.” He tugs at the buttons on his shirt. “I cut a fine figure.”

“Mmm,” I hum appreciatively, mostly because I can’t help myself. It’s fun to turn the tables on him.

“As I tell Isabela time and time again—”

“Yes, yes,” I say, waving him off. “I’ll behave.”

Snorting, he picks up his tankard and has a sip of wine. “We’ll see.” It almost sounds like a ‘I wish you wouldn’t,’ but that could just be me overthinking. When he sets down his tankard again, he’s more serious. “I don’t know if I can do anything about your—” he does the elvhen thing gestures again “—but if there’s anything…”

“Thank you, Varric,” I say with a smile.

“You’re welcome,” he says, and then, with a grin, “Just don’t call me squishy again.”

“I think I have some wine,” Merrill says, not long after she’s closed the door.

Garrett immediately grimaces and shakes his head and waves his hand, saying emphatically, “No. No, thank you. Not me.”

Merrill turns to Varric, who’d accompanied us, and says, in a whisper-that-is-clearly-not-a-whisper, “Is he having a Bad day.”

“Looks like it,” Varric says.

Merrill nods once but then looks to me and Varric. “Would you like some?”

“No, thank you,” I say, just as Varric answers, “I really shouldn’t.”

“Have you all been at the Hanged Man all day?” Merrill asks, squinting at us.

“Well, I do live there,” Varric says.
“Mana and Hawke don’t,” Merrill points out, but she shakes her head. Her face goes pensive, and I can’t help but wonder if she’s upset it’s taken me so long to…follow up after the whole ‘Dread Wolf’ experience. “Is there something you needed? Mana? Hawke?”

“Actually,” Garrett begins, “I think Mana’s got something you need.”

“Oh?” Merrill turns to me and gives me a curious look. She doesn’t look angry, but Merrill’s pretty good at masking her emotions.

“I might have something to help with your eluvian.” She waits for me to continue, so still and expectant. “There’s a pass phrase.”

“There is?” Varric says, sounding a little intrigued himself.

“What is it?” Merrill says, with that familiar spark in her eye.

“First—”

“Maker, Mana,” Garrett says. “Just tell her.”

I take a deep breath. “Melana en athim las enaste.”

Without another word, Merrill turns and heads for the eluvian. We follow, and I don’t miss the multitude of looks that pass between Varric and Garrett. I know, from my time here, that Merrill’s project has been a source of tension among all Garrett’s friends, mostly because of Audacity’s involvement.

I couldn’t guess how they feel about my involvement.

Merrill places her hands on the surface of the eluvian, almost gingerly, and she says, very clearly into the glass, “Melana en athim las enaste.”

Nothing happens.

She tries it again, and when it doesn’t work again, she looks to me. “I said it right, didn’t I?”

“You did,” I say, trying not to cry. I’d really, really, really hoped it’d work, but I knew it was unlikely. “It’s been a long time, Merrill. It’s probably changed since,” I stop for a beat, then finish lamely, “then.”

“But that’s what I’m missing?” Merrill says. “I did fix it?”

“I think so,” I say tentatively. “I’m not an expert on eluvians or anything, but from what you’ve said about it, I’d guess so.”

She smiles. “And was I right? About it being used for communication?”

“Yes,” I say. She opens her mouth to respond, still smiling, and I rush to add, “And it’s a door. Sort of.”

“A door?” Garrett repeats, a little skeptical. Or maybe that’s apprehension.

“There are no ancient elven roads,” Merrill mutters to herself. Her smile brightens even further, and she darts forward and grabs me round the shoulders, spins me. “Thank you,” she says right before she kisses me right on the mouth.
“Oh,” Varric says, shocked then entirely too pleased with himself.

“You’re welcome,” I say, a little dazed. Merrill just beams at me and lets go. “Even though you did all the work and figured most of it out yourself.”

She just keeps on smiling. “I’ll have to speak to—” she stops, smiling dimming just a bit as she glances to Garrett.

“You’re going to talk to the demon!” Garrett accuses.

“I know what I need now,” Merrill says. “I’m so close, Hawke. If Audacity has the pass phrase—”

“You don’t need the demon,” Garrett says. “You have Mana!”

“About that demon,” I mutter. Varric seems to be the only one to catch it and gives me a look that says something along the lines of ‘please tell me you didn’t just say that.’ Merrill and Garrett continue arguing, and they get progressively louder until I nearly shout, “About that demon.”

“Mana,” Garrett says, deathly serious.

“I didn’t make a deal with them,” I rush to say.

“Andraste’s sword.” Garrett slaps his hand on his face and slides it down slowly.

“You’ve spoken to Audacity?” Merrill says, brow furrowed. “How? They’re trapped in the Sundermount.”

Garrett’s hand drops like a stone. “That’s a good question. How did you meet with…Audacity?”

The name seems to leave a bad taste in his mouth. Grimacing, I try to piece together the proper response.

“They’re in Daern’thal, aren’t they?” Merrill guesses.

“Shit,” Varric says, and a look passes between him and Garrett.

“Who is it, Mana?” Garrett says, advancing on me. It’s a little funny. A few minutes ago I was getting kissed, and now, here I am. Dealing with this.

“I don’t think they’re evil.” Garrett gives me such a look at that, and I feel my stomach drop. I regret mentioning it, and I feel ashamed to have gone against Audacity’s warning. They were right. I’d always known they were right. Demons, spirits. It was all the same now. We—they weren’t to be trusted.

Still, I try to explain, “It’s not that simple, Garrett. They know about—” I gesture vaguely around myself.

“That’s what demons want you to think,” Garrett snaps. He exhales, nostrils flaring, and asks again, “Who is it?”

I don’t like his tone, and I tell him so, “Don’t talk to me like that.”

Varric grimaces with almost every exchange, and Merrill remains close to me, watching very closely.

“It’s a demon,” he says. “Demons lie, Mana. They get into your head”—he motions with both hands to his own head—“and tell you all the things you want to hear.”
I can’t help it. I laugh, and he straightens where he stands, angry. “That’s not what happened at all,” I say, once I tamp down on the laughter. “And I don’t know why you think you understand this matter better than I do.”

He stares at me for a while, trying to puzzle me out. “What did it want from you?” he asks eventually, words surprisingly even.

“For me to ‘endure,’” I snap, and he frowns.

It clearly wasn’t the request he was expecting, and he opens and closes his mouth several times before he asks, “So it’s just a spirit then?” He clearly doesn’t believe so, but I understand that he’s trying.

Sighing, I run my hand down my face. “Why does it have to be one way or another?” He gives me an uncomprehending look, and I sigh again. “Yes, I guess so. If you have to put a name to it.”

“But you won’t tell me who it is?”

“Now?” I say shortly. “No.”

“Was that your first kiss?” Varric asks, as we pass the tree in the alienage. There’s still a significant amount of tension between Garrett and I, and Varric’s clearly trying his best to lighten the mood.

“No,” I say, trying not to sound so short. “No, it was not.”

“Was it a good kiss?”

Garrett quickens his pace and gets ahead of us.

“Are you taking notes?”

“Maybe?”

“It was a surprise kiss,” I say. “Not really good or bad. I really didn’t have time to process it.”

Varric opens his mouth to respond to that, most likely with disappointment, but Garrett beats him to the punch. “Talk about kissing later,” Garrett orders, turning to look back at us. “It’s starting to get dark.”

“Yes, Hawke,” Varric says dutifully, but as soon as Garrett turns around, he looks at me and gives me a wink.

I wink back with a smile, and he chuckles.

Then I hear it, the sound of an arrow cutting through the air.

“Pebbles!”

Chapter End Notes

Melana en athim las enaste, according to Wikipedia at least, means now let humility grant favor.
The first arrow gets me in the chest, knocking the air right from my lungs, and I’m forced back a few steps.

I swear everyone and everything is silent for a moment after that, then—

I gasp for air.

Sound rushes back in.

Garrett strikes out with his lightning, aiming for someone on the roof. Probably the archer.

Varric loads and fires the first bolt from his crossbow. It flies at a group of men coming down the main staircase into the alienage. “Come here and give Bianca a kiss!”

The bolt catches one of the men in the leg, and he goes down, screaming. His companions don’t stop to help him. Instead, they rush right on into the alienage.

“And we’re under attack,” Garrett says with a laugh. He spins his staff and catches one of the attackers in the stomach. “What a surprise!”

When he looks to me, though, there’s no trace of humor in his face at all, and I can’t help but wonder if I imagined the laughter.

There wasn’t pain at first, but now, it’s blooming fast in my chest, eating away at everything inside of me: my thoughts, my feelings, everything.

It seems likely that I misremembered or imagined his laughter.

“Get to Merrill’s,” he orders, and there’s a flash of a smile, though it’s strained. “She’ll kiss it better, I bet.”

“Garrett—” I begin.

He shakes his head and slams his staff on the ground, hard. The small group trying to surround him are thrown back, and he starts to spin his staff above his head.
The air in the alienage heats—

“Mana,” he shouts, never breaking the spell. “Go!”

Fireballs start to rain down around him.

I try and go, but the way back is blocked. I can’t focus well enough to even begin to puzzle out where all these people came from, how they managed to get behind us, but what matters is they’re there. Five or six in worn leathers, all with sharp things in their hands and sharper grins.

“It’s a shame,” one says, looking me up and down. He spins his daggers once, twice, as if to intimidate me.

And I am a little intimidated, understandably, but mostly, I hurt. Now, the arrow wound in my chest burns. My mouth tastes of blood, and I can smell it, too, in my nostrils.

The man who spoke lunges at me, and instinctively, I jerk out of the way of his daggers.

He nicks my arm and goes at me again. And again, I try to slip him.

I’m not fast enough.

He gashes my forearm, and it stings and burns and hurts. Blood drips down my arm onto the stone, onto the front of my dress, and my exhale is a hiss.

“The guildmaster wants her dead, Ottavio,” one of his companions warns. Her accent is strong. “Don’t play too long. The others are having trouble with the mage.”

Ottavio waves them off, and they leave me to his mercies.

There’s a small puddle of my blood on the ground, and my arm’s stinging so bad that it’s bringing tears to my eyes.

“Would you care for a dagger, messere?” he asks, flipping the one in his left hand so the hilt’s pointed in my direction. He bounces it lightly. “They will, at least, be able to say you died with a weapon in your hand.”

It’s not a kind gesture.

He’s toying with me, even despite his companion’s warning.

I have few options though. My injured arm is going numb, and the burning in my chest is getting worse and worse. My whole body feels heavy, like it’s starting to give out.

“No?” Ottavio says eventually, sounding mock-disappointed. He flips the dagger back and rolls his shoulders. He smiles at me, goes to pounce.

I clutch at my wounded arm and, without thinking, reach.

Immediately, my power reaches back and flows right on. Out.

Orana’s eyes go so wide when we come in from the foyer, but Garrett puts his hands up and rushes to reassure her.

“It’s really not as bad as it looks,” he says. “Well, the dress is a lost cause. No one’s ever getting the
bloodstains out—"

“Mana?” Orana whispers.

“I’m fine,” I reassure. “It’s—” I shrug, struggling to find the right words to explain. Eventually, I just say, “I did magic?”

“You did,” Garrett crows, slapping me on the back. My heart stutters in my chest, but he plows on. “And I’m jealous, cousin. I’m capable of a lot but turning people into statues? Maker’s Breath. I’m impressed. Aren’t you impressed, Varric?”

“It was pretty impressive, Pebbles. Next time we head down to the Wounded Coast, I vote we take you along,” Varric says, and just like that, my heart plummets. They’re just so nonchalant about it.

I try not to let my feelings show, but I’m not sure how good of a job I do on that front.

I killed someone.

They’d like for me to do it again.

So what? I keep asking myself that. This is Kirkwall. So what if I killed someone? So what if I kill someone else?

So what.

Yeah. No. Geldauran may have killed people, but me? Mana?

Fuck. Just...fuck.

It doesn’t matter what’s normal for this world. It’s hard. I can’t imagine it ever not being hard.

I killed someone.

I turned him to stone.

I exhale and throw that train of thought to the abyss. It seems to be the only good place for it for now.

“—of all the applications!” Garrett cries, throwing his arm around my shoulders. “We could go into the garden decorating business.” He looks up to the ceiling and wonders, “Is it called that? Garden decorating?”

“Garden décor, Hawke,” Varric quips, exaggerating the accent.

“Sounds expensive,” Garrett replies with a low, impressed whistle. He gives me a little squeeze. “What’d you say? We can start small. Giant spider statues first.”

“What’s happening?” I say, squinting as best I can up at his face. I still feel vaguely sick about the whole thing. I can guess what he means – he’s jokingly suggesting that we sell what are essentially corpses, I think, which really? Really? – and that’s bad enough.

“I’m taking that as a yes,” he says.

I roll my eyes and refuse to answer.
“Are you alright, Mana?” Orana asks. She still looks worried. She’s fidgeting with her hands, and her face is pinched.

I can’t help but wonder if it’s at least, in part, the magic that’s worrying her. I can’t blame her if it is.

“I’m alright,” I say, offering a smile.

“I’ve heard *that* tone before,” Varric mumbles, and he nudges me with his elbow.

Immediately, I rub where he nudged, through it didn’t hurt at all. I can’t look at him.

“Pebbles, you had to do it,” he says gently.

“I know.” I sound sort of…defeated. Which wasn’t my intent.

“And the blood?” Orana prompts.

I glance down my front, and despite the fact that I’ve already seen it, it’s *still* a little surprising. There’s so much blood, and it’s all mine.

Wincing, I begin, “Well…it’s mine.” Her eyes go wide, and I hurry to explain. “It’s fine now. It’s healed. I’m fine.”

“She got me, too,” Garrett says, flexing his free hand in front of us. It’d been all torn up before. “Then her magic did ‘a thing,’” he finishes, putting ‘a thing’ in air quotations.

I sigh - because I’d hoped he’d hold off on that part - and he reaches up and musses my hair. Then he drops his arm.

“You’re explaining the thing,” he says, hip-checking me.

“I don’t know how to explain the thing,” I grumble, shifting out of range. It’s not a lie. Geldauran’s memories are not…whole, and the more I think about the Fade, the more it doesn’t make sense. And *my* relation to the Fade, and by extension my power, especially doesn’t make sense.

“Just try,” Varric says.

“It’s not *in* me—” I begin.

They, of course, snicker at the wording. I just let them get it out of their systems, then go on, as if they hadn’t temporarily devolved into a pair of twelve-year-olds, “Or here, so I had to…call on it?” The words don’t feel quite right, but then again, the whole thing doesn't 'feel quite right.' “It’s not here anymore anyway.” I gesture vaguely around my person.


“Pebbles,” Varric scolds. “You can’t just go around crushing a man’s dreams like that.”

I roll my eyes. It feels good, though, their easy acceptance. Somehow, it feels almost *too* easy. It probably is. I think maybe Garrett knows how freaked out I am about the, you know, *murder* part. “I’m changing out of these clothes.”

Garrett hisses as if in pain and slams a hand over his heart.

I roll my eyes again and head into the library, feeling a little numb.
A few seconds after I’ve entered it, Orana’s there. She closes the door, hesitates for a second, then reaches out to grab my sleeve. “You’re really alright?” she asks.

I’m about to put my hand over hers, then I see all the dried blood there. I go to drop it, but she grabs it, squeezes.

“I’m alright,” I say again, squeezing back. “Are you alright?”

She frowns even as she says, “Yes, I’m alright.” She starts to worry her bottom lip. “I’ve never heard of a mage turning anyone to stone,” she says.

I draw away, again disgusted with myself. “Garrett said so, too.”

“It’s alright,” she says, letting her hand drop.

She does sound as though she means it, but the expression, itself, is becoming empty no matter how anyone says it.

“Mana, are you going to leave?”

“What?” For a second, I’m completely confused, but it was just today, wasn’t it? That I told Garrett I was going to stay? It was before I—well, before we went to Merrill’s, before the Hanged Man, before the messenger. It feels like I’ve lived out a hundred years just today. “Yes, I’m staying.”

“Oh,” she breathes, and a lot of the tension bleeds right out of her. “I thought—” She shakes her head.

I can’t keep myself from asking, “What did you think?”

“I thought you’d go for sure,” she says, shoulders dropping. “You remember things now, don’t you?” She meets my eyes, and I know that she gets it. At least, to some extent. “And you have your magic now.”

“Well,” I say, unable to keep from making a face. Because I don’t have it. Not really. It felt almost like I had borrowed the power for a moment. Which, of course, is odd and doesn’t make a lick of sense.

She laughs, probably at my expression.

“I’m still going to stay,” I reaffirm, when her face goes a little pensive. “I like you lot too much, I think.”

She drops her head on my shoulder and wraps her arms around me. “We like you, too,” she says. She rubs her forehead back and forth and adds, very quietly, sometime later, “If you go, promise you’ll tell me.”

I rest my head on top of hers and promise, “I will. I swear.”

“All Soul’s Day?”

Everyone’s eyes are on me. They’re waiting for my answer, of course, but it definitely feels like they’re waiting on a specific answer. No doubt, they want me to drop some tidbit about my mother. Revka.

I wonder if I should dispense with the ‘lie’ of Agrippina now or try to integrate her into the story of Revka. Leandra and I never really discussed it in much depth.
Maybe my mother went by Agrippina after she fled Kirkwall? Maybe…maybe. Thinking of all the possible lies is…exhausting.

“Mana?” Saemus prompts.

I shake my head, smile, and in the end, settle for the honest answer, “I hadn’t thought of it.”

“Well,” Sareth says, pouring me a fresh cup of tea, “there are a few weeks yet.” She passes me the cup with a soft, concerned smile. “Leandra wouldn’t speak of it. I know—” She stops.

If All Soul’s Day is anything like the one back ‘home,’ I can understand why it’s so difficult for Leandra. Even now, the mention of Bethany sets everyone in the house on edge.

It’s a wound that doesn’t seem like it’s even begun to heal.

“We have a small gathering here at the estate,” Sareth says. “My husband and I. Marlowe, if he can be spared.” Her eyes flicker to Saemus, and she lets out an exasperated sigh. “Saemus, if he can be bothered. And Marlein.” She pauses. “You are, of course, welcome. And your family.”

“I’ll think about it,” I say. “And I’ll pass word along.”

“Of course,” she says, and the matter drops. There’s a little, though significant, pause before she tackles the next matter, “I have to say, I’m pleased to see you looking so well today.”

“Sareth,” Saemus warns.

“Saemus,” she says back with a huff.

For a while, they hold each other’s gaze, and I can tell they’re locked in some kind of silent battle with one another.

“Did something happen?” I venture to ask, tracing the flower patterns on my cup.

“There was just a rumor making its rounds yesterday,” Saemus says, throwing an irritated look at Sareth. He grimaces as he finishes, “They were saying that you’d nearly been murdered.”

“Murdered?” I fidget with the handle of my cup.

“Someone recognized some Antivan Crows…skulking around the Undercity,” Sareth says. She’s watching my face closely, and it takes everything for me to hold it together and act calm.

After I’d cleaned up and redressed yesterday, Garrett told me that the people we’d – I used the word ‘we’ in the loosest sense – fought were Antivan Crows. They had papers on them, and from what he could glean from them, they’d been following the messenger who’d been carrying Mahariel’s message.

Apparently, they didn’t like her very much and us by association.

Sareth gives Saemus a look and says, “That part was true.” Her words are slow and deliberate.

“There’s a new installment in the alienage, I understand. The guards were discussing it this morning in the Ke—”

“Maker’s Breath,” Saemus snaps, and he whips around in his chair to look at me. “Guard Lia saw you coming out of the alienage yesterday. You were covered in blood.”

“Saemus,” Sareth warns this time.
He rolls his eyes and inhales sharply. “I swear, you’re the worst liar I’ve ever seen, Mana,” he says, sounding very frustrated.

I hadn’t actually lied about anything yet, but I suppose I understand what he means. I react to pretty much any mention of the ‘statue’ in the alienage. I can’t help it.

“Charming.” Sareth says, covering a laugh with a cough. “Though he’s correct. I assume…certain parties made sure that you escaped this…event unscathed?”

“Yes,” I say. My voice is a little rough, but a feeling of relief washes over me.

She thinks Garrett healed me.

“Good,” she says, looking pleased. Then her brow furrows and she starts, “Why—” She stops and shakes her head. “Nevermind.”

“Hmm?” I say, tilting my head slightly.

She waves it off, “Oh, it doesn’t matter.” Despite saying that, she continues, “One of Garrett’s friends lives in the alienage, yes?”

“Yes,” I answer, trying to keep my voice neutral. “Merrill.”

“Ah,” she says, in understanding. “The Dalish one?” There’s a touch of…ness to her tone that makes my skin crawl.

“The Dalish one,” I agree with a single, probably too sharp nod.

“Perhaps,” she says, “you might hold off on future visits for the time being?” She smiles, but this time, it’s a bit crooked. “Just until things have calmed down some.”

I nod once and smile, but I know it’s all very strained.

“It was only a suggestion,” Sareth says, as if sensing my discontent. “We’re just concerned about you.”

“Yes, we are,” Saemus agrees, and when I look at him, he seems surprised with himself. I don’t think he meant to speak.

“I’ll try my best to stay out of trouble,” I say, tapping the handle of my cup, “but there are no guarantees. Especially here.”

Sareth exhales, “Yes, I suppose you have a point. What is it we keep saying?” She mimics Marlein’s voice when she says, “‘This is Kirkwall.’” Then she shakes her head. “Still, I can’t help but think you’d be safer away from that alienage.”

“The templars raided their estate,” Saemus points out, voice a bit gruff. “They could raid yours, too, if they wanted. There is no safe place.”

“Well,” Sareth says sourly, “there’s safer places at least.” She paused before asking, in a faint sort of voice, “Do you think the Knight-Commander—?”

Saemus looks surprised by the idea, then his expression turns grim. “I don’t know.” He looks to me.

“There’s no proof,” I say gently. There won’t be any proof either because it seems more likely this has to do with Mahariel than Meredith. But of course, I have to keep that to myself. “Garrett’s not
without his enemies.”

“That’s true,” Sareth says, relaxing a bit. She gives me a little, almost mischievous smile. “But even so, we might mention it in our letter to the Divine. They should at least investigate the matter.”

Saemus snorts.

“Marlein’s sworn to go to Val Royeaux herself to deliver it if that’s what it takes,” Sareth says. “There’s more than enough going on here to warrant—”

“What purpose would that serve?” Saemus says. He’s working himself into a mood, and Sareth, too, seems to be following him. “The name Selbrech holds little weight here and no weight in Orlais. They’ll laugh her right out of the Grand Cathedral.”

“We have to try something. The Knight-Commander oversteps herself, raiding the houses of nobles for no good—”

Saemus snorts again.

“Oh!” Sareth snaps. “I suppose you’d like your father to pass her the crown then?”

I must make some sort of face because Sareth takes one look at me and deflates. She goes a bit pink in the face, too. “Mana, my apologies. I didn’t mean to shout.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Saemus says. His voice is so small.

“I know it’s not,” Sareth replies with a sigh. “But revolutions are bloody and costly, Saemus, so let us at least try.”

I go to the hall where I met Audacity and try an old exercise of Geldauran’s.

There’s a long line of maybe twenty sconces on one of the walls, and I go down the line lighting them with magic. One, two, three, four, until the whole wall’s blazing with light.

I put them all out.

I light two at a time. Put them out. I light four, put out four, light four, put out two. I light the ones at the ends. I put them out. I make patterns, snuff them out. I create a flame above one of the sconces, then slowly drop it into the socket. I lift it up again and move it over a sconce.

“Hardly a fitting job for you, Geldauran,” Audacity says, and when I turn, I find them just there by the door. They don’t seem surprised by the development, if it’s even right to call it that.

“Audacity,” I say, nodding once. I turn back to the wall and stare at the flickering flames. “Is there something you needed?”

“Needed,” they repeat, amused. “Not me, no. But you, Geldauran?” They chuckle. “You’ve spent the last hour lighting lamps.”

“Isn’t time meaningless in the Fade?” I mutter, and sighing, I turn back to them.

Audacity raises a brow and completely ignores the comment, saying, “You can do more.” I open my mouth to retort, but Audacity gives me a look. It’s familiar, that look. “You know that you can.”

“I’ve already done more,” I say.
“Yes,” they agree. “I heard. Considering how weak mortals are, you should not consider that much different from lighting lamps.” They aren’t smiling anymore. “Once, that would have been as easy as breathing.”

“What would?” I snap. “Lighting lamps or killing people?”

“Both,” Audacity answers, without a trace of their usual amusement. “You helped build this city.” They gesture grandly around us. “Do you remember?”

I hesitate, but in the end, I nod because I do remember that. I remember how easy it was, too, and how different it felt back then, to do magic.

They nod as though they hadn’t expected any other answer. “In less than a day, we built—”

I can’t help myself. “You said ‘we.’”

Audacity stops, frowns, then with a shrug, they admit, “I did.”

They’re about to go on, but I rush to ask, “Who are you?” The question’s been on my mind for far too long. They open their mouth again, and they’re smiling this smug little smile, so I add, “Don’t say Audacity.”

“That’s who I am.” They sound amused again.

“You know my name,” I point out. “You know Geldauran, I mean. Why won’t you tell me who you were?” I feel frustrated tears start to well up in my eyes, but I force them back angrily. I refuse to cry.

Audacity clicks their tongue twice as they consider it. Then they huff out a little, breathy laugh. “You will know in time,” Audacity says, at last.

“Really?” I hope I sound as unimpressed as I feel.

“The best and most valuable knowledge is the most difficult to obtain,” Audacity says, mimicking something I used to tell the apprentices in the archives. They grin at me. “Shall we?”

“Shall we wh—”

A blast of cold catches me right in the chest, and Audacity laughs, really laughs. “You certainly are out of practice.”

“You’re a dick,” I mutter, brushing ice off my clothes, but already, I’m thinking of the best way to get them back, to counter.

They try it again, and this time, I’m ready. Or more ready anyway. A wall of flame roars to life between me and the incoming blast with a sharp wave of my hand.

But it’s not entirely effective.

Parts of the wall crystallize, frozen solid by Audacity’s spell. I run my hand over these patches and the fire overtakes them.

Audacity hits the wall again and again, presumably with the same spell.

My spell holds.
Eventually, Audacity moves so they can attack one of my open sides, and I let the wall drop.

It starts to feel more natural. The magic mostly but also the rhythm of the exercise, the fight.

I think of Garrett and try the lightning. Audacity sticks to their ice, shields themselves with it, and when the lightning hits, ice shatters off their shield. It flies up in the air and showers down on both of us.

Audacity laughs, delighted. “That was new,” they say, and they toss aside the remains of their ruined shield. When it hits the floor, it shatters, sending ice shards skittering across the floor.

Audacity raises a hand and begins, “Perhaps—”

The door leading outside opens.

It’s Feynriel, and he stops right in his tracks when he sees the both of us…and the aftermath of our brief fight.

Audacity drops their hand, and I wave away the icy debris and put out the lights. My face is a little warm. Somehow, I feel like we’ve just been caught.

“Uh,” Feynriel says, looking from the sconces to Audacity to me to the floor. Then he looks at me and his eyes narrow significantly. “Were you fighting?”

“It was a demonstration,” Audacity answers, and they sound like Keeper Marethari again.

“A demonstration,” Feynriel repeats, brow furrowing. “A demonstration of what?”

“Magic,” Audacity answers simply. When they look to me, I see a flicker of that familiar smugness. Audacity indeed. “It seems the rumors are true.”

“Is there anyone who hasn’t heard?” I mumble, more to myself than to them.

“It’s true?” Feynriel says, excitement entering his tone. He steps into the hall and the door closes behind him. Without the light from the outside, it’s dark in the hall once more. Audacity looks from me to the sconces, silently encouraging me to ‘demonstrate.’

They have an agenda, but I can’t for the life of me puzzle it out. But it feels pointless to resist considering Audacity flat out revealed that I can do magic now.

With a sigh, I light all the fixtures in one go. Feynriel makes a pleased little noise almost immediately.

“It wasn’t that impressive,” I say.

“It wasn’t that impressive,” Feynriel repeats, staring at me with an incredulous expression. “You can do magic!” He suddenly frowns. “The templars—”

“It’s easier here, in the Fade,” I say, and I frown myself. “I don’t know why.”

“But you turned that man to stone, didn’t you?”

I feel as though I’ve been hit by one of Audacity’s ice spells, but I swallow and nod once.

“But—” He stops himself with a shake of his head, looking regretful. “Nevermind. Later. Orsino wants to talk to you. He hasn’t much time.” Even as he speaks, he’s turning back to the door.
“Of course,” I say, glancing at Audacity one last time before heading after him.

Audacity doesn’t follow.

Chapter End Notes

I know we’re going Someplace with this, but if you would, please bear with me here. I’m trying to reveal things as...organically as possible.
Heya, peeps. As you may or may not have noticed, there's a new note in the summary of this fic now: **This fic has been discontinued, but you can find the rewrite (17,000+ words already) here.** And yeah. That's what's going on. This fic has been discontinued, BUT I have been rewriting it.

Someone suggested that I post this announcement in an actual chapter because a lot of people, especially subscribers, didn't know about the rewrite. So if you liked this fic, consider trying out the rewrite. I'm very proud of it. I think I grew a lot as a writer between this version and the rewrite.

And finally, I'm sorry if I dashed your hopes of new content just now by posting this "chapter." :(

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!