May Death Never Stop You

by kadaransmuggler

Summary

A high school student wakes up near Ostagar before the big battle. This is (most of) her story.
Arya Huskins woke up slowly, her head aching with an intensity that nearly made her sick. She was, most of all, confused, unable to pinpoint her location. Where am I? she thought. Didn't I fall asleep in class? Even without waking up, though, Arya could feel grass underneath her and her backpack. She wondered if perhaps her friends had played a joke on her, taking her out of the building while she slept and leaving her in the grassy courtyard, although she wondered how. She was heavy, and her backpack even moreso, and whoever managed to lift both of them and carry them to the pavilion was, well, impressive. And none of her friends could exactly do that. She cracks open her eyelids, and when the sky stops spinning above her, she sits up slowly, raising a hand to her head and one to her mouth. Her stomach lurches and twists uncomfortably, and finally she gives up trying to combat the nausea and shrugs her shoulders out of her bag, managing to make it a few feet away before she lands hard on her hands and knees, emptying the contents of her stomach into a conviently placed bush. When she finished, she scurried away again before the smell of sick could get to her, and she dragged her pack over to her, digging around for some gum that she knew was in there somewhere. She took a moment to look around while she was elbow deep in her bag, and then it hit her. She wasn't at school anymore, and she didn't even recognize any of the nearby landmarks.

"What the fuck?" she muttered, abandoning her search for gum. Sudden panic swamped her.

"Oh, goddess. Dad's going to flip. Mom's going to flip. I'm going to flip right now," she mumbled, pulling her phone out of her jacket pocket. It was, unfortunately, dead, and she let out a long stream of curses. She started to throw it, but thought better of it and instead tucked it back into her pocket.

"Dammit all to fuck," she cursed, while she pulled out her laptop. Maybe she could get some more information, even if it was only the time. Maybe her friends had even left her a message before so kindly leaving her in the middle of nowhere. Tragically, however, the time was frozen at 9:25a.m. Which was when she last checked it in class. She let out another long stream of curses, rocking back on her heels and forcing herself to take deep, even breaths. She put her laptop away, jerked the zipper closed on her backpack, and stood, dusting off her jeans before throwing her bag over her shoulder.

The nearest structure was just barely visible in the distance, and she didn't recognize it, either. It looked remarkably like a ruin, though, and if she weren't freaking out, she probably would have been excited.

Instead, she was terrified as she hitched her bag higher on her shoulders and started walking, thankful that she'd worn comfortable shoes instead of the heels she had so nearly put on. As she got closer, the sun was high in the sky, and she noticed people practically swarming the ruin. As she got even closer, she noticed that they had swords. And armor. And not the shitty props that people usually had. Then she noticed all the stairs, and groaned. Her backpack weighed as much as a small child, and climbing those stairs was not something she looked forward to, but she soldiered on. She did, however, take note of the strange looks she was getting as she drew near, and she put most of her focus on not panicking and doing something stupid.

Arya took a deep breath to steady herself and then approached the nearest person, a kind-looking man who was sitting on a stump polishing his sword. And for once, she really wished that was a euphemism. "Hi, so, uh, I kinda got really lost. As in, I don't even know where to start with how lost I am. Could you tell me where I am?" she asked, trying her best to be polite. She worried that she'd stumbled on a cult, and she really hoped she didn't offend them because what if they were the type of cult that was completely okay with human sacrifice? She didn't want to be a sacrifice. Instead,
however, the man looked up at her and smiled.

"Of course, miss. You're at Ostagar, in the Korcari Wilds. Were you fleeing from the darkspawn?" he asked. Oh, fuck me sideways. Darkspawn, Korcari Wilds, Ostagar....wasn't this all a little Dragon Age-y? she thought, although she kept a polite smile on her face.

"I was. They attacked and I just started running. I haven't looked back since," she answered, brushing her hair out of her eyes. Internally, however, she decided that this was all most likely a dream. She was still in English class, drooling on her expensive textbook, with friends who were drawing obscene things on her, and a teacher who was probably 200% done with her shit.

"Well, perhaps you can find some assistance deeper in the camp," the man said, and Arya nodded, making a hasty retreat. Despite having firmly decided that this was indeed a dream, Arya shifted her backpack on her shoulders and headed up the stairs. She got a little distracted when she saw the kennel master, who ignored her completely, although she also saw the dogs. They were huge, and they could easily have weighed two-hundred pounds each. She wanted six.

After an embarrassingly long amount of time spent watching the dogs, she thought she should probably move on. Which she did. And, for her effort, she got a face-full of gleaming, golden plate metal. She bounced off, almost comically, and craned her neck back to look up at the face of the person wearing the golden armor she had so boldly introduced herself too, almost crying when she realized who it was.

"Shi...Sorry!" she squeaked, trying to duck away from him. He reached out almost automatically, grabbing her arm and anchoring her into place. I am so fucked, she thought, but he merely gave her a curious look. She had no idea how she was going to get out of this one.

"Who are you?" Cailan asks, and he doesn't sound angry.

"I'm, uh, Allison. Allison Gunn," she says, and then closes her eyes and berates herself. Out of all the possible fake names in the entire universe that you could have chosen, you chose the fake name Shepard took? Goddess, that's so stupid, she thinks, and she almost misses Cailan's next remark.

"You don't look like you're from here, Miss Gunn," he says, and she almost laughs. She swallows heavily, instead, and thinks about all the possible consequences that could arise from messing with someone in a position of power.

"I'm not," she answers, and she is proud when her voice doesn't shake.

He smiles at her, then, a kind smile. "What are you doing at Ostagar, then?" he asks, cocking his head to the side. Oh, Goddess, he's such a puppy, she thought, but she returned his smile with a nervous one of her own.

"I was running from the darkspawn horde. I ran for a long way. I'm not even sure how I got here, to be honest. I thought, once I saw Ostagar, that I could find some safety, but I don't think that is the case," she says, and she hopes it is a convincing lie, and she a convincing actor.

"What makes you think that you aren't safe here?" he asks, nudging her out of the way so an elven servant carrying an armful of boxes can pass. She glances at the servant guiltily, but she forces herself to focus on Cailan's question.

"I'm a, uh, seer. I saw the outcome of the coming battle. I would be willing to discuss what I saw, but I would insist that it is done privately," she says, thinking fast. She'd never been too good at coming up with lies on the spot.
"Very well, Miss Gunn. If you don't object, I'd like to send two of my personal guards with you. I have a meeting with Teryn Loghain that I am unable to miss, but I'm very interested in what you have to say," he says, and the relief Arya feels is almost overwhelming.

"Of course. I, uh, would like to see a healer while I wait. And, uh, are you going to tell Loghain about me?" she asks, her voice small.

"I didn't plan on telling him, no," Cailan answers, patting her shoulder. Her knees almost buckle, and she can only imagine how heavy the armor he's wearing is.

"Okay. Thank you," she says, and Cailan calls in a couple of stone-faced guards.

"Take Miss Gunn to a healer, and then take her back to my tent. Make sure she's comfortable," he instructs, and then they lead her away, deeper into the bustle of Ostagar.
a king among men

An hour later, when King Cailan returned Arya back to his tent, she had gotten a healer to take care of her headache, and had even eaten. The food hadn't been free, but one of the guards with her had talked the cooks into letting her eat without paying as a personal favor to the king. She had even had enough time to do her makeup, and she thought that this dream was awfully realistic considering she had to redo her eyeliner six times before she got it right thanks to the shaking of her hands. When Cailan returned to his tent, he dismissed the guards. They shared a look with each other before glaring at her. She picked up on it pretty quickly, actually, and scoffed.

"Don't worry. He's safe with me. He could probably snap me in half. It'd be suicide to try anything and I don't actually want to die," she said, and only after an insistent gesture from Cailan did they turn and walk away.

Cailan ushered her inside before entering himself, sitting down on the edge of the cot. She sat down gingerly on a rough-hewn stool, and found herself leaning forward, her elbows propped up on her legs.

It was only after she sat down that she noticed how dark it was inside, and she acutely felt the lack of the guard's presence. Even though she'd expected a private audience with Cailan, she also expected him to keep at least one guard with him, just in case she tried anything.

"Well, Miss Gunn, I suggest you start talking. Emergencies that need my attention tend to rise up quite often," he said, humor glittering in his eyes. She cleared her throat nervously, cracking a small smile despite her nerves.

"Right, yeah, of course. Uh, this is probably going to sound really crazy, but I'm a seer. I've also traveled really far, as you can probably tell from my things. I could show you in detail what I have, and maybe that'd convince you, if you don't believe me," she says, speaking in a rush. She's not the best at talking to people.

"I think I'd like that, Allison," he says, his voice warm and soft, and Arya thinks she could melt from it. She's always had a thing for voices.

"Right, well, the first thing is my pack itself. It won't look like any other that's from around here," she says, nudging the aforementioned pack closer to him with her foot. He picks it up effortlessly, and she wrinkles her nose. She can barely lift it, and she's been carrying it for three years. He just picks up it up like it weighs nothing.

"It is very strange. What are these?" he asks, sliding one finger delicately along a zipper. Arya could think of at least a dozen sinful uses for those fingers. She shook her head lightly, trying to keep her mind out of the gutter.

"Those are called zippers. It's a sort of clasp that's more effiencent than buckles or buttons," she informs him, jiggling her leg subconsciously. She reaches forward and shows him how to use it, and his face lights up, the lines beside his eyes crinkling together.

"That's genius! How common are they? How are they made?" he asks, and Arya gives him a slow and steady smile.

"They're on a lot of things, and much more common than buckles. Probably even more common that buttons, but I'm not sure on that. I'm not sure how they're made, sadly. They are used on a variety of
things, though. Packs, clothing, and some other things," she answers.

"What sort of clothing utilizes this?" he asks, still absentmindedly fingering the zipper. Arya swallowed heavily and looked away from his hands.

"Uh, things like this. It's a jacket; it goes on over an outfit and is meant to keep you warm. Like a cloak," she replies, untying her jacket from her waist and shrugging it on to demonstrate. For good measure, she even zipped it up, and he reached out to touch it.

"The fabric isn't like anything here, either. Does it keep you warm?" he asks, looking up at her. Sometime during their conversation, she'd stood and shifted closer. She was, in fact, standing much closer than she probably should be.

"I...for the most part, although that's because it never got really cold where I'm from," she answers. He tilts his head back, the dim light reflecting off the bright pale blue of his eyes.

"I believe you, just so you know. If you want to show me more interesting this, by all means, don't let me stop you, but you don't have to prove anything to me," he says, and she grins.

"I can prove more, later, if you listen to me," she says, and he scoots over to the side, letting her take a seat on the cot next to him.

"Very well. Tell me, all-seeing seer," he says, nudging her playfully, and she chuckles.

"This is, uh, pretty heavy stuff. You won't like it, and you probably won't want to believe me. I do have a few questions before I really begin, 'cause the future isn't set in stone. It can change. The big battle is tonight, yes?" she asks, forcing herself to speak slowly.

"Yes, it is. It'll begin shortly before dusk, if all goes to plan," he answers. She drags the toe of her shoe through the dirt and chews on her lip.

"What is the name of the recruit that Duncan brought a few days ago? I'm aware of Daveth, the thief, and Jory, the knight, but isn't there a third?" she asks, and she wonders how long she can go before she makes a mistake and reveals the truth about who she is and where she's from.

"Yes. His name is Eldris Mahariel. He hails from a Dalish clan out of the Brecilian Forest," Cailan answers, and Arya smiles. The next part, she thinks, will be easy. She'd played the opening of the game a hundred times or more.

"Tonight, before the battle, Eldris, Jory, and Daveth will go through a Warden ritual called the Joining. It's secret, but it's what makes them a true Grey Warden. In my vision, after the Joining, when Eldris woke, you requested a strategy meeting. At the end of the meeting, you decided to send Eldris and Alistair to ensure the signal is lit. However, when they get there, the tower is overrun with darkspawn, and when they get to the top of the tower, they are late. Loghain quits the field in order to save as many lives as he can. You...you do not survive. Neither does Warden-Commander Duncan. Actually, Eldris and Alistair are the only ones to survive, thanks to some...intervention from outside forces. This is why I came to warn you, and this is why I insisted on doing so in private. I did not want Loghain to accuse me of treason, especially considering that in my vision, he blamed the Wardens for your death," she says, and by the end she has picked one of her nails until a drop of bright red blood has welled up. She wipes it on her jeans.

It is silent for a long time before Cailan responds. "Loghain betrayed me? He left the field while we were still fighting?" Cailan asks, his voice soft. Arya reaches out, taking one of his hands in both of hers. His hands are rough and calloused, a soldier's hands, and her hands are so small compared to
"I don't believe so. I believe he made the best tactical decision he could have made. If he had charged...everyone would have died. Ferelden would have been consumed by the Blight," she answers, glancing at him sympathetically. She'd never been good at comforting others.

"That...makes sense. What happens, then, as a result of my death?" he asks, and he grips her hand tightly for a moment. She squeezes his hand gently before she answers.

"Ferelden nobility was plunged into chaos. There were those who tried to take advantage of that, Arl Howe being among the foremost. It isn't until Eldris and Alistair, with Arl Eamon's help, call a Landsmeet that the situation is resolved, and even then there is unrest. It is...it would be better if you survived," she told him, and then she looks at the ground once more.

"I would like your advice on how to proceed, then," Cailan says, and Arya looks up at him sharply.

"Me? But I'm not a soldier or a strategist," she protests, and this time he squeezes her hand.

"No, you aren't, but I believe you found your way here and gave me this information for a reason. I would like your advice," he says, firmly but gently, and she conceded, thinking carefully before answering.

"Very well. What I would do in your situation is...well, probably the worst thing possible, but if I were you...I'd get out. Tonight, before the battle. Make up some excuse, leave, and go to Lothering. I can go with you if you'd prefer, but you should take a couple of guards with you. You should, however, have me speak to Eldris and Alistair. They can meet you in Lothering and you can decide from there what the best course of action would be," she says.

She could talk to Duncan, too, but he was so close to his Calling that she doubted he'd go with her, if he even believed her. She realized with a start that all of this was a dream anyway, and almost laughed. It felt so real, though.

"You think that this would truly be best?" Cailan asks, examining their twined hands.

"I think so. Ferelden needs you. I know you want glory, and I understand that, but you must place your people before your desire for glory. So, what will it be? Will you take my advice?" she asks, and she, too, examines their clasped hands.

There is a very pregnant pause before Cailan answers. "Yes, Allison, I will. This...this will not be easy for me, so I hope for both of our sakes that you're telling the truth. I would like it if you accompanied me when I left. Prior to leaving, I'll get you fitted for some armor, and we'll get you the heaviest set you can wear. I'll also gift you some daggers. You may lack the proper training, but instincts usually take over long enough to survive until someone can teach you. I'll have the two guards I sent with you earlier accompany us, and one of them can escort you to the Wardens' tent," he says, but he doesn't make a move to let go of her hand. She smiles and bites her bottom lip.

"Thank you. But I have no money, and I can't afford to pay you back for the armor and weapons," she says. He shakes his head, a faint smile on his own face.

"Nonsense. What's the point in having all this coin if I can't afford to gift someone some new armor occasionally? Besides, you can't travel with me in the clothes you're wearing," he points out. She smiles and squeezes his hand one final time before letting go and standing.

"Brett told me that you didn't have any coin. I don't expect you to pay me back, but maybe eventually we can work out a way for you to earn some money of your own. It's never good to rely
on the charity of others," he says, his tone gentle to take the sting out of his words.

"Yeah, I know. I have money from back home, but that won't do me any good here. I have a few skills I can probably put to use earning something, but if not, don't worry about it," she says, and she almost tells him that she isn't his problem. His eyes are shining with concern, though, and she doesn't want to antagonize him. He had just promised to buy her a new set of armor, after all. He stands, brushing against her as he moves past her in the cramped, crowded space. She sucks in a deep breath, and then she is blinking against the sudden sunlight when he holds the tent flap open.

"You first," he says, laughing. She rolls her eyes, and once they adjust she shoulders her backpack once more.
Ostagar was much larger than it was in game, Arya quickly realized. She couldn’t even see Duncan’s sequestered, separate campsite from where she stood outside Cailan’s tent, flanked by Brett and the other guard, Eliza. “Um, can one of you take me to the Grey Warden’s campsite?” she asked, her gaze nervously flickering between the two of them.

“I can,” Eliza said, stepping forward. She shared a brief glance with Brett, who merely nodded before he looked away, ducking inside the tent to speak with Cailan.

“Come on, then. The Grey Wardens have a camp mostly separate from everyone else’s. It’s quite a long walk, for it to be in the middle of camp,” she said, a kind smile on her face behind her helm. Arya returned the smile, and trailed after Eliza as the other woman led the way towards Duncan’s campsite.

“So, you’re telling us that you’re a seer, and you saw the coming battle fail through my eyes, and that we’re going to be saved miraculously by the witch we met in the Wilds earlier?” Eldris demanded. Arya shrank back away from him. Although he was slightly shorter than her, the deep red lines and the angry scowl on his face kind of intimidated her.

“I’m also saying that you and Alistair both need to find King Cailan and myself in Lothering after this happened,” she reminded him helpfully.

“Are you insulting my intelligence, shemlen?” the elf demanded, shaking the messy brown hair out of his eyes and crossing his arms.

“No! I’m not insulting anything about you! I’m telling you that I saw the future, and if you don’t do this then the world would burn,” she says back, mirroring his stance in her frustration. Eldris narrowed his eyes, stepping closer to her.

“And just why should I care what happens to the humans?” he asked, his eyes glinting dangerously. Arya took a deep breath. She knew this was a touchy topic. Hell, the Dalish were her favorite part of any Dragon Age game. But, more importantly, she understood their anger. She just hoped that’d be enough.

“I wouldn’t, if I were in your position. The only thing the humans have ever done for the elves was take their homeland and force them into something barely better than slavery. But you aren’t just Dalish, now. You are a Grey Warden, and you have a duty to save the world from the Blight. By all means, go and burn the shemlen cities afterwards. I’ll even help. But standing aside and letting the Blight consume the world would put the Dalish in danger. You can only run for so long before it catches up to you,” she said, her hands moving to her sides as she met his eyes steadily. Her heart fluttered in her chest, but she was proud when her voice hadn’t shook.

“You…have a point, which is surprising for a shemlen like you. Very well. I believe you, regardless of whether Alistair does,” he conceded, and Arya deflated, letting out a heavy sigh. Oh, thank the gods above, she thought, as she turned to the blonde man standing next to Eldris.

“What do you think, Alistair?” she asked, her voice soft. He’d always held a soft spot in her heart. He’d been her favorite pretty much from the first time she played the game, and seeing him standing
in front of her was…nice. Even if it is only a dream, she thought. It had to be a dream.

“If my…companion believes you, I do. Are you going to tell Duncan?” he asks, and Arya remembers the awful way Duncan had died. She also remembered how close he was to his Calling.

“I will talk to him, yes. Whatever he decides to do is up to him, though,” she says, carefully, pushing her hair out of her face.

“Of course. We’ll be sure to meet you in Lothering,” he replies, cheerfully, grasping her hand in his and giving her a firm handshake. Arya smiles at them both, before turning and wandering away, searching for Duncan, Eliza trailing behind her.

She finds him a few minutes later, speaking to a pretty elven servant. The girl sees Arya approaching and bows, backing away. Duncan turns to her, his dark eyes flicking up and down her.

“I don’t believe we’ve met,” he says, his tone cautiously polite.

“We haven’t, ser. My name is Allison Gunn. Are you Warden-Commander Duncan?” she asks, clasping her hands behind her back.

“I am. What do you want with me, Miss Gunn?” he replies. She gives him a small, polite smile.

“Could we go somewhere more private to talk? I have some information for you that might be upsetting, and it is, at the very least, sensitive,” she says. He pauses, considering for a moment.

“Very well. Follow me to my tent,” he said, turning on his heel and walking off, giving her no time to respond. She could have cried at the thought of walking much farther, but thankfully his tent was relatively close. And, surprisingly, he had two stools in there. She seated herself on the one closest to the exit, her backpack on the ground by her feet.

“Well? What is this information?” he asks. It was almost demanding, but not quite. She shifted nervously.

“You might not believe me, at first. It’s a lot to swallow. I’m a seer, and I’ve traveled very far. A few weeks ago, I had a vision of the battle that takes place tonight. I saw it through Eldris’s eyes, so perhaps my perception was a bit biased, but the battle fails. Cailan dies on the battlefield, along with you, and Loghain calls a retreat because the signal was lit late. Ferelden is launched into political unrest, and Eldris and Alistair have to save the world from the Blight despite their inexperience. It is…not pretty,” she explains, watching Duncan’s face carefully.

“I’ve seen visions similar. It comes from being a Warden,” he replies, and his voice is more guarded than ever.

“I know you are close to your calling. I’ve already spoken to King Cailan, and Alistair and Eldris. Cailan is leaving before the battle, and I’m joining him. Eldris and Alistair will meet up with us in Lothering. Your fate, however, should be your choice,” she says, gently, and Duncan graces her with a smile.

“Thank you. I think, even knowing how this will end, that I will stay and fight,” he says, and Arya feels her chest constrict with sadness.

“That is an…honorable decision, Duncan. I do suggest speaking to Alistair and Eldris prior to the battle, if your decision is truly made,” she replies, and Duncan reaches out and squeezes her hand, giving her a small, sad smile. After a moment, she turns and leaves the tent. Eliza leads her through
the camp once more, to the quartermaster and Cailan. The day feels heavier than it did before.

“Hail! Did you speak with them?” Cailan asks as she approaches, and his smile is nearly as bright as the glint of his armor.

“I did,” she said, once she got closer, “and they believe me. I talked to Duncan as well, let him know,” she said, and maybe it is something in the tone of her voice that gives her away.

“And what did Duncan say?” Cailan asked. She frowned, dragging a hand through her hair.

“He wants to stay and participate in the battle,” she says. Cailan takes a deep breath, processing the information.

“Oh,” is all he says, and then they stand there in silence for a few minutes.

“Well, we should probably get you fitted for that armor, now,” he says, turning to her suddenly. She smiles up at him, hoping some of the heaviness in the air would dissipate.

“Yes, we should. I’ve always wanted some armor. Although, that was for nerd reasons instead of survival reasons,” she says. She leaves her pack with Eliza, and Cailan takes her hand, pulling her gently over to the quartermaster. After a long conversation full of technical armor terms that Arya doesn’t know, she’s been stripped down to her underthings in the middle of camp.

“Are you sure there’s nowhere else we could do this?” she complains, glaring at Cailan as the quartermaster moves around her, measuring and prodding and clucking as he examines her.

“Nope,” he answers with a cheeky grin, and he makes a show of looking up and down her body. She sticks her tongue out at him and he laughs, a clear and bright sound. The quartermaster shakes his head, mumbling to himself before straightening up.

“We’ve got three full kits that could work for her. Two of them are plain leather, although the first is a lot rougher than the second. The second’s a third tier set of armor, despite the fact that it’s missing a helmet. The third is a set of studded leather armor. The second’s probably the best quality,” he says, speaking quickly.

“I probably won’t wear a helmet. If the second one is best, then maybe we should go with that one?” Arya suggests, crossing her arms over her breasts.

“You need a helmet. But we can take the helmet from the third suit and substitute it,” Cailan said. Arya frowned, remembering how uncomfortable the leather helmets looked.

She didn’t get much say, however. The quartermaster handed her the armor and walked off, leaving her feeling frustratingly overwhelmed. She didn’t even know where to start, and, to her horror, she felt tears welling up in her eyes. It was a simple thing, really, but she was so lost.

“Don’t you know how to put armor on?” Cailan asked, his hand on her shoulder. She shook her head mutely, blinking back the tears before the first had begun to fall. She sniffed, then looked up at him. “That’s okay. I can tell you’ve never worn it before. I’ll show you how to put it on until you get it,” he murmured, reaching down and picking up the first piece.

It turned out, despite the excessive amount of armor pieces, it wasn’t that difficult to put on. There were just way too many buckles for Arya to begin to make sense of. Cailan’s fingers are deft and quick, though, making short work of them, and it took a surprisingly short amount of time for Arya to get armored up.
“And now for the finishing touch,” Cailan says, sliding daggers into the sheaths at her waist with a flourish. She grins, running her fingers along the smooth leather of her helmet.

“It’s heavier than I thought it would be,” she says, finally, and Cailan only smiles, linking his arm through hers and leading her back through the camp. Eliza had long since stocked up on supplies for the journey, returning to Cailan’s tent with the provisions and Arya’s backpack.

“Have you eaten?” Cailan asks, stopping short in front of the mess hall.

“Yeah, earlier when I saw the healer,” she answers.

“You need more food than that. C’mon, I’ll eat with you,” he says, and his hand is still warm in hers so she follows. She’s not even all that hungry, really, but she knows she will be later, so she suffers through the line with him.

“You know, I don’t even like this stew. It’s too…bland,” she complains, sitting across from him.

“Hey, this is fine Ferelden cuisine right here,” he says, a glimmer in his eyes letting her know he’s teasing.

“I could do better. And I’ve never cooked over an open flame like this” she retorts, and Cailan’s foot nudges hers underneath the table.

“It isn’t that bad,” he tells her. She shakes her head slightly, a small smile quirking the corner of her mouth up.

“Agree to disagree?” she asked, her eyes wide and innocent. He snorts, nods, and shovels another bite into his mouth.

By the time they finished eating and returned to Cailan’s tent, it is dusk. “I’ve got a meeting with Loghain, Duncan, and Eldris, which you already knew about. I’m going to go to that, and then we’ll leave,” he promises. She shifts on one foot, biting her lip as she looks up at him.

“Are you going to mention the fact that you’re leaving?” she asks. He shakes his head.

“No, I’m not. Duncan already knows, of course, as does Eldris, but Loghain…I can’t help but think it would be best for him to remain in the dark. If all goes according to your vision, then we’ll find Loghain afterwards and figure out where to go from there. If it doesn’t, well…” he says, trailing off uncertainly at the end.

“We’ll cross that bridge when she get to it,” she concluded, a faint smile on her face.

“Exactly. Anyway, I’ll be back shortly. Eliza and Brett will accompany us when we leave, so you can get to know them now if it would make you more comfortable,” Cailan said turning to go. Arya watched him leave, her eyes following the shine of his armor.

As she waited, Arya discovered that Ferelden nights got cold. She curled up on herself, shivering. She didn’t want to put her jacket on because the red of the fabric would draw attention to her, but she wasn’t fond of sitting there and freezing either. In the end, she did neither, because Cailan returned before she made a decision.

“Cold?” he asks, humor in his voice.

“A little. I’m fine, though,” she said, her teeth clattering together.
“You are a terrible liar,” he says, ducking inside. He comes back out a moment later and drapes a cloak over her shoulders, tying it off. She stands still as he does so, a faint smile on her face. She draws it closer to her, flapping it around her a few times and grinning. She felt like a kid on Christmas morning. Cailan stepped back into his tent to change into a set of Templar armor, and when he came out once more, Arya didn’t even recognize him. Which was the point, really.

She found herself clinging to Cailan’s arm as they entered the Korcari Wilds. Almost immediately away from the camp, the paths were overgrown and there were roots and braches just lying in wait to trip her. Which they did, many times, and if it weren’t for Cailan she’d have faceplanted on the ground and refused to get back up. So, really, it was very fortunate that Cailan was there. She knew they’d have moved a lot faster without her, and she knew when they set up camp it was because of her, but she was too tired and too cold and too achy already to complain. She curled up on a bedroll beside the fire, Cailan laid down on the opposite side of the fire, and she was asleep almost before her head had hit the pillow.
She was on a hospital bed, the air cool and sharp with the scent of antiseptic. “I can’t get a pulse,” a man said, his voice rushed and panicked. His hands compressed her chest, his mouth coming towards hers and forcing air into her lungs. She wanted to cough and splutter and hit him, or at the very least make some sign that this wasn’t necessary. She was fine! The man gave up a few moments later, stepping back. The others swarmed around her, putting the shock pads on her body. Her head was spinning; they were moving too fast, and she couldn’t quite feel what was happening. Everything was murky, hard to see and harder to feel and Arya wanted to scream. The only thing she was sure of was how desperately afraid she was.

Her body arched off the bed with the electric pulse, and then Arya was standing in the corner of the hospital room, watching. Her body was on the bed, deathly still and surrounded by nurses still trying to start her heart, to get a pulse, to make her breathe. They can’t keep going forever, though, and they admit defeat, stepping back with sagging shoulders. “Subject declared dead at 2:16p.m, Wednesday, October 15th,” a woman says, and Arya lets out a sob before she can stop herself. The scene contracts and spins away, and she is somewhere else.

She is still in the hospital, but this time she is in a waiting room. Her mother is there, and her stepfather, and even Ella. The same man from before is there, and Arya thinks that perhaps he is the doctor. “If you would come with me, we can discuss this,” he says, and his voice is soft and sad and Arya is crying before she fully realizes it, reaching up to wipe away the tears. Ella’s eyes look wide and scared and her mother has been crying softly, tears streaking down her face. Her father is trying valiantly not to cry, and it isn’t working. She couldn’t recall seeing her father cry before, and another sob falls out of her chest. She drifts behind them as they follow the doctor, unsure of what else to do.

They sit in chairs in what she assumes to be a private consultation room. Ella stays standing, her hip and shoulder leaning against the wall. The pose is so familiar to Arya that it aches. “The circumstances are very unusual,” the man begins, and his voice is still so soft and so sad. Arya thinks that, later, her mother will get angry about how patronizing his tone is.

“How so?” Ella asks, and Arya isn’t surprised that the question comes from her friend and not from her parents.

“Her heart just stopped. You were there when it happened. There was no warning, no anything. An autopsy might reveal something later, but I doubt that it will. Maybe if we’d gotten there sooner, we could’ve revived her, but even that’s doubtful. Her heart just quit,” he says, and Arya is crying harder now.

“So there was nothing you could have done, at all?” Ella demands, and it’s so like her to get angry at the people who couldn’t bring her back.

“No. We tried everything. I’m sorry for your loss,” the man says, and then Arya wakes up.

She is back in camp in the Korcari Wilds, and her body is shaking with sobs. She sits up halfway, curling in on herself, and then Cailan is there, lifting her into his lap and cradling her against his chest. She shudders, burying her face in his shirt, and she sobs even harder. He sits there, rocking her gently and stroking her hair, mumbling soft words. Either it works eventually, or she’s ran out of tears to sob because she removes her face from his shirt and scrambles at it with the corner of the blanket that’s still wrapped around her shoulder.
“What’s wrong, Allison?” he asks, and Arya shakes her head vehemently.

“No. No, that’s not my name, and this is real. I thought it was a dream but it’s not, and I’m dead,” she says, and Cailan’s brow furrows, but he says nothing. She gulps in a deep breath of air, steadying herself, and then she starts to talk.

“I told you I’d traveled from a long way away, and I guess I did. I’m from a different world, completely and totally. The last thing I remember is sitting in school, listening to the teacher. I thought I’d fallen asleep, but I…died, instead. I don’t know why dying there made me wake up here, but I thought it was a dream. I gave you a name that wasn’t mine because I don’t really like my name and I probably shouldn’t have but I didn’t think this was real,” she says, twisting the ring on her finger.

“What is your name?” he asks, his voice steady and clear and not at all angry like she’d thought it would be.

“Arya Huskins,” she answers. Cailan takes a deep breath, dragging a hand through his hair.

“I believe you. It explains a lot about you. It’s an odd story, certainly, and the why and how doesn’t make sense, but I believe you,” he said, and the relief that Arya feels is almost crushing. She curls up against him again, resting her head against his chest. She feels tired and drained, and she is content for a moment to lay against him as he stroked her arm absentmindedly.

“Are you okay? It must be incredibly jarring to wake up in a world that is not your own,” he asks, his voice soft and soothing despite the question he was asking. Arya sighs, shifting so she sits more comfortably on his lap.

“It is…I don’t know. I don’t know how to deal with this. I’m probably not going to for a long time. I’ve, ah, never been good with this touchy-feely stuff,” she answered. Her head was already starting to ache from her crying session, which was why she almost never cried.

“Well, when you’re ready for the touchy-feely stuff, I’m here,” Cailan says, and the thought comforts Arya a lot more than she thought it would.

“It’s almost dawn. Should we wait until day breaks, or head out now?” she asks, after a few minutes in silence. She doubted she could have fallen asleep again. She was too afraid of nightmares to risk it.

“We can head out now,” Cailan murmured, and a few minutes later the camp had been packed up and Brett was leading them deeper into the Korcari Wilds.
There was an ominous feeling in the pit of Arya’s stomach as they walked. She didn’t pay much attention to it, however, chalked it up to run-of-the-mill anxiety. She’d just found out she was dead; it was probably normal to freak out a little about it. Cailan must have sensed something off with her, or maybe he was concerned about her emotional state because he walked far closer to her than was strictly necessary, occasionally reaching out a steadying hand. She appreciated the gesture.

It was almost noon, judging by the sun’s position in the sky, when they were attacked. It was a group of bandits, jumping out of the surrounding trees and circling them. Cailan pushed Arya behind him, and she was grateful that he’d worn his helmet. Had he been recognized, the situation would have been much more precarious.

“What do we have here? One of them tin-tops escorting a mage?” the leader asked, leering at her, and a shudder went down Arya’s spine. The man was disgusting, and Arya had had plenty of unfortunate experience with disgusting men. Then her concept of fear seemed to vanish completely, and her inner smart-ass took over.

“So what if I am a mage? Mages fry assholes like you on a regular basis,” she snarks, and Cailan’s elbow shoots backwards but misses.

“Ooh, I’ve never had me a mage. I think it’d be fun. I could cut off your hands to keep you from casting those nasty spells and then I could have my wicked, wicked way with you and no one would be none the wiser,” the bandit said, showing his teeth. Or, well, what was left of them, anyway.

“Aw, how cute. You don’t know anything about magic at all, do you? A mage doesn’t need her hands to obliterate you,” Arya responded, a thin-lipped smile on her face.

She’s not certain who made the first move, only that a few heartbeats later there was an explosion of movement around her. She watched partly in awe, partly in disgust, and partly in fear that came swarming back to her as Cailan, Brett, and Eliza engaged the bandits in a whirl of steel and blood. She could handle gore and blood and death in the movies, but it was different when it was right in front of her. The smell was almost overwhelming, and when she was sprayed with a moderate amount of blood, she started backing up. That was when her back hit something very solid, very warm, and very human-like. She let out a blood curdling screech, whirling around and throwing her hands out to protect from whatever was about to come.

Something unfamiliar and new bubbles up within her, rushing to the surface, and with a gasp there is fire pouring out of her hands, hot and bright and intense. She jerks away, clenching her hands to make it stop as the man falls to the ground, screaming in agony. She gags, the stench of burning flesh filling the air, and she makes the mistake of looking at him. His face is melting off, literally, as he thrashes and screams, and she manages to turn away before she falls to her knees, gagging and shaking her head and trying valiantly to not throw up. Steel slashes through the air, and then it is blessedly silent aside from Arya’s gagging.

Cailan is beside her almost instantly, dropping his sword into the dirt as one hand sweeps her hair out of her face and the other rubs her back gently. “Arya, are you all right?” he asks, and she wants to laugh. She’s on her hands and knees in the dirt gagging, does she look all right? But she doesn’t. She takes deep gasping breaths and gets herself back under control, sitting back on her haunches and giving him a weak smile.

“I’m fine. It was just…overwhelming. I’ve never killed anyone before, and certainly not with fire,”
she answers, and she’s grateful for the hair-tie around her wrist as she pulls her hair back into a ponytail.

“You didn’t tell me you were a mage. Are there any other secrets you’d like to tell me?” Cailan asks, and his tone is only slightly accusatory.

“I’d have been upfront about being a mage if I had known about it. Real magic, the kind of magic you’re used to, doesn’t exist in my world. This must be some new addition that happened after my death,” she answers, and she wants to get angry, for a moment. She’d died, and here he was, accusing her of lying. Sure, she hadn’t told him her name immediately, but she’d never have kept something like being a mage secret. The urge passes before she can even really consider getting angry, and suddenly she feels acutely tired.

“Well, as King, I hate to do this,” Cailan begins, but she cuts him off, jumping to her feet with a snarl.

“You will not take me to a Circle. I know how they operate and I will die before I let Templars take me,” she says, her voice hard and angry, but she is careful to keep her fists clenched. Cailan raises his hands in a placating gesture.

“I wasn’t going to suggest it, Arya. I was going to say that as King, I hate to blatantly disregard Ferelden’s laws. I won’t let them take you. Maybe it’d be different if you were from here, but you’re not. You said it yourself, you don’t have magic in your world. You just found out you’re dead back home, and you’re surrounded by unfamiliar places and things. I’d hate to see what giving you to a Circle would do to you,” he says, gently, and Arya deflates.

“I’m sorry that I just started accusing you. I just…I know how a lot of people feel about mages, especially here, and I shouldn’t have automatically assumed that you shared those beliefs, especially when you’ve been so kind already,” she says, sighing, running her fingers through her hair. It’s sticky with blood in some places, and when she pulls her hand away, her face conveys her revulsion.

“Right, I think you need a bath,” Cailan says, and there’s laughter in his voice.

“You need one worse than I do. You’re covered in blood. None of it is yours, is it?” she asks, suddenly worried as she shifts closer to him, her hands unclenching.

“No, it’s not mine. At least, I don’t think it is. I’ll let you personally look me over when we set up camp, though. The maps show a river near here, we’ll head that way and make camp early,” he answers, and she nods, satisfied with the answer for now. Brett and Eliza join them, having just finished checking to make sure all the bandits were dead and taking their coin and some of their more valuable items. They’d need the money before the Blight was over, especially with Cailan unable to access his royal funds for awhile.

They’d piled the bodies up in a clear spot, and they look at Arya expectantly. It takes her a moment to realize they want her to light the pyre. She tries, making a good effort, but the feeling just won’t come back. She can feel it, bubbling underneath the surface, but no matter how hard she tries, she can’t call it to her. She shakes her head in disappointment, and Eliza steps forward, fiddling with flint and steel for a moment before the sparks catch and the pyre bursts into flame.

They reach the river in good time, and there is, fortunately, a natural cove with water deep enough to bathe in right beside the camp. This grants them the privacy they desire. Cailan and Brett go first, while Arya and Eliza take the time to set up the camp and start preparing supper. It’s a quick, mostly tasteless stew, flavored with elfroot and nothing else, but it’s better than no food at all, and after the chill of the water, Arya thinks she’ll be very thankful for the stew. When both of them return, Arya
gathers her change of clothes and heads to the river. Eliza had, miraculously, managed to avoid getting blood on her, so she opted out of the bath. Arya wasn’t going to complain, she’d be more comfortable by herself.

It took her awhile to unfasten all the buckles and belts on her armor, but she finally shed it, leaving it lying neatly on the ground as she stepped into the water. Cailan had told her it would be a little cold, but when she surfaced, shivering violently, she thought she might kick him when she got back to camp. The water was freezing, and her nipples were probably hard enough to cut glass because of it. She took a while to clean herself, not because she was a masochist and enjoyed the biting cold, but because she was shivering so hard the simple task of rinsing her hair took much longer than it should. When she finally clambered out of the water, shaking, she toweled off hurriedly and dressed even faster. Her fingers and toes were so cold they were almost completely numb, and it took her a couple tries to get all her armor gathered in her arms. She walked back to the camp and dumped them on the ground before curling up next to the fire.

“Cold?” Cailan asked, an amused grin on his face.

“Nah, I’m warm. That’s why my skin’s turning blue,” she ground out, and he laughed, a clear and bright sound and Arya found herself smiling despite the cold.

“Come over here,” he said, and she regarded him suspiciously.

“What?” she asks, her hands drifting closer to the fire. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to set herself on fire.

“Because you’re cold. I’m warm, and I have plenty of body heat to share. Plus blankets,” he said, and she conceded, clambering clumsily over to him and curling up in his lap. He wrapped a couple of blankets around them both, and after a few moments Arya realized he felt like a furnace. A magnificent furnace that wouldn’t burn her.

“I think you’re my new favorite person in all of ever,” she said, and he chuckled, brushing her hair off of her shoulder.

“Tell me about your world,” he says after a few minutes of watching the crackling flames.

“What do you want to know about it?” she asks, looking up at him. Some distant part of her thinks that maybe it’s inappropriate for her to be in his lap so much lately, but the part of her that’s still cold and still anxious and still ready to cry because she’s dead and she killed a man earlier gives zero fucks.

“You said there wasn’t any magic in your world. Does that also mean there’s no Chantry?” he asks.

She thinks for a moment on how best to answer his question. There wasn’t a Chantry, or its equivalent, back in the United States, but religion still played a huge part in what was accepted and what wasn’t.

“Well, no, not exactly. There’s no official group or anything like the Chantry, but religion still plays a big part in our social norms. The major religion that people always cite is Christianity. It’s very similar to the religion that most people in Ferelden follow. There’s one all-powerful God, and to be honest, I never really paid attention in Sunday school. I can’t give you the fine details of it because I didn’t believe in it myself,” she answers.

She barely notices whenever he winds a strand of her hair absentmindedly around his finger. He makes a noise in the back of his throat, thinking and considering. “Is it better there than it is here?” he
asks.

“That’s up for debate. There’s a lot of things here that are probably better than the way it is back home, but there’s a lot of stuff back home that you don’t have here. Like, back home we have a ton of machines to make life easier. At the same time, our governments are different. Yours seems to be doing better from everything that I know, but you’re also in another time period with a different government type entirely. So, really, that’s an academic issue,” she responds. She’s a lot warmer now than she was before.

They talk well into the night, about government and politics and the machines that Arya mentioned. When they do finally go to sleep, Arya is pressed against his side and his arm is still around her waist, keeping her close to him.

She dreams of Leliana that night. They are standing together on a cliff, with the Blighted lands stretching out before them. “We can stop this,” Leliana says, her gaze steady and hopeful and Arya laces her fingers through hers.

“It won’t be easy,” Arya says, the wind whipping her hair around her face. Leliana’s grin is vicious, something a predator might wear.

“There best things never are,” she answers, and then they jump, falling through the darkness. They both brace for an impact that never comes.

Arya wakes up abruptly, jerking as she opens her eyes. It is still late, several hours until sunrise, although the fire has died down considerably. She can see the outline of Brett’s back at the edge of camp, keeping watch. Someone has draped another blanket over them both, and as she settles herself more comfortably against Cailan, her back pressing into the cold, hard ground, she thinks that perhaps she could make this place home.
Arya had, of course, warned Cailan and the two guards about the bandits outside of Lothering, but when they arrived on the bridge, it was empty save for them. Cailan reached out, laying a hand gently on her shoulder, while the other strayed towards the hilt of his sword.

“Arya?” he asked, and she bit her lip, puzzled.

“I’ve got two theories, and maybe they’re both wrong, but it’s all I’ve got,” she says, finally and Eliza smiles at her.

“Let’s hear it, then,” she says, sounding faintly amused, and Arya shoots her a glance.

“The first one is that those assholes who attacked us a few days ago were the bandits who were supposed to be here. We weren’t that far from Lothering, so it makes sense, and they can’t be here if they’re dead. The second theory is that we’re too early. It’s several days before the events of my vision,” she explains, running a hand through her hair. She realizes pretty quickly what a bad idea that was. Her hair’s tangled and messy from days of travel without a proper bath and a brush.

“Regardless of why the bandits aren’t here, they aren’t, and we should make our way on into Lothering,” Brett says, shifting uneasily. The others agree, and Eliza cautiously leads the way into the village. Refugees had begun to trickle in, but there were few compared to how many there would eventually be. Brett was sent to the market to restock their provisions, and Eliza (along with all of their gear) was sent to the inn, to get two rooms. That left Cailan and Arya alone, and they decided the best course of action was to head towards the Chantry.

Despite Lothering being a small village, it was quite crowded. Arya clung to Cailan’s side, both of her arms wrapped around one of his. “Don’t like crowds?” he asked, his breath tickling her ear and sending a shiver down her spine. She shook her head wordlessly, and he smiled, extracting his arm from her grip to throw it around her shoulders and tuck him against his side. They’d taken time last night to cut Cailan’s hair, and with the aid of some makeup, Arya hoped no one would notice him. He was still in Templar armor, so it was unlikely that they would, but still, she worried.

Outside the Chantry’s gate, there were two Templars. There wasn’t any sign of the screaming man from the game, either, and overall there was still an optimistic feeling in the air. News of Ostagar must not have reached this far, not yet. Arya stands up on her tiptoes, tapping Cailan’s shoulder to get his attention. “Ask for Sister Leliana,” she whispers. He glances at her, raising an eyebrow.

“Can’t you?” he asks. It’s an innocent question, but Arya locks up. She’s never been good at talking to people. She shakes her head vehemently, in response, and he gives her a quizzical glance but he squeezes her shoulder gently and guides her over to one of the Templars.

“Excuse me, sers, is there a Sister Leliana in the Chantry?” he asks.

“Aye, she’s in there. She’s either praying or preaching. If she’s praying, don’t interrupt, but if she’s preaching or doing anything else, feel free to approach her. She’s very friendly, always willing to talk,” the Templar answers, giving Cailan a nod of respect. Cailan returns the gesture and thanks the man before heading inside.

“You know, I never thought I’d enter a church willingly. Or without bursting into flames, at the very least,” she murmurs, just loud enough for Cailan to hear. He chuckles, but otherwise doesn’t
respond, instead focusing on navigating the center isle without bumping into people. It seems that most of Lothering’s population is in the Chantry.

Leliana is standing at the front of the isle, talking to another sister. They wait politely until the conversation is over, and the other sister has walked away before Arya ducks out from underneath Cailan’s arm and approaches the red-head before she can change her mind.

“Sister Leliana?” she asks, and she’s proud of herself when her voice doesn’t shake.

“Yes. How can I help- wait a moment. I know you! I dreamed of you!” Leliana says, and Arya is desperately relieved.

“And I of you,” she replies, a grin on her face. She isn’t as nervous as she feared she would be, although she still feels shaky inside.

“The Maker must have brought us together. Surely this is divine providence,” Leliana says, a brilliant smile on her face.

“Uh, sure. Yeah, he must have. Listen, is there any way we can go somewhere more private and talk? I’ve got a lot of things to tell you,” Arya says, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

“I have my duties here to tend to, but I can come see you after supper. Will you be staying at the inn?” she asks. Arya nods.

“Yes, I will. My name is Arya, by the way. I guess I’ll see you later,” she says. Leliana pulls her in for a quick hug, which surprises her. She hugs her back, though, and then Leliana walks off to do whatever it is that Leliana needed to do.

Eliza had succeeded in securing two rooms. “Could you, uh, wait downstairs until supper?” Arya asks. The guardswoman waggles her eyebrows, and Arya is left spluttering as Cailan drags her up the stairs, laughing.

“You’re both awful!” she protests, but she’s got a grin on her face too, despite the pinkness of her cheeks. When he released her arm on the landing, she crossed them over her chest and pouted. He laughed harder, pushing open the door, but all playfulness dispersed when Arya saw the bed.

“Oh, fuck yes,” she says, and she takes a running jump, landing face down on it. She sprawled across it, and it was the best sensation she’d ever experienced.

“This bed is probably the actual best,” she says, lifting her head up slightly.

“Yeah, well, move over and make room for me,” Cailan says, and she hears his armor hitting the floor. She rolls to the side, realizing that she probably should have removed her armor first. With a longsuffering sigh, she stands, and she goes about unclasping and unbuckling and unstrapping it until it all lands in an ungraceful pile on the floor and she’s left in her underthings. She lays back down, stretching out as Cailan settles in beside her.

“Did you need to tell me something, or did you have another reason for dragging me up here alone?” Cailan asks. She pauses, thinking for a moment. She’d almost forgotten what she wanted to talk to him about.

“Oh! Yes, of course. We should look into taking jobs from the Chanter’s Board. There’s probably
other work, too. It would, however, be a good idea to stockpile all the money we can. You probably won’t have access to the royal treasury or whatever for awhile yet,” she says. He snorts, turning over onto his side.

“What is it with you and money?” he asks. She turns over, too, facing him.

“Well, see, I know from personal experience what it’s like to be broke. Besides, more money is always better than less money. Except when it comes to debt, but fuck that. I mean, I have some dollar bills in my wallets. Some pennies, too, and maybe even quarters. But I don’t have any of your currency,” she says.

“I’d like to see your currency,” he says. She rolls onto her back again, dramatically this time.

“Oh, fuck you. I don’t even know what Eliza did with any of my things,” she says. A smirk turns the corners of Cailan’s lips upwards.

“Well, if you’re offering…” he says, and Arya hits him with the pillow before sliding off the bed. Her pack, it turns out, is piled with the others neatly in the corner. She grabs her wallet out of it before seemingly noticing how naked she is.

“Hey, do you have any spare shirts with you?” she asks, looking over at him.

“Yeah, they’re in my pack. Why?” he replies.

“Can I borrow one? I mean, I know I’ll have to wear proper clothes when we go back downstairs, but that’s later,” she answers. He nods, giving her permission, so she rifles through his bag until she finds an over-sized shirt. It hangs down well past mid-thigh once she gets it on.

She rejoins him on the bed, opening her wallet, and then she explains roughly how their currency works. He nods, looking interested, and then Arya has an idea. They have a couple hours until it’s time for them to go to supper, anyway. She’s got the time to kill.

“You remember how I mentioned all those machines we have where, right? I’ve got one with me that I can show you. It’ll seem like magic, at first, but it’s not,” she says, already bouncing up off of the bed.

“Okay, this is a show called Sherlock. It should give you a pretty good indication as to what sort of machines that we’ve got back home. The episodes for this are a lot longer than usual, but if you need me to stop and explain what’s going on, I can do that,” she says, curling up against his side and pressing play.

At the end of the experience, she’s impressed. He’d kept up with the storyline quite well,
really, and he’d only asked for explanations on a few of the jokes and references. He was also doing remarkably well with the introduction of new technology.

“That was very interesting. Is there more of it?” he asked. She smiled up at him, closing the computer and putting it on the nightstand next to the bed.

“Yes, there is, but we don’t have time to watch anymore right now. Maybe we can watch another episode before bed,” she says, stretching and getting off the bed. She had to put on proper clothes now.

“I’d like that. We could bunk together; save Eliza and Brett the hassle of dealing with it,” he said. Arya didn’t think that was appropriate, but, then, she was standing the middle of the room in her underwear while he looked at her, so she wasn’t one to say what was and was not appropriate. Besides, after the first nightmare she’d had, they slept pretty close together anyway.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea,” she concedes, pulling on a pair of jeans. About twenty minutes later, they head downstairs.
They ate a quick meal, a tasteless stew that Arya started to wrinkle her nose at. Her stomach, however, growled and Cailan reminded her that the stew was her only option until breakfast tomorrow. She made a big show out of sighing and eating it, bemoaning the lack of spices and the lack of foods from home.

“You know, one day you’re going to have to show me some food from your world. Maybe once we get to Redcliffe and have proper supplies,” he says, and Arya’s eyes light up.

“I could show you what pizza’s like! It’d be a poor imitation because I’m not the best cook in the world, but it’s better than nothing. A lot better than nothing, actually,” she says, and she wishes she were in Redcliffe already, despite the walking corpses they’d encounter. Pizza was well worth dealing with the undead, in her opinion.

Leliana arrived not long after they’d finished eating. Eliza had just offered Arya a pint of ale, and while Arya was curious about it for novelty’s sake, something still felt undeniably wrong about drinking when she wasn’t old enough.

“Good old America,” she sighed, following Leliana into a private room after thanking Eliza for the offer but declining politely. They sit at the table, Leliana gesturing for Arya to make herself comfortable.

“I get the feeling that this is going to be a long chat, no?” she says, and Arya flashes her a smile as she leans back, crossing her legs in her lap.

Once they are settled, it’s time for one of the hardest conversations Arya has ever had. She’s pretty sure that Leliana will think she’s bat-shit crazy, and that’s if the red-head even hears her out.

“So, you are a seer?” Leliana asks, prompting her.

“Of a sort. My real name is Arya Huskins. I come from a different world entirely. I’m not sure what pulled me through, but I died there, and woke up here, so I’m making the most of it. I’ve seen… visions of this world and how it operates, and I have personal information about you that I’ve gathered from my visions to use as proof,” she says, leaning forward and propping her elbows up on the table. Leliana’s eyes narrow, and Arya can almost see the gears turning in her mind as she thinks.

“You realize this sounds absurd, no?” Leliana says, her voice steely, and Arya is seeing less of the Chantry sister and more of the Orlesian bard.

“Most would say the same of the visions you’ve had,” Arya counters, a slight smirk creeping onto her face.

“True. Very well, I’d like to hear this proof you’ve got,” the bard says, and Arya sits straighter in her seat.

“Young. The only thing that you remember about her is her scent—a flower native to Ferelden called Andraste’s Grace. An Orlesian noblewoman by the name of Lady Cecile raised you. Your mentor in the Game was a woman by the name of Marjolaine. Eventually, you found out that Marjolaine was committing treason and you tried to talk to her about the documents you found. Later, the guards arrested you for the same act Marjolaine had committed because she’d altered the documents to frame you. You eventually found your way to Ferelden, and to Lothering’s Chantry. Is there anything else?” she says, and Leliana shakes her head in amusement.
“You do know things about me that no one else would, and I trust you. After all, the Maker must have brought us together for a reason, if we shared that dream. I suspect there’s a larger plan in the works, though,” she says, finally, and Arya breathes a sigh of relief.

“Yes. Two Grey Wardens, along with an apostate, are supposed to meet us in Lothering in a few days. There’s...a lot we’ll need to talk about once they get here, but ah, ultimately, our goal will be to stop the Blight,” she explains.

She thinks about Sten in the cage outside and how they’ll need to get him before they leave, and she thinks about all the things they’ll have to do after, and it’s very nearly overwhelming. Then there was the matter of Zevran, and how in the Goddess’s name were they going to join up with him? She sighed, rubbing her forehead. That was a problem for another day.

“Very well. I can come by tomorrow and we can talk more,” Leliana says, standing. Arya stands as well, and Leliana envelopes her in a hug. Arya hesitates for a moment before she hugs her back, unused to the physical contact. Her friend group usually affectionately insulted each other and that was about it. But Leliana gave nice hugs and she smelled like wildflowers. Arya followed her out of the private dining room, rejoining Cailan at the bar while Leliana left to make her way back to the Chantry.

“Here comes trouble,” Cailan says, a teasing lilt to his tone as she approaches.

“Watch it, sweetheart,” she warns, a grin on her face as she sits down. He chuckles, motioning to the bartender to bring another drink for her.

“Eliza and Brett have gone on upstairs. But our lovely guardswomen told me that she tried to buy you a drink. I think she was actually hitting on you earlier,” he says, eyes twinkling.

“Oh, Goddess, if that’s the case then I need this drink,” she mutters, picking up the cup and sniffing it. It smells...well, it smells like alcohol.

“What are you waiting for? Never drank before?” he asks, and there’s an undercurrent of laughter.

“I’ve never drank anything alcoholic before, no,” she admits, and then she tosses it back.

It is a valiant effort she makes not to spit it all out, and she’s rewarded by a god-awful aftertaste in her mouth when she finally swallows.

“That tastes like piss. How can anyone enjoy drinking that?” she asks, her lip curling in disgust. Cailan throws an arm around her shoulders, both of them sliding off the seats and heading towards the stairs. “People don’t drink stuff like that for the taste, darling,” he says, and she shakes her head, taking the steps two at a time. She’s got a soda in her backpack, and while she’s going to miss soda, she decides that she wants to show him.

“Well, this was fun and all, but I’ve got something for you to try,” she says, opening the door to their room and heading straight for her back. She digs the soda out, raising it up to him in a toast. He shuts the door behind him, sitting down on the edge of the bed and looking at her expectantly. She opens it, taking a sip first to wash the taste of the ale away.

“This is Dr. Pepper and it’s a type of soda,” she says, holding it out to him. He takes it and sniffs at it cautiously before taking a drink. He looks surprised, and she figures it’s probably because of the fizz.

“They’re a lot better cold, but it is what it is,” she says. He takes another sip and then passes it back to her.
“You know, I think I prefer the ale,” he says, a cocky grin on his face. She laughs, screwing the lid back onto the drink before putting it on the nightstand.

She sits down beside him on the bed, kicking her shoes off. “Leliana believed me, by the way,” she said. He gave her a sideways glance, that teasing sparkle still in his eyes.

“Of course she did. You’re the most believable person with the most believable story in all of history,” he says, and she hits him, playfully. It escalates, and then she’s lying on her back while Cailan hovers over her, his hand hovering above her sides.

“Don’t you dare!” she says, and then he is tickling her and she is trying not to shriek.

“I hate you!” she says, trying to twist and squirm away from him. He laughs, tickling her mercilessly, until he pins her wrists above her head.

“Do you yield?” he asks, his face close to hers. She glares up at him, defiantly trying to buck him off. He’s like a rock, though, and won’t move. He waits, a smug little smirk on his face until she admits defeat and slumps against the mattress.

“Fine. You win, asshole,” she says, and he lets go of her wrists, sitting back. She lunges forward, then, using what momentum she can build up to throw them both off of the bed, landing heavily on top of Cailan.

“Maybe not!” she crows, victoriously, but her victory is short lived. He’s strong enough to roll them over once more, making sure Arya lands gently.

“You were saying?” he asks, and Arya lets out a groan.

“I was saying that you are literally the worst for this,” she pouts, and Cailan laughs, rolling off of her to lay sprawled-out on the floor next to her. They are both panting lightly, and Arya’s sides ache from laughter.

“I’ve not done something like that since I was a kid. Can we wrestle, next? Wrestling was always the most fun thing ever,” she says, after a few moments spent catching her breath.

“Sure. It feels good to act like a kid again,” Cailan says, sitting up. Arya watches him, one arm crossed over her stomach. She realizes she’s already starting to feel like she belongs, and that scares the shit out of her. Maybe it just hadn’t sunk in yet.

Not long after, Cailan goes to sleep. It takes Arya quite a bit longer to fall asleep, time that she spends staring at the ceiling in the dark before she finally drifts off. When she does sleep, she dreams.

She is a child, once again, staring up in awe at a waterfall. “Daddy, I want to climb it!” she says, turning excitedly to her father.

“That’s not the best idea, Little Bit,” he says, ruffling her hair affectionately.

“Why not?” she asks, and then her father is replaced by a figure that she can’t quite make out.

“There might be things up at the top that you don’t need to see yet,” the figure says with her father’s voice, but Arya ignores it. It is, after all, no longer her father.

She isn’t a child any longer, but she is still so young and inexperienced. She fumbles and curses and almost falls, but she starts to climb, the water making the rocks slick. She loses her grip before she
reaches the top and she slides back down, landing ungracefully on her ass. She is left staring up at the figure, which has morphed into Cailan. He has a kind smile on his face as he reaches out a hand to pull her to her feet.

“Careful, don’t want you getting hurt,” he says, and Arya smiles up at him.

“Climb with me,” she says. He shakes his head, ever so slightly.

“Not now. Now isn’t the time. Maybe later,” he says, and before Arya can puzzle out what the words mean, she wakes up.
The next day, Cailan leaves just after breakfast with Eliza and Brett, heading to the Chanter’s Board for work. Arya doesn’t quite know what to do with herself. Leliana had promised to come by after lunch, but lunch was ages away when she had so much free time and nothing to do. Cailan had also made her promise she wouldn’t go wandering around Lothering alone, so she wasn’t left with many options. So, for a while, she sat in the inn’s common room, staring morosely out the window and nearly driven mad with boredom.

About half an hour of sitting there alone, a child approached her nervously. He look like he was ten, maybe, certainly not any older. “Excuse me, miss, but me mam is sick and we’ve got mending we need done. There’s no one else in the village who can do it, they’s all busy. Can you help us? We’ll pay you for your work,” he says, shifting nervously from one foot to another, and Arya smiles, suddenly grateful that her aunt had insisted on teaching her how to sew. “I’d love to help. I am, however, waiting for someone so I shouldn’t leave the inn. Could you go to the merchant across the bridge and bring me the things I’ll need for it?” she asks, already digging her wallet out. Cailan had said that dimes and nickels would pass as silver coins, and pennies would pass as copper, so she had almost a whole sovereign’s worth of money on her own. That should be plenty to purchase some scraps of fabric, some needles, and some thread. The boy nods, quickly, a smile flitting across his face. “I’ll be right back, miss, with the things you asked for and the work,” he promises, accepting her money and dashing off.

Cailan had been kind enough to set up a tab at the bar, so she could at least eat and drink whatever she liked. She gets a pastry, some sweet and crumbly thing while she waits, picking at it as she stares out the window. When she sees the boy coming back, she pushes the plate away and dusts her hands off. “It were thirty silver for everything, miss. Mam said she’d pay you fifty silver when you finish, and for me to come by in three days’ time to pick it up. Does that work for you, miss?” he said, passing off the coins left over along with a burlap sack containing the mending work necessary and the purchased materials. “That works just fine for me, ser. If you could, though, spread word through the village that I’m willing to do this sort of work for any price,” she says, and the boy’s eyes light up. “Of course! Thank you, miss!” he says, and then he dashes off again. Arya smiles to herself, collecting her things and heading back up to her room.

Her computer sat on the edge of the table, taunting her as she spread all the work out. She sighed, biting her lip. Maybe later, she thought to herself, when Cailan has returned. With that, she picked up a needle, threaded it, and set to work. She finishes up just when Leliana arrives, knocking politely on the door before walking in. “You found work?” Leliana asks, as Arya sets it aside and starts gathering up the materials left over. “More like work found me. A kid came up to me while I was downstairs, not long after Cailan left. I sent him after the materials, and I got him to spread word around the village that I’m willing to do this sort of work for any price,” she says, and Leliana crosses her arms over her chest. “Of course! Thank you, miss!” she says, and then she dashes off again. Arya smiles to herself, collecting her things and heading back up to her room.

Leliana settles herself into the chair in the corner of the room, dressed in a normal dress rather than Chantry robes. “Is there anything in particular you want to talk about?” she asks. Arya frowns, biting her lip for a moment. “Yeah, actually. I, ah, don’t know anything about Ferelden customs. Not really. Especially hygiene practices,” she says, and she can feel herself blushing. Leliana laughs, a clear and bright sound, and Arya crosses her arms over her chest. “Of all the things I expected you to ask about, I must admit that hygiene was not one of them, although it’s to be expected. What do you wish to know?” she asks, doing her best to compose herself again, although she can’t keep a faint smile off of her face.
“Well, uh, for starters...Goddess, I don’t even know where to start. Do you shave anything?” she asks, and she wants to bury her face in her hands and never look up again, even though this was a perfectly innocent question. “What do you mean?” the bard asks, her head cocked to the side. Arya sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose between two fingers. “Back home, women shave almost everything. Legs, armpits, private bits,” she explains, and Leliana’s smirk widens for a few seconds. Arya doesn’t think the girl will lie to her, though. She’s not that cruel. “In Ferelden, it doesn’t seem to matter. I’ve seen an equal amount of women that shave and do not shave. In Orlais, though, more women shaved than did not,” Leliana explains.

“Right, okay. I’ll probably keep shaving for comfort, then. What tools are used to shave, here? Back home we have these disposable razors, which I have one in my backpack, but that won’t last forever,” Arya asks, sitting down on the edge of the bed. “We have knives made specifically for this purpose. One of those traveling with you may have one. I’d suggest asking the guardswoman whenever you need to shave. The two men may tease you about it,” Leliana replies. Arya nods, filing the information away in her memory. At the very least, she hopes she’ll remember.

“All right, next one. How do women here take care of periods?” she asks, and she’s almost afraid of the answer. “Periods? What are those?” Leliana asks, and Arya knows that this time, at least, Leliana isn’t teasing her. “Uh. Maybe you call them monthlies or something?” she says, and Leliana’s eyes brighten with recognition. “Oh, yes, we do. Most women use rags that they wash whenever they need. In Orlais, there are some rags made for this purpose. Their sewn together and stuffed with cotton, and they’re remarkably cheap. They’re to be discarded after use,” she explains, and Arya decides that she likes Orlais a lot more now. “Great, so Orlais is probably my favorite,” she says, sighing, and Leliana giggles. An honest to god, adorable giggle that makes Arya want to squish her.

“Is there anything else you need to know?” the red-head asks, and Arya shakes her head. “Not right now. I may later, though,” she says, and Leliana nods. The conversation dissolves into something more casual and less awkward. They talk for an hour about nothing important before Leliana excuses herself to go off to the Chantry, so Arya heads back downstairs. She takes a book with her and sits in the common room for about an hour before Cailan arrives, sweaty and mucky but exuberant, with Brett and Eliza trailing behind him.

“Hey,” Arya greets, marking her place and looking up. Cailan grins at her, sitting his helmet on the table. “I’m glad you suggested the Chanter’s Board. We went after some bears today, and some bandits. Nothing major, but it was kind of fun,” he said, and Arya rolls her eyes. “You think picking a fight with a bear is fun? Why am I not surprised?” she says, but she has a faint smile on her face as well. Eliza snorts, coming up beside them. “I don’t; not in the least. And we got disgustingly filthy. I’m going to go take the longest bath of my entire life,” the woman says, her nose wrinkled as she looks down at the mud and blood coating her armor. “Ah, Eliza, I thought the blood added to your charm,” Arya said, winking at her. The guardswoman just shook her head before heading back upstairs.

Cailan watches her go, a thoughtful look on his face. “I think I’ll go to our room and take a bath, myself. Do you need anything from there?” he asks, turning to glance at her. “Nah, I’ve got my book. I do request the right to a bath later tonight, though,” she says, and he nods, picking up his helmet and ambling up the stairs without another word. Brett hops up in the chair across from her, a mug of ale, but he doesn’t seem intent on talking so she resumes reading. After a few minutes in silence, Brett speaks.

“You’re lucky, you know. Not many people would believe you,” he says, softly. Arya looks up, her thumb marking her place in her book. “I know. I didn’t expect him to believe me, either. I’m surprised that anyone does,” she admits. Brett grins at her, one hand reaching up to rub the back of
his neck. “I guess you’re just incredibly charismatic. Or maybe it’s the innocent, naïve feeling about you,” he says, and Arya laughs. “It’s incredibly easy to seem naïve and innocent when you know almost nothing about the world you’re in,” she remarks, and Brett nods. “Right you are, at that. I worry about you, though. Like you said, you don’t know anything about Ferelden, or the rest of Thedas. It’d be easy for someone to take advantage of that,” he says, and she takes a moment to look at Brett. He looks older, around forty years old.

“Yes, people tend to be cruel. While I may not know the world, I know people,” she says. Still, his concerns are valid. Back home, people took advantage of her all the time because she was reluctant to be a jerk. Almost being killed rectified that some, but not much, and Arya doubted the people in Thedas would be as kind as the people back home. “That may be so, but I worry about you all the same. I’ve a daughter back home, about your age. I don’t know what your parents were like, but if you need one, you can come to me,” he said, somewhat awkwardly. Arya was touched. She reached across the table, putting her hand over Brett’s. She felt tears welling up in her eyes, of all things, and she smiled at him. “Thank you, Brett. That means a lot to me,” she says, and he squeezes her hand gently before pushing his seat back and making his way back to the bar.

Eliza comes down the stairs, then, her hair still wet. She was wearing casual clothes, an old and patched dress that was actually quite becoming on her. “Oi, Brett, the room’s free if you need it,” she calls out, hopping onto the seat Brett had previously occupied. Brett raises his hand, gesturing to let her know she heard. Eliza turned to Arya, a glint in her eyes. “I hear the good king bought you an ale yesterday,” she said. Arya chuckled, running her hand through her hair. She made a face of distaste; her hair was entirely too greasy for comfort. “He did. It wasn’t to my taste, though,” she says, and Eliza grins wickedly. “Ale’s not the only thing we’ve got ‘round here. What do you say you let me buy you some…other samples?” the girl says, and Arya can see this branching off into a thousand different dangerous directions. “Maybe some other time. I’d like to ease myself into the wonderful world of alcohol,” she says, and while Eliza looks disappointed, she doesn’t push the issue. The chat lightly for a few minutes before Cailan comes down the stairs. “Arya, you’ve got a hot bath waiting for you upstairs,” he says, and Arya is leaves mid-sentence, rushing up the stairs. She doesn’t even hear their laughter.

She spends an obscene amount of time soaking in the bathtub. The hot water relaxes muscles that she didn’t even know she had, much less knew they were tense, and it feels so wonderful to be properly clean again. Sure, she’d taken a bath in the river, but that water had been cold and hadn’t exactly produced the same effect. She gets out only reluctantly when the water begins to cool, and just for fun she puts on one of Cailan’s shirts. It’s just as huge as the other one was on her, but it feels comfortable. Just as she pulls it over her head, there’s a knock on the door.

“Arya, dear, you didn’t drown in there, did you?” Cailan asks. “Surprisingly, no,” she says, making sure the shirt covered everything before opening the door and letting him in. He eyes her before reaching out and plucking on the sleeve of the shirt. “You know, you look nice in my clothes,” he said. She grinned up at him, but didn’t reply. He ruffled her hair affectionately, and then went over to the window, opening it and dumping the dirty water outside. It made sense now why the tub was so small. “I’ve got something I want to try,” she says, once he’s finished with the tub. “Oh?” he says, turning around to face her. “I’m going to contact Ella, my friend from back home. I…I don’t know if it’ll work. But we’ll see,” she says, and she is suddenly so much more nervous.
Arya had been staring at Facebook for about twenty minutes now, the cursor hovering over her messages. Cailan was sitting beside her, one arm around her waist, his chin resting on her shoulder. She didn’t even know where to begin even thinking about how to go about this. “I don’t know what to say to her,” she admitted, finally. Cailan laced his fingers through hers, squeezing her hand gently. “Take your time,” he murmurs, and she sighs. “I guess I’ll go with humor,” she mutters, and then clicks the message box open.

Arya: hi, i’m tate, i’m dead, wanna hook up? She sends, and hopes for a reply. She wouldn’t put it past Ella to just let the message sit in her inbox.

Ella: What the fuck is wrong with you?

Arya: It’s me, El. Really me.

Ella: What kind of sick, twisted fuck would do this to someone?

Arya: I mean it! It’s me!

Ella: My best friend is fucking dead, and you wanna play this game? Arya could almost see the snarl on Ella’s face, and if it weren’t for Cailan, she doubted she could do this. She was already about to cry. She hadn’t really expected Ella to believe her, not really, but it still hurt. She leaned back against Cailan, taking in the solid warmth of his presence before she replied.

Arya: I’m not playing a game. It’s me. As in, Arya Huskins, dead girl. Except, I’m not really dead. It’s a long fucking story.

Ella: I can’t believe some sick fuck is trying to pretend to be my dead friend. What the fuck.

Arya: It really is me, El! And I’m not dead!! I didn’t expect you to believe me at first, but seriously.

Ella: All right, then. Prove it. Say something that only we would know.

Arya: Okay.

Arya: Remember that time when we couldn’t find our classroom ‘cause the teacher had moved to a new room and we didn’t get the memo? We walked into class five minutes before it was over, and I was almost in tears. Mr. Elkridge was so angry with us he was about to combust, and you just walked up to him and told him that if he wasn’t going to send out proper notifications when someone switches rooms, then he didn’t have the right to be angry. It shut him up, but he held class over because of us.

Arya: And that one time, you dared me to sneak into the city pool after hours with Alexis, because I had a crush on her. And I did, and the next morning you didn’t believe me until I sent you that picture of Alexis making out with me. Do you believe me yet?

Ella: Maybe. Nobody else would know those things. But Arya Huskins died. I was there when it happened, I saw her collapse. So stop playing these fucking games. I’m done.

Arya: Fine. Video call me. I can prove it’s me.
Ella: And you just assume I’m going to do this?

Arya: I don’t know what else you want from me.

Ella: I don’t know either.

Ella: Fine. I’ll Skype.

Ella: After you give me some sort of goddamned explanation for what happened.

Ella: And if it isn’t really my friend, I’m going to hunt you down.

Arya: I don’t have an explanation. I’m probably more fucking confused than you are. All I know is that I woke up in fucking Thedas. As in, Dragon Age’s Thedas.

Ella: Wow.

Ella: I can’t fucking believe this.

Ella: Dragon Age is just a game.

Ella: Thedas isn’t real.

Arya: I thought so too.

Arya: But King Cailan is sitting here, probably inappropriately close, and he can vouch for Thedas’s realness.

Ella: Wow. I don’t even know what to say.

Arya: Then don’t say anything. Skype me, and let me prove it, goddammit.

Ella: Fine. But if I don’t like what you say, or if you aren’t Arya, I’m calling the fucking police.

The call comes in about twenty seconds later. Arya answers without any hesitation, and the first forty-five seconds, she and Ella just stare at each other. Cailan’s still there, curled around her, and Arya thanks whatever gods there are that she’d explained what was going to happen beforehand. His questions, while adorable, would have completely ruined the moment. “I can’t fucking believe this. Start from the beginning, and tell me everything,” Ella demands, and Arya slips her fingers through Cailan’s again for moral support. He squeezes, gently, and she starts to talk.

“I woke up not far from Ostagar. I thought at first that you guys had played a prank on me. Just carried me and my stuff somewhere and left us. But I didn’t recognize the area. Then when I finally asked someone where I was, I thought it was just a dream. So I find Cailan. Convince him that shit’s about to go down, and we get the hell out of there. I don’t know how it happened. I don’t know how I have an internet connection. I don’t know how any of this works, or why it’s happening,” she says, and Goddess help her, she’s crying. It’s dark enough that she doesn’t think Ella can tell, though.

“Your first thought was to blame us?” Ella asked, and Arya couldn’t tell if the anger in her voice was real or fake. “You guys are assholes. It’s totally something you’d do if I fell asleep in class,” she replies, and Ella rolls her eyes. “You have a point. Wait, if there’s no electricity in Thedas, how are you charging your computer?” Ella asks, and something in Arya’s stomach clenches. “I’m not. I’ve got an idea, but I can’t make it work without a mage. For now, the thing’s just slowly dying. So, that means I won’t be able to talk a lot. I need to conserve the battery,” she says, and Ella frowns. “So how the hell am I going to know you’re okay?” she demands. Arya tenses, until she feels Cailan run
his thumb along the back of her hand. She forces herself to relax.

“I could send a message once a day, but that’d drain the battery pretty quickly. I can check in every couple of days, maybe more if my, ah, idea works,” Arya suggests. Ella chews her bottom lip. “Fine. I can’t really expect anything else. Since the battery’s dying, and I have to go to work, I’ll cut this short. I love you, Ar. Be careful, and don’t do anything stupid,” she says, and Arya smiles. “I won’t. I love you too, El, and you be careful too,” she replies, and then the call ends. She shuts the computer, putting it on the nightstand again. Cailan shifts, letting her go and pulling the covers down.

Arya stands, pacing over to the window and looking out. “You all right?” Cailan asks. She crosses her arms. “I don’t know. Maybe. I still don’t know if I’ve processed all this. It’s…certainly an odd feeling. I’m technically dead, but here I am, very much alive. I just…I don’t know,” she says, turning back to him. He’s gotten under the covers, leaving the other side pulled down. “Come on to bed, it’s getting late,” he says, and Arya grins. “So eager to get me into bed, aren’t you?” she says, a smirk on her face. “Just get in the damned bed,” he grumbles, but he’s smiling as Arya crawls under the covers, curling up next to him like a cat. He curls around her, radiating heat, and Arya doesn’t know if it’s become a habit by this point.

* 

The next day, refugees start flooding in. They town is bursting at the seams with them and everyone is scrambling to accommodate them. For now, there’s just enough room, but only barely. Arya knows it’s only going to get worse before it gets better, and so she offers to do mending work for a copper a piece. She works most of the day doing that, down in the common room so more people can approach her. Cailan had got her plenty of sewing supplies, and she’d told him about Sten and what an asset he’d be. Once more refugees arrive with even less to their names, Arya starts mending their things for free. Cailan seemed to approve, and Brett told her one night he was proud of her.

Four days after she messaged Ella, Eldris arrives with Morrigan, Alistair, and the dog. Alistair and Eldris look like death warmed over, pale and dirty. Morrigan fares much better. Arya had been just outside of Lothering when they arrived, picking any healing herbs she could find and safely identify. The dog saw her and charged ahead once Alistair gave her a friendly wave, knocking her over. The dog was nearly the same height as her, so she had no qualms about rolling in the dirt wrestling with him. Eldris spares her a glare as he walks into Lothering, and Morrigan gives her a nod as she walks past, following him. Alistair is the only one who stops, waiting until she stops rolling around with the dog before helping her up.

“Does this handsome puppy have a name?” Arya asks, scratching behind the dog’s ears. “No. Mister Sunshine over there hasn’t spoken more than six words since we picked him up. I’ve been calling him Dog since no one else has named him, but I don’t think he likes that,” Alistair answers, reaching down to pat the dog’s flank. “Maybe Eldris will let me name him?” she suggests, hopefully. Alistair gives her a bright smile. “That’s a great idea!” he says, and then he offers her his arm. She links hers with his, and they walk into Lothering together.

When they get to the inn, Eldris storms out, looking like a storm. “You could have warned me about that, shem!” he snarls, and Arya holds up her hands in a placating gesture. “Warned you about what, Eldris?” she demands. The dog moves to stand in front of her, and something in Arya glows at the thought of his dog protecting her. “Loghain’s men were in there. They think the Grey Wardens kidnapped the king because he went missing before the battle. They demanded to search me; like they thought I was hiding him in my trousers,” he growls, kicking at the ground. She lets out a deep breath, dragging a hand through her hair. “Jesus Christ, Eldris, you had me worried it was something serious! I didn’t know about Loghain’s men in there, for your information. We need to
have a serious heart-to-heart before you start jumping down my throat,” she says, and he glares at her wordlessly, turning on his heel to march back inside. Arya throws her hands up and follows him.

When she enters, their entire group is gathered around a table. An unfamiliar…creature, is there, a giant-horned man that Arya assumes is Sten. Leliana is sitting next to him, and Brett and Eliza are on the other side. On the opposite side of the table leans Morrigan, and Arya finds herself…appreciating the curve of her back as she leans over. When Morrigan turns to face her, the only thing Arya can think about is how desperately she wants to shove her face in between Morrigan’s legs. She coughs, turning red, as she and Alistair and Eldris join them. The dog’s tail thumps against her legs, and Arya reaches down to pet him again. “You know what, boy? I’m going to start calling you Sam. You like that name?” she says, and the dog wags his tail harder. She could swear a smile stretches across his face, too.

“You are the seer, correct?” Morrigan asks, and Arya almost panics, instinctively looking for Cailan. He is, however, upstairs, confined to the bedroom until they leave. Arya forces herself to take a deep breath, calming down. “I am, yes. Would you like to speak to me in private?” she asks, her tone suddenly professional and business-like. “I would,” Morrigan replies, and then she leads the way up the stairs, her hips swaying tantalizingly. Leliana winks at Arya, who turns a darker shade of red, before following Morrigan.

They shoo Cailan out of the room she shares with him, sending him across the hall. He grumbles, but he goes, taking a book with him. The door closes behind him, and Arya leans up against the wall, facing Morrigan. “Are you truly a seer?” she asks. Arya doesn’t answer for a moment, thinking. She doesn’t think she is, not truly, despite all her knowledge about the world, and despite her specific religious practices. “I don’t know. I might be, and I certainly do have dreams occasionally that I later realize mirrored future events. Calling myself a seer was the easiest way to describe what I was, and how I know what I do,” she says, finally, and Morrigan observes her carefully. “And what can you do? Aside from that, how are you at all useful to this party?” she asks, and Arya gives her a smirk. “I’m a mage, believe it or not. My magic only manifested recently, and there’s a whole story I’ve got to tell as to why it happened so late, but it’s one that involves everyone, and I’d like to wait until the big meeting to tell it. There’s something I wanted to ask you, related to that, though,” she says.

“I’m listening,” Morrigan says, crossing her arms. The motion accentuates her chest, and Arya has to try really hard to keep her eyes on Morrigan’s face. “I was hoping you’d train me. I’m not yet sure how to call spells whenever I’d like, and that’s really quite important,” she says. A coy smile stretches across Morrigan’s face. “I am…willing to give you private lessons, once we leave Lothering,” she says, and Arya lets out a breath of relief. “Thank you, Morrigan. I’ll repay you for it, somehow, but I have a feeling we’ll be talking privately once more before the day is out,” Arya says. She had plans to explain her situation to everyone, then offer to meet with them privately so she can clear up what she does and does not know about them. “Perhaps you will,” Morrigan says, before turning and leaving the room. Arya is left with a lot of mixed feelings, but at least she hadn’t gotten a fireball to the face.
Everyone is called into a meeting not long after, all of them squeezing into the small room that Arya shares with Cailan. Cailan himself is desperately restless, having been mostly confined in the two rooms upstairs since the refugees started pouring into Lothering. It takes a lot of effort to get everyone situated, and even as it is, Sten ends up standing in the corner and Arya ends up sitting on Cailan’s lap. Once they all get settled, however, Arya’s stomach tenses as she realizes they’re all looking at her. She swallowed thickly, and Cailan’s fingers squeezed her hips, calming her a little.

“All right, all-knowing seer, I suggest you start talking,” Eldris demands, and Arya takes a deep breath, pinching the bridge of her nose. She honestly didn’t know how much patience she could devote to dealing with the angry man.

“All right, listen here. The future isn’t set in stone. Anything I saw is subject to change, and some of it has already. I have no guarantee of the future, only what might happen. I’ve already messed with a lot, changing the course of it so drastically everything else might turn out different. In my visions, King Cailan died at Ostagar along with Warden-Commander Duncan. As you can see, this man is very much alive and if he doesn’t stop pinching me, that’s not going to last for very long,” she says, and by the time she finishes, twisting to glare pointedly at Cailan, her teeth are clenched. He just smirks at her, raising his hands up in a placating gesture. She shakes her head, then continues. “Anyway, he’s alive, and Loghain is inquiring about his disappearance, not accusing the remaining Grey Wardens of murder. Things are already different, and I don’t know how it’s going to work out in the end,” she says, and the room is met with silence for a few heartbeats as everyone processes what she’d said.

Of course, Eldris is the one to challenge her. He crosses his arms, and narrows his eyes at her. “How do we know you aren’t making all this up to save your own ass?” he asks, his ears flattened against his head. The sight reminds her so much of a snarling cat that she almost laughs. Instead, she shakes her head slightly before rattling off everything she could remember from the Dalish origin story. “You were hunting in the forest with your friend, Tamlen, when some shemlens stumbled too close to your camp. They mentioned ruins with artifacts, and Tamlen insisted upon investigating. You went, and you found the ruins, but they were strange. The architecture was human and the artifacts were elven, and then you found the mirror. Tamlen saw something moving inside, and then he touched it and you passed out. Warden-Commander Duncan found you and you alone outside the cave. He brought you back to camp, and it took you a few days to wake up. When you did, Keeper Marethari sent you back to the ruins with her First, Merrill, to look for Tamlen. All you found were darkspawn, and Duncan- who was standing in front of the mirror. He said that it was tainted, told you that it was an artifact originating out of Tevinter. He was wrong, although you don’t know that. He then smashed it, and you eventually returned to camp, where it was discovered that you were sick with the taint. Duncan then conscripted you into the Wardens and you left your clan. Am I missing anything, lethallin?” she says, staring at him coolly.

A smirk curves Eldris’s lips upwards, the first expression she’d seen on his face that wasn’t a scowl. “You know about the mirror?” he asked, almost casually. Arya, however, saw the desperate hunger lurking somewhere deep in his gaze. “Yes, I do. It was an eluvian, and at one point in time, mirrors like it spanned the ancient elven empire. Surely you’ve noticed that the ancient elves left no roads, only ruins spread far apart? They used the eluvians to travel between them. If the mirror had not been tainted, perhaps you could have gotten it to work and stepped through. It is a piece of your history, elven in origin,” she says, and there is something undeniably sad that flickers across Eldris’s face. She almost pushes Cailan’s hands away, almost stands and embraces him, but something stops her. Most likely survival instinct, but it stops her nonetheless, and Eldris is left processing this on his own. The conversation moves forward.
“Do you know these sorts of things about the rest of us?” Sten asks, his voice hoarse from disuse. “Most of you, yes. I’d also like to make a blanket statement, here and now, that I will not reveal anything about any of you intentionally. If you’d like, you can meet with me individually and find out what I do know about you. I’m not all-knowing, but I do have quite a bit of knowledge that most of you wouldn’t like to come to light,” she says, and the room is oppressively silent still.

“So, in short, you are telling us that you know some, if not all, of our major secrets?” Morrigan inquires, a hard edge to her tone. Arya does her best to sit up straighter. “Yes, that is what I’m saying. I’m also saying that I won’t betray those secrets. They are yours to tell or keep as you see fit,” she affirms, and she can tell that almost none of these people trust her. Cailan, it seems, is perhaps the only one who does. Well, aside from Sam, but she doesn’t really count the dog. He had no secrets that she could possibly betray, and she was a mostly good person, so really while she was honored that Sam liked her, she didn’t count him. Not in this, at any rate.

Cailan leans forward, then, his breath tickling the back of her neck. She can’t stop herself from cringing. “Are you going to tell them about the, ah, thing?” he asks. She tries to keep a straight face, but she can’t quite keep the grin off of her face. “Which thing? There have been several things,” she says, and he rolls his eyes. “Take your pick, pup,” he says, and she chuckles. She realizes that she still has the attention of the others, and since he’s said something, she has to talk.

“Well, there are a couple of things that I need to get out. The first one is relatively easy: I’m a mage. My magic developed, like, ten days ago so I have no actual idea what I’m doing? But that’s a thing that’s happening. Then there’s another one that’s a lot harder to explain,” she says, and she takes a deep breath. Everyone is looking at her expectantly, and for one heart-wrenching second she is wracked with anxiety. She shakes it off, or at least successfully manages to ignore it, despite the sudden feeling of nausea.

“I don’t know the how or the why. All I know is that I’m not from Thedas. This isn’t my world. I’m from a place called Earth, the United States specifically. Around the time my magic manifested, I had a dream, or maybe it was a vision, I don’t know. I do know that back there, I’m dead. I’m sitting here, walking and talking and breathing and living, but back there I’m dead. I, ah, don’t think it’s quite sunk in yet, but yeah, you might notice some strange things about me,” she says, and suddenly it hits her all over again. She’s dead, and she’s lost almost everything she’s ever known. She is definitely going to freak out about that tomorrow.

“Well, that is useful information, even if we don’t believe you. However, we should discuss the more immediate matters,” Morrigan says, a smirk quirking the corners of her mouth upwards. Arya mutely nods her agreement, and Cailan shifts her slightly so he can see around her a little better. “Are there any others that we need to pick up, Arya?” he asks. She frowns, thinking in her head. She glances around, taking stock of the people they’ve already picked up. “Yes. It should be fairly easy to get Wynne and Oghren, but Zevran might be a bit more difficult. In my vision, he was sent after Alistair and Eldris because Loghain believed they had betrayed and killed Cailan. Zevran is a member of the Antivian Crows. I’m not entirely certain how we could get him to join us, but he was an incredibly valuable part of the team, and trustworthy once his life was spared,” she explains, shifting uncomfortably.

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“Cailan remains unidentified, no?” Leliana asks. Arya nods, and she can almost see the gears turning in Leliana’s head. “Very well. I suggest we spread rumors that Eldris and Alistair have kidnapped him and are keeping him somewhere. Perhaps Loghain will then send out the assassin,” she says. Eldris shifts, stepping forward and bouncing on the balls of his feet. His ears have perked up, standing at attention, and Arya is momentarily fascinated by the way they move. “We could fake his death. If Loghain suspects he is dead, we’re back to square one,” he suggests, and Arya could swear he sounds proud. “How would we fake his death? Rumors are easy to accomplish; that is
somewhat more difficult,” Morrigan points out, and Arya is intensely attracted to the woman in this moment. She shifts again, starting to get restless. She wasn’t sure how long the meeting had gone on, but it felt like it’d lasted way too long. Eldris’s ears droop slightly.

“I’d like to use the rumors. Faking my death would require a body that looks like me, and I don’t want to think about how we’d find out. Leliana can start them up here, in Lothering, and with as many refugees coming and going word will get out somehow. I can travel with you until then, which leads us to the next thing on our agenda. What are we doing? Where are we going to go to get allies?” Cailan says, and it is Alistair who steps forward to answer. “We’ve got treaties requiring the elves, dwarves, and Circle mages to provide the Grey Wardens with assistance. Arl Eamon should also provide us with allies. I thought perhaps we could go to Redcliffe first, and stop by the Circle afterwards on our way to Orzammar. Geographically, that seems to make the most sense. At least, in my opinion,” he says, his tone polite and respectful. He steps back, leaving the floor open.

“Arya, do you know what will happen when we go to get allies?” Leliana asks. Arya slides to the edge of the seat, balancing on Cailan’s knees. He keeps his hands on her hips to steady her, or, if the need arises, catch her if she starts to fall. “I know what might happen. In my visions, the elves of the Brecilian Forest were suffering from werewolf attacks. There was…a lot to deal with when it came to fixing the curse, but it wasn’t ultimately too hard to solve the problem. The Circle is likely experiencing unrest, and in my visions by the time you all arrived, it was overrun by blood mages and abominations. In Orzammar, there was intense political unrest because King Aeducan died—his son and a dwarven lord by the name of Harrowmont were locked in a political battle. In my vision, there were several tasks that whoever you supported wanted you to complete, and once a king was named, assistance was promised,” she says, picking at a spot on her jeans.

“What about Redcliffe?” Alistair asks, and Arya looks down at the floor. “In my vision, when you arrived, it was nearly overwhelmed with monsters that rose at night. Arl Eamon had been poisoned, and Conner was possessed. I don’t know if that’s how it will be when we get there, but it’s not pretty,” she says, her voice softer than it was a minute ago. “We’ll handle it, like everything else. What should we do first?” Eldris says, his voice brisk and hard, but the glance he shoots at Alistair is soft and gentle and sympathetic. Arya supposes that Eldris understands what it’s like to have your home under attack.

“I’d like to go to Redcliffe first,” Alistair says, and there is something strained in his voice. “Of course. We’ll leave for Redcliffe in the morning, and then afterwards we can go to the Circle. Your plan was a fine one,” Eldris said, and Alistair gives him a grateful smile. “Is there anything else we need to discuss?” Morrigan asks, her arms crossed in front of her chest. No one can think of anything, so they all disperse. They’d be leaving in the morning before dawn breaks, Morrigan and Eldris and Alistair camping just outside of Lothering while the others stay in their rooms.

Arya makes the most of the inn while she can. She takes another bath, soaking in it for a while, and then she washes her clothes. She is, perhaps, most upset about the lack of regular hygiene. Later, she sits in the bed, and she thinks. Cailan is nearly asleep next to her, laying on his side with heavy-lidded eyes. Mostly, he’s just watching her. “You get the most adorable little crinkle in between your eyes when you’re thinking,” he says, and Arya glances down at him with a half-smile, the crinkle between her eyes relaxing. “I don’t even know I’m doing it,” she says, and he smiles, pulling her down next to him. “It’s cute. Don’t stop,” he says, and she lets out a chuckle. “Aye, aye, sir,” she says, in mock seriousness. He reaches out, pushing her hair out of her face. Part of her is almost uncomfortable; there is a fluttering in her stomach and she doesn’t know how to feel about this.

“Get some sleep,” Cailan murmurs, and she curls closer to him, her eyes shutting almost of their own accord. It must have been a lot later than she realized, and she feels him shift behind her,
blowing out the candle before laying back down and gathering her against him.
Morning comes way too early for Arya’s comfort. When Cailan throws back the curtains, letting the weak early morning sunlight stream in, she rolls over onto her stomach and buries her face in the pillows. “I’d forgotten how hard you were to wake,” he muttered, sitting on the edge of the bed. She let out an incoherent mumble, sinking deeper into the bed. Cailan reached out, laying a hand on her back. “Arya, you need to get up,” he says, gently. She whimpers something into the pillows, and he sighs. “Will you get up if I close the curtains and just light a candle?” he asks, and part of her wonders how he’s so patient with her. She gives him a definitive yes, one that he can hear through the pillows, and a few seconds later, most of the offending light is gone, with only a candle burning in the darkened room.

She rolls over onto her back, rubbing her eyes with the heel of her hand. “You promised,” Cailan says, his voice a warning tone. “I’ll get up. Just….really slowly,” she says, and he joins her on the bed again, reaching out to her. She sits up slightly, curling into his side. He wraps his arm around her, rubbing circles on her back with his thumb. “You all could totally just leave me here,” she says, after a few minutes. Her body aches because she didn’t get enough sleep, the tiredness threading through her bones. “The darkspawn would get you, if we did that,” he said, amusement laced through his tone. “You know, at this point, I’m ready to embrace death so long as I get to sleep in,” she grumbles, and he laughs, pushing her gently into a sitting position. She swings her legs over the bed automatically, wrapping the sheet around her shoulders.

He gives her a one-armed side hug, despite her grumbling, and stands, stretching. His shirt rides up over his stomach, and Arya finds herself wondering how in the hell someone can have abs that are that defined. “We leave in two hours,” he tells her, and her eyes go back up to his face, where a cocky grin sits. She rolls her eyes, and contemplates just shoving her face back into the blankets. Instead, she throws the blanket off of her shoulders and stands up, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes. “I’m going to murder whoever suggested we get up at the ass-crack of dawn,” she mumbles, going over to her bag and pulling out her underclothes.

“I wish I could get away with just wearing jeans and a t-shirt,” she complains, and then Cailan is there, his hands resting lightly on her hips. “You could. Of course, that might just be the last outfit you ever wear,” he says, and she shakes her head, chuckling. “That’s kind of the entire reason that I’m not,” she says, and he steps back, letting her gather up all the pieces of her armor. She makes a face at it as she strips out of her pajamas, pulling on the underclothes. “I’ll help,” Cailan says, and while that made the task a lot easier, it was still something that Arya was ready to be done with before it even started. Eventually, they got her strapped and fastened into her armor, and then Cailan got dressed while Arya sorted through the crap in her bag. She didn’t need her notes or books from school, so she dumped them in the fireplace, freeing up some much-needed space in her bag.

When she finally makes it downstairs, Eldris is the only one there, slumped miserably over a cup of tea. Sam is curled up at his feet, still sleeping, although he perks up for a moment when Arya walks down the stairs. She slides into the seat next to Eldris, the barkeep groggily setting down a cup of tea in front of her. No one, it seemed, was ready to be up this early in the morning. “Who decided that leaving this early was a good idea?” she grumbles. Eldris glances at her sideways, one hand tangled in his hair. That was probably the only thing keeping his head held up, actually. “I don’t know, but if I find out who, I am going to stab them,” he replies, and Arya takes comfort in the fact that neither of them are morning people. “Hey, by the way, I was wondering if we could talk, later,”
she says, propping her chin up on her hands. “What about?” Eldris asks, and this is perhaps the least angry she’s ever seen him. “About you. And the Dalish. If you’d rather not talk to a human about it, I understand, but I’d really like to know,” she says, swinging her feet through the air. “Why do you want to know?” he asks, and his tone is slightly guarded but mostly curious. “I… I don’t really have a solid answer. Only that my religion has lost a lot, too, because of an organization like the Chantry. I guess maybe I want to see if there are any similarities. And I’d just like to know. If you’d rather not talk to me about Dalish culture, that’s fine, but I am interested in getting to know you as a person. Maybe things will be less antagonistic between us if that’s the case,” she says.

Eldris actually smiles, reaching out and patting her heartily on the back. “All right, lethallan. If you still want to talk by the end of the day, we’ll talk once we set up camp,” he says, and Arya smiles brightly. Morrigan enters the tavern, a few minutes later, looking completely unbothered by the early time. Arya bites her lip as she watches her walk towards them, wondering why she found her so attractive. She joins them at the table, sitting back as far as she can. She doesn’t speak, other than a muttered greeting, and it’s about five minutes before Leliana enters a few minutes later, dressed in leather armor, a bow hanging on her back. Alistair follows almost immediately, looking tired but entirely too cheerful. They both slide into seats nearby, and the two of them start talking animatedly. “Hey, guys, you’re great and all, but it’s too early in the damn morning,” Arya complains. Leliana laughs, but mostly ignores her, and then Cailan comes down the stairs with Brett and Eliza following. Sten is the only one left, but they’d agreed to meet him near his cage.

Once they all double-checked that they had everything, they headed out. Sten was indeed waiting by his cage, deep in meditation. It felt wrong to disturb him, but they needed to get moving. Brett was the brave soul who cleared his throat. “Sten? We’re all ready to go,” he said, quietly, and Sten cracked one eye open and then the other before rising. They’d found a mismatched set of armor for him, and a heavy battle-axe, but Arya could see he didn’t feel comfortable.

The darkspawn attacked as they reached the wall, just like they had in the game. Cailan, Alistair, Sten, Brett, and Eliza all rushed forward, doing an incredible job of tanking. Leliana hung back, firing arrows into the fray, and Eldris disappeared and reappeared near Bodahn and Sandal. Morrigan stood nearby, flinging ice and fire and electricity at the darkspawn. Arya was the only one not doing anything, hanging back incompetently.

A Hurlock broke away from the main group. It was big, and ugly, with a heavy great sword on its back. It let out a snarl as it rushed towards her, and Arya panicked. Time seemed to speed up and she thrust her hands out. She reached deep inside herself, pulling on that wild, primal thing and urging it to come out. It did, ice freezing the Hurlock solid. She held her breath for a few moments, the silence ringing in her ears. Everyone else, it seemed, had taken care of the others, and their eyes were on her. She brought her hand above her head, then brought it down in a sharp slicing motion. The Hurlock shattered, and the stench finally reached her. She almost gagged, but she swallowed it down, and then Cailan was there. “Hey, you did good,” he murmured, pulling her hair back away from her face. “Deep breaths,” he urged, and by the time he’d calmed her down, everyone else was ready to move on. She thought perhaps she should be embarrassed, but her magic was still there, thrumming underneath the surface, and she couldn’t bring herself to care.

“Your technique could use some work. At the very least, however, you have a very good foundation to build upon,” Morrigan said, and Arya flashed her a smile. “Does that mean you’ll teach me?” she asked. The black-haired woman gave her a rare, indulgent smile. “Of course it does. It would hardly do for some Chantry mage to teach you,” she said, and Arya felt more triumphant over that than actually killing the darkspawn.

They gathered their things once more and headed out, looking forward to an entire day of walking. Arya wasn’t pleased about that, considering they rarely stopped to rest, but there was still
some part of her that felt oddly energized. She walked next to Cailan, Sam trotting by her side, and while they occasionally filled the silence with small talk, most of the time the entire group of them were silent.

When they finally made camp, Arya insisted on setting up her own tent. She spent thirty minutes working diligently before she ended up tangled and miserable. Cailan took pity on her, then, taking over and setting it up in about ten minutes. “We’ll share, all right?” he says, and she nods. Leliana was bent over the campfire, stirring something in a pot, but she thought it’d be awhile before supper was finished. Eldris was cleaning his daggers, and she didn’t feel like bothering him, so she made her way to Morrigan’s sequestered campsite.

“Are you here for lessons?” Morrigan asked. Arya nodded, sitting on a log and looking up at Morrigan. The view from down there was quite nice, after all. “Very well. One of the most important spells that you could ever learn is a basic healing one. With it, you’ll be able to help yourself and others. Most mages, however, have an affinity for specific groups of magic. I am most proficient with electricity magic, although I have no idea what you’ll find the easiest to learn,” she said, dragging another log over in front of Arya. The two of them set to work in earnest, then, Arya stubbornly determined to learn the spell before the night was over. Cailan came over, eventually, sitting next to Morrigan and watching them working.

Morrigan decided the best way to teach was through practice, so she made a small, shallow cut on Arya’s wrist after teaching her the spell. “Heal it,” she ordered, and though it took Arya a few tries, she managed it. It was messily done, leaving a small, raised scar, but she’d done it. She held her wrist out to Cailan, a delighted smile on her face. “I did it!” she said. “That you did,” he replied, chuckling. Morrigan had a faint smile of amusement on her face. “That’s enough for tonight. It’s amazing that you managed to cast it that quickly,” Morrigan praised, and Arya almost glowed. Cailan stood, helping her to her feet, and they headed off towards the campfire. “I can’t believe I actually did it!” she said, and he grinned, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. “Maybe you’re a natural born healer,” he says. She smiles, thoughtfully. “Perhaps I am. That’d be nice,” she says.

She’s so tired that she almost falls asleep in her stew. Cailan rescues her, taking the stew out of her hands and passing it off to Eldris. “I think we’re ready for bed,” Cailan says, laughter in his voice. Arya mumbles something, and he scoops her up into his arms. She curls closer, already almost asleep. He shakes his head fondly as he ducks into their tent, settling down for the night. Eldris and Alistair were going to take turns on watch, making sure that no darkspawn crept up on them. They weren’t going to keep that schedule up long, only until they were well on their way to Redcliffe, but it had been decided that Arya would stay out of the watch rotation indefinitely. She wouldn’t be much help.

That night, though, Arya dreamt. When she woke, all she remembered was running through a forest, sunlight dancing on the ground, and laughter chasing after her.

Chapter End Notes

The pacing of this chapter felt a little awkward so uh sorry about that? It was mostly filler and I'm not good at filler unless it's conversation or deep, introspective thought. I don't want to drag things out too long, but at the same time I don't want to rush it, so I'm going to try and find that balance somewhere. I hope you all enjoyed the chapter, regardless of the awkward pacing!
When Arya woke the next morning, she was stiff and sore and almost as unwilling to get up as she had been the previous morning. Despite having gone to sleep next to Cailan, she was alone when she finally forced her eyelids apart. Were it not for the ache in her bladder and the desperate dryness of her throat, she’d have stayed on her miserable pallet until someone came to retrieve her. As it was, she rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and crawled out of the tent to see everyone huddled around Eldris and Alistair, a map held in their hands. Leliana glanced up at her and waved her over, but otherwise everyone stayed focused on the task at hand. She jogged over, the need to relieve herself momentarily forgotten.

“What’s going on?” she asked. It is Eldris who answers, looking up with something that’s not quite a scowl but isn’t entirely friendly either.

“We’re trying to figure out how long it’s going to take us to get to Redcliffe. It’d be easier and quicker on the roads, but we don’t want to risk someone discovering Cailan. Most of us are used to the terrain, or at the very least traveling with little to no rest…” he said, trailing off.

“But I’m not, and I’m holding everyone back?” she said, finishing his sentence. He nodded sheepishly and she sighed, dragging her fingernails through her hair.

“I doubt we could go much faster, even if you weren’t with us. The terrain is unpredictable, we’re all wearing full armor while we’re traveling, and we’re all carrying our own gear,” Alistair says, and Leliana nods in agreement.

“Regardless, you are here. If we can keep up yesterday’s pace, we can get there in eight days, maybe a little sooner,” Alistair replies, kindly.

“How soon could you be there if I wasn’t with you?” she asks, almost afraid of the answer.

“We could be there in five and a half days,” Sten answers, and Arya feels immensely guilty, clenching her jaw to prevent saying something reckless. They spend a few more moments gathered around the map before Alistair folds it up and slips it into his pocket. Leliana passes out breakfast, and then they pack up the camp. They are gone before the sun has fully slipped over the horizon.

Arya tried valiantly to keep a higher walking speed, but with her backpack weighing her down and tree roots tripping her up, she couldn’t go nearly as fast as she’d have liked. She did manage to move a little faster than yesterday, despite her aching and sore muscles. Alistair fell easily into step beside her, smiling. “You’re doing great, Arya. You don’t need to push yourself to impress any of us,” he says. She shakes her head, stubbornly.

“I do, though. If it weren’t for me, you could get there so much faster. I don’t even belong here. Everyone probably thinks I’m just some spoiled kid, and by the standards of your world, they
aren’t wrong,” she says, and she doesn’t know if that’s bitterness in her tone or something else. Alistair shakes his head, almost violently.

“I don’t think that, and I doubt the others do. Well, Sten might, but the Qunari view things differently anyway. You’ve lived a very different life than the rest of us, sure, but you come from a different place. There’s a lot you don’t know about this world, but any of us wouldn’t even know where to start in your world. You’re doing great, Arya,” Alistair argues, and a smile tugs the corners of her mouth upwards, despite herself.

“Thanks, but even I can sense their impatience,” she says, glancing at the rest of their traveling companions. Morrigan and Eldris are far ahead, talking about gods know what. Cailan has trailed behind, speaking to Leliana, and Sten is in the front, leading their party stoically, but perhaps impatiently.

“They’re like that with everyone,” Alistair said, and Arya laughed. She was extremely appreciative of Alistair, especially at that moment.

“Thank you, Alistair. I feel a lot better now, although I still feel bad about holding everyone back,” she says. He slings an arm around her shoulder, ruffling her hair playfully.

“Anytime,” he replies, grinning.

*

They stop a little later than they had the night before, and Arya is so tired and sore and incredibly cranky. She helps Cailan pitch their tent, and then she drags Leliana to the river, washing herself as best as she can with the limited supplies. The water is breathtakingly cold, and while Leliana laughs at her, she eventually joins in. When they return to the camp, supper is ready, and Arya curls up next to the fire and eats.

She has retreated to her tent and is cleaning her armor when Eldris approaches. She and Cailan both look up, and Arya is surprised to see him. “You said you wanted to talk?” he asks. It takes her a moment to recover from her surprise, admittedly.

“Yes, of course. Find somewhere and sit down,” she says, nodding at some of the empty space left in the tent. Gingerly, he settles down near the tent’s exit, eyeing Cailan warily.

“Did you have any specific questions?” he asks, once he’s settled. His knees are pulled up to his chest, almost defensively.

“Not about the Dalish. However, can you do tattoos that aren’t vallaslin? I know that the vallaslin are blood markings to honor your Creators,” she says, and Eldris’ ears perk up a little.

“I do, actually. Do you want one?” he asks, once he’s settled. His knees are pulled up to his chest, almost defensively.

“Yes! I’ve got several picked out. Some of mine honor my gods and goddesses, others are just personal. Would you be willing to give me a tattoo? I’ll even pay you,” she says, leaning forward. Cailan grins to himself at her enthusiasm.

“I can give you one now, if you like. While I work, I can talk about some of my culture,” Eldris offers, and Arya grins, her entire face brightening.

“I’d love that,” she says, placing her armor carefully off to the side. Eldris scrambles out of the tent and waits for her. A few minutes later, she comes crawling out, her computer in hand.
“So, what do you want, and where?” he asks. She thinks for a moment, considering. She had so many tattoos she wanted to get, but she had no idea where she wanted to get all of them at.

“For my first one, I want the triple goddess symbol on my back, maybe in between my shoulder blades? I’ll show you a picture of what it looks like,” she says. He ducks inside his tent, holding the flap open for her. He motions for her to settle down on the blanket. She stretches out, pulling up a picture of the symbol she wanted. He digs through his pack, pulling out the ink and the needle.

“I can do that. Go ahead and take your shirt off,” he instructs. She almost makes a joke, but thinks better of it, pulling the shirt over her head and leaving it beside her. Eldris takes a moment to get situated, settling down comfortable at her side. He readies the materials, and then Arya is on her way to getting her first tattoo.

While Eldris works, he talks, telling her stories that Hahren Paviel had told him growing up, telling her about why he chose Mythal’s vallaslin, about Tamlen, about stories from his childhood. By the time he’s finished, Arya feels like she knows him a lot better.

“Thank you, Eldris. I appreciate this,” she says, giving him a soft smile. He returns it, for once, and Arya thinks he looks so incredibly young.

He sends her back to her tent with instructions on how to care for her new tattoo, and she falls asleep for the night.

The next few days pass with increasing monotony. At night, once a camp has been set up, Arya either trains with Morrigan, learns more about practical combat from Leliana, or talks with the various members of the group. She spends the least amount of time with Sten, because he intimidates her, because he doesn’t seem like he enjoys her company, because she’s afraid of offending him. She spends the most time with Alistair and Cailan, the two of them being most accommodating and friendly. While the others were mostly totally polite (a few exceptions coming from Morrigan’s caustic remarks or Eldris’ hasty ones or Leliana’s teasing ones) Arya didn’t feel as comfortable with them. She was cold, tired, achy, and hungry most of the time. Everything, it seemed, hurt, and the nightly training sessions with Leliana and wooden daggers never helped. She was convinced she was dying, half the time.

“Are you sure you can do this?” Eldris asked once, from the sidelines where he watched, and Arya’s jaw clenched with determination and her eyes hardened.

“I’m fine,” she’d snarled, and leaped at Leliana with a new fervor. She fought tooth and nail, throwing everything into her attacks. She blocked most of Leliana’s, landed a few of her own, and by the time they separated, panting, Arya had done a good job for a beginner.

“I doubt you can do better,” Eldris had said, a shit-eating grin on his face. She’d wiped the sweat from her brow, taken a drink of water, and glared at him wordlessly.

It was on the sixth night, a half day’s walk from Redcliffe, that Arya checked in with Ella once more, this time to let her meet the rest of the group.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I'm back again with another filler chapter w/e I hope you liked it anyway even though I don't know what I'm doing. I thought about having them just get to Redcliffe
but I don't want to rush things either so here we are. As always, comments are (more than) welcome about how you liked it, or even about ideas and things you want to see coming up. While I've got a good bit of the proper story fleshed out, there's also a lot of stuff that I'm adding and removing and switching around, so I can probably get to any requests if you have them (and if the characters cooperate.) Basically just comment if you liked this even a little- it means a lot to me and gives me a ton of motivation. Thanks so much for reading!
Two nights before she introduced Ella to the rest of her merry band of misfits, she’d been talking to Morrigan while the two of them worked at mending some of their clothing. The witch was surprisingly curious about her, and Arya wasn’t whether or not that she should be nervous. “You said you knew some of our secrets. Shall I assume that mine are included?” she asked, and Arya froze.

“I- yes. They are,” she answers, after a moment. Morrigan’s golden eyes narrow, and there is a flinty edge to them that hadn’t been there a few seconds ago.

“What do you know of me?” she asks, and though she’d made a good attempt at keeping her voice steady and her tone casual, there was an edge to it. Arya resumed sewing, nervously, as she began to talk.

“You grew up with Flemeth in the Korcari Wilds. Your father was likely Chasind in origin. Flemeth was far from nurturing, but she taught you everything you know. Some would offer you pity for your childhood, but you don’t want it. She taught you how to survive, and that’s what matters- to you, at least. Once, when you were young, you ventured outside of the Wilds. You found a noble’s golden hand mirror, and you were delighted with your treasure. When you returned to Flemeth, however, she smashed the mirror to teach you a lesson. Sentimentality, it seems, is not an option for those who value survival. Flemeth sent you with Eldris and Alistair, not to kindly provide aid, but because you have knowledge of a ritual, performed on the eve of battle. If the ritual is performed, the old god’s untainted soul will pass into the child conceived during the ritual,” she says, and halfway through she stops sewing, focusing on speaking.

Morrigan’s hands have stilled, as well. “I am…impressed at your knowledge. But you mustn’t speak of this ritual to anyone else. I would not have my time away from the Wilds cut short because others got suspicious,” she says, and Arya gives her what she hopes is a reassuring smile.

“Don’t worry, your secret is safe with me. It isn’t mine to tell, anyway. But I can…I can show you, where my visions come from. A little explanation will probably be in order first, but it would be of great interest to you, I think,” she says, and she wonders if she will live long to regret this decision. None she know would appreciate being told their lives were a game.

“Very well. Begin your explanation, and then show me,” Morrigan says, and she resumes sewing. Arya wonders how much damage the witch could do if she stabbed her with the needle in a fit of rage. Arya places her own needlework down, and pulls her computer out of her bag. It still had almost seventy percent battery life, thankfully.

“In my world, we have these things called video games. I suppose…the closest thing here would be an interactive play. These are probably not like the games you have here. They…their purpose is to tell stories. I didn’t have visons, not truly, but there is a game about the Fifth Blight, which we are currently living. It is…it is ridiculous, I think, now that it’s real,” she says, picking her words carefully. Morrigan tenses once more.

“You are saying our lives are just a game to you?” the witch asks, and her voice is cold and deadly. Fear and arousal in equal parts shoot through Arya, and she knows she’s walking a very thin line.

“Yes and no. Like I said, the purpose of the game is to tell a story. In this case, it is Eldris’s story. It would be like having the whole thing written in a book,” she explains, and while Morrigan
isn’t entirely pleased, it seems she is willing to stomach the explanation.

“Show me,” she demands, her voice like cold steel, so Arya does. She boots up the game, and, with Morrigan sitting at her shoulder, shows her the basic controls, and then lets her take over. She watches nervously, but part of her is hit with the reality of the situation. Morrigan is sitting on a log in the middle of a forest, with a laptop on her lap.

Morrigan isn’t entirely happy with the idea of their lives being in a game, but she accepts it readily enough once she’s started playing. Arya lets out a breath of relief, packing her computer up and going to supper. She makes a mental note to ask Morrigan about electricity spells and charging the damn thing later.

The next night, when they stop, she does just that. Morrigan is the only one who can hold the spell for prolonged periods of time, and Morrigan is the one who is currently using the computer the most, so Arya leaves it in the witch’s capable hands, observing from a distance.

It is the day after when she ends up introducing Ella to everyone else. She’d been pulled aside by Leliana for ‘girl talk’ when Morrigan came crashing through the bushes, terrified. “Arya, come quickly. I think I may have gotten a person trapped inside your…device,” she says, and Arya is bewildered enough to follow her without asking any questions. When they reach the computer, however, all she can see is Ella, bent double and cackling.

“Morrigan, it’s all right. You haven’t trapped anyone anywhere. This is a form of communication,” she explains, sliding in front of the camera. Ella barely takes any notice of her, she’s still so busy laughing. Morrigan’s eyes narrow, and Arya figures she doesn’t need to be humiliated. She mutes the computer for the time being. When Ella finally calms down, after intense glares from her friend, she unmutes the computer.

“I thought you said you weren’t going to be able to use it that much, because battery life or whatever. Now you’re letting Morrigan use it?” Ella demands, and Arya rolls her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingers.

“I found out a way to charge it. Electricity magic exists here, remember? And, besides, I was…showing Morrigan something. That’s not important now, though,” Arya answers, and Ella rolls her eyes but relents.

“Fine. By the way, where are you?” she asks, and Arya is grateful for the distraction. The rest of the camp has begun to gather, by now, with only Cailan having seen this before. He stills seems amazed, which isn’t all that surprising, although it is endearing.

“Somewhere in between Redcliffe and Lothering. I told them everything I could, and we decided that was best,” she answers. Ella raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t comment on their choice.

“So, what’s going on with you?” she asks, and Arya grins, passing the computer off to Cailan. She angles the camera so Ella can still see her, and then she reaches deep inside of her for that primal song and coaxes it out. Light blooms between her fingers, playful tendrils that twine around each other.

“You’re going to exhaust yourself if you use your…talent for pretty light shows,” Morrigan says, almost fondly. Arya frowns, but retracts the spell gently, letting it curl into her chest softly.

“You’re a mage!” Ella exclaims, as if that isn’t obvious. Arya grins, and accepting the
computer once more. At this point, Eldris has gotten over his wary caution, and moves over to her. He crouches behind Arya, wrapping his arms around her waist and resting his chin on her shoulder.

“And who’s this?” Ella asks, her head tilting to the side. Arya has nearly frozen at the physical contact. She isn’t uncomfortable by any means—she just hadn’t expected Eldris to be comfortable enough around any of them to do anything like this at all.

“My name is Eldris, if there are to be introductions. Although it seems like you know most of the others around here in the same way Arya did,” he says, his voice warm and actually polite in her ear.

“My, my, Eldris, what has gotten into you?” Arya asks, holding her breath in case she offends the man. She feels him shrug behind her.

“Who knows, lethallan?” he says, and she can almost hear the smile in his voice.

“I’m not gonna complain,” she says, a faint smile on her face. There’s a noise through the computer, one that is very obviously not made by Ella before she swears and pushes the computer aside, standing up. She disappears for a few seconds, then pops back into the frame.

“I’m gonna have to go. Damn dog. Anyway, love you, Ar, see you later, bye!” she says, ending the call quickly. Arya shuts the computer, and everything is quiet and still for a moment.

“Well, that was fun!” Leliana says, a cheerful smile on her face. Sten looked ready to disagree, but thankfully he didn’t. That, and their continued proximity to Redcliffe, reminded Arya of an issue rather important to the Qunari. When everyone disperses and Eldris untangles himself from her, she puts the computer away and approaches him.

Sten is sitting cross-legged in the grass, meticulously cleaning his armor. “Yes?” he says, his tone somewhere between impatience and annoyance. Arya crosses her hands together behind her back, like a soldier giving a report.

“I know about Asala. I know how you lost your blade, and I know where it can be found again. Or, at least, I know what my visions showed me. It may be in a different location, and if that’s the case I am still more than willing to help you track down your sword. I know what it means to you,” she says, swallowing thickly as Sten regards her carefully.

“Where is it?” he asks, stilling. She stiffens, glancing down at his hands. Each one is bigger than her entire skull. Sten could do some serious damage if she pissed him off.

“In Redcliffe. There was a dwarf in my vision who had come into possession of it. I know you that sword is like your soul, made for your hand and your hand alone. I can’t really grasp what exactly it means to you, but I know that it’s beyond important. I’d like to help,” she says, and Sten regards her for a moment longer before nodding once, sharply.

“Very well. I will speak to the Wardens about this once we reach Redcliffe,” Sten says, clearly dismissing her. She nods, and backs away, joining Eldris at the fire once more. The two of them speak of legends and stories, Eldris speaking of stories about the Creators and Arya telling him about mythology.

Cailan was assigned first watch that night, and she stayed up, sitting quietly beside him on the computer while they waited for someone to come relieve him. “You know, you don’t need to do this. You’re tired enough as it is in the mornings,” he says. She rubs her eyes, grinning ruefully.

“Consider it practice,” she says in response. He smiles, ruffling her hair fondly. She leans
against him and he wraps an arm around her.

“You seem more comfortable here, now,” he remarks after a few moments. She glances at him before looking away, rubbing her hands over her arms. The air had gotten a lot chillier once the sun went down.

“I am, I think. It’s…It still hits me, all of a sudden, sometimes, how this isn’t really my home, and how I’ve lost a lot of things by coming here. But then I think about all things I can gain from being here. Back home I…I honestly probably didn’t have a lot of potential. There weren’t any careers I wanted to go into. But here, I feel useful. Well, moderately. I know I’m holding you guys back by quite a bit, and I know I’m learning almost everything, but I have knowledge. That’s gotta count for something, right?” she says, and suddenly she feels so tired. She’s used to having relatively everything handed to her, and she understands that Cailan and the others have given her so much for free, but she’s had to do so much more since she got here.

“I think you’re doing great, for what it’s worth. You’re…remarkably well adjusted,” he said, nudging her gently. She snorts, rubbing her eyes with the palm of her hand.

“I wouldn’t say that. More like ‘doesn’t understand how to feel emotions so I block them out,’” she retorts. Cailan shakes his head, fondly, and the two of them lapse into silence. A few minutes later, Alistair comes to relieve them of their post.

True enough, Arya is extra angry in the morning about the necessity of consciousness.
They make relatively good time to Redcliffe village, considering that Arya isn’t used to keeping up grueling traveling speeds. The village was bustling with people when they arrived, and there were no signs of a poisoned arl or walking corpses that arrive at night. The guards, however, seem to recognize Alistair, and would have recognized Cailan had he not been wearing a hood that concealed most of his face. As it was, they insisted that the entire party stay at the castle. They ushered them into the guest wing, giving Arya remarkably little time to sight-see, and showed them their rooms. She ended up rooming with Cailan, more out of comfort and convenience than anything. Once everyone had settled in, Alistair and Eldris got whisked away to meet with Arl Eamon, and the rest of them were provided full use of the facilities.

Arya was torn. On one hand, she wanted to take a bath and soak in it for approximately three years, while washing all the filth off of her. On the other hand, she didn’t have any casual Ferelden clothing. “You could take a bath, wear something of Leliana’s, and then we can go buy you a few dresses?” Cailan suggests. Arya agrees to the idea almost immediately, bounding over to the room Leliana is sharing with Morrigan and asking to borrow clothes. The bard agrees readily enough, a wicked gleam in her eyes that Arya pretends not to notice.

With her newfound magical abilities, keeping the water hot for a lot longer is a breeze. She soaks for an obscene amount of time, scrubbing until her skin is pink and her scalp tingles. When she returns to her room, running her fingers through her hair to get rid of the tangles, Cailan has cleaned up too. She finds her gaze lingering appreciatively on him for a few moments before she dumps her armor in the corner. “I’ll deal with that later,” she declares, and Cailan grins.

“Very well. Buuuuut, I should pick out your clothes. You don’t know anything about Ferelden fashions, after all,” he says, a playful glint in his eyes.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Cailan, I swear to the gods above, if you make me look like a fool I will castrate you,” she says, and he laughs, slinging an arm around her shoulders. She rolls her eyes, scooping up her coin purse.

“I know of a good shop. The owner is discreet and the products are finely-made,” he says, and Arya is thankful they won’t have to spend ages looking for a shop. She tucks the coin purse into an internal pocket, and motions for Cailan to lead the way.

“Redcliffe is so big,” she found herself saying, tucked up against his side as they walked through the village. At the center was a dirty market square, full of haggard people trying to sell their wares and beggars trying to make a living. The houses near the market are squeezed together, and it’s full of people. She’s suddenly glad she’s clinging to Cailan like he is; it’d be easy to get swept away and lost in a crowd like this.

The tailor he’d mentioned is in the center of the market, tucked into a corner shop. Dirty white paint is flecking off the outside of the building, but the inside is bright and warm and cozy. Shelves line the walls, stacked full of bolts of fabric, and there’s a curtained off area behind the counter. The tailor, or whom Arya assumes is the tailor, is an old woman, sitting on a stool at the counter and writing something in a journal. She looks up when they enter, smiling kindly. “How may I help you today?” she asks, laying the quill down neatly next to the journal.
“My friend here would like some clothes. Two dresses suitable to wear at court, two casual dresses, and a set of traveling clothes, if you’ve got it,” Cailan answers, his tone polite. The woman slides off the stool and comes around the counter.

“Well, girl, let me look at you,” she says, and Cailan nudges Arya forward. Arya stands there, nervously, as the woman moves around her, reaching out and plucking at Leliana’s shirt.

“That shirt there’s a bit too small, but I think I happen to have two court dresses in the back that should work with some minor adjustments. Is color or style an issue?” she asks. Arya glances back to Cailan, fidgeting with the necklace she wore.

“No, not particularly. She is meeting with the arl tonight, so something fitting for that occasion is the only specification,” Cailan answers, and then the woman ducks back behind the counter and returns with a tape measure, a charcoal pencil, and a few pins. She ducks behind the curtained area and returns with four dresses to pick from, all of them silky and far fancier than anything Arya thought she would wear. One of them is a dark red, one a light purple, the other a deep blue, and the last one a pale green.

“These are the court dresses. Would you like to step behind the curtain to try them on? Or maybe send your friend outside?” the seamstress asks. Arya looks at Cailan. She doesn’t want to send him out, in case the lady asks her more questions she can’t answer, but she doesn’t necessarily want him to see her naked.

“He can stay, if he turns his back,” she says, finally, and Cailan smirks as he turns around.

“Very well. Please undress,” the woman says, kindly, and Arya deposits her coin purse in Cailan’s lap before shucking out of the rest of her clothes. While she does that, the woman locks the door.

They start with the red dress. It fits her well, with the collar needed slight adjustments to keep from revealing too much. The green one is much too big, and it would take so many adjustments to get it to fit that it would almost be easier to make a completely new dress. The purple one fits, but the neckline is too low for comfort due to the style, and the blue one just needs to be hemmed. Without much issue, she settles on the red one and the blue one, and then the woman brings out several, much more casual dresses. These are made from cotton and wool, and the fabric is heavier and more durable.

By the time Arya leaves the shop, she has a dark grey cotton gown and a dark green wool gown, as well as the two she can wear in court. The woman has also taken her measurements, and had set about making two sets of traveling clothes. Arya was insistent on paying her in advance, and the total came out to a whooping six sovereigns. She winces inwardly, but pays the fee with a smile, and leaves the shop in her new cotton dress.

“That looks good on you,” Cailan comments, once they’re out of the shop. Arya shifts the clothes she has on her arm and looks up at him.

“Thank you, my good sir,” she says, a smile playing across the corners of her mouth. Cailan wraps one arm around her waist, pulling her closer so they won’t get separated.

“Would you like to see the rest of the markets before heading out?” he asks. She nods, and so they walk among the winding kiosks. Arya buys a delicate silver necklace, something that’ll go
much better with her new clothes than the pentagram currently around her neck, and she buys a hair pin. She sees a silver bracelet that she buys for Morrigan, and a Chantry amulet that she buys for Leliana. She also purchases a small painting for Sten. She searches for something for Alistair and Eldris, but is unable to find anything she thinks either of them will like, and she’s not going to buy Cailan something while he hovers over her shoulder. By the time she returns to her room, squirreling away her new outfits, she has a total of three silvers and thirty coppers left.

“You shouldn’t have spent so much,” Cailan scolds. She shrugs, picking out the gifts she’d purchased and laying them out on the bed, separate from everything else.

“Perhaps not, but most of this isn’t for me. Speaking of, I’m gonna go see if I can find everyone else and give them their gifts,” she says. He nods, stretching out on the bed. She gathers the gifts up in her arms and exits her room, looking around.

Leliana isn’t in the room she shares with Morrigan, but the witch is. Arya deposits the clothes she’d borrowed onto the table, and approaches the dark-haired woman. “I have something for you,” she says, holding out the bracelet. Morrigan eyes it, and her, with suspicion.

“What is this?” she asks. Arya grins.

“It’s a bracelet. Surely you’ve seen them before,” she says, and Morrigan frowns.

“I know what it is. Why are you giving it to me? What do you want in return?” she asks, and something twists, sharp and painful, in Arya’s chest.

“I saw it, and I thought you might like it. I don’t want anything in return,” she answers, sitting down beside the other woman on the bed, still holding the bracelet towards her. Morrigan accepts it, cautiously, fastening it around her wrist.

“Are you….sure?” she asks, uncertainly. Arya nods, a soft and gentle smile on her face, and something new and guarded flits across Morrigan’s face before she hides it with her usual cool mask.

“Then you have my thanks, and more, if you want it,” the witch breathes, and there is something sacred between them in that moment. Arya almost asks what she means, but she’s interrupted by Leliana walking through the door,

“Arya! You have returned!” she says, cheerfully. Arya stands, returning the hug she knew was inevitable.

“I have! And I’ve got you something,” she says, offering Leliana the Chantry amulet. She’d worried that Leliana already had one, but she’d rather give her a gift she already had than leave the bard out.

“Oh! How dear of you!” Leliana says, fastening it around her neck immediately. She rubs her fingers over the steel surface, looking genuinely delighted. Morrigan still looks baffled by her own gift.

“You’re welcome. Do you know where the Sten is, by any chance?” she asks, and Leliana shakes her head.

“No, last I saw him, he was headed into the village. He may have returned by now, but if he isn’t in his room, then I don’t know where he will be,” she answers. Arya thanks her for the
information, gives the bard another hug, and dashes out of the door.

Sten’s room is situated at the end of the hall. The door is shut, although when she knocks there is only a brief moment before the qunari’s rumbling voice bids her to enter. Sten is sitting cross-legged on the floor, almost like he was meditating before she interrupted.

“Yes?” he asks, almost impatiently.

“I brought you a gift. I remembered, in my visions, you liked paintings and that sort of thing, and, well, this one is small enough that you can carry it around with you. I thought it was pretty,” she said, and holds it out to him. It’s a simple painting of a sunset bleeding into the ocean, and it was masterfully done. Sten’s face remains as passive as ever, but there is something glittering in his eyes now.

“You have my thanks. I have spoken to the villagers about Asala, as well. The dwarf who has it is supposed to bring it to the castle later,” he says, and Arya’s smile brightens.

“I’m glad you found it, Sten,” she says.

“As am I,” the qunari replies, and when it is clear that he’s done talking, Arya leaves the room, shutting the door softly behind her.
Leliana insisted on doing Arya’s makeup before supper. It was supposedly some grand affair, dining with the arl, and Leliana wanted Arya to look her best. So she laced her into the red dress and did some dramatic, dark makeup that made Arya marvel at her skills. Cailan escorted her to the dining hall, and apparently Eldris or Alistair or someone had briefed Arl Eamon on the situation, because he didn’t seem too surprised to see Cailan. He insisted that Cailan sit next to him, and Alistair on the other side, and Arya was shuffled down to the end of the table, across from Leliana and beside Morrigan.

The food itself was only slightly better than what she’d come to expect in Fereldan. Everything was rather bland, and the only thing she really enjoyed was the bread. She suffered through as much as she was able before she pushed her plate away, and a few minutes later, Morrigan leaned over. “Shall we return to our rooms?” the witch asked, and Arya was so desperate to get out of the situation that she didn’t notice the undercurrent in the witch’s tone.

“Yes, please,” she whispered, and Morrigan stood and led Arya out of the dining room, through the corridors. They entered Morrigan’s room, the witch shutting the door behind them before turning to Arya, a glint of something dark in her eyes as she stepped closer. Arya watched her, warily, her back against the wall.

“’Tis cold in my room, all alone,” the witch all but purred, and Arya’s eyes narrowed sharply.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest. Morrigan sighed and stepped back, running a hand through her hair.

“I was trying to be more subtle about it, but yes,” she admitted, and Arya shook her head slightly.

“You’re not doing this as a way to pay me back for the gift I gave you, are you?” she asked, and Morrigan laughed. It was too high-pitched, too nervous, and utterly devoid of humor.

“No. I…I know my goals, here, traveling with the Wardens. I must admit that I’m not fond of the idea of conceiving the first time I ever…enjoy myself,” the witch admits, bracing herself against the table. Arya is stunned, and speechless for a few moments.

“I…I can’t say I blame you, for that, really. We should talk before we do this, though. I don’t want to do anything you’re uncomfortable with, and I don’t want to expect things from you,” she replies, finally, and Morrigan turns back to face her, looking so utterly vulnerable in that moment.

“You said you know me through your game. Surely you know my ideas on romance and love,” she said, scorn dripping from her voice. Arya sighs, and almost rubs her eyes with her palm. She remembers her makeup last minute and stops herself, however.
“Yes, Morrigan, I know your views. I also know that, should the player decide to romance you, you fall head over heels in love and it scares the absolute shit out of you. I want you to decide our relationship, and I don’t want you to feel like you have to do something, and I don’t want you to do anything you’re not comfortable with,” she said, moving to stand next to Morrigan. She lets her hand rest gently on her exposed back, and she feels Morrigan let out a deep sigh.

“I do not know if it’ll be a one-time thing, Arya. And believe me, I’m not going to do anything I’m not comfortable with. I just wanted to try it with someone I trusted,” she says, turning to face Arya suddenly. They’re so close that Arya can feel Morrigan’s breath skating across her skin, and she shivers.

“Okay. We’ll try this, take it slow,” Arya says, after a few heartbeats, and then Morrigan surges forward, pressing her lips against Arya’s. Arya is admittedly surprised by the intensity, her hands coming up to rest awkwardly on Morrigan’s hips. When the other woman breaks the kiss, Arya starts pressing small, soft kisses down her jawline, leaving faint pink smudges from her lipstick. When Arya reaches her neck, Morrigan lets out a soft gasp, and her hands move up to tangle in Arya’s hair, tugging it out of the up-do that Leliana had spent so much time on.

Arya comes back up, a grin on her face as she kisses Morrigan again, and lets out a soft chuckle when she feels Morrigan unlacing the back of her dress. Admittedly, she herself has no idea how Morrigan’s top works, but with a little fumbling and a lot of good luck, she manages to get the damn thing to fall off. Morrigan pauses, something flashing in her eyes before she pushes Arya’s dress off of her shoulders, letting it crumple into the floor. Arya’s hands come up to cup Morrigan’s breasts, rubbing a thumb over her nipples. The witch leans into the touch, sighing.

“I don’t mean to rush this, but the others will be back soon. Perhaps we should hurry it along?” Morrigan suggests, after a few minutes of light touching and kissing, where all they’ve managed to do is get naked in front of each other. Arya grins, shrugs and then gently pushes Morrigan onto the bed. She lands on her back; props herself up on her elbows. She watches through heavily-lidded eyes as Arya crawls after her, pressing kisses on her stomach and her thighs. Her breath hitchs in her throat and Arya pauses, hovering, looking up at Morrigan.

Morrigan nods, and Arya smirks. When her tongue meets Morrigan’s skin, soft and wet and flushed with desire, her hips lift up into the air and a groan escapes her lips. Arya giggles, but doesn’t stop, and it’s not long until Morrigan’s hand tangles in her hair. Arya presses one finger inside, and then another, and Morrigan’s breath is coming out in sharp, short pants. Arya thinks about stopping, drawing the experience out, but the noises coming out of Morrigan’s mouth and the scrape of her fingernails against her scalp is too sweet to pass up, so she keeps going until Morrigan shudders through her release, letting out a soft keen. She presses a couple more kisses to Morrigan’s thighs and stomach before the woman’s fingers slip out of her hair, and Arya climbs back up, laying down on her back next to Morrigan.

To her surprise, Morrigan rolls over and curls herself around Arya, tucking her head underneath Arya’s chin. Arya doesn’t say anything, curling into the embrace and stroking Morrigan’s arm gently. They stay like that for a while, until long after their breathing has returned to normal. “I suppose you should return to your quarters before everyone else returns,” Morrigan says eventually, sitting up slowly. Arya sits up as well, swinging her legs off the side of the bed.

“Most likely,” she agrees, assessing the other woman for signs of distress. Morrigan is, of course, guarded like usual, so Arya is unable to detect anything until she reaches out, laying a soft hand on Arya’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, and Arya just nods as she gets up and pulls her dress on. She
was tempted to dash across the hall without it, but she’d rather not risk someone catching her naked, so with a heavy sigh she goes about getting dressed. Morrigan is there, suddenly, her nimble fingers doing up the lacing on the back of the dress easily. Arya flashes her a grin over her shoulder, and she rolls her eyes, smiling almost fondly. Once Arya is dressed, she heads across the hall to her own room, which is blessedly empty for the time. She sits on the edge of the bed.

It takes her a moment for the entire reality of what just happened to hit her. When Cailan comes slinking in, smelling like a brewery, the others departing into their own rooms (loudly) as well, she still hardly believes it. She has, at least, managed to get ready for bed, which mostly consisted of putting on fresh underwear and the tank-top she’d arrived in and removing her makeup. “You have a fun night?” Cailan asks, coming up behind her and draping himself across her in a hug. She laughs, nudging him farther from the edge of the bed.

“You’re drunk,” she says, and he laughs in her ear.

“Of course!” he responds, and then he lets go of her, flopping backwards onto the bed, a dopey grin on his face.

“I take it supper was much more thrilling for you than it was for me,” she remarks dryly, and he reaches up and pushes a strand of hair behind her ear.

“You didn’t enjoy it?” he asks. She shakes her head lightly, a soft smile turning the corner of her lips upwards.

“Not particularly. The food wasn’t something I enjoyed, and my two biggest friends were sitting at the opposite end of the table. Morrigan’s great, but not the best for dinner conversation,” Arya says, and Cailan’s face falls melodramatically before brightening.

“What kinds of food do you like? We can go make some, right now. I remember where the kitchens are!” he says, and Arya shakes her head fondly.

“Not right now. Maybe sometime tomorrow?” she says, and he nods, rolling over suddenly and burying his face in the pillow. It isn’t long before he starts snoring.

She feels far from tired herself, so after a few moments she stands, pulling on one of Cailan’s shirts over her tank-top, and opens the door. The hallway is deserted, and she has no idea about the layout of the castle, but she starts walking anyway. Eventually, she ends up at a door that leads onto a balcony, and she steps outside into the cold night air. Her breath fogs in the air, and a few seconds pass before she realizes she’s not alone.

She doesn’t recognize this man as they stare at each other, but something about him looks familiar. “I’m sorry- I…I couldn’t sleep. Thought I’d try to get some air. I didn’t mean to disturb you,” she says, suddenly, after a few seconds. The man smiles tiredly at her, looking ragged.

“It’s quite all right. My name is Jowan. Who are you?” he asks, and Arya steps forward before she can stop herself, shutting the door behind her quietly.

“My name is Arya. Are you…I’m sorry, by any chance are you the Jowan from the Circle Tower?” she asks, and he tenses.

“How do you know about that? Are you a Templar?” he hisses, backing away. She raises her hands up in a placating gesture, shaking her head furiously.

“No! I’m a mage too, dammit. I just…You’re here to poison the arl, aren’t you?” she asks, and Jowan’s eyes narrow suspiciously.
“How did you know about that?” he demands. She shifts from one foot to the other, wishing desperately that the stone under her feet wasn’t so bitingly cold, or that she’d thought to put on shoes. Or, hell, at the very least, socks.

“I’m a seer,” she says flatly, crossing her arms over her chest. She’s suddenly very conscious of how little she’s actually wearing, and she shivers.

“…Are you going to tell anyone?” he asks, and she scoffs.

“Are you shitting me, kid? I’m going to try to talk some sense into your damn head, and if that doesn’t work, I’m going to kick ten different kinds of shit out of your ass,” she said, dragging her fingers through her hair.

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I? I’m a maleficar, and if they catch me they’ll make me Tranquil for sure. Arl Howe is offering me protection if I agree to do this,” he hisses, and she steps forward, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

“You always have a choice. Always,” she says, and there is a ghost lingering in her eyes and in her clenched fists, and Jowan turns away from her, bracing himself against the railing on the balcony, his head hanging down.

“What else am I supposed to do?” he asks, and she sighs, stepping forward to stand next to him.

“Well, I’m traveling with the Grey Wardens. I could talk to Eldris and Alistair, see if they’d recruit you. Maybe leave out the maleficar bit- Alistair was a Templar and I don’t think that would go over too well,” she suggests, looking at Jowan out of the corner of her eye. The man looks so tired.

“I just wanted to live a normal life. Fall in love, get married, have kids,” he says, his voice cracking. Arya lays a hand on his shoulder.

“I know. It’s not fair, and it’s completely fucked up, but this is what you’ve got to work with, kid,” she says, sadly, and Jowan drags his hand over his face before straightening, turning to face her. There’s a fire in his eyes now, hard determination.

“Talk to your Wardens, then,” he says, before walking off, new determination in his steps. It’s a while longer before Arya retreats inside, managing by some stroke of sheer, dumb luck to make it back to her room. When she slips into the bed, Cailan reaches out in his sleep, pulling her close. She lays awake for a long while yet before she passes into a deep sleep.
the past does(n't) define us

Chapter Notes

Content Warning for referenced domestic abuse that occurred between Arya's mother and Arya's father. Also, Arl Eamon is an asshole. Sorry not sorry about that second one.

She is a child again, and her mother is crouching in front of her, her eyes wild and angry, her face stained with tears. “No matter what, Arya, you always have a choice. Your life is your own,” she says, desperately and fiercely. Arya is too young to understand what her mother means, too young to understand why the bruises blossoming underneath her mother’s eye come from her father. Her mother stands, moving around frantically after this, piling both her clothes and Arya’s into a suitcase haphazardly. Her father beats on the door from the other side, and her mother stalks over to the drawers, pulling out a pistol. She shoves Arya behind her, and when her father breaks through the door, he is met with a gun in his face.

“Get the fuck away from me,” her mother snarled. Her father laughed, and her mother’s hand doesn’t shake as she clicks the safety off.

“What are you going to do, you old bitch? You don’t have it in me to shoot you,” her father laughs, and Arya doesn’t understand that the stench rolling off of him is akin to that of a brewery.

“Don’t you dare touch me or my daughter ever again, you son of a bitch,” her mother snarls, and her hand is still steady. Her father eyes her warily for a few moments.

“Fine. You have two hours to get the fuck out of my house,” her father says, turning to walk out of the door. Once he is gone, her mother flicks the safety back on but shoves the gun into the waistline of her jeans.

Arya wakes up, tears in her eyes, long before anyone else does. She throws the covers off, eases out of Cailan’s grip, and goes to stand by the window, wiping at her eyes. She doesn’t hear Cailan wake up behind her, and she startles when she feels his hand on her shoulder, jerking away from the contact on instinct. Cailan lets go immediately.

“Arya, what’s wrong?” he asks, and she shakes her head, rubbing desperately at her eyes.

“I just…had a nightmare. I didn’t mean to wake you or worry you,” she says, and when he reaches out this time and cups her face, she leans into the contact. He wipes her tears away with his thumb and urges her closer gently, wrapping his arms around her. She sighs, burying her face in his chest.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks. She shakes her head.

“Not right now. Can we just…Can we go back to bed?” she asks, and she knows she won’t sleep, but he must be tired and hungover, and she doesn’t want him fussing over her. He nods,
leading her back to the bed. She curls up against him, and she stays like that until his breathing slows and steadies, signaling his venture into unconsciousness again. She feels restless, all of a sudden, so she slips out of his grasp and pulls on her jeans, slipping her feet quietly into her boots. She scribbles a quick note to him, leaving it on her pillow, and slips out into the hallway.

She wanders through the castle until she runs, quite literally, into Alistair. “Oh, shit. Sorry, I didn’t see you there,” she said, reaching out to grab him as he stumbles.

“It’s all right, Arya. I was just on the way to the meeting with Eamon,” he says, grinning easily at her.

“What meeting?” she asks, tilting her head to the side.

“Didn’t anyone tell you? We’re supposed to meet with Eamon over an informal breakfast and figure out what to do next,” he says, and she shakes her head, her arms wrapping around her stomach.

“No, no one told me,” she says, and Alistair frowns.

“Well, I’ll escort you back to your room and you can get dressed and we’ll go together,” he says, linking his arm through hers. She smiles.

“You are entirely too good for this world, my friend,” she said, and the tips of his ears turn pink. She giggles, but otherwise they lapse into a companionable silence as they navigate the castle.

The meeting, it turns out, is incredibly dull and boring. Arl Eamon automatically ignores any of her suggestions, even when the others agree with them, and she thinks about storming out halfway through. Instead, she decides to confront the arl. He was a piece of shit anyway.

“What the fuck is your problem with me?” she asked, interrupting him mid-way through a sentence. Eldris reached over and laced his fingers through hers, squeezing gently.

“I’m sorry, what?” the arl asked, probably shocked about the delicate lady using such indelicate language.

“What’s your problem with me? Every idea I’ve given has been shot down, even when the majority of the group agrees with me. So what’s your problem?” she asks, again, and she thinks of her mother again.

“I don’t have a problem with you, girl, you’re just inexperienced,” Eamon says, and Arya wants to hit him so hard he sees stars.

“Be that as it may, some of my ideas were obviously good ones. Why are you even here, anyway? We only need you for support at the capital in case someone tries to dispute Cailan’s claim to the throne, which is a ridiculous notion anyway,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at him defiantly.

“I beg your pardon, do you realize who you’re speaking to?” he asked, and Arya wanted to scream.

“Uncle, she has a point,” Cailan says, stepping forward. Eamon looks like they just offended his great ancestors, and Arya has to hold back a laugh.

“Let’s not forget that Alistair and I have final say over any decision made. I think it would be
easier to do as Arya suggested, and go around Lake Calenhad, stopping at the Circle of Magi, before continuing to Denerim. Otherwise, we’ll have to backtrack and return to the Circle anyway,” Eldris says. Arl Eamon crosses his arms over his chest defensively.

“And you have experience with traveling?” he asks. Eldris snorts.

“It’s almost like I didn’t spend my entire life running from shemlen who want to slaughter me for sport,” he replies, cold anger seeping into his tone. Arya reaches out, lays her hand on his shoulder. She can feel how tense he is, but her touch seems to ground him a little.

“Do whatever you wish. I am, after all, just here for support,” Eamon says, and Arya entertains herself during the detailed planning by thinking of all the ways she could brutally murder the aging arl. Perhaps she should have let Jowan poison him, even though that would just cause complications in the end.

Eventually, it’s decided that they’ll leave in three days, Jowan in tow. Arya is relieved to get out of the study, and away from Eamon. She practically flees to the room she shares with Cailan, nearly locking herself in out of habit. If Cailan hadn’t been on her heels, she probably would have. As it is, she almost doesn’t notice Leliana and Alistair disappearing into the courtyard together. Almost. She’ll have to talk to the bard about that later.

“I’m sorry he thought it was okay to talk to you like that,” Cailan says, after a moment of silence where neither of them knew what to say. Arya shrugs, reaching up to rub the back of her neck.

“It’s fine. Can I expect the same sort of welcome in Denerim, though?” she asks, and there is a vicious sort of thing that curls under her chest.

“I doubt it. Anora is far too polite, and Loghain minces his words less than Eamon. I doubt you’ll have much of a problem,” he says, his hands settling reassuringly on her shoulders.

“Tell me about Anora,” she says, curling up on the edge of the bed. Cailan, looking moderately surprised, sits down next to her.

“My marriage to her isn’t the happiest one, even among nobility,” he says, eventually, and she cocks her head to the side, reaching out to put a comforting hand on his knee.

“Why is that?” she asks, and she hopes she’s not pushing him to answer questions he doesn’t want to ask.

“Anora and I were good friends before the marriage. Once we were married, once we started trying to rule a country together, our disagreements became more vocal and more frequent. And they were about more important things, too, like what new policies to implement and how, or what judgements to deliver. And, for no lack of trying, Anora isn’t producing any heirs. It’s....put a severe strain on any friendship we had prior to our marriage,” he says, and Arya leans over, nestling her head on his shoulder.

“I’m sorry. Is there anything you can do about it, or is it just stuck like this? A king can’t rule when he’s competing with his queen, and a queen can’t rule when she’s competing with the king,” she points out. Cailan’s frown deepens.

“I know. I was corresponding with Empress Celene, and there was a point where I considered leaving Anora. I could make her a teryna, and maybe both of us would be happier that way. Not to mention how a marriage between myself and Celene would benefit both Ferelden and
Orlais,” he says, and there is something almost wistful in his tone.

“Was?” she asks, gently prodding for answers. He sighs, and lays down, his hands clasped over his stomach.

“Loghain doesn’t want that, at all. He hates Orlais, and I think that hatred blinds him sometimes. I couldn’t make Anora a teryna in good conscience either. She loves this country, and she wants to make it better. I respect and admire her for that. Fereldan might even need her more than me,” he murmurs.

Arya lays down next to him, sprawled out on her back. Cailan reaches out, links his fingers through hers. “Any other ideas for how to fix this mess of things?” she asks, turning her head to look at him. He meets her gaze, looking intensely troubled.

“Nothing that would work. Arl Eamon is pushing for me to take a mistress, since Anora isn’t bearing any heirs, and while I’m not entirely opposed to the idea, I don’t want some woman whose only purpose is to bear a child,” he says. She squeezes his hand reassuringly.

“If I could meet Anora, talk to her, maybe we could all get something worked out?” she suggests. She doesn’t know how she’d manage to help, and gods above, was she really going to play marriage counselor?

A teasing grin flitted onto Cailan’s face. “Are you quite sure you wouldn’t try to steal my wife from me?” he asks, a playful lilt to his tone.

“Why would I?” she asks, confused.

“I know about you and the apostate,” Cailan says, and Arya rolled her eyes at the smugness in his expression.

“Morrigan and I are just friends, who occasionally have sex, because she trusts me,” she says, and Cailan looks appropriately skeptical.

“You tell yourself whatever you want to make yourself feel better, sweetheart,” he says, and she rolls her eyes.

“I don’t need to make myself feel better about anything, thank you very much. Morrigan just wanted her first time to be with someone who had her best interests in mind,” she says, and Cailan squeezes her hand gently.

“So there’s nothing romantic between the two of you?” he asks. Arya shakes her head.

“None whatsoever,” she answers.

“So you might steal my wife after all!” Cailan says, and Arya laughs, punching his arm playfully.

“Hey now, I might end up with Eldris before this is all over with. He’s just so charming,” she says, and Cailan laughs too.

“Does that mean you like men and women?” he asks, after they settle down. His thumb traces nonsensical patterns against her wrist.

“It does. I’m bisexual,” she confirms. There is a moment of silence between them before Cailan rolls onto his side to face her, a shit-eating grin on his face.
“Would you be interested in the position of royal mistress?” he asks, and Arya chokes while Cailan laughs.

“You are such an asshole,” she says, once she regains her ability to speak. He laughs all the harder.

That night, she dreams of her mother again, and this time the memory is even less pleasant. Her sleep is restless.
Before leaving Redcliffe, Morrigan insisted that they purchase a staff for Arya. It’s awkward and fumbling, and Arya isn’t entirely sure how to use it, but it does help her coax the song out from that deep place inside of her. Morrigan also teaches Arya a barrier spell before they leave, in case of any emergencies where Morrigan can’t raise one. Bright and early, before dawn, everyone gathers in the dining hall. A quick breakfast has been prepared for them, and they spend a half hour eating before setting out, towards Kinloch Hold. It would take them nine days to reach the docks.

On the fifth day, just after stopping for a quick lunch, a disheveled woman approaches them. “Oh, thank the Maker! We need help, please, they’re attacking the wagon! Oh, please help us,” she says, and her eyes are round and wide and pleading. Eldris and Arya share a look, Arya nodding subtly before stepping forward.

“Oh, you poor thing! Lead the way, and we’ll do our best to help you,” she says, her voice sugary sweet. She shifts her grip on her staff, a smile working its way onto her face. This was most likely the ambush from Zevran, so they follow the woman, Arya in the front for a change.

They come out into a clearing about five minutes later. The wagon is indeed there, turned on its side, its previous contents scattered everywhere. The tree that Arya remembers falling in-game is leaning ominously forward, taking out any doubts she might have had. She raises her hand, stopping her companions, and she can’t get her grin off of her face.

“Oh, my, wouldn’t it be such a shame if this was an ambush?” she says, loudly. Eldris’ eyes scan the surrounding area warily. She wonders how many assassins there are in hiding, but her attention is drawn back to the scene at hand when something, no, someone beside the wagon twitches and gets up. She raises her hand in a mock-friendly greeting. The woman stops, turning back to look at her. She plays her part well, confusion coloring her face.

“You wouldn’t happen to be the wonderful Zevran Arainai, member of the Antivian Crows, sent here to kill Wardens for holding King Cailan hostage, would you?” she calls out, cheerfully, but her grip on her staff tightens and she shifts on the balls of her feet, ready for an attack.

The someone gets closer, and she can tell that it is indeed Zevran. He crosses about half of the distance between them before stopping. “You seem to have me at a disadvantage, my friend. Are you one of the Wardens?” he asks, and his voice does funny things to Arya’s insides.

“I am not. Two of my traveling companions are, though. I’m Arya Huskins,” she says, and the tension in the air was so thick that she could have cut it with a knife.

“Well, all this is well and good, Arya, but where does that leave us?” Zevran asks. She shifts again, doing her best to appear open and unthreatening.

“King Cailan was never kidnapped. In fact, he’s right here, and very willingly at that. I’m a seer, long story short, and you have a very important part to play in the upcoming events. So, if you want to come closer so I don’t have to yell, I think I have a very attractive option for a man in your standing,” she says, and even from so far away she can see the hesitation flitting across Zevran’s face.

“Well, surely one as attractive as you could come up with some decent offers. Let’s see what they are, no?” he says, finally, stepping forward. As if drawn by magnets, everyone’s hands snap to their weapons. She shoots a glare at them over her shoulder, but quickly turns her attention back to
the assassin, moving forward to meet him partway.

“So, what is this you wanted to offer me?” he asks, and he does a good job at looking bored. There’s an undercurrent there of something else. She shifts her sweat-slick grip on her staff once more.

“I know you never chose to join the Crows. I know you expected this job to be your last. Come with us,” she says. Zevran’s eyebrows slant downwards in surprise, but he recovers quickly from the display of emotion.

“I don’t have much of a choice, do I?” he asks, and Arya’s face grows flinty.

“You always have a choice. Even if neither option is particularly good, you always have a choice,” she says, and there is something hard and heavy in her voice. Zevran looks back at the other side of the clearing, where more assassins must be waiting for some sort of signal.

“They would be a problem,” he says, quietly, and the clearing is completely still in that moment.

“We’re very talented. And we’ll provide protection from the Crows, should they come after you,” she answers, and then a woman steps out of the brush, an arrow pointed at Zevran’s heart.

“Zevran, you can’t do this,” she says, and Arya looks at Zevran. If the assassin decided to stay with the Crows, she wouldn’t have the time to pull up a barrier. He looks back at her, and she can see something harden in his eyes. He nods, almost imperceptibly, and Arya grins.

“Oh, but he can,” she says, and then she flings a shard of ice at the woman. It sinks into her chest, blood bubbling up bright and hot. The woman’s mouth moves into an o shape, and then she collapses. Zevran pushes Arya to the side, and the fight bursts out around them. Arya throws up her barrier, and the sharp, sudden decrease in her mana is enough to make her dizzy.

She surveys the battlefield, feeling more mana trickle in even despite the strain of holding up the barrier. She notices an assassin trying to sneak up on Eldris, who’s busy with two other opponents. With a deep breath and a vague prayer to the havens, she sends another spike of ice into the fray. The man falls, and once Eldris has dispatched his two victims, he stops for a moment to take a breath and flash Arya a grin.

The fight is over almost before it begins, and the battlefield is suddenly still and calm. Zevran limps towards Arya, his hand pressed to a wound in his side. “I suppose that decision was made,” he says, rather cheerfully. She rushes forward, letting the barrier fall, and he slips his arm around her shoulders, letting her take some of the weight.

“We need to get away from here, set up a camp.” Eldris says, wiping sweat and blood from his face. Arya shifts her grip on Zevran, passing her staff off to Cailan.

“Everyone all right?” Alistair asks, as the procession starts moving forward. For the most part, they are. Zevran’s side, of course, is presenting problems, and Eldris has a gash on his forearm. The others only had superficial, surface wounds. Arya and Morrigan are the only ones completely unscathed, thanks to their barriers.

It isn’t long until they find a campsite, and once they do, Arya deposits Zevran in the grass, at the base of a tree. “Take off your armor,” she says, and he flashes a smirk up at her.

“My dear, you could at least wait until I am no longer filthy and covered in blood,” he says, and she laughs.
“Honey, that’s what I was going to try and fix,” she says, and Morrigan comes over, a pot filled with water. She leaves it next to Arya wordlessly and moves on to heal Eldris. The others have begun setting up tents, and so Arya rolls her sleeves up and pulls some cloth out of her pack.

She assists Zevran as best as she can with the removal of his armor, but she fears she ends up hindering more than helping. When it’s finally in a pile in the ground, she dunks the cloth into the water and does her best to get most of the blood off, focusing on the wound.

It isn’t a serious wound, all things considered, so once she deems it sufficiently clean she focuses, and lets a wave of healing magic wash over him. Zevran shifts, leaning back. “I’m sorry, I’m not very good at magic yet,” Arya apologizes, and her mana has ran out all too soon. The wound hasn’t even fully closed, but she reaches into her pack for a lyrium potion. It tastes like piss, but it floods her with mana, energizing her almost worryingly. She goes back to healing, letting more magic wash over Zevran, her brow furrowed.

Eventually, the job is done. “You have my thanks,” the assassin murmurs, pale and sweaty.

“I’m not done yet. You’re still filthy,” she says. She does take a moment to glance over her shoulder. The rest of the camp is coming together, tents set up and a fire going. Leliana is bent over a pot, stirring what’s probably going to be their supper.

“I can take it from here,” Zevran says, but Arya shakes her head stubbornly, dabbing the blood off. He leans his head back, closing his eyes as she works.

“It has been a long time since a lovely woman such as yourself has pampered me so,” he says, after a few minutes of silence pass, a crooked grin on his face.

“Well, flattery will get you everywhere,” she says, an easy smile on her face. He laughs, and soon she finishes, sending him on his way. She returns to her tent, where Cailan is, his shirt off as he dabs ointment on some of the minor scrapes he’d gotten.

“Arya, you scared me,” he acknowledges. She grins, stepping further into the tent and peeling herself out of her armor.

“I try,” she says, letting the various pieces thunk to the ground.

“You did well today,” Cailan says, softly. She pauses, her hands on a buckle, and glances over at him.

“Thank you. I… I wasn’t sure what I was doing at all. It was a gamble,” she admits. Slowly, she continues, her fingers working the buckle loose and moving on to the next one.

“You’re either better than you give yourself credit for, or very lucky,” Cailan says, and there is something odd swelling in her chest, pressed against her ribcage.

“I seem to be very lucky indeed,” she agrees, softly, and then she is finally finished removing her armor. She feels oddly exposed, all of a sudden, until Cailan tosses her one of his shirts. She pulls it over her head, letting it settle around her.

“That you are,” Cailan says, and Arya grins before ducking out of the tent once more.

“I’m going to go talk to Morrigan,” she says, letting the tent swish shut behind her.
“Yeah, I’m sure all you’re going to do is talk,” he calls after her, teasingly, and she can’t stop herself from laughing.

Zevran stops her before she reaches Morrigan, gesturing for her to sit down next to him. He’s quite a bit away from the others, propped up against a different tree with two bowls of stew. He must have expected her to come by. So she sits, settling down, her back against the tree and her shoulder rubbing against Zevran’s. He passes her the second bowl of stew. She doesn’t know what’s in it, but her stomach clenches uncomfortably with hunger, so she eats.

“I never meant to force your hand, Zevran, but I’m glad you joined us,” she says, eventually, glancing at him out of the corner of her eyes.

“My dear, you didn’t force anything, least of all my hand. I wanted to thank you for giving me the chance,” he says, and there is something almost vulnerable in his voice.

“I know a little of your history with the Crows. I know they bought you when you were a child. I don’t think anyone deserves to have choices made for them,” she says, and Zevran lays a hesitant hand on her knee.

“I am sensing a story behind those words, my friend, especially as often as you say them,” he says, and she frowns.

“It’s the only lesson my mother ever bothered to teach me,” she says, and there is something equally vulnerable in her voice.

“What was your mother like? Since you seem to know about my past, it is only fair,” he asks, tentatively, and Arya realizes this is the first time anyone in Thedas has ever bothered asking her about her family members.

“She was…she was angry. And I think she tried. Just not hard enough,” she says, biting her lip.

“Oh?” Zevran says, and his hand on her knee squeezes gently.

“When I was four years old, my father hit her one too many times. She started packing all of our things. He came into the bedroom, like he was going to hit her again, and she pulled a gun on him. He let us leave after that. Being a single mother, and a victim of abuse herself, it definitely wasn’t easy for her. That doesn’t excuse the fact that she was a shitty mother,” she says, and her voice shakes.

“I’d toast our terrible childhoods, but neither of us has a drink, so there goes that idea,” he says, and Arya grins despite herself.

“From what I remember, your childhood was much more terrible than mine,” she says. Zevran shrugs.

“I’ve made peace with mine, and, really, it wasn’t so terrible in the Crows,” he replies.

“Maybe we both just have really skewed perceptions on what a normal childhood should be,” she says, and there’s a gleam in his eyes.

“That’s probably it,” he agrees.
She finally joins Morrigan just as the witches finishes pitching her tent. She looks up at Arya, nodding once, and goes back to the task at hand, which just so happens to be starting her personal campfire.

“Could you teach me how to change my shape?” Arya asks, suddenly. Morrigan stops, and looks up at Arya.

“I suppose I could make the attempt,” Morrigan says, and Arya grins.

“Great! When do we start?” she asks, and Morrigan rolls her eyes fondly.

“Right now, if you wish,” she says, gesturing the inside of her tent. Arya ducks inside and sits down in the center. Morrigan’s tent smells like Morrigan herself, and it’s warmer and cozier, somehow, than the others.

“How do we do this?” she asks, clapping her arms together around her knees.

“Which animal do you wish to turn into?” Morrigan asks. Arya thinks for a moment.

“A cat, maybe,” she says, and Morrigan smiles softly.

“Close your eyes. Visualize a cat. Think about how a cat would move, what a cat would do. Think about how it might feel to be a cat,” she says, and Arya does what the witch said, thinking about her cat, Spots.

“Let your magic trickle into your thoughts. The transformation, if successful, will take most of your mana. Do not let that startle you,” Morrigan says, her voice soft and comforting. Arya does as she said.

She feels a weird tingling on the top of her head. She also feels a sharp, sudden decrease in her available mana, but none like what Morrigan was describing. She opens her eyes.

“That was…partially successful,” Morrigan says. Arya’s brows furrow in confusion.

“How?” she asks.

“You have cat ears,” the witch responds, and Arya reaches her hand up, partially horrified. Morrigan wasn’t lying to her, and the ears twitch. She drops her hand back into her lap like she’d been burned.

“How the fuck do I fix it?” she asks.

“The spell will wear off eventually,” Morrigan promises, and Arya’s lip curls.

“How long will it take?” she asks, and Morrigan shrugs. Arya groans.

“I could distract you,” the witch offers, a wicked gleam in her eyes as she moves closer. Arya’s lip quirks up.

“I think I might like that,” she says, as Morrigan pushes her down gently on the furs, a hand creeping up the soft skin of her thigh.

“I thought you would,” she answers.
Arya stays with Morrigan that night. When she wakes up, her cat ears are gone, and Morrigan is laying half on top of her, still asleep. She closes her eyes again, basking in the embrace, until a few minutes later.

Cailan pops his head into the tent. “Rise and shine!” he calls out, and Arya groans. Morrigan raises her head sleepily, her golden eyes narrowed.

“Cailan! I managed to grow cat ears last night!” Arya says, sitting up as Morrigan distances herself.

“Is that why you didn’t return to our tent?” he asks. She nods, a wry grin on her face.

“It took them awhile to go away. But Morrigan’s going to teach me how to change my shape, so maybe instead of just growing cat ears, I can turn into a cat,” she says, and her enthusiasm makes him smile.

“Well, little cat, if you want breakfast I suggest you hurry. Eldris and Alistair are working on eating everything,” he says, turning to go. Arya stretches, and she and Morrigan dress together before joining everyone. Zevran gives Arya a knowing look, a gleam in his eyes. She smirks.

They don’t get the early start they wanted- it took them too long to pack up the camp, but they manage to make good time despite that. It only takes an extra day to get to the docks at Lake Calenhad, the Circle Tower sharp and intimidating in the distance.
Arya was, admittedly, terrified once they reached the Circle Tower, and her anxiety increased tenfold. “How very fitting they would make a prison for mages in the middle of a lake and make it look phallic,” Morrigan scoffed. Arya folded her arms over her stomach, her fingers curling into a set of the straps. Cailan and Zevran seemed to be the only ones to notice her distress, Zevran putting a hand briefly on the exposed skin of her arm. Cailan pulled her aside, to the back of the group.

“Are you okay?” he asks, softly. Worry shone in his eyes, and Arya was touched.

“I just…If things were different, I’d have ended up there. I still might. And I…I’ve heard the stories. About how mages are abused and neglected and how, no matter what, they still don’t have any rights,” she says, and her eyes are wide with fear. He reaches out and puts a hand on her shoulder.

“They won’t even know you’re here. You and I are supposed to wait in the inn,” he says, and something in Arya’s stomach clenches. She shakes her head, almost violently.

“I don’t think I can do that. I think I need to be there, doing something,” she says, chewing on her bottom lip. Her fingers tighten against the straps, her arms pressed against her stomach.

“If that’s truly the case, then we need to speak to the others,” he says, gently. She nods, almost frantically. The worry and fear is pressing in on her, thick and suffocating, and Arya doesn’t know how anyone can stand such a place. Cailan manages to catch the attention of Alistair and Eldris.

Eldris doubles back, coming to a stop in front of them. “Is there a problem?” he asks, his eyes flicking to Arya.

“I want to go with you. I’ll go crazy if I have to sit in that inn. I don’t need to fight, if the Tower is overrun with demons. I remember there were children, where we met Wynne. They’ll need someone to stay and look after them. I’m good with children— I could help, and it would keep me busy,” she says. Eldris sighs, dragging his hand through his hair.

“You’re not making this easy,” he says, his eyes flicking to Arya.

“I want to go with you. I’ll go crazy if I have to sit in that inn. I don’t need to fight, if the Tower is overrun with demons. I remember there were children, where we met Wynne. They’ll need someone to stay and look after them. I’m good with children— I could help, and it would keep me busy,” she says. Eldris sighs, dragging his hand through his hair.

“You’re not making this easy,” he says, but there’s something soft in his frown. Arya manages a weak smile.

“I know. I’m sorry,” she apologizes.

“I could go as well. I have a helmet that covers my face. So long as I don’t speak, no one will know it’s me,” Cailan suggests. Eldris crosses his arms over his chest, one hand coming up to his face. He absentmindedly chews on his thumbnail.

“Who would stay behind and get rooms?” he asks. Arya glances around at their companions.

“Morrigan has made her distaste of the Circle clear. Perhaps she’d prefer to stay behind? Sten might like to stay, as well. I know the Qun has some…strict practices regarding magic. And maybe Leliana and Brett can stay as well, to babysit the two of them. I know Sten respects Brett, so there should be little ill there. Eliza can also stay, if you want, or if there’s not room in the boats,” she says, and Eldris finds himself nodding along.
“I’ll ask them. That seems a sound enough plan,” he agrees, and by then the rest of the group has stopped at the bottom of the hill, waiting for the others to catch up. Arya hangs back, trying desperately not to glance at the Circle Tower.

It is a few minutes before everything is settled, but ultimately it was as Arya suggested. Eldris and Alistair passed the coin over to Leliana, and then the group of three broke off, heading towards the inn in the distance. Eldris, Alistair, Sam, Zevran, Cailan, and Arya made their way to the docks, where a fresh-faced young Templar was keeping watch.

It takes a while to negotiate their crossing, but the man finally decides that the increasingly impatient Eldris is not worth angering, and they all clamber into the boat. Arya clings to the edge, watching the water ripple behind them. She thinks she sees something swimming in the depths, and shivers, drawing away. Cailan holds his arm up, and she burrows against his side, the cool of his metal armor seeping through her thin set of leather.

The Circle Tower is indeed overwhelmed, the Templars desperately overworked, and Greagoir is calling for the Rite of Annulment. They manage to bully their way into fighting for the mages left, or for any who may be left, and there is a heavy sense of finality as the doors close behind them. “Crazy bastards,” Arya hears a Templar mutter. She doesn't think he's wrong. Even that hallway is littered with the broken bodies of the dead, and Arya thinks it was a mistake coming here. She walks close to Cailan.

Wynne looks exhausted from holding up the barrier, and she lets it drop away as soon as it’s established that they were there to help. Arya hands the senior enchanter several lyrium potions, and Wynne looks at her thoughtfully before accepting them. Arya gives her a smile.

“T’m here to help. I’m not that good in a fight, so I can stay here, and watch the children,” she says. Petra, the apprentice she remembered from the game, was exhausted and perhaps even younger than she was herself. Wynne’s smile is brilliant.

“That would be welcomed,” she says. Cailan turns to her, reaching out and taking her hands in his.

“Be careful. I know we’ll be up ahead, killing everything we come across, but still. Something could slip past, or something else could come through the Veil. We’ll be back before you know it,” he says, and Arya smiles, stretching up on her tip-toes to kiss his helm.

“I’ll be fine, I think. I can tell the children stories, and that’ll keep my mind occupied. You’re the one who needs to be careful. You are, after all, going to be fighting demons and abominations,” she says, a faint smile on her face. He squeezes her hands gently.

“I’ll be fine. I can take everything they throw at me,” he promises. Eldris clears his throat impatiently, cutting any goodbyes short. Cailan does take a second to pull her into a hug, his armor jangling, before stepping back and joining the others. Seconds later, Arya is left alone with the children and the young apprentices.

One of the children is only a toddler, perhaps three years old at most. The others are closer to six and seven, and Petra and Kinnon, the eldest of them all, are probably around thirteen.

“If you two want to lay down somewhere and try to rest, I can take over with the young ones,” she says, picking the three year old up. He clung to her, starved for affection and terrified.
Petra and Kinnon were grateful, thanking her profusely before slinking over to a corner and trying to make themselves comfortable.

Arya gathered the other children around her in another corner, three of them pressed directly up against her, trembling. The toddler, Nyris, clung to her. She smiled brightly at them, or as brightly as she could manage.

“Would you all like to hear a story?” she asks. They nod enthusiastically, quieting and calming. Arya had to think desperately for a story.

“Once, there were two brothers. Their names were Sam and Nathan Morgan, and their mother was a treasure hunter. They grew up learning everything about history…” she began, and the kids were hooked. She had to do a few adaptations to the base story of the Uncharted games, but it was a fun challenge for her. Nyris fell asleep near the beginning of the story, but the others stayed attentive. Eventually, however, exhaustion won out for the rest of them, and they fell asleep too.

Arya thought that it’d be hours before her companions returned, and now she had nothing to do. She settles down, leaning her head against the wall. She hadn’t thought she’d fall asleep, but what felt like a few minutes later, someone was gently shaking her awake.

“Miss Arya, I think everyone’s coming back soon. I heard the big door down the hallway open. It woke me up,” Vela said, a scrawny six year old girl. Arya sat up, partially, Nyris still cradled against her chest, sleeping soundly. She rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand. “Thank you, Vela,” she whispered. The girl nodded, and then wormed her way against Arya’s side, curling up. Arya wrapped one arm around the child in a one-armed hug. By the time Eldris’s group returned, Alistair supporting an exhausted Irving, Vela had fallen asleep again.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this chapter is a little shorter than some of the others, but I thought that was a good place to end it. There's going to be a few more chapters before they head to Denerim, which I anticipate being the approximate middle of the story. The Big Explanation is also coming up in a few chapters, so I, uh, guess that's something to look forward to. Thank you all so much for reading!! As always, comments and kudos are greatly appreciated and motivate me to write, so consider leaving one of those if you enjoyed~
Everyone looked older, haggard and worn. Arya stretched, careful not to wake Nyris who was still curled up, snoring softly. She supposed it was because of the sloth demon, and whatever they’d encountered in their dreams, had that happened. Or it could simply be that death clung to the Tower, permeating everything. Their nose, however, woke Petra and Kinnon, who came and gathered some of the younger apprentices to them, the ones still sleepy and scared. Arya was still left with Nyris, and her legs had fallen asleep.

“Help me up?” she asked, as Cailan approached her. He nodded, reached down, and nearly lifted her. She winced as blood rushed back into her legs, the pins and needles nearly unbearable. Nyris let out a soft coo in his sleep, but otherwise slept on.

“You all right?” she asked him, and he shook his head slightly.

“Not really. We can talk later, though,” he says, and his voice is hoarse. Arya nudges against him. It was the only physical comfort she could provide, with the child in her arms and the blood and gore spattered across his armor.

“It’ll be okay, whatever it is. But we’ll talk once we get out of here,” she says, softly, and then drifts over to where Eldris and Wynne stand close together.

“Thank you again, dear, for helping with the children. I can see little Ny is quite taken with you. He’s fussy with everyone else,” Wynne says, and Arya gives her a weak smile.

“He was so scared. They all were. I’m glad I could do something to help,” she murmurs. Wynne’s answering smile is gentle and motherly.

“As am I. That’s why I insist upon leaving with all of you. Eldris informed me that you were a mage, and there was another young woman in the group who was also a mage. He said you were inexperienced, and she knew few healing spells. I think everyone could appreciate having me,” she says, a wry smile on her face. Arya grinned back.

“I think we’d be lucky to have you, Wynne. I do have a question, however,” she says, having made her mind up sometime in between waking up and standing.

“Is there a mage in the Tower that goes by the name of Anders?” she asks, her eyes narrowed slightly, a gesture asking if he’d step aside and talk with her privately. He nods in agreement, and then leads the way to the far side of the room, where they’d have a little privacy.

“I think we’d be lucky to have you, Wynne. I do have a question, however,” she says, and Eldris looks slightly surprised. Wynne crosses her arms in front of her chest, glancing around the room. Alistair has sat Irving down in a chair, and is offering him some water and some dried fruit. Petra and Kinnon are comforting the other children, and Cailan is leaning against the wall, his head tipped back.

“What is it, dear?” she asks.

“Is there a mage in the Tower that goes by the name of Anders?” she asks, having made her mind up sometime in between waking up and standing.

“There is. Greagoir has had him in solitary confinement for the past three months. I don’t know how he fared, with all of this mess,” Wynne answers, carefully. Arya glances at Eldris, then nods her head sharply, a gesture asking if he’d step aside and talk with her privately. He nods in agreement, and then leads the way to the far side of the room, where they’d have a little privacy.

“Is this about that Anders you mentioned?” Eldris asked, his voice low so the others couldn’t hear.

“It is. I was hoping we could conscript him,” she says. Eldris’ eyes narrow slightly, a
calculating look that she’d seen him wear often when trying to puzzle through something.

“Why?” he asked, genuinely curious.

“The Circle isn’t a good place for him. He’s in solitary confinement, and I know he’s not a blood mage. He’s just a mage who wants the same freedoms as you or anyone else. If I can walk free, he should be able to do that too. And, besides, in my vision he was recruited anyways. By you. Later on. After gods know how long he spent in solitary confinement, which fucks anyone up. And you remember the mage rebellion I told you about? Maybe we can make it better by recruiting him now,” she says, insistent.

Eldris sighs, dragging a hand through his hair. He doesn’t seem to notice the way his gauntlets catch on the tangles, or how the blood matts it together in some places. “Fine. I’ll invoke the Right if I have to. But we’re going to talk later. There’s, uh, some advice I want,” he says, and there’s something in him that looks even more disgruntled than ever. Arya is puzzled, but she nods.

Nyris shifts in her arms, drawing her attention.

A few minutes later, everyone is limping towards the main chamber. Nyris is still napping in Arya’s arms, and Vela and another little girl named Ava are clinging to her legs. She’s thankful everyone is moving at such a slow pace, anyway. She doubts she could have coaxed the children to move any faster.

After a quick conversation between Irving and Greagoir through the door to confirm that it was, indeed, over, the giant doors swing open, and everyone spills out. The main hall doesn’t smell like death and rot, and it’s like a breath of fresh air. Everyone sags a little with relief.

Wynne and Eldris go to talk to Greagoir while Arya stands off to the side with Cailan. Alistair is still taking care of Irving, now with the assistance of a young Templar. After a few moments, Eldris beckons Arya over. She passes Nyris over to Cailan carefully, the kid sleeping through that, and goes to join them, rubbing her arms.

“The elf tells me you have a question,” Greagoir says, and Arya shoots Eldris a dirty look.

“Yes. I believe you have a mage that goes by the name of Anders in solitary. I want him to walk out of here with us,” Arya says, clasping her hands behind her back and doing her best to appear in control and important.

“Why do you Wardens need another mage? I’m sending Enchanter Wynne with you, as well as promising aid,” Greagoir says, and he doesn’t sound angry, not yet, more annoyed and confused than anything.

“Our reasons are our own. Please go get Anders,” she says, and she is proud when she doesn’t fidget.

“You cannot have every mage you desire,” Greagoir snaps, and finally, there is the hint of anger that Arya was waiting for. She doesn’t flinch.

“Oh, but we can. I hereby invoke the Right of Conscription. Anders leaves with us,” Eldris says, stepping into the conversation. Arya shares a glance at him, and she’s surprised to see that he looks…proud. She tried not to grin. She was mostly successful.

“Fine. You, and you, go get the mage,” Greagoir snarled, pointing to the two closest recruits. They bustled off, returning a few minutes later with Anders.

He looked…awful. He was barely able to stand, and he was so thin it was pitiful. He was
dirty, and he stank so badly that Arya could smell him from where she stood. His hair is dirty, thin, and oily, and he looks like he’s only barely aware of what’s happening around him. He mumbles something incoherent as the two Templars supporting him stop. Arya is stepping forward before she realizes it, anger flaring up.

“What the fuck have you done to him?” she snarls, pushing the two Templars away and accepting his weight. He mumbles something that might have been “help” and her heart breaks for him. Greagoir shrugs, casually.

“We did what we had to do to keep him from escaping again,” he answers, and Arya snarls, an animalistic sound. Anders weighs hardly nothing, even with most of his weight bearing down on her.

“If I hadn’t started helping him, I would rip your eyes from your skull. Your job is to protect these mages, not lock them up in a cell and abuse them,” she hisses. Greagoir’s eyes narrow.

“You have no right to tell me how to treat my charges,” he says, and Arya’s lips twist into an ugly sneer.

“Someone has to, since you can’t do your damn job,” she mutters, and when Anders groans, she turns her attention to him immediately, making soft, soothing sounds.

Greagoir doesn’t say anything else, and Alistair appears. Petra takes Nyris from Cailan, murmuring thanks, and Wynne motions Arya forward, towards the doors. She complies, and Anders is stumbling along so clumsily that she thinks perhaps it’d be better to carry him properly. Cailan helps them into the boat, Wynne and Eldris sitting across from her. Anders is still slumped over, and Arya helps him situate himself so that his head is in her lap.

“What did they do to him?” she asks Wynne, quietly, once everyone has gotten into the boat.

“They’ve fed him magebane. It’ll take a couple of days to leave his system,” the older mage answers, grief in her voice. Arya runs her fingers through Anders’ hair, rubbing her thumb gently along her forehead. She was so angry.

“I want you to teach me how to be a healer. I want to help him, and everyone else,” Arya says, and something in her voice is steely and hard and determined. Wynne nods, and Anders shifts. Arya makes soft sounds, deep in her throat, and slowly it seems that Anders is becoming more and more aware.

Arya insists on helping him back to the inn herself. Cailan walks close by, and she can’t tell if it’s because whatever awful thing he saw in the Fade, or if he wanted to be there in case she needed help. Maybe it was both. She doubted it mattered. Anders had gathered enough awareness that his eyes seemed clearer, and that he was aware of his surroundings.

“Sorry I can’t be of more help,” he says, his voice hoarse and rough.

“I’m sorry I’m not sure how to help,” she answers, and he’s awake enough that he shoots her a grin, one that she barely catches.

“I think you’ve done wonders for my health already, just getting me out of there,” he says, his hand curling on her shoulder. She smiles, a sharp, vicious thing, lined with teeth.

“If I’d known they were doing that to you, I’d have been there much sooner. And left with their blood splattered on the walls,” she answers, and her voice shakes with anger. He makes a soun
in his throat that might have been agreement or amusement, and then they are at the inn, Cailan holding the door open for them.

They stumble in, and what a sight they must make. Thankfully, the inn is mostly empty, so there are few patrons to stare at them. Morrigan is sitting by the fire, and Leliana by the bar. Sten isn’t anywhere in sight, but that isn’t anything unusual. Leliana rises to greet them, her mouth opening in a soft o shape when she sees Anders and the sorry state he’s in. She rushes forward to help, but Arya holds up her hand.

“I’ve got him. Where are our rooms?” she asks. Leliana smiles weakly.

“We managed to rent all of them. There are eight rooms, so some of us will have to double up,” she answers. Arya helps Anders into a seat, and everyone gathers around to figure out the room situation. It takes a while, everyone talking and complaining and suggesting, until it’s finally worked out. Morrigan and Sten will each have their own rooms, although Sam will stay with Sten. Cailan will share with Eldris, and Wynne with Leliana. Directly across the hall from Wynne, Arya will stay with Anders. Alistair and Zevran will be staying in the other room, which gives everyone a nice place to stay, and room-mates they can get along with. It was also decided that in the morning, everyone would meet and decide what they were going to do next.

Wynne takes over Anders, for a while, ordering broth for him and having a bath drawn in his room. Arya is still determined to help, so once she removes her armor and rolls her sleeves up, she does.

“She can handle bathing me, I think, if she’s really so determined to do this,” Anders says, sharing a look with Wynne. The older woman nods, and disappears for a few minutes, coming back with towels and clothes for Anders. Arya dumps her back on the bed, and then two elven servants arrive, carrying the bathtub between them, full of steaming water. Wynne makes sure Arya can handle it before leaving a bar of scented soap on the table.

It takes a few minutes before they get Anders into the tub, but when they do, he lets out a groan. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been treated to the luxury of a bath,” he says, and Arya grins at him, reaching for the soap.

“I think that’s a little obvious,” she answers, dryly, and he grins at her.

She’s up to her elbows in soapy water, trying to be gentle as she scrubs at the grime on his skin, before he says anything else. “You’re being remarkably professional about this. I’d expected some blushing or something,” he remarks.

“I’ve had to bathe people who couldn’t bathe themselves before. This experience, so far, has been a lot better. It’s easier to focus on getting someone clean when they aren’t barking orders and yelling insults the whole time,” she says, and she’d expected to feel the same old anger harden in her gut, but instead she just felt tired. Anders makes a noise in the back of his throat, something that might have been reassurance or sympathy.

“So, you want to be a healer?” he asks. She nods, motioning for him to scoots forward as she moves around to wash his back.

“Yeah. Even before, back in my world, I wanted to be a nurse. I have a talent for taking care of people, it seems,” she says, and before she knows it, she’s telling Anders the whole story about how she woke up at Ostagar with no clue where she was or what had happened. He was… supportive, accepting her story readily enough.
By the time she finished, she was helping him out of the water and drying him off before he yanked some clothes on. He stumbled over to the bed, curling up, his damp hair spread out on the pillow. She drags the bathtub out into the hallway before one of the servants notice, rushing forward to help her. He takes over, insisting she go and do whatever else she desired.

She finds herself in Cailan’s room. He was alone, there, having just finished a bath of his own, and bent over his armor as he scrubbed at the gore. He looked up when she entered, a tired smile on his face. “Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” she answers, going to sit next to him. She pulls her knees up to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. They sit in silence for a few minutes.

“So, about today,” she says, and he sighs.

“It was the sloth demon. I…you were there, in the Fade,” he admits, and her brows furrow. She reaches out and lays a hand on his shoulder.

“It must have been bad, to shake you up this badly,” she says, and he lets out a wry laugh.

“Not quite. It was only bad realizing afterwards,” he said, and he could almost hear her confusion.

“What does that mean?” she asks. He turns to face her, some unidentifiable emotion flitting across his face. He hesitates for a moment, and then his hand is cradling her cheek and his lips are pressed against hers, hot and insistent and Arya isn’t a stranger to kissing- she likes to think she’s pretty good, but the shock makes her freeze. He pulls back after a second, opening his mouth to apologize, and then she leans forward, pressing her lips against his in a clumsy kiss, awkward because of the angle.

Cailan shifts, scooting backwards and pulling Arya into his lap. She tangles her hands in his hair, his hands on her hips steadying her. She prays to whatever gods that are out there that no one comes into the room and finds them like this, her cheeks heating at the thought. She finally pulls away for a breath of air, and she’s left straddling his lap and staring at him. They’re both breathing heavily, and there’s something fluttering in her stomach. Cailan coughs, awkwardly.

“I, uh, should have asked before I did that,” he said, and she almost laughs.

“No, it’s okay. I mean, it was definitely unexpected. Good, though. Definitely wanted contact,” she says, moving off of him.

“Yeah. So, um, where does this leave us?” Cailan asks, and Arya tenses again. This had all been pretty sudden, and while maybe she’d thought about Cailan kissing her or pinning her down on the bed and having his wicked, wicked way with her, she’d never expected anything like this.

“That’s a very good question,” she replies, warily. She curls back up, examining the chipped and faded polish on her toes.

“I think I’d like…something,” he says, and Arya almost wants to laugh. The King of Ferelden sat beside her, fumbling with his words and feelings like a teenage boy. Not that she was any better, mind, but the whole situation was ridiculous.

“Well, if I recall correctly, the position of royal mistress is still open,” she says, a teasing lilt to
her tone. He rolls his eyes, laying back down on the bed. His shirt rides up over his stomach. She thinks about brushing her hand along the soft skin there, but doesn’t.

“It is. I’m not going to force you into anything, though. Say the word and I’ll court you properly. Well, as properly as I can,” he says. She grins, and lays down on her side next to him.

“Being courted does sound nice, even if it might not be for me. I’ll tell you what. We’ll test the waters of this thing, see how it works,” she says. He smiles at her, reaching out to cup the side of her face again.

“That sounds nice,” he said. She reaches up, pushing a strand of hair away from his face.

“Yeah, I think it does too. I’ll even stop sleeping with Morrigan,” she says, and Cailan rolls his eyes.

“You don’t have to, actually. If I’m going to expect this to work between us while I still sleep with Anora, then I can hardly expect you to stay monogamous,” he says. She rubs her thumb along his jawline gently. He leans into the touch.

“Very well. I’ll leave my arrangement with Morrigan in her hands. I’ll let her know, though. I don’t know how fond she’ll be of sharing,” she answers, and Cailan gives her an easy grin, sitting up just enough to give her a quick kiss.

“Go on, and take care of that mage you fought so hard to get,” he says, nudging her. She rolls her eyes, but stands, stretching, before leaving the room and padding down the hallway.
Eldris is leaning up against the wall outside her room when she approaches. “We said we’d talk, remember?” he says, and Arya nods, hoping like hell she looks presentable and not like she’d just been making out with the king of Ferelden. Which, she had, but still, appearances were important. He leads her down the hallway to a secluded alcove with a table and a couple of chairs. He sits, and motions for her to do the same.

“He’s here,” he says, and out of all the things Arya expected to talk about, that was not one of them.

“Arya, buddy, I’m not the best person to go to for romantic advice. Is there anyone specific? I can give better advice if there is,” Arya says, feeling way out of her depth.

“I…no. There’s no one specific. Well, there is, I just don’t know if I’ll ever see her again,” he says, and for a moment he looks so miserable that Arya can barely stand it. She doesn’t have the first clue about how to help him.

“Is she someone in your clan?” she asks, and the expression on Eldris’ face is almost an answer itself.

“She is. With the Blight and everything going on, I’m probably not going to see her again for a long time, if I ever get to see her again. I was hoping you had some advice about courting someone from afar,” he tells her, and Arya finds herself smiling.

“If you can send letters, that’s a good place to start. Gifts, too, if you can manage, but I don’t know about Dalish courting customs,” Arya says. Something in him seems to wilt.

“I’m not the best at writing. Could you act as a scribe?” he asks, fidgeting nervously.

“Of course,” she says, grinning at him.

“You’re the best,” he said, a faint smile on his face.

“I know,” she answered, a cocky smirk on her face, and he laughed, pushing her gently in the direction of her room.

Get back to your mage and see if he needs anything,” Eldris said, and his tone is light and he is happier than he has been in a long time. Hope is, it seems, a powerful thing.

Anders is asleep when she enters the room, a candle burning softly on the table. She doesn’t feel like putting the effort into charging her computer so she can use it, so she just pulls her pack over to the table. She decides that, since it’s been awhile since she’s drawn anything, she should start.

She settles on drawing Eldris on a piece of notebook paper, trying to get the way one corner of his mouth would draw downwards and the way the space between his eyebrows would crinkle whenever he thinks really hard about something. She gets a pretty good sketch down until she gets to his vallaslin, and the lines and branches and swirls are just so complicated that she has to set it aside until she can look at him for reference. She settles for drawing Morrigan next, the way she looks at Arya with heavy-lidded eyes when she tries to seduce her. It turns out really well, actually, and she thinks about giving it to her.
By the time she decides it’s time to stop, it’s late and her hand has a cramp in it, even though she has other ideas for things to draw. She leaves the sketches on the table with her pencils, and kicks her pack closer to the wall so she won’t trip over it in the morning. She blows the candle out and then feels her way around the bed, climbing in gently. Anders stirs as she slips under the blankets. “Arya?” he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m here,” she answers, her voice soft.

“It’s late,” he replies, sleepily.

“Yeah. You need anything?” she asks.

“No,” he answers, but his stomach rumbles loudly. Arya grins in the darkness.

“You sure? I don’t care to sneak downstairs and bring you back something to eat,” she says. There’s a moment before he answers.

“…Please,” he says. She throws the covers back and stands up, feeling her way to the candle again. As a mage, she coaxes the song out from where it lay dormant in her chest, and lights the candle from a neat little ball of fire in her hands. Anders rises slowly, and she moves to help him, but he pushes her away.

“I can get to the table myself. You can, uh, go on downstairs,” he says, and she can tell that there is something almost painful about asking for help. She nods once before turning on her heel and slipping out the door, leaving it cracked open just a little. There’s lanterns lit in the hallway, so at least she doesn’t have to try and master the stairs in the dark.

There’s a tired woman working behind the counter. There’s an air of silence over the whole place, like talking might break some unspoken rule. Arya quietly asks for a bowl of broth and some bread for Anders, and a piece of cheese for herself. She hands over the money wordlessly, and a few moments later she accepts the food with a quietly mumbled “thanks” before returning up the stairs.

Anders has managed to get himself to the table by the time Arya arrives, looking like a small child wearing his father’s clothes. Arya recognizes the shirt he’s wearing in the dim candlelight- it’s one of Cailan’s. She also notices how he’s picked up both of her sketches, looking over them. “These are good,” he says, as she approaches.

“Thanks. I’ve not drawn anything since I’ve been here. When I wasn’t tired earlier, I thought that was a good chance,” she says, sitting his food down on the table. He passes the sketches over before he starts eating, his hands shaky.

“They’re good. Maybe you could even make some money drawing and painting,” Anders suggests as she lays them down on the end table.

“That’s something to look into. I was accepting commissions back home, but I don’t know what the market would be like here,” she answers.

“I’ve been locked in a tower for my entire life, so I can’t tell you anything about it, but I bet nobles would be your best bet, unless you worked for really cheap prices that lower classes could afford,” Anders says.

“I’ll talk to Leliana about it, see what she says. She has an eye for art, so maybe she can give me some answers,” Arya says. The two of them lapse into silence then, until Anders finishes his meal.
Arya helps him back into the bed, before gathering up the empty bowls and plates and stacking them neatly on the table. There was no way she was going back to bed, so she made sure he was comfortable and had everything he needed before slipping out down the hallway.

There is a dim light seeping out from underneath Morrigan’s door. Arya doesn’t bother knocking, pushing it open and slinking inside. Morrigan is sitting in the far corner of the room, tucked up against the window, a candle burning low and a black book open in front of her. Arya knows what it is. Arya knows, by the horror on Morrigan’s face and the tears building in her golden eyes, that Morrigan has discovered what Arya wishes she hadn’t.

She looks up sharply, at Arya. “I just wanted to learn my mother’s secrets. I thought it would just be spells and rituals,” she said, softly, and Arya moves to stand beside her, her arms open. Morrigan curls towards her, pressing her face into Arya’s shirt and letting out a deep shuddering breath. Arya’s arms close around Morrigan, and she slides awkwardly to the floor, bringing Morrigan with her. She isn’t sure what she’s doing, rubbing small circles on the smooth skin of Morrigan’s back in what she hopes is a comforting manner. Morrigan does her best to choke back her tears.

“It’ll be okay, Morrigan. She won’t get you, or your soul,” Arya murmured, and it is a few moments before Morrigan pulls her face out of Arya’s shirt to look at her. Arya cups her cheek with the palm of her hand, swiping away the tears with her thumb.

“How do you know?” Morrigan asks, sniffing back more tears.

“A soul is never forced upon the unwilling. She will not have you so long as you do not wish it,” Arya says, and Morrigan leans back.

“Are you sure?” she asks, something scared and vulnerable in her eyes.

“As sure as I can be of anything,” Arya says grimly.

“I heard about you and Cailan. The bard is insufferable with her chatter. Are you…Is whatever we’re doing over?” Morrigan asks, something frail and fragile in her voice.

“Morrigan, I’ll always be your friend. I’ll always be there for you, whenever you need me, regardless of whether we’re engaged in a sexual relationship. I wouldn’t just use you for that. Cailan told me I could continue that, but if you’d rather not share, that’s fine, too,” Arya says, softly, her thumb rubbing a soothing circle on the other woman’s skin.

“I…do not know what to say. I know little of friendship,” she admits, and something in Arya’s heart aches.

“That’s okay. Just know that whether we keep our relationship physical, it is up to you,” Arya tells her, and Morrigan lets out another deep, shuddering breath. She seems calmer now, at least.

“I think…I think we should stop the physical part, at least for a while. I need to think,” Morrigan murmurs. Arya nods.

“Of course. Whatever you want,” Arya promises, and Morrigan sniffs. Arya doubts she’d let any tears fall, thanks to the dryness of her shirt, but it must have been a hell of a battle to keep them from falling. Morrigan shifts into a position more comfortable position for both of them. They sit like that for a while longer before Arya insists on moving to the bed. It’s cold, and staying on the hard and uncomfortable floor isn’t going to help the situation.
“I don’t think I can sleep,” Morrigan says softly.

“That’s understandable. We can watch a movie, instead, if you like,” Arya offers, Morrigan curling into her, almost desperate for affection.

“What is a movie?” Morrigan asks, her head resting on Arya’s shoulder as she looks up at her. Arya finds herself wanting to curl around the other woman, wanting to protect her, although Morrigan would probably adamantly refuse such an act.

“It is…It is similar to a play. There are several on the computer,” Arya offers lamely. For a moment, she marveled once again at how different everything was here.

“…Very well. It should be a suitable distraction,” Morrigan decides, drawing back enough to let Arya stand. She did, giving Morrigan a reassuring smile.

“I’ll be back in a second,” she promises, ducking into the hallway. She wonders just how late it is, and if she’s going to get to sleep at any point during the night. Anders is still fast asleep whenever she enters their room. She quietly scribbles a note on a piece of scrap paper from one of her drawings, hoping it’s legible, before she grabs the computer and heads back to Morrigan’s room.

The witch curls around her automatically when Arya sits back down on the bed. It takes them only a brief moment to get situated, Arya leaning against the headboards, the computer in her lap. Morrigan curls up against her side, her head resting on Arya’s shoulder. She has one arm slung loosely around her waist, and something about the vulnerability of her friend tugs at Arya’s heart.

Arya, thanking whatever gods that can hear her for her parents’ subscription, pulls up Netflix. “I always watch *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* when I’m upset. I know the title’s a mouthful, but it’s my go to feel-good movie. Do you wanna go with that, or pick something out yourself?” Arya asks. Morrigan sniffs, shifting on her shoulder until she’s more comfortable.

“I hardly know what I’m doing. I’ll let you pick,” she responds. Arya clicks play on *The Divine Secrets*. Perhaps it would have been easier to explain a movie set in a time period closer to what Thedas was, but Arya didn’t feel like looking. She settles in, the headboard uncomfortable hard behind her head, and she falls asleep ten minutes into the movie, her head resting on top of Morrigan’s. Morrigan manages to stay up much later, almost finishing the entire movie. She knows she will fall asleep before the end, though, so she carefully moves the computer off of Arya’s lap and places it on the bed next to Morrigan’s room.

When Arya wakes up the next morning, with the pre-dawn coming through the cracks in the curtains, she has a crick in her neck and a desperate need to piss, but Morrigan is sprawled out on top of her, and her computer has been kicked haphazardly to the other side of the bed. It has, thankfully, not fallen off, but Arya is effectively pinned. She lays there for a few minutes, debating on whether or not she should try and wiggle out. She thinks about just staying there, but the sharp ache in her bladder convinces her to gently pry Morrigan off of her. She makes a soft noise of complaint before curling up before the end, though, so she carefully moves the computer off of Arya’s lap and places it on the bed next to her feet. She can still see the screen perfectly, so she drifts off as the movie finishes.

She doubted she’d be able to go to sleep again, so she left Morrigan a note on her computer, changing the settings so the computer wouldn’t go to sleep. It was running the battery down, but she didn’t want her to think she’d abandoned her. She also shut the curtains more securely, so the light wouldn’t bother Morrigan, and then headed out into the hallway. She had plans to stop by her room
and check on Anders, but before she can, she runs into Cailan. Her face smacks against his chest, and she’s knocked back almost comically. His arms go around her automatically to catch her, an easy grin slipping onto his face.

“Well, well, look what the mabari dragged in,” he said, and he was entirely too cheerful for it to be ass o’clock in the morning. She couldn’t tell if she was jealous or annoyed by it, so instead she stood on her tip-toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

“Good morning to you, too,” she says, and a smile slips onto her face. He wraps his arm around her waist, and they walk down the hallway together, to the alcove Eldris had taken her to before.

“Did you have a good night?” he asks, and there’s a glint in his eyes. He’s asking something else, something about her and Morrigan, and she wonders if he really meant his offer of an open relationship or whatever this was between them.

“Depends on how you define good. Morrigan learned some…sensitive information last night, so we watched a movie. I passed out in the most uncomfortable position. I’ve got a damn crick in my neck, and the gods only know how late it was before I finally managed to get to sleep,” she complains, rubbing at the sore spot.

“I’d offer you a spot in my bed, but Eldris is currently taking up most of it,” he says, grinning again. She lets her head fall onto the table, her hand falling close to his as she rested her chin on one arm. He laces his fingers through hers and squeezes, once.

“I doubt I can fall asleep again anyway,” she murmurs, sighing regretfully. By the end of the day, despite feeling fine now, she was going to be aching with exhaustion. There was probably going to be another strategy meeting today, or whatever, and she doubted she’d get away with a nap anytime soon. She’d kill a man for a pot of coffee.

“I can talk to Eldris, and you can stay with me tonight, if you like,” he offers.

“We’ll see how the day goes,” she answers, sitting up. She stretches again, her back arching like a cat’s as she yawns. Her stomach rumbles, too, and Cailan chuckles.

“I’ll go get some breakfast for us. You can check on Anders while I do that,” he suggests, and Arya nods, standing and stretching again. This time, her back popped several times, leaving her feeling much better about life in general.

“You’re the best,” she says, giving him a quick kiss.

“I know,” he answers, a cocky grin on his face as he pulls her back down for another kiss, his hand coming up to cup her face. She wants to continue, and she almost does, but then she remembers Anders, and she pulls back.

“I’ll see if he wants to come downstairs, and we can eat there, in front of the fire,” she suggests.

“Good idea,” he says, standing. They walk down the hallway together, sharing another kiss outside Arya’s room before Cailan heads downstairs and Arya cracks the door open. Anders is awake, sitting at the table with a book when she walks in, the curtains drawn back.

“I started to get worried about you, before I found your note. Is everything all right?” he asks, and his voice isn’t as hoarse and he looks worlds better after a good night’s sleep and a proper meal. Arya steps inside her room, shutting the door and sitting down next to him.
“Yeah. Morrigan just learned some…sensitive information about her mother. She needed me
for emotional support,” she answers.

“Ah, I see,” he answers, running his fingers over the soft leather cover of the book.

“How are you feeling this morning?” Arya asks. He looks fine, but she had no idea what the
effects of mage bane were. Wynne had told her it’d take a couple of days for him to recover
completely.

“I’m much better. I’m still clumsy and still a little weak, but I can feel my mana returning. I
suspect that by tomorrow I’ll be feeling normal,” he says, and Arya smiles at him.

“I’m glad. If there’s anything you need, let me know,” she says. He looks down at his hands,
and then he sets his jaw determinedly.

“I want to go outside. I want to see the sunrise out there,” he says.

“All right. Put your shoes on and let’s go,” she says, slipping into her boots. She’s wearing
the tank-top she arrived in, and a pair of shorts she’d had the tailor make in Redcliffe after much
consideration. She thinks she should be self-conscious, going down there in so little, but she doesn’t
care. Once they’ve both got their shoes on, Anders stands and carefully makes his way to the door.
He fumbles with it for a moment, but Arya lets him get it open on his own. He seemed determined
enough.

They pass Cailan on the way out, and Eliza is standing at the door, her back against the wall
as she drinks something that’s probably stronger than Arya could handle. “Where are you going?”
Cailan asks, curiously.

“We’re going to watch the sunset. Come with us?” she asks, and Cailan nods. He was mostly
dressed, and Arya wondered what a sight she and Anders made. She decides resolutely that she
doesn’t care as Cailan’s arm slides around her waist, guiding her through the bar and outside, into the
pale morning sunlight.

The sunrise is breaking across the lake, red pink spilling over the horizon and reflecting into
the water. Anders takes a deep, unsteady breath as he watches, slipping his shoes off and wiggling
his toes in the grass. He looks so…awestruck. Like he can’t believe he’s watching the sunrise outside
of the Tower, with no threat hanging over him. He almost looks like he might cry.

Arya turns her attention to Cailan, giving the mage more privacy. She almost felt like an intruder in
this moment. Cailan, it seemed, did too. He gave her a devilish grin, though, and leaned down,
kissing her against the backdrop of the sunrise. “It’s beautiful. Almost as much as you,” he whispers,
and her laughter is swallowed by his next kiss.

“You dork,” she murmurs affectionately, her arms draping over his shoulders.

“Mm, yeah, but I’m your dork,” he answers softly, pressing another kiss to the corner of her mouth.
She turned her eyes back to the horizon, at the sight still spilled across the world in front of them. She
glances back at Anders, at the dazed look in his eyes, and she wonders what else she’d taken for
granted.
do you still believe in love i wonder?

Chapter Notes

Warnings for some more of my (tame) smut ahead. I'll section it off in case you don't have any interest in that sort of thing.

As it turns out, there wasn’t a strategy meeting that day. Everyone agreed that they needed a day to rest after the grueling experience at the Circle Tower, and that strategizing could damn well wait until tomorrow. Arya was free to take her nap, which she did, curled up against Cailan as he watched a movie. Morrigan had been kind enough to charge her laptop after being the reason the battery was almost dead. It’d have to be charged again soon at this rate, but Cailan was enjoying himself, and Arya was, for the most part, enjoying the sleep.

Morrigan, it seemed, had a plan for getting Eldris to agree to her ritual- when Arya went down to the inn’s common room after waking up around noon, her stomach rumbling, she spotted the two of them in a secluded corner. Eldris looked nervous, and to anyone else, Morrigan looked nonplussed. Arya, however, could see more nuances in the other woman’s expression, and she could tell that Morrigan was just as nervous as their elven friend. She gave them a friendly wave as she approached the bar, but otherwise left them alone, ordering enough food for her and Cailan before retreating back upstairs.

Anders had taken a spot by the fire in the common room, a stack of books that Wynne had produced next to him, and the senior enchanter herself was down there as well, knitting. Arya trusted her to keep an eye on Anders, and take care of him if he needed it. Normally, she’d feel a little guilty about leaving him to do her own thing, but she wasn’t actually a healer yet and had barely knew what was wrong with him. While he was, to an extent, her responsibility, it was better if she let someone who knew what they were doing handle it. Especially considering Anders had been in solitary confinement for months- sudden contact with a lot of people was, most likely, disorienting. She would, however, put effort into a nice drawing as a thank-you gift to Wynne for picking up her slack.

“So, I’ve been thinking,” Cailan says, as she nudges his bedroom door open with her hip. She raises an eyebrow at him.

“Oh? I doubt that’s a good sign,” she says, a teasing lilt to her tone, but Cailan looked serious.

“What are we going to do, when we get to Denerim?” he asks. She sits down next to him, passing him his bowl and draping her legs across his lap, bracing herself against the headboard.

“That’s probably what the strategy meeting is for,” she says, taking a bite. He sighs, and shakes his head.

“For the general plan, yes. I am, however, talking about what we’ll do,” he says, and Arya frowns.

“I don’t plan on changing our relationship, if that’s what you mean. I have no illusions to monogamy with you, Cailan. You’re the king of Ferelden, and if you weren’t married to Anora already, you’d have to marry a noble woman eventually,” she says, stirring her stew absentmindedly. She’d kill for a pizza, right now, or anything resembling pizza.
“Well, there’s that, but there’s also Anora herself. How will she react to this? How will you two get along? And then, there’s the whole matter of Eldris and Alistair. Are you going to continue traveling with them? Are you going to stay in Denerim?” he asks. Arya sets her stew aside, sitting up properly to prepare for this conversation. Cailan sets his bowl aside almost absentmindedly before he begins picking at the hem of his shirt anxiously.

“I have no idea how Anora will take the news, but if your marriage was as miserable for her as it was for you, I doubt she’ll raise too much of a fuss. I can also assure you that I will make every effort to get along with Anora. I’ve seen some of her in my visions, and she’s a woman that, while I didn’t always agree with her possible actions, I respected her greatly. I still respect her. She’s a powerful woman, Cailan, and that’s something I can get behind,” she answers. He still looks anxious, and Arya doesn’t know if he really has so little faith in her ability to make friends, or if it’s something else that runs deeper.

“Will you be staying in Denerim, though?” he asks, an unspoken with me hanging at the end of his sentence. She shifts, scoothing closer to Cailan and resting her hand on his arm.

“I will, yes. While I think it’d be interesting to go to Orzammar, I highly doubt I’ll benefit from it. I’ll write down everything I know to prepare Eldris and Alistair, and after that, there’s no real point in me going. I’m not good in combat, and while I can defend myself, I’d rather not take any chances traveling with the Wardens,” she says, softly and reassuringly. She didn’t mention about how desperately she wanted to see the Dalish. She knew that, as a human, there’d be a sharp distrust of her. It was better for everyone, really, that she stay in Denerim. There, with Cailan’s backing, perhaps she could do something. Or, at the very least, and more realistically, be of some use to someone.

“Are you sure you’re comfortable staying in Denerim?” he asks. Arya leans forward, pressing a gentle kiss to his cheek.

“So long as you don’t abandon me there,” she answers, an easy grin falling into place on her lips. He rolls his eyes and leans forward, kissing her properly. The angle is awkward, leading to too much teeth in the kiss, but he seems much less concerned whenever he pulls back.

“You know, I think we’ll have some time to ourselves for a few hours,” he says, fingertips trailing up the side of her leg. She looked at him innocently, fighting to keep a wicked grin off of her face.

“Whatsoever shall we do to pass the time?” she asks, and she’s reminded of the first time Morrigan tried to seduce her with that godawful pick-up line and she has to fight to keep from ruining the moment with ugly laughter.
“Not fond of waiting?” he asks. She rolls her eyes, her hands moving down his chest to the hem of his shirt. She gives it a soft tug, a grin slipping onto her face.

“Oh, I can wait. Can you?” she asks, and then she lets go of his shirt and lets her hands drift upwards, underneath it, tracing scars and the lines of muscle. She pushes him back gently and crawls on top of him, a glint in her eyes.

“Maybe not,” he concedes, and she laughs before pulling his shirt up and over his head and tossing it over her head. Hers soon joins his in a pile beside the door, her bra following, and then he is pressing kisses and bruises across her chest. She gasps, arching into the contact, and he chuckles against her.

Minutes later, she is laying on her back, her shorts and panties somewhere across the room and Cailan is between her thighs, her hands tangled in her hair. He glances up at her, a wicked glint in his eyes. “If you say anything about having a clever tongue right now, I will leave this room and I will not come back,” she warns, panting. He doesn’t say anything, only goes back to what he was doing before with renewed vigor. She gasps and her hips thrust up, a needy whine rising in her throat.

It is only when he thrusts into her that the burning stretch reminds her how long it’s been since she’s had anything more than fingers inside her. She groans, her nails digging into Cailan’s back as his hands ghost along her sides. He is far gentler than Morrigan ever was in the handling of her, running soft fingertips over her sides and stomach and thighs where Morrigan raked her nails across the skin. Cailan presses kisses to her face and lips and neck where Morrigan would bite, her teeth bruising. She wonders, for a moment, if it is wrong for her to prefer the roughness before she sinks her teeth into Cailan’s shoulder to muffle a cry. “Fuck,” she pants, and curls up, hanging on to him as she shudders through her release. He wraps one arm underneath her, supporting her until he finishes and rolls off of her, landing on his back beside of her. She nestles against him for a moment, content, and the two of them fall asleep in the tangled sheets.

She wakes up a couple hours with the sharp ache of hunger in her stomach. Cailan grunts when she moves, pulling her closer and burying his face in the pillow. “C’mon, get up, I’m hungry,” she complains, and her voice is husky with sleep.

He groans and releases his hold on her, rolling onto his back and wiping his eyes with the palm of his hand. She leans over and presses a kiss to his lips. “Go get something to eat. I’ll be down in a minute,” he tells her. She smiles and carefully untangles herself from the sheets.

“Want me to save something for you?” she asks. There’s a moment of consideration before he answers.

“Nah. I’m just gonna go to sleep again,” he admits. She rolls her eyes, but pulls the blankets over him.

“Sleep well,” she said, and then went about the process of getting dressed, gathering her clothes up out of the floor. She folds his, as well, leaving them neatly on the nightstand before heading outside, letting the door close gently behind her. By then, Cailan has started snoring, his arm thrown across his face.

Once she gets to her room, she does her best to clean up and look presentable before pulling on one of the dresses she’d gotten in Redcliffe. The bruises on her neck aren’t that visible, and they’re down lower, where her clothing should cover them. That was…thoughtful, she decided. She brushes her hair, and as she does she things about the whole situation. She had enough birth control to last for another week. After that, she’d be shit out of luck, so unless she wanted a bunch of little Aryas. Wynne or Anders would probably be the best to talk to about that, but she found herself more
comfortable with Morrigan. There couldn’t be any harm in asking her fellow apostate, she supposed as she headed downstairs.

Eldris is still sitting in the corner, but he’s alone now, Morrigan having gone somewhere else. He doesn’t look absolutely miserable, so she takes that as a good sign. Alistair and Leliana have settled into a cozy spot near the door and Arya notes how close they’re sitting and the way they’re looking at each other. Anders has fallen asleep in his spot by the fire, and Wynne is knitting on, making good progress on what Arya thinks may be a scarf.

She slides into the seat next to Eldris. “How’d it go? I saw you two talking earlier. Making friends?” she asks. Eldris grunts and motions to a waitress.

“I can’t tell. I think it went all right,” he said, gruffly, and she could sense an underlying anxiety. The waitress comes over and the two of them order something. Arya orders some wine, hoping it’ll be sweet enough for her to tolerate. When it arrives, she takes a sip.

“So, I have a question. It’s awkward, so you might not want to answer it,” Arya tells him as their food is slid into place in front of them. Her stomach clenches painfully and she realizes that she hasn’t really eaten anything aside from breakfast.

“What is it?” Eldris asks. She frowns, her foot scuffing the floorboards underneath the table. He was Dalish, and while he wasn’t a Keeper or a healer, he probably had some knowledge.

“If I wanted to avoid a pregnancy, how could I do that?” she asks. Eldris makes a face, and she can’t tell if it’s disgust or sympathy or somewhere in between.

“The Dalish use herbs, but since you’re a mage there’s some spells that you could learn. Morrigan might know them, and if she doesn’t, Anders will,” he says, slightly less gruff and a little more sympathetic.

“Thanks. There were ways to prevent it back in my world, too. This wouldn’t have been a problem if I was back there- I took medication regularly that made it hard for that to happen. I’m running out now, but it wasn’t a concern a few days ago,” she says, and even though part of her wants to dig into the food enthusiastically the way Eldris is, but there is still a hard knot in the pit of her stomach at having to get a sex talk from Anders.

“I’d go talk to Morrigan if I were you. She probably knows the herbs that can help, and the spells,” Eldris tells her. She sighs, picking at her food. She’d still kill for a pizza.

“That’s a good idea. Where is she?” she asks. Eldris motions vaguely towards the door, his mouth stuffed with stew and bread. She eats a few more bites, and then stands up, wiping her mouth.

“I’ll go find her, then,” she says, and she walks outside in the cool evening air, passing a table where Brett and Eliza are sitting.

Morrigan is sitting near the lake, surrounded by three piles of herbs and a mortar and pestle, along with multiple flasks. Arya sits down next to her, and the witch gives her a smile.

“You seem troubled, my friend,” Morrigan says, by way of inquiry, and Arya wants to curl herself against Morrigan and stay there with her forever.

“Cailan and I had sex and while I currently have some birth control left, that won’t last for long. I need help,” she says. Morrigan purses her lips thoughtfully before a grin turns one corner of them upwards.
“I can help with that, but I suppose you’re sorely missing my company right now,” she says, lightly, teasingly. Arya laughs and nudges her friend gently.

“Actually, I kind of was. You were always rougher with me. He was good, he was just… gentle. I like a little teeth,” Arya admits. Morrigan laughs, a clear and bright sound, and Arya wants to frame this moment forever. She wishes she had a sketchbook or a camera or anything to capture the expressions on Morrigan’s face.

“Yes, I know all about how you like a teeth,” she answers, a playfulness to her tone that Arya hadn’t heard in a while.

“Perhaps you should give Cailan some lessons. After you keep me from birthing his spawn,” she replies, leaning back on her elbows, turning her face up to the sun.

“Perhaps. To the matter at hand, however, I know several spells. There’s a few to be cast before intimacy to prevent any worry, and there’s one that can be cast afterwards. There’s also a few to…resolve the situation if you end up with child,” Morrigan says.

“Could you teach them to me?” Arya asks. Morrigan looks over at her, the sun glinting in her golden eyes.

“Of course. It’ll take a few days for you to learn, but we’ll start work tomorrow. You may cramp, it may hurt, or it may be an incredibly pleasurable experience for you, so prepare either way,” Morrigan says, her tone now business-like.

“Tomorrow sounds good. Thank you, Morrigan. I’m not sure where I’d be without you looking after me,” Arya says, a grin creeping across her features.

“You are welcome. By the way, Arya, if that…brute does anything you don’t want, let me know,” Morrigan says, and there is a fire in her eyes. Arya grins at her.

“I will, Morrigan. And if you need me for anything at all, you let me know,” she replies. Morrigan returns the smile, a fierce thing full of teeth. Arya was her first friend, and while Morrigan was almost uncomfortable with these new feelings she was experiencing, she would fight for this friendship.

“I will not hesitate, my friend,” Morrigan remarks, going back to her herbs, crushing them into a fine powder. Arya sits with her for a long while, until the sun sinks towards the horizon. She helps her gather up her materials and bring them in, feeling lighter than she had in weeks because of everything and nothing at all.

She heads up to bed, helping Anders up the stairs. She says goodnight to Cailan with several kisses in the darkened hallway before Eldris walks by, clearing his throat loudly with a sideways glance and a smug smirk in Arya’s direction. She rolls her eyes, kisses Cailan once more, and then joins Anders in their bedroom. Despite having slept quite a bit earlier that day, she fell asleep rather quickly.

The next morning she was woken early for the meeting. There, they worked out a plan for what would come when they arrived in Ferelden’s capital city. Anders was still too weak to travel long stretches at a time, so he would stay at the inn, with Wynne, Leliana, Zevran, Eliza, and Sten. Eldris, Alistair, Cailan, Arya, Morrigan, Brett, and the dog would all travel to Denerim, stopping in the Korcari Wilds at Flemeth’s Hut. While they did that, Morrigan would continue ahead, reaching Denerim a day or two before the rest of them. While she was there, she would use an animal form, most likely a raven, to get a feel for the political climate in the city. They’d meet up outside the city,
and then head for the palace, where Cailan would arrive and publicly excuse the Wardens after reasserting his throne. Once everything was settled, word would be sent to Wynne and the others, and they would join them in Denerim. This would give them time to plan everything carefully, and time for a message to be sent to the Dalish.

Arya spent the entire rest of the day packing, and once she was finished, she began another drawing, this one of the Circle Tower in the sunset. She’d need to get paints to finish it later, but once she did, she figured she could give it to Wynne. She went to sleep early again, knowing that the next day would be full of grueling traveling.
They left around dawn, sure enough, and Arya was exhausted before they’d even begun. She suffered through a sickly sweet goodbye between Leliana and Alistair, and while they were cute, she was too tired to deal with this shit. Her feet were aching by the time Lake Calenhad had disappeared behind them, and she was nearly as grouchy as Eldris. Despite all this, it was good to be on the road again. It was going to take them a full week to get to Flemeth’s hut, and another week and a half to get to Denerim from there. She hoped they could resolve the situation with Flemeth peacefully, and, the longer she thought about it, she hoped Flemeth could give her some answers about her arrival in Thedas. She didn’t mention it to anyone, preferring to walk along deep in thought, occasionally holding Cailan’s hand. That was a little more awkward through their gauntlets, but she wasn’t one to complain. The affection was surprisingly comforting and grounding, while not being too invasive.

Five days into their journey, Morrigan went her separate way, saying her goodbyes to Eldris and Arya and turning into a crow before flying off. Arya waved at her until she was long out of sight, despite feeling a little silly for doing so. Later that day, Brett had an awkward conversation with her where he personally threatened to castrate the king if he so much as laid a hand on her that she didn’t desire, and she was left with a cocktail of emotions swirling inside of her. Brett was the father she’d never had, and while her stepfather had tried, they’d never gotten over the icy awkwardness between them. She did, however, miss home with a sharp ache. She missed everything, suddenly, but she was incredibly touched that Brett would even consider threatening Cailan for hurting her.

After five days of walking and sleeping on the ground, she was beginning to adjust, and she was much less surly than when they began. On the sixth day, when it became clear they’d arrive at Flemeth’s around noon, they all gathered around the campfire. There was a tension gathering in the air, one that Arya wasn’t entirely sure how to deal with, so she began to sketch the scene- all of them around the campfire like a family.

“You said you’ve had visions, Arya. Did you have visions of this?” Eldris asks, a calculating look in his eyes. Arya hesitated for a moment before answering, which was an answer in and of itself.

“I have. There are several ways that this can go, according to them,” she says cautiously, her pencil still moving, albeit slowly.

“Don’t keep us waiting. How are we going to do deal with this?” he asks. She frowns, and her pencil stops moving. She doesn’t look up, not yet.

“Flemeth offers a peaceful way to get her true grimoire,” she says, finally.

“Morrigan wouldn’t be safe,” Eldris says simply.

“Even if we kill Flemeth, she won’t stay dead. It’ll be a hard battle that’s difficult to win even in the best circumstances. Flemeth can’t do anything to Morrigan, not unless Morrigan lets her. I’m assuming you know the nature of the matter, and I can go ahead and tell you right now that a soul is never forced upon the unwilling,” Arya replies, her tone grim, finally looking up.

“How difficult than this battle be?” Cailan asks, curiously. If Eldris decides to fight, if there is no way that he’ll leave with the book peacefully, Arya decides then that Cailan must be kept out of the battle. He was their only chance at keeping the peace in Ferelden.
“Flemeth turns into a high dragon. It’s a fierce battle, difficult to win, and in the end it might not work. She could kill us all, and I doubt she’d have second thoughts about it,” Arya answers, her grip on the pencil tightening.

“I’ll make a decision when we get there,” Eldris says, after a few seconds of silence.

“Okay. You know my viewpoint, though,” Arya says, shrugging. She forces herself to relax her grip on the pencil, and she continues her sketch.

Flemeth is standing in front of her hut when they finally step out of the marsh, looking far more regal than Arya suspected. The magic in the air is so strong she can almost taste it, and Arya has no doubts that the Veil is thin and her powers would be accessed much more easily.

“And so you come to me at last, my child,” Flemeth says, and she’s looking straight at Arya. Arya is perplexed, and she glances at the others through the corner of her eyes. Flemeth chuckles, a warm sound, and Arya realizes that there is a strong sense of belonging that she feels, and that Flemeth is speaking to her.

“What do you mean?” she asks, after a few seconds. She wipes the sweat off of her brow, the air hot and humid, and Flemeth smiles, beckoning her forward by curling two fingers. Arya takes three steps forward without realizing it, and she pauses, looking at Flemeth with her brow furrowed.

“Have you not wondered how you came to this world, girl, or why it feels so much like a home to you already?” she asks, and Arya is surprised at how utterly calm she is. She’d expected to be shaking in her boots when they came to confront Flemeth. Around them, the swamp is silent, making her feel as if she and Flemeth are the only two people in the world. Perhaps they were.

“I have. I also hoped that you might be able to give me some answers. I know who you are, and I thought that if anyone knew, it would be you,” Arya answers. Flemeth smiles at her, a motherly smile, and Arya wonders if Morrigan had ever seen it.

“In short, you are mine. I spent seventeen years in a ritual to bring you here,” Flemeth answers, turning to look out over the water. Arya steps forward, ever closer to her. She feels like something is about to break and shatter. She only hopes it will not be her.

“What? Why would you do that?” Arya asks, her head tilting to the side. Flemeth glances at her, over her shoulder, a wry grin on the old woman’s face.

“Your life on Earth was not your first. If you like, I can give you all of your memories. You would be whole, completely and totally, but there will be a price to pay,” Flemeth tells her, and the witch’s gaze is calculating and thoughtful, as if she’s analyzing every small detail of Arya’s expression. Arya knows, the second Flemeth mentions it, that she will reclaim her memories. She can feel it now, a gaping hole inside of her where something is missing.

“I’ll pay it. Whatever it is, I will pay it gladly,” she says, and she is not so far forward that Cailan cannot grab her arm. He does, anchoring her firmly in place.

“Arya, what in the Void do you think you’re doing?” he hisses. She glances at Alistair, who looks confused, his arms crossed over his chest, and at Eldris, whose ears are flattened back against his skull and whose lips are curled in a snarl.

“I’m doing what I have to, Cailan. These are my memories, and this is my choice,” she says, and that hard and flinty thing is back in her voice again. If there was anything her mother ever did for it, it was to make sure she knew that her life was her choice.
“Are you sure about it? She’s crazy. Anyone could see that,” Cailan says, trying his best to persuade her.

“I’m positive. I’ll pay the price gladly for this. I trust her, anyways. Or, at least, as much as anyone can ever trust her,” she says, and Cailan sighs heavily and finally lets go of her arm. Flemeth has turned back to face them, and she beckons Arya forward again. She can sense the others’ concern, can sense their disapproval, but this path is hers.

“Know this, I would never hurt my champion,” Flemeth says, and Arya pays no mind to her confusion. All would be explained in a moment. Flemeth gives her a knowing smile, and it seems like the whole of the Wilds is holding its breath, waiting for the outcome. The old woman brings her hands up, resting her fingertips against Arya’s temples. “This is likely to be overwhelming,” she warns, and Arya nods, once, and she only has a scant second to prepare herself before blackness consumes her and her world erupts in a supernova.

An elven boy chases an elven girl through the forest, spirits gliding past with only a passing interest, if any at all. Laughter followed them, and joy. The boy’s face is unmarked, but the girl bears Mythal’s markings, and she does so proudly. Sunlight streamed overhead, and the forest was warm, but neither were out of breath and neither were too hot.

“You’ll never catch me!” the girl calls over her shoulder, easily leaping over roots and ducking under branches.

“You’ll eat those words, Bellanaris!” the boy calls back, and though he is behind, he is slowly gaining on her. She laughs again, a sound like chiming bells, and without warning, she scampers up a tree, moving effortlessly from branch to branch and then leaping through the canopy.

“Oh, that’s just not fair!” the boy yells, his voice full of fondness, but he stays on the ground, running at full speed.

“Do you surrender?” the girl asks, from so far ahead that he knows he will not be able to catch her. He slows to a stop, catching his breath.

“Fine, Bella, you win. I’ll hunt for our supper tonight. Are you happy now?” he asks, and there is only mock annoyance in his tone. It seems that he had known the outcome from the start.

“Of course,” Bellanaris answers, dropping down from above and landing gracefully on her feet. She flops down underneath a tree, her hands behind her head, and even that action was something graceful and beautiful. The boy sits down next to her.

“You’re going to be the death of me one day,” he says, fondly reaching over to ruffle her hair.

“At least we’ll die together,” she says, a wicked grin spreading across her face. He laughs, and lays down next to her, and it is a long time before anyone moves, and then they hunt together.

The same elven girl stands in the same forest with the same elven boy. They are at an opulent temple this time, and the air is full of anger and desperation. The girl has her staff out, and it is crackling with magic. The air is sharp with it, and the girl will not go down without a fight. The boy has a bow in his hands, an arrow drawn back as far as it will go. A man far older than either of them is standing behind them, also elven, also wearing the same markings on his face as the girl.
Even though the boy and the girl are still young, they are also much older. They have all seen the death of a goddess now, and neither of them expect to make it out of the situation alive.

“Abelas, get inside the temple and seal the doors. Lanaste and I will hold them off,” she says, and her voice is cold and angry and determined and the man’s heart breaks at the sight of her. He reaches out, a hand on her shoulder for a fleeting second before he turns and flees inside, working with the others inside the temple to shut the great doors. Something heavy hangs in the air as the door to the inner sanctum finally seals behind the boy and the girl, and Bellanaris shares a look with Lanaste.

“You do not have to stay, Lan. Mythal was not your goddess to serve,” she says, and Lanaste shakes his head and steps closer to her, the string on the bow relaxing minimally. They did not have much time.

“Damn Mythal, Bella! I’m here for you!” he said, and she wants to argue, wants to tell him to get out and save himself so she can die with something aside from vengeance to fight for, but she swallows something bitter and doesn’t.

“I love you, my friend,” she says, instead, and Lanaste shares a grim smile with her.

“I love you too, ma taron sal,” he says, and then Elgar’nan’s forces are storming them, death and blood raining throughout the outer sanctum. When they fall, they fall together, eternity and mercy dying side-by-side and hand in hand. Elgar’nan’s forces try for three days to breach the inner sanctum, and they go home defeated. Inside, Abelas and remaining acolytes of Mythal slumber.

An elven Qunari woman rises early one morning before dawn has broken over the horizon, with the same face and the same hair and the same body as the elven girl before, to the crying of a young child. Her face is unmarked, and she is so much younger as she coos and sings to the child, rocking it until it calms and quiets, blinking at her curiously. As a tamassran, her role is a versatile one, but an important one. She feeds and changes the child before placing him gently back in his crib, a kiss pressed between his horns that makes him giggle.

After making sure none of the other tamas have risen, the elven woman sneaks outside, into the cool air, and leaves the city silently. Away from the border, an elven man rests against a boulder. She greets him warmly with a friendly kiss to the cheek that he returns. “I didn’t think you’d be able to make it,” he says, and she grins at him, an easy and happy thing.

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she tells them, and though they must keep their meeting brief, lest they be discovered, the boy pulls out a map and the two of them huddle over it.

“I cannot stay long, I’m afraid,” she says, regretfully, after a few seconds of chatter.

“Don’t tell me you’re becoming responsible, Bella!” he says, playfully, and she nudges him with her shoulder.

“Never, Lanaste,” she says, and when she slips back into the city her heart is light and happy.

The next time Bellanaris sneaks out to meet Lanaste, she finds only his corpse surrounded by angry stens. “Were you planning on leaving us, Tamassran?” one of them asks her. She does not answer, only crumples to her knees as a sharp keen claws its way out of her throat. Lanaste was the
only one who had ever given her a name, a real name, and he was her soul as she was his soul and now there was a part of her that was raw and broken and missing and she did not know how she would survive this.

“Do you submit yourself for reeducation?” one of the stens asks, not unkindly. Bellanaris looks up at them then, a snarl rising to her face.

“You will not have me,” she says, and so the stens shrug and do their duty to the Qun, and when Bellanaris falls, her body lays next to Lanaste’s.

Bellanaris loved the stars. She loved them so much that she would sleep under them most nights, in the forests next to Arlathan. The city itself was a place of opulence and wealth, a place that Bellanaris did not belong, a place where Bellanaris stuck out with her sharp cheekbones and her sharp elbows and her wild and tangled hair. Arlathan was a place of bureaucrats, and Bellanaris was a soldier.

“I do not understand your obsession with the night sky,” Lanaste said, once, but he would curl up next to her under the twinkling blanket of the sky, his head on her stomach. She would run her fingers through his hair, and sometimes she would hum.

“The stars are so vast and beautiful, and so distance,” she answered him, her gaze still turned towards them. She could spend an eternity looking up at them and never learn their secrets. Lanaste would grumble and complain, but by the time Mythal was betrayed and he fell next to her, if anyone had asked him what his favorite memories were, he would have answered that they were spending the nights under the stars with the twin of his soul. Bellanaris’ answer would have been the same.

When Bellanaris was first dragged in front of Mythal, the goddess sensed what the elf did not want her to. She sensed the grief and the rage that had sunk its claws into the orphaned child, and she had taken pity, purchasing her from the slavers and marking her so none of her brothers or sisters could. Slowly, she earned the elf’s trust.

Bellanaris met Lanaste on a job for Mythal long after she’d risen to the status of champion. He was strange and new and she was drawn to him, because her soul was his and his soul was hers. His face was strangely unmarked, and he followed Fen’Harel, the mortal who was nearly a god in his own right.

“I’m proud of mine. Of my vallaslin,” Bellanaris said, once, out of the blue. Lanaste looked at her, his brows furrowed slightly before he gave her a wide smile.

“Oh course you are. A blind beggar could see the love you have for Mythal, and the love she has for you,” he answered, and it was then that Bellanaris decided Lanaste truly was her soul.

Arya woke slowly and painfully. She had been moved inside, to a bed that smelled faintly of Morrigan, and her head ached. A thousand new memories she had not yet seen warred in her head, banging against her skull, and she let out a long and low moan, drawing everyone’s attention to her. Brett was seated next to her, arguing right along with the others regardless. Once they all noticed she was awake, Cailan rushed towards her, kneeling on the ground and taking one of her hands in his. Brett held the other, and Eldris had sense enough to let the argument drop. She didn’t know she was crying until Cailan was wiping the tears from her face.
“What did she do to you?” Cailan whispers, and Arya gives him a weak and watery smile.

“She gave me back my memories, just like she said,” she answers softly, her voice hoarse and sore. She wonders if she had screamed.

“No, not that,” Cailan says, perplexed, and Arya pulls away from him with her eyebrows furrowing in confusion as her head throbbed.

“What do you mean?” she asks.

Eldris coughs behind them, and Arya glances up at him. “You resemble me more than him now, lethallan,” he tells her, and Arya half-falls off of the bed and scrambles over to a mirror hanging on the wall. She is, indeed, elven. She is wearing the same face as the girl in memories and her body is the same, too.

“What did you do?” she asks, turning to look at Flemeth as her fingers let go of Cailan’s hand and trace the points of her ears.

“I did nothing, dear girl. You, however, cast a spell, one that changed your form to what you are most comfortable with,” Flemeth tells her, and this is all too strange for Arya. She is Bellanaris but she also herself and the two personalities are just different enough to clash inside of her.

“How did I manage that?” she asks, weakly.

“It’s an old spell. You will not be able to cast it again. The Veil was thin here, and I fed you a stream of my mana to keep you breathing. It was an instinctual action,” Flemeth explained.

“Thank you for…everything,” she tells Flemeth, and then turns to Cailan and asks, “What did you see?” He looks concerned, worried for her safety or perhaps her sanity.

“After she gave you your…memories, there was a bright light as you collapsed. She caught you, and then moved you in here, and wouldn’t let us attempt to wake you. That’s what we were arguing about,” he explains, and Arya wonders if it is too late to go back to bed.

She turns back to Flemeth. “So, should I call you Flemeth or Mythal?” she asks, and the old woman gives her a sad smile.

“I am more Flemeth than I am Mythal,” she answers, and even though the information isn’t new, something in Arya grieves for the loss.

“I…am still sorry. I failed Mythal…I failed you, in my duty as champion,” Arya says, only it is not Arya who failed but Bellanaris, even though they are the same yet different.

“My child, you could not have prevented my death, and you held the sanctum. You did your duty, and I am so proud of you,” she says, and more tears fall from Arya’s eyes. She doesn’t bother wiping them away. She does not realize how close she is standing to Flemeth, and she is moderately surprised when the old woman reaches out and cups her cheeks.

“Now go, until I call you again,” she says, and something rises within Arya, something ancient and powerful and proud. This is the price that she must pay for her memories- she is bound, as she has always been bound.

“Yes, Flemeth. Might I inquire about the grimoire Morrigan seeks? That is, after all, why we came,” she says. Flemeth turns to the hearth and picks an ancient and worn book up, gently passing it to Eldris, who cradles it to his chest.
“Tell her what you wish, but might I suggest honesty? Morrigan did, after all, learn from me,” Flemeth says, and she and Arya share a wry smile.

“I wouldn’t lie to her. Thank you, again, for everything that you’ve done,” she says, and she can sense confusion from her companions. In their eyes, Flemeth hasn’t done anything, only cursed Arya with memories from times long gone.

“Of course. Now go, da’len, and let the world shake before you,” Flemeth says, her golden eyes alight with something. Arya bows, and this time, she leads the way out of the swamp. She knows that later there will be much for her to speak to her companions about, and there will be much in the way of her new memories to sift through, but for now she is herself, ancient and powerful, with magic thrumming in her veins. The world, it seems, is hers for the taking.
They made camp a little early. There was still light that they could have used to travel with, but there was no guarantee that they could find a decent spot to camp should they keep going, and they were all tired. Well, most of them were. Arya found that she was feeling fine, once her headache dissipated. She was stronger, faster, and she could see farther and more clearly than before. She could have gone for hours before she was truly ready to stop. There was new knowledge swirling around inside of her, spells and other things, things that Bellanaris had known but she had not, blending with her own until she didn’t know where she ended and Bellanaris began.

She helped Cailan set up their tent. Helped, rather than hindered, and she could almost hear the questions he had. “I’m sure after we get camp set up, everyone will want to talk. I’ve got a lot to say, myself,” she says, and Cailan frowns at her.

“Just…tell me something,” he says, and she turns to look at him, her head titled to the side and her mouth curved downwards.

“Of course. What is it?” she asks, but she does not stop, because the sooner the tent is up the sooner they can all have their little talk.

“Are you still you?” he asks, and her fingers abandon the rope, letting the tent hang awkwardly as she shifts, moving closer to Cailan. She doesn’t touch him, not yet.

“I am. I just…It’s weird, because I’m still me, but I have memories that belong to someone else, only that someone else is me too. It’s…almost scary, but I’m still me,” she says, and he frowns.

“You don’t even look like you,” he says, only that’s not entirely true. She looks like she would if she were elven. Her hair is still the same color and the same length and the same style, and her eyes are still the same shape and color, and she still has the dark bags underneath them, and her nose is still crooked. Her face is narrower, true, and her lips are more even, and her eyebrows are the best they’ve ever been, but her features have mixed with Bellanaris’ because they are one and the same.

“I did that. I know a lot more spells now, thanks to that, but it wasn’t entirely intentional. I have always had most of these features. They are...Her name is Bellanaris. Or, I guess, my name was Bellanaris. It is…complicated,” she says, and she wonders if she should have told Flemeth to sod off with her offer of memories. Once she thinks that, there is a part of her that almost physically recoils.

“It’s going to take some time to get used to,” Cailan says, and there’s something unreadable in his expression.

“For you and me both,” she replies. She expects Cailan to dismiss her, but when he turns back to work, there is a soft smirk forming on his lips.

“I think I’ll have plenty of time to get used to your new body tonight, though,” Cailan says.

“I’ll make sure you're very thorough,” Arya replies, a smirk of her own falling onto her lips.

Finally, the camp was put together, and they all gathered at the campfire. Sam, it seemed, was completely unbothered by any of the events today, but Eldris and Alistair regarded her with more than enough suspicion. “Start talking,” Eldris demanded, and Arya obliged.
“While that woman was Morrigan’s mother, Flemeth is also a vessel for what is left of Mythal. A long time ago, before the creation of the Veil, Mythal was murdered by Elgar’nan for openly siding with Fen’Harel in the war. That was the first time I died, when Elgar’nan’s forces stormed the temple of Mythal that resides in the Arbor Wilds. That was the first life I lived, but from the memories Flemeth gave me, I’ve lived many others,” she explains.

“What makes you think I’ll believe you? Mythal wasn’t murdered. She was locked away with the rest of the gods, by Fen’Harel,” Eldris said, and there is still the anger there.

“I was there, Eldris. Mythal was murdered by Elgar’nan. He killed her himself, and when we tried to fight back, his people slaughtered us. It was all we could do to defend the temple long enough to get the doors sealed!” Arya says, and her voice is rising slightly with the anger.

“Why should I believe you?” he asks, his chest rising and falling heavily.

“You should believe whatever you damn well please. But I was there. I was Mythal’s champion, her favorite,” she answers, and she is more than a little angry herself, but her anger is older and runs deeper, millennia in the making.

“Fine. Say I do believe you. Why did you turn into an elf?” he demands, and Arya realizes how insensitive her sudden transformation must seem to him.

“It was not on purpose. This face and figure are the ones that I had originally, and through all my other lives, as Bellanaris. If I had been in proper control of my actions, I wouldn’t have done it. I know what discriminations the elves face every day, and I know how hard it is for the Dalish to live in this human society. I am sorry, Eldris,” she says, and Eldris looks at her for a good long while.

“If it wasn’t intentional, then I suppose I won’t hold it against you. You’ve got a lot to learn, though, about living as an elf in a human society,” he said. Arya gave him a grim smile.

“I know. I’m not completely looking forward to that, but I think I’ll be able to manage. I have all of you, after all,” she said, and Eldris gave her one of his infectious crooked grins.

“What price do you have to pay for this whole deal?” Alistair asks. From the way Cailan shifts beside her, Arya knows that’s what his worry is, too.

“I’m not entirely sure. She didn’t outright say, obviously, but I think I will still be bound in my duty to Mythal,” she answers.

“Bound to a dead goddess?” Alistair asks, one eyebrow raised, and Arya and Eldris both snarl.

“She isn’t dead!” they both protest.

“There is little left of Mythal, but there is something left, and I will fight until my dying breath to protect her, even if that were not the price demanded of me,” Arya elaborates. Eldris shares a look with her.

“I do not know if that witch truly is Mythal, but even if she were not, our legends say that she was locked away with the other Creators. She is not dead,” Eldris says, and Arya is thankful that there is at least some effort that he makes to retain his hostility.

“Fine, that was, admittedly, poor wording. What would that mean, if you were still bound to Mythal?” Alistair amends.
“I would be required to do anything Flemeth asked me to do. Mythal was, however, a
goddess known for mercy and justice. Elgar’nan was vengeance and anger, and I think that’s why
things ended the way they did. Her joining with Flemeth may yet have changed her. There was…
there’s a story, I know, about a man who joined with a spirit of Justice, to give Justice a home,
because Justice didn’t have a body of his own. But the man’s anger warped Justice, turning him into
Vengeance. I don’t think that has happened to, although Flemeth is definitely angry. There’s so little
left of Mythal that I don’t think she could have warped,” Arya says.

“Well, no matter what it means and no matter what price you have to pay, we’ll be here to
help you with this. There’s no use worrying too much about it now,” Cailan says, and so they eat a
supper in terse silence, broken by little conversation, before they head off to bed.

That night, Arya walks in the Fade. She finds, somehow, Morrigan, and the witch almost
doesn’t recognize her. “Arya? Why do you look so different?” she asks.

“I talked to your mother. Eldris has her grimoire, but gods, this is a complicated mess. I
wish you were here,” Arya says. Morrigan slides closer to her, and it seems as though they are in a
garden.

“Tell me everything,” Morrigan says, and her tone is more sympathetic than she would
have liked.

“I thought maybe your mother might know something about how I got here. She has her
fingers in a lot of pies, metaphorically. It turns out that this is just some reincarnation bullshit. Your
mother gave me access to my memories. I was an elf in Arlathan, first, and…there’s so much,
Morrigan. There’s so much you don’t know about your mother,” Arya murmurs, almost miserably.

“I’m beginning to get that impression. How bad is it?” Morrigan asks.

“Your mother is the vessel of whatever is left of the elven goddess, Mythal. When I was
Bellanaris, in Arlathan, I was an orphan. I don’t remember much before I met Mythal, not yet, but
when I was brought before her, she saw everything I didn’t want her to, and she took me in and
helped me. She saved me, really. If she hadn’t chosen me, and one of the other Evanuris had, I
would have died. I became her champion, and then, later, she was murdered by Elgar’nan. I
originally died defending her temple so that those inside could seal it. There are more memories,
more lives, but that was the first, and I think, perhaps, the key,” she explains. Morrigan shifts closer
and lays a hand on Arya’s knee.

“This is…shocking, but I believe you. It is difficult to lie in the Fade. Did she demand a
price for returning these memories?” Morrigan asks.

“She said there would be one to pay, but she did not say what it is. I may be bound to my
original oath to Mythal, or there may be something else,” Arya admits, and her fear shows.
Morrigan curls closer, automatically, until she is laying against Arya’s chest.

“Whatever price she demands, I will stand beside you, my friend,” Morrigan says, and
Arya’s breath catches in her throat.

“I appreciate that. I have a feeling that I might need your support by the time this is over,”
Arya says, and Morrigan’s smile is brilliant even if Arya can’t see it.

“You will have it.”
When Arya wakes the next morning, she is full of determination. Whatever the price is, whatever this means, Arya will pay it, and her new family will stand beside her.
They hit nothing but good weather as they trek towards Denerim, making everything a little easier. As a result, they make good timing, and Arya’s newfound strength and abilities let her travel faster and longer, so they’re no longer compensating for her. Although she’d expected it, the suspicion that Eldris and Alistair regard her with stings a little. Cailan had been a little wary at first, but once he’d been reassured that she was really still herself any awkwardness had left. Sam remained unbothered by everything, and while Brett was concerned and shocked, he supported her and did so staunchly. His support meant the world to her.

Denerim was…not what she expected. It was massive, and while she’d known it would be, she hadn’t expected a city of this size. Morrigan met them outside the gates, looking desperately bored. “What do you have for us?” Alistair asks, when they finally reach her. Arya takes a moment to remove her back, stretching her shoulders and doing her best to soothe the tense muscles. Morrigan seems moderately surprised to see Arya and her new body and her new face, but she does well at hiding it.

“It is as she said. The alienage is locked down, with reports of a plague. The arl’s son was murdered, and there is an elven woman by the name of Anaba Tabris in the dungeons who is supposedly responsible for the act. Queen Anora has shown interest in the elf. A noble man by the name of Lysander Cousland has also taken up temporary residence in the castle. I was unable to find out more about him, but it seems as though he is petitioning Anora for assistance,” Morrigan tells them, and Arya starts at the familiar names.

“I know the Couslands. Lysander was Bryce’s youngest. I’ve never met him personally- I wonder what he could want?” Cailan murmurs. Arya clears her throat, and everyone’s attention moves to her.

“I think I know. In my visions, Arl Howe attacked the Cousland castle. Sometimes, Lysander was the only survivor, other times there were none. I may have some information about Tabris, as well,” she explains.

“Well, I suppose we’ll find out shortly. What’s our plan? How are we going to go about doing this?” Alistair asks, and Arya looks towards the horizon, where the sun is sinking lower and coloring the sky with oranges and pinks.

“Everyone going into the palace would just be suspicious. We should divide the team- a couple of us will go with Cailan as an honor guard, and the others can go to an inn somewhere. It’s getting late, it’d be hard for the palace’s servants to ready rooms for everyone anyway,” Brett suggests. Cailan and Alistair both nod their agreement.

“I want you to accompany me, Brett, as well as Arya. Having Eldris or Alistair along will be a good idea as well- it’ll explain the Warden business,” Cailan says. Arya drags a hand through her hair nervously. She’d expected Cailan to request her presence at his side- but she was elven now. She knew what some would think of her if she showed up to the palace at his side. She wasn’t going to tell him no, though. If she were in his shoes, she’d want the support, too.

“We could wait and arrive in the morning. That way the group going into the palace isn’t too large, and if things go sour we’d have time to get out of the city,” Eldris suggests. Cailan’s brows
furrow as he bites his bottom lip, glancing between them all as if he’d find hidden answers there.

“Very well. Arya, Brett, and I will head for the palace tonight. I need a few moments to change into my armor, but after that, I’ll be ready to go. The rest of you should go ahead and head into the city. There are several inns in the market district that should be suitable,” he says, finally. They nod, gathering their things again, and Brett and Cailan go a few steps away, into the scrawny brush, so the latter can change into his armor.

Eldris pulls Arya aside. “Listen,” he begins, hesitantly, “I know people are going to treat you differently than they would have before. Keeper Marethari gave this to me whenever I left. It’s not much, but maybe it’ll help,” he says, and he passes over a worn cloth hood, the edges lined with leather. There are twisting vine-like designs pressed into the leather, and the cloth may have at one point been a pale purple. It reminded her of the hood Abelas wore, and she took it carefully, holding it to her chest.

“Thank you, lethallin,” she says, softly, and there is something fragile in her voice. Eldris gives her a gentle smile and pulls her into a quick hug before releasing her.

“I don’t know if you’re right about Mythal and the other Creators. I don’t think it matters, though. You’re the closest thing to clan and kin I have, now,” he says, and there is something achingly sad in his voice. She pulls him into another hug.

“Your clan is still there, Eldris. After all this is over, you can go back,” she says, and a soft smile turns the corners of his mouth upwards.

“I think I will. I’ve sent a few messages- I don’t know if they got them. But you be careful, Arya. These shem aren’t going to care about you,” he says. She nods, brushing his hair back out of his eyes.

“I will. You be careful, too, Eldris,” she says, and he flashes a crooked grin at her.

“I always am, da’len,” he says, ruffling her hair before heading off to the gate.

Morrigan approaches Arya next. “If anything happens, you set the entire place on fire. You have my blessing,” she says, sniffing. Arya grins at her and pulls her into a hug. Morrigan is temporarily shocked, but she returns the hug without much protest.

“I’ll do my best,” she said, and she wasn’t sure why everything had an air of finality about it. She supposed that after this, they’d all be branded as criminals if their plan failed. Morrigan nodded before joining Eldris and Alistair at the gates, disappearing inside. Cailan came back out of the brush a few moments later, his golden armor glittering in the sun.

He looked…right, in that armor, Arya thought, but she and Brett merely split the contents of his pack between them. It wasn’t right for a king to carry his own pack, after all, or at least that’s what Brett said, and so they’d split the load and Arya pulled the hood Eldris had given her on. By the time they headed into the city gates, the pinks and oranges of the sky were shot through with deep indigo. A few scant steps past the gates, and people were already recognizing Cailan, leading to a long procession to the castle where Arya followed Brett’s lead and pretending like the citizens didn’t exist until they got too close to Cailan.

Loghain met them at the palace with a group of six guards, one of them most likely Ser Cauthrien. “What is the meaning of this?” he demanded, sounding for all the world like an angry father who’d waited long past curfew for an errant child to return home.
“I have returned. My country needs me,” Cailan answers, a crooked grin slipping easily onto his face. Loghain crossed his arms over his chest and leveled a glare at Cailan that made Arya wince.

“Where have you been? Who in the Void is that with you? You’ve got a lot of explaining to do,” Loghain says, sounding for all the world like a father scolding his son. Arya tried desperately not to laugh once she saw the similarities, fighting to keep her face schooled.

“That’s a long story, Loghain, and one perhaps best discussed inside. What is important is that I’m back now, and I’m not going anywhere until the Blight ends,” Cailan says. Loghain sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose between his fingers. Upon closer inspection, Arya can see how tired Loghain looks. The bags under his eyes are dark and he looks…stressed.

“Very well. We’ll meet in your study,” Loghain says, and the guards part to let them through, Loghain leading the way through the castle.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly I don't even have a good excuse for why it's taken so long to update I had all but a paragraph written and then my wisdom teeth were cut out and school started and I've just been too lazy to get onto this computer and update.

Next chapter shouldn't take that long to update, and it'll be when the Big Explanation happens. Anora may be introduced then, or in the one after idk we'll see how it pans out but I hope you enjoyed this!!!
While Loghain set a brutal pace through the castle, leaving Arya with little time to admire the décor, she did notice how beautiful it was. The walls were covered in tapestries and murals and mosaics, and the rugs running along the centers of the hallways were a form of artwork themselves. Most of it depicted various stories, the most common theme being battles that Arya assumed were from Ferelden history. Servants brushed past the group, working in a frenzy now that the king had returned with guests. As they draw closer to the study, Cailan reaches out and links his fingers with Arya— a gesture that Loghain doesn’t fail to notice. She can feel his glare, and staunchly avoids looking at him.

When they finally reach the study, there are several chairs around a table, and tea set out for them. The tension in the air was so thick, it could have been cut with a knife as Cailan let go of Arya’s hand and took a seat at the head of the table. Arya, seeing no better option, sits down next to him, although she wonders if she would feel better if she remained standing. Loghain sits across from Cailan, and Brett assumes a position behind Arya. She feels some sort of comfort at his presence.

“So, boy, why don’t you start talking?” Loghain asks, leaning back in his chair with his ankle crossed over his leg. He’s feigning nonchalance, but Arya can see how tense and angry he is. She wishes miserably for a moment that she’d gone with Morrigan and Eldris.

“After the battle of Ostagar, where it failed spectacularly, I was found near death on the battlefield by the Grey Wardens. They spent some time nursing me back to help, and I traveled with them for a short while until we could return to the capital,” Cailan explains, and Arya knows in that moment that the story won’t hold up. Loghain has to know better.

“I’ve known you since you were a boy, Cailan. Do you expect me to believe that?” Loghain asks with a snort. Arya fidgets, glancing at Cailan. She feels Brett place a hand on her shoulder, which makes her feel much better.

“I’m telling you what you need to know, Loghain. There’s more at stake here than you could know,” Cailan replies easily, effortlessly. At least Arya knows he can hold up under verbal fire.

“At least tell me who she is. I’m not stupid, boy, she’s no Warden,” Loghain says, his gaze turning to Arya. She swallows heavily.

“Her name is Arya, and her story isn’t mine to tell,” he answers.

“No, I can’t say that I am,” he replies lightly, and Arya notices how exhausted Loghain looks. Cailan’s disappearance must have been hell for the man.

“You must know how this looks, Cailan. The King of Ferelden disappears for months, and then shows up again with a flimsy explanation and a knife-ear hanging onto—” Loghain begins, but Arya cuts him off and jumps to her feet, knocking her chair back loudly.

“What was that?” Arya asked, leaning over the table, her hands splayed out on the wooden surface to keep them from trembling.

“I believe you heard me,” Loghain answers, and it takes all of the willpower Arya possesses not to jump across the table and backhand the man.
“If you can’t manage to show me the same fucking respect that you’d show anyone else, you’re not going to have vocal cords for much longer,” Arya threatens. Cailan sighs loudly beside her, and she can almost see him pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration without turning to look. Loghain, meanwhile, watches her intently, his eyes narrowed. The look is calculating, and Arya gets the sudden feeling that this is some sort of test.

“And just who are you, girl, that you so boldly demand my respect?” Loghain asks, and she realizes that this is definitely some sort of test.

“That’s a good question, and a long story,” she mumbles, a week of existential crisis catching up with her suddenly. She pushes herself back off of the table and crosses her arms over her chest.

“Then I suggest you start telling it, before I have you thrown in the dungeons,” Loghain replies. Arya huffs and turns away, walking over to the window. The room overlooks the gardens, and they are quite beautiful.

“This isn’t how we were planning on telling you,” Cailan warns. Loghain shrugs in response, and Arya begins talking.

“Once, the Veil didn’t exist. Spirits mingled freely throughout the world. Elvhenan was the empire, Arlathan it’s capital. Most think of the wooden aravels the Dalish use currently when they think of Arlathan, but think instead about crystal spires twining through the treetops, wonders that only uninterrupted access to magic could produce. Then, there was a war. The effects happened slowly. The Evanuris were great generals, and then great leaders, and then they were gods. There was an elven girl dragged before them, an orphan, lost and angry and scared, and Mythal saw what I didn’t wish for her to. She took me in, gave me shelter and safety from the others, and I became her favorite, her champion. Then she was murdered by the others in their greed for power, and I died defending a temple long enough to get the doors sealed. I only received those memories recently, and there is much that I don’t know,” she says.

“You expect me to believe any of this?” Loghain asks, one eyebrow raised. Arya keeps her back to him, looking out over the gardens.

“You can believe whatever you like. I’m telling you what I know,” she replies. Loghain scoffs.

“I can tell you, at least, believe your story. Still, now is a bad time for your relationship to be made public. Cailan, you must know this. Anora’s too fond of that Cousland boy that’s been hanging around- a scandal was brewing already. It’ll be ten times worse if the kingdom finds out you and—” he hesitates, glancing at Arya.

“Arya. My name is Arya. Or Bellanaris. I prefer the first one,” she answers, mindlessly, and he continues.

“If the kingdom finds out about you and Arya, or Anora and Lysander, it’s not going to be pretty,” Loghain warns.

“Arya and I will speak with Anora and Lysander and handle it, Loghain. We can do that now, in fact, as soon as someone can go round up the two of them. Meanwhile, I want reports on everything that’s happened while I’m away, delivered as soon as possible. The country is faced with a Blight- we need to hurry. There will be Wardens arriving tomorrow, and many more guests arriving after that.

Loghain nods and stands. “Very well. Arya, I’ll meet with you privately later. You claim to
have knowledge of this world, and I’m not going to take you at face value,” he says. She nods, turning back around and leaning against the wall.

“Yes, sir. I look forward to that conversation,” she tells him. The corners of his mouth twitch as if he’s fighting back a grin, but then he turns and sweeps out of the room.

“I’ll go find Anora and the Cousland boy,” Brett says, bowing and striding out after him. Cailan rises and walks over to Arya, putting a hand on her shoulder.

“You handled that well. Are you all right?” he asks.

“More or less. I definitely could be worse,” she replies, standing up on her tiptoes to press a kiss to his cheek. He smiles and wraps his arm around her waist, pulling her closer.

“The worst part is yet to come. Anora is a terror,” Cailan warns. Arya laughs, leaning against him.

“We’ve got this, babe, don’t worry,” she says. They pull apart, Cailan heading back to his chair, and the door swings open.
The first thing Arya noticed about Anora was how composed she is. A man follows her, moving through the room with cocky ease. She assumes that this is Lysander Cousland. He is small but muscular, his hair brown and falling into his face, and he has two daggers strapped to his thighs. His eyes glint in the light, a dark brown color, and Arya knows he’s more dangerous than he seems. She tries not to shiver.

“So my husband arrives, dragging another woman with him,” Anora says, and there is steel in her eyes but a soft smile on her lips. She sits carefully, crossing one leg over the other, while Lysander sprawls out almost casually, his feet propped up on the table. It did nothing to hide the tension.

“In all fairness, I tried to discourage him,” Arya replies. She is still standing by the window, her arms crossed over her stomach as she leans against the wall. She is more comfortable here, too anxious to sit, even though her feet are beginning to ache.

Anora smiles, and Arya relaxes considerably. “I suppose you discovered he was not so easily discouraged,” she said, and Arya nodded, a faint smile of her own on her face.

“I did indeed,” she murmurs.

Lysander clears his throat and shifts in his seat. “So, we’re here to negotiate our relationships?” he asks. Something about his voice makes Arya squirm.

“Negotiate sounds so…clinical,” Arya complains, and he shoots her a grin.

“I have a suggestion, if I may,” Anora says. Cailan crosses his arms.

“Let’s hear it,” he says.

“Lysander and I will keep to ourselves. You and her will keep to yourselves. We’ll come together to rule the country and do our duties, but our private time is just that,” she says, and Arya thinks that maybe she’s missing something pretty important.

“That’s a great idea and all, Anora, but isn’t that just a breeding ground for resentment? We’ll all end up hating each other if we do that, and it’ll be damn near unbearable,” Arya chimes in.

“I agree. There are other breeding grounds that are much more fun,” Lysander says, laughter in his eyes, and Arya almost chokes. Cailan coughs, shifting in his seat uncomfortably.

“What if we hate each other anyway? Anora and I aren’t on the best of terms already,” Cailan points out.

“I can at least be civil, Cailan, and it’s worth trying. Arya is right,” Anora says, casting a glance at Arya.

“Well, if we hate each other, we hate each other, right? We can keep to ourselves after, but shouldn’t we at least try not to be assholes?” Arya says. She moves closer and perches on the edge of the table. Lysander sends her an appreciative glance, and she can’t stop her shiver.
“All right. This sounds…like a nice idea,” Cailan says. The others agree, and Arya’s thankful that it was all worked out so quickly.

“There are, however, a few things you should know about me. I’m not keen on starting whatever this is with two of you in the dark,” Arya says, and then she is standing and pacing again.

“Well, that’s kind of you,” Lysander says, smirking. Arya chuckles, anxiously tugging on her necklace.

“Yeah, well, it’s pretty fuckin’ complicated, you’re both probably going to call me a liar, and I don’t know where to start, so…” she says, and Cailan shakes his head fondly.

“Start with the Mythal thing,” Cailan suggests.

“Mythal? Isn’t that an elven goddess?” Lysander asks.

“You know about Mythal?” Arya asks, stopping her pacing to look at him.

“Not much. Father had a book in the library of old Dalish legends. She was mentioned,” he says, almost casually, but she can see something flash in his eyes.

“Well, Mythal is an elven goddess. She was the goddess of justice, a counter to Elgar’nan’s vengeance. A long time ago, there was a war. The Creators were great soldiers, first, and then great generals, and then great leaders, and then, finally, they were gods. It happened slowly. Later, though, they started taking slaves. When my parents were murdered and I was kidnapped, I was brought before Mythal. She saved me, and in turn I became her Champion, her favorite. When Elgar’nan betrayed her in a fit of jealous rage, I...we were all that was left. I held off his forces long enough for the Temple doors to shut. I don’t know the rest of Mythal’s story, and I don’t know all of mine. All I know is that, eventually, I reincarnated on Earth. The vessel of what is left of Mythal spent nearly two decades constructing a ritual to bring me back. I’m not sure why. We’ll probably find out,” she says.

Arya is met with silence. Anora shares a glance with Cailan, and then one with Lysander.

“Well, you were right. You do sound completely crazy,” Lysander says, one corner of his mouth quirking up in a grin.

“Yeah, well, I warned you,” she says.

“So, say we’re willing to go along with this. You certainly believe it. Cailan seems to. What else is there, princess?” he asks.

“I’m a mage. There’s no magic on Earth, where I’m from, so it was a shock,” she says, and there is a challenge in her eyes whenever she meets his gaze.

“And why are you carrying daggers?” he asks. Arya shrugs.

“Someone thought it would be better for me to have something to use instead of my magic,” she says.

“Do you know how to use them?”

“Sort of.”

He grins. “I’ll teach you, then, if we’re going to do this,” he says.
“I…Well, I appreciate that,” she says.

“Yes, yes, how very touching. I’m sure you’ll be fast friends. What about this Earth you mentioned?” Anora asks.

“That’s…even more complicated. Like I said, there’s no magic there, but we’re so far ahead of Thedas technologically that some of the things we have seem like magic. I have a computer with me, and it’s…well, it’s nothing like anything you all have here,” she replies.

“Show us,” Anora demands.

“It’s…okay. It can play music, and there are movies which are sort of like plays but not really. It can also help me find a lot of information,” she says, kneeling down to pull it out of her pack.

“Now there’s a position I could get used to seeing you in,” Lysander mumbles, half to himself. Arya flashes a grin at him.

“If you play your cards right, you just might,” she answers easily, standing. She places the computer on the table.

“Well, well, aren’t you a bold little thing. Why don’t we start with music? It’s something we already know,” Lysander says, grinning at her. He looked so smug.

“It’s not going to be any music you know, trust me,” she says.

“What are you going to show them?” Cailan asks. She meets his gaze across the table.

“Dunno yet. You’ve got something in mind?” she asks.

“Let me see it,” he says, and she pushes the computer over towards him. A few seconds later, music starts playing. It was one of the songs Arya didn’t listen to often, one she kept purely for nostalgic reasons.

*Living on the road my friend*
*Was gonna keep you free and clean*
*But now you wear your skin like armor,*
*And your breath as hard as kerosene.*

*You weren’t your mama’s only boy*
*But her favorite one it seems*
*She began to cry when you said*
*Good-bye, and sank into your dreams.*

*Pancho was a bandit boy*
*His horse was fast as polished steel*
*He wore his gun outside his pants*
*For all the honest world to feel.*

*Pancho met his match, you know*
*On the desert down in Mexico*
*Nobody heard his dyin’ words*
*Oh, but that’s the way it goes*

*All the federales say*
She turns it off before it can play out. “So, there’s the idea of it. Depending on how much
time we’ve got, I can show you a movie, too. They’re usually about an hour and a half long, some
longer, some shorter,” she says.

“I’d like that. We’ve certainly got the time, and this device seems interesting,” Anora says.

“It’s not dangerous, is it?” Lysander asks.

“Not really? I mean, it can be, but generally, it’s harmless,” she tells him.

“What are you going to show us?” Cailan asks, almost eagerly.

“I could introduce you all to horror movies, or kids’ movies,” she says, and there is a faint
smile on her face.

“Horror movies?” Anora asks.

“It’s movies about something scary. A lot of them are garbage, I’ll admit, but some of them
are quite good. I rarely watch them, though. Usually, I watch kids’ movies,” she explains.

“Well, show us your favorite,” Lysander says.

“All right. We’ll have to pile together in the floor so we can all see the screen,” she says, and
it takes several long minutes to arrange themselves. In the end, Arya is sitting on Lysander’s lap, with
Anora and Cailan squished together on either side of them. She goes to Netflix, and scrolls for a few
minutes before pressing play.

“So, okay, there’s probably going to be a lot that you don’t get in this, but that’s okay? It’s
more of a cultural insight than anything,” she says, pressing play. She’d decided to show them
Brother Bear, mostly because it’d been a long time since she’d seen it. It was still one of her favorites
from childhood.

At the end, she supposes they all enjoyed it. Lysander had started playing with her hair
halfway through, and she’d practically melted with a soft purr, nearly falling asleep. He’d chuckled
to himself, but hadn’t stopped, and when the movie ended, there were only a few moments before
the door opened as Loghain entered.

“You two have been here for nearly two hours. I was beginning to get concerned. I see now
that it was justified,” he mutters.

“Do you have something to say about the state of my affairs, Father?” Anora asks, standing
and brushing off her skirts. Arya reluctantly hauls herself to her feet as well.

“You know my feelings on the matter. Anyway, Arya, I thought we could meet tomorrow
over lunch. It’s nearly supper now, so I doubted you’d want to meet tonight,” Loghain says, turning
his attention to her. She stretches lazily, her back popping.

“That sounds fine to me,” she answers.

“We can start your training in the morning,” Lysander says.
“…All right, but if I have to meet with Loghain covered in bruises or blood, I’m setting you on fire,” she says. He grins, reaching up to ruffle her hair.

“I’ll make sure we finish early enough for you to take a bath after,” he promises.

“How considerate,” she teases. He chuckles.

“Are we going to eat in the main hall?” Cailan asks.

“I think it’ll be best if we dine privately. We’ve been given a lot to think about,” Anora says.

“She does have a point,” Arya agrees.

“All right. I’ll join you, then. Are our rooms prepared, Loghain?” Cailan inquires.

“Yes, they are. I’ll have the servants send two meals to Arya’s room. Will the two of you be dining together or…” Loghain asks, turning to Lysander and Anora.

“I’d like to eat alone,” Anora says.

“As would I,” Lysander agrees, and after the servants are notified, Arya is led to her room. It is grand thing, like all the other rooms in the palace, large and spacious. There is a fire burning low on one wall, several bookshelves taking up another, and in front of the fire sits a table and two chairs. There’s a couch and another table, and then there’s the bed. It’s the biggest bed Arya’s ever seen, and it takes everything in her not to jump on it immediately. Instead, she settles into a chair at the fireplace, across from Cailan, and the two of them eat. That night, when she is alone for the first time since she came to Thedas, her sleep is restless. Arya dreams.

In a time before the Evanuris were the Evanuris, a time when war was brewing but had not yet broke, a little elven girl grew up among the crystal spires of Arlathan. It was a great and magnificent city, and the girl felt lucky to call it home. She learned all the nooks and crannies and all the alleyways and all the places she could get into trouble. She would play in the alleys, and run through the streets, and one day, war broke out in a blinding flash. The streets the girl had played in flowed with blood, but she was older, old enough to pick up a staff and fight, and so she joined the army to protect her people and her city.

The elven girl met an elven boy. He fought with a bow instead of a staff and he made jokes in the middle of battle, but he stood side by side with her and she felt safe when he was there. They fought with another elven girl, one much older than both of them, who went by the name of Mythal, until she was promoted. They fought and bled together, and then the war was over and Arlathan restored.

The elven girl chased the elven boy through the streets she once played in, and there was laughter in the streets again. Sometimes he would let her win their games of cat-and-mouse, and she would catch him. Other times, they didn’t stop running until they were far away from the glittering spires. They would collapse in a pile together, panting and giggling somewhere in the forest. Sometimes they would wrestle and sometimes they would lay on their backs, looking up at the sky as the stars emerged.

While they played and laughed and loved like the children they didn’t have a chance to be, Mythal and the other generals rose through the ranks of power and flirted with godhood. “Should we be worried?” the boy asked one day, his voice hushed, even though they were alone in the forest.

“No, ma taron sal. Mythal can handle herself,” the girl said. So they laughed and they loved and they tried not to worry, until a few months later Dirthamen put an arrow through her skull and a
knife in his throat and told Mythal they had disappeared together for a new life.

Chapter End Notes

so, the words "ma taron sal" have cropped up before. it basically means "my twin soul" which is a concept that will later (probably in the second fic) be explained upon a lot more, when the 'twin soul' comes into play.

the lyrics are not mine (i could never be that talented) and are from a song sung by merle haggard and willie nelson called "pancho and lefty"

i'm probably going to split the next segment into a couple different filler chapters, depending on how long each section runs. with school and all, i'm not sure how long it'll take me to get up, but hopefully not too long. anyways!! i hope you enjoyed this chapter!!
Don't you see the starlight?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Apparently the phrase in the morning meant the ass crack of dawn for Lysander. Arya was woken entirely too early in her opinion, by a pretty elven servant girl. She had long dark hair bound in a neatly braided bun at the top of her head, and wide tired eyes with dark bags underneath.

“Excuse me, miss, Ser Cousland sent for you. He’s waiting in the courtyard,” the girl says. Arya groans and burrows deeper into the pillows.

“Thank you. Give me a minute,” she mumbles. She takes a moment to stretch, throwing the blankets off and exposing herself to the chilly morning air.

“Of course, mistress. I’m supposed to help you dress,” the other woman says. That gets Arya up in a hurry.

“You don’t have to! I mean, I don’t want to be of any trouble!” Arya says hurriedly. The woman starts when her face comes up out of the mountain of pillows she’d burrowed under.

“You’re not a shem?” the woman asks, astounded.

“…It’s a long story, but no. What’s your name?” Arya asks.

“Anaba Tabris. I should be in the dungeons, but Queen Anora showed mercy, or at least, I’m sure that’s what they’d tell you. I’m to work in the palace now, to pay off my sentence,” she answers, bitterness leeching into her tone.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Anaba. Would you rather work for me, or…? Cause I can talk to Anora about making you my personal servant. I’ll be here for a while, and well, I don’t know, I thought maybe you might like it better? If it were up to me, I’d have you freed completely, but you know how it is. Someone always has to take the hit, and it’s easier if it’s not some noble,” she offers, her head tilted to the side.

“Yes. There’s nothing to consider. It’s either working for a shemlen or working for one of my kind, although I don’t know what’s so special about you,” Anaba says, looking her over. It’s clear that the statement wasn’t meant to be offensive, but it still stings a little.

“Cailan took a liking to me. It’s…well, I’m sure you can guess,” Arya explains, finally sliding out of bed. The floors are cold, but it feels nice on her feet.

“He didn’t force you, did he? King or not, I’ll gut him,” Anaba says, and there is something hard and bitter in her eyes and Arya has to look away.

“No it’s…it’s not like that,” she replies, quickly. Anaba still looks suspicious, but she accepts the answer readily enough.

“Right, well, as I said early, Ser Cousland sent me to fetch you. He’s waiting in the courtyard,” she says. Arya nods.

“Right, yeah. I think all of my clothes are still in my pack,” she says, walking over. She hefts it onto the couch and starts digging through it. She tosses her training clothes onto the bed. It’d been an old outfit, one that consisted of her jeans and a shirt that Eldris had let her borrow when she’d started
training with Leliana. It’d been a long time since she’d had any lessons with the rouge, and she was both looking forward to and dreading the upcoming session with Lysander.


“I can dress myself. If you could find a way to secure my hair so it stays out of the way, that’d be lovely, though,” Arya says.

“Of course. Go ahead and get dressed,” Anaba tells her. Arya hesitates for a moment before shucking off the clothes she’d slept in- a shirt she’d borrowed from Cailan. She’d likely have to get something tailor-made eventually; she doubted she could continue to steal his clothes. She dresses quickly, the outfit was low maintenance, and before she knows it she’s seated in front of the vanity with Anaba brushing her hair.

The elven woman is gentle with the brush, and the motions are soothing. Arya’s ears twitch and she lets out a purr, her eyes fluttering shut. Anaba chuckles behind her as she finishes brushing and begins braiding. “Ser Cousland will have our heads for taking so long,” she murmurs.

“Ser Cousland can go stuff it where the sun don’t shine,” Arya mutters, but Anaba is finished soon after.

“Could you show me the way to the courtyard, Anaba? I’m afraid I’m terrible with directions,” Arya asks. Anaba smiles at her.

“Of course. Follow me, miss,” she says, and leads Arya through the castle.

Lysander is pacing impatiently in the courtyard. There are four wooden daggers with him, dull blades whose only danger is giving the user a splinter. “There you are! I was beginning to think you’d decided not to show up,” he grumbles. Arya gives him an apologetic grin as Anaba disappears back inside, melting into the shadows.

“I’m not a morning person,” she admits. He gives her a cursory glance up and down, his eyes lingering on the ill-fitting tunic.

“I’m not either, usually,” he replies, absentmindedly.

“So, what are we doing first?” she asks.

“Stretching, of course. You may not have time before every battle, but this isn’t a battle. It’s training, and if you’re not careful, you can injure yourself,” he tells her.

“Let me be the first to admit that I’m not very flexible,” she says. He grins at her.

“That’s okay. It just means I’ll have to help you out,” he says, giving her a mock-seductive look. She laughs, elbowing him.

“Hey, maybe we can do some private stretching later,” she says, and he grins wickedly.

“Well, let’s begin, so we can actually get something done,” he says.

He starts off easily enough, with stretches like he said, that gradually increase in intensity until Arya is sweaty and mostly ready for the actual training to begin. And once it does, Lysander doesn’t hold back. He makes her show him everything Leliana taught her, and then they spar for hours until Arya is bruised and battered and ready to curl up in a ball and never get up. Her entire
body hurts, and she’s barely landed any blows on Lysander.

“You have a good starting point. You’ll have to work hard if you want to do this,” he tells her, once he’s officially concluded the training session.

“I don’t want to be the best duelist in the world. I just want to be able to keep myself alive,” she points out. He shrugs.

“Still, if someone came at you right now, you’d have to resort to your spells. If we’re going to hide an apostate at court, we’ll need something better. Especially if you’ll be close to Cailan and Anora. Hell, even if you get close to me. People won’t hesitate to use you as a bargaining chip,” he warns.

“I know. That’s what I want to prepare for. I don’t want someone to be able to use me against someone I care about, be it you or Cailan or Anora. You all deserve better, and I’d like to be able to go somewhere by myself without an armed guard following me. I was helpless, before, and I never want to be that helpless again,” she says. She thinks again of the long journey from Ostagar and here, and she thinks of how much farther she has to go.

“I can respect that. I never expected to stay at Highever. After…well, after, I can’t go back. There’s too many ghosts there for me to be able to rest,” he says. Arya reaches out, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“We’ll get Howe. I’ll do everything in my power to help. I want to see the bastard pay, too, Lysander,” she promises.

“Well, if you’re on my side, sweetheart, how could we lose?” he asks, pulling her close with a grin. Even though they’re both sweaty and still slightly out of breath, Arya is grinning herself. She rests her head against his shoulder for a moment.

“We can’t. But in the future, do you think we could start training later in the day? I’m exhausted all over again,” she complains. He ruffles her hair.

“If you don’t mind, maybe the two of us can meet at night, and get all disheveled in a way that’s much more fun,” he suggests, a twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh, I don’t think I’d mind,” Arya says, letting her eyes drift up and down his form as she steps back. He laughs, and then pushes her towards the door.

“Go on inside and get cleaned up, kitten,” he says.

“Kitten?” she asks.

“Do you not like it? Should I call you something else?” he asks.

She shrugs. “With that voice, you can call me anything you like,” she says. He flashes a wicked grin at her.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he says.

After a long bath and a fresh change of clothes later, she is led to Loghain’s private study. A lunch is set out for the two of them, and Loghain is waiting for her.

“Sit, make yourself comfortable,” he says, gesturing at the chair across from her. She sits
down, and a servant pours her a glass of wine before excusing himself.

“So, how do you want to do this? I can answer questions, or just tell you what I know,” Arya asks.

“You mentioned Flemeth, in your story,” Loghain says.

“I…yes, it is a complicated situation,” Arya replies, taking a sip of the wine. She has a feeling that she’ll want something stronger by the end of the conversation.

“I met the old witch, once. I was with Maric,” he murmurs, so softly Arya almost didn’t hear him. He sounded so sad for a moment, and Arya can see the old grief of Maric’s death still lingering. After a few moments of silence, he seems to shake off his old ghosts, and continues. “When I met her, I knew nothing of her aside from the legends. I didn’t trust her,” he finished, and his voice was louder.

“There are few who would trust her. That is, perhaps, the wisest course of action,” Arya remarks, trailing her finger along the grain of the wood. A ghost of a smile flickers across Loghain for a moment, so fleeting she is sure she missed it.

“Could you tell me more about her?” he asks, and Arya nods. She takes another sip from her wine before she begins speaking.

“I don’t know anything about Flemeth the woman. Not well, anyway. I could go on for a lifetime about Mythal, or the fragment of her that possessed Flemeth. She saved me from a life of misery and slavery, and she gave me a choice. I chose to give myself to her. I swore to serve her for all of eternity, across that life and any that followed it. And Creators help me, I loved her. She was a mother to me, and I think she loved me too. But she was murdered by her husband. She was…she was love and justice and hope, and he was vengeance and fire and anger. It was bound to happen eventually. She had a temple in the Arbor Wilds, and as far as I know, it’s still standing. It was home to the vir’abelasan. A friend and I held the temple gates until they were sealed. I don’t know the rest of the story firsthand, but I’ll tell you what I know,” she says.

“I’d like that,” Loghain says, and so Arya continues.

“Flemeth was a woman, crying out in the dark, long after the fall of Arlathan and the creation of the Veil. And whatever was left of Mythal heard her. What was left clawed and crawled her way through the ages to get to Flemeth and I…I think time has been unkind to them both. There isn’t much of Mythal left, but whatever there is, Flemeth is her vessel. She sensed me, back on Earth, and she spent seventeen years with a ritual to bring me back. There’s got to be a reason, but she has yet to tell me what it is. I suppose I’ll find out soon enough,” Arya says, and she can feel Bellanaris throbbing in her mind for a moment, she can feel the memories swirling and burning. She brings a hand up to her head and rubs at her temples for a moment, suddenly exhausted.

It is silent for a long time, before Loghain meets her gaze and gives her a nod of respect. “Then I thank you, Arya, for telling me this story. Old ghosts are never easy to lay to rest. It’s getting late, though, well past lunch, and I’m sure we both have other things to attend to,” he says. She glances at the lunch that lay untouched on the table. She doesn’t feel hungry.

“Of course. I’ll see you later, Loghain. If you need to speak with me again, you know where my room is. I’m always willing to talk,” she says, and then excuses herself, stepping out into the hallway. She isn’t entirely sure where she is, or where she should go next, so she wanders through the hallways, taking the chance to explore. The palace is much bigger than she anticipated, and the corridors all look the same. Soon, she is hopelessly lost, but she doesn’t mind. She passes servants
frequently, and should she need help, she could always ask. Eventually, though, she runs into Anora, just past the kitchens.

“Oh! Arya! What are you doing here?” Anora asks.

“I’m just wandering around the palace. I’m not even entirely sure where here is,” she admits. Anora smiles at her.

“You’re near the servant’s quarters. I was coming to check on Anaba,” Anora tells her.


“No, nothing like that. I just want to see if she’s settling into palace life. I know what she did, and I know why she did it. I’d like to say it’s hard to believe that Lord Vaughn would do such a thing, but unfortunately it isn’t. If it were up to me, I’d have let her return to the alienage and her family. There would have been an uproar of people calling for her blood. This was the best option for her,” she answers.

“Ah, that makes sense. She seemed well-adjusted this morning, if a bit shocked that I’m elven. Still, I feel bad for her. She shouldn’t have to suffer because she did what was right. If I had been Anaba, I’d have killed Vaughn, too. She was...incredibly bitter about the whole thing. Not that I blame her. I’d be bitter too. Speaking of, I was going to ask you about Anaba,” she replies, falling into step next to Anora.

“Yes, it makes sense that she’d be shocked. Everyone else is, as well, although many of them would be too polite to mention it. By the way, if any of them treat you differently, let me know. But, what did you want to ask me?” Anora says.

“I doubt anyone would be so rude as to outright treat me badly. Anyway, I was wondering if Anaba could be my personal servant. She might be more comfortable working for another elf than she would for a human, and I’m pretty low maintenance. I’m sure she has nothing but contempt for most nobility, considering her background, so we’d likely avoid some sort of incident this way,” Arya replies. Anora shrugs.

“I’ll consider the offer, after speaking with Anaba. You are right that she doesn’t like most of us, not that I can blame her. I think it would make her a lot more comfortable if she could work for you. The two of you might even become friends. If anyone can get past that barbed personality, it’s you. Anyway, I believe Lysander was looking for you a few minutes ago,” she mentions.

“Oh? Why? It wasn’t too long ago that I spoke with him,” she asks.

“I believe he wanted to show you another way to get some exercise, likely in some dark hallway,” she says, a smile pulling the corner of her lips upwards. Arya can feel herself blushing, although she tries to fight it.

“Of course he did. Where can I find him?” she asks.

“The best bet would probably be to head to your rooms. He’ll find you eventually,” Anora tells her. Arya sighs.

“I’m so lost right now I don’t know if I’ll ever find them again,” she complains.

“Go to the end of the hall, take a left, go up the stairs, and take a right. Yours is, I believe, the third room down,” Anora tells her, unable to hide her grin.
“…Thank you. Oh, by the way, before I forget, would you like to get together and talk sometime? I mean, it’d be a good idea if we want whatever’s going on to work, but also…I thought maybe you might like a friend. Lysander’s the only other noble I’ve seen around here, and he doesn’t seem like the kind you’d gossip with over tea or whatever it is that you like to do in your free time,” Arya offers.

“I’d appreciate that. I’ll find you eventually, when I’ve got time. And when I’m sure you’re the only one in your chambers,” Anora says, eyes glinting in amusement. Arya turns scarlet.

“Yes, well, I’ll talk to you later, bye,” she says, and hurries off, her shoes clacking on the stone floors as she makes a beeline for her room.

Chapter End Notes

i've had this chapter written for awhile, but thanks to some computer problems i couldn't post it. anyway, i'm partially through with the next chapter and hope to have it up soon. let me know what you think my dudes!!!
Eventually she makes her way to her room and eventually Lysander finds her there. He has cleaned up well, or maybe he’s just pretty. Arya welcomes him into her room without hesitation, offering him a seat. He stretches out on her couch, one leg stretched out over it, the other dangling off the edge.

“I heard you were looking for me,” she says, after a couple of seconds.

“I was,” he tells her, crossing his arms behind his head.

“I got lost in the castle. I didn’t want to bother Loghain with asking for directions and I don’t know my way around,” she explains, settling down in an armchair by the fire, tugging it until it faced the couch.

“That must have been an adventure in itself,” he says, and she grins at him.

“It was. If it weren’t for Anora giving me directions, I doubt I’d have found my room,” she says. He chuckles, and the room falls silent for a few minutes.

Suddenly, he sits up. “Listen, I know I was…forward, earlier. I wanted to make sure I wasn’t making you uncomfortable,” he says, his hands clasped together.

“You didn’t. I’d have let you know,” she assures him.

“All right. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t uncomfortable. Some people think I’m too forward,” he explains.

“I didn’t think so. I might if I weren’t interested, but I am. You’re pretty enough, and seem like someone I could get along with,” she says. He grins at her, a wicked, predatory grin.

“Does Cailan not treat you well, kitten?” he asks.

“He does. A little too well, sometimes, but I can’t exactly complain,” she says.

“Oh? What do you mean by that?” he asks.

“He’s just…gentle,” she says. There is a moment where his brows are tilted down in confusion before he understands, and a grin blossoms across his face. He throws back his head and laughs, and it is a bright happy sound that makes the room feel warmer.

“You like someone with a little teeth,” he says, once he has his laughter under control. Arya is blushing, the tips of her ears red, but she nods.

“Yeah. Morrigan was always much rougher than Cailan. It was something I picked up pretty quick my first time with him,” Arya explains.

“I can understand that. Rough is good, sometimes,” Lysander says.

“What about you?” she asks.
“I like a lot of things. I have a feeling I’ll like you, too,” he says, and there is a smug and cocky grin on his face. She laughs.

“You’re not so bad yourself, Casanova,” she says.

“What did you call me?” he asks, his brow furrowing again.

“Ah, that’s right, you don’t have that word here. Well, maybe one day I’ll tell you,” she says, a teasing glint in her eyes.

“How cruel,” Lysander says, but he cannot fight his grin.

“Anyway, was there anything else you wanted to talk about? You spent a lot of time tracking me down,” Arya asks, changing the subject.

“Sort of. I wanted to ask what kind of relationship you expected to have with me,” he answers.

“I…I’m not sure. I wasn’t expecting much to come out of this—things never work out that good for me. I like you, though, and so far I like Anora, too. If we worked at it I think all four of us could make something nice,” she says.

Lysander leans back again. “I never expected to have any sort of lasting relationship with someone,” he says.

“Oh? Why not?” she asks. He shrugs.

“I was expecting an arranged marriage from my parents. A loveless marriage isn’t exactly set up to last. And once Howe betrayed us, I never expected to think about anything else,” he explains.

“What about Anora?” Arya asks.

“She was supposed to be a one-time thing. It turned into a two-time thing, then a three-time thing, and then she said it would last until we went after Howe,” he tells her.

“And now?” Arya asks. There is a faint smile on his face as he meets her gaze with his own.

“Now? I’m thinking about sticking around for some time yet,” he tells her. Arya smiles faintly.

“Well, regardless of Anora, I’d appreciate your company,” she says.

“Oh? Then I think I’m definitely going to stay, kitten. I can see a bright future with you in it,” he says, and her grin grows.

“Is that so?” she asks, throwing her legs over the side of the armchair. It wasn’t very ladylike, but Arya had never been concerned about that, and she was less so when she was around Lysander.

“You make it easy to dream about domesticity,” he tells her, and there is something almost sacred in that confession.

“Domesticity would be nice. I have a feeling it wouldn’t fit, at least not for you,” she says.

“You know me so well. No, domesticity probably wouldn’t fit, not in the long-term. I’d like to do something meaningful. But a wife and kids to come home to might not be so bad,” he says. She crosses her arms behind her head and turns her gaze up to the ceiling, where the shadows cast by the firelight dance.
“A family would be nice. You know, even before, I never expected a normal, apple pie lifestyle. I always thought I’d be too…restless to get tied down like that,” she admits.

“I can understand that. Although, for what it’s worth, I think Cailan’s a good fit for that. He likes adventure too, although I doubt he’s so restless as he is hungry for glory. Of course, maybe if we all manage to make this work, it’ll be even better,” he says.

“Oh? How so?” she asks.

“I could take you out for nice, romantic dates that include knives and killing things,” he says, and she doesn’t have to look at him to see the grin on his face.

“Aren’t you just a man after my own heart?” she says, and there is an easy grin on her face, too. It hasn’t been this easy to smile in a long time.

“I try, kitten, I try,” he says. She laughs, but then she flips herself out of the chair, stretching. “Something the matter?” he asks, his eyes following her across the room.

“Not really. It’s just…this is all so…different. God, I can’t believe laying around has gotten different and strange for me. I used to do nothing but lay around in my bedroom, back home,” she says, moving towards the window. There are no sounds that warn her of his approach, only the slight movement behind her before his hands are resting lightly on her waist.

“Do you miss it?” he asks.

“Sometimes, when I’ve got time to just think. It was easier to ignore while I was traveling. There was always something that needed my attention, always something more pressing. I don’t think I’ve really taken the time to decompress and just think about all the implications. I lost my entire life,” she says, as if it were suddenly just hitting her. Lysander’s grip tightens, and he pulls her closer, resting his chin on his shoulder.

“I’m here, in whatever capacity you need me,” he says. She smiles, although there is still something sad in her expression.

“In that case, can we watch Netflix? I want to watch Bob’s Burgers. It’ll cheer me up,” she says. He steps back, ruffling her hair affectionately.

“Of course, kitten. But it’s not good to bottle up your emotions like that. It’s okay to feel them,” he tells her. She snorts.

“Are you trying to say you don’t do the same thing?” she asks.

“Hey, do as I say, not as I do,” he says, and she laughs, taking his hand and pulling him over to the bed. She trips on the rug, falling backwards onto the mattress, and Lysander is pulled along with her. He lands with his arms on either side of her head, his legs straddling her waist.

“I could get used to having you above me,” she says, slightly breathless. After a moment recovering from the shock, Lysander grins.

“I could get used to this, too, kitten,” he replies, that cocky grin on his face.

“Mmm, why waste the opportunity?” she asks, letting her fingers thread through his belt.

“What about whatever it was you wanted to watch?” he asks. She grins up at him.
“That can wait,” she answers.

“So can you, kitten,” he says, “I’d rather do this with Cailan or Anora around the first time.” She leans up, bracing herself on her elbows.

“That makes sense. It’ll probably work out better, anyway,” she agrees, letting her hands fall.

He lets out a hum and sits back. “Not that I would appreciate the chance to spend hours between those pretty thighs of yours, but that’s a tangled mess I’d like to avoid,” he tells her.

“Makes sense. I’m sure we’ll get the chance sometime,” she says, stretching out. Her backpack is on the other side of the bed, and it takes little movement to pull her laptop out.

“So, what’s this thing you want to watch?” he asks.

She grins at him. “It’ll be easier to show you.”

Chapter End Notes

i tried to talk myself into waiting at least until tomorrow to post this but here we are. hope you enjoy it!! let me know what you think~
Despite Lysander’s warnings, Arya continued to bottle up almost all of her emotions. She spent a nice hour with him, curled up on the bed watching Netflix, and then, after fixing her hair and making sure she looked presentable, the two of them headed down to dinner. She’d have never made it if she hadn’t followed him, and when they got there, Anora and Cailan were already there, at the head of the table. Lysander and Arya took their seats next to them, Cailan reaching out and squeezing her hand. She flashes him a smile as a plate is laid out in front of her.

“Eldris and the others will be joining us in the morning. We needed time to get their rooms ready,” he informs her. A servant fills a wine glass as she shifts in her seat, picking up her fork and twirling it around in her hands.

“Do they have any idea where they want to go next?” she asks.

“I’m not sure. I plan on recommending Orzammar, though,” he tells her.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“It’ll give us enough time to get things settled here. I’m going to be in meetings all day tomorrow, thanks to my extended absence. Not that I regret anything, mind you,” he says, giving her a smile. She grins back and takes a sip of the wine. The food was standard Fereldan fare- roast meat and stewed vegetables. Unfortunately, it was incredibly bland. She was going to have to venture into the kitchens herself later at night and make something with more flavor- or any flavor at all.

“So, what time will they arrive?” she asks, making a face at the vegetables on her plate.

“Early. Likely right after dawn. Would you like to join us in the war room?” he asks.

“I’m going to regret being woken up that early, but yes. If they’re going to Orzammar I need to be there. I’ve got information they need to know, especially when they decide who’s going to go,” she says.

“All right, I’ll make sure to notify someone. Would you like to stay with me? I can send word to Anaba so she can lay out an outfit and everything. The meeting with the Wardens would be the first of the day,” he asks, and Arya very pointedly ignores the lewd look Lysander is sending her.

“Yeah, that’d be nice. I was going to try and find someone to bunk with anyway,” she says, rubbing at her wrist nervously.

“Are the nightmares bad?” Cailan asks, his voice soft.

She nods. “Worse than I was expecting,” she admits, finally picking at her food.

“Well, with three of us, surely there’s someone you can always bunk with,” he says, almost cheerfully. Arya rolls her eyes.

“He is right. If this arrangement works, Lysander and I would also be available. If sleeping alone is a problem for you, we can make sure it never has to happen,” Anora chimes in.

“I’d appreciate that. They’re worse when I’m alone,” she says softly, and Lysander grins at her across the table.
“We can’t have that, kitten. We’ll make sure someone’s always with you,” he promises. There is a lapse in conversation then, as Cailan calls over a servant to send a message to Anaba. They fall into an easy silence, broken by light conversation, until they part ways after supper, Lysander and Anora going to their separate rooms. Arya follows Cailan up the stairs, her arm linked through his.

“Would you like a bath before bed?” he asks, navigating through the corridors with ease.

“When don’t I want a bath before bed?” she answers, teasingly. He laughs, leaning over and pressing a quick kiss to her temple.

“I don’t think I’ll ever understand why you’re so…clean,” he says, his nose wrinkling fondly.

“Well, there are different hygiene standards in my world. A bath a day is customary. Although I have some ideas. Maybe we could use fire runes in a showerhead to keep the water warm. There’d have to be an elaborate as hell pipe system, but maybe someone would be able to do it,” she says.

“What in the Maker’s name is a showerhead?” he asks, perplexed.

“It’s the part of the shower that the water comes out of,” she responds.

“And what’s a shower?”

She grins. “It’s like…a miniature waterfall inside. It’s a bath, but standing up. It’s so much quicker and so much nicer,” she says.

“That definitely sounds like something to look into. It’ll probably be expensive, but if we can build a prototype that works, perhaps the trend would catch on,” he says.

“I would literally sell my soul to the devil if we could make showers popular in Thedas. We also need some sort of water purification system. It’ll cut down on water-borne illnesses, and it’s better for us in general,” she says.

“With your help, we could likely get a lot more inventions in Thedas,” he tells her, as they reach his rooms. Anaba is stepping out as they approach.

“Mistress, I’ve laid out outfits for in the morning and to sleep in tonight. Is there anything else I can do for you?” Anaba asks.

“No, thank you, Anaba. We’re going to the baths though, so if you could send word to have them filled, that would be wonderful,” Cailan says. Anaba narrows her eyes, glancing at Arya.

“Very well, Your Majesty,” she says, ducking away and hurrying off down the corridor.

“She seems very wary of us all,” Cailan remarks.

“I don’t blame her. She was in the dungeon for killing a noble man,” Arya says.

“I…was unaware of that. I’m sure Anora will brief me in the morning,” he says, and Arya nods, unwilling to say anything else. Anaba’s story is her own to tell; she’s not going to spread it around.

After gathering up their clothes and heading towards the bathing chambers, it’s entirely deserted aside from a single servant preparing the baths. “Greetings, Your Majesty. The water should be ready now,” he says, bowing politely.

“Thank you. We may be a while- do you think you could keep others out?” he asks.
“Of course,” the servant replies, nodding again before making a hasty retreat towards the door, letting it shut behind them.

“Cailan! You didn’t have to kick everyone else out. I’ve gotten over a lot of my modesty traveling with everyone else,” Arya says, but there is a faint smile on her face as Cailan drops their pajamas on a shelf near the bath before pushing her against the wall, his arms on either side of her.

“Maybe I just don’t want to share you right now,” he says, pressing a kiss to her lips before pressing another to her throat.

“I…oh,” she says, her hands gripping the loose cloth of his tunic. He chuckles against her neck, pulling back enough to rest his forehead against hers.

“That is, if you want to,” he says. She bites her lip.

“There’s something else I want to try,” she says. He furrows his brow.

“Be my guest. If I don’t like it, I’ll stop you,” he promises. She grins at him and kneels down, her fingers inching towards the waistband on his trousers.

“If I’m not completely terrible at this, I think you’ll like it,” she says, her eyes twinkling as she tugs them down. He’s already half hard, his hands braced against the walls.

“You don’t have to,” he tells her, gasping as she leans forward and runs her tongue along his length.

“Darling, I don’t have to do anything. I want to do this. With you,” she says, and when she takes him into her mouth his hand comes down and tangles itself in her hair.

“Maker, I love you,” he says. She stops for a moment, her lips curved up in a grin.

“I love you too,” she murmurs, before her head dips down again.

An elven girl with dark hair and bright eyes runs through the dirty streets of an alienage, an elven boy on her heels. “You won’t catch me, Lan,” she calls out, laughing, nearly tripping over her skirts. Adults watch from their doors or their clotheslines, faint smiles on their faces as the children run and play. Life wasn’t easy in the alienage, but nothing worth doing was.

A year later, the same elven girl and the same elven boy run through the streets together. The atmosphere is heavier, this time, and the boy is keeping pace with the girl. “We have to tell Papa!” the boy calls out, and the girl skids to a stop in front of their house, wrenching the door open far harder than necessary in her panic.

“Papa! The humans are coming!” she calls out. An elven man leans down in front of her and pushes her hair out of her face. It is only then that she realizes it had come undone from the bun she usually wore it in.

“Take your brother and get in the cellar,” he tells her, pressing a dagger into her hand. She nods firmly, still out of breath, but she ushers the boy into the cellar and climbs down after him. The door locks above them, and she can hear her father pulling the rug over the door. “Don’t come out until I tell you it’s safe,” he says, his voice sharp with fear and anger before she can hear his steps leading away, towards the door. She ushers her brother deeper into the cellar and stands in front of him, the knife clutched in her hands. That is the last time she ever sees her father alive.
Three years later, the elven girl has been sold into slavery. A young nobleman bought her from the slavers that killed her father, and there are days when she shivers with the anger of it all, her throat tight with it. They’d found her pressed into the corner of the cellar, her brother behind her and her face smeared with mud and tears as she faced them down. She fought, of course, she always would, there was no changing that, but the humans took her so easily, and she had been separated from her brother. Her new master had no need for a boy, he said, but a pretty girl like her would make a nice addition to his home.

The other slaves were kind. They were elven, too, more girls than boys, and they assured her that her brother had gone to a good master. They knew what it was like to be new, and angry and scared and lost all at once. She was far angrier than she was scared, and one day when another girl asked her how she’d gotten captured, she turned around and punched the wall, the rough stone scraping the skin off her knuckles.

She had been hauled to her master’s study and dumped in front of him. “What do you have to say for yourself, Bella?” he asks, his voice cold and controlled. Her lips turn up in a snarl.

“It was the wall or the girl. I thought you’d take less offense to the wall, but I can always go after the girl,” she answers.

“You cannot keep acting like this. It doesn’t suit your pretty face,” he says, and she bites back an insult. There is nothing she can do with a broken hand and bloodied knuckles, so she lets the slave master lead her away.

The first time her master hit her, she tasted blood for a week afterwards. She did nothing to cover up the bruise, defiantly angry even after others questioned her. The anger boiled just underneath her skin, white-hot and blinding at times. The other slaves avoid her, as do the servants, and she does her job only as much as she must.

One night he gets drunk and he hits her again before he kisses her rough, his fingers digging into the soft tissue of her breast. She exploded with magic she didn’t know she possessed, leaving a dark scorch mark on the floor. She stole his money and ran, never looking back.

Arya wakes with a soft gasp, sitting up in the bed. Dawn is breaking across the horizon, and it is likely only a few minutes before servants would wake them for the day. There is a moment in between breaths when she does not know who she is, where she doesn’t recognize herself or the man lying next to her, and her heart hammers wildly in her chest. By her next breath, she remembers, everything coming back to her so suddenly it leaves her breathless. Cailan shifts beside her, the covers falling away as he brushes his hair out of her face.

“What’s the matter?” he asks. “Dreams?”

She nods, her hand pressed to her stomach as it rolls uneasily. “Yeah. Worse than I expected. It’s nothing unusual, though,” she says. He lets out a muffled noise and pulls her closer, his arm wrapped around her waist. She smiles despite herself, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

“The servants will be by to wake us soon,” she murmurs, running her fingers through his hair.

“That’ll be later,” he says, shifting deeper into the sheets. She smiles and lets out a quiet purr,
settling down with him.
The others were already in the war room by the time Arya and Cailan were able to join them, Loghain pensively gazing out the window. “Oh, you’ve finally arrived. Can we get started? We’ve got a lot of ground to cover today, boy,” Loghain says. Brett stands next to him, giving Arya a friendly smile as she enters.

Cailan nods, walking over to the table and leaning over the map. Arya grabs a plate of breakfast, with enough food for them to share, before moving to stand between him and Eldris. The other elf’s brow furrows as he observes the map, pointing at two places opposite each other. She notices that he and Alistair are wearing their armor, and Morrigan is wearing an outfit that Arya had never seen before, but it was one that let her blend in more easily with everyone else.

“Right, so we’ve got two groups left to approach in aid against the Blight. There’s the elves in the Brecilian, and the dwarves in Orzammar. Zathrian’s clan should still be in forest- she usually settles for long periods of time deep in the woods, especially this close to winter. Since winter’s coming, no matter where we go, we’ll likely have to stay until spring. The elves might not appreciate it. Alternatively, we can head down to Orzammar, and spend the winter underground. Arya, do you have any insight into what we’ll be facing in either location?” he asks. Arya hastily puts down the pastry she’d been eating, taking a quick swallow of milk, and clears her throat. She glances over at Morrigan, who lingers in one of the corners, and the witch nods encouragingly at her.

“I recommend Orzammar. There was a lot to deal with there…before, so you may end up being busy for most of the winter anyway. There are several problems in the city you’ll be asked to help with, ones that Grey Wardens shouldn’t necessarily involve themselves in, but if that’s what it takes, that’s what it takes. The elves have issues of their own, but you said they may not appreciate having guests during the winter, and I doubt their problems will be as severe. They should be fine to outlast the winter, even if the situation is the same, but Orzammar’s state will likely only deteriorate. It’s best to deal with it first,” she answers, clasping her hands behind her back.

“What sort of state was Orzammar in? What do we need to prepare for?” Alistair asks, glancing down at the maps. Arya sighs, one hand moving up to fidget with the necklace she wore.

“Obviously, I’m not sure how accurate this is. I was wrong before, with Redcliffe, so maybe luck will be with us and Orzammar will be in a better state. As it was, though, the previous king had died and the line of succession was muddied. His son, Bhelen stood to inherit the throne through blood, but it’s said that Harrowmont was named the successor while the king was on his deathbed. Naturally, it’s led to a political struggle between the two of them. The city can’t promise aid when there’s no king to grant it, so you had to pick one of them to support and go through a series of tasks to garner enough support for them from the Assembly. This included a Proving, which likely won’t be an issue for any of you, as well as taking down a crime lord named Jarvia before venturing into the Deep Roads in search of the Paragon Branka. The last one is what’s difficult- and a problem,” she replies. She doesn’t remember everything leading up to the last section that well- and she doesn’t remember much about finding Branka, only that the broodmother gave her nightmares for weeks. She was surprised they hadn’t resurfaced, considering it was very likely to be a real problem soon.

“How is it a problem? Is there something in the Deep Roads we aren’t prepared to face?” Alistair asks her. She frowns, biting her bottom lip.

“Well, sort of. Did Duncan ever tell you about broodmothers?” she says.

“What in the Void is a broodmother?” Eldris asks, crossing his arms over his chest. Arya
almost smiles, despite herself

“Only that they’re a rare type of darkspawn found in the Deep Roads by those that are
unlucky,” Alistair says, “I don’t remember anything else, if he mentioned it.”

“Broodmothers used to be people. Women. Something happens, somehow, and the
darkspawn turn them into the broodmothers that birth more darkspawn continuously,” she answers,
shuddering. The thought that she was now in a world where those things were real hit her suddenly,
and she shifted closer to Cailan, brushing up against him for comfort.

“How is this a problem?” Morrigan asks, speaking for the first time since the meeting started.
She looks almost as unsettled by the thought as Arya feels.

“It means that only men should go to Orzammar, just in case. We’ll likely have to wait until
the others can join us from Kinloch so you can have a full force, but that shouldn’t take more than a
week,” she says, letting out a breath.

“That can be arranged. There’s a few things in the city that it gives us time to take care of,
and it’ll let us restock,” Eldris answers, dragging a hand through his hair.

“Is there anything else we need to go over in this meeting?” Loghain asks, moving from the
window to stand at the end of the table.

“No. We’ll meet again once the others arrive from Kinloch, but until then there’s no use in
worrying about anything,” Alistair answers. Loghain nods.

“Very well, then you’re all dismissed, except for Cailan,” Loghain says. The others start to
filter out, but Arya takes a moment to give Cailan a soft peck on the cheek. His brow is furrowed
already, his lips turned downwards in a frown as he thinks ahead.

“Good luck,” she tells him, softly. He smiles, rolling his eyes fondly.

“Thank you, darling. Your moral support is astounding,” he replies, but he kisses her gently
before nudging her towards the door.

“What would you do without me?” she asks, glancing back over her shoulder.

“I don’t know how I’d manage,” he responds, humor glinting in his eyes. Arya shakes her
head fondly before heading out in the hallway, where Morrigan waits for her, a bemused smirk on
her face.

“You are absolutely smitten,” she teases.

“Yes, but not just with Cailan,” Arya answers, linking her arm through Morrigan’s.

“Flatterer,” she answers fondly. Arya grins and leads the way through the hallways.
Confusing as they are, she’s able to find her bedroom from the war room without difficulty.

Lysander was waiting for her when she opened the door. She stopped just inside the door,
Morrigan unlinking their arms. The curtains were drawn tight, leaving the room dark except for the
fire flickering in the fireplace. He’d been pacing back in front of it, but stopped when the door
opened, leaving him silhouetted in the light. He takes a step towards her, something dark and wild in
his eyes.

“Arya? Can I talk to you? It’s about something important,” he says. Arya shares a bewildered
look with Morrigan.

“I…Of course, Lysander,” she says, walking forward. Morrigan hesitates, but follows her anyway, letting the door shut behind her.

“Who’s your friend?” he asks, his gaze turning to the witch. Morrigan crosses her hands over her chest and does her best to look bored.

“Lysander, this is Morrigan. Morrigan, this is Lysander,” Arya says, glancing between the two of them almost cautiously.

“Arya? Could you come with me? This is…private. Personal,” he says, his face softening a little. He looks almost pleadingly at her, and she sighs.

“Oh, fine. Morrigan, I’ll be back soon,” she promises, turning to the witch. Morrigan gives her a soft smile.

“Very well. I’m sure I’ll find something to occupy myself in here,” she says. Arya rolls her eyes, but then Lysander is standing at the door, almost vibrating with impatience. She heads after him, closing the door behind her as he leads her down the hall and into his room, where he resumes pacing.

She can’t stop herself from looking around as moves to stand by the couch, hesitant to sit down. While there weren’t many personal items of Lysander’s in the room- she imagined he didn’t have many left from when he fled Highever- the room still offered her glimpses into his personality. There was a small pile of clothes in the corner next to the room, shiny chainmail on an armor stand by the door, a sword hung over the fireplace that glinted with runes etched into the surface, and a blanket spread haphazardly over the bed. It was old and faded, the edges frayed, and she guessed that he’d had it for awhile.

“So, what’s the problem? You seem pretty worked up,” Arya asks, her teeth worrying her bottom lip.

“You know about Howe, don’t you? About how he betrayed me, killed my family?” he asks her, stopping and looking at her.

“I don’t know everything, but I know enough, yes,” she says, crossing her arms.

There is a moment before he answers, a stillness that hangs heavy between them. She isn’t sure what she’s expecting when he answers, but his face hardens again in that heartbeat stretching between them and whatever it is she knows it will not be good.

“I want to go after him. I want you to come with me, and I want to gut the bastard for what he did to the Couslands,” Lysander says.
“Lysander, are you certain? Do you even have a plan?” Arya asks, reaching out and putting her hand on his shoulder. He tenses, stilling under her touch, and he doesn’t quite meet her eyes. Her heart is beating fast, and she feels like she is standing on the edge of a cliff, teetering towards the abyss.

“Enough of one. Howe is in Highever right now, but he won’t be there much longer. If we want to do this, we’ll have to leave now. I know the castle well enough that we can stay hidden. Please, Arya, don’t make me do this alone,” he pleads, his dark eyes staring helplessly into hers. A thousand different scenarios run through her head of all the terrible ways this could end, and she feels anxiety pooling in the pit of her stomach. She knows Lysander will go, with or without her. She also knows that she is afraid of what he may become.

“That’s a terrible plan, Lysander. And why would you come to me? There are others much more skilled in combat and stealth. I know a little magic, and that it’s. Surely someone else would be a better choice,” she asks, her voice low, as her hand drops back down to her side. Lysander paces away from her and leans against the window, his fingers drumming on the sill.

“Because I trust you, Arya. I have never, ever been this vulnerable in my entire life. You’re the only one I trust to go with me and not try to stop me. Cailan and Anora, for all they’ve promised me, will only speak of honor and letting the courts bring him to justice. But the courts haven’t seen the things I’ve seen. The courts won’t avenge my family. I trust you to let me do what I need to do without letting me go over the line. I trust you to have my back in this. And you’re skilled enough that I know you can keep yourself safe. I know Highever. I know Howe. I can get us in and out, and this is something I need to do,” he sighs, his voice ragged with desperation. She crosses her arms over her chest, feeling sick to her stomach.

“Lysander, you cannot seriously expect me to walk into Highever with you and your half-cocked plan without telling someone else. At the very least, let me tell Morrigan. I can’t risk something like this without someone like her knowing. At the very most, we could bring Anaba along with us, if she’ll go. She’s skilled enough to kill Lord Vaughn, and I’m sure she’d help us. If you don’t want her to go, that’s fine, I can understand that, but if we leave together, I’m telling someone,” she says, running a hand through her hair. She can’t help but feel that she is making one of the worst decisions of her entire life. She knows she might want the same, were she in Lysander’s shoes, but she can’t help but think that she is risking everything for a boy she barely knows.

“Very well. Tell them both, for all I care, but this is something I want to do with as little help as possible. We need to leave today, though, or there’s a very large chance that Howe will be gone,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest and staring resolutely out the window.

“Fine. I hope you know what we need. I can pack my own clothes, and I can take some of the load for you, but I’m still pretty damn clueless about all of this. I’ll go tell Morrigan and I’ll find Anaba and let her know. You can be in charge of provisions, as well. We’ll be gone for near a week, but it’d be suspicious if both of us decided to raid the larder. And, besides, you know what we’ll need,” she tells him. He nods, and his hand cups her cheek for a moment, tilting her face up to look at him. His eyes are wide, shining with worry and anger and desperation, but there’s relief there, too.

“Thank you, Arya. You don’t know what this means to me,” he murmurs. She puts her hand
over his, worry pulling her lips down into a frown. She thinks, for a moment, about leaning up those few inches and pressing her lips to his.

“It’s us against the world, I suppose,” she says, and she tries to give him an easy grin. She thinks of the quick kiss she pressed against Cailan’s cheek a few minutes earlier, and she wonders if he’ll forgive her for what she’s about to do.

“I suppose it is,” he answers, a faint smile on his face before he lets his hand drop. He nods towards the door, and after a moment, she leaves, padding down the hallway to her own room.

Morrigan is curled up on the corner of the couch, Arya’s sketchbook in her lap, when she opens the door.

“I was unaware that you were an artist,” she remarks, her golden eyes shining in the flickering candlelight.

“I have to tell you something. And you can’t tell anyone else, not for a few days,” Arya says, the words leaving her in a rush. Morrigan closes the sketchbook, setting it aside.

“Very well. You have my word,” she says, simply, putting her chin in her hand.

“Lysander and I are leaving for Highever. Howe’s there, and will be for a couple of days, and Lysander says this is something he needs to do. I wanted to tell you in case things go south while we’re there. I wanted someone to know where we were, what we were doing. Cailan can’t know, under any circumstances, until we’ve had enough of a head start that he won’t be able to catch us,” she explains, strangely breathless. Morrigan regards her for a few moments, her head tilted to the side.

“You are aware that storming Highever’s castle is suicide, yes?” the witch asks, an air of aloofness about her. Arya can see through it, though, can see how worried Morrigan is about her.

“We’re not that stupid. He says he knows a way for us to sneak in. I don’t think Howe will kill us immediately- if we don’t return in a week’s time, I suppose you should send someone after us. Actually, don’t quote me on that, I’m not sure how long it should take for us to get there,” she sighs.

“If the two of you insist upon doing something so foolish, allow me to give you a parting gift,” she says, pursing her lips and rising gracefully from the couch.

“A parting gift?” Arya asks, her eyebrows raised.

“Yes. ‘Tis a ring, one enchanted with magic. It will let me know if you’re in trouble, and should the need to find you arise, ‘twill lead me to you. I have its match,” she murmurs, reaching up to cup Arya’s face. She lets her hand rest over Morrigan’s, a faint smile on her face.

“Thank you, Morrigan. It means a lot to me,” she breathes. The smile Morrigan gives her is soft and sad as she lets her hand drop from her cheek, bringing out the ring from a hidden pocket on her skirt.

“I would not have my best and only friend go somewhere so dangerous without a way to know if she needs me,” she says, slipping the ring onto Arya’s finger. It is made of wood, gleaming ever so slightly with an enchantment. The surface seems to shift and shimmer, flashing images. She can never quite make out what they are, but it is one of the most beautiful rings she’s ever seen.

“Thank you, once again, Morrigan. I’m sure it’ll come in quite handy,” she replies, running her thumb across Morrigan’s knuckles.
“Of course, Arya. Now, I’m sure you need to pack if you’re to leave so quickly. Do you want my assistance?” she asks, her voice brisk. There’s still a wealth of unsaid things lingering in her eyes, but neither of them wants to make this parting any more painful than it already is.

“I think I can handle it. I’m not gonna need much, and Lysander is in charge of provisions,” she says, suddenly feeling as though she might cry. She knew that there was a risk that she’d never see Morrigan again if she did this with Lysander, but she’d sooner cut her own tongue out before telling him no now.

“I will go, then, and let you pack in peace. If you have need of me before you leave, I shall be in the library. I will wait three days before I let the others know where you are. I doubt I can stall them forever,” she murmurs. She hesitates, indecision flickering over her features before she leans over, angling her body just so to press her lips against Arya’s. She leans into the kiss, one hand curling in the loose purple fabric of Morrigan’s robes.

“I’ll be back before we know it,” she promises, breathless, when she finally pulls away.

“I shall hope so,” she replies, a sad smile on her face, before she sweeps out of the room.

It only takes half an hour to finish packing. She would leave wearing her leather armor and the hood Eldris gave her, her daggers strapped to her thighs and her staff across her back. If she was lucky, she could disguise it as a walking stick. In her pack, she had a single spare set of underclothes and her mage robes. There was an overwhelming sense of sorrow and finality about leaving, even though she planned on returning.

She met Lysander at the stables. He was wearing a hooded traveling cloak, the hood drawn low over his face. He’d saddled two horses, loading one down with supplies. He handed the reins of the smaller horse to Arya.

“Are we ready to leave?” he asks her. The sun was starting its descent- she knew it wouldn’t be too long before Cailan noticed she was missing. She knew, of course, that he wouldn’t believe it at first. He would assume she was lost somewhere on the palace grounds, either inside or out in the gardens. He’d spend the rest of the evening searching, likely well into the night, before he started branching off and searching the surrounding area. Hopefully, the two of them would be gone lone before then. She takes one last, long look back at the palace

“I’m ready,” Arya answers, taking a deep breath. He meets her gaze and nods once, boosting her onto the horse and climbing onto his own. With a cluck of his tongue, they were under way, the palace ever so slowly fading into the distance, the reins gripped tight in her hands as she tried to swallow down the lump in her throat.

Chapter End Notes

so, i've finally updated this fic.

i was considering abandoning it- i had temporarily lost the drive to continue. i have a plan worked out for this fic (and two sequels to follow) and the characters weren't cooperating at the time. i think i've managed to appease them by starting a new story- this should be up in the next few weeks. it'll be another modern insert, featuring annaliese hawking and a focus on morrigan.
as such, i hope to have the next chapter of this out shortly in order to make up for how long it's been inbetween updates, but i'm not going to promise anything. i'm hard at work on a fic for the mass effect big bang, and while i think i'm almost done, these things have a way of making a liar out of me. i'm definitely moving this fic up in the list of priorities, though. if you're looking for something to read while you wait, i do have a similar fic for fallout: new vegas.

please leave a comment/review letting me know what you thought- i've been away from this fic for so long i'm not sure how well it fits with the rest of it (not to mention the fact that it's your reviews that keep me inspired. i try to respond to all comments, as well, and even if i don't respond definitely know that i do read and appreciate all of them). as always, i hope you enjoyed, and i'll see you next time!
yesterday we were just children

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Do you have horses back home like this?” Lysander asks, breaking the silence that had been hanging over them since they rode out of Denerim nearly four hours ago.

“Sort of. We keep them as pets, but we don’t really need animals like you do now. We have other methods of transportation that are much more efficient. Although I’m sure there are still agricultural needs for them that I’m unaware of, but generally, horses are only a thing for people with quite a bit of money,” she answers, looking around at the scenery. They were somewhere she’d never been before, the horses plodding down a remote, barely-there road. Trees were lining the sides of it, their branches hanging over the path to form a sort of roof. It was beautiful, and focusing on the landscape helped keep her mind from wandering.

“I suppose that does take away a lot of their use,” he remarks. He glances over at her, his gaze conflicted and guilty. She pretends like she can’t feel his eyes on her.

“Yeah. For the most part, we generally don’t use animals the same way you do here. Here, a cat is valuable as a mouser, and a dog has a number of uses. Back home, they’re just pets. We have mouse traps, so we don’t need cats to catch them, and our way of life is completely different. It’s not like we need dogs to chase away intruders when we have so many other ways to deter them,” she says, glancing over at him. He shifts his gaze to the road ahead of them, like he hadn’t been watching her the whole time. If she notices, she doesn’t point it out.

“You make it sound almost like a paradise,” he responds. She laughs, shaking her head.

“No, it’s far from it. There’s a lot we could do to make our world better. It’s just…different, I suppose. There’s a lot of the same problems dressed up in different clothes, too. Classism is still a problem, racism is still a problem, sexism is still a problem. You’d think humanity would get our shit together at some point,” she says, sighing.

“Well, maybe it’s not so different after all, then. Same shit, different place,” he tells her, concern shining in his eyes. She laughs, glancing over at him again. She thinks he’s trying to comfort her, to make sure the weight of everything she’d been taken from isn’t pressing down too heavily on her shoulders.

“Maybe it isn’t. Sometimes none of this feels real. I’ll catch myself thinking that this must all be some dream, and I’ll wake up safe and sound back in my bedroom at home,” she tells him. Her voice is quiet, and the air around them is hushed and still, like the world itself is holding its breath at her confession.

“Would you ever go back?” he asks her, forcing his voice to be casual. He tells himself to be prepared for the worst, to be prepared for her to tell him that she would leave now if she would. He tries to tell himself it would have nothing to do with him. He is fearful of her answer anyway.

“I…don’t know. There’s a lot of things I miss from back home, and a lot of people too. But there’s a lot I would miss here, too. I’d miss my magic, for one, and I’d miss everyone I’ve gotten to know so far. I wouldn’t be the same person. And I don’t know if the person I’ve become would like to go back,” she admits. There is some part of her soul screaming you would never leave here again, and there is another part of her soul telling her that going home is what you want the most, and she
isn’t quite sure which part to believe.

“Well, kitten, for what it’s worth, I’m glad you managed to get stuck here. Thedas is better off for having you here,” he tells her, looking over at her. She’s almost close enough to touch, but he knows taking his hands off the reins is a bad idea.

“Well, there’s nowhere else I’d rather be stuck,” she says, the corners of her mouth curling upwards in a grin.

Riding a horse for hours without rest is just as exhausting as Arya remembers. By the time Lysander allows them to stop, it is well past midnight, and everything aches. She needs his help to even get off the horse, her hands clutching his shoulders as his rest on her waist. He lets them linger a few moments longer than necessary, his face hovering inches away from hers. If she wanted, she could lean forward and press a kiss to his lips. It’s an attractive option, but she doesn’t, mostly because her body aches.

“I feel awful. Everything hurts,” she complains, and he grins at her.

“Sorry about that, kitten. I could give you a massage once we eat, if you like,” he offers. There’s a flash of guilt in his eyes, and she knows that he’s trying to make up for leading her here.

“I’d appreciate that, Lysander. What are we eating?” she asks, moving to loop her horse’s reins around a tree.

“I thought it might be best to go for something that wouldn’t require a fire. We’re still too close to the palace for comfort. Cailan will likely send others out soon, and a fire would just be a beacon. I grabbed a few loaves of bread, some meat, and some cheese. I also managed to sneak out a jug of juice, so it might not be too bad,” he tells her, tying his horse and moving to the packs.

“Sounds good enough. Thedas has made me a lot less picky when it comes to my meals,” she replies, a faint smile on her face. She tries not to think about all of the things that have been left behind.

“And how picky were you back home?” he asks, a teasing lilt to his voice as pulls out their bedrolls. He passes them off to her, and begins rummaging around for the food.

“My mother always told me I was one of the most difficult children to feed that she’d ever seen,” she replies, a faint smile on her face as she moves a few feet away, laying out the bedrolls.

“I suppose you had more options there,” he remarks, finally pulling out the bag he’d put the food in. They had enough fresh food to last them the next couple of days, by which it would begin to turn stale, and after that they’d be down to eating regular travel rations.

“I did, yes. It’s not like I can just order a pizza here. Which reminds me, once we’re back in Denerim, how would you feel about trying some of my food? I promise I know what spices are, unlike the rest of Fereldan,” she offers, grinning.

“It sounds…interesting. I’ll try damn near anything once,” he says, a faint smile on his face. He sits down on his bedroll, dropping the food next to him as he tugs his boots off. He knew taking them off wasn’t the smartest thing, but they were close enough to Denerim that they were safe enough.

“I’ll have to keep that in mind, Cousland,” she says, flopping down on her bedroll. Her muscles scream in protest, but it feels nice to be sitting still after all that time.
“I’m sure you will, kitten,” he says, passing her the food.

Once they’ve eaten and laid around for a few minutes, he stands up on his knees and stretches.

“All right, kitten, off with the armor,” he orders.

“Wow, somehow I expected you to be way more smooth about trying to get in my pants,” Arya replies, but she starts fiddling with some of the fastenings.

“I’m glad you think so highly of me, kitten, but this is because of that massage I promised you. I may be good with my hands, but I’m not that good,” he says, his trademark cocky grin on his face. She rolls her eyes, but soon the armor is piled up next to her bedroll and Lysander slides into place behind her. His hands are gentle, his fingers skimming up her sides before his hands rest on her shoulders. She tilts her head back, her eyes fluttering shut as he sets to work, his fingers working out the knots.

“You are good with your hands,” she purrs, cracking one eye open almost lazily. She can almost see the cocky grin on his face again as he chuckles.

“So, you don’t care if I get a little handsy, do you?” he asks, his voice casual and light, but there’s a darker undercurrent that makes liquid heat pool in the pit of her stomach.

“Right now, I’m down for anything,” she answers. She jumps when he leans down, pressing a kiss against the skin of her throat. She tilts her head to the side, giving him more access, and he chuckles again. His hands trail lower, working at her back, and his lips trail up, his teeth dragging against her ear. When he reaches the tip, she gasps, a shudder going through her body.

“Do you like that?” he asks, his voice warm and husky. Her hips squirm as she leans back against him, her eyes still shut.

“You’re nothing but a tease,” she whines. His hands come to a rest on her stomach, his fingers all too close to where she wants them to be.

“Once we take care of Howe, I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll spend some quality time taking care of you,” he promises. She lets out an annoyed huff of breath, shifting until she can see him.

“You aren’t going to fuck me to get rid of whatever guilt you’re feeling. Not that you should be feeling guilty for asking me to come with you, Lysander. I agreed to come completely willingly. I want to be here, with you, helping you do this because it’s important to you,” she scolds. He sighs, letting his chin drop down to her shoulder.

“I still feel a little guilty, but I don’t think it’s just because you came with me. Maybe it’s survivor’s guilt. Courage and I were the only ones to survive Howe’s betrayal, and she got hurt and has to stay in the kennels. Maybe I feel guilty because I didn’t bring her with us. Or maybe it really is because I’ve stolen you away from everything else because I can’t let go of this, even though Cailan and Anora promised me they’d bring Howe to justice,” he sighs.

“Hey, I get it. This is personal for you. Howe made it personal when he came after your family. He was stupid enough to let you get away, and now he’s gonna get what’s coming to him. I don’t know what I’d do in your situation, but I’m not going to fault you for this. Wanting revenge is perfectly normal. I’m here, and I’ll keep you from going too far if I have to set the son of a bitch on fire myself,” she tells him, linking her fingers through his.

“You’re amazing, you know,” he says, a half-smile on his face as he leans down, pressing his
lips against hers. She’d expected him to be more confident, more controlling, but his kisses are hesitant and unsure. She pulls back and stares up at him for a moment.

“We should sleep. We’ve got a long way to go,” she murmurs. He nods, shifting so he can lay them down, pulling her tight against his chest. She turns until she’s facing him, burying her face in his shirt, and they try to sleep.

The second day passes the same as the first. Occasionally, Lysander tries to break the silence with conversation, but mostly the two of them ride lost in their own thoughts. It is on the third day that things change. With the sun high in the sky, Lysander leads them off of the main road and through the woods, along a hidden trail.

“We’re getting close to Highever, now. It’ll be dangerous if we’re seen on the main road,” he tells her. She tries to ignore the way panic flares up in her stomach, making her clutch the reins tighter. She doesn’t know what’s waiting for them, and she’s not sure she wants to find out. They’re too far to turn around now, though, and she knows she couldn’t find it in her heart to deny this to Lysander.

“So, on a scale of one to ‘we’re dead,’ how angry do you think Cailan and Anora will be once we return?” Arya asks, ten minutes later. The silence had grown oppressive, and she didn’t think she could endure much more of it.

“They’re probably definitely going to flog us into repentance,” Lysander replies, a grin on his face. He doesn’t seem too worried, though, not like she is. For all that she wants to keep him from being guilty, she’s not sure they’ve done the right thing.

“I’d pay money to see Cailan try to flog someone. I mean, come on, have you seen him? I think he’d break down crying,” she says. It’s easier to joke than it is to think about what might actually happen upon their return, if they’re lucky enough to make it out of Highever.

“I’m sure he’ll go easy on you, kitten. I plan on taking the blame for this anyway,” he says, reaching over and squeezing her knee.

“I’m not gonna let you take the blame for this, Lysander. I mean, yeah, you came up with the idea, but I’m here willingly. Although, I don’t think I’d mind being kidnapped by you,” she replies, catching his eye and grinning as he draws his hand back.

“Be careful what you wish for. You’re giving me all kinds of wicked ideas,” he says, a half-grin on his face as he turns his eyes back to the road. Up ahead, it narrows, and Arya doubts both horses can walk side-by-side. She tugs on the reins just enough to get her horse to slow so Lysander can draw ahead.

“Are they naughty ideas? Naughty ideas are the best ones,” she says. He glances over his shoulder at her, the grin still on his face as he rolls his eyes.

“And Anora always told me I was the naughty one. I think you’re giving me a run for my money, kitten,” he says, but there’s fondness in his voice.

“I don’t know, I think you might be a lot naughtier than I am,” she says, and she tries to keep a straight face but she can’t fight the grin off for long.

“Maybe we’ll have to ask Cailan and Anora when we get back,” he counters. She can almost see the matching grin on his face.
“Maybe that’ll make them forgive us,” she says, and she tries to swallow the worry she’s feeling.

“Maybe we’re worrying for nothing. Maybe we’ll get back and they’ll give us a big medal for kicking so much ass here and then we’ll have some great makeup sex and it’ll all be over,” Lysander says. She can see the stiffness of his shoulders, though, and she can hear the tightness in his voice.

“Hey, we can dream. Maybe they won’t be mad. Maybe they’ll be so worried they won’t know what to do with themselves and we can say that we’re big fucking heroes,” she says, and if a little bitterness seeps into her voice, well, they both pretend not to notice.

“Maybe, kitten, maybe. I bet that pretty witch of yours will be glad to have you back in one piece,” he says.

“If she doesn’t have to mount a rescue mission. If she does, she’ll kick both of our asses,” Arya replies, a fond smile on her face. She runs her thumb along the ever-changing surface of the ring. She wonders if Morrigan knows she’s thinking about her.

“Will she even be able to find us?” Lysander asks. There’s an unspoken end to this sentence, if something goes wrong, that they both pretend not to hear.

“Yeah. She’s good, like that. She’ll be able to find us,” she answers. She doesn’t tell him about the ring. She wants some part of Morrigan that belongs to her, and her alone.

“Well, now I feel much better, knowing someone like that might come to our rescue,” he says, and they lapse into silence again. Somehow, it’s more bearable this time.

It is dusk when they finally arrive at Highever. Arya casts a silencing spell as soon as they slip off their horses. She’s too keyed up to notice how sore and stuff her muscles are, her stomach fluttering with anticipation. She drags a hand through her hair, pacing back and forth while Lysander makes sure the horses are secure. She can feel a memory pressing against the edges of her mind, giving her a headache, but she pushes it away.

“Are you ready?” Lysander asks, silently appearing next to her. She almost jumps before she turns to him, brown eyes wide with worry.

“As we’ll ever be, I suppose. What’s the plan?” she asks, reaching out and linking her fingers with his. His eyes soften as he pulls her closer, letting out a deep breath of his own.

“There’s an entrance ‘round back for the servants. There’s two men guarding it. We’ll need to take them out somehow, drag them out here to the brush. We’ll need to take their armor and put it on, and then it should be pretty easy going from there. I’ve got a contact in the kitchens that can help-Howe was stupid if he thought Nan would stand for any of this. We’ll come out in the larder, so Nan will be able to get us through the rest of the palace. There’ll be minimal risk once we take out the guards, but if we run into any trouble, let me do the talking,” he explains, his hand tightening on hers.

“I can use a sleeping spell on the guards. We’ll have to leave them bound and gagged next to the horses, but hopefully it won’t pose too much of a challenge. Will the armor fit me?” she asks, standing on her tiptoes to peer through the trees. She can’t see the guards, though.

“One of them is built like a wall. We should be able to fit it over the armor you’re wearing, if nothing else,” he assures her. She nods, taking a deep breath. She leans up on her tiptoes, pressing a
quick kiss to his lips.

“Let’s do this,” she says, and then she slips through the trees, her footsteps silent as she crouches among the shadows. Lysander hovers behind her as she lets a spell build between her hands, her eyes narrowed. One of the guards has his helmet off, sitting in front of the door and twirling a knife between his fingers. The other one, the big one, is standing, his arms crossed. Arya can see how annoyed he is with his fellow guard, even with the helmet covering his face.

“Can you hit both of them at once?” Lysander asks, his breath tickling her ear. She nods, furrowing her brows in concentration before throwing her hands out. Two spheres of light shoot towards the guards, hitting them before either notice. There’s a long, uncomfortable second where nothing happens, but then the big one slumps over and the small one’s head chin hits his chest. Arya lets out a breath she hadn’t known she had been holding, and she and Lysander slip out of the shadows, dragging the guards back into the brush with them.

Chapter End Notes

thank you all so much for reading! i know it's slow going, and i know i'm slogging through filler right now, and i'm barely getting through all the crap i'm going to have to wade through to get where this fic is going (and then the sequel, and then the sequel's sequel!), but i have solid ideas for where this needs to go. that being said, there is some room for added scenes, so if you have a scene you'd like to see between any of the characters appearing in this fic, feel free to let me know, and i'll do my best to incorporate it (after all, i need plenty of bonding between everyone!)

if you don't have any ideas or anything you specifically want to see, feel free to leave a comment anyway. i really appreciate them and i always do my best to respond to all of them. see ya next time!!
Anora is no stranger to diplomacy. She is every inch a queen, used to keeping her composure even in the worst circumstances. Standing across from the raven-haired witch is the only time she has ever been tested.

“What do you mean you let them go?” she growls, slamming her hands down on the table. The witch shifts, her golden eyes narrowed.

“I took precautions. I am not as foolish as you may believe,” Morrigan answers lightly, crossing her arms over her chest.

“The point of the matter is that you let them go, Morrigan. I’ve seen you in action. How could you let her go if you care about her half as much as you claim to?” Cailan asks from his place by the window. He looks older than he ever has before, haggard and worn, the circles under his eyes dark.

Morrigan stills, her posture shifting. “How dare you?” she breathes, a wooden ring on her finger glinting with enchantment as she clenches her fists. Cailan turns to face her, lips twisted in a frown.

“I’m not the one who let them walk out of here,” he returns. A snarl bursts out of her lips and Morrigan stalks across the room to stand in front of him, nearly vibrating with anger.

“If you fools would give me half a moment to explain, perhaps I could. I would never have let Arya go if I didn’t have a way to make sure she’s safe. Right now she’s nervous in her abilities, nervous that they will be caught, but she is fine,” she spits.

“You’ve yet to tell us your brilliant plan that lets us know for certain they’re safe,” Anora reminds her, directing a cold glare at the witch as she moves to stand next to Cailan. She is nearly the same height as her husband, standing with her back straight, a defiant tilt to her jaw. Morrigan draws herself up to her full height.

“Do you see this ring on my finger? Arya wears its mate. ’Tis an enchantment, an ancient one, that tells me what she is feeling and if she is in distress. And should the need arise, it will lead me to her. I would never let her do something so reckless without me otherwise. Respecting the wishes of others is not so foreign a concept to me that I would have refused them this. The Cousland boy seemed to need this, and yet you would deny him this. Need I remind you that you insisted he go through the courts? Had you not insisted, perhaps he would have come to you first,” she says, her voice cold and hard, her eyes flashing.

“We are the monarchs of Fereldan. Of course we insist Lysander go through the courts. If we allow him to take his own vengeance, what will that show the rest of the country? We’d have civil war breaking out over imagined disputes!” Anora protests. Morrigan doesn’t answer, merely stares her down until Cailan sighs, dragging his hand over his face.

“Arya would have known how important that would be to him. And she can’t say no. Not to something like that,” he says. Morrigan hesitates. She’s never seen anyone look so tired before.

“That’s precisely why I never attempted to stop her. It is her choice to follow him,” she
murmurs, her voice soft. The steel melts out of her.

“Should we go after them?” Anora asks, suddenly uncertain.

“No. They’re all the way in Highever now. The best we can do is wait for their return,” Cailan answers. He stands, straightening his shoulders again.

“I suppose now we should work out how to react once they come back to us,” Anora says, dragging her hand through her hair and undoing the braid it had been in.

“I will go, and leave this discussion for the two of you,” Morrigan says, turning. Anora nods distractedly as Cailan wraps his arms around her shoulders. The witch lets the door close behind her, and pads down the hall to Arya’s bedroom.

An old woman meets them in the larder. Her face is wrinkled with age, her grey hair swept up into a tight bun. Her face is haggard and worn, but her eyes light up when she sees Lysander, his helmet off the moment she steps through the door.

“Never thought I’d see you again, boy,” she says, pulling him down into a hug. Arya looks away and tries to pretend she didn’t see the tears in the woman’s eyes as Lysander hugs her back, his face buried in the crook of her neck.

“Never thought I’d see you again, either, Nan,” he says, sniffing. She laughs weakly, pulling back to pat his cheek.

“I’m too important for Howe’s men to kill me,” she says, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Of course you are, Nan. Highever wouldn’t be Highever without you,” he says, a tired smile on his face. For all the times Arya has seen him smile, she has never seen him look quite like this. He looks like the boy he is, barely twenty-one, his armor ill-fitting and his grip on his daggers loose.

“You’re damn right it wouldn’t! Now put that helmet back on your head, boy. I’ve a cart loaded with food that’s going straight to Arl Howe,” she says, taking a moment to compose herself before bustling back into the kitchen, loading plates and trays onto a cart. Lysander takes a deep breath, squaring his shoulders before slipping the helmet back over his head. Arya reaches out, slipping her hand into his. The gauntlets bang together, and she can see a smile twitching at the corners of Nan’s mouth as she lets go again.

Nan sets a brisk pace through the castle, Arya and Lysander left to march along after her. Highever is a twisting maze the same way that the palace in Denerim is, and Arya is soon left with the knowledge that she would never be able to find her way back out without Lysander or Nan. Lysander, for his part, is tense, his head turning sideways as he sweeps his gaze across the corridors. She wishes she could reach out and take his hand.

“Hey! You there!” a man calls out. Arya almost flinches, and Lysander’s hand drops to his sword as they all turn around. The man approaching them is a guard, but he only wears the standard armored boots. He is dressed in rumpled casual clothes, the left sleeve torn. He has something clutched in his right hand, and he looks nervous.

“What do you want?” Nan demands, her hands on her hips. The man ignores her, instead focusing his gaze on Arya. She reaches inside her, pulling on the well of magic that surges within her. If she’s forced to act, gods only know how messy this will get.
“Sven! Glad I caught up with you. I’ve been looking all over the castle for Gwen. I’ve something for her. You haven’t seen her, by any chance, have you?” he asks. She almost panics. If she answers him, her voice will clearly be different than Sven’s, if that’s truly the guard whose armor she stole.

It is then she remembers a spell. *She clings to the upper branches of a tree, the leaves cloaking her in shadow. “Lanaste!” she calls, using a simple illusion spell to make her voice different than it is. The sound bounces around the courtyard, and Lanaste swings his head from side to side, his mouth open as he breathes in the air.*

“I know it’s you, Bellanaris! I can smell you!” he calls out. She giggles, the spell still in effect.

“But can you find me?” she asks. *The branches beside her shift, a light breeze blowing as Abelas shifts. He gives her a grin that she returns.*

“Maybe I don’t want to. Maybe I’ll just stroll on inside and eat the best meal I’ve ever had, while you stay hidden in the garden,” he calls out, but there’s a light note of teasing in his voice.

She comes out of the memory almost painfully, aware that the guard is staring expectantly at her. She reaches for the wellspring of magic, weaving the spell around the room.

“No, I’m afraid I’ve not seen her today,” she answers, and her voice sounds deep and gravelly. The man dips his head at her.

“Thank you anyway, Sven. I’ll keep looking,” he says, and he heads off the direction they’d just come from. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief as he turns around the corner.

“How did you do that?” Lysander asks, his voice quiet enough that only she can hear him over the squeaking of the cart’s wheels.

“It was a spell. From Arlathan,” she answers, and he lets the subject drop.

After that, no one questions them, and she doesn’t know if it’s because they look like they belong or if it is because they stick to servant’s halls. Nan gets a couple of nods and that’s it. Arya isn’t sure whether to be unsettled or grateful, so she gets stuck somewhere in between the two of them until they come out into a grand hall. Lysander tenses up behind her, his gaze fixed ahead of them on a large, ornate door. Two guards stand on either side, slouched over, but as they see Nan wheeling her cart towards them they snap to attention.

“We weren’t told about a relief guard,” one of them says, his voice gruff with suspicion. Arya’s breath catches in her throat, her heart stuttering in her chest.

“You see all the food? This is all here by request. I’m an old woman, young man, nowhere near as strong as I once was. I need the help. I’m sure you’ll appreciate your time off,” she says, folding a towel and swatting it through the air. The guard stares her down for a moment, but Nan, bless her, stares right back at him, her hands on her hips and a frown on her face.

Arya holds her breath.

The guard moves aside, nodding his head at his partner.

They walk down the hall.

Arya’s breath leaves her suddenly, and Nan gives them a smug grin that fades into a concerned frown. “Are you two ready for this?” she asks, but she doesn’t take her eyes off of Lysander. He reaches out, and Arya puts her hand in his, squeezing gently.
“I am,” he answers, his voice rough. Nan nods towards the door, and Arya lets her hand fall to her side as Lysander steps forward, knocking twice before pushing the door open. Arya pushes the cart into the room. Nan stays outside, nodding at them with a hard glint in her eyes.

Howe is sitting at a desk, his body half-turned towards the door, a quill clutched in his hands. His nearest weapon lies on the bed, along with his armor. He is utterly defenseless, and Lysander has gone utterly still.

“Well? Where’s that useless cook?” he demands, and Lysander lets the door thud shut.

“I think you might want to change your tone,” Arya says, and she lets go of the cart, pulling her helmet off. She starts working on her gloves next, and Lysander has his gaze locked on Howe as he reaches up to his helmet.

“What’s going on?” Howe demands. Lysander removes his helmet, a strange grin on his face.

“Just the average story of revenge, Rendon. It wasn’t anything personal, of course, until you butchered my family in their beds,” he says, and he lets the helmet thud to the floor.

Chapter End Notes

so i could have kept this chapter going and i really, really thought about it but i also wanted to go ahead and give you guys what content i could. the next chapter is in the works but that may take awhile because university has slammed me harder than i ever expected. hang in there guys i promise i'll have it up as soon as i can.

however, i have a couple of questions for you. i've gotten feedback from one reader already, but: i'm trying to branch out in my writing and that's started to include real smut. would you prefer if i kept this M rated or went ahead and bumped it up to E and wrote some real smut? the smut won't be for a few chapters but it's good to get things squared away in advance. secondly: would any of you guys be interested if i started a tumblr exclusively for this fic? i could post sneak peeks, run some aesthetic tags for the characters, answer any questions, post extra content, etc. is that a thing people want, or nah? please leave a comment letting me know- if there isn't any interest shown i just won't start the blog so no harm done.

hope you all enjoyed!!!
Out of all the things in Thedas that Arya hadn’t expected, the fear on Rendon Howe’s is perhaps the most shocking. It is only there for a split second, before the man forces his lips into a grin that stretches almost unnaturally across his face. There’s a manic gleam in his eyes, and she can see him dropping into a defensive stance already, even though his armor is piled at the foot of the bed, his weapon far enough away that it won’t do him any good. For good measure, Arya moves between them, shedding the bulky metal plate so she stands in her leather armor.

“Well, well. Bryce Cousland’s little boy, all grown up and still trying to fit into Daddy’s armor. What would Bryce think of this, I wonder?” he asks, and she can see Lysander’s face harden.

“I don’t see why it matters what my father would think. I think that it stopped mattering when you killed him in his own home,” he snarls back, and then he moves. Despite all the time she’d spent training with him, all the times she’d watched him move, she’d never imagined he could be this fast. He’s there at Howe before she can even blink, has him by the collar of his shirt. He slams him against the wall, lifts up just enough to make Howe choke. He brings his fist back before slamming it into his face. Blood streams from his nose, bright and hot, and Arya tries not to flinch.

She has never seen Lysander look so angry.

“You know, I made your mother kiss my feet before I killed her. It was the last thing your father ever saw,” Howe taunts, baring his bloody teeth in a snarl. Lysander growls, and then he throws Howe across the room. He lands in an undignified heap at Arya’s feet before he starts to rise, and Lysander’s hand goes to the knife at his belt.

For months, everywhere Fen’Harel had gone, he’d been met with soldiers, all of them bearing the marks of Elgar’nan. It had taken weeks of meticulously examining every member of the Dread Wolf’s council before the traitor was found, and Bellanaris finds herself pacing outside a door leading to the dark depths of a dungeon.

“I want him dead,” she snarls, and all she can see is the knife sinking into Lanaste’s stomach, his mouth falling open as he fell to his knees. They’d been lucky enough that Mythal was there, that she could pour enough healing magic into him to keep him alive, but Bellanaris had never been so angry, not even when she’d stood in front of Dirthamen and Falon’Din, her arms bound behind her back, her teeth bared in a snarl as her chest heaved. She’d fought like a wild thing when she’d been brought in, but the anger she feels now runs deeper than that ever did.

“And he will be. Eventually,” Abelas answers. He stands next to her, leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Why can’t I be the one to get the information out of him? He almost killed Lanaste. I have a vested interest in keeping it from happening again,” she says, and she starts pacing, restless energy building up until she was desperate to give it an outlet.

“Because it’s different when it’s personal. If you walk into that chamber as angry as you are now, you won’t be trying to get information. You’ll be trying to make him hurt. And you will not be the same person when you walk out,” he tells her, moving forward and taking her hands in his. His thumb ghosts along her knuckles, his brow furrowed in concern.
“Does that matter?” she asks, but all the fight has drained out of her, like she knows the answer already.

“Yes. There will be more in the days to come. There will always be more. And one day you will be unlucky enough to be given the assignment of extracting information. It is better that Solas handle it,” he tells her, and then he pulls her into a hug, letting her bury her face in his chest.

She steps in front of Lysander, her hand coming up and wrapping around his wrist. He looks down at her, not so far gone that he can’t recognize her. His brow furrows in confusion.

“What are you doing? This is what we’re here for,” he says, and she shakes her head.

“You don’t want it to be personal. Let me do it,” she says, and she calls a ball of fire to her hand. At their feet, Howe’s eyes widen and his struggles to push himself to his feet renew.

“I…Arya?” he asks, and she has never seen him look so confused.

“It’s different if it’s personal, Lysander. If you want to draw it out, you let me do it. Otherwise, you kill him quick,” she says, and she lets go of his wrist to put her hands on her hips, the fire extinguished. He stares at her for a moment, considering, and then he sheathes his knife and steps back, gesturing to Howe.

She leans down, grabbing him by the hair and forcing his head back. He glares up at her, but he can’t quite mask the fear in his eyes as she summons the fire again.

“You know, Lysander has the King and the Queen in his pocket. So do I. And Cailan and Anora wanted us to wait, to go through the legal systems and see you brought to your knees in the throne room,” she says, her voice low and throaty, a mockery of the seductive tone she’d used on Morrigan, on Lysander, before. Howe growls, tries to thrash away until she brings the fire close enough that he can feel the heat.

“Do you think I care about any of that, you knife-eared bitch?” he hisses, but he still flinches away from the flickering flames.

“I don’t think you care about anything, Howe, except for yourself. And you know what else I think? I think that’s going to make this fun,” she purrs. She draws the dagger from her belt and slips it under the hem of his shirt, cutting upward in a swift, decisive movement. The tip of the dagger grazes his skin just enough to remind him it is there, leaving a long welt on his chest. He snarls, thrashing against her, and it’s enough that she throws a paralysis spell around him.

“It doesn’t matter how much the King and Queen care about you. They’ll never stand for a little knife-ear like you killing one of the most esteemed arls in all of Ferelden. Especially not a mage. They’ll give you the brand for that, and you can be their little whore,” he spits. Lysander goes stiff behind her, but the predatory grin doesn’t slip off of Arya’s face. The fire in her hand burns hotter, and she spreads her palm out. She gives him enough time to understand her intent, but before he can react she presses her palm against his chest.

The stench of burning flesh fills the room.

Rendon Howe screams.

Lysander flinches.

When she pulls her hand away, Howe has screamed until his voice has given out. There is a handprint burned black onto his chest, just below his heart, and Arya pretends like she isn’t hovering
between two worlds, that it isn’t an elven agent of Falon’Din she sees at her feet. Howe glares up at her, but there’s a resignation in his eyes, as if he has accepted that this is how he dies. Lysander reaches out, his fingers wrapping around her wrist. She blinks, turning to him with a question in her eyes. For some reason, she’d expected to look into silver eyes instead of brown.

“Enough. I’ll kill him quick. We should get going, anyway. That scream probably alerted everyone in the castle,” he says, his voice hoarse. She nods, stepping back, and she lets the paralysis spell fall away. She makes herself useful by barricading the door. It will buy them enough time to get them out of Highever alive, she supposes. Lysander kneels down, the knife steady in his hand, and he places the edge against Howe’s throat.

“Maker spit on you. I deserved more,” Howe says, and then Lysander draws the blade across his throat, blood flowing hot across his hands. He lowers him to the floor gently, wiping the knife on Howe’s breeches, and then he stands.

“How are we getting out of here?” Arya asks, turning away from the door. Lysander walks over to the window, his shoulders stooped under the weight of the family he couldn’t bring back.

“We can’t go out the window, not without breaking something. I could probably get down, but I doubt you can. We can’t go back in the hall, either. Any ideas?” he asks, his fingers gripping the windowsill. When he steps away, he leaves bloodied fingerprints behind, pressed into the white paint.

“I don’t know the castle. There’s not any secret passages into the room, are there?” she asks, and she’s already thinking ahead. Jumping out the window with a barrier spell active? Maybe, but she doesn’t know if she’s got enough mana left to hold it and she doesn’t have any lyrium with her. She can’t remember any low level illusion spells to get them out of this, either.

She has never been so frustrated with the Dread Wolf until now.

“No. There isn’t,” he says. She walks over to the window, looking down. It’s not a fall that would kill her, even if she didn’t have a barrier. She thinks she can do this.

“Okay. Out the window it is then. You can climb down. I’ll hold a barrier and jump,” she says, shrugging. She opens the window, getting ready to climb out.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right? I don’t want… I don’t want to see you get hurt,” he says, a hand reaching out to steady her. She looks over her shoulder at him, and there’s a distant, faraway look in his eyes.

“I’ll be fine. What about Nan? I don’t want her getting hurt for letting us in here,” she says. She reaches up, lacing their fingers together. If she minds getting blood on her hands, she doesn’t show it.

“Nan is… she should be at the horses when we get there. I told her where we would leave them,” he answers. Arya nods, and opens her mouth to say something else when the door shudders under the force of a knock.

“We have to go now. Can you climb down in time?” she asks, her eyes searching his. He hesitates for half a heartbeat before he nods.

“Don’t worry about me. Just go,” he says. She nods, yanking him down to press her lips against his, and then she slides out of his grip and onto the window ledge. There’s a light breeze blowing, enough to tug at her hair as she activates the barrier. Once, when she was seven years old,
she’d climbed the tallest tree in her yard. She’d stood at the top, the wind tugging at her as she looked out over their yard. Her mother must have seen her through the kitchen window, because she’d ran out of the house, panicked and yelling for her to get down. Arya had laughed, and then she had fallen. It had felt like she’d hit every single branch on the way down, and she’d wound up with a broken wrist and a cast that she’d had to wear until she was sick of the damn thing. Her mother had cried the entire drive to the emergency room, and Arya hadn’t understood until she was older. She’d been the one with the broken wrist, and yet she’d lain in the backseat, curled up against the door, dry-eyed and asking for an ice cream on the way home.

She wonders, in the half-second she stands on the edge, if she will ever see her mother again. She isn’t sure that she wants to.

She lets herself fall, tipping over the edge, and she closes her eyes as the ground rushes up to meet her.

Chapter End Notes

hey guys! i hope you all enjoyed this update!! i hope the next one won't take as long, but, again, university is kicking my ass and i'm going to be covered up even over fall break with work so yay me i guess.

anyway, i didn't get any responses before so i'll go ahead and ask again: would anyone be bothered if i tried to include, well, actual smut? i kept the scenes already here pretty general and nondescriptive but i want to push myself as a writer and this is one of the areas i want to do that with.
also, would anyone be interested if i made a blog specifically about this fic? like i said in the last chapter i could post snippets of chapters in progress, headcanons about the characters, scenes that were cut from the fic, etc.

ANYWAY i hope you enjoyed i'll catch ya next time!!! feel free to leave a comment, i usually always respond!
Arya hits the ground with a sickening crack before rolling onto her back. The pain comes a second later, threatening to overwhelm her. It hadn’t been this bad when she was a girl, but now she has to let her eyes drift shut so she doesn’t throw up. A half-second drags past, and then she remembers.

“Aren’t you sure you know this spell well enough?” Abelas asks her from his spot on the ground. He peers up into the tree canopy, a fondly exasperated look on his face.

“It’s the same as a regular barrier, isn’t it?” Bellanaris calls back down, but she doesn’t look apprehensive as she walks the length of a branch. It dips and sways under her weight, but it holds firm. She doesn’t think she has ever been so high up before—she cannot even make out the details of Abelas’ expression.

“You should know by now that it’s a different technique, one that protects you from the force of your fall. It’s different than what you would need to block a blade or a spell. Perhaps you should climb back down, attempt this later, when you can tell me the difference yourself,” he calls up. She can picture the concerned frown on his face perfectly—it’s an expression he wears often enough, when it comes to her.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. Besides, Mythal is inside. She’s good enough at healing that I’ll be fine. This fall isn’t enough to kill me,” she calls back down. She slows down, barely creeping along the branch. It’s nearly too thin to bear her weight anymore, but she doesn’t want to risk hitting any other branches on the way down.

Abelas doesn’t respond, merely steps back out of the way. Bellanaris stops, measuring the distance left on the branch. She decides she cannot go any farther, not without the branch buckling completely, and so she peers back down at the ground, giving Abelas a small wave. And then she jumps, sailing through the air with a shriek of laughter.

The barrier shatters as she hits the ground, enough that the wind is knocked out of her and her leg breaks. She collapses, swearing, her eyes pricking with tears as she grits her teeth. Abelas is at her side a moment later, bundling her into his arms.

“I’m okay, I’ve got you,” he murmurs, his hand patting her shoulder gently as he carries her. She curls against him, sniffling as she blinks away her tears, her fingers curling into fists in the loose material of his shirt.

“No ‘I told you so’?” she asks him, a wry smile on her face. He pauses long enough to look down at her, a fond expression on his face.

“No while you are still in pain, vhenan,” he answers.

Arya’s eyes open to a pair of boots. There is a moment of horrible disorientation before the man wearing the boots kneels down, worry shining in Lysander’s eyes.

“Are you all right?” he asks, reaching down to brush her hair out of her face. She groans,
pushing herself up into a sitting position.

“My ankle. Must not have gotten the spell right. I don’t know if it’s broken, but it hurts like a bitch,” she says. He presses a quick kiss to her forehead before scooping her up in his arms.

“There’s no time. We need to get into the woods- the trees will give us some cover,” he says. He sticks close to the castle walls, moving quickly as Arya tries to make herself smaller.

“That’s okay. Never liked walking anyway,” she says. She twitches her feet, trying to feel out the injury. Only one of them hurts, and she thanks every god she can think of. It also doesn’t feel broken, and she prays it’s only sprained. Either way, she knows it’s beyond her capabilities as a healer.

Lysander dashes from cover to cover, until they’re well within the forest. He puts her down carefully, letting her take her weight as she can. Hesitantly, she puts her ankle on the ground, then draws in a sharp breath.

“Not happening,” she tells him, frowning. It doesn’t hurt as bad as it did before, but it still hurts too much for her to even consider walking on it. Lysander sighs, crouching down and throwing her arm over his shoulders, his arm going around her waist.

“This would be easier if you were taller,” he grumbles, and Arya manages a laugh as they limp through the forest.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way? Because if you drag me all the way through the forest only to get me lost, I don’t know if I’ll be able to forgive you,” she teases. He laughs, gently pinching her side.

“We aren’t lost, kitten. I know this part of the forest like the back of my hand. We’ll be back where we started in a couple of minutes. Nan should be waiting with the horses. We can ride one together, let Nan have her own. Don’t think she’d forgive either of us, otherwise,” he says, but his grip on her waist tightens just a little.

“You’re worried about her, aren’t you?” Arya asks, her voice dropping until it’s just barely above a whisper.

“She’s all I have left. Howe killed everyone else in Highever. And as much as I wanted him to suffer, to pay for what he’s done… I couldn’t let you be the one to do it. I don’t care if I bloody my own hands, but I don’t want you doing that for me. I don’t… I don’t want you to have that on your conscience, not when it should be on mine. But… I don’t think I would have stopped, if he’d killed Nan too. She just about raised me. Mother and Father were always busy with their duties, and they tried to make time for me, but it wasn’t enough. I think… I think it would have been worse, if Nan were the one to die instead of Mother,” he tells her, the words leaving him in a rush, almost like he was scared to say them.

“She’ll be fine. I don’t know her that well, but she’s stubborn enough that it’d take more than Howe’s goons to kill her,” she tells him, leaning over to press a kiss to his cheek. The come into the clearing then, and Nan is leaning against the tree, her arms crossed over her chest.

“You’re damn right it’ll take more than that, girl,” she says, but there’s a soft smile on her face and she reaches up to take Arya away from Lysander until he can get the horses.

“It damned well better, Nan,” Lysander tells her. He checks on the guards, still unconscious where they lay. He cuts through their bonds enough so they’ll be able to break it when they wake
before he unties the horses, checking their saddles.

“So, girl, I suppose now is the time for introductions. You can call me Nan like your boy over there does,” she says. Her grip is gentle, and she shifts Arya until she’s leaning up against the tree.

“Nice to meet you, Nan. My name is Arya,” she replies. Nan hums in acknowledgement as she gently pulls off Arya’s boot. Her ankle is swollen, but it doesn’t look half as bad as Arya had feared.

“Definitely not broken, but I don’t have anything to help and we’re too close to the castle for comfort. I can try to help when we stop for the night, if you like,” Nan tells her, before tugging the boot back up just as Lysander leads the horses over.

“Thank you. I appreciate it,” she says, a faint smile on her face. All in all, she thinks they did rather good, getting in and out without getting seriously injured.

Lysander boosts Nan up onto the mare that Arya had previously ridden, before helping Arya onto his horse. She pats the creature’s neck as Lysander hauls himself up behind her. He wraps his arms around her, and kicks his heels into the horse’s side. Nan does the same, and they’re off, the horses running to carry them as far away from the castle as they can get.

Morrigan is half asleep, curled up on one end of the couch in Cailan’s room, when she feels it. She jerks awake with a gasp, her hand moving to grasp at her ankle. Cailan stirs across from the opposite end of the couch, sitting up.

“What is it?” he asks, reaching for his sword.

“It’s Arya. I…I think she’s fallen or something, sprained her ankle,” she says, blinking. She can barely feel it anymore, can only feel the ghost of pain. She knows it’s worse for Arya, knows the connection between them is fragile.

“Are they okay? Are they coming home?” Cailan asks, sitting up and moving towards her. Anora stirs from the bed, sitting up. None of them had gotten any real sleep since Lysander and Arya had left, and Loghain had been kind enough to postpone all of their meetings, with the excuse that Cailan needed more time to recover from his ordeal.

“I…I think so. She’s nervous, but she feels like…feels like they’ve won. I think the pain has faded a little, too,” Morrigan relays, twisting the ring around and around on her finger.

“So what are we going to do?” Anora asks, her voice husky from sleep.

“I could fly towards them, meet them before they get here,” Morrigan offers. Cailan bites his lip, clearly tempted.

“I don’t want to say no, but if you do that, how will Anora and I get any information?” he asks.

“I suppose you have a point. You aren’t going to yell at them for this, are you?” she asks.

“No. They made their own choices. We’ll let them know we didn’t approve, let them know we were worried, but we aren’t here to control them,” Anora says, dragging her hand through her hair. One of her braids has come undone.
“We may have to take Lysander on trial, but we’ll be the judges if we do. We aren’t going to
convict him,” Cailan adds. Morrigan nods, more at ease now than she had been earlier.

“I think I shall wait until they’re an hour’s ride away and meet them, ease their thoughts
about what reception they’ll get upon return. It’ll be another day or so before they get back, and
they’ll probably come back slower,” she says.

“You’re sure they’re safe?” Cailan asks, leaning forward nervously.

“As sure as I can be, yes. Arya isn’t abnormally distressed, aside from the pain in her ankle,
and I doubt she’d be so calm if Lysander were injured. Unless I fly there to check myself, I’ll have
no way to be certain, though,” Morrigan tells him. The room lapses into silence, then, Anora laying
back down but turning on her side to face the others. Cailan stands, stretching until his joints pop,
before he puts another log on the fire.

For the first time since Arya had left, Morrigan lets herself breathe, the knot of anxiety in her
stomach disappearing. She spins the ring idly as she watches the flames. Hurry home, she thinks, as
she pulls her knees up to her chest.
Nan starts fussing with Arya’s ankle as soon as they make camp, bony fingers poking and prodding. Arya hisses, fingers curling in the furs on the bedroll.

“Christ, Nan, you could be a little more gentle,” she complains. Nan looks up at her, a wry grin on her face.

“I don’t have to help at all, girl. I have to find out how bad you’ve managed to hurt yourself, jumping out of that window like a damned fool,” she retorts. Arya looks up at Lysander pleading, but he only flashes her a grin across the fire, poking at the flames with a stick. She gives him a pout in return.

“I’d have a lot worse that a sprained ankle if Howe’s men had found me in the castle, Nan,” Arya reminds, trying to keep her ankle as still as possible. Nan’s shredded Lysander’s spare shirt, there’s a potion boiling over the fire, and Arya thinks Nan’s got a good shot at fixing this without magic, but damn if doesn’t hurt.

“Probably. But the point is that you need to sit still and let me work,” Nan tells her, so Arya bites her lip and leans back. Lysander gets up from his place by the fire and slides in behind her, propping her up in his lap. He reaches up, brushing the hair out of her eyes. She gives him a faint smile that turns into a grimace again at another particularly sharp prod from Nan’s fingers.

“So, what are you going to do? Just use the shirt scraps as a brace?” she asks, peering down at Nan. Dusk is well on it’s way and the flickering shadows of the fire doesn’t make it much easier to see what the woman is doing.

“That’s right. The potion up there should help with the pain as well as speed up the healing process. It’ll hold you over until we can get another mage to look at it, and the bindings should keep you from worsening the injury,” she tells her. She leans back for a moment, stretching, before she bends back over Arya’s ankle, gathering the strips of the t-shirt.

“You know, she had to do this for me all the time when I was little,” Lysander tells her, shifting so his mouth is right next to her ear. A small shudder runs down her spine as his breath ghosts over her neck, but his voice is distracting enough to keep her focused on him.

“Tell me a story,” she says, looking up at him, firelight dancing across his face. He smiles, leaning down to kiss her forehead, before he settles into to tell her about when he was a boy and the world was big and bright and full of hope.

Leliana and the others arrive in Denerim as night falls over the city. Eliza leads the group towards the palace, where warm food and warm baths and soft beds await. Sten takes up the rear, guarding them from anything they might happen to run into, and the rest of their party is interspersed between the two. Anders walks with Wynne, their shoulders brushing in case he stumbles. “It’s beautiful,” he breathes, tilting his head back to take in the city.

“You made it to Denerim the last time you escaped,” Wynne reminds him, a fond smile on her face. She’d never really known Anders during the Circle- he was a young rebel and she was older and more responsible, but the man was determined to a fault. He’d insisted they move out
when they did, whether he was ready or not, because he was tired of the silhouette of the Circle Tower hovering over his shoulder.

“I was still a wanted man, then. It’s different, seeing it when you’re a free man,” he tells her. The city stretches for as far as he can see on all sides—they’re getting close to the palace.

“You aren’t completely free. You just belong to the Wardens now,” Wynne reminds him. His wonder is a little infectious, though, and Wynne remembers the first time she’d been granted permission to leave the Circle.

“I trust them not to imprison me,” Anders says, a wry grin on his face. He runs a hand through his limp hair, still dull from a year in solitary confinement. But he’s free, now, and the Circle will never be able to do this to him again.

Morrigan meets them at a crossroads, sitting on the back of a black mare.

“Morrigan!” Arya yells, nearly falling off the horse in her haste to dismount. The witch laughs, sliding off of her own mount and reaching out, pulling Arya off the horse and into a hug.

“It’s so good to see you again. Are you all right? I felt it when you hurt your ankle,” she says, concern shining in her golden eyes.

“I’m okay, it’s just a sprain. God, it was only a few days, but it feels like it’s been forever since I’ve seen you,” she says, cupping Morrigan’s face in her hands. Morrigan gives her a soft smile.

“It does indeed. If you’re injured, though, we should hurry back to the palace. Wynne and the others arrived last night, not long after sundown, so she should be able to fix you back up,” she says. Arya nods, turning back to Lysander with a grin.

“Well, you owe me ten coppers. There’s someone that doesn’t want our heads for this little journey,” she says. He rolls his eyes.

“And what about Cailan and Anora? I’m sure they want to skin us alive for this,” he says.

“Actually, I believe they’ll just be glad you’ve returned. They’ve been worried, but I don’t think they’re going to be angry at you,” Morrigan says. Arya lets out a heavy breath, leaning against Morrigan to keep the weight off her sprained ankle.

“Thank fucking Christ. You hear that, Lysander? That’s two silvers you owe me,” she says, but the look on her face is nothing but relief.

“Yeah, yeah, kitten, you’ll get your money. I suppose we shouldn’t keep them waiting any longer, though,” Lysander says. Morrigan boosts Arya up on her own horse, swinging up behind her.

“Then let us be off,” the witch says, spurring the horse onwards before anyone can say anything. Nan’s laughter follows them as Lysander nudges his horse into following.

Morrigan stops the horses just long enough to dismount fifteen minutes before they reach the palace.

“What are you doing?” Arya asks, shifting nervously.
“Going back to the palace. I’ll go ahead of you, so things are ready for you,” she answers.

“Wait,” Arya says, reaching out and grabbing Morrigan’s wrist. She turns, tilting her face up at her.

She leans down, moving her hand to Morrigan’s cheek to coax her into standing on her tiptoes. She presses a kiss to Morrigan’s lips, resting their foreheads together for a second. Morrigan curls her fingers around Arya’s wrist.

Arya pulls back before Nan can fuss at them. “Thank you, Morrigan. For everything,” she says, and the witch gives her a fond smile, reaching up to brush a lock of hair behind Arya’s ear.

“Of course, you fool,” she murmurs fondly. She checks to make sure there’s nobody else watching, and then a bird is sitting where she stood. She takes off, and Arya watches for a moment before urging the horses on.

Cailan and Anora greet them at the gates. Morrigan is nowhere in sight, but Arya isn’t concerned. The King and the Queen are the very picture of monarchs until Arya and Lysander slide off their horses- stiff and formal, their hands clasped behind their backs and severe expressions on their faces. The second the travelers’ feet touches the ground, however, they change. Cailan pulls Arya into a hug, mindful of her ankle, and breathes her in. She buries her face in the crook of his neck, and she hadn’t realized she had missed him so badly until she was blinking away tears. Similarly, Anora has pulled Lysander down into a hug, tears streaking her face, before she holds him back at arm’s length and checks him for injuries.

“I was so worried,” Cailan breathes in her ear, and she pulls back enough to give him a watery smile.

“I’m okay. We’re both okay,” she says, as he presses kisses on her forehead, her cheeks, her nose.

“Good. We should get you both inside, get you to a warm bath. Loghain! Come make sure their friend gets settled in!” Cailan calls out. Anora leads Lysander inside, still fussing over him, and Cailan sweeps his arm underneath Arya’s knees, picking her up.

“Whoa, tiger. A little warning would be nice,” she says, grinning.

“Sorry. We’re all just… glad you made it back to us in one piece. I’ll take you to Wynne right now, and we’ll have a private bath waiting for us in your room by the time you get out, with a cart of food from the kitchens. How does that sound?” he asks, smiling down at her.

“Heavenly,” she answers, and she can hear Nan around the corner, talking Loghain’s ear off.

Wynne heals Arya’s ankle in seconds. Cailan leans against the doorway, however, while Wynne pulls Arya into a hug before setting back to berate her.

“Next time, Miss Huskins, you need to tell people you’re leaving. Cailan and Anora were beside themselves when we got here!” she scolds. Arya has the decency to look sheepish.

“Sorry, Wynne. Lysander needed me, though, and I couldn’t bring myself to say no to him,” she says. Wynne pulls her into another hug.

“I know, dear. I’ll let you off the hook, this time. And if you need to come talk to me later,
I’ll be right here in my room. I’m sure this will catch up with you soon,” Wynne says, squeezing her hand. Arya smiles gratefully as she slips off the bed.

“Thank you, Wynne,” she says, stopping for one more hug. The mage gently nudges her towards Cailan as they break apart, and he sweeps her back up, warmth glittering in his eyes. She laughs as they round the corner.

She sinks into the bath with a groan as Cailan kneels next to the tub. Her armor is in a pile on the floor in front of the bed, discarded for the moment. She tilts her head back against the rim of the tub, sinking deeper into the water, and lets her eyes drift shut. She hadn’t realized how sore her muscles were until the warmth of the water had begun to relieve them, but she was certainly feeling the recent days spent on horseback.

“So, how did you hurt your ankle?” Cailan asks, dipping a soft rag into the water before lathering it with soap. He begins to gently work at her skin, washing off the grime of travel. She opens her eyes lazily at the sensation, glancing down at his hand on her leg before relaxing again.

“I jumped out a window,” she tells him. His hand travels up her stomach, and a shiver runs down her spine as she leans into the touch.

“Maker, Arya. It’s a wonder you’re back in one piece at all,” he scolds, but his focus is on the rag in his hand.

“I had a barrier spell up. I just…didn’t do it right. Besides, it was either that or let Howe’s men catch us. It was a close call, and we’re probably lucky we got off so easy. I’m just…really glad to be back. Everything is kind of hitting at once,” she says. She lets Cailan move her limbs around as he likes, basking in the warmth of the water. She feels drained, with the days of anxiety catching up to her. Howe’s scream when she burned him sits heavy in the back of her mind, too, and she knows that’s going to be something she’ll have to deal with. But for now, nothing exists but the warmth of the water, the flickering of the candles, and Cailan’s hand gentle on her skin.

She falls asleep before he finishes washing her. He chuckles to himself when he notices, finishing up. He hefts her out of the bathtub, wrapping a towel around her and drying her off. He carries her over to the bed, slipping a pair of panties up her thighs and one of his shirts over her head. He presses a kiss to her forehead as he pulls the blankets over her. A knock at the door keeps him from climbing in with her.

Lysander is standing on the other side in his pajamas, looking a little less worse for the wear after a bath. “She’s asleep,” Cailan says, before he can say anything.

“I figured. I…didn’t want to stay in my bed by myself,” he admits, running a hand through his hair. Highever haunts him, more than he’s willing to admit.

“The bed’s big enough for all three of us,” Cailan says, evenly. Lysander looks taken aback for moment before he strides into the room. The door shuts behind him, blocking out the light from the hallway.

“Are you sure you don’t mind…sharing?” he asks. Cailan gives him a small smile.

“Not with you,” he answers. Lysander shrugs and crawls into the bed. Arya curls around him immediately, slinging an arm across his chest and burrowing into his side with a soft sound. Cailan takes a moment to blow the candles out before he joins them on Arya’s other side, pressing a kiss to her forehead before he settles in.
A girl stands in a world that isn’t real, and the landscape shifts around her as she flickers. She can feel someone else burning under her skin, begging to get out, someone that she can’t quite reconcile with herself anymore. She begins to prepare.

The ritual is dangerous and lengthy, but the girl is determined. When the smoke clears, the girl is not alone. A boy lays on the ground next to her. Both of them are more solid now, neither of them flickering, and the landscape stops shifting around them. She frantically checks for a pulse, breathing a sigh of relief when she finds out.

The next time they live, they enter the world together, with a promise to find each other again.

Chapter End Notes

hey guys! thanks for reading! feel free to comment and let me know what you thought!

in case you didn't know, i have a tumblr dedicated to this series, which you can find here. it isn't very active right now, but i'm always accepting questions on the blog about the series, and if there was more interest shown i would post updates and snippets and things inbetween my erratic update schedule.

there's a lot left to write for this fic, but i hope i can get it finished soon. but don't worry! the end of this fic doesn't mean the end. i have a sequel planned, and i'm doing my absolute best to keep myself under control so i don't go ahead and start writing the sequel. just in case i do, you may want to subscribe to the series as well (if you want, of course!) because the sequel is sort of separate story, until they'll come back together in the third installment.
“I have someone for you to meet,” Mythal says, her hand cupping Bellanaris’ cheek, thumb tracing the vallaslin curling around her cheekbones.

“Is it someone about your...project?” she asks, glancing around to make sure no workers lingered. Mythal gives her a fond smile as she lets her hand drop.

“Yes, you could say that. Come, little one. He’s waiting in the courtyard. You’ll be partnered with him for a lot of missions, if you get on well,” she says, taking Bellanaris’ hand.

Bellanaris trails behind Mythal through the temple. It is new, the construction barely finished, and the workers linger for small and last-minute jobs.

The courtyard is empty, save for two workers and Solas. He stands with another man, talking animatedly, and then he puts his hand on the other man’s shoulder. The man turns around and the whole world seems to stop.

Bellanaris finds herself walking forward without any intention to do so. The man meets her halfway, head tilted to the side. His lips are parted, mouth still open to finish whatever he’d been saying to Solas. She knows him, but she doesn’t.

Mythal and Solas stand behind them, side by side, sly smiles on both of their faces. “I told you I was right, Mythal,” Solas murmurs. She rolls her eyes at him, but she doesn’t respond. She knows when she’s beaten.

The man reaches out, putting his hand on Bellanaris’ cheek. She lets out a soft keen, leaning into the touch. She feels whole, like she’d been missing an arm and hadn’t realized it until she had it back. “My name is Lanaste. I think I’ve been looking for you for a very long time,” he breathes, his thumb catching her tears and wiping them away. She steps closer before wrapping her arms around him, resting her head in the crook of his shoulder.

“I’m Bellanaris. I’ve missed you, and I hadn’t even met you,” she tells him, a laugh escaping her. She feels a tear roll down into her hair, and she tightens her grip around him.

Arya wakes up, tears streaking her cheeks. She wipes them off with the back of her hand and takes in the light streaming through the windows. Lysander sleeps next to her, and although she distinctly remembers Cailan crawling in the bed with them both, he is gone. She disentangles herself from Lysander, slipping out of the bed. She finds a note on the end table.

Arya,

There was a meeting I had to get to, with Eldris and Alistair.
We thought you needed your sleep more than you needed to be there.

Love you.

-C

She shrugs, putting the paper back down and stretching. She was still tired, still sore, and now she felt the sharp ache of loss burrowing under her skin. She paces around the room, feeling trapped before she pulls on a pair of pants under Cailan’s shirt. They’re a little too big, so she thinks they’re someone else’s, but she cinches them around her waist with a belt and flips the paper over. She leaves a brief note to Lysander, telling him where she’d gone, and then she slips her boots on before stepping outside.

The hallway looks the same as it always does, candles flickering along the walls. It’s a stark change from the hallways of school, serving only to drive the point even further that she wasn’t home, that she was halfway between making this her home. She wasn’t sure she ever wanted to go back, but she felt lost and confused, stuck in an in between. In between Arya and Bellanaris, in between Thedas and Earth, in between who she is and who she wants to be.

Lysander finds her in the hallway. His clothes are still rumpled, his hair still messy, and it is clear that he had only just rolled out of bed and gone to look for her. “Didn’t wanna be alone,” he says, wrapping his arms around her from behind. She leans into his touch, suddenly desperate for it. “We could go back to my room,” she says, a faint smile on her face. He buries his face in the crook of her neck, pressing gentle kisses against her skin.

“Got anything particular for us to do in there, kitten?” he asks, and the familiar seductive purr is back in his voice. She remembers the promises he’d made, with that look in his eyes, in that voice that makes heat pool in the pit of her stomach.

“Only if you promise you’re not doing it because you feel like you should,” she says. He laughs, low in her ear.

“Only because we both need to feel good, kitten,” he promises. She turns around in his arms, giving him a quick peck on the lips.

“Then maybe you should make good on all those promises you made,” she says, and he links their fingers together, leading her back through the hallways. It is seeming less and less like a labyrinth, and more and more like a home.

“All of them and more,” he says, his voice doing the thing again, and she finds herself more than willing to let go of everything and get out of her head for a while.

She is the one who pushes the door open, leading the way inside. The bed is still rumpled, making it clear that none of the servants had come in to make the bed, and Lysander shuts the door behind them. She finds herself hesitating, suddenly, unsure of what to do. She’d forgotten that there were steps in between, now that the insistent heat wasn’t there. She’d fallen into bed with plenty of people, but that had always been something of heated kisses and grasping fingers.

Lysander comes up behind her again, his hand splayed out across her stomach, underneath her shirt. His fingers tease the edge of her bra, not quite slipping underneath, but enough to make her want.

“Anything particular you want to try, kitten?” he asks, his breath skating down her spine and making her shiver. She shakes her head wordlessly, not trusting herself to speak. He chuckles again,
stepping back and pulling her shirt off in one quick movement.

“You, uh, got anything, in particular, you want to do?” she asks, biting her bottom lip. He grins at her, leaning down to kiss her again. This kiss is different- open-mouthed and wet, his tongue tracing along the edges of her lips. By the time he has finished, heat is pooling in the pit of her stomach, and she feels like she could fall into his warm brown eyes.

“Not at first. But later, once we’re all warmed up? I want you to ride me,” he says, and there’s nothing particularly dirty about the way he said it, but the look on his face and the huskiness of his voice is enough. She reaches out, hesitantly, and unlaces his breeches.

“Well. I think I want to suck your cock, on my knees, with your hands in my hair,” she says, her voice dropping into a seductive purr. Suddenly-

“-I have you right where I want you, Abelas,” she purrs, her fingernails scraping against the scarred expanse of his torso.

“Oh? Then perhaps I should turn the tables,” he answers, a mischievous glint in his eyes. In the space between breaths, he dispels the spell Bellanaris had used to bind his hands, flipping them over easily. She laughs as she lands on her back, her fingers splaying across his thighs to hold him steady.

“Maybe you should punish me. Push me on my knees on the ground and take my mouth,” she suggests, a glint in her eyes. They’ve barely gotten started, and already she’s wet and waiting for him to slip inside her, to fuck her into the bed until all thoughts of the Evanuris vanish.

“Is it a punishment if you enjoy it?” he asks, amusement laced in his tone, but he rolls to his feet and pulls her with him in one fluid motion. He pushes her down on her knees and gathers her hair in his hands. She eagerly pulls the trousers off, heedless of the fine silk they were made with.

“I think you can make it one,” she says, her hands stroking his cock. He’s half hard already, and she parts her lips and takes the head inside her mouth, swirling her tongue around it. Abelas groans, pushing her head further onto his cock, and-

When Arya comes back to herself, she finds that only a heartbeat has passed. Lysander’s eyes have barely had time to furrow in concern.

She finds, suddenly, that she is sick of this. Sick of the concerned looks shot her way, sick of the questions people ask. She is not made of spun glass- she will not shatter because there are lifetimes of memories in her head.

She pulls him down into a kiss that is all tongue and teeth, nipping at his bottom lip. She can feel him against her thigh, getting hard.

“I change my mind,” she says. He raises an eyebrow, a silent question that she doesn’t answer with words. Instead, she pulls her breeches off, letting them pool on the floor next to her shirt. Lysander reaches for her, but she dances backward until her knees hit the edge of the bed. She takes a moment to pull her bra off and throws it across the room before her panties follow. She lets herself fall onto the mattress, then, and then she spreads her legs. The air is cool against her.

Arya puts two fingers in her mouth and sucks, and Lysander finds his heart in his throat. She pulls them out of her mouth with a pop and a wicked look on her face, trailing her hand down her neck. She stops to pinch and pull at her nipple, a soft moan escaping her mouth before her hand continues the journey down the soft skin of her stomach.
She cups her hand over her mound, teasing herself just as much as she is him. “I want you to watch me touch myself,” she says, breathily. Just knowing that he’s standing there watching her, with that heat in his eyes, is enough to make her wet.

“I think I can manage that, kitten,” he answers, oddly breathless. His cock is tenting in his breeches now. She slides two fingers inside of her and thinks about how it would feel to have him inside her instead, thrusting into the wet heat of her cunt. She lets out a long, low moan, grinding the heel of her hand against her clit, her eyes slipping shut.

She jumps when she feels hands on her hips, her eyes snapping open and her hand slowing. It’s just Lysander, now just as naked as she is.

“I’m gonna have to put a bell on you. You scared the hell out of me,” she says, laughing. He chuckles, tipping her head back to kiss her.

“Ready to move on, or do you want to keep tormenting me?” he asks as he pulls back, his breath skating down her spine and making her shiver.

“As much fun as it would be to torment you, I want you inside me,” she murmurs. Lysander lets himself fall back against the pillows as Arya turns, straddling him.

The anticipation has her dripping. He reaches up to steady her as she reaches down to guide his cock inside her, sinking down slowly. Even though she’s wet, even though she’d taken two fingers, the stretch of it burns deliciously.

She has just reached the end of his cock, breathless as she tries to adjust to the feeling of him inside of her, when the door opens.

Cailan stands there, his brain taking a moment to catch up with what his eyes are seeing. Arya turns back to Lysander, and he meets her eyes with a silent question in his gaze. Slowly, she nods.

“Are you going to stand there, or are you going to come join us?” he asks. Cailan steps into the room, the door falling shut behind him. He fumbles with it behind his back until the click of the lock is heard.

When Arya starts to move her hips, lifting herself up so Lysander’s cock and glide in and out of her, Cailan makes a sound like he might die.

“Aw, look at him, Ly. He’s not getting any attention,” Arya says, her voice sugary sweet. Lysander’s hand leaves her thigh to swat her ass, making her gasp and then moan, grinding down on his cock.

“And you’re doing all the work. Maybe he should get over here and give you a reward,” he says. Cailan squeaks, and Arya giggles. There’s an awkward moment of shuffling where Lysander spins her around, his cock still inside her, until she’s facing Cailan.

Lysander sits up, pulling her against him until her back is against his chest. “What sort of reward?” she asks, breathless. Cailan’s eyes are trained on the place where they’re joined, Lysander rocking inside her with short strokes.

“Come and lick her cunt. Anora told me you never offered to do it for her,” he says, meeting Cailan’s eyes. Hesitantly, the king shuffles forward, crawling onto the bed until he’s kneeling between Lysander’s legs.
“Please, Cailan? I want to feel your tongue,” she whimpers. The king’s movements are slow and unsure as he lays down on his stomach, his breath fanning across her skin. If something doesn’t happen soon, Arya thinks she might die.

“Go on, then,” Lysander encourages, and Arya tangles her hands in Cailan’s hair. The first swipe of his tongue against her clit almost makes her scream. Lysander takes that as a cue to shift backwards, his hands on Arya’s hips as he starts to lift her, fucking her properly.

Cailan’s inexperience is almost endearing. It is obvious that he doesn’t know what he’s doing, but with Lysander’s cock stretching her, fucking into her with harder and deeper thrusts, his tongue on her clit is sending her hurtling towards the edge.

“Yes, please, please don’t stop,” she begs, almost incoherent. Lysander chuckles in her ear, speeding up. With her hands tangled in Cailan’s hair and her movement limited, Arya is forced to take what they give her.

Cailan inches closer, the tip of his tongue swirling around her clit. It’s the sweetest sort of torment she could imagine. “Faster, please, harder, fuck, yes, just like that,” she whines.

It is a hard lick across her clit and a particularly deep thrust that pushes her over the edge. Arya screams, squiring her come across Cailan’s face. He flinches away, eyes wide with surprise, but Lysander fucks her through the orgasm until she’s a whining mess.

“How much longer can you go, kitten?” Lysander asks, his voice low in her ear. Arya is caught somewhere between overstimulated and please never stop.

“Please, please, please,” she begs, and she doesn’t know what she’s begging for anymore, only that the pleasure borders on pain and if it doesn’t end soon she will fall over the edge again.

“If you ask so nicely,” he says, and then he starts to really fuck her, his moans making her blush to the tips of her ears. A few moments later and he tips over the edge, cock twitching inside her as he comes. She rests against him for a moment as he starts to soften inside her. When she can move her legs again, she rolls off of him.

“Fuck,” she says, eloquently, and Cailan’s quiet laugh turns their attention back on him.

“I’m sure you enjoyed the show. Let me take care of you, now,” Lysander purrs, nudging Cailan until he rolls over and climbing between his legs.

He looks like he plans on devouring the king. Arya sidles up behind Cailan, her arms wrapping around him and her chin resting on her shoulder.

“Let him make you feel good,” she says, and Cailan nods. It’s all the encouragement Lysander needs as he slips Cailan’s cock into his mouth, tongue tracing patterns on his skin, his hands stroking whatever isn’t in his mouth.

It only takes a few moments before Cailan is falling apart. Lysander pulls back, stroking Cailan’s cock until Cailan cries out and paints Lysander’s face with his come. They sit there in the silence for a moment.

“You look good in white,” Arya says, and Lysander swats at her as he laughs.

“That was…that was something,” Cailan says, a faint smile on his face as Lysander rolls off the bed, pulling his shirt off the floor and using it to wipe his face.
“That was better than I expected. Feel free to walk in on me more often,” Lysander says, winking at Cailan, who flushes all the way down his chest.

“I actually needed to ask you a question,” the king says, mind going back to the business at hand.

“Oh?” Lysander asks. Arya sprawls out on her back, one arm under her head as she watches them. Lysander moves around the room, pulling his clothes back on, although he discards his soiled shirt entirely and doesn’t bother to lace his breeches.

“The men will be leaving for Orzammar tomorrow. Loghain insists I stay here. Would you go with them, in my stead?” Cailan asks. Arya holds her breath. She knows it will help if Lysander goes, knows his quick thinking and skills as a rogue will serve them well. She doesn’t like the thought of Lysander in the Deep Roads, though.

“Of course. I’ll go wherever I’m needed, now that Howe’s taken care of. And maybe by the time I get back, anything of that sort will have blown over;” he says.

“Promise me you’ll be careful,” Arya says, pushing herself off the bed and going to take Lysander’s hands in her own. He leans down to kiss her, pulling her against him.

“I promise, kitten. It’ll take much more than some darkspawn in the Deep Roads to kill me;” he promises. She isn’t so reassured, but she would cut off her own hand before she tries to stop him.

“I suppose that means you need to go get ready to leave,” she says, heaving a sigh. Lysander grins, kissing her again before stepping back and finding another shirt to pull on.

“Unfortunately. But at least I have a very fond memory to look back on while I’m gone,” he says, with a wink. She scoffs, watching as he takes a few moments to make sure he doesn’t look too disheveled before ducking out into the hallway, whistling a tune as he goes to his own bedroom.

Cailan reaches for her wordlessly, and Arya curls up against him. It’s comforting, to be held like this, her head tucked under Cailan’s chin. They stay like that until Cailan pulls himself away, another meeting he has to attend.

The waiting is always the worst part, Eldris decides. There is nothing left for him to do. He has repacked his bag several times over, with enough provisions to get them to Orzammar and everything else he would need. He feels wrong in the palace, as well. He was used to towering trees and wind blowing through the branches, babbling brooks with glittering fish. He wants to scale trees again, wants to race through the forest with his sister ahead of him and his boyfriend behind him.

He finds that he misses home. With a sigh, he pulls a hooded traveling cloak on, double checking the knives in his boots, before he slips out of the palace and onto the streets of Denerim.

He skirls the edges of the marketplace. He didn’t come here to shop, and he doubts there’s anything he wants anyway.

There’s a single guard standing by the alienage entrance. He starts to question him, but Eldris pulls his hood back far enough to show off the points of his ears and the guard leans back against the wall.

The alienage is dominated by a massive tree in the center. It is dirty and dank, houses crammed together. His heart hurts for his People that are kept in such conditions. There are enough here that they could make a dozen small clans. He wishes he could help them do it.
He finds a redheaded woman standing underneath the tree, looking up at the branches. Her hair is pulled back in several braids to keep it out of her face. He stops beside her.

“Who are you?” the woman asks. He pulls his hood down and turns to her with a smile, taking in the way her eyes widen as she catches sight of the vallaslin on his face.

“I am Eldris, of Clan Mahariel. I’m leaving the city tomorrow, but I thought I’d offer my assistance while I was here. We need to stick together,” he says, relaxing in a way he never has around the humans of the camp.

“Well, Eldris of Clan Mahariel. It’s good to see a Dalish taking an interest in helping. Most would just call us flat-ear and be on their way. We need a lot- coin, food. Buildings need to be repaired,” she says, her hands on her hips as she turns to survey the buildings of the alienage.

“I have ten sovereigns I can spare,” he says, holding out a coin pouch. The woman’s eyes light up as she takes it from him. She looks at him like he hung the moon in the sky.

“This…you don’t know how this will help us, Eldris. Ma serannas,” she breathes, pulling him into a hug. He’s so surprised that he just stands there for a moment, before his arms wrap around her in return.

“It is time we Dalish stop ignoring the Elvhen left to rot in the alienages,” he says, giving her another smile as she pulls back.

“We certainly appreciate it. This can do so much for us,” she breathes, looking again at the coin pouch with reverence in her eyes.

“Of course, lethallan. When I return in the spring, I will bring more. I suspect I will be here longer, as well, so I can help with more physical things as well,” he says. The elven girl cannot stop smiling.

“I’ll hold you to that, Eldris,” she says, carefully tying the coin pouch to her belt.

“I look forward to it. I should head back, but before I do…what’s your name?” he asks, already turning to go, looking over his shoulder.

The elven woman has a mischievous glint in her eyes, like she’s thinking about keeping it to herself. After a moment, she answers.

“Shianni. My name is Shianni,” she tells him.

Eldris’s steps are lighter as he returns to the palace.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so, so much to anyone who’s stuck with me so far. i know my update schedule is erratic and slow, so thank y’all for putting up with it and thank you for reading.

that being said, i absolutely thrive off of comments. feel free to leave one if you enjoyed, and i’ll do my best to respond.
you'll be the girl with the cinderblock garden

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Those destined for Orzammar leave before dawn the next morning. Arya sleeps poorly that night, but even so she drags herself out of the bed to see them off. She is finding that waking early is easier and easier, although she is sure that after spending the winter in the palace that it would be difficult to fall into the rhythm of traveling once more. The others, save Eldris and Anders, seem to be mildly disgruntled that their stay in the palace is over. Arya is sympathetic, although part of her wishes she could see Orzammar.

Eldris pulls her aside just before they leave, with quizzical looks from the others. He merely rolls his eyes at them as he drags her out of earshot.

“Something important you want to tell me?” she asks, a wry and amused look on her face, ears twitching playfully. Eldris shrugs.

“I visited the alienage yesterday. I met a woman named Shianni. It looks like they need help. I thought I should let you know, in case you wanted to try and help. Tell her you know me, if you do,” he says. Arya blinks at him, surprised. She hadn’t expected Eldris to care about the city elves. From what she knew, most Dalish turned their noses up at their brethren that lived behind city walls.

“Thank you for telling me, Eldris. I’ll do what I can to help them,” she promises. The smile he gives her is gentle and soft, completely at odds with her initial impressions of him.

“I knew you would, lethallan. I’ll see you in the spring,” he tells her, wrapping her in a hug before letting go and stepping away, bounding back over to the others. After a few moments to make sure all the gear is secure, and that everybody has everything, the party is gone.

The palace feels empty without them, and Arya can feel her mood from the day before returning. Where are you, Lanaste? Why have you left me alone? she thinks, an ache in her chest.

Most of those who were left behind had opted to stay in the bed and sleep. As it was, Leliana and Wynne were the only other two that were there, and they seemed as though they were ready to fall back asleep at any moment.

Arya excuses herself to her empty bedroom. Since coming to Thedas, it has felt like there was always something to do, or a conversation to be had, or something to explain. She hadn’t felt truly alone since she arrived, not with Brett and Eliza and Cailan always within reach. But Cailan is in his chambers, having given her a night of privacy with Lysander, and she doesn’t know where Brett and Eliza are now.

Her eyes rove across the room, searching for something to do, and they land on her laptop. It makes her think of Ella, and with a twisting feeling in her stomach she realizes she hasn’t spoken to her best friend in weeks, if not months. She wonders if Ella would even recognize her.

She decides to find out.

It takes three back and forth calls before they can actually speak. The first time Arya called, Ella hadn’t answered. Arya had stayed on the bed, curled up on her side facing her computer, until she was nearly asleep. Ella had called back, and Arya had only rolled over and burrowed into the
covers, until she shot upright with the realization of what that sound had been. Luckily, Ella had answered when Arya called.

“Hey! Holy shit, what the fuck happened? Thedas plastic surgery?” Ella asks, taking in the changes, an eyebrow quirked up.

Arya finds that she doesn’t remember what she had looked like before. The changes wrought by unlocking her memories were subtle, but her face was undoubtedly just different enough to give Ella pause. And then, of course, there were the ears. At least her face was lacking vallaslin.

“Hah, no. It’s…a long ass story,” Arya answers, sounding exhausted. She’s afraid that Ella would think her crazy, not that the girl probably didn’t already think she was crazy. She doesn’t know if Ella ever truly believed her. She knows she probably wouldn’t, in her friend’s place. Thedas wasn’t real, after all. That was absurd. And maybe it wasn’t real. Maybe none of this was, but if it was a dream it was one she couldn’t wake up from and it was damned realistic to boot.

“I’ll bet. It’s been forever since we’ve spoken!” Ella tells her, faintly admonishing. Arya gives her a sheepishly apologetic look.

“Sorry, El. There’s been a lot going on,” she apologizes. If she were honest with herself, for all that she claimed to miss her home, she had forgotten about calling Ella. She feels like there is an gulf between them that she can’t cross, not anymore.

“There must have been, since you couldn’t even call me on your birthday. And that was over a month ago!” Ella says, hurt leaking into her tone.

“Whoa, wait, hold up. Birthday?” Arya asks, checking the date and time. The time zone had seemed to adjust, but it still followed Earth’s calendar. Her birthday had indeed passed her by, a month and a half ago.

She was eighteen. She had turned eighteen and instead of the birthday bash she had been excited for once upon a time, she hadn’t even noticed.

She knew, then, in that moment, that she would never go home. Even if Flemeth could send her back across time and space, could put her back to where she had been or where she was supposed to be, Arya wouldn’t let her. She feels an ancient stirring in her mind, faintly pleased, that says we belong here.

“Yeah, birthday! You could at least tell me what the hell was going on! You know, I thought that I hadn’t lost my best friend after all, when you called me. But it looks like I did anyway,” Ella says, angry and sad mixed together in a way that makes Arya’s heart hurt.

“I’m sorry, Ella, I really am. We’ve been traveling, and I found out why I’m here and how I got here, and this is bigger than just me,” she says, but she will not beg Ella’s forgiveness if it comes down to that.

“You know what? It’s fine. I made peace with it,” Ella says, something final in her voice. It doesn’t hurt as much as Arya had thought it might.

“We can still talk some, if you like. I’m going to be stuck at the palace all damn winter, so there’ll be time to catch up. And if you don’t want to do it over a video call, we can text,” Arya offers. It’s the only olive branch she has that she can extend.

“I…Okay. We’ll do that. But I’ve gotta go for now,” Ella says, disconnecting the call before Arya can say goodbye.
It leaves her feeling frustrated, although she knows she should have expected this. She was the one who had forgotten Ella, after all. It only makes sense that Ella is upset.

She sends *I'm sorry for everything* before she shuts her computer. Now she needs something else to do. There was no point in moping around over a life that wasn’t hers any longer, and she didn’t feel like laying in the bed until Cailan deigned to join her. She could watch a movie, but she found that she wanted little to do with her computer now. It was just another reminder of how she had changed. No, the palace was hers for now. It was time she began to explore it.

Eldris feels eyes on his back until they clear the city gates. He can finally breathe, even though there’s still on the roads. It isn’t the true freedom he desires, but it’s the best thing he’s felt in weeks. The walls of the palace and the walls of the city had only served to make him feel claustrophobic.

He truly did want to help Shianni and the others in the alienage, but Creators if he didn’t wonder how they managed to live in the stifling walls. Elvhen were meant to roam free, with nothing but the halla, their aravels, and each other. Maybe they’d had true homes, before. Before Arlathan fell, before they were driven from the Dales, before the humans had ruined everything.

It was an old anger, but it was one that Eldris fed. Sure, not all humans were bad. But he remembered those who had hunted his clan for support, and he had decided long ago that enough of them were.

He finds himself falling into step with Loghain. The surly faced general seemed the best out of any of the traveling companions to walk alongside, especially since the man seems more than fine leaving them to walk in a companionable silence until the city is well out of sight.

“Glad to be away from Denerim?” he asks, a knowing smile on his face.

“Creators, yes. I’m used to sleeping under the stars on fur pelts. I missed it,” he admits. His anger had dulled, leaving sadness in his place. He still didn’t forgive Duncan from dragging him from his clan- he would have died with them otherwise, and gladly at that. It hadn’t been easy to let go of that anger. But there was no point in holding onto it, not when it would serve to poison him instead.

“Not many would complain about a soft bed,” Loghain says, amused. He is one of the few that Eldris has met that hasn’t tried to size him up or shrank back in fear of the wild savage rabbit with tattoos on his face. It was refreshing.

“Hah, you shems and your soft beds. You aren’t meant to sink into your bedding,” he returns, earning a chuckle from the older man.

“Lately, my back would make me inclined to agree with you,” he says, glancing around at the others.

“What, don’t mean to tell me you’re getting too old for this,” Eldris teases. Months ago, it would have taken some poking and prodding to get him to speak to any of his human traveling companions, much less tease them. It makes him think of Eden, and Theo, and home.

“I can hardly help it,” Logan replies, and they lapse into silence again, an easy friendship between them.

It really was easier when Eldris wasn’t making enemies out of friends.
Arya wanders through the palace until Anora finds her yet again. The Queen looks tired, but there’s a faint smile on her face as she invites Arya to a private lunch in her quarters. Intrigued, Arya agrees, following Anora through the twisting corridors.

The food is already waiting on them, along with bottles of wine imported from Antiva and brought up from the cellar. Anora motions for Arya to sit down as she draws the curtains back to let the light in.

Her bedroom overlooks the back gardens. Even now, so close to winter when most things in the garden are dead, the space out there is beautiful. She wonders if Anora likes to spend time out there.

“My husband is going to be in meetings from the rest of the day, but my presence isn’t needed. I thought perhaps we could use this time to get to know each other,” Anora says, turning to her with a smile.

It is a smile that Arya returns. In the sunlight streaming in through the window, Arya notices how beautiful the queen looks. Her cheeks are dusted with freckles and some of her hair has fallen from her braids to frame her face. “I’d like that a lot,” she says, softly, bringing her legs up in the chair until she’s sitting with them crossed. After a moment spent looking out at the garden, Anora turns to join her.

“Well, that makes this easier. You know, I was almost determined to hate you. Things had been rocky between Cailan and myself, and I thought you would only serve to split us further apart. But I think you are actually the best thing that could have happened to our relationship,” Anora says, taking a moment to pour the wine. It is odd, in a way, to see the Queen serving herself, and even more odd to be served by her.

“I’m glad to hear that. I was worried about you the most- you deserve to feel secure in your relationships. If you had insisted, I’d have told Cailan to never touch me again. I’m glad that things have worked out like this. And I really do look forward to getting to know you as well,” Arya says. She is glad, suddenly, that she had landed in Fereldan instead of Orlais. She doesn’t like the idea of Empress Celene dining with her, although Arya doubts she would have been so lucky in Orlais. She wonders if she will have to face the Empress someday, or if Anora and Cailan can keep her hidden here in the Fereldan court.

“No many other women would say that. If the King turned his attentions to them, and believe me, there are chambermaids that can claim such, they would laugh at the thought of my anger. I’m not stupid- I know the lack of an heir has turned much of the nobility against me. But I’m more than my ability to produce an heir- it was me that kept the kingdom running during Cailan’s absences. It is not a good feeling to see those achievements ignored,” Anora admits, picking at her food. Arya makes a sympathetic sound, reaching across the table to take her hand.

“You are much, much more than that Anora. And from what I hear, Cailan hasn’t been that kind to you in bed. A little bird told me that he’s never even gone down on you,” Arya says, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

Anora, to her credit, doesn’t even blush. “When Cailan would lay with me, he would do what needed to be done to finish inside me, and would leave it at that. Lysander was better, but it was clear he never planned on staying,” she says. Although there is a faint smile on her face, Anora is unable to completely mask her feelings on the matter. It’s clear that it’s left her feeling ignored.

“Well, I’m not going anywhere unless you make me, so say the word and I’ll keep my face between your thighs for hours,” Arya says, squeezing her hand gently. Anora snorts, but she...
“That’s hardly necessary,” she protests. At that, Arya gets out of her chair, coming around behind Anora. Her hands fall onto her shoulders, kneading gently.

Anora practically melts.

“Oh, my beautiful Queen, but it is. You need someone to treat you right, to worship you like you need to be worshipped. Perhaps we should even make Cailan watch- he doesn’t know how, after all,” she purrs in her ear. A shiver races down Anora’s spine.

“I can certainly see the appeal, temptress,” Anora breathes, food entirely forgotten.

“Come with me,” Arya says, reaching around to take Anora’s hand and tugging her towards the door, a playful look on her face.

“And where would we be going?” the Queen asks, rising to her feet.

“My rooms. And no, not for sex, unless you want to,” Arya answers. Anora gives her a questioning look, but Arya doesn’t answer as she leads the Queen down the hallway.

It only takes Arya a moment to set everything up, opening her computer and turning the volume up just loud enough. She gives silent thanks to her past self for setting up plenty of playlists as she clicks on one full of slow songs perfect to dance to.

Anora is mystified until Arya uses her magic to shove the couch out of the way.

“You want to dance?” the Queen asks, one perfectly manicured eyebrow raised.

“You need someone to treat you right. That doesn’t just mean sex, sweetheart,” Arya answers, her voice soft, a gentle smile on her face.

Arya never knew how to dance, not well at least. But Bellanaris has hazy memories of elaborate parties that would last for months, of twirling through the crowd with Lanaste. There were whispers that even the Evanuris envied them.

It is those memories that Arya uses as she guides Anora into a dance. She wishes she were taller, but even barefoot the Queen has several inches on her. She tunes out the music, operating instinctively as she keeps her attention focused on Anora.

They dance until they slow unconsciously to a gentle sway. With the curtains closed and no fire in the fireplace, the passage of time seems strange. They could have been there for minutes, or maybe they have been there for hours.

They talk the whole time. Anora learns Arya the same way Arya learns Anora. It is light conversation, at first, about trivial things that don’t matter. Gradually, it shifts into deeper conversations, where Arya learns that Anora fears she will only be remembered as the Queen who couldn’t produce a Theirin heir, and Anora learns that Arya is struggling in an in between.

They do not stop until Anaba knocks on the door to bring them to supper.
shoutout to jennserr for reminding me about ella, haha. i'm going to try to get through the passage of a lot of time with only a few chapters here, so we aren't stuck on filler forever. i wanna get this beast moving so we can get it finished (you would not believe how excited i am for the sequel my guys.)

ANYWAY thank you so, so much for reading. i hope you enjoyed this chapter, and if you did feel free to leave a comment down below. i love getting them and i'll do my best to respond to them. see you next time!
beware of a tall dark stranger

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

If Cailan sleeps that night, it is not in Arya’s chambers, nor is it Anora’s. He had looked distracted at dinner, barely speaking to them before disappearing back into his study. Arya wanted to go check on him, but she also didn’t want to disturb him. She trusted him to find her if he needed her- she supposed he was just putting in extra work on that law that needed passing.

Arya spends three hours tossing and turning before she stombs out of her bedroom in frustration. The palace is becoming easier to navigate- where all the corridors looked the same before, she is noticing differences in them now that keep her on track. She knocks on Anora’s bedroom door before she slips inside. Eliza, stationed outside, gives her a knowing smirk as she does. Arya only rolls her eyes in response.

“Oh! Do you need something, Arya?” Anora asks, looking up. She’s sitting on the couch with a book, legs tucked underneath her, hair in one long braid.

“I can’t sleep by myself. I was hoping you might indulge me and share your bed,” she admits, biting her bottom lip. Here, in the flickering firelight and a long white nightgown, Anora doesn’t look like a queen. She looks like a girl, with too many expectations placed on her shoulders.

“Of course. I was just getting ready to turn in, myself. Make yourself comfortable,” Anora encourages, a soft smile on her face as she slides a bookmark neatly into her book, returning it to the shelf. Arya climbs into the bed as Anora banks the fire.

Just before she clambers into the oversized bed, Anora blows out the candle, leaving them in darkness. She takes a moment to pull the curtains tight around the four poster bed to keep the light of the fire at bay.

Arya’s arm snakes around her waist, and Anora curls into her warmth, practically melting against her. “Don’t get cuddles often?” she asks, sleepily. Anora shakes her head silently, curling around Arya. By the time they’re settled, their legs are tangled together, and Anora’s head is pressed against Arya’s chest, the sound of her heartbeat lulling her to sleep.

Bellanaris had grown up wild and free, like the beasts that roam in the forests she calls home. But then Mythal had claimed her, and the All-Mother had no purpose for a feral and free thing. First, Bellanaris was caged with the blood writing on her face, and then the All-Mother began to tame her.

It happened slowly. Bellanaris was resistant until the very end, but Mythal’s love and patience wins out, and one day she allows her new champion to join her among the Evanuris.

This new and tamed Bellanaris is pleasant, smiling and chatting with the other elves even as she eyes them with distrust. It is not until she meets two shadows that she remembers her last experience with the Evanuris.

“My, my. Mother has a gentle hand, as always. Wouldn’t you agree, ma taron sol?” Falon’din asks, turning to his other half. Dirthamen’s smile is predatory.

“Yes. The little wildling is nothing like she was when last we saw her,” he says. Before,
Bellanaris would have snarled and screamed, would have raked her nails across his face for daring to speak about her like she wasn’t there.

This Bellanaris only smiles, sugar sweet. “Oh, but of course. The Lady Mythal is love incarnate. I think perhaps she needs to spend time with you, next,” she says, before slipping away and vanishing into the crowd. Falon’din’s bark of laughter follows her.

She wishes she could cut his tongue out and feed it to him until he choked.

It is only Elgar’nan that doubts her transformation. The others are shocked but they do not doubt their mother’s capability. Elgar’nan, however, tells her he can see into her heart.

He tells her she burns almost as brightly as he does. He whispers in her ear until she follows him down a long and dark hallway, empty save for them.

She lets him pin her against the wall, lips grazing the point of her ear, the pulse point at her throat. Elgar’nan says that she is special. Elgar’nan says that her anger is a beautiful and terrible thing. It has been a very long time since she was allowed to be angry.

Mythal catches them, because Mythal always knows when she is needed. Elgar’nan flees, and Mythal will not allow Bellanaris to join her amongst the other Elvhen for centuries after.

Arya wakes to an empty bed, an old anger stirring in her chest. She had loved Mythal, once. But there had been a time when she had hated her, too, because eternity was not meant to be caged.

After seeing him in her dream, Arya realizes that Elgar’nan looks like Eldris. The Warden she knows is different in several aspects- his ears are longer, his hair is a light brown and a different style, and his eyes are not the blazing red that Elgar’nan’s had been. She wonders if she would find Elgar’nan on his family tree, if she could trace it back far enough.

It is not a thought she wants to dwell on. She pushes herself up, swinging her legs off the side of the bed. Sunlight streams through the curtains, and there is a note that Arya spots on Anora’s bedside table.

With a smile, she rushes over to the window. There, in the garden, she can spot Anora with her morning cup of tea. The Queen is sitting with the King, who looks exhausted even from this distance.

Arya turns away and drifts through the palace to her bedroom, a faint smile on her face.

Eldris is the first one awake. They were close enough to the road that they hadn’t felt the need to keep watch- the Grey Warden Griffin on many of their things would likely serve as a sufficient deterrent.

He thinks about loping off into the copse of woods nearby, to find breakfast. But Eldris had not been the hunter of the family. That had been Eden, deadly with a bow. Eldris was the one who would skin and gut her kills.

Even now, he misses her, like he has lost a limb.

With little to do, he watches as the sun rises. When the sky has turned light, he nudges the rest of the camp awake, and they resume their travels once more.
He does not speak to anyone until they stop, lost in thoughts about forests and childhood.

Arya does not see Anora again until mid-morning. She herself had missed breakfast, opting to find her way down to the training yard and watch the recruits as they sparred. She found herself wishing Lysander had been there for another training session. She supposes at some point during the winter she will need to find Leliana and ask the bard for training.

Anora found her yet again in the palace corridors, although this time Arya wasn’t lost. The smile that the Queen gives her is radiant.

“What are you up to?” she asks, falling into step next to her. Arya smiles without realizing it.

“I’m on my way to the kitchens. I want to try to make some food from home,” she says. If she could make a decent sauce, she could make a decent pizza, or maybe a calzone. Maybe she could revolutionize Thedas cuisine while she was here.

“Oh! May I join you? I usually get chased out of the kitchens, but I think I’d like to try and help,” Anora asks. Arya smiles, linking her arm through Anora’s.

“You don’t even have to ask! You’re welcome to join me anytime, Anora,” Arya says. Ducking into the kitchens, she finds that much of it is taken over by the staff that is working to feed the other denizens of the palace. There is a single oven not in use, and a small stretch of countertop. It is enough for Arya’s needs.

“What do you plan on making?” Anora asks, watching curiously as Arya weaves around servants and gathers ingredients.

“I was thinking pizza, but now I think I might do a calzone instead. If I can get it right, it may be something the palace serves. It might even be decent travel rations if the cooks can adapt them,” she answers, dumping her prizes on the counter.

Anaba had set aside dough for her, after an earlier conversation in Arya’s quarters. Arya only had to roll it out and begin to work on the sauce.

She and Anora fall into a rhythm, and before they know it the kitchens have cleared out, leaving the two of them alone, wrist-deep in mashed tomatoes.

The next time Arya glances at Anora, she notices flour on the Queen’s cheek. Impulsively, she reaches up to wipe it off, freezing as her hand cups Anora’s cheek.

“How very bold of you,” the Queen teases, a wistful sort of look in her eyes that tells Arya just how badly she wants bold.

Arya’s answer comes in the form of a kiss, quick and gentle. Anora freezes beneath her, but as Arya pulls away the Queen grabs her back and kisses her again, fingers fisting in the loose fabric of her shirt.

They kiss, and they kiss, until Arya thinks she might drown.

The dough lays forgotten next to the tomatoes.

Anaba will clean it up later, a fond smile on her face.
The first snowstorm of the season is a pain in the ass, and Eldris would have been the first to admit that he loved snow. Many of his memories came from chasing his sister through the forest and pelting her with snowballs, before going back to camp and flopping down next to the fire with a cup of the sweet chocolate tea the Dalish served.

Those memories were fond. This situation was very much the opposite.

He was cold, and wet, and tired, and he knew the others were in much of the same boat. The storm had moved in suddenly and quickly, forcing them to shelter in a shallow cave below the highway. Were it not for Alistair’s quick thinking, they likely wouldn’t have found it.

So, there they sat, stripped down with their clothes spread in front of the fire to dry, huddling against the cold rock wall.

Surprisingly, the teryn’s son was the one complaining the least. Lysander sits by the fire, stirring it occasionally with a stick, his eyes hooded.

Eldris knows enough about ghosts to see that Lysander is thinking of his own.

When Arya finally talks about her recent birthday, she is lying in bed between Cailan and Anora, watching the first snowstorm of the season. She had been thinking of Eldris and Alistair and the others and wondering if they were close to Orzammar. With as little time as had passed since their departure, she doubted it. She only hopes they have found a decent place to shelter.

“Another year has almost passed,” Anora says quietly, breaking the sleepy silence they had fallen into. Cailan stirs, disrupting Arya. She curls up closer to Anora with a huff.

“Tell me about it,” she says, yawning, “my birthday passed almost two months ago and I never even knew it.”

That gets their attention. They both sit up, leaving Arya as the only one still laying down. She rolls onto her back with a groan.

“So, you’re eighteen now?” Cailan asks, a grin on his face. He could get the palace to celebrate. Knowing Arya, she wouldn’t want anything big, but perhaps he could gather those who had stayed behind. He could get the kitchens to send up all the best desserts, and he could raid the cellars for the best wine they had.

“Yup. You know what that means? That means I am totally, one hundred percent, legal. It’s hard to keep track of the months, but I think I’ve been eighteen since right around Kinloch?” she says. She could try to count backwards, but she’d lost count of the days and she knew she’d only give herself a headache with that line of thought. It just wasn’t worth it.

“No, that means you need to let Cailan and I treat you the way you try to treat me,” Anora says, reaching over to brush Arya’s hair out of her eyes.

“Well, I wouldn’t say no to some late birthday pampering,” Arya replies, almost reluctantly. As much as she liked getting pampered, she also hated being the center of attention. At least she could always return the favor later for both of them.

“Then leave everything to us,” Cailan says, leaning down to press a kiss to her forehead before leaning over to kiss his wife.
Arya wakes bright and early the next morning to a quiet but insistent knocking on her door. She wiggles out from underneath Cailan’s arm, bringing a blanket with her that she has wrapped around her shoulders. She opens the door to reveal Anora, who darts into the room and shuts the door behind her.

“What’s going on?” Arya asks, uncertainly, glancing back towards the door.

“You need to get dressed and come with me,” Anora says briskly, pacing back and forth with pent up anxiety. Arya lets the blanket fall to the floor and tugs one of her dresses from her closet. It is one of the warmer ones, a deep red fleece. Anora automatically moves to help her lace it up.

“What’s going on, though?” Arya insists. She can feel her own panic rising, and forces herself to take deep breaths as she breathes in.

Anora finishes lacing up the dress before she answers. When Arya turns back around, crossing her arms over her chest, Anora’s lips are pursed. After another moment, the Queen finally answers.

“There’s a man who claims to be Lysander’s brother waiting in the throne room.”

Chapter End Notes

damn y’all i am on FIRE getting these updates pumped out i just don’t wanna stop. i guess this is what happens when i go months without writing, lol.

there's a few things i wanna address in this little end note without making you read blocks of texts. i'm going to go ahead and say my thanks here, so you can quit reading if you like. so: thank you so much for sticking with this and my erratic updates. i checked the stats and found out this fic has seventeen subscribers and that's a really big number. this fic has been slow going, and y'all are still trudging through it with me. and a big, big shoutout to the new readers i'm picking up. those comment sprees are probably the driving force behind my sudden motivation to write. comments really do mean a lot to me- you all don't know this, but i've got a folder of comment screenshots that i keep to look back on.

NOW, onto the author explanation that you probably don't need. in terms of bellanaris, i am trying to add a more complex nature to her relationship with mythal. even though mythal was the "best of the evanuris", mythal still owned slaves. a lot of the groundwork i'm laying out now won't bear fruit until the third fic in the series. that being said, i'll go ahead and clear this up now- bellanaris was previously entirely devoted to mythal. it was definitely a little unhealthy, but mythal had conditioned her into her champion. it is only now that she's broken free from her lives as bellanaris that she can begin to question it.

furthermore, the next chapter is first and foremost going to deal with the supposed brother. with that being said, since these next several chapters are going to be filler interspersed with Eldris's terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day(s) in Orzammar, once they finally get there. so with that in mind, feel free to suggest any specific interactions between the folks left back in Denerim. aside from throwing a wrench in with the new character (who is not fergus, unfortunately, although i can bring fergus in if you guys want to see him), i plan on giving Arya her birthday celebration as well as some more
time with Anora. So, with that in mind, feel free to suggest anything you want to see.
The man in the throne room has Lysander’s eyes and the same color of hair. She thinks they have the same nose and the same chin, but she wonders if she is just looking for similarities in the face of a stranger. She wishes desperately that Lysander had said no, had stayed in Denerim with her.

For that matter, the man in front of her looked like shit. He had been leaning against the wall, exhausted and dirty and probably injured by the way he limped forward to bow stiffly in front of them. This stranger is shorter than Lysander but still taller than Arya, and his armor is made of mismatched pieces. From his demeanor, Arya would guess that he was a seasoned soldier. He looked young, though, only a little older than Lysander.

“Who are you?” Arya asks before she can stop herself. Anora shoots her an annoyed glance—clearly, she had wanted to handle the situation.

“My name is Reno Cousland. I’m looking for my brother, Lysander. I’ve reason to believe he escaped Highever and knowing my brother, he probably came here to ask for aid,” the man says, sounding bone-weary. He’s a little older than Lysander, and Arya idly wonders what he would look like without all the grime. She takes note of the name—did Reno replace Fergus? Or was there a third Cousland child?

“Well, Reno, I’m sorry to say you just missed him. He joined the Grey Wardens a few days ago on a trip to Orzammar,” she says, apologetically. After a moment, Anora turns on her heel and walks away. She only seems mildly disgruntled—Arya hopes she had just decided to leave the situation to her to handle. Perhaps she had gone to find Cailan.

“Dammit,” Reno swears quietly, looking almost desperate. Arya’s heart twists sympathetically. Movement draws her eyes upwards, and she sees Leliana hovering in the doorway, wearing a periwinkle dress and the finest boots Arya has seen in the whole of Fereldan.

“I’m sorry. They aren’t due to be back until spring. You could wait for them here, though,” she offers, turning her attention back to Reno. The man shakes his head, running his hand down his face. He’s practically dead on his feet.

“I couldn’t take advantage of the palace’s hospitality, and I’m not certain you’re in a position to be offering me these things,” he says, apologetically. His eyes linger on the points of her ears. With the finery she’s wearing, she doubts he mistakes her for a servant. He isn’t entirely wrong, however. The palace belongs to Cailan and Anora. Arya is a guest as much as Reno would be.

“I can pull some strings and find some loopholes, trust me. Underneath all that grime and that limp you’ve got, you look like a decent fighter,” she says. With a twist in her heart, she remembers herself as Bellanaris, sizing up hopeful recruits looking to help the Dread Wolf. She misses it, sometimes.

“I like to think I am. I taught little brother much of what he knows,” Reno replies, a soft and sad smile on his face. Arya isn’t entirely convinced he’s Lysander’s brother, but she realizes she doesn’t know enough about Lysander to figure it out. She’d have to take his word for it, or not.
“Oh? Well, I have a small stash of coin saved up. The pay is terrible, but you’d be living in the palace. Once we get you cleaned up, I can take a look at that limp, and I could hire you on as a bodyguard. I’m sure Anora would like to ask you questions first,” she says. She meets Leliana’s eyes once more, and the bard nods, a calculating look on her face.

“That is a very generous offer, my lady. If you would be so kind as to point me to the baths, I’ll answer any questions you like,” Reno says, a wry grin on his face.

“Of course. And please, call me Arya. I’ll go find a servant to take you to the baths and find some clean clothes for you,” she says. Reno nods, sinking back against the wall with a groan.

Leliana falls into step with Arya as they make their way to the corridors. “So, do you believe him?” Leliana asks, glancing at her companion.

“I’m not sure. I’d need more information, either way. But there’s little harm in being kind. The palace is full of guards, and I’ve come into my own. If Reno tries anything, I’ll hit him with a paralysis spell that I think I remember correctly,” she says, with lifting one shoulder.

Leliana laughs, but just then they come across Anaba.

“Something you need?” the elf asks with a wry twist to her lips.

“Unfortunately. There’s a man in the throne room. Could you take him to the baths and get him a clean set of clothes?” Arya asks. She tries to pretend she’s comfortable with asking things of Anaba. If the other elf is to pose as her servant, then Arya needed to be able to give her the orders one would expect a servant to receive.

“Another stray you’re taking in? I’ll take care of it,” Anaba says, patting her on the back as she hurries past. Arya watches her go, wondering if the servants ever get a moment to stop and breathe.

“You know, it has been a while since we have spent time together,” Leliana points out. Arya can’t hide the guilty look on her face.

“I’m sorry, Lels. I’ve been so caught up in everything,” she apologizes. Leliana only laughs, linking her arm through Arya’s and pulling her through the corridors.

“Don’t worry about it. I imagine we have both been quite busy with our respective friends,” she says, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively. Arya swats at her, but she can’t hide her grin. She hadn’t realized how much she had missed spending quality time with the bard.

“And now your friend has left for Orzammar, and you’re feeling lonely?” Arya asks, one eyebrow raised.

“Oh, but of course! And not only has my friend left, but your teacher has too. I was thinking- I could take over your training sessions. It is still a valuable tool, to know many ways to fight. I prefer to have a bow in my hands, but you’re at a level that there is much I could teach you with the daggers, and at hand-to-hand combat,” Leliana says. Arya realizes just about then that they’re drawing close to the kitchens- an early breakfast, perhaps?

“Oh, thank you so much. I hadn’t even thought of that,” she says, brightening. It would give them both something to do to keep them from sitting around with nothing to do during the day.

“It would be my pleasure. I thought, for now, we could eat while we wait for your new friend, but you may want to talk to Anora instead. She seemed a little upset that you had taken over,”
Leliana says, with an amused twinkle in her eyes.

“I should probably deal with that, you’re right. I hope she isn’t too upset- I wasn’t going to be rude to the man. He shows up on her doorstep, hurt and hungry and exhausted. He didn’t need someone grilling him right off the bat, and that’s something I’ll stand by,” she says. She doesn’t want an argument, but if it comes down to it Arya will argue. At least over this, at any rate.

“I understand. I think Anora is right to be cautious, as the Queen, but you are not entirely wrong either. I hope your chat goes well, my friend,” Leliana says, leaving her at the door to the kitchens and ducking inside. Arya stares at the heavy wood for a moment before she turns and makes her way through the castle to find Anora.

Anora had returned to her own quarters. She sits at her desk, penning a letter she doesn’t know if she will send. She doesn’t look up when Arya enters the room, waiting until she has finished the sentence she was writing.

“How much more information did you give him?” Anora asks. She isn’t the same Anora Arya danced with- this is the Queen of Fereldan, known for her cunning and political prowess. If it weren’t so early in the morning, Arya might have been impressed.

“Not much. I offered him a job as a bodyguard, and before you say anything, I can handle myself. I’ll keep a barrier spell up around him so he can’t harm me, and if he tries anything I’m able to take care of myself. But the man was hurt, hungry, dirty, tired, and injured. He needed someone looking out for him,” Arya explains, her voice even. She wasn’t going to apologize, but she could try to foster an understanding between them.

“That sort of behavior will get you killed one day. You can’t be prepared for everything. I’m familiar with the Couslands- Bryce only ever mentioned Fergus and Lysander. What sort of black sheep is this Reno, if Bryce never spoke of him?” Anora says, putting her quill down more forcefully than entirely necessary.

“I don’t know, Anora. I don’t have those answers. But even if he isn’t who he says he is, he is still a person who deserves to be treated like one. That was all I was trying to do. Once he’s clean and fed, I will have no qualms about questioning him,” she replies, intentionally softening her voice.

Anora sighs. “You have a point, but I’m the Queen of Fereldan. I can’t give personal aid to every person in need. I can try to set up programs to help those who are less fortunate, but I’d end up dead within the week from an assassination attempt if I just opened the palace doors,” she says.

“I know. That’s why I did it. I understand where you’re coming from, and it’s valid, but I can do things you can’t. Including giving Reno what he needs before demanding answers from him,” Arya says, stepping across the room. Anora huffs a sigh, curling into her as Arya opens her arms.

“If it bites you in the ass, I reserve the right to say I told you so,” Anora says, stepping back with a fondly exasperated smile on her face.

“If that happens, you have every right to do so. I only hope it doesn’t,” Arya says, grinning.

“On that, we can agree. Come with me- we can question him over breakfast for all of us,” Anora says, taking a moment to straighten her dress before striding towards the door.

Anaba leads Reno into a private dining room, where Anora and Arya are already seated at the table. Reno glances at them uncertainly, wearing clothes that fit awkwardly. The shirt is too large,
but the pants are too short. Arya thinks those pants might have belonged to Eldris. At least they fit around the waist.

Reno hesitates for a moment before he takes a seat next to Arya, who is doing her best to look inviting. Maker knows Anora certainly doesn’t.

“Join us, please. Anora’s got a few questions for you. I thought we could take care of that over breakfast,” she says. Reno nods cautiously, accepting a plate full of food.

“Very well. I’ll do my best to answer any questions you have,” he says, expression guarded. Anora links her hands together and lays her arms down on the table in front of her, her plate pushed to the side.

“Thank you, Reno. Are you the middle son? Why didn’t Bryce ever mention you?” she asks, bluntly. Reno looks like he’s answered the last question a dozen times over, and like he’s sick of the answer.

“I am the middle son, yes, although I’m not a legitimate son. I’m a bastard- I haven’t stayed in Highever Castle for several years. I’ve tried to stay primarily within Highever- Lysander and I are close. Fergus and I, not so much. But Lysander knew I wouldn’t tell his secrets, so he trusted me with a lot of them. When I heard of the siege, I left Highever under the cover of darkness. I had assumed that both of my brothers died. I got news awhile back that Fergus had been at Ostagar, and I thought he had survived. And then I got news of the massacre at Ostagar, so I’m not holding out hope for his survival. It wasn’t until recently that I began to hear rumors of Lysander appearing in Denerim,” Reno explains, in between bites of food. He eats like he had gone days without food. From the looks of him, he may well have.

“I thought Bryce was faithful to Eleanor. It is news to hear that he wasn’t,” Anora says, a dangerous look in her eyes. Reno shakes his head, laughing.

“He was, and I’d kindly ask that you don’t accuse my father of infidelity. My mother served as Eleanor’s servant- Eleanor was an enthusiastic partner in the relationship. It was my mother who didn’t want me legitimized. It was a matter of contention until Eleanor had Lysander- Bryce was traditional in the sense that he wanted an heir and a spare,” he says, meeting Anora’s gaze with a challenge in his eyes.

“So, why didn’t your mother want you to be legitimized?” Arya asks, playing with her eggs with her fork. They were scrambled, served with green peppers and onions. She thinks it would be perfect if she had salsa to go with it.

“My mother was a…practical woman. She knew that there may come a day when her relationship with Bryce and Eleanor came to an end, and she didn’t want to leave me caught up in a political shitstorm as a result. It would have been easy to pass me off as Bryce’s and Eleanor’s, but my mother didn’t want to do that. I was her son and she wanted to keep me,” he tells her. It hurts, in a way, to think of his parents. As far as he was concerned, Eleanor had been a mother to him as well. And now they were all dead.

“That was…smart of her. I suppose that’s all the questions I have. I can’t verify that you truly are a Cousland, but I can send a letter to Lysander. We would get a response long before they were expected back,” she offers. Arya glances at Anora to see cautious trust in the Queen’s eyes- she thinks they have both believed the story, for now.

“I would like to send a letter of my own as well,” Reno says, pushing his plate away. He looks even more tired now, and Arya hopes she can get him to bed quickly.
“Of course. But first, you’re dead on your feet. Let Arya escort you to one of the guest rooms and allow her to look at your injuries,” Anora says, waving her hand. Reno nods, pushing his chair back and rising to his feet. Arya does the same, glancing at Anora. The Queen only smiles and nods.

It is a testament to how well Arya has learned the palace that she does not get them lost on the way to Reno’s quarters. She isn’t sure if it is disquieting or comforting, to know that she is making this place her home. But it is nice to feel like she belongs.

“Have you thought any more of my offer?” she asks, as she opens the door. Reno slips inside, and the way he moves reminds her of Lysander with the littlest ache in her chest.

“I’ve thought quite a bit on it, yes,” Reno tells her, sinking down onto the couch and stretching his leg out. Arya kneels in the floor, pushing the leg of his trousers up over his knee. There’s a deep gash that runs the length of his calf. It had been hastily treated before—poorly applied field medicine, elfroot slapped on top of the wound and wrapped in bandages made from a cut-up shirt. Arya wrinkles her nose in sympathy.

“What have you decided?” she asks, rising and going to fetch the basin of warm water the servants had left on the mantle. There’s a pile of clean bandages and a rag there too, which she doubles back to get after she places the basin next to Reno.

“I’ll do it on the condition that you keep your coin. The only payment I need will be food and lodging,” he says, the look on his face telling her he would take no arguments.

“…Very well, if that’s what it takes. I’ll inform Cailan and Anora soon enough. Now, there’s one thing you should know,” she says, dipping the rag in the warm water. There are, surprisingly, no signs of infection, although it is a real enough danger.

“Oh? Got a surprise for me, sweetheart?” he asks, a grin on his face that’s quickly replaced by a grimace as Arya starts to clean the wound.

“I’m an apostate, ser. Under the King’s protection, might I add. There’s also some other information I have, although the likelihood that you’ll believe me is slim and Cailan and Anora probably wish to keep that from you until they truly trust you. But you know what? It’s not their secret to tell,” she says, biting her bottom lip in sympathy. The elfroot had stuck to the wound and proved difficult to remove. She was sure it hurt.

“I’ve spent the last few weeks with an apostate, fled from Kinloch Hold. A little elf girl, the sweetest I’ve ever met. I have no problem with mages or magic. But I’m interested in this other secret of yours,” Reno tells her. Arya glances up when he mentions the elf—was it Surana?

“Elf girl?” she questions, her movements slowing. Reno nods, shifting on the couch.

“She goes by Echo. I’ve used the last of my coin to pay for a room at the Pearl. I couldn’t ask you to take her on as well, but…I’d like it if you could help her. She’s alone, now. Lost and scared. She told me she shattered her phylactery, and the Circle experienced some trouble before the Templars could take blood for another,” he explains, meeting Arya’s eyes beseeingly.

“Echo, huh? I’ll go talk to her and see what I can arrange,” she promises. With the wound clean, there is little left to do but attempt to heal it. She thinks, for a moment, that she should go get Wynne. And then—

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“Bellanaris, we both know that you are not the healer of the group,” Lanaste scolds, hands on his hips. Abelas lays on the ground, back propped up by a tree. He’s nearly paler than snow from...
blood loss and pain, an arrow sticking out of his thigh. It had only barely missed the vital arteries.

“You’re right, Lanaste. Abelas is the healer of the group. But considering he’s going into shock, something needs to be done,” she snaps, her fingers working quickly to stabilize the wound and remove the arrow.

Abelas looks up at Lanaste with a pained smile, one hand reaching out to ghost against Bella’s cheek.

“I’ve been teaching her. She’s a quick learner. I trust her,” he says, and Bella’s fingers slow but they do not stop as tears well in her eyes.

“It’ll keep him alive, anyway,” she says, voice thick. A moment later, he is bathed in pale light, warm and gentle. He lets out a quiet sigh, his face relaxing as the pain melts away. When Bellanaris removes her hands and the light fades, there is nothing more than a pale scar where the arrow had been-

When Arya is back in the here and now, she finds that she has already cast the spell. Reno has nearly melted into the couch, old aches soothed by the outpouring of magic. She is glad that she could help him, but there is fear there, too. She had cast a spell while she wasn’t aware. It was fine now, but it could be so much worse.

She needed to talk to Morrigan, and soon.

Arya urges Reno into the bed, then slips out of the door.

The snowstorm keeps them in the cave for three days. After the first, Eldris thinks he might go mad, so he slips out of into the snow and makes his way towards the forest. Even in the snow, he is confident he could find something small for them to eat, to supplement their travel rations.

He has caught two scrawny squirrels and a snow hare when he hears footsteps behind him. He whirls around, a knife pressed against Lysander’s neck.

“What do you think you’re doing, sneaking up on me?” he demands, ears flattened against his head. Lysander holds his hands up in a surrender.

“I saw you leave. I didn’t want to stay there in that cave, getting lost in the same damn thoughts,” he explains, easily, casually, like there isn’t a dagger held against his throat. Eldris sighs, and sheathes the blade.

“This should be enough for a stew. Help me clean it, and maybe tell me about those thoughts you’re getting lost in,” Eldris offers. Lysander nods his agreement, moving to clear the snow off of a log so they have a place to sit.

“What if I told you those thoughts involved a certain elven mage from another world?” he asks, impishly. Eldris rolls his eyes as he sets about gutting the hare. The entrails may attract other animals- if the storm lasted much longer, it would do them good.

“Cute, but there’s no reason for you to be brooding about Arya. Why don’t you cut the bullshit and tell me what’s really on your mind?” he says. Lysander takes a seat next to him and begins to work on the squirrel, his fingers falling into the movement instinctively. He’d learned when he was young how to fend for himself, if necessary. He’d insisted until he’d gotten to tag along with Gilmore.
The thought of his old friend is enough to send a bolt of pain through his heart. “I was thinking about my brothers. Fergus was at Ostagar- why hasn’t he been found?” he says, after a moment of silence. There’s the smallest quiver in his voice. Eldris ignores it.

“He may well have been. But do people know you’re alive, to send you the news?” Eldris asks, eyebrows raised. Lysander stops, turning to stare at the elf with wide eyes.

“I…hadn’t even considered that. I thought after I arrived in Denerim, rumors would circulate…I suppose it was foolish to bank on that, especially if Fergus were lost in the Wilds. Still, Reno wasn’t anywhere near the Wilds nor was he at the Castle. He should have gotten away,” he says, voice thick with pain as he turns his attention back to the dead animals.

“It’s likely he did, but if he came to the same conclusion that it was Arl Howe, he likely wanted to keep a low profile,” Eldris says. It’s odd, to think that he is offering comfort to this strange human he hardly knows. He’d never been one for comfort, not even for Theo and Eden and Merrill. Tamlen was the only one who’d ever been comforted by the abrasive rogue.

“I try to keep telling myself that,” Lysander murmurs. They fall into silence then, each of them lost to their own ghosts. They are still silent as they carry the kills back to the cave.

Anaba slips out of the palace at dusk, Arya’s coin purse tucked away underneath her cloak. The streets were silent now, blanketed in snow as if the whole city is asleep.

It wakes up the closer she gets to the Pearl. Taverns are still open, and patrons are still visiting. The same can be said of the whorehouse, but Anaba pays the patrons no mind as she slips inside and goes to speak to the manager. There is a moment of quiet and hushed arguing before she is escorted to a room.

A small elven mage, young and unharrowed, opens the door. Her blonde hair braided back out of her face, and her violet eyes are wide but determined as she takes in her visitor.

Anaba presses the coin purse into her hand and tells her it is from a friend. Echo waits until the city elf is gone before she opens the pouch to look inside.

There is enough coin to book passage on a ship.

She thinks she might go to Kirkwall.
Leliana wakes her early the next morning. Arya gets out of bed without complaint—she had slept on her own that night after insisting Cailan and Anora spend time together. Their relationship was still mending, after all. It had, however, meant that Arya had slept poorly. She had considered finding Morrigan or Leliana, or even Wynne, and asking to sleep with them, but she’d fallen into an uneasy rest before she could.

Arya’s only complaint was that Leliana had swept into the room and drawn the curtains back, letting the light into the room. The bard was far too cheerful for the pale light of dawn to only be breaking over the horizon. Cailan and Anora were likely still asleep, even with all the royal duties they would have to attend to. It wasn’t as difficult to get up as it had been months ago when she’d just arrived. And it had been unthinkable to get up so early back in her world.

“Ready for our first training session?” Leliana asks, eyes twinkling as she perches on the couch to wait for her to get dressed.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess. What’ll we be working on today?” she asks, digging through her clothes for the outfit she’d reserved for training.

“I thought we could try our hand at throwing knives. It’s a useful skill to know,” Leliana says. She has plans for after the lesson, as well, but those aren’t important just yet.

“That sounds moderately dangerous. Let’s do it!” she replies, with a grin on her face as she takes a moment to adjust her clothes. She reaches up to her hair but decides to just pull it back. She can brush it properly when she takes a bath later.

Leliana leads her through the palace to a room dedicated to training. It’s smaller than the courtyard outside, but it’s much warmer and there’s no snow on the ground, so Arya isn’t going to complain. It’s also empty, save for them, and she gets the feeling that Leliana had intentional engineered that.

The bard gives her a crash course in knife safety. Much of it is obvious, common sense stuff and thus completely unnecessary. Arya’s spent enough time in this world to know that the weapons are weapons, not toys, and they should be treated as such.

The first knife Arya throws, she throws all wrong. She’s got the grip wrong, and the stance wrong, and the hilt of the dagger lands against the painted wood of the target with a thunk. Leliana laughs as she steps behind her, adjusting her stance. Once she’s satisfied Arya is standing correctly, she shows her how to hold the knife before she throws it. When Arya tries, the bard spends an extra two minutes fussing with the placement of her fingers on the hilt before she’s satisfied.

When Arya finally gets to throw her second knife, it misses the painted area of the target entirely, but still lands on the wooden board. Her standards are low enough that she would call it a victory.

The lesson continues, and Arya finds that Leliana is a good instructor. She’s insistent at the right times, gentle at the right times, and she has plenty of praise and encouragement to dole out. It makes the training session fun, not something that Arya is doing because she feels like she has to,
and she actually learns more than she had with Lysander. Leliana’s lessons just seemed to stick better. Not that Arya would ever mention this to Lysander - she didn’t think she could survive the puppy eyes he’d give her in return.

“So, shall we go take a bath?” the bard says, putting the last knife back into place on the weapon racks. Arya feels energized - a bath with Leliana sounds perfect. There’ll probably be a lot of chatter and playful splashing. It really has been too long since Arya had just spent time with her. The bard was very much a refreshing change from the rest of the companions, although she found herself missing Morrigan as well. She wondered where the witch had been the last few days, if she had taken up in the library or if she’d been exploring the streets of Denerim. She decides that once she and Leliana have gone their separate ways for the day, she’d find Morrigan. They could explore the city together, if the witch wanted.

“Of course. You know I’m not gonna turn down a bath, especially here where the water is always warm,” Arya answers with a grin. Leliana laughs, linking her arm through Arya’s. Between the two of them, navigating through the corridors is easy. Arya supposes it was easier for Leliana from the start - the bard had grown up in Orlais, after all. From what Arya knew, Orlais was far more extravagant than Fereldan. If the palace of Denerim was a maze, then even the homes of minor nobility likely contained labyrinths in Orlais.

Arya strips out of her clothes eagerly, despite the fact that she hadn’t broken a proper sweat. She hadn’t exactly been shy before - her friends hadn’t hesitated to be in various states of undress around each other, and while she had initially been incredibly shy about it back home, she’d lost that over time. Even so, by the standards here, she had been quite modest. She thinks back to the first bath she’d had here, in that cold stream, and how relieved she had been that Eliza hadn’t gone with her. Now, she was looking forward to taking a bath with her friend.

Leliana is the first to step into the water, letting out a soft gasp as she sinks into the warmth. Arya follows moments later, groaning as the warm water relaxes her muscles. She could spend all day here if they let her, and judging by the look on her friend’s face, Leliana felt the same.

“So, I was thinking,” Leliana began, a sudden mischievous look in her eyes. Arya kicked her feet through the water, grinning.

“Uh-oh. I’m not gonna like this, am I?” she asks, and Leliana gives her a look of mock offense.

“Why do you not have faith in me, my friend? I was only going to suggest you let me do your hair today,” she says, splashing water at her.

“Well, you should have said that was all you wanted! Here I was, thinking you wanted to put me through some sort of torture in the name of beauty,” she exclaims, laughing.

“It’s hardly torture, Arya,” Leliana replies, scandalized. Arya truly had missed this - Leliana was easy to talk to, even when the conversation was about nothing at all.

“I don’t know, I’d argue that it is,” she says, sinking further into the water.

“Of course you would. But I also heard something quite interesting,” the bard says, that mischievous glint back in her eyes.

“Uh-oh. Now I feel like I’m really in trouble,” she says, grinning.

“I heard that Cailan and Anora plan to give you a sort of party for your birthday. Only among
us, but still. The kitchens have been scrambling to get the ingredients for the best desserts they know how to make,” Leliana says, her eyes still glinting. She had heard from Morrigan, who had been told by Anora. The witch was looking for a present for her now-adult friend, and Leliana had some ideas. Some of them were marginally more wicked than others.

“Oh! Yeah, my birthday passed, and I didn’t even know it. I didn’t know what they were planning on doing, though,” she says, reaching for the soap. She wasn’t truly dirty, but the feeling of scrubbing her skin clean was a luxury here that she was going to indulge in as often as possible. She’d gone too long without it before when they were on the road.

“Well, there just so happens to be an Orlesian style spa here in Denerim. You can find them all over Orlais, but as far as I know, Denerim is the first place in Fereldan I’ve found one. I thought perhaps I could take you before your little party, as my gift to you,” Leliana offers, mischief replaced by excitement. Arya’s only experience with any sort of spa in Thedas came from the Trespasser DLC.

Which suddenly reminded her that Vivienne was now a real person that she could actually meet. She had never been more excited for an event that might happen in the far future. She didn’t actually know what the future would hold, but if the Conclave happened and the Breach was a problem that needed to be dealt with, Inquisitor or not, Arya would be there to help.

Which reminded her of Solas, who was still asleep. Suddenly, she found it difficult to care about the spa at the moment.

“That sounds wonderful, Leliana. I’d love to go to the spa with you,” she says, giving the bard a slightly forced smile. If Leliana notices, which she most likely does, she doesn’t say anything.

At the thought of Solas, Bellanaris stirs in the back of her head. Together, they have several guesses as to where the Dread Wolf may be sleeping. The idea of leaving the palace behind to search him out was enticing. But then, who said she needed to leave the palace to seek him out?

She hadn’t tried Fade walking intentionally, but she knew instinctively that Bellanaris had once been adept at it. The ancient elf in question was encouraging her to try, but Arya herself was doubtful. What could she change, by finding Solas, either in the Fade or in the physical world? If she did find him in the physical world, could she even wake him? The idea was frightening.

She knew she was going to try later that night anyway.

An hour later, Arya walks through the castle looking for Morrigan. Leliana had done an elaborate braid, similar to the style Scout Harding had in Inquisition. Arya absolutely loved it. She’d have to recruit the bard to do her hair more often, it would seem.

She finds Morrigan in an alcove, sitting on a window seat and staring out at the courtyard. The witch of the wilds is certainly lost in thought, but she looks up as Arya approaches and gives her a rare smile.

“Hey, you. Where have you been?” Arya asks, returning the smile as she takes the seat opposite Morrigan.

“The library, mostly,” Morrigan answers, stretching out so her leg just barely brushes against Arya’s. Arya wishes, suddenly, that things were different. That she didn’t care about Cailan or Anora or Lysander. That she could be Morrigan’s and Morrigan’s alone because she knew the witch wasn’t fond of sharing. But things were not different, and Arya couldn’t make herself stop caring.
“Find anything interesting?” she asks, a faint smile on her face. She thinks about Bellanaris, who had only had Abelas. But that wasn’t true, was it? There was one life-

-“We shouldn’t do this, Bell. Who knows what’ll happen?” Lanaste says, his brows crinkled with worry. He hovers over her, and already he has pushed her nightgown above her hips.

“Whatever it is, we could deal with it. Besides, Falon’Din and Dirthamen are twin souls, and I’m pretty sure they have sex with each other. But if you don’t want to-” she begins, only for Lanaste to kiss her before she can finish that thought.

“I want you more than anything, taron sol,” he murmurs. When he enters her, there is an echo through the Fade, and they can feel each other. They fall apart over and over again together. Days pass before they leave their bed, curled around each other. Whenever they are hungry, Lanaste summons food. Whenever they are thirsty, Bellanaris makes ice and thaws it.

Months later, and Bellanaris finds that she is pregnant. Lanaste’s brow is pinched with worry again.

“What will this mean for the da’len?” he asks. Bellanaris puts her hand on her stomach and does not answer, because she does not know. Solas is optimistic. Mythal is not.

They have a daughter, and she is love, and-

And Bellanaris does not remember what happened to her. There is only the sharp ache of grief and regret like Bellanaris had yanked the memories out of her own head. In that moment, Arya makes her mind up. She has never thought she would be a mother. But she remembers the child she’d had before when she wasn’t her, and Arya wants. She wants her baby (it was never hers, though, was it?) back in her arms, wants to know she is safe and secure, wants to reassure the daughter whose name she can’t remember that she was loved.

She will find Solas tonight, then.

She does not know she’s crying until Morrigan leans forward and wipes the tears from her cheeks.

“What did you remember?” the witch asks, and her voice is infinitely patient and gentle. Arya sniffs, leaning into the other woman’s touch.

“I had a daughter. I had a daughter, and I can’t remember her name or what happened to her, but it hurts,” she says, shivering violently as she fights back a sob. Morrigan bundles Arya in her arms and murmurs soothing sounds against her ear as the elf breaks in her arms, millennia-old pain rising to the surface.

Arya cries until she cannot cry anymore, and then she wipes the tears from her face and rises.

“Come. We will have a cup of tea in your bedroom, and then you can tell me what was troubling you before you remembered,” Morrigan says, rising, and gently nudging Arya through the corridors. It takes only a moment to find a servant, and as Morrigan fusses with Arya until she is settled, the servant comes back with two cups of chamomile tea, sweetened with honey.

Morrigan doesn’t have an answer for the way the memories seem to take over, but she promises Arya that she will do whatever research she can to find out. If there is nothing she can find, she had promised to accompany Arya to Flemeth’s hut, even though her mother was the last person she had ever seen before.
Cailan had tried to join her for bed, but Arya insisted she wanted to sleep alone. He had seemed worried, but he shrugged it off easily enough and followed Anora to her chambers.

Morrigan would stay on the couch, to watch over Arya, and to slip into the Fade to provide assistance should she draw demons. With a gentle sleep spell, she lulls Arya to sleep and begins her vigil.

The first place Arya-Bellanaris- thinks to look for Solas is in the Brecilian Forest. In a deserted and forgotten temple, she thinks she may find the elf she seeks. If she cannot find him there, then she will try Skyhold. If he isn’t there, there are other options, each of them decreasingly likely that that is where the Dread Wolf slumbers.

The temple she remembers has been swallowed by the earth. There are only a few ancient tunnels that lead inside. It is remarkably well preserved, a barrier thrumming over much of the ruins.

In the center of a once-ornate hall, a figure sits with his back to her. It is a figure she would recognize anywhere- brown skin, hair pulled back into braids and clipped together with a fragment of bone. It is a piece of a wolf’s skull, if she remembers correctly.

“It has been a long time indeed, Fen’Harel,” she says, and there is something viciously satisfying in the way he flinches from her voice.

Slowly, he turns, golden eyes wide and mouth agape.

“Bellanaris?” he questions, hope shining in his eyes for the first time since he’d found her body all those millennia ago.

“Sometimes,” she answers, and she can feel Bellanaris pushing through, trying to break free and take over. Arya takes all of her might and pushes and-

-And they are standing in her bedroom back home.

Chapter End Notes

i fiddled with solas's appearance and gave him something more akin to concept art than what we had in game because brown dreadlocked solas is the solas we deserve. also i had intended for the birthday celebrations to happen here but plot happened about a dozen chapters before i had planned for it to happen so these guys do what they want i guess. plans are briefly derailed but will resume shortly. that birthday bash is happening eventually whether these kiddos like it or not.

thank you guys so, so much for reading. i am so glad i get to share this with you guys, and a huge thank you to everyone who has left comments. seriously, y'all rock and are 90% of the reason i have any drive to finish this. that being said: i love your comments. so much. feel free to keep leaving them- they're more appreciated than you know.
Solas takes in the new surroundings, and his eyes widen in understanding. “I had wondered why I had not found you- her- in the Fade while I slept. I thought perhaps you had taken your final rest, that you were done. I thought it even odder that Lanaste wouldn’t come back. And then I began to wonder if Elgar’nan had done something to keep you from coming back. I see now that things had just gotten…mixed up,” he breathes. He looks at her like she is the answer to all of his problems.

“Wait a second. You just…accept that I’m from somewhere else?” she asks, flopping down on her old bed. The mattress was nothing like what she had gotten used to in Thedas. She finds that she misses it.

“The people of Arlathan achieved many great and terrible things. I take it you remember the Crossroads? How it was in between this world and others? You never got to see any of the other worlds we had access to. Most did not. Only the Evanuris knew where those eluvians were located, and even then, I think it was only Falon’Din and Dirthamen,” he tells her. He walks over to her desk, running his fingers over the wood. It is like nothing he had ever seen, not even in the days of Arlathan.

“I suppose you would have more answers for me than I have for myself,” Arya says, trying to keep the bitterness from her voice. Even now, when she is someone else, that has not changed.

“About some things, yes. If you did not become Bellanaris when you lived here, who were you? I do not want to call you by the wrong name,” he says, a faint smile on his face. He plucks a pencil from the cup on her desk and examines it.

“...Arya. I’m Arya. But there are...complications,” she says, sitting up. After a moment, Solas comes to sit in front of her. Never did she think she would have the Dread Wolf sitting cross-legged on her bed.

“I would imagine so. You are not Bellanaris, and Bellanaris is not you. But you were, once, many times over. So those lives are bleeding through. Bellanaris is bleeding through. You are locked in a struggle for dominance without even knowing. This is where you make a choice,” he tells her, reaching out and taking her hands in his.

“What choice?” she asks, helplessly, clinging to the point of contact between them. She knows that he is the only one who could give her the answers she seeks, the answers she needs. There is Mythal, but there is a part of her distinctly uncomfortable with talking to what is left of her mistress.

“There are three. You could let go and let Bellanaris take over. You could push Bellanaris back and take over yourself. Or you could see this out and keep finding memories until you have all of them. Until you can coexist. Until there are no distinctions between the two of you,” he says, infinitely gentle and infinitely patient. This is the way she remembered him: quiet moments in between the war they were fighting. He had been a good teacher.

“Oh,” she says, eloquently, and Solas smiles at her. He squeezes her hand once before he
“But that is not why you sought me out, is it?” he asks, turning his back to her. His hands are clasped behind his back, and this is how she remembered him too. He is not her friend, when he stands like that. He is the Mythal’s general. He is Fen’Harel. He is the Dread Wolf who frees slaves.

Except for her. He had tried, but Bellanaris would not listen. Arya wonders if he could break those chains now.

But that is not why she sought him out, either.

“I- she- had a daughter. With Lanaste. But I cannot remember what happened to her,” she says, her mouth dry. He turns to her again, and there is an expression of infinite sadness on his face.

“Those memories are painful. You will like her less when you see them. She asked me to put a block in her mind, to keep her from remembering,” he tells her, coming to sit by her again. She decides she is tired of this not knowing.

“I want to know them. I want to know what happened to my baby,” she says, and there is an undercurrent of steel in her voice. Solas only gives her a sad smile.

“Lie down, then. I will remove the block, and I will allow you to remember,” he tells her. He would not keep this a secret. He had not wanted to do so in the first place, but Bellanaris had argued. Had told him that if she would keep fighting his war then he would take those memories and put them somewhere she could not find them.

Arya closes her eyes, and Solas reaches into her mind and breaks down the door holding the memories back.

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Her daughter’s name is Isala. In the same way that Solas was Pride, and Lanaste was Mercy, and she herself was Eternity, she names her daughter Love.

She takes her daughter on missions that are not so dangerous. She puts her in a sling tied around her chest, and this is the way that she will keep her daughter close. The way that she will not forget what is important in the war that has gone on for many lifetimes.

On the missions that are too dangerous, on the ones that lead to battlefields or assassinations, she will leave her daughter with Solas or Abelas. There is something that stops her from leaving Isala with Mythal, but it is not something she will ever be able to put her finger on.

Isala is an angelic infant. She rarely cries, and when Bellanaris needs her daughter to be silent, Isala does not make any sounds. She grows in the temple in what will become the Arbor Wilds.

Her hair is a startling silver, but her eyes are a warm gold. She has her mother’s nose and her father’s chin but her cheekbones are her own. She is ethereal and beautiful.

Bellanaris discovers that her daughter likes to climb: trees, the temple walls, anything that can be climbed. She practices her barrier spell until it is perfect, so her daughter will be safe even when she is not there to catch her.

It does not last.
Isala is seven years old the first time she meets an Evanuris aside from Fen’Harel, and Bellanaris had done whatever she could to make it so. They had gone to the market in Arlathan one day, and while Bellanaris went shopping, Isala had slipped away. Bellanaris hadn’t been worried until four hours had passed, and her daughter had not returned.

She slips through the crystal streets. She knows them like the back of her own hand from past lives and past memories, even if the city grows and changes and expands. The heart of Arlathan is the same.

She tastes ash when her daughter’s trail leads her to the glinting spires of Elgar’nan’s palace. With her heart in her throat, she is granted entrance. She finds her daughter in Elgar’nan’s lap in the throne room.

He had been braiding her hair. When Bellanaris enters the room, he looks up with a grin that is all teeth. Isala laughs in his arms, squirming, and gently he puts her in the floor. She runs to her mother, tugging on her hand.

The look Elgar’nan sends her would be enough to freeze her blood in her veins if she were the sort of woman who could be cowed by the Evanuris.

She snatches her daughter into her arms and stalks out of the palace. She will not let Isala return to Arlathan.

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There is still plenty for Isala to explore. She is five hundred the first time she leaves Mythal’s temple. It is only a short outing, to explore the outer reaches of the Wilds that she has known her entire life.

For the first time since the marketplace in Arlathan, Bellanaris is afraid.

Abelas tries to stop her, but Bellanaris is the sort of woman who does what she wants, and to protect her daughter she would do anything. She follows Isala silently and watches as her daughter sets up camp.

Her daughter finds an injured man in the forest. On his face, he wears Falon’Din’s vallaslin. Bellanaris knows that this man has been sent to work against them.

That night, when he is sleeping next to the fire, Bellanaris strides into camp with intent to kill him.

Isala stands between them. The man sits up on one elbow and reaches for his daughter. Bellanaris calls fire to her hands, but Isala’s barrier snaps into place before it reaches him.

“You will not touch Din’an,” she hisses, the man’s hand lands on her ankle.

He makes no move to hurt her. It is almost as if he is offering comfort.

“You are nothing but a child, da’len! You do not know what you are doing. This man’s name is Death, and the vallaslin on his face marks him as an agent of Falon’Din. You would doom us all if you let him live,” Bellanaris says. Isala’s eyes are full of fire.

“Din’an was looking for Fen’Harel. He wants to be free,” she tells her mother, and when
she speaks her words are cold. Bellanaris does not falter.

“It is a ploy used to find our base of operations and destroy it,” she insists. Isala’s barrier remains strong, and behind her Din’an pushes himself unsteadily to his feet, reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder.

Isala relaxes into his touch.

In that moment, Bellanaris realizes it is not the first time they have met.

“You will lead us to ruin,” Bellanaris says, and she disappears into the trees to warn the others.

Isala will not return for many centuries. Din’an will stay by her side.

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When Isala returns, Din’an’s face is bare, and Isala is happy. Abelas only gives Bellanaris a look, one eyebrow arched. She gives him a glare in return.

Isala does not stay for long. Always, whenever she goes, Din’an goes with her.

Bellanaris wishes she knew what they were to each other. She does not trust the man who had worked for the god of death.

Falon’Din was not known for letting his pets out of his sight.

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Isala will visit occasionally, and always Din’an is with her. Bellanaris wonders if he ever leaves her side. Slowly, she starts to trust the man.

It is that, or lose her daughter entirely.

She wonders how a single encounter could change things between them. Mythal assures her that this is the case for most families. She has not seen her own children, after all, for over a thousand years.

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Isala is two thousand years old when Bellanaris loses her forever. She had just left the temple in the wilds.

Din’an comes running back.

Isala had been taken.

---

Falon’Din and Dirthamen keep Isala in a hidden temple of their own. They feed her when they must. The cell that is now her home is dark and damp, but she spends much of her time sleeping.

She finds Din’an in the Dreaming, and she weeps. He promises that he will rescue her.
Isala trusts Din’an, and she trusts her mother and her father, and Solas and Abelas. They will come for her. She will not die in this prison.

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Falon’Din and Dirthamen take her out of her cell, sometimes. The first time, she had been hopeful.

She had been carried back to her cell because they had ensured her legs would not support her weight.

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Isala doesn’t know how much time has passed. She can no longer find anyone in the Dreaming. Not Din’an, not her mother.

Falon’Din and Dirthamen take her eyes.

Still, they do not come. She has long since stopped caring why.

Isala dies in the dark.

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When Arya wakes, it is morning. Morrigan has fallen asleep on the couch. It is jarring, to see the witch. Jarring to see the bustling city of Denerim instead of a temple deep in the wilds.

The grief she feels is overwhelming. Her daughter had died alone because she had not saved her. She should have been better, done better.

For the first time, Bellanaris is truly silent in her head.

Arya slips out of her room, and out of the palace. She is gone for most of the day.

That night, Morrigan sits alone at the end of the table in the dining hall, her knees pulled up to her chest. At the other end, Arya sits between Cailan and Anora.

The witch would not admit it, but she is lonely. Arya is the only friend she has, but she would not begrudge her friend this. She had looked haunted when she’d returned to the palace, and she was only beginning to cheer up.

She looks up sharply when a man drops into the seat next to her. There are dozens of empty seats- why had he decided to sit next to her?

Her first instinct is to be rude. It has served her well, so far. But she glances back at Arya and remembers how lonely she feels, and she decides that she will try something else.

She lets the man initiate conversation.

“I’ve heard about you. You’re Morrigan, right? I’m Reno,” he says, a friendly smile on his face.

“I’ve heard of you as well,” she says, giving him a small smile. Arya made this look so easy, but Morrigan felt like she is blundering around in the dark.

“I hope it was only good things,” he says, reaching for a glass of wine.
“There was not much to hear. It would seem you are nearly as mysterious as I am,” she returns, an amused smile gracing her features. She wondered why the man had chosen to sit with her.

“Well, a little mystery is intriguing, no?” he says, raising his eyebrows. Morrigan decides in that moment that she likes this strange man. He seems to like her, too.

“That depends on the sort of mystery. There are many that are only frustrating,” she answers. A look crosses his face, then, mischievous.

“Well, why don’t we see what kind of mystery I’ve got. Come with me,” he says. Morrigan frowns, her brow furrowed. The man didn’t seem to want to do anything…untoward. She was used to men trying to get her alone for those reasons.

“…Tis hardly worse than sitting here, I would think. Very well, lead on,” she decides. She lets him lead her through the palace until they come to a small storage room, one that clearly hasn’t been used for quite some time. In the darkness, Morrigan casts a spell to call a wisp that lights the way.

Reno shuts the door behind them. Normally, this is where Morrigan would get suspicious. But before she can accuse the man of anything, she hears tiny squeaking. She furrows her brows at him, and he gestures for her to follow him quietly. He leads the way deeper into the room, through stacks of wooden crates.

There, in the corner of the room, is a cat curled up with kittens. Reno folds himself onto the ground next to the mother, a closed fist reaching out. The mother bumps her head against his hand, and Morrigan can hear the purring even from here.

“You wanted to show me kittens?” she whispers, a smile on her face that she can’t shake as she joins Reno on the ground.

“I thought you might be a cat person. Besides, they’re really cute,” he tells her, a smile on his own face. Cautiously, he reaches down, picking up one of the kittens. It squeaks in protest at being removed from the warm nest. Gently, he deposits it in Morrigan’s lap.

The kitten is grey, and as Morrigan strokes her fingertips down the creature’s spine, it begins to purr, bumping against her other hand and demanding affection.

“I doubt anyone else knows about this. Anyone important, at any rate. I’d wager the servants know,” he says, pulling an orange tabby into his own lap.

“Tis certainly not what I expected,” she murmurs, still stroking the kitten, which has curled up in the crook of her knee.

“A good sort of mystery though, no?” he says, a crooked grin on his face.

“This time, perhaps,” Morrigan answers, returning his grin with one of her own.

Outside, snow begins to fall once more. It will be hours before Morrigan and Reno move, putting the kittens back in their nest and creeping through the now-dark palace. She thinks she might like to see more of his mysteries.
after the angst with Isala, I thought I should end with something less angsty so have Morrigan with kittens. Hopefully next chapter I'll get us back on track with the birthday stuff
	hanks a bunch for reading! i hope you guys continue to enjoy this fic, and if you do, feel free to keep loving those comments. i'm gonna end up framing some of them, mark my words.
The snow does not stop falling, but it lessens until it is no longer a howling blizzard. Eldris is the one to insist they should leave now, while they can. If they don’t, they’ll never be able to make it through the mountain pass to the gates of Orzammar. It would be a whole winter wasted, when the Blight threatens the world. It is not a delay they can afford.

Alistair protests. There are dangers and discomforts to traveling in a snowstorm, even one that has turned into light flurries. The rest only grumble, with no true disagreements. They’re afraid of getting cut off at the pass, too.

It is quick work, packing their things. They have subsisted off of what Eldris and Lysander could catch for them in the snowy woods, so they still have enough rations. It will be difficult work, traveling through snow knee-deep in some places, but Orzammar will be difficult work, too.

Anders casts a haste spell on them as they leave, stepping out into the falling snow. The pull their cloaks tight about them as they step out into the lightly falling snow.

It is a long way yet to Orzammar.

Arya’s birthday celebration had been pushed back. Anora was very secretive about the whole thing, really, only telling her they needed time to prepare with a mischievous glint in her eyes. It suited Arya just fine- there was still part of her locked in the mourning of a daughter that wasn’t hers. Fen’Harel’s rebellion had been more important than Bellanaris’s daughter, and Arya doesn’t know if she will ever forgive her for that.

Morrigan watches her friend retreat into herself, lost in her thoughts. It breaks her heart, but the only thing she can do is hope the upcoming plans would serve to take her mind off of it, to bring her back to herself. Information about the little party was on a need-to-know basis. From the gleam in Anora’s eyes, she thought it great fun. Morrigan did not care for such trivialities, but she did find herself in need of a present.

Leliana had been of little help. She’d taken her through the Denerim markets, until they reached a small shop tucked away in a dark alley. Morrigan had gone warily inside, only to find garments made of lace and toys for the bedroom. She’d turned on her heel and stalked back out, zapping Leliana with electricity as she goes.

There was the matter of Arya’s staff. It was a cheap and ugly thing, purchased in Redcliffe because it was the only one around. Arya had always fumbled with it, even when she’d learned how to use it. If she works quickly, there is just enough time to have one ready by the time Anora plans to have the party. It is not, however, something she can do alone.

Morrigan finds herself in front of Reno Cousland’s bedroom door, her fist raised to knock. She hesitates for a moment, and before her knuckles can strike the wood, the door swings open. Reno stands in front of her, hair rumpled, shirt held in his hands. She stares at him, golden eyes wide in surprise as her hand falls back to her side.

“I thought I heard someone out in the hall! Come in,” he says, standing aside. Morrigan tears her eyes away from his bare chest and steps into the room. The grin on his face tells her he noticed,
“I need your help with something, if you can do it,” she says, awkward and fumbling and Morrigan understood the necessity of hiding in the Wilds, but she hates her mother in that moment for never teaching her how to be around other people. Reno doesn’t seem to mind, though. Didn’t ever seem to mind any of the few times he’d sat down beside her, or led her off through the hallways, or once when he’d led her through the markets to show her a shop of oddities.

“What do you need?” he asks, whiskey brown eyes turning to her with a warmth that almost scares her. Morrigan swallows and turns her back, going to stand by the fire. She finds it easier to look at the flickering flames than it is to look at him.

“Arya’s present. I want to get her a new staff, one better suited to her. I’d like to make one, but I’m hardly skilled at shaping wood or steel. Barring that, the only thing left to do is buy her a new one. I was hoping you might know where I could find one,” she says, and then she turns back to look at him because part of her wants to see his face.

“I can help make one. If we use wood, we can use the cat room, it shouldn’t disturb them, and we wouldn’t be disturbed either. If you’ll give me a moment to get dressed, we can go out and get the supplies. I can even teach you,” he says, and there’s a crooked grin on his face and it is only now that Morrigan notices the tiny scar at the corner of his lips. Absurdly, she wants to reach out and touch it.

“T’ll be a present from both of us, then,” she says, with a faint smile. Reno’s eyes are warm as he tugs his shirt on and reaches his for his boots.

It takes days for the two of them to make the staff. Morrigan had chosen the wood, and had sketched out a design. She didn’t have the same talent for sketching that Arya did, but it got the point across easily enough. They had set up in the room with the kittens, who were beginning to walk around and explore, tails sticking straight into the air. They liked to play with the dangling necklaces Morrigan sometimes wore, and when they did Reno would always smile. She found herself wearing those necklaces more often.

Reno’s hands are steady on the knife as he carves. Once the general shape starts to form from the block of wood, he has Morrigan sit between his legs, his hands on hers as he shows her how to move the knife. It is not so difficult to pick up, and Morrigan is perfectly capable of doing it alone now that Reno has shown her how, but he keeps his hands on hers, his chin on her shoulder, and she doesn’t find it in her to complain.

When they reach Orzammar, it is not snowing, and for that Eldris is grateful. He lets Alistair negotiate their way inside the city, and he turns his face to the sky. Wind ruffles his hair, his ears pinned back against his head. The tips of them burn from the cold, but Eldris knows he will miss the weak winter sun on his face.

He only turns away when Lysander calls to him, standing at the open door. Eldris takes one last look at the sky and follows the rest of the party. He feels as though the Earth has swallowed him whole, his skin prickling as if he’s been caught in a trap. But there’s no trap here, only a city without a king and locked in a political power struggle. It will be a very long winter.

Eldris finds himself thinking of Duncan, of all things. He’d hated the man at first. Many of his memories of the old Warden were of arguments- his anger had been tempered now, but Duncan had found him when it was fresh and bright and hot and he’d taken him away from his Clan.
It was only his sister’s arms around him that kept him from drawing his weapons on the man. So Eden had encouraged him to go and Eldris had gone, but he hadn’t been very happy about the whole situation, and he can feel guilt about Tamlen pressed against his skin right next to guilt about Duncan.

He cannot imagine coming here to die in the Deep Roads, with stone overhead instead of open blue sky. He had found a cure for Sam, the stupidly loyal dog who walked at his heels even now. Perhaps he could find a cure for himself, too, when all this was over.

But it is only really beginning. The entire party is given accommodations in the royal palace, Bhelen welcoming the Wardens with a wolf’s smile.

They are careful of what they speak of, here. They do not trust that the walls do not have ears. For now, they will map out the situation as carefully as they can, meeting in the dark corners of Tapster’s Tavern to plan.

The day dawns bright and early, and Leliana is sweeping into Arya’s bedroom. Cailan and Anora are nowhere to be seen, and Arya doesn’t want to leave the warm cocoon of her blankets. In the past days, Arya had retreated in on herself. She only spoke to others when she had to, preferring to keep to herself in her bedroom or the library, floating through the palace like a wraith. She does not know if the grief is hers or Bellanaris’s, but sometimes it aches so strongly it takes her breath away. Even now, Arya does not want to do whatever Leliana has planned.

The bard doesn’t give her much choice. Cheerfully, she yanks the blankets back. Arya groans, rolling over, curling tight into a ball. Leliana threatens to douse her with cold water, and Arya rolls out of the bed grumbling.

Leliana presses a pile of clothes into her arms and Arya takes her time getting dressed. Leliana flits around the room, rearranging things as she can. For all that this has become Arya’s home, it is startlingly bare. Her computer sits on the desk, and her bag is under the bed. The staff she’d gotten in Redcliffe is tucked away in the closet. There is little that says it is Arya’s home.

“Where are we going, Lel?” Arya asks. It’s the first time she’s spoken since her rude awakening, and Leliana gives her a bright smile in return.

“In Orlais, we have these marvelous bathhouses,” she says, as if that is all the explanation needed.

“We aren’t in Orlais,” Arya says, grumpily, as Leliana leads her into the palace corridors.

“No, we aren’t. We’re in Denerim. And the bathhouses of Orlais are popular enough that one has set up here. It is hardly as good as the one in Halamshiral, but it is better than nothing. And this is the first present you get today,” the bard says, eyes twinkling. Arya can’t find it in her to stay grumpy, so she lets Leliana lead her through the city, snow crunching under their boots, until they find the bathhouse.

They are ushered inside by the madam and stripped of their clothes. Fluffy towels are wrapped around them immediately, and the room they find themselves in is hazy with steam.

It feels divine.

They are given a while to relax in the warm steam before they are ushered into the baths proper. The water is hot, and floral-scented oils have been added. There are sugar scrubs lining the walls of the tub, some of them having seen more use than others. There are more towels piled
The water is heavenly, and Arya forgets all about Isala and the grief that might not be hers. She forgets how early in the morning it is, and how poorly she had slept. She forgets everything but the rose-scented water easing the ache in her bones, the sugar scrub that smells like honey, and the bard sitting in the water next to her.

It is evening when they finally leave the bathhouse. They had moved throughout the place, and had even gotten massages from a middle-aged elven woman with kind eyes and strong hands. New outfits had been brought for them both, set up in advance by Leliana and carried out by Anaba. Leliana wears a dress of dark blue. She has matching shoes, of course.

Arya’s dress is not from her own closet. It is new, a deep blood red thing made of silk. There are silver accents on the collar, hem, and sleeves. It comes with matching shoes, and a heavy cloak lined with fur.

They look stunning, together. She wonders what the everyone will look like back at the palace, because she has no doubts that the party Anora had mentioned however long ago was tonight. Leliana links her arm through Arya’s, and leads her out into the snow. Arya finds that she is excited.

Anora, damn her, had ordered new clothes for everyone for the party. They were fine, but not overly so, and Morrigan still hated the thrice-damned dress she had been forced into. It is a deep plum shade, with a plunging neckline to show off the jewelry she wears. It comes with matching shoes that she refuses to wear. Cailan and Reno were lucky enough to escape with new shirts. They mingle in the ballroom, Morrigan tucked away in a corner.

Even Anaba had gotten a new dress for the occasion. The whole thing is meant to be sort of casual, but Anora had wanted to do something big, so nice and new outfits were par for the course. There was also a table full of food. It just so happened that some of it was pizza. Anora had borrowed Arya’s computer and found a recipe, which she copied down and gave to the cooks. There was another table with presents- a staff from Morrigan and Reno, a quilt from Anaba (bought with Anora’s money, of course), jewelry from Cailan, books from Wynne, and even Eliza had chipped in with a bottle of expensive Antivan wine.

Reno finds Morrigan just as the ballroom doors open. Leliana slips inside, followed by Arya, and the doors shut again as Arya gapes. Music starts to play from Arya’s computer, pilfered by Cailan and operated by Anora. Morrigan had been sure to charge it.

“Happy birthday,” Anora says, pulling Arya into a hug. Arya wraps her arms around her again, and it is Cailan who suggests they dance.

Arya tries to dance with the Cailan and Anora at the same time. It is horrible to watch, a messy thing, but it is full of laughter and Morrigan finds herself happy for her friend. Leliana pairs off with Wynne, laughing as she twirls the older woman around the ballroom, and Anaba and Eliza hover near the food table.

Morrigan is content to stay on the sidelines, watching her friend have fun, but Reno turns to her and offers his arm.

“May I have this dance?” he asks, roguishly handsome, a twinkle in his eyes, and Morrigan can’t say no. He twirls her around the ballroom, until he steals Anora away and places Morrigan in
Arya’s arms. He’s back soon enough, though, stealing Morrigan away. She doesn’t know how long it’s been, only that one song blurs into another and they dance until her feet ache. Reno finally stops, next to the table of food, and Morrigan grabs a glass of wine gratefully.

Her hair is slipping from the ribbon holding it up, and Reno reaches up to tuck it behind her ear. Morrigan meets his eyes, warm and soft, and there’s something between them.

It is broken by Arya, who has just now caught sight of the table. It is laden with desserts and yes, the pizza from her world, and the whole room stops to stare at the grin blooming across her face.

The night devolves quickly, then. They eat, crowded around the table. Morrigan sits at the end, Reno pressed against her side, and Arya is sandwiched in between Anora and Cailan and across from Leliana. It is a thing of bumping elbows and laughter. By the end of it, they all have more than enough wine in them.

Wynne slips away first, with some quiet comment about old bones. Eliza follows shortly after, a dry grin on her face when she mentions guard duty in the morning. Anaba tries to slip out, but Arya tells her to lay off her duties tomorrow and stay if she wants to stay, so the elf stays. It is then that they move to presents.

Even wine-drunk, Arya takes her time with them. She trails her fingers over the covers and spines of the novels Wynne gave her, and coos over the jewelry from Cailan. Some of it, she puts on then. The wine is set aside, and the quilt draped over her shoulders like a cape. The staff she unwraps last, and she runs her fingers over the carving along the base of it.

She finds Morrigan later and pulls her into a hug. Her breath smells like the wine she had been drinking, fanning across Morrigan’s face.

“Thank you,” she whispers, “the staff is perfect.” She slips away then, back to Cailan and Anora. Morrigan watches her go with a faint smile on her face.

Morrigan slips out, and Reno goes with her. The music and the wine and the dancing had been too much, and the witch desperately wants quiet, so she slips through the corridor with Reno at her heels and into the room full of kittens.

She sinks to the ground and Reno sits with her, close enough that their shoulders brush together. The kittens are all asleep, but the mother cat crawls into Morrigan’s lap and starts to purr. She strokes her fingers through the calico fur. Silence stretches between them, but it is a comfortable one. It always has been, with Reno.

He shifts, curling closer, and Morrigan looks at him, golden eyes meeting brown. He reaches down and scratches the cat’s chin, but his eyes don’t leave hers.

“Did you have a good time, tonight?” he asks. She bites her lip as she nods, slow, and a smile blooms across his face.

“I did, yes, thanks to you. There was only one problem,” she says, a grin teasing at the edges of her lips.

“What was that?” he asks, and there’s something in his face that says he might kiss her. There’s something in hers that says she might want him to.

“I hate this thrice-damned dress. If I never have to wear it again, it will be too soon,” she declares, and Reno’s laughter is warmer and brighter than any fire Morrigan has ever seen.
so there's the birthday party done! i didn't mean for so much of this to be in morrigan's perspective, but it was, so there's that. i'm impatient to get the ball rolling (i really want to get into DA2) and i don't remember much of orzammar, so as a heads up i may be skipping over much of orzammar. we'll still get some fun bits, though! i hope to introduce brosca and aeducan in the next chapter. also, anora got arya another private present that i hope to introduce (°_<-5°)

that being said, thanks so much for reading! i really appreciate the support you guys give me. i try to respond to any comments to show you guys how much i do appreciate it, but regardless of response, your comments are what keep me going sometimes when inspiration is being a bitch.
Arya had woken up the morning after her party with a headache, in bed with Anora. Cailan had gone to his own quarters, that night, a twinkle in his eyes. Anora had promised she had a present to give Arya in private, but by the time they’d stumbled to the bedroom, they were too drunk to do anything but collapse on the bed.

The benefits of being a mage healer-in-training, however, means that Arya can wave her hand and cast a spell and her headache disappears. She still has to piss, and she could still drink an entire river dry, but she doesn’t feel like death warmed over, so she’ll take it.

Anora wakes up as she’s drinking from the basin of water left for them. Arya puts it down at Anora’s groan, and uses the same spell on her. The Queen seems happier, after that, sitting up on the edge of her bed and rubbing her eyes.

“You said you had a present for me?” Arya asks, because she’s been curious all night, and Anora’s cheeks turn pink.

“Yes, I… I do. It cost a pretty silver, too,” she says, ducking under the bed. She comes back up with a box held in her hand, cheeks still oddly pink.

Arya takes it, and opens it up. Inside is a… dildo?

“A Anora…?” she says, looking back at the Queen. She doesn’t answer, and slips off the bed instead. She pads over to her dresser, and digs in the drawers for a moment before coming up with what is obviously a harness. So, not a dildo then. A strap-on. Fun for the two of them. Arya could work with this.

“It’s… enchanted,” Anora manages to say. Arya’s read enough dirty fanfiction to know where this is going.

“Should we try it out?” she asks, with a grin, and Anora nods shyly, holding the harness out. Arya strips out of her smalls and fumbles with the harness until it’s on, and when the dildo slots into place she gasps.

So. The sensory enchantments worked better than expected. It shifted, changing to something that looked almost natural on her body. She shuffles in front of the mirror to examine it.

If it weren’t for the harness, she might think it was real. Well, that, and the lack of balls. Hesitantly, she reaches down, and curls her fingers around the base, and gasps. Definitely sensitive, and definitely hardening under her touch.

When she turns around, her heart goes to her throat. Silently, Anora had divested herself of her own smalls, and kneeled on the floor. She’s blushing in earnest, now, but she reaches out and hooks her fingers in the straps of the harness and tugs Arya closer.

“I… May I?” Anora asks, and it’s all Arya can do to nod, letting her hands fall to her side. Anora leans forward, and swipes her tongue over the head of her dick, and Arya groans.

Emboldened, Anora presses on, licking a stripe up the underside before opening her mouth
and taking the head inside. Arya’s hands go to her hair, tangling in it. Gods and Goddesses above, but she just wants to take Anora and throw her onto the mattress and fuck her. She whines, and Anora chuckles around her length, and the vibrations make the coil in her stomach wind tighter.

Anora pulls her mouth off her dick with a pop. “I was going to take my time, but I think you want to move on all ready,” the Queen teases, and Arya pulls her up and kisses her until they’re both dizzy, spinning them around and walking until Anora’s back hits the mirror.

She doesn’t think they’ll make it to the bed.

Arya slides her knee in between Anora’s thighs, and the Queen grinds down on it eagerly, already wet and wanting. Arya deepens the kiss, tongue gliding along her bottom lip, teeth nipping ever so gently, and Anora hooks one leg around Arya’s waist. Her length is pressed against Anora now, and the wet heat is warm and inviting, but Arya’s not going to turn selfish just because she’s got a cock now. She reaches down between them with one hand, sliding her dick between Anora’s lips, and starts to move her hips, gliding in and out of the wetness.

Anora curls her fingers around Arya’s shoulders, nails digging into her skin. Maker, but she wants, and Arya’s just teasing her.

“Please,” she whines, pulling back from the kiss, and Arya grins.

“As you wish,” she breathes, and pulls back just enough to sink inside. Anora’s other leg wraps around her waist, and then it’s just Arya and the mirror holding her up.

Arya ducks down and bites her neck. Anora cries out, wiggling her hips, and Arya starts to thrust in and out. The mirror bangs against the wall, and it’ll be a miracle if they don’t break it, but Anora’s skin is soft against hers and her cunt is warm and wet around her cock and Arya doesn’t give a damn whether the mirror survives or not.

Anora finishes first, when Arya ducks down and takes her nipple into her mouth. Arya follows her over the edge, her walls practically milking her, and gods if this is what it feels like for Lysander and Cailan, Arya doesn’t know how they ever stop.

She almost drops Anora, but the Queen unwinds one leg first to steady them. Arya rests her forehead against Anora’s, breathing hard and heavy.

Anora is the one to break the silence between them when she pulls back to kiss Arya’s nose. “So, did you like your present?” she asks, grinning.

“Oh, I’m not sure. I think I’m going to have to use it again, and again, and again. Just to be sure, you know,” she says, and Anora blushes so prettily at the promise of a second time that Arya has to kiss her again.

When Eldris will think back to his time in Orzammar, especially in the early days of the winter when they’d just arrived, he will remember the arguing. It took place tucked away in a corner of Tapster’s Tavern, with heated whispers instead of shouting matches. The fate of Orzammar, after all, was best discussed with an inside voice, instead of loud enough that every dwarf in the city could hear them.

Eldris wondered if it would be easier if the citizens of Orzammar did know that it was up to two Grey Wardens and their merry band of misfits to decide the next king. He rubbed his temples, wishing Morrigan were here. The witch could have cowed Alistair into agreeing with a single look and a well-said barb. But Morrigan wasn’t here and Eldris was alone in arguing his point. Most of their party had shifted away, some of them milling through the market place outside. It was only
Alistair, Eldris, Loghain, Lysander, and Sten that sat in the tavern. And only Eldris and Alistair seemed to have any opinion on the matter.

The crux of the problem was that Eldris wanted to support Bhelen, and Alistair wanted to support Harrowmont, especially as they uncovered more about the situation. Alistair’s argument was that Bhelen was a bad man. Eldris’s argument was that Harrowmont would be a weak king.

“You were fine letting me make decisions in the Circle Tower,” Eldris says, glaring daggers at Alistair. Alistair, for the most part, is unperturbed, crossing his arms over his chest and raising an eyebrow.

“And now I’ve grown enough as a person to accept responsibility. Do you want me to pull rank? I’m the senior Grey Warden here,” he reminds him, and Eldris gives him a look that says try it, and you won’t be able to give orders.

“Grey Wardens aren’t even supposed to get into politics, remember? Maybe we should leave and let the whole fucking city rot, which will happen anyway if Harrowmont takes the throne because the man is mired in tradition,” Eldris hisses. His ears are pinned back to his head, and Lysander would swear that he looked just like the dog with hackles raised.

“Oh, but I thought Dalish elves like yourself were all about tradition,” Alistair says, and it was the wrong thing to say because Eldris starts to vault across the table, a dagger already in his hand. Sten is the one that stops him, reaching out and pulling him back into his seat with a sharp yank. He doesn’t let go.

“Will the two of you knock it off?” Lysander snaps, finally. He’s at his wit’s end listening to them, and he had half a mind to storm out and make the decisions himself. The only thing stopping him was the disastrous consequences that might have.

“He went too fucking far, and he’s wrong anyway,” Eldris snaps right back. If looks could kill, Alistair would be dead a thousand times over. The Dalish were nothing like the dwarven deshyrs. The deshyrs were so mired in what had been that they would not move forward. The Dalish had lost everything and done nothing but move forward. And it wasn’t as though the Dalish clans were united- some clans were less traditional than others, and Eldris was sure the same could be said of individual dwarves, but Orzammar was controlled by a king. And the city needed a king that would move them forward, lest they stagnate and fall.

“Why don’t we put it to a vote? We’ll all be doing the dirty work,” Loghain says, dryly, and Eldris looks back at Alistair. The other Warden looks properly chastised, and he nods. Eldris relaxes, just a little, and Sten lets go of him.

In the end, they decide to work for Bhelen. Anders had abstained from voting, and the dog didn’t get a say. Eldris feels vindicated, and he triumphantly goes to tell Bhelen that their decision has been made while Alistair sulks in his bedroom.

Eldris’s reward is getting to play errand boy. He should have expected this, really. Supporting Bhelen meant doing things for Bhelen, which in this case meant convincing those who mattered to support him. Lord Helmi offers his support easily enough, but Lady Dace sends him to the Deep Roads. Disgruntled, he turns back to the royal palace to collect the others.

Natia Brosca was not having a very good day, or even a very good week. At this point, she had been exiled for months. It hadn’t been so bad, at first. She was a Dust Town rogue, and that meant she knew how to catch and skin and cook deepstalkers. Occasionally, she would get lucky,
and she would find a nug.

And then she’d found another dwarf. It wasn’t like Natia hated other people. Quite the opposite, in fact. Put her in a room and Natia would thrive as the center of attention.

Natia hated nobility, and even exiled, the middle Aeducan was noble.

“Stone, Brosca, are you always so grumpy?” the ex-noble asks, and Natia bristles.

“Maybe you’d know, Signa, if you’d ever deigned to look beyond your palace doors,” she spits, and this is an argument that they have had many times over. Signa Aeducan had tried to give up her since her exile, but Brosca didn’t care. Noble was noble, and noble didn’t give enough of a shit to look past the Diamond Quarter, much less into Dust Town. So Signa Aeducan was now just Signa, instead of Scout, like she’d tried to become.

Even so, she thought of Rica, and hoped her sister had managed what she herself could not. She was just glad, viciously so, that Beraht would not benefit.

“Natia, I can’t make up for everything the noble caste has done to casteless like you. I didn’t even do all those things! And I’m not noble, anymore. I’ve been erased from the sodding Memories! I’m just Signa now, and we’re stuck together in the Deep Roads trying to survive the darkspawn and hunger and thirst and I’m so sick of having you at my throat over every breath I take,” Signa says, and she is so tired.

She thinks of Bhelen, and she thinks of Trian. She wished her younger brother had seen that she would never have been a threat to his rule. Signa had wanted to work in the Shaperate, with the Memories. She had not wanted the throne.

Natia doesn’t answer, just holds up her hand, and Signa lets out a frustrated sound. Natia whips her head around and glares.

“Shut it. I hear someone coming,” she hisses, and then she slips into the shadows of the tunnel. Signa snuffs out their fire and looks at their pitiful camp. It was made of salvage, but even so there was enough that she could not pack it up and slip after her. And so she sits, and waits, and hopes it is not members of the warrior caste that might kill them for surviving past their time.

Seconds stretch into minutes and Natia slips back, bumping against her in the dark. Her mouth hovers at her ear. “It’s Grey Wardens, and our best chance for getting out of the Deep Roads. I don’t know about you, but I’d rather take my chance on the surface than waiting in the Roads to die,” she breathes. Signa nods, reaching for her scavenged sword and shield. Natia takes her bow, but she already has her daggers. She never takes those off.

“Let’s go,” Signa says, swallowing hard, and even in the dark she can see Natia’s wolf smile.

Even with the maps that Lady Dace had so kindly given them, Eldris gets lost. He hated the Deep Roads. He wanted to claw his way out of his own skin and then out of the rock, up and up until he reached the surface. He wanted to turn back, to leave the others to do this, to keep going until there’s wide blue sky above him instead of more Creators-damned stone. Instead, he stumbles across dwarves.

Unfortunately, it is not the dwarves he is looking for. They are two women, and yet they do not look more different. One of them has a dark tattoo on her face. Casteless, then. She has dark hair, brown or black, he can’t tell. Her eyes are blue, cold and hard. Her skin is almost as dark as Alistair’s. The other dwarf, not Casteless, has blonde hair and warm brown eyes. She’s paler than
Casteless, but she’s the nicer of the two. He can tell by looking at them.

“You don’t happen to know where Lord Dace is, do you? I’m afraid we’re lost,” he says, attempting a smile. Casteless snorts, stepping forward into the light of their torches. Not Casteless follows, a hand reaching out and grabbing her arm. Casteless looks like she might turn around and snap, but for the moment, she lets her hold on.

“Only if you conscript us, Grey Warden. See, we were exiled from Orzammar, so if you don’t conscript us, we’ll die down here. And if we die down here, well, why would we care about helping you?” Casteless says, a grin like a knife’s edge.

“Well, I’ll certainly tell whoever I need to tell that we’ve conscripted you. Really, though, I can just use it to smuggle you to the surface,” he offers, and Casteless wrinkles her brow as she tries to figure out if he’s telling the truth. Not Casteless steps forward, hand still curled around Casteless’s arm.

“That would be very kind of you, Ser Warden. Kinder than anyone has been to us for months. We’ll take your offer. I’m Signa, formerly Signa Aeducan, and this is Natia Brosca,” she says, with a smile, and Eldris is glad to have names to match to the faces, if nothing else. It would have been uncomfortable, if he had to keep calling them Casteless and Not Casteless.

“Well, Signa, Natia, you get us to Lord Dace, and we’ll get you to the surface. If we hurry, we may be able to send you on to the surface,” Eldris says.

“Give me your map, then. I’m assuming you know where Lord Dace should be, even if you don’t know where you are,” Natia says, holding her hand out. Signa’s hand is still on her arm. Eldris hands the map over, and Natia looks it over. It takes her a moment to figure out where they are, and another after that to figure out how to get to Lord Dace, but she has it soon enough.

Wordlessly, she passes the map back to Eldris and turns on her heel. Signa gives him an apologetic smile as they start to trudge after Natia.

Signa and Natia had hidden behind the Wardens’ party, scavenged helmets on their heads. Lord Dace didn’t recognize them, but still, Eldris told him to go to Orzammar ahead of them.

Natia lead them another route, and they returned ahead of Dace. It is Alistair who takes them through the market, buying them armor that fits. They were lucky that both dwarven women knew their measurements, else everything would have been ruined.

By the time they make their way to the surface, they have a pile of letters, packs full of food, and brand-new armor. It is nothing like Signa used to wear, but it is something Signa likes better. Natia loves the surface from the moment she steps into the clear mountain air. The sky is cloudy and overcast, and the air is so cold it makes her teeth ache. The wind blows, just enough for her to feel it. It makes her feel alive. It makes her feel the same razor-sharp victory she’d felt when she stood over Beraht’s dead body.

Signa wants nothing more than to return to Orzammar. The sky is a gaping hole that threatens to swallow her whole, and the openness of the surface is dizzying. It is cold, too, colder than Orzammar had ever been. And still, there is the sharp ache of grief tucked close behind her heart. Grief for Trian, and for her father, and even grief for Bhelen because no matter what had happened, Bhelen had been her younger brother once.

“Well, we should head out while we can. Eldris said if we wait much longer, the snow would
block the path off, if it hasn’t already. Denerim shouldn’t be hard to find, though,” Natia says, her hands on her hips as she surveys the landscape.

“We’re…going together?” Signa asks, and Natia turns to her with a small smile.

“Of course. We survived the Deep Roads together. Besides, you were right. I was an ass. But I was angry, and if I hadn’t been angry, I would have been dead,” she says, and it is the only olive branch Signa will get and she knows it.

“Well, that’s good enough for me,” Signa declares.

When the sun sets, it is on two dwarven women that walk side-by-side down the snow-covered path.

Chapter End Notes

well, there's that, quicker than i expected. next chapter I hope to get us up to Oghren joining the party in Orzammar, plus some more Bellanaris memories, plus some cute shit with Morrigan and Reno. if there's anything you'd like to see in either of those categories, let me know and i'll do what i can to work them in!

thanks so much for reading- this fic probably wouldn't have gotten off of the ground if it weren't for you guys. thanks again for all your comments and kudos <3
When Bellanaris is brought before the Evanuris, the guards push her to her knees. She snarls, and Mythal can see her husband eyeing the feral thing at their feet. Falon’Din and Dirthamen whisper to each other, and Mythal knows that if they claim the wildling at their feet that she will not survive very long.

It is not an easy thing, to take her. The others argue, but Mythal is the avatar of justice and she knows just what to say to make them listen. They argue for days, with the wildling still on the floor. She has stopped snarling, but there is still defiance in her eyes. Mythal knows it will be difficult to train that out of her, but Mythal is the patient sort. The time she has taken to win the wildling has proved it.

Bellanaris is not grateful when Mythal saves her, but Mythal is not surprised. She holds her down herself when the blood writing is written on her face, scrawling vines in gold on her skin. Her hair is tangled beyond saving, so Mythal cuts it off. Her eyes are the color of a turbulent sea. The anger in them reminds Mythal of her husband, and it is not a kind comparison.

It will be centuries before the wildling relents. Mythal is patient, and Mythal is kind, and Mythal teaches the girl what her life might have been like if Falon’Din or Dirthamen or Elgar’nan had claimed her. Eventually, the girl learns that Mythal had saved her. Eventually, the girl forgets why she had resisted.

Bhelen sends them after Jarvia next, and Eldris will remember the way Dust Town stank of desperation. It is not so different from the alienage in Denerim, really, only there is no tree in the center and the people here look more tired than determined.

There is a woman with a baby, and Eldris promises to help her however he can. Another woman gives him answers on the Carta, and he presses a sovereign into her hand and steps away so he doesn’t have to watch her weep.

It is easy enough to keep going from there. The dwarves of Dust Town fight dirty, but Eldris and Lysander and Zevran do too. The Carta’s thugs are no match for the three of them, much less when the rest of their party follows in their footsteps. Jarvia dies quick.

And Bhelen sends them back into the Creators-damned Deep Roads. Eldris would think the man had a personal vendetta against him, if it weren’t for the fact that he was working to put him on the throne. And they managed to pick up a stray, too.

Oghren. He spells like a brewery, and Eldris could have sworn he finished that flask of ale three hours ago but he’s still drinking from it. Occasionally, Oghren will see him looking, and will hold the flask out to him.

Around the time they make camp, Eldris finally accepts. The ale is strong, and burns all the way down to his stomach where it sits in a warm pool, but he still feels like the walls are closing in on him. He feels like he needs to claw his way out of his own skin.

It is Sten that saves him where Oghren’s ale cannot. The Qunari sits by the fire, legs crossed, arms at his side. He cracks open one eye to look at Eldris and says, “Sit.”
Eldris sits. Sten tells him how to breathe, and soon Eldris is thinking of nothing save the way his chest moves up and down as he breaths in and out.

Loghain walks beside him as they navigate the tunnels. Mostly, it is silent, but sometimes when the sadness is easier to swallow, he will talk of the last time he was in the Deep Roads.

There’s always a funny sound in his voice whenever he mentions Maric. It makes Eldris think of Tamlen in a way that makes his teeth ache.

And then, speak of the demon, because they have just set up camp for the night when the camp is attacked by shrieks.

In the middle of them is a face Eldris knows better than his own.

“Tamlen,” he says, voice a strangled gasp. He is useless for the rest of the battle.

_________________________________________

Lady Arya,

Today, I was thinking of chances and opportunities. It was a line of thought that led back to you. I realized that you might not know what became of me after we spoke in Redcliffe.

I don’t think you actually spoke to your Wardens about me, but it wasn’t needed. I spoke to the angry one. He reminded me of a friend. Her name was Echo. Did you hear of her fate at the Circle? I know you were there. I heard that something bad happened there.

Anyway, your friend told me he didn’t want me in the Wardens. He wasn’t mean about it, though. There was a funny twist to his lips when he told me to leave. He even passed me a coin purse. It wasn’t overly full, but it was more than I would have had. With it, I was able to leave Redcliff.

I hear you’re in Denerim now, with the King and the Queen. I hope you’re happy there. Maker knows you’ve given me my chance at it.

I apologize for the brevity of my letter. I was never a man of words in the Circle, and even less so now that I am on the road.

-Jowan

_________________________________________

Sometimes, Morrigan has nightmares. Most often, they are of Flemeth. Those are the ones that make her bolt awake, heart pounding in her chest, a sick feeling in her stomach. She does not remember them once she has them. She does not sleep again, either.

Tonight, though, it is early when she jolts upright in her bed, panting. She remembers her mother’s laughter, cruel and echoing in her ear. She pulls her blanket around her shoulder, and knows sleep will be impossible to come by when she is alone in her bed.

She is not quite sure what possesses her to do so, but before she can stop herself she pads barefoot down the hallway and knocks on a door.

Reno opens the door moments later. He’s not wearing a shirt, and his hair is rumpled, and his face is tired, like he had just rolled out of the bed. His eyes, though, are bright and warm. He looks at her like he always does- like he has never been happier to see someone before.
“I…I had a nightmare. I was…Could I stay with you?” she asks, and Reno doesn’t say anything, just reaches out and gently pulls her into his room. The door shuts softly behind her, and she is left standing in the middle of his room.

“You don’t even have to ask,” he tells her, almost falling into the bed. His eyes close for a moment, but he blinks them open to look at her. She hasn’t moved yet, doesn’t until he pats the space next to him. Slowly, she crawls onto the bed, settling on her side facing him. He takes a moment to fix the blankets, draping them across both of them.

The palace is cold in the Fereldan winter. Morrigan tells herself that is the only reason she curls closer.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks, wrapping one arm around her waist and pulling her against him. They fit together like two pieces of a puzzle.

“It was about my mother. She is old, and she is powerful, and it is only now that I am realizing I deserved better,” she says, and it is the first time she has ever said so out loud. It is a painfully freeing admission.

“Well, you don’t need me, but if your mother ever tries to come near you without your permission, she will have to go through me,” he promises. It is oddly comforting, to hear that.

“I think you might be the second person in all of Thedas who would do so,” she says, and she thinks she should feel bad for keeping him awake, but she enjoys existing with him far too much to truly feel bad.

“Well, the rest of Thedas is populated by fools,” he tells her, and she curls closer, tucking her head underneath his chin.

Sleep comes easy after that.

Jowan,

I hope my letter finds you well. It was nice hearing from you- I had wondered. I also apologize for not speaking to them myself. I think I mentioned to Eldris at some point that he should consider you, but I honestly don’t remember. It has been quite some time, after all.

As for your friend…all I’m willing to say over a letter is that she did not perish at Kinloch. If you want more information, well, you know I’m in Denerim. I’d be very glad to see you. I’m unsure if you knew a mage who goes by Anders, but if you did, he is with the Wardens as well now. He deserved much better than what he was getting when I found him. It seems we have a penchant for collecting strays.

And Eldris gave you a coin purse? Are you sure? I thought Eldris only cared about other elves. Regardless, that was kind of him. I’ll tell him you’re doing well- I’m sure he’ll want to know his investment paid off.

Oh, speaking of, there’s been updates to my situation. There might be a bit of a shock if you come see me. I didn’t have pointed ears when last we met, after all.

Yours,

Lady Arya
The shrieks fall, but still Tamlen stands. His veins are black with the Taint, and Eldris can feel the Blight radiating from him. He lets out a soft keen and presses forward, reaching for him. Alistair looks like he might stop him, but he doesn’t. Eldris stumbles forward, reaching, and Tamlen falls into his arms. They fall to the floor, and Eldris cradles his best friend in his arms.

“Lethallin, please,” Tamlen begs, and Eldris does not know if this is something he can give. He thinks of Eden, and how much his sister loves Tamlen. He thinks of his childhood as Tamlen presses a knife into his hand (they are fifteen and fourteen and Eldris spends six months making a knife to give Tamlen, and they are sixteen and fifteen who Tamlen and Eden present him with a matching set they made together).

“There is….there is blood left from my Joining, in my necklace, perhaps we could save you,” he says, desperate, and he does not know he is crying until Tamlen wipes his tears away (they are seventeen and sixteen and Eden is sick and Eldris had found his friend weeping by the river and wiped his tears before pushing him in the water).

“I can already hear the song. It was discordant, at first. Now it is beautiful. I don’t…I don’t know what I want, but I know it lies deeper,” he says, and Eldris bites back a sob (they are nineteen and eighteen and Tamlen touches a mirror and Eldris looks until he collapses and Eden’s eyes are red but they are dry and Creators how are they supposed to endure this).

Eldris curls his fingers around the knife he made.

“Tamlen, please, lethallin, don’t ask this of me,” he begs, but Tamlen is humming now and Eldris knows that it is time.

When he sinks the knife into Tamlen’s chest (they are fourteen and thirteen and they just learned that a knife between the third and fourth ribs is a quick kill) black blood spills over his hands.

They burn the body. There is little else to do- it is impossible to dig past the rock of the tunnel floor.

Eldris stands and watches until the fire is nothing more than smoldering embers. He does not jump at the hand on his shoulder, even if he had not expected it. He does not think he will ever fear anything again.

“You should rest, my friend,” Zevran says, his voice soft and quiet in a way that tells Eldris he has been there before.

“It is strange, isn’t it? We had a funeral with no body, and now we have a body with no funeral,” he murmurs (they are nineteen and eighteen and Eldris and Eden plant Tamlen’s tree over an empty grave while the rest of the clan watches in somber silence).

“Such is the way of things, sometimes,” Zevran says, infinitely patient and infinitely gentle and since there is nothing left for the fire to burn, Eldris lets the other elf lead him to his bedroll.

Chapter End Notes

woot woot the angst train is here
thanks so much for reading- we've hit forty-five chapters! i can hardly believe it! as always, if you have any scene suggestions or thoughts to share, i would love to hear them.

as an update- i got a job recently, and while it is only a couple days a week, i am also a little bitch who is permanently exhausted. updates may be slower than i'd like while i work on adapting with my low ass energy levels. that being said, this fic has gone several months between updates before. it won't be like that. i'm doing what i can to buckle down and finish this fic because i want to move on to the next part (and then the finale after that). i will promise that the same day i post the final chapter of this fic, i will post the first chapter of the next one. this is just so you guys don't have to worry about waiting, so if you're interested in the sequel, then keep an eye for that when the time comes (trust me, though, i'll remind you).
Weak dawn sunlight spills into the window, and Morrigan wakes up. She has never been so warm in the winter before, and the heat emanates from the body curled around her. She knows it is not Arya because it is too big and too warm (Arya is always cold) but it takes her a moment before she remembers the night before.

She is not embarrassed to find herself in Reno’s bed, but she doesn’t quite have the words to say what she does feel. He breathes slow and steady against her back, so she knows he is still asleep. She finds that she does not want to wake him, so she does her best to lay still. She watches the sun’s steady progress across the room until she feels him shift against her.

She rolls over, and when he opens his eyes, the first thing he sees is her face. His expression is impossibly soft, and he only pulls Morrigan closer. He does not speak, but Morrigan is not bothered by that.

It will be another hour at least before either of them moves, and only then because they are both thirsty enough they could drink an entire river.

It is easy to wake up with Reno. There’s a softness to it, a feeling of safety that Morrigan hadn’t known she was missing until she had it. She does not know what it means, and she is not sure that she wants to know. But Reno gives her a small smile like a secret as he pulls his shirt on, and Morrigan reaches up to fix his hair without thinking about it, and she thinks that maybe she doesn’t need to know what it means.

Eldris’s motions are mechanical as they cut through the darkspawn. He does not falter when they reach the Broodmother. Arya had told them it would be horrifying. Eldris thinks nothing could ever be as horrifying as putting a knife in your best friend’s heart.

He stops when the others must rest, but he only eats or drinks because Sten tells him to (Sten, with his arms crossed over his chest and a glare that tells Eldris he will take no arguments, Sten who is probably keeping him alive right now because Eldris can’t think about anything other than blood black on his hands, who feels like no matter how hard he scrubs it will never come off. He blinks, sometimes, and it is still there, dark and sticky and he wants to throw up).

When they reach Branka, it is no different. Eldris does not falter. He does not stop. He cuts Branka down. He lets the golem destroy the anvil. He takes the crown and turns to go back to Orzammar.

He does not look at Oghren. He does not look at the way he stares at Branka’s body. He does not think about the way he himself had looked at a burning pyre. If he stops to look, he will falter. If he falters, he does not know if he can keep going.

And if he notices the way Zevran watches him, a way that says I know how you’re feeling because I was feeling it too, well, Eldris pretends he doesn’t.

The road from Orzammar’s gates to Denerim is not an easy road to traverse in the middle of winter. In some places on the mountain path, the snow towers above the heads of Natia and Signa. In
most places, they wade through snow that is chest deep.

Signa wants to stop. Natia scoffs, and calls her a weak noble, and Signa keeps going. It is easy in the places that face north, where the snow has hardened into ice and they can crawl on top of it. It is harder in the places where the snow is just snow. At times, Signa and Natia both wonder if they will ever make it.

And sometimes, even though she would never admit it, Natia wonders if she will fall into the sky.

Eventually, they find a traveling merchant. He is cold, shivering where he stands, and they have furs in their bags where Natia caught their suppers. They trade the furs for a horse. It is an old horse, a white mare that blends in with the snow around her save for the mud on her legs and belly. She is gentle, though, and patient when it takes the two dwarves several long minutes to climb on her back.

The road to Denerim is easier after that.

Arya forces herself out of her shell. She cannot mourn Isala forever, not when Isala was not hers in the first place. She lets Leliana take her down to the courtyard, where the snow has been cleared as best as able by the servants. She still has much to learn.

They are down in the courtyard again, practicing. Leliana has thrown Arya to the ground no less than fourteen times today. Arya is sore and tired and sweaty, but she is determined she will win, if only once. She has been training for weeks now. Her improvement was slow, but it was there. She wonders, faintly, if Lysander will be impressed with her progress.

Two dwarves step forward cautiously, watching them. Arya notices them, but her focus does not falter. She has had spectators before, of course. Brett had watched more than a few sessions, and some of the other guardsmen would come to give tips. Leliana, however, seems to forget they are sparring and turns to look at them. It is easy for Arya to sweep her legs out from underneath her and send her to the ground.

Leliana blinks dazedly up at her grinning friend before she laughs, loud and clear in the winter sunshine.

The dwarf with the tattoo on her face laughs too, and her friend scolds her, looking mortified. Arya helps Leliana to her feet, and together they go to talk to the dwarves.

There are letters for seemingly everyone. Alistair has written one for Leliana, and by the way her friend blushes Arya knows she will track her down and borrow it later. Lysander has written one for her, but she thinks she manages to keep from blushing. Reno had gotten a letter from his brother, and had to sit down before he could read it. Morrigan sits next to him, a short letter from Eldris in her hands. Arya gets a letter from Anders as well, and stops paying attention to everyone else. Anders, it would seem, was a man of many words.

His letter spans three pages in handwriting that begins as neat but is scrawling and messy by the end. She is not sure if she should reply or not. Much of it, though, is devoted to describing the city to her. He makes it sound magnificent. Arya had always liked caves- she thinks she might like to see Orzammar one day. He also tells her they have supported Bhelen. She has mixed feelings about it- she had supported him when she played the game, but it wasn’t a game anymore. He had killed his brother- Signa’s brother- and pinned the blame on his sister. He was ruthless and cunning, but he
was progressive in a way that would keep Orzammar from dying.

She is not, however, surprised to hear that Eldris was the one who wanted to support him, nor was she surprised to hear of the arguments.

Arya retires to her quarters to read the letter from Lysander. It is naughty in some parts, yes. He tells her how he misses her, how he would take her by the fire while the others slept around them. There are also parts that are incredibly endearing. He tells her how he wishes to have her sleeping next to him, so he would know she was okay. He tells her that he thinks most often of her. He tells her that he wishes she were there so he could show her the city and buy her handmade dwarven jewelry.

Then, at the bottom of his letter, he tells her to take care of his brother.

Bhelen is crowned king, and the crown that Eldris carried through the Deep Roads is put on his head. They wait for a long while until the Assembly dwarves calm down, and Bhelen offers to shelter the Wardens through the rest of the winter. There is still a part of Eldris that yearns for blue sky above his head, that yearns for the open freedom it provides. It would seem it not even Tamlen’s death (black blood spilling hot over his hands, tears streaming hot down his face, but he has never felt so cold in all his life before and Mythal give him strength because how is he meant to go on after this) could crush it.

He does not complain, though. If Tamlen could survive (could die) in the deep dark under the rock, then Eldris could survive (endure) until winter breaks. When he returns to his quarters, he finds that there have been letters pushed under the door. They bear no stamp in the wax seal, and when he cracks them open, he recognizes the handwriting (they are eight and seven and the hahren is teaching them how to write and Eldris’s handwriting is meticulous and perfect and Tamlen and Eden have matching scrawls). His heart twists in his chest, but this kind of hurt might be a good one. He opens the one from his sister, first.

Brother,

I hope the shemlen world is treating you okay. I know you didn’t want to go, and even though it hurt to watch, I am glad you went. I do not think I could have endured watching you waste away, not with Tamlen gone.

I’ve been dreaming of him, lately. Mostly, it is memories, or things that could have been memories. Often, he chases us through the camp. Sometimes, you chase both of us. Other times, he and I are huddled together in some sort of hiding place-a hollow long, a shallow cave- and you are trying to find us. I do not know what it means. Keeper says it means nothing, but Theo…Theo is not so sure.

But that does not matter. I know you, brother, as well as I know myself. Better, probably. I know you are blaming yourself. Blaming yourself for letting him touch the mirror, blaming yourself for not insisting you get me or Theo or Merrill or Keeper. Blaming yourself for not knowing the mirror was Blighted. Blaming yourself for not finding him.

It is not your fault. You looked for him until you collapsed- if he was to be found, you would have done so. And you know as well as I- Tamlen had made his decision to touch the mirror. You could not have stopped him. Even if you had bound him and dragged him kicking and screaming back to Keeper, he would have found a way.

I am only glad Keeper was able to keep you alive. Creators, I paced outside the aravel you were in. I chewed my fingernails until they were bloody and sore. I did not think of Tamlen. I thought of my
brother who might not wake. I thought of my brother who deserved so much better. Creators, you
still do. I think we all do, but that is not the point I am trying to make.

I am glad you survived, Eldris. I do not know if you think otherwise, but I would not have it any
other way. I would not sacrifice you for Tamlen. I would let Tamlen go a thousand times over to
keep you safe. You are my brother. You are part of me, and I am part of you. The shemlen say that
it is a connection between us that formed when we were in the womb together, but I don’t care about
what the shemlen say. All I know is that you are my brother and I love you, you stubborn fool.

I am also very proud of you. I am not sure how long it will be until the Blight is over and you can
return to us, but I await your return. May the Creators watch over you, and may the Dread Wolf
never catch your scent.

-Eden

It is a letter that tastes like ash and broken glass in the back of his throat. How long had it
been since she had sent the letter? What would she think now, if she knew that he had killed
Tamlen? He does not know what he is supposed to do, supposed to think.

He glances over at his desk. There is the letter from Theo he has yet to read, and there is a
letter-opener. Sharp as a dagger (black blood spilling over his hands around the hilt of a knife he’d
made) and idly he wonders how often such a thing has been used as a weapon.

Outside his room, he hears a door shut. Footsteps stop outside his door, so he folds Eden’s
letter and reaches for Theo’s. Whoever it is will see him busy if they enter his room. It is just as well-
he does not think he can speak around the lump in his throat.

Vhenan,

I have been so worried about you since you left. I know you can handle yourself, but it is my job to
worry, isn’t it? You made it my job when you presented me with that fur pelt from the first wolf you
killed. I remember the way you looked, vallaslin so fresh on your face I couldn’t tell if you had
chosen red or if you were still bleeding. You were so pleased with yourself, and so sure I would
accept. How could I have turned you down? How could I not worry about you now?

But I am not only worried because you are saving the world. That, of course, is not something that
surprised me. If anyone could save the world, it is you (but perhaps you should stay out of trees
when you do it. Unless you can fall on the archdemon. Rinaya is still jumpy when a breeze blows
through the branches). I am worried because you are stubborn and far too hard on yourself. What
happened is not your fault. It will never be your fault, you nug-headed fool.

I hope you are okay. I know you may be having a difficult time. You are on your own, and I know
you enough to know you are drowning in guilt. I should have done more. Insisted that I go with you,
or that Eden go. It would have done her good, too, I think. But as it is, things have worked out well
enough.

The two of us are still in the Brecilian Forest. Keeper Marethari did not want to leave without
something telling you where the clan had gone. You are still one of us, vhenan. So I will tell you this:
they have gone to Kirkwall, and Eden and I have sought shelter with Zathrian’s clan. I do not know
if you remember him- our clans have met a handful of times, but we were small. Were it not for the
Keeper, I wouldn’t remember him.

But the Keeper knew about you Wardens. If your Warden came to our clan, and we could spare only
you, she expected him to come to another clan. We heard the news of Ostagar, and for a time we
feared for you. But we got your letters, and knew that you lived. And we knew that it would fall to
you, especially now, to gather allies to fight the Blight.

Zathrian’s clan may not be able to offer much aid, but I still hope to see you in the spring. Do not
rush, though. Our problems here are contained. It is doubtful they will bother us all winter. I dare
not say more- I do not know how shemlen couriers work. We send sparse letters through the
traveling Keepers, but they are infrequent. I do not trust them not to read the letter. So know this:
when you come, Zathrian will likely ask for a favor before he gives you aid.

When he does, know that I will be there to help you. And when you are done, and you have the aid
of his clan, I will walk of the Brecilian Forest with you into whatever the future will hold. After all, I
only want one with you in it.

Yours,
Theo

Eldris blinks back tears as he puts the letter down. He thinks again of Tamlen (how could he
not, when they had all grown up together?) but he thinks, too, of Theo and Eden. He thinks of
Merrill, too. Creators, but he misses them. Creators, but he knows they can never go back to what
they were.

In the end, Eldris does not know if he has changed or if they have. In the end, Eldris decides
that it doesn’t matter.

Arya finally admits that she does not know how to integrate Bellanaris into herself. She does
not know how they can coexist (Bellanaris is too different, too hard and angry and jaded and Arya is
none of these things). It is another week after this admission that she gives in.

She does not have the answers she needs, but she knows who does, and Fade-walking is
easier and easier. One night, she plans a date between Cailan and Anora. It is sweet, disgustingly so,
and incredibly romantic. There were no flowers that survived the snow, so Arya made them out of
paper and paired them with holly branches. She also helped prepare the meal, although she was more
useless than she would have liked. When she is sure that Cailan and Anora will be slipping away to
their own chamber for the night, together, she slips away.

It is easy enough, to fall asleep. When she lays down, she can almost reach into the rhythm of
her magic. It is soft and quiet and gentle, and it is on the lull of the Fade that she falls asleep.

She does not have to search for Solas. When she opens her eyes and finds herself in the
Fade, they are back in her bedroom at home. He is sitting on the beanbag in the corner, and
something about the image makes her want to laugh.

“I suspect you have questions, or I doubt you would have sought me out again,” he says,
looking up at her with a smile. He looks...tired. She wonders if he knows anything of the world he
has yet to wake up to. It will be a long time yet before he does, and it will continue to move on
without him.

“Perhaps I should. Or, rather, you should seek me out. I’m sure it is lonely. You have
been in one place while you slept. You must have reached the edges of the Fade that you can find by
now,” she says, sprawling out on the mattress. She wished she could find a way to make one of
those in Thedas. It was the perfect mix of hard and soft- the beds in Thedas were just soft, made of
feather down.
“I have, yes. At first, my range was long, but as the world outside changed, I could not go as far,” he tells her, looking almost wistful. Something rises up in her— in Bellanaris. The Veil was not the plan they had made. But Solas had been left alone, and she did not begrudge him his plans. Not anymore. Not entirely.

“Then come find me whenever you like, Solas. You were friends with her, once. You can be friends with me, too,” she says, and Solas’s smile is bright as the sun. Bellanaris was not the one who loved him (Mythal knows she teased Lanaste enough for it) but she can see why her other half had. And perhaps, since he was her other half, she could feel some of it too.

“I will start doing that, then. But speaking of Bellanaris, I presume that is what you wished to speak of?” he asks. Arya nods, slipping off the bed and coming to sit next to him.

“Tell me what she was like. You knew her, but I only know what she thought of herself,” she says, and Solas smiles, his ears perking up. Even in the days of Arlathan, he had liked to teach. To tell stories.

“She was an old soul, but her name was Eternity for a reason. She thought of the long-term. She was the type of woman who used the ends to justify the means. But I only knew her after Mythal had found her. As much as I loved Mythal, it was clear that Bellanaris was what Mythal had made her. I saw flashes of what she was before— wild and free in a way that suited her better than the title of Justice’s Champion ever did,” he says, his words softened with gentleness, as if he is afraid he would offend her.

“Why did you let Mythal keep her, for lack of a better word? You were trying to free slaves,” Arya asks, and her tone is not accusatory. She just wants to know.

“Bellanaris would not let me. Much as I love Mythal, she had her faults. She was the best of the Evanuris, but she was still one of them. Even as she fought to liberate the slaves of Elgar’nan and Andruil, she kept her own. Bellanaris was one of them, but Bellanaris would not admit that she was a slave. Mythal would not either. To both of them, she was a Champion. And if she was not a slave, she did not need to be freed,” he tells her, and there is something sad in his voice when he does. For once, Bellanaris is quiet in her head. Like she is taking in the information. Like it is only with Arya’s help that she can see the truth in it.

“How should I go about integrating her into me? I do not want to lose myself. There is much of Bellanaris that I did not like— she left Isala on her own, and she does not care about other people in the way that I do because she is blinded by the big picture. I do not want to lose all that I am,” she says, and there is a sympathetic twist to Solas’s mouth.

“My advice? If you can, take her vallaslin again. Bellanaris loved it, and you are already bound to Mythal without it. The blood writing will only solidify her claim, but it is weak as it is. There is little left of her. If it is something you do not want, as time goes on, there are things I can do to help. None of it until I wake, of course,” he says, and there’s a wry grin on his face that tells her he wishes he was already awake.

“How long will it be before you wake?” she asks. She knows that he had only woken a year before Inquisition, but then, she had also known Eamon would be poisoned, and they had arrived at Redcliffe to see him in fine health. Not that the bastard deserved it.

“I do not yet know. A few more years, at least. It goes quicker when there is energy I can take,” he says, stretching like a cat and rising to his feet. Arya clambers up after him.

“I could give you some of my energy? I’m sure there’s some of it I can’t unlock yet. There
are more spells I’m remembering the more I see of her memories, and I think I’m becoming a stronger mage as it happens,” she says, and Solas gives her a look that she can’t quite interpret.

“You don’t need to,” another voice says, and it is cold and flat. Arya’s bedroom melts away around them, giving way to a forest, and she whirls around. A familiar elf stands in front of her. His face is bare now, but once it held the vallaslin of Falon’Din. His hands are wrapped around a staff, made of ironbark. Once, they held her daughter’s face and told her everything would be okay. Once, he had come to her and told her that her daughter had been taken, and she had not saved her.

“Din’an,” she says, and Bellanaris flares up within her, but Arya will meet him on her terms or not at all.

Chapter End Notes

i have a flair for the dramatic and also apparently cliffhangers. We’ll find out more about Din’an in the next chapter, and maybe more about Isala as well. I’m probably going to get a lot of quick filler out of the way in order to keep this fic moving - I know the focus is on relationships, but I don’t want to get bogged down in filler. Besides, I’m ready for the gang to be reunited again.

as always, thank you guys for reading and your support. it means the world <3
Din’an’s lips are curled into a barely-contained snarl. “You just keep coming back, don’t you? You know, I really wish you’d learn to leave well enough alone, Bellanaris,” he says, and Arya knows that who she had been deserves every bit of his anger. But she is not Bellanaris.

“Well, to be fair, I’m not Bellanaris. And I was technically brought back by Mythal,” she says, and his eyes narrow but some of the harshness fades from her face.

“And what does that mean?” Din’an asks, eyes guarded, and she can’t say she blames him.

“Well, for one it means that she is in my head, and she’s pissed. She really doesn’t like you, you know? And I don’t remember everything yet, but you tried to find Isala when she didn’t. And that makes her a piss-poor mother. She was so afraid of letting her daughter near Arlathan after she found her with Elgar’nan, but once she was taken? She wanted to use it to her advantage. And that is not a decision I could ever abide by. That was her daughter,” she says, and it must be what Din’an needed to hear, because he steps forward cautiously.

“Do you remember what happened to me?” he asks, and she wracks her brain, but she cannot remember. She remembers the way he had returned to the temple in the Arbor Wilds, frantic and terrified for Isala. She remembers how he found her in the Dreaming. But beyond that, she does not know.

“No. I remember you found her in the Dreaming. That Falon’Din and Dirthamen made it difficult to find her, but you could do it anyway because you were once one of Falon’Din’s. Other than that, I do not know. The memories are fragmented,” she says, apologetic, and she doesn’t know when it happened but Solas is gone, leaving her alone with Din’an. She is not afraid, though.

“I was to lead a team to find her. We were so close, but they did not take orders from me. They took them from you. From her, I suppose. It is only…you look a lot like her. But I can tell you aren’t her. Anyway, I was not the one truly in charge. And when the time came, I was to scout ahead. If there was trouble, she was supposed to lead the rest of them to aid me, and to save Isala. But when the time came, she held them back. I died on the doorstep. I was so close, and yet, I was not close enough,” he says, and it is something that Arya knows to be true.

She closes her eyes, sitting down on a fallen log. “Why did she do it?” she asks, voice barely above a whisper, but this is the Fade and so Din’an can hear her anyway.

“With Isala in hand, Falon’Din and Dirthamen were arrogant. They thought it would cripple Fen’Harel’s resistance, and so they grew careless. She did not want to lose that advantage,” he tells her, and he sits down next to her. She can see grief, ancient in the stoop of his shoulders.

“Ir abelas. I am so sorry. I know nothing will ever ease that sort of pain,” she says, but she does not reach out to touch him. She remembers that Din’an would not appreciate it from her.

“Isala manages, whenever we can meet. It is not often. I was surprised that she came back. She was in a similar sort of situation to you are now, I suppose. She had remade herself twice,
and lived in many different universes. I went with her for some of them, but I was never anyone else. Somehow, I think she knew of your arrival. It was all that brought her back. She does not want to do the same thing twice,” he says, and some of the grief fades away into something like hope. It brings a smile to Arya’s face.

“She’s here in Thedas, then?” Arya asks, and there’s a traitorous flutter of hope in her chest. She doubts Isala would ever want to see her, though.

“Yes. Quite happy, too. I think she’s pleased to be herself again,” he says, a fond smile on her face. Arya laughs, and she thinks that she can empathize with that.

“It is good to hear. I hope things go better for you this time around, Din’an,” she says, and his smile is genuine, if guarded.

“And for you, Arya. I am glad you are not her. Although, Solas tells me you are having problems with that?” he asks, curious.

“Yes. It is...we are odds, sometimes. Solas tells me I could let go, and let her take over. Or he tells me I could try to take over. He also says I could try to integrate her into myself,” she tells him. She hopes Din’an could help, even if he was no expert.

“Well, you didn’t ask for my opinion, but I think you should take over. Bellanaris is trouble. It is best for you to leave her behind,” he says, and Arya is not so sure.

“I...will think on it. It feels wrong, to abandon everything. But I do not know if I can truly integrate her into myself. We are different, and I am afraid we are too different. Solas suggested I get Mythal’s vallaslin, that it might ease the way,” she says. Din’an frowns, but there is understanding there too.

“Just...think on it, then. You may be better off without her, but it is your decision. Whatever you decide, I hope it goes well,” he says, and Arya thinks that it has gone better than she could have possibly hoped for.

As the winter progresses, Morrigan finds that she spends more nights in Reno’s beds than she spends in her own. It is a quiet night that she is sitting on the couch in his room, curled up and watching the fire. Reno isn’t there, but Morrigan expected him to come back soon. He had gone to the baths after dinner- she was sure he would be back in a few moments.

She stretches, rising from the couch and padding over to the window. She had forgone her usual outfits in favor of a pair of breeches and one of his shirts. It was warmer than most of the clothes she owned- even the warmest outfits she had were thin and worn, pieced together.

Outside, it is snowing again. It is different, she thinks, to watch it snow in the city. She almost misses the Korcari Wilds- the forests were beautiful in the snow. It is there she is standing when the door opens. She turns around, a warm smile on her face when she sees it is Reno.

“I thought I might find you here,” he says, almost amused. Morrigan can’t hide her own grin.

“‘Tis impossible to stay away from you,” she says, and though she has grown comfortable around him, she had not expected him to close the distance between them and wrap his arms around her. She leans into him. He is warm around her, chasing away winter chill that she had not noticed until it was gone.

“Oh? That’s good to hear. I had an idea that you might like then,” he says, spinning her
around. His arms are still around her, and there is something playful about it.

“And what might that be?” she asks, reaching up to drape her arms across his shoulders. This is almost familiar, between the two of them, as if this was how it was supposed to be.

“Move your things into my room. You’re in here more than you’re in there. It would keep you from having to go back to your quarters every morning,” he says, and he’s swaying just a little, to music neither of them can hear. She sways with him, as easy as breathing.

“My room is bigger,” she says, an impish smile on her face. Reno laughs, and the sound is bright in the dark room.

“Then say the word, and I will move my things there,” he says, and her chest tightens with emotion. There had been few people who would do such a thing for her.

“Oh, don’t be silly. You have many more things than I do. Although I don’t see how— you arrived with nothing more than the clothes on your back, and now you’ve accumulated several trinkets. Regardless, my things should be easy to move,” she says, and she finds that she can’t stop smiling.

“Then why don’t we go move them?” he asks, breaking away from her and bounding towards the door. He looks genuinely happy at the prospect, and Morrigan can’t help but to follow along after him.

“I suppose we might as well,” she says, playfully, and Reno laughs again as he leads her down the hall.

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Ella: hey hey hey
Ella: been a few days since the last time we talked
Arya: yeah, I know
Arya: I’ve been
Arya: feeling weird, I guess
Ella: well, we’ve spent the last few conversations talking about me
Ella: so tell me about you
Ella: hows ur life?
Ella: how’s thedas treating you?
Ella: is there anyone in thedas thats treating you?
Arya: you sure could say that
Ella: omg
Ella: gimme the deets
Arya: wow eager much
Ella: i think about nothing but ur sex life sweetie
Ella: anyway. the beans. spill ‘em.
Arya: so
Arya: u remember Cailan right?
Ella: of course!!!!
Ella: my favorite king <3
Arya: he’s the only king
Arya: but that’s beside the point
Ella: has he put his dick in u
Ella: he did, didn’t he?
Ella: omg
Ella: that would make u the other woman
Ella: since he has a wife
Arya: well i ve also put a dick in his wife
Ella: what!!!!!
Arya: enchanted sex toy
Arya: i fucked her against her mirror
Arya: it was awesome
Ella: u whore!
Ella: kidding
Ella: have u fucked anyone else tho
Ella: gimme allllll the juicy gossip
Arya: well
Arya: i ve mentioned lysander before, right?
Ella: i knew it!!!!
Ella: i knew by the way u talked about him you d fucked him!!!!
Arya: well why did u need me to tell u
Arya: miss all-knowing
Ella: hey
Ella: if I was all-knowing I wouldn t be riding ur ass to talk to me
Arya: tru
Arya: anyway
Arya: lysander and i did indeed fuck
Arya: we also had a threesome w/ Cailan
Arya: i think it was cailan s first experience with another dude
Arya: and i think lysander sucked his soul out thru his dick
Ella: that s truly beautiful imagery
Ella: but that isn t all, is it?
Ella: tell me abt ur sexcapades!!!!
Arya: ok so
Arya: u remember how we were all gay for morrigan
Arya: turns out morrigan was gay for me too
Ella: what!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Ella: u did not fuck morrigan
Ella: omg
Ella: i want the DEETS on that
Ella: u couldn t get me nudes could u
Ella: god i bet she looks good naked
Arya: she looked real good
Arya: and she tastes even better ;)
Arya: buuuuut
Arya: i think there might be something between her and lysander s brother
Ella: u mean reno
Ella: the hot older soldier brother
Arya: that s the one!
Ella: tell them if they re into exhibitionism i d love 2 watch
Ella: kidding
Ella: but seriously
Ella: they re both so hot
Arya: thank u for objectifying all my friends
Ella: well someone needs to!!!!
Ella: but
Ella: that s not all that s been going on
Ella: bc lots of hot hot sex would not be bothering you
Ella: and you have been bothered lately
Arya: yeah
Arya: so
Arya: I never told you about the elf ears, did i?
Ella: no
Ella: nor did you tell me about why ur face looks different
Ella: I mean it looks good
Ella: I got a smokin’ hot bestie
Ella: but it ain’t ur face
Arya: well that’s because it’s only partly my face
Arya: so surprise surprise it was Flemeth that pulled me through
Arya: apparently in the days of ancient Arlathan
Arya: I was her champion
Arya: I went by the name Bellanaris
Arya: so this is her face
Arya: but mixed with mine
Arya: like our features blended together
Arya: when Flemeth unlocked the memories
Arya: I guess I automatically cast some sort of spell
Arya: a more advanced ancient version of morrigan’s shapeshifting abilities
Ella: what
Ella: the
Ella: fuck
Ella: that’s so wild!!!
Ella: so you know Mythal?
Ella: and ancient Arlathan?
Ella: what was it like!
Ella: you know that shit was super cool
Ella: even if I preferred dwarves
Arya: well it was
Arya: beautiful
Arya: and corrupt
Arya: Mythal was the best of them, yeah?
Arya: But Bellanaris was not a willing subject
Arya: she was enslaved and brought before them
Arya: and Mythal took her
Arya: and Mythal made her into her champion
Arya: the way solas talks, she was brainwashed
Ella: what!!! that’s fucked
Arya: yeah
Arya: solas told me
Arya: solas told me that Mythal would only say Bella was her champion
Arya: and that was all Bella would say
Ella: and if she was a champion
Ella: she wasn’t a slave
Arya: exactly
Arya: so bella fought in fen’harel’s war to free slaves
Arya: whilst she was a slave herself
Ella: so is it just all that shit ur dealing with?
Arya: kinda
Arya: Bellanaris was sort of package deal
Arya: there was another elf
Arya: lanaste
Arya: something happened
Arya: Bellanaris would keep dying and coming back
Arya: but somewhere along the way
Arya: sometimes she’d come back as Lanaste
Arya: and not Bellanaris
Arya: so from what I can understand
Arya: one day
Arya: she pulled him out of her
Arya: gave him his own body
Arya: his own life
Arya: and after that they were soul twins
Arya: or whatever
Ella: so
Ella: who is this lanaste now?
Arya: I don’t know
Arya: but I saw some of the memories of her meeting him
Arya: it was like
Arya: it was like she was made whole, and hadn’t even realized she wasn’t
Ella: so what’s eating you?
Ella: the fact that he isn’t there?
Arya: not really
Arya: there was one life
Arya: only one life
Arya: where they got together
Arya: they had a daughter
Arya: named her Isala
Ella: it means love, doesn’t it?
Arya: yes
Arya: and one day
Arya: Isala got taken
Arya: by Falon’Din and Dirthamen
Ella: this doesn’t have a happy ending, does it?
Arya: Bellanaris left her there
Arya: Isala died there waiting to be rescued
Ella: shit
Ella: what kind of person does that?
Arya: me, I guess
Arya: except not really
Arya: and that’s the crux of the problem
Arya: plus sometimes I’ve been
Arya: remembering
Arya: but they’re flashbacks?
Arya: but they feel real
Ella: that sounds intense
Arya: I healed Reno in the middle of one
Arya: I wasn’t me and I cast a spell
Arya: that could be dangerous
Ella: well shit
Arya: yeah
Arya: solas says I could try to coexist with her
Arya: so I think
Arya: when we go to get Zathrian’s help
Arya: I’ll try to get vallaslin
Ella: well
Ella: I know jack shit about this
Ella: but I hope it helps
Ella: oh shit
Ella: sorry gotta go
Arya: lemme guess
Arya: declan’s there?
Arya: about to dick u down?
Ella: well I sure as shit hope that’s what he’s gonna do
Ella: or else I shaved my legs for nothing
Arya: lmao I love u ella
Ella: love u too
Ella: if I get that sweet sweet dick I will be sure to spill the deets
Arya: well it’s only fair if u do
Ella: <3
Arya: <3

Three days after they return to Orzammar, Eldris finds that he can’t stand to be in his own skin. Oghren seems to understand, and Oghren drinks to deal with it, so one night when they’re all in Tapster’s Tavern, Eldris decides he will drink to deal with it. Out of all of his decisions, it is not his worst one.

Eldris underestimates dwarven ale. Clan Sabre had brewed their own alcohol, primarily wine from fruits they found in the forest. His favorite was blackberry wine- it was the perfect mixture of sweet and fermented that he could drink five cups and only get a light buzz. It was light enough that sometimes children were permitted to drink it.

If Eldris saw a child drink dwarven ale, he might well have a heart attack. Two tankards in, and he’s sloppy drunk. He doesn’t know if it’s the strength of the ale, or the fact that the tankards are the size of his face, or if it is some mixture of the two, but for the first time since he killed Tamlen (he looks down and his hands are black and sticky again but he blinks and it is gone) Eldris laughs.

Perhaps he laughs too much, because suddenly everything Zevran says is hilarious. Eldris doesn’t know why he hasn’t spent more time with the assassin (for the first three weeks after they found him Eldris woke up every hour in a cold sweat braced for a knife in the back because no matter what Arya said he was an assassin sent to kill him and Eldris has never been one to trust easily) but he is so very glad that he is getting the chance to do so now.

In fact, he is so glad to spend time with Zevran that the two of them are in the tavern long after their other friends have left. When it is just the two of them and the other dwarves that Eldris doesn’t know nor does he care to know, he leans forward to kiss him.

He doesn’t quite make it. Zevran leans back, and hurt flashes in Eldris’s green eyes, but Zevran wraps an arm around his shoulders.

“Let’s get you home,” he says, and the dwarven ale is honey-thick on his tongue and Eldris can’t tell him that home is so far away he might never see it again (home has gone to Kirkwall, home is waiting with Zathrian’s clan, home was burned on a pyre). Eldris lets the other elf lead him through the Commons and through the Diamond Quarter, through the Royal Palace until they get to
Eldris’s quarters.

He wishes that he could make this home. Will he see it again, when he comes down here to die? He thinks he might like that, to spend one last night in a familiar bedroom.

Zevran doesn’t leave, and Eldris’s heart is in his throat when the rogue steps closer and makes quick work of the buckles on his armor. Zevran undresses him piece by piece, carefully laying his armor aside. Eldris can’t quite remember why he’d insisted he wears his armor in Orzammar, but he finds he doesn’t want to complain when he watches Zevran take it off.

A moment later, and he is standing in his undershirt and trousers. Fumblingly, Eldris unlaces his leather pants and drops them on the floor, leaving him in his underclothes. By the time he manages to do this, Zevran is back at his side, pressing a small tankard into his hand. Eldris drinks it down in one go, only to realize that it is not more ale. It is some sort of potion, and horrifyingly, he finds his head clearing. He drags his hand through his hair desperate, and hurls the tankard at the wall. The breath he lets out is sharp and jagged, and the grief and guilt threaten to swallow him whole.

Zevran doesn’t say anything, and that is what Eldris will appreciate most about this moment. The other elf feels no need to make this worse for him than it already is as he wraps an arm around him and ushers him into the bed. He even stays to pull the blanket up over him.

Eldris stops him with a hand wrapped around his wrist. Zevran turns to chide him, to tell him clearly that he will not sleep with Eldris when he is still drunk, but by the look on Eldris’s face, Zevran can tell that isn’t what he wants.

“Please stay. When I dream I can see it again, and I don’t think I can be by myself right now,” Eldris whispers, brokenly, ears pinned back against his head and he is only barely holding back his tears. He had thought he had cried them all out, but it is clear that he had not.

Zevran hesitates only for a moment before he undoes his trousers as well, climbing into the bed. Eldris curls around him immediately, burying his face in his chest. Zevran holds him, and in his arms, Eldris gets the first restful sleep he has had since that trip into the Deep Roads.

Leliana always wakes up early. Once, there had been a time when she would sleep late. She remembered it fondly as a time of decadence, days spent sleeping in Halamshiral and nights spent dancing. But here in Denerim, Leliana does not dance, and so she sleeps at night and wakes to watch the sun rise.

The bard misses much of Orlais. Fereldan is almost a different world entirely- if it is like this for her, her heart goes out for her friend. Arya must have had a rough time of it indeed. But one thing that Leliana finds is the same is the tea. The royalty of Fereldan drinks the same sort of tea that the royalty of Orlais does, and thus Leliana is able to have one small remembrance of home. She drinks her tea the same way she did before- four cubes of sugar, and a splash of cream.

Often, she will drink her tea on the balcony as she watches the sun rise. It is well past dawn today, though, but Leliana sits on the balcony with her tea in her hand. She had stayed up late the night before, reading and rereading the letter Alistair had sent her.

Maker, but she missed him. The air on her skin is warmer than it had been the last few months, and there is a flutter of hope in her chest. It should not be long before Alistair comes home. Soon, she will stop taking her tea on the balcony at dawn. Soon, she will lay in bed until the servants come to wake them, tucked up against Alistair’s side. She had found that she liked to lay her head on
his chest, and listen to the beating of his heart.

Yes, Leliana thinks, as she watches the sun climb higher in the sky, it will not be long before she can listen to his heartbeat again.

As the winter goes on, the kittens grow. They drink less and less of their mother’s milk and start eating more of the mice she brings back for them. Eventually, they are weaned, and Morrigan thinks it is finally time to reveal their secret. In the quiet of the night, she and Reno bundle them back to their room. The cats are quite docile, and the mother purrs the whole way. They give them the night to adjust to their new surroundings, and then Morrigan decides to get to work.

The little orange one must go to Anders. Morrigan knows little of him, but that is something she does know, from the few sparse conversations they have had. The solid grey one will be hers- in a way, it had been hers from the moment Reno first placed it in her lap. That left two kittens, as Reno had already claimed the mother. He names her Mouse, and Morrigan scoffs and rolls her eyes. She names her kitten Smoke. There’s a sandy colored one left, lighter than the one for Anders, and a grey tabby.

Morrigan carries the tabby to Wynne. She hadn’t been sure the older woman would even want a cat, but something about the image of the old mage with the grey kitten perched on her shoulder made her think she’s made the right choice. She waits nervously outside Wynne’s door, shifting from foot to foot and stroking the kitten to keep it calm. It barely works- the kitten is young, and it is in a new part of the palace, and Morrigan can tell it wants to explore so badly it doesn’t know what to do with itself. Wynne finally opens the door, a dressing gown pulled tight around her as she yawns and rubs her eyes.

Perhaps this could have waited until later, but they were already here now. “I have a gift for you,” she says, with no preamble, and thrusts the kitten out towards Wynne.

Wynne stares at it for a moment, as if she isn’t quite sure what she is seeing. “You….brought me a cat?” she asks, and Morrigan nods.

“There is one I will give to Anders- he mentioned he liked them,” she says, and she doesn’t know why she feels so exposed when she is wearing more layers than she usually wears.

“Reno and I found them when they were very young. I thought you might like to have one of your own. There is one I will give to Anders- he mentioned he liked them,” she says, and she doesn’t know why she feels so exposed when she is wearing more layers than she usually wears.

“That will do him good. And I think it will do me good, as well. Is there anything I can get for you? Tea?” she asks, shifting awkwardly and stepping back, like an invitation into her room.

“No, thank you. It is late. I will leave you to sleep, and to get acquainted with your new friend,” she says, with the most gracious smile she can muster before she flees down the hallway. She was glad that Reno had offered to give Arya her new friend.

Reno is already back in their room when Morrigan returns. She raises a single eyebrow, a question in her golden eyes. It was not like Arya to turn him away so quickly.

“She took one look at the cat, took her from my arms, and shut the door in my face. I think I had woken her up,” he says, an amused smile on his face. Morrigan cannot help but laugh.

Natia falls into the rhythm of life in Denerim as easy as breathing. Signa needs much more time to adjust. They had been offered a room at the palace, and perhaps that would have made Signa’s transition easier (or maybe it would have been harder, because even though it is a palace, it
would have been a stark reminder that she is not home) but she had seen the reluctance in Natia’s eyes and she had been the one to decline.

The King and Queen had been kind enough to pay them both for delivering the letters. It is more than the job had been worth, but Cailan had told them it was a hazard fee for making them wade through chest-deep snow in the mountain passes, and to pay for the horse that made their travel possible. He also offers to keep the horse in the stables, free of charge. Between the two of them, there was enough coin that they could stay in the city.

They had bought a house. It is a tiny thing, only two rooms, and they share an outhouse with the other houses on the street, but it is theirs. Natia found work easily, as a guard in the marketplace. She tells Signa she works for a dwarven man, but she is more than content to keep quiet in the evenings instead of talking about work. It takes Signa longer to find a job, but eventually, an old human woman with a bark worse than her bite takes pity on her and gives her work as a washerwoman. It is thankless work, but at the end of the day when Signa’s hands are wrinkled and she has a pile of clean clothes next to her, she finds a quiet pride in it. It is something that she had done herself, and it was not so terrible as her brothers and father made it out to be. They only have one bed, but it helps them shrug off the chill of winter in the dead of night.

It is only rarely that Signa and Natia get days off. Sometimes, Natia’s employer will look at the hard line of her jaw and tell her to take some time to relax. Signa’s employer will look at her with a frown twisting her lips, and tell her that she is working too hard (this is rare, for Signa, but sometimes she will be sent home with a half day’s wages and she will feel like it is all the wealth in Orzamm). It is on a day where this has coincided for both of them, and Signa had declared that they needed food from the market. Natia had insisted they needed more blankets too, and it had turned into one of their not-quite-arguments that only ended when Signa declared they had to go to the market for food and cloth and thread so she could feed them and make blankets in her spare time.

Natia had told her with a gleam in her eye that her boss would probably maybe give them a discount, and Signa knew that coin was hard enough to come by, so she had let Natia lead her through the market until she came face to face with a man she’d never thought to see again.

“Signa?” he asks, at the same time she says, “Gorim?”

Natia looks between them, hesitation written in the lines of her face. “You two know each other?” she asks, and from the look on Signa’s face, she can deduce that they knew each other well.

“I had hoped you would get away, my lady,” Gorim says, his voice impossibly soft, and Signa’s face is impossibly guarded. Natia had never seen her look like that before.

“I am hardly a lady anymore, Gorim. I’m just Signa now,” she says, and something about it makes Natia think of Leske (Signa and Gorim were softer than she and Leske, though. Natia and Leske had been a thing of heated words and snarled arguments, of kisses in alleyways with Natia’s leathers hiked over her hips and Leske buried inside her as the worked frantically for an end).

“Well, Signa, I am pleased to see you in Denerim,” he tells her, and there is a ghost of a smile on his face that Signa cannot find it in her to return.

“It looks as though the city is treating you well,” she says, and there is something in her voice that speaks of lost time. Natia feels like a voyeur, watching the two of them, as though it is something too private for her to see.

“It is, my lady- Signa. I’ve a wife, now. Ruka, used to be Voten. We just found out she’s expecting, actually,” he says, and there is something about the way he says it, like it is a confession.
“Congratulations to the both of you. I’m sorry to cut this short, but Natia and I must really be going,” she says, linking her arm through Natia’s with a faux-pleasant smile on her face and leading her through the market.

They do not speak of it as they shop. Signa tells her what they need, speaking as little as possible, as though she is speaking around broken glass in her throat, and Natia is the one who haggles for it. It seems the ex-duster had a talent for such a thing, and by the time they find themselves back in their tiny house, they have gotten twice the items for half the coin.

Signa does what she must to put their groceries away before she goes to sit on the bed, shoulders stooped. Natia hesitates only a moment before she sits next to her, hand splayed across Signa’s back. She can feel the heat of her skin through the fabric of her shirt, and it is a far cry from what they had had in the Deep Roads. Natia doesn’t think she’s ever apologized for the way she had acted, then. Somehow, she thinks Signa knows she’s sorry anyway.

“How did you know him?” she asks, after a long moment of silence. Signa swallows hard before she answers.

“He was my second. There was…I loved him. I was arrogant enough to flaunt it in the royal palace. It angered both my brothers. My father was quick to remind me it would not last, since Gorim was a lower caste, but I didn’t care,” she says, and Natia understands with sudden clarity why she had looked like the breath had been taken out of her.

“Oh. I’m so sorry. If I’d known, I’d have kept you on the opposite side of the market,” she says, helplessly, because Natia has never learned how to navigate her own emotional turmoil, much less help someone else.

“It’s okay, actually. It’s not…I expected it to hurt, when I saw him. But it never did, not even when he mentioned his wife,” she says, turning to look at Natia, and oh, she hadn’t expected her to be so close, hadn’t expected to want to kiss her so suddenly.

“Oh. That’s…good, I guess? I’m not sure what to say here,” she says, apologetic, but Signa gives her a soft smile and looks at her like she hung the moon in the too-big sky.

“I think…I think I realized why I didn’t care,” she says, and Natia doesn’t get a chance to ask why because Signa leans forward and kisses her, and Stone, but Natia hadn’t known she’d wanted it until it was happening. She shifts, scooting further onto the bed and pulling Signa onto her lap.

They kiss slow and soft. Signa’s touches are exploratory, but they’re sure as she winds her hands into Natia’s hair. Natia is the one who hesitates, unsure how to do this without being rough enough to leave bruises. Somehow, she thinks that Signa wouldn’t mind if she left bruises on her.

It is Signa who pushes Natia, until her back hits the mattress and she’s left looking up at her. Signa looks nothing like the Aeducan princess she had once been as her fingers trail down Natia’s stomach to toy at the hem of her shirt. Stone, but Natia thinks that it’s the most beautiful sight she has ever seen.

“Do you…want to?” Signa asks, suddenly all nerves. The smile Natia gives her is gentle and soft, almost out of place on the duster’s face.

“Yes,” she breathes, and then she surges up, kissing her again. It’s harder, this time, hotter. Signa opens her mouth and Natia takes, nipping at her bottom lip before soothing it with her tongue. The thought of Signa writhing beneath her, above her, because of her has heat pooling in the pit of Natia’s stomach.
She all but tears Signa’s shirt off, parting only for a moment to pull it over her head before she flings it away from her. They go right back to open-mouthed kisses as Natia fumbles with the tie on Signa’s breast band. Signa grinds down against her lap, and Natia pulls back to gasp. Signa makes her move, then, yanking her shirt off. The sudden show of confidence has Natia ripping the breast band off of her, caution thrown to the wind. Signa whines and Natia kisses her again in between promises to buy her a new one.

Natia keeps it up, heated kisses pressed against Signa’s lips and trailed down her jaw and to her neck until Signa is all but humping her leg. Natia gives her a few more kisses for good measure and then pulls back, settling onto the bed.

“All right, come on. Get those trousers off and your smalls, and come sit on my face,” she says, and Signa snorts. She tries valiantly to be serious, but then she is laughing hopelessly and Natia raises an eyebrow. “Care to share with the rest of the class?” she asks, and Signa tries desperately to stop laughing long enough to answer her.

“It’s only…that is the most unromantic thing anyone has ever said to me,” she says, still giggling, and Natia takes a moment to consider what she’d said and then she’s laughing too. When Signa can finally stop laughing, she leans forward to kiss Natia again before she wiggles out of her remaining clothes and pulls Natia’s off for good measure.

It is not the romantic sort of thing she might have had with Gorim. Gorim had always been so careful with her like she might break and shatter in his arms. He treated her like she was something precious, like Paragon Branka herself had forged her from the finest materials. Natia treated her like a person, and Signa didn’t have the words to say how grateful she was for it.

This time, when Natia beckons, Signa lets her pull her up until her thighs are on either side of her face. Stone, she has never felt so exposed before, spread open. Natia looks at her like she’s starving and staring down the table at a feast. Signa hesitates, self-conscious about so many things. She’d always worried that she wasn’t pretty enough, and that hasn’t abated. Now, she worries about other things. Is she clean enough? Will she taste bad? Will Natia decide Signa is the worst lay in all of Thedas and hate her after this?

She is given little time to contemplate her insecurities. Natia pulls her down and proceeds to devour her. It is the only word Signa can possibly find to describe it- Natia eats her out like she will die if she doesn’t, and Signa is left to hold on to the headboard and take what she is given.

Gorim had never gone down on her before. He had preferred to kiss her while his fingers did the work of getting her ready. He had been an attentive lover, usually making her come once or twice before he finally enters her, but Gorim was controlled more than anything else. Natia dives in with wild abandon until Signa’s thighs are shaking around her head. If her mouth wasn’t otherwise occupied, the duster might make a joke about how they’re too poor for her to afford ear muffs so could she please just keep her legs right where they are?

Signa reaches down and tugs on Natia’s short hair, and she finally lets up until it is not so intense and Signa can take a moment to breathe as her tongue traces teasing, intricate patterns over her slit. Cautiously, she reaches behind her, her hand trailing down the flat planes of Natia’s stomach to cup her mound.

The duster stills then. Only for a moment, and then she picks back up, but it is enough to encourage Signa to slip her fingers in between the damp folds. Her touches are clumsy- she is reaching behind herself, after all, and it is hard to focus on pleasing Natia when Natia is back to sucking her clit like her life depends on it- but Signa does her best, and Natia gets wetter underneath her fingers.
Natia makes her come, hard, thighs shaking and Signa wails. Natia doesn’t let up, and Signa slips two fingers inside. She stills then, and Signa climbs off of her face, shifting until she can really work her fingers in and out.

Natia is quiet. Not like Signa, who’d had the luxury of thick stone walls, who’d learned that there were no consequences to being loud. Even quiet, there had been a couple of exhilaratingly embarrassing time when her fun with Leske had attracted attention (and if the way that attention had stuck around to watch and the way Leske wouldn’t stop fucking her had made her come quicker, well, nobody had to know). But when Signa leans down and hollows her lips around Natia’s clit and sucks, Natia can’t help but cry out.

She knows Signa will be so damn smug afterwards, but dammit, right now all Natia can think about is how close she is to coming. “Signa,” she groans, and she dutifully speeds up, until Natia’s hips buck and she comes with a cry. Signa’s nice enough to fuck her through the aftershocks until Natia reaches down and grabs her wrist. She withdraws then, licking the slick off of her fingers as she settles in beside Natia, propped up against the pillows.

It is quiet for a long moment between them. It is not like the quiet they had known in the Deep Roads. That silence had been just this side of hostile, when Natia had hated Signa because of the name Signa used to carry. This silence is comfortable, companionable. This is the sort of silence that Signa could live with for the rest of her life, and not to get too ahead of herself, she thinks she might want to.

“So,” Natia says, finally, and Signa looks at her with a raised eyebrow.

“So,” she agrees.

“I always did say fuck the nobles,” Natia says, and Signa’s laughter brightens the whole house.

Spring breaks, and the snow thaws. Eldris isn’t sure how he knows, with the way he is still underground, but somehow, he does. He is the one who goes around, rounding everyone up and telling them they will leave by evening. He will camp under the stars that night, on the surface, whether they come with him or not.

Zevran had stuck close to his side, after the first night in the tavern. Eldris didn’t mind. When he asked, Zevran would stay, and the nightmares were not so bad. Sometimes, Eldris still thinks about what might have happened if Zevran had slept with him, usually in the quiet of his room when he is alone and can wrap his fingers around himself until he comes with a silent sigh. Mostly, Eldris is just grateful that Zevran had been far nicer to him than he’d deserved.

He had also gone to Anders. There had been a period when he couldn’t sleep, even with Zevran in his bed, and Anders had made him a vial of potion. It eased his way into the Fade, and like that Eldris was finally able to get some sleep. He needed the potion less and less, but he was still grateful to the mage.

Even though the mage is currently complaining. It will be a long trip back, and he has just gotten used to the soft beds, and really everyone here is very impressed with his magic, so do they really have to leave? Besides, he is soft and squishy and certainly not the best suited to traveling long distances.

Eldris looks at him, and Anders braces himself for something scathing. Instead, Eldris’s ears twitch as he fights back a grin.
“I’d carry you,” he says, face a careful mask until the end of his sentence, “but I’m afraid you’re too tall. Your legs would drag the ground.”

Anders is so startled that he laughs.

Arya and Anora take tea together, sometimes. Cailan had insisted he take up a more prominent position leading his country, instead of leading his armies to battle, and Anora’s concession was that he got to work through tea time while she retired, provided he did not need her. While Arya had no shortage of people to spend time with, sometimes it was nice to just spend time with Anora.

“So, I noticed you and Cailan have been waking up with each other a lot,” she teases. Truly, she is happy for them. It seems their marriage has begun to thrive again, and Arya has done much better sleeping on her own. It helps that Solas often seeks her out, with endless questions. She still feels like she is on rocky ground- she is Bellanaris and she is Arya, all mixed up, and right now she is just waiting for the dust to settle. She tries to take the time to listen, to see what Bellanaris would have done. So far, she has had less trouble than before.

“I’ve also been taking a special tea with every meal. To boost chances of conceiving,” she says, a glint in her eye, and Arya’s eyes widen. She had not expected something like this so soon- it almost feels as though Anora has pulled the rug from under her feet. It is a reminder that life will not stay the way it is now.

“That is…oh,” she says, eloquently, and Anora laughs, taking a sip of the tea in question. Arya glances down at her cup. It is not the same sort of tea, hers is peppermint, and Anora’s is something else, but it makes her think. She had been worried about contraceptive teas, after all, and Anora was drinking the exact opposite.

“The nobility still expects an heir. And I never tried the tea before. Perhaps I am barren, and it is all for naught, but it is at least fun now. Or perhaps it is Cailan that cannot produce an heir. Either way, so far we have had little luck,” she says, and Arya can see a sort of hidden pain in her eyes. She reaches out and takes her hand.

“When Lysander comes back, I’ll use everything I’ve got to find a spell or some herbs to reduce their…refractory period, and then you can lay on your back all day with your legs spread and one of them inside you. Surely that would get you pregnant,” she says, laughing, and Anora gasps.

“You’re awful,” she says, but she thinks it’s funny too, and Arya wonders if this will change with the arrival of a child. She wonders if she should go off her contraceptives. It makes her think of Morrigan, too, and what she will do at the final battle. It makes her realize that she is only eighteen. I am ancient, says the voice in her head, and Arya rolls her eyes. Yes, but this body is only barely eighteen, she thinks in response, and Bellanaris is content to hum in response.

“Completely,” Arya agrees, and anything else they might say is cut off when Anaba sweeps inside the room. The elf doesn’t bother knocking- Arya had insisted that her quarters may as well be Anaba’s. It was certainly nicer than the servant’s quarters her handmaid stayed in, although Anaba insisted she stay in them. She hadn’t wanted to be too close to the nobles, after all.

“I’ve news,” Anaba says, handing Anora a piece of paper, and one to Arya. Arya isn’t sure what message Anora has received, but hers is short, in a scribbled scrawl hastily written in Eldris’s hand. She reads through it twice, then looks up to meet the Queen’s eyes.

“They’re coming home,” Anora says, and Arya can’t help but laugh in relief.
i had to split this chapter up because it was almost 8,000 words and i still had eight
scenes left to write. timeline-wise these fools are gonna spend a month in denerim to
"recover" after orzammar before heading to the brecilian forest. i'm gonna try to wrap
that up in a single chapter, but, like, no promises.

thanks to all of you for your continued support- it's probably 99% of the reason this fic is
actually getting written. i'm glad you've liked it this far, and i hope you keep liking it.
If Eldris had been asked what he thought their return would look like, his answer would have been incredibly different from what they got. For one thing, he’d expected everyone to be waiting just outside the palace gates to greet the weary travelers, notified by sentries or even by Morrigan who would have seen them as a bird or some other creature. The sun would have been shining, and they would have piled into the palace, shedding armor and hugging and Eldris would have pretended to hate it.

But that is only what he thought it would be like. Instead, it is raining, and miserably so. It is a cold rain that soaks them to the bone. Old aches from old fights flare up, but the group soldiers on. They could have stopped for shelter, but by the time Eldris found somewhere that had enough room for them to dry their clothes, the city was in sight. If they kept walking, they would be there soon, and Eldris figured that at this point they were already drenched, so a little more rain wouldn’t hurt them.

They finally reach the palace, staggering through the door like a bunch of drowned rats. Eldris shakes his hair out, the motion mimicking the dog’s, and instead of the reunion he’d been looking forward to (not that he would ever admit it, of course) they got a bunch of servants rushing forward to (not that he would ever admit it, of course) they got a bunch of servants rushing forward with towels and promises of hot baths in their bedrooms.

Anaba is the one who draws the short straw, sent to deal personally with Eldris. Anaba isn’t worried- his bark is worse than his bite, and her bark is even worse than his. She can give as good as she gets, and with Eldris she doesn’t have to worry about being formal. She doesn’t hesitate to wrap the towel around his head, rubbing vigorously to dry what she can of his hair. Not that it means much when the rest of him is soaked through, but he leans into her touch and she can hear him purring from it.

“The King and Queen are to be in meetings until dinner is served in a couple of hours. They’ve got a big one planned, but you’re all free to reunite with everyone else on your own terms until then,” she says, leading him through the palace. She knows he likely hasn’t forgotten how to get to his bedroom, but he seemed content to follow him. The other servants were meant to pass on the same message, more or less, to the others.

Eldris pretends he is disappointed until Anaba opens his door and reveals a steaming hot tub of water. His fingers are fumbling with his armor before he’s even inside the door, his gauntlets hitting the ground only to be kicked into the room by Anaba as she follows him. She leaves him to undress himself, bustling around the room instead and arranging soft towels by the tub, as well as soaps and scented oils. She lays out a pile of clothes near the couch, too, before turning to him just as he shucks his smalls off.

She wonders if the Dalish are as free around each other as the city elves. When you’ve got four or five people living in a two or three-room house, it is hard to be shy around them. She imagines it might be similar for the close-knit clans of the Dalish, especially since the elf in front of her doesn’t seem shy.

“The Queen has requested you wear the clothes laid out for you. They’re nicer than you may be used to, but she picked them out herself with the help of Arya and that bard of yours,” she says.
“They’re not...awful, are they?” he asks, stepping into the tub. He looks up at her with his wide eyes, one hand still on the lip of the tub to balance himself. He reminds her of Soris, in that moment, and Anaba’s heart aches fiercely from it.

“No, just a tunic and breeches. The make of them is fine, though. They were probably expensive, but it seems the Queen has a soft spot for dressing her friends in nice things,” Anaba says. Eldris sinks into the water with a groan, his ears pinned back to his head. She can’t help but smile at the sight.

“Oh. Thank you, then, Anaba,” he says, his eyes fluttering shut. She stops next to the tub on the way out, running her fingers through his hair.

“I’ll leave you to it,” she says after a moment, withdrawing her hand after another. He pouts after her, but doesn’t say anything as she slips out the door. When she’s gone, he sinks further into the hot water to chase away the chill from the rain.

Lysander just manages to strip out of his armor when there is a knock at the door. He isn’t sure what he is expected, until he opens the door and sees his brother standing in front of him, Morrigan standing behind him. As his eyes drift to the witch, she leans up, tugging on Reno’s sleeve.

“I’ll be waiting out here,” she murmurs, and Reno nods before slipping into the room. Lysander nods at Morrigan and closes the door, turning around and stripping out of his wet clothes. He is reminded of the few times he and Reno had gotten to bathe together— it had been great fun for them, and the nursemaid who watched them had been miserable as she tried to keep them from splashing.

“It’s been a long time, you bastard. I thought you were dead,” Reno says, as Lysander gets in the tub, taking a moment to adjust himself. He’s too tall to fit comfortably, so he ends up with his legs draped over the edge.

“I thought the same of you, brother. I even went back to Highhever, thinking I’d hear something. Well, and to go after Howe, but I never heard anything about you until I got the letters in Orzammar,” he says, affronted, and Reno grins at him, leaning back against the couch with his arms crossed.

“I heard of what was happening at the castle and managed to get out of Highhever. I knew they wouldn’t let me leave alive if they knew of me, so I left before they could. By the time I heard, it was already too late to do anything. The servant that found me told me Gilmore had already fallen, and that you were gone,” he says, with a haunted look in his eyes. There’s one in Lysander’s, too, when he remembers Gilmore. He remembers Dairren, too, and can’t help but wonder if he might have survived if Lysander hadn’t invited him to bed. Lysander wonders about a lot of things he might have done differently, that night.

“Well, you know what I did after, coming to Denerim and all. What did you do?” Lysander asks, letting his eyes drift shut as he sinks further into the water. Maker’s breath, but it feels good after the cold of the rain.

“I stayed mostly in the forest. I tried to make my way to Redcliffe, but I never quite made it. I found a girl in the woods, a mage. She told me there’d been trouble at Kinloch and she’d been lucky enough to escape after her phylactery had been shattered. When I finally made it to Denerim to see if there was news of you, she came with me. Your girl gave her enough coin to pay for passage on a ship out of Fereldan,” Reno says, and Lysander has to admit that that sounds like Arya.
“Wait a second, my girl?” he asks, cracking one whiskey-brown eye open to look at him. His brother is grinning at him.

“Yeah, your girl. She definitely missed you. Think that might be part of the reason why she was so charitable to me,” he answers, as Lysander takes the soap. He hadn’t gotten incredibly filthy, but there was still sweat and grime on him from traveling. He would be glad to wash it off.

“I didn’t know she was mine, but it makes me feel good to hear it,” he says, a faint smile on his face.

“I’ll bet. You’re lucky to have her,” Reno tells him, stepping closer to examine the scented oils left for his brother.

Lysander tries to tell himself that he should really not be considering what he is considering. That he is a grown adult, and that such a thing is childish. Lysander then tells himself he is a childish man, and he reaches up and yanks his brother into the tub with him.

Reno splutters, yelling wordlessly as they both thrash in the water. Lysander laughs at the indignation on Reno’s face, even if it is uncomfortable to have his older brother sprawled out on his lap in soaking wet clothes.

Both of them freeze at a knock on the door. “Is everything all right in there?” Morrigan asks. Lysander knows she’s ready to come in at the slightest indication of trouble. He glances at Reno, who gives him a wide grin.

“No, actually, it isn’t!” he calls out, and Lysander is the one spluttering in indignation as Morrigan opens the door.

It shuts gently behind her and she puts one hand on her hip, an eyebrow raised as she examines them.

“What’s going on?” she asks, slow and careful, but there’s a smile threatening to break through.

“He pulled me in!” Reno tattles, and Morrigan laughs as she makes her way to the tub, hauling him out. Water sloshes out of the tub and onto the floor, and Reno is soaked through, dripping from it.

“Now, now, boys,” she says, reaching for a towel.

“Hey, I could pull you in,” Lysander threatens, and Morrigan glances back at him with another perfectly arched eyebrow.

“Oh? I suppose it would be fun to see what I could come up with in response,” she says, and she lets go of Reno long enough to summon a ball of fire. She wouldn’t truly set the man on fire, but there were plenty of other spells she knew that could be used to annoy him in response.

“Point taken, you’re scary and would probably kill me in my sleep for it, I will not pull you in,” he says, grinning. Morrigan laughs as she goes back to drying Reno.

“Come now, Reno. Let’s get you into dry clothes,” she says, leading him towards the door.

“And you in your dress?” Reno asks, and even Lysander laughs at the look on Morrigan’s face.
Leliana is waiting for Alistair in his quarters. The servant who had escorted him ducks away at the sight of her, leaving him standing in the middle of his bedroom, dripping wet, with his girlfriend. Maker’s breath, but he’s glad to see her. Heedless of his soaked armor, he sweeps her into a hug. She laughs, her arms wrapping around his neck and pulling him close. He takes a moment to just breathe her in and realizes he has missed her much more than he had thought.

“You’re soaked. Let’s get you in the bath,” she says, her voice a familiar lilt, and Maker, he’s got it bad for her. He whines just a little when she pulls back, fingers making quick work of the buckles of his armor, and maybe he should be shy, but he isn’t. His face heats up when she starts working at the laces of his trousers, though. He thinks he might get away with it escaping her notice, but her laugh, clear and bright, tells him otherwise.

“Don’t laugh at me!” he protests, and it only makes her laugh harder as she continues to lay him bare.

“I’m just really happy to see you,” she says, pressing a kiss to his lips. She steps back, letting him remove his smalls on his own, and Alistair’s heart melts at the gesture. That’s his Leliana, making sure he’s comfortable, always doing what she can to keep him from getting nervous about anything they do together.

“Happy enough to join me in the bath?” he asks, and even though he can’t make the offer without blushing, there’s something wicked in his dark eyes. Leliana closes the distance between them again, draping her arms across his shoulders as she kisses him.

“Perhaps if you would be kind enough to help me out of my dress,” she says, innocently, and Maker’s breath but she will be the end of him.

“That can be arranged,” he says, against her lips, as his fingers fumble with the laces of her dress. It takes him a moment, but he gets it, and Leliana steps back to let the dress slip off her arms. Alistair pushes it off her hips until it pools on the floor, and he hooks his finger the waistband of her smalls. She reaches behind her to undo her breast band, a wicked gleam in her eye as she lets it fall to the floor. He pushes down, and her smalls join her dress.

He takes her hand to steady her as he leads her to the tub, waiting until she steps in before he joins her. The heat feels better than he had thought it would on his skin- he hadn’t realized he had been so cold. He lets out a soft sigh that brings a smile to Leliana’s face as she reaches over the side of the tub for the soap that had been left behind.

“Let me take care of you,” she says, voice soft and sweet, and Alistair nods as she lathers the soap on a washcloth. She is gentle as she swipes it over his skin, cleaning away the grime of travel and turning him into putty in her hands. Her touches start off chaste, genuinely interested in cleaning him, but as he gets cleaner, her touches get more seductive, until she is sitting on his lap and he is valiantly trying to pretend he is not hard beneath her.

She drops the rag into the water and leans down to kiss him. His hands come up, one resting on her waist and the other cupping her cheek as he kisses back. She breaks away for a moment, flushed and smiling, and Alistair grins up at her. He’s convinced he looks dopey and in love and altogether like a giant dork, but he’s her giant dork, and dammit that’s all that matters.

“Is this, uh, the best place for this?” he asks, reaching up to rub the back of his neck, and Leliana laughs. She rises to her feet though, water streaming down her skin, and Maker’s breath but she’s beautiful. If he wasn’t hard before, he is now. She steps out of the tub and reaches out for him. He comes willingly, rising from the water and following her to the bed. He doesn’t care that they’re getting the sheets wet as she pushes him back- they can sleep in her room tonight, for all he cares.
Right now, he just wants her, however he can have her.

She crawls up the bed until she’s hovering over him, leaning down to kiss him. He tangles his hands in her hair and kisses back like his life depends on it as she reaches down between them, wrapping her fingers around the base of his cock. He breaks away with a gasp, and Leliana can’t help but laugh.

“I promise not to torment you, mon chéri,” she breathes, kissing him again. This time, when her fingers reach between them, it is for her own folds, teasing herself. The idea of it makes Alistair groan against her, and he fumbles, reaching down. His touch is hesitant and clumsy, but Leliana withdraws her hand and rocks her hips against his hand, letting out a soft and needy sound. Alistair is sure that he might burst into flames at any moment, based on the heat he feels on his cheeks.

Leliana is the one who pushes his hand away, scooting back and raising herself up. She reaches down to guide him in, and as the head of his cock enters her, Alistair makes a sound like he might die. Leliana laughs, her other hand resting flat against his chest to brace herself as she sinks down. Finally, he is hilted inside her, his hands resting on her hips. Leliana leans down to kiss him again and he starts to move his hips slowly, experimentally.

There is a part of him terrified of hurting her. He knows it is silly- while she is wet and warm and tight around him, she would not have sank down on his length if it hurt.

Leliana seems to pick up on his thoughts, pushing herself back up. It takes a moment for her to set a rhythm, faster than anything Alistair might have thought of doing, and it is all Alistair can do to keep up with her, moans spilling from his lips. Leliana’s clit throbs at each sound he makes, and as soon as she thinks he can fuck her like she wants, she lets him take her weight and reaches up to pinch her nipples, nails scraping lightly over her skin. Alistair groans again at the sight, and Leliana giggles.

Alistair lets out a breathless laugh in response, shifting to get a better grip on her hips. He’s lifting her up and down just as much as he’s moving his hips, and when Leliana reaches down to rub her clit, it is a wonder he doesn’t finish then and there.

“Leliana!” he groans, a warning and a prayer all at once, and she leans down to kiss him again. His thrusts turn erratic, and moments later he’s spilling inside her. She gasps, rubbing frantically until she follows him over the edge. She rolls off him, tucking herself up against her side. They’re both breathing heavy now, but the quiet between them is a relaxed one.

“I am glad to have you home, dear heart,” she says, looking up at him. Alistair looks down at her with a dopey smile on his face, shifting so he can kiss her.

“And I am glad to be back. But, uh, speaking of being back, there’s something I’ve been thinking about and I would maybe also like to be with you when I do the thing I’ve been thinking about because I really don’t want to be alone,” he says, rambling, and Leliana leans up to kiss him again.

“Of course I’ll come with you. What is it that you’ve been thinking about?” she asks, her fingers tracing nonsensical patterns on his chest.

“So, you know the whole thing about my father, right? Well, supposedly, I’ve got a sister in the city. Her name is Goldanna,” he says, nervously tapping his fingers, and Leliana’s heart twists in her chest.

“We’ll go tomorrow,” she promises, and Alistair smiles down at her.
Wynne gives Anders enough time to get out of the bath before she knocks on the door, the ginger cat that Morrigan intended for him in her arms. She waits for a long moment before he answers the door, in the middle of putting on a shirt. He stares at her for a moment, as if he is unable to comprehend the idea that Wynne is standing at his door holding a cat.

“He’s for you,” she says, holding him out for her. Anders takes the cat immediately, looking like she’d just given him the city of Denerim.

He steps aside to let Wynne enter almost absentmindedly. She shuts the door behind her, watching with a bemused expression as he carries the cat to his bed, curling up on the quilt and curling around the kitten. It’s purring loud enough that she can hear it from where she stands, and she can’t shake the fond smile on her face.

“I take it you like him?” she asks, and Anders looks up at her, nodding enthusiastically.

“I think I might name him Ser Pounce A Lot,” he says, and Wynne can’t help but crawl onto the bed and pull him into a hug. She hadn’t liked him that much while they were in the Circle—Anders was always a troublemaker, and Wynne didn’t like troublemakers. Now, though, he’s thriving, and she has never been more proud.

“That’s a fine name. I’ve got one of my own, a little grey tabby,” she says, and Anders jumps off the bed immediately, Ser Pounce still cradled in his arms.

“I want to go see it right now immediately,” he says, and Wynne laughs but leads him to her bedroom all the same.

After his bath, Lysander dresses quickly before he ducks into the corridors. It has been a whole season since he was here, but he still knows his way around as if he had only been gone for a day. As he’d hoped, Arya is in her room, sitting at her desk and reading a letter. She looks up as the door opens, and then stands, letter forgotten.

“Honey, I’m home,” he says, a roguish grin on his face. Arya flings herself at him, her arms wrapping around his shoulders, and Lysander catches her easily, spinning her around. She laughs, and he hadn’t realized how much he’d missed that sound, missed her. He pulls back to pepper kisses across her face, making her laugh even more, and his heart does a funny flip in his chest.

“Maker’s breath, I’ve missed you,” she breathes, pulling back to rest her forehead against his. Lysander smiles, impossibly soft, and sits her down.

“I’ve missed you too,” he tells her, kissing her again. His hands rest on her hips and she tilts her head up even after they’ve pulled apart. She’s making it very hard to stop kissing her.

“So, you probably don’t know this, but Cailan and Anora have been sleeping with each other almost every night,” she says, conversationally, and Lysander raises an eyebrow at her. He has a faint idea of where this conversation is going.

“Oh?” he asks, casually.

“Mhm. Which means I’ve been all by myself. It’s been a very long time since I’ve gotten any attention,” she says coquettishly, and Lysander surges down to kiss her again, his hands coming up to tangle in her hair. He is absolutely ruining the work that Anaba had done earlier, but neither he nor Arya can bring themselves to care. It has been months for him, too. There had been a brothel in Orzammar, of course, but Lysander hadn’t wanted a dwarven whore. He wanted Arya, spread out
beneath him, Arya’s nails digging into his back, Arya calling out as she came around him.

Their touches are frantic, as if they only have a few minutes instead of a few hours. He all but rips her tunic off as she fumbles with the laces of his pants. He kicks them away impatiently as soon as they’re around his ankles, yanking hers down as she pulls his shirt off. It takes them only a few heartbeats to undress entirely, and then Arya is backing up towards the bed, pulling him after her. He goes willingly, lips still pressed against hers. She hits the mattress and he follows her, fingers on her skin as he trails his hand up and down her side. Their frantic touches slow down then, to something softer and slower, and Arya realizes how much in that moment she had missed him. Gods, how had she survived without him for so long?

He trails kisses down her jaw to her neck, where he starts to suck bruises onto her skin. She knows her dress won’t be able to hide it, but at this point, she can’t bring herself to care. She tangles her fingers in his hair as he kisses down her body, stopping to flick his tongue across her nipples. She groans, and he chuckles against her skin before moving even lower.

She’s already wet for him. It is definitely an ego boost, but right now all Lysander can think about is how much he never wants to let her go again. He wraps one hand around her hip and laves his tongue across her slit. She cries out as he circles his tongue around her clit, not quite touching it. He moves lower, lapping up the wetness, and Arya’s hips buck. For once, Bellanaris is entirely silent in her head, and she has never been more grateful.

She tugs on his hair until he pulls back, looking up at her with a question in his eyes. “Please. I want you inside me,” she says, and Lysander grins as he kisses his way back up her body.

She can taste herself on his lips when he kisses her again, the head of his cock at her entrance. She whines, bucking her hips, and he chuckles against her as he pushes inside. She gasps, throwing one leg around his waist. He hilts himself inside her and stops, pushing her hair out of her face and cupping her cheek with his hand.

He thinks he would like nothing more than to spend the rest of his life with her. He remembers Highever, and how she agreed to go with him. She leans up to press a kiss to his lips, fingers on his back.

“Marry me,” he says, before he can think about it. Arya tilts her head to the side, sliding her hand further down his back.

“I mean, we’re a little busy right now,” she says, but she can’t hide the smile on her face. Lysander laughs, burying his face in the crook of her neck.

“After the Blight, then. We’ll need to celebrate somehow,” he says, pressing a kiss to her bare shoulder.

“Oh, well, in that case, yes. A thousand times over,” she says, bucking her hips just a little to remind him what they are currently doing. He laughs again, but he takes her cue for what it is and starts to move his hips, shifting to get a different angle. She groans, throwing her head back. Her eyes drift shut, and it gives him a dozen dirty ideas for later. He speeds up until she’s writhing and gasping beneath him, just like he’d imagined those long nights alone in Orzammar.

Her orgasm, when it comes, is almost unexpected. Almost. She had lost herself in the way he felt inside her, above her. She had lost herself in the way it felt to have him back, and she was not at all focused on the coil of heating the pit of her stomach, that tightened until it breaks and she comes apart beneath him with a hoarse cry, her nails raking along his back.
It only takes him a moment before he comes too, spilling inside her. He collapses on top of her, one arm and a leg thrown over her as he tucks his head in the crook of her neck again.

“So, marriage, huh?” she asks, after a moment. She fumbles for a moment until she finds his hand, linking their fingers together.

“Yeah, marriage. I just…love you,” he says, sheepish, because maybe he should have admitted that before he asked her to marry him.

“I love you too, vhenan,” she says, shifting and curling against him. He hums, eyes fluttering sleepily, and curls closer to her.

They manage to sleep through the reunion that Anora had so meticulously planned.

Anora had gone to great length to make sure the reunion planned would be perfect. Everyone piled into the ballroom, where the tables were piled with food once more and she’d snagged Arya’s computer again. She’d snuck into her room to get it, trying to wake Lysander to no avail, and so she had left them sleeping. She loses track of everyone almost as soon as it starts, tucked close against Cailan’s side as she plays the smiling host.

It was a nice gesture, Eldris admits, but Eldris feels like he’s going to crawl out of his own skin. When he thinks there is no one looking, he slips out of the ballroom and through the corridors of the palace. It is only when he steps outside that he realizes he was followed.

“Where are you going on such a fine evening all alone, my friend?” Zevran asks, but there’s something else in his eyes. Worry, maybe, and Creators but Eldris is sick of people acting like he can’t be alone (he’s even more sick of feeling that way himself, because he’s lost count of how many times his eyes have gone to his daggers and the sharp edges and Tamlen had made one and Eden had made the other and Creators he is so lost he doesn’t know what to do anymore).

“I wanted a drink,” he says, softly, shrugging his shoulders. He doesn’t know how to explain everything else, but the best thing about Zevran was that he rarely needed to explain it.

“I recommend the Pearl. A whorehouse it may be, but no one will ask questions, and no rumors will be spread if something should happen,” he says, closing the distance between them. Eldris falls into step with the assassin as easy as breathing.

“You’re better at this than you should be,” he grousers, and Zevran only laughs. They walk close enough that their shoulders brush, and once it might have rankled under his skin, but now it is only a comfort for Eldris. He reaches up to trace the vines of Mythal’s tree on his face and sighs.

“I think the Pearl will cheer you right up, my friend,” he says, reaching down between them to link their fingers together. Somehow, the gesture helps, grounds Eldris enough that he doesn’t feel like he’ll fall apart. Creators, he was sure he didn’t deserve Zevran. The other elf was a better friend than Eldris likely deserved.

The Pearl is warm and quiet, and the lady who runs it is a little disappointed when Eldris says he isn’t interested in a whore, but she serves him ale readily enough. Zevran lingers for a moment before disappearing into the shadows, giving him the peace and quiet that he’d been craving. He’d give the elf a raise, except they weren’t exactly paying him. Or any of them, and maybe he really should rectify that at some point.

His eyes are drawn to a commotion near the far corner. A woman is surrounded by three men, all of them armed and armored. He shoots a glance at the woman who’d served him to see her
face pinched in displeasure, but she doesn’t make a move to stop them. One of the men makes the first move, and Eldris is glad that he had turned his attention back to the four of them in time to see what happened next.

The woman moved with more grace than he thought possible. She slams his head into the wall behind her, spinning him around and throwing him bodily at one of the others to knock them both out of the way. The third has just managed to find his sword in the sheath when she puts her dagger to his throat. There is a heated moment between them before the men scurry away, and the woman goes back to her drink looking amused.

Eldris slides into the seat next to her before he had made the decision to approach. Maybe he’d had more ale than he thought, but at least it was regular human ale instead of the stuff he’d had in Orzammar. He’d have certainly made a fool of himself then.

“Do you need me to teach you a lesson too, sweet thing?” she asks, barely looking up at him, but there’s a grin quirking up the corners of her mouth, so he knows he’s not in trouble yet.

“I was going to offer to buy you a drink,” he says, a smile on his own face, and she turns his attention to him. It is only now that he gets a good look at her- her skin is dark, and her eyes are whiskey gold, and there is jewelry in her ears and in her lip and around her neck. She wears a blue bandana in her hair, and the fighting hadn’t even managed to displace it.

“I never say no to a free drink, sweetling,” she purrs, and Eldris motions to the waitress again. She brings two ales, and Creators, he may regret this, because the woman turns her attention to him and suddenly she is impossibly close, her fingers just barely touching his forearm. Once, he wouldn’t have tolerated even the idea of such a thing. Now, he finds himself hoping she presses closer.

“I suppose I should ask for your name,” he says, conversationally, and the smile she gives him is downright predatory as she strokes her fingers up his arms.

“I see you’ve met Isabela,” Zevran says, dropping into the seat across from them, seemingly out of nowhere. Things fall into place, then. Zevran had mentioned Isabela a handful of times in Orzammar. Eldris was hazy on the details, but he knew that Zevran had been hired to kill Isabela’s husband, and that Isabela wasn’t actually that upset over it. All he really knew about her was that she was a pirate captain.

“Oh! You didn’t tell me you knew Zevran!” Isabela exclaims, voice slightly less seductive, but she doesn’t stop leaning against him.

“I didn’t know he was relevant,” Eldris says, and Zevran pouts at him. He’d feel bad if he knew it was sincere.

“You wound me. I am always relevant, my friend,” Zevran chides, and Isabela laughs low in Eldris’s ear.

“So, what brought you over to me, sweet thing? I don’t think you just wanted to buy a pretty girl a drink. You were here for ages,” she says, her fingers still moving up and down Eldris’s arm.

“I saw what happened. I’ve never seen anyone fight like that,” he admits, and she laughs again. The sound is almost enough to send shivers down his spine.

“I’m a duelist, sweet thing,” she tells him, and her chin is almost resting on his shoulder now, but not quite, and Eldris isn’t stupid. He’s only surprised by the interest Zevran suddenly seems to have shown in the duel between himself and the woman.
show, shifting in his seat and leaning closer.

“A duelist? Is there any chance you’d be willing to teach me?” he asks, innocently, and Isabela chuckles.

“I’ll tell you what, sweet thing. I’ll teach you, if you play a game of Wicked Grace with me and win,” she says, and Eldris doesn’t let the smile slip from his face even if he’s rubbish at card games.

“Unfortunately, I am absolutely terrible at Wicked Grace. I do have another suggestion, though,” he says, lowering his voice just a little. Isabela perks up, her fingers stilling on his arm, but she’s no less interested now.

“And what might that be?” she asks, reaching for the ale she’d bought him. She takes a sip of it, tongue tracing the rim of the tankard for a moment.

“You’re a pirate, yes? I’d wager you’ve a ship in the harbor. So why don’t the two of us take a trip to your quarters on your ship, and I can show you something else I’ve got some talent with,” he says, and Isabela pulls back, a thoughtful frown on her face like she’s considering.

“On one condition,” she says, her eyes flicking over to Zevran.

“What’s that?” Eldris asks, downing the rest of his mug. Whatever her condition is, he’s sure he won’t mind.

“Zevran comes too,” she declares, and Eldris glances across the table at the other elf, who currently has the cheekiest grin on his face that Eldris has ever seen in his life.

“You’re a woman after my own heart,” Eldris says, and she laughs as she rises. She flips a sovereign towards the waitress- more than enough to cover all of their drinks- and walks towards the door with a swagger in her step. Eldris follows, and Zevran falls into step with him, a hand on the small of his back, and Eldris thinks this is exactly what he needs.

Eldris has never been on a ship before. His whole life, his clan had stayed in various camps in the Brecilian forest. He finds that he likes the way it rocks under his feet in the harbor, but he doesn’t have long to admire the view of the sea because Isabela is leading the way to her cabin and Zevran’s hand has slid from the small of his back to cup his ass. He wondered, briefly, if Theo had found anyone to pass the time with in Zathrian’s clan. They’d never been too terribly exclusive, but there was a connection he had with Theo that he didn’t have with anyone else. Theo wasn’t just sex. Technically Zevran wasn’t just sex either, but that was in the sense that Zevran was a friend. Eldris had already presented Theo with the pelt for the bonding ritual. They were meant to have been married (by shem standards, anyway, not that Eldris gave a single shit about those) by spring, but then everything had happened.

He was sure Theo would have taken this opportunity if they’d switched places, and by the Creators, Eldris was certainly going to take it.

The door shuts behind them, and Eldris takes a moment to examine Isabela’s cabin. It is ornate- the walls are covered in red satin halfway down, where it gives way to mahogany wood. She has matched red drapes over the two windows in her cabin, and one wall is made entirely of bookshelves, stocked full. Part of the cabin has been sectioned off into a sort of office- she has a desk there, and a safe bolted to the floor next to it. The floor has no less than three massive rugs- one underneath the bed, one in front of the bed and covering most of the floor space, and another
underneath the desk. It is fancier than any of the rooms he had seen in the palace of Denerim, and with delicate red lines of his vallaslin, he feels right at home. He thinks it is almost the same shade.

“I want to watch you two, first,” Isabela says, sprawling in a chair against the wall. The idea of Isabela watching makes heat pool in the pit of his stomach and his cock stir in his breeches. Zevran turns to him with a wicked smile, and closes the distance between them to pull him into a kiss.

It is not the sort of kiss he shares with Theo. This one is pure filth, open-mouthed and wet as Zevran pushes his tongue inside his mouth. It is an odd feeling, but a welcome one as Zevran slides his hands down again, kneading his ass. Eldris whines against him, nearly forgetting entirely that Isabela is watching them. Zevran laughs into the kiss, and Eldris might feel embarrassed that he’s already hard, but he can feel Zevran against his thigh too. Creators, that single kiss had blown every fantasy Eldris had ever had out of the water.

Zevran pulls back with a languid smile on his face, but there’s a smugness to him that Eldris is sure he will find unbearable lately. He reaches down to tease at the hem of his shirt before pulling it off in one swift motion, throwing it across the room. His own shirt follows moments later, and Zevran turns Eldris around slowly until his back is pressed against his chest.

This means that Eldris is free to make eye contact with Isabela as Zevran’s fingers find the laces of his breeches. The pirate had removed her armor, leaving her in that long white tunic. She’d abandoned her trousers, too. She wasn’t quite wearing the tunic, though. She’d slipped her arms out of the sleeves and pulled it down, pinching and tugging at idly at her nipples as she watches them. He’s surprised that she hadn’t wanted the attention on her, but Creators, he isn’t going to complain, especially not when Zevran only undoes the laces far enough the slip his hand in and tease him. He whines, bucking his hips into the touch, and Zevran laughs low in his ear.

It seems the elf is feeling merciful, though, because he pulls his hand back out and undoes the laces all the way, pushing them down his hips until they pool at the floor. He’s left in his smalls as Isabela looks him up and down with a wolfish smile. Behind him, he can feel Zevran fumbling with the laces on his own breeches. The pirate scoots forward in her chair before leaning back, draping her legs over the sides.

Creators help him, but she isn’t wearing any smalls under that tunic. Zevran turns him around again, depriving him of that wickedly delightful sight, and kisses him again. Eldris almost doesn’t realize they’re moving until his knees hit the back of the bed. Zevran lowers him down easy, climbing after him as Eldris falls back against the pillows, of which there had to be at least two dozen, and if he weren’t so distracted he’d wonder why Isabela had so many decorative pillows.

Zevran doesn’t kiss him again, and Eldris is almost disappointed, but he trails kisses across his jaw, and runs his tongue along the edge of his ear, and Eldris squirms beneath him. He laughs again before running his tongue along Eldris’s throat, nipping gently at the skin before moving lower.

Isabela approaches them and Eldris watches her through heavy-lidded eyes, but she just stands behind Zevran to pull his smalls down. “Get his off soon. I’m impatient,” she says, playfully smacking his ass before slinking back to her chair. Creators help him, there was a chance that she’d end up killing them both tonight.

“Do you mind letting me work?” Zevran asks, over his shoulders, but he scoots back enough to pull his smalls off, leaving him bare before them both. Eldris reaches for him again, whining and Zevran laughs as he leans back down, giving him a quick kiss before he goes back to licking and kissing the rest of him.
It isn’t long before Isabela is back, a vial of oil in her hand, and Creators, Eldris hopes it’s for what he thinks it’s for. “How do you two want to do this?” she asks, holding the vial up so that it catches the light and shaking it just a little. Zevran pulls back to look at Eldris, the same question in his eyes.

“Creators, I don’t care, I just want him inside me,” he says, impatient. Zevran laughs, leaning down to placate him with a kiss.

“You could turn him over, prop him up with some of the pillows? I could sit here, you know I like to watch anyway,” Isabela suggests, pointing with her fingers. Eldris is impossibly hard- right now, he’d take whatever he could get to take the edge off. Zevran deliberates for a moment before nodding, glancing down at Eldris to make sure he’s okay with it. Eldris nods, eagerly, and Zevran smiles at him.

It takes a moment of awkward shuffling before they’re positioned correctly. They’d used three pillows to prop his hips up, and Isabela had smacked his ass before she’d settled in front of him, her legs on either side of his head, and he knows where that will eventually lead. He licks his lips, eager for that too, but he can’t stop himself from wiggling in anticipation as he feels Zevran settle behind him, nudging his legs apart.

Eldris jumps when he first feels the oil, warm and slick over his hole. Zevran makes a soft shushing sound under his breath, and Isabela cards her fingers through his hair like she’s petting him, and he relaxes again, even if there’s something under his skin thrumming with anticipating. His cock is dangling free between his legs, down the underside of the pillows, and he doesn’t know how much friction that will give him when he’s rutting desperately, but maybe that was part of the reason Zevran had taken care to position him like that.

Zevran keeps his touches careful at first, kneading Eldris’s ass, barely touching the rim of his hole. Eldris is whining by the time Zevran slips a finger inside, and elf beneath him is so relaxed he can add another finger almost immediately. Really, he could probably move on entirely, but both Zevran and Isabela want to see how much of a mess they can make of Eldris first.

He keeps his movements slow, at first, and the slow drag of his fingers in and out makes Eldris whine more insistently, bucking his hips back against Zevran’s hands. He can’t quite get enough of a hold to really push back, not without leaning up on his elbows, but Isabela clucks her tongue anyway. Eldris only whimpers in response, his skin too hot in the flickering candlelight.

“What do you say, sweet thing? Should we be nice to him?” Isabela asks, still carding her fingers through his hair. Eldris hadn’t ever navigated sex like this, but it feels good to just let go and let them do what they like.

“Hmm, I don’t know, Isabela. What do you think?” Zevran asks, but he doesn’t slow his movements at all.

“What do you say, pet? I’ve been dying to spank your pretty little ass this whole time. If you let me spank you, he goes ahead and fucks you. If you don’t, then he gets to take his time,” she says, reaching out to rub her hand along his ass.

“Don’t hit me too hard. I need to be able to walk home,” he says, still relaxed against the mattress. Isabela laughs, but she takes his invitation eagerly and peppers smacks across his ass cheeks. Each hit is relatively gentle, but it all builds up until his ass is pink from the onslaught. Eldris isn’t embarrassed to admit that he’d liked it. He is embarrassed by the sounds he made with each hit-a tiny squeak that Isabela had delighted in wringing out of him. He hid his face in his arms so he wouldn’t see the gleam in her eyes.
When Isabela is satisfied that his skin is red enough, she sits back and nods at Zevran. He shifts behind Eldris, his hands skating down his back as a warning, and then he’s pushing inside him. It is agonizingly slow—Eldris does not know if it is to give him time to adjust, or if it is just another way that Zevran is teasing him. He whines his impatience, and Zevran and Isabela both chuckle as Zevran starts to move his hips.

Eldris is lost in the sensation until he feels Isabela pulling on his hair. He raises his head and she gestures at herself, scooting closer, and it isn’t hard to figure out. It takes a moment for the two of them to adjust themselves, Eldris shifting his arms to curl underneath her thighs, and Isabela scooting even closer so he could reach her properly, but then she is spread beneath him like a feast.

Eldris takes his time, his motions exploratory as he tries to find out what she likes best. He laves his tongue up and down her slit, swirls it around her clit, teases at her entrance. She isn’t shy, fingers tangled in his hair as she lets out a litany of sounds. He pays attention to each one she makes, ears flicking. Zevran must see the way he is fully devoted to his task, because he speeds up. Eldris whines at the unfairness of it, and Isabela laughs.

Eldris is content to give himself over to the way Zevran feels inside him, and to the way Isabela tastes on his tongue. He isn’t sure how long he spends like this, but suddenly Isabela is coming and he’s lapping up the slick until she pushes his head away, and it is only then that Eldris realizes how close he is. Zevran must notice the way he comes out of whatever trance he had been in, because he speeds up just a little, fucking into him fast and rough.

“Zevran!” he gasps, fingers scrabbling at the sheets, and the other elf just laughs. Isabela shifts so she can land a few more smacks on his ass, and Eldris is so close he can almost taste it, his toes curling. He whimpers, rocking back to meet his thrusts. Isabela drags her nails over his back and down his thigh, reaching down and wrapping her fingers around his cock. Zevran doesn’t slow down, close to his own end, and Isabela strokes down and that is all it takes to undo Eldris. He comes hard enough that he sees stars, and seconds later Zevran comes too, draping himself on top of Eldris.

Isabela looks at them fondly for a moment, reaching to run her fingers through Eldris’s hair and pulling Zevran into a kiss. She pulls back and glances down at her pillows, all fondness vanishing from her face. “You’ve ruined them!” she gasps, and Eldris dissolves into giggles as she works them one by one from underneath him. Zevran pulls out of him only to curl around him, Eldris’s back against his chest.

“You’re lucky your mouth was so talented,” Isabela grumbles, but she tosses the ruined pillows off of the bed and pulls down the sheets. It takes some effort with the way Zevran and Eldris are laying on top of them, but eventually, she pulls them all the way down and curls up on Eldris’s other side, pulling the blankets back up over them. Zevran falls asleep, face pressed against Eldris’s back, and Eldris joins him not long after, the gentle sway of the ship rocking on the harbor’s water lulling him to sleep.

Reno and Morrigan sneak away from Anora’s little party early. Reno’s curled up on the couch with a book, and Morrigan’s sitting on the other side, flipping through the pages of her mother’s grimoire without truly reading them. She glances up at Reno, taking note of the way his hair falls into his face, but how he doesn’t seem to notice because he is so intent on whatever is happening in his story.

She hadn’t realized what she was feeling until that moment, and she feels a little like it had crawled up behind her and hit her over the head. The realization that she cared for Arya had been gentler, something inevitable that Morrigan tried to fight to no avail. She had not anticipated the way
she has come to care for Reno.

“Can we…talk?” she asks, suddenly. Reno looks up at her, sliding his bookmark into his book and putting it aside immediately. It makes Morrigan’s chest feel funny—tight and overfull, all at once.

“Of course. What is it?” he asks, concerning shining bright in his eyes, and Morrigan wonders how she ever could have doubted that she loved him. She can’t even pinpoint the exact moment it had happened— it had come slowly, over the course of the winter.

Frustratingly, she does not know what words to use to tell him this. He frowns at her, and she can feel his concern growing. Her heart flutters like a bird in a cage in her chest, and for a moment she is terrified that she will let the moment pass without telling him.

She looks at him, though, and she decides that maybe she doesn’t need to use words to tell him. She leans forward slowly, a hand coming out to fist in the loose fabric of his shirt, and then they’re kissing, his mouth soft under hers as he pulls her closer, a hand resting on her hip and another cupping her cheek.

She is flushed when she finally pulls back, her forehead resting against his.

“I…had no idea you felt that way,” he says, and Morrigan’s laughter rings out in the bedroom.

“You are a fool, Reno Cousland,” she declares, giving him a quick peck on the lips again. Reno laughs, his fingers threading in her hair.

“And I am your fool, Morrigan,” he tells her, and kisses her again.

Eldris wakes to sunlight streaming in through the red drapes in Isabela’s cabin. There is a disorienting moment, at first, when he feels the ship rocking underneath him, can feel the dried come between his legs, and forgets how he got here. It only takes a moment for him to remember, and then he is blinking awake and looking around for Isabela.

She enters the cabin a moment later, dragging a tub of hot water behind her. She pulls it to the center of the room before standing up, her hands on her hips. Eldris reluctantly pulls himself from Zevran’s arms as she turns her gaze to him.

“I thought I’d give you a bath. You’re still dirty from last night,” she says, grinning at him, and Eldris rolls his eyes. Zevran shifts behind him, blinking awake, but Eldris can’t think beyond sleepy and bath, so he stumbles towards the tub of steaming water and sinks into it. Isabela laughs, running her fingers through his hair like she’s petting a mabari, but Eldris leans into her touch.

She only seems marginally surprised when he starts to purr beneath her ministrations, and really she had only meant to ruffle his hair quickly before going and seeing to Zevran, but he looks so relaxed in her tub that she finds herself staying, her fingers working through his hair as he washes the scent of sex from his skin. When he is done, she stops and leads him from the tub, wrapping him in a towel even though he whines at the loss of contact.

Zevran slips into the water as Isabela dries Eldris off. She’d managed to escape without getting too dirty, so she wasn’t that concerned with bathing herself. She focused on handing Eldris’s clothes to him piece-by-piece as he dressed, and then putting a mug of lukewarm tea in front of him. He cups his hands around the mug and drains it in one long drink, and admittedly he feels much more awake after it.
Zevran finishes up his bath just as Eldris finishes his tea. Isabela tosses him a towel and goes to drag the tub out of the way, planning to get rid of it once her guests are gone. Just as Zevran finishes dressing, there’s a knock at the door. Isabela opens the door, and the cook bustles in with a platter of food piled high for the three of them. The cook leaves just as quickly as they arrived, the door shutting behind them, and Eldris is the first one to dig into the spread. It is far better than what the palace serves, flavored with spices from Rivain and Antiva. He lets out an appreciative groan as he tucks into the meal.

“So, I guess what they say about Grey Wardens is true,” Isabela remarks, and Zevran snorts.

“You would do well to secure food for the two of us, my dear, before he eats it all,” he tells her.

Isabela laughs, but she takes his advice and snags two plates.

It is noon before Eldris and Zevran finally make their way back to the palace, though it had been near dawn when they woke. Eldris had extended an offer for Isabela to visit them in the palace whenever she liked, and had gotten a wicked grin and a slap on the ass in response.

Alistair had barely slept that night, tossing and turning. Leliana couldn’t sleep because of it, but she didn’t mind. She stayed awake with him, running her fingers through his hair. She prayed with him, sang pieces from the Chant of Light, and in the early hours of the morning she had regaled him with some of the bard stories she knew.

They leave the palace early. Alistair is dressed in his tunic from the night before, and Leliana wears a simple dress and the finest shoes she has managed to find. Goldanna’s house is easy for them to find.

Leliana is not surprised that the woman is awake when they knock, but Alistair looks like he hadn’t expected it. Leliana is a quiet presence at Alistair’s elbow until Goldanna starts to talk about money, and it is then she takes his arm and gently leads him outside.

“I did not think… I thought, maybe, that family would count for something,” he says, hopelessly lost. Leliana reaches up and tucks a strand of hair behind his ear. His hair had gotten so long since he had left for Orzammar.

“Blood doesn’t make family, Alistair. We’re your family. Me, and Arya, and Eldris, and even Morrigan,” she tells him, her voice soft and gentle, and it is enough to draw a smile from him.

They wander around the market before they return home, and Alistair has almost forgotten the visit with Goldanna.

Arya stands in the forest clearing. An ancient temple had stood here once, and she wonders what she would find if she were to journey here in person. Bellanaris had seen it before the temple was even erected, after all.

In front of her, Solas sits on a stump. She makes her way over to him, and he does not startle at her approach. She wasn’t sure if she had sought him out, or if he had pulled her into his dream. She was never sure when it came to Dreamers like him.

“You seem happy, my friend,” he says, barely looking up at her. She reaches out, idly examining his braid. It is a slightly different style than what he wore when he was Fen’Harel. It suits him better, she thinks.
“I am. My friends have returned from Orzammar,” she says, smiling at him as she takes a seat next to him.

“That is good. It is always hard to be separated from those we care for,” he says, giving her a quick smile.

“Speaking of those we care for,” she says, and it is then that Solas looks up at her properly, setting aside the ancient book he had been reading. It looked like a journal of sorts. Had he found it in the Fade, or was it one that he remembered?

“What is it?” he asks, taking her hand in his.

“Lanaste. Have you seen any sign of him?” she asks, biting her bottom lip.

“No,” he tells her, looking sad, and frustration wells up inside her. The past few nights she had been searching desperately, calling out to him in the Fade. But there had been no answer.

“I spoke with Asha’bellanar, though. She says that she will try to bring him through as she brought you through, but that it would likely take longer,” he tells her, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. She swallows back her disappointment.

“I suppose that is better than not bringing him through at all,” she admits, and Solas smiles at her before letting her hands go.

“Of course. And how goes things between you and Bellanaris?” he asks. She feels her shift in her head at the mention of her name, but she does not truly stir.

“I think we’re making progress,” she says, honestly, and the smile on Solas’s face is genuine.

“Wonderful. I think this might help. It was a journal she kept, in the early days of the war. You should wake to find it under your pillow,” he says, and now Arya is the one smiling as she takes the journal he had been reading.

The cover is embossed with a halla on the front.

“Thank you, Solas,” she says. The dream shifts around her, then, and she is no longer in the forest and Solas is no longer with her. She forgets about him until she wakes.

Days turn into weeks, and before she knows it, it is not long until Arya is due to travel to the Brecilian forest. In the days leading up to their departure, Anora and Cailan insisted on having tea with her every day. They also insisted on stealing her away from Lysander at night, assuring her how much they would miss her while she was gone.

Her days are a bustle of activity. She still trains every morning, sometimes with Leliana, sometimes with Lysander, and sometimes with both of them. After that, she goes through her clothes to find what is suitable for travel. She tracks down bedrolls and blankets and tents, secures extra traveling rations, and does everything she can to keep her mind away from the mounting anxiety she feels.

They day they leave, they leave before dawn. Wynne had lulled Arya to sleep so she wouldn’t be awake the whole night. She double checks everything before they leave- she had told Ella in advance, and planned to leave her computer at the palace. She left her cat, named Pitter-Patter and affectionally called Pat, with Sten. Everything had been taken care of, and Arya found that she
was almost eager to begin traveling again.

Few people rose to see them off. Alistair was there to say goodbye to Leliana, and Anders was there to say his farewell, and Anora and Cailan had dragged themselves out of bed, but everyone else still slept. The group was larger than originally anticipated, but it was still a small enough group that they could travel quickly. Eldris was there, looking happier than Arya had ever seen him look, and Wynne had joined them as a healer. Lysander had wanted to come because Arya was going, and Reno had the same excuse because of Morrigan. Eldris had insisted Zevran join them, even though the original plan had been for the assassin to stay in Denerim. Anaba had also requested permission to go, and all of them seemed eager. At some point, they would also travel to Honneleath, so Eldris carried the control road in his pack.

Finally, as dawn breaks over the horizon, the group leaves the city behind.

Chapter End Notes

i did not think i would EVER get this chapter finished holy shit. anyway i've never written so much smut before in my life. prior to That Scene i thought eldris was the one who assumed the dominant role but i guess i was wrong so that was a fun discovery. next chapter comes not one but TWO new ocs (theo and eden babey) and also Elf Stuff i guess. also my editing software doesn't like the way Isabela's named is spelled so that was a fun fight

thanks again for the continued support. this fic would quite literally not have come so far without y'all.
The trek to Zathrian’s camp should not have been such a long one. The group managed to get trapped for three weeks by no less than four severe rainstorms. They spent the time holed up in a cave—by the end of it, Arya was surprised that Anaba hadn’t killed someone. When the rain finally let up, the entire group went slower than expected—the roads were little more than mud (Arya managed to step on a particularly squelchy patch and ended up sinking in past her ankles) and all of them were used to the soft beds of the palace. Surprisingly enough, Anaba toughs it out better than most of them. She doesn’t complain, except about the rest of their group. Arya is a little impressed with the way she weathers the mud and the exhausting marching.

Eldris doesn’t complain at all. The past months (almost a year now, Arya realizes with a start) seem to melt away, replaced by an almost childish enthusiasm. One night, after the rain is far behind them, he surprises her by tackling her to the ground in the name of lessons and wrestling. It brings back childhood memories of Ella, who usually won because she was bigger and therefore stronger. This time, she’s got a few tricks up her sleeve because Lysander and Leliana have taught her how to fight dirty. She lets Eldris pin her and waits until he looks excitedly at Lysander as if to see his reaction, and then she surges upward, flipping their positions. He doesn’t even try to win again.

Eldris also teaches Anaba how to hunt on their journey to the Brecilian. Even when they were stuck in their cave, he taught her how to make snares and traps. On the rest of their journey, the two of them replenish their lost traveling supplies, which were dangerously low. Eldris even insists on cooking most nights, just to try his hand at some Dalish recipes. Even if he has to admit it is still a far cry from what he had at home.

Arya finds that traveling is more draining than she remembered. She is constantly exhausted, and even on the days when they were just wasting time in a cave, she finds that she is tired. She brushes it off as sleeping on the hard ground and on the fact that Lysander frequently keeps her up late in the privacy of their own tent.

Finally, they reached the edges of the forest. Eldris is too excited to camp, so they travel later into the evening than they usually would. The forest is dark and dim as they make their way through it. Up ahead, there is a clearing. It is lighter there, without the tree canopy blocking the dying light.

They step into the clearing and immediately find a group of elves opposite them, weapons drawn. Arya throws a barrier over everyone automatically, marveling at the ease with which she does.

Seconds pass, and then: “Lethallin?”

An elf-shaped blur darts forward, and Eldris charges into the clearing, meeting her halfway. They fall to the ground in a tangled heap, laughing, and it takes Arya a moment to realize they’re wrestling. Whoever she is, she manages to pin Eldris beneath her after a moment, and it allows Arya a moment to look at her face.

She supposes she can see a resemblance to Eldris. The same brown hair, worn long and in a simple braid that drapes over her shoulder. The same green-grey eyes. The rest of Eden’s features are a little harder to see under the vallaslin, red as blood. Arya recognizes it instantly as Elgar’nan’s. Once, the version she wore was reserved for the Evanuris’ most trusted servants. A line splits her...
face in two, half of it colored red save for the thorny vines twisting across her face, and the rest of
it marked only by the pattern. Arya smiles at the idea of them: twins, one wearing vengeance and the
other wearing justice. She wonders if they did it on purpose.

The leader of the group of elves sighs, putting her bow away and watching the two elves
wrestle on the forest floor. Arya takes pity on her and crosses the distance between them.

“Andaran atish’an. My name is Arya. We’re with him, and he’s with the Grey Wardens.
We’re in possession of some ancient treaties, and we’re here to talk to your leader about assistance
with the Blight. More than that, though, I think you may have his boyfriend squirreled away
somewhere,” she says, amusement glittering in her eyes.

“Andaran atish’an, lethallan. My name is Mithra. Theo is indeed in our main camp- he told us
we should expect you. Eden here has insisted upon joining every patrol, hoping to catch him as he
arrives. She’ll be pleased that she managed it, and would have been insufferable otherwise,” the elf
says, surveying the two elves who have since stopped wrestling to flop on the ground beside each
other.

“He’s been looking forward to this ever since he found out we would need to make the
journey. We thought of coming before winter, but we were afraid the snows would trap us, and we
didn’t want to overstay our welcome,” she says, idly. The other elves put their bows away, and most
of Arya’s group has relaxed but still hangs back. Anaba is the only one who steps forward, walking
cautiously as though the ground were littered with traps.

“Andaran atish’an. Who might you be?” Mithra asks, a soft smile on her face. Anaba glances
at Arya, who nods encouragingly.

“Anaba Tabris. I’m from the alienage in Denerim. I was hoping I could learn more about…”
she says, trailing off as she struggles to find a word that fits the scope of what she wants.

“Everything?” Mithra suggests, a faint smile on her face.

“Exactly,” Anaba says, looking relieved. Mithra reaches out, and Anaba takes her hand
gingerly.

“You are always welcome among the Dalish. We have to look out for each other, after all,”
she says, and Anaba nods in agreement. By now, Eldris and Eden have gotten to their feet, and Eden
has climbed her brother until she’s perched on top of his shoulders.

“Right. Let’s go back to the camp then,” Eden says, looking down at them all. Somehow, she
looks more authoritative than Anora.

At some point, Eden had jumped off Eldris’s back. Her brother hadn’t even stopped, and
she’d fallen into step with him almost as soon as her feet touched the ground. Arya couldn’t decide if
she was impressed or jealous at the way the two of them moved seemingly effortlessly.

Mithra’s group walked ahead of them, Anaba absorbed into it as the city elf slowly lost her
reservations and fired off questions. Something in Arya- in Bellanaris- ached at how much had been
lost. Even compared to the Dalish, the city elves had almost nothing, and compared to what was lost,
the Dalish only had scraps.

The camp is only a short distance away, lit by several strategically placed balls of magelight. It was
softer than the light Arya had seen in the Circle, looking almost like stars in the darkening sky. In the
center of the camp, two elves wearing robes were talking to each other, deep in conversation. Their
faces were lit softly by the magelight - one of them was unmistakably Lanaya. She didn’t have long to wonder about who the other one was.

Eldris stops dead in the middle of the camp, causing her to bump into his back. He doesn’t seem to notice, though, eyes fixed on the two elves up ahead. He charges forward, crashing into the other elf, the two of them going down in a tangle of limbs. “Theo!” he finally manages to say, before peppering kisses all over the mage’s face. Arya hides her smile as she steps around them to approach Lanaya.

“Andaran atish’an. I’m one of Eldris’s companions. Eventually, he’ll need to speak to your Keeper. We’ve come for aid against the Blight, but if there’s any help you need, we’re happy to provide it,” Arya says, dipping her head respectfully. Lanaya smiles at her, glancing fondly over her shoulder at Theo and Eldris, who are still on the ground. Eden has joined them.

“There’s certainly much we need, but we can speak of that tomorrow. For now, let me show you where you can set up your tents. We have a couple of spare aravels, but there’s not enough room in them for all of you. You are welcome to them, if you’re willing to divide up amongst yourselves who is allowed to sleep in them,” she offers. Arya gives her a grateful smile.

“That would be much appreciated. I’ve been learning much about the Dalish recently - if it’s truly no bother, I think I’d like to spend at least one night in an aravel,” she says, trying to pretend she isn’t as excited as she actually is. Bellanaris and Arlathan could get fucked - Arya had loved the Dalish from the moment she’d seen them in-game, and now they were real, and they were offering her a chance to sleep in an aravel. Damn right she was gonna take it.

“We would love to have you. Our hahrens have retired for the evening, but tomorrow if you’re in camp, you are more than welcome to sit in on their stories. They love to have new ears. And if you have any questions for me as the First, I am happy to answer them,” she says, with a gentle smile. She reaches an empty part of the camp, with ample space for all the tents.

“Ma serannas. Although…may I meet your halla? I’ve heard of them and I would be honored to meet them,” she asks. The rest of the group had trailed behind them, but now they were spreading out, beginning the work of setting up their own camp.

“Of course. They’re wonderful creatures. If your companions don’t mind, I can take you to see them now,” she says, brightening considerably. Arya almost trips over herself trying to go tell her friends where they were going. They let her go easily enough, assured that she wasn’t going far.

The halla in the pen haven’t bedded down for the night. For the most part, they roam freely. There is a small area fenced in, likely for halla that need to be separated from the others, but that area is empty. Arya is a little relieved - she remembered making sure she had two points in the survival skill before visiting the Dalish in the game due to a sick halla. It’s nice to see that they’re all healthy.

She hangs back until Lanaya gently prods her into moving closer. She stretches out her hand as she goes, stooping over just a little, and Lanaya backs away to give her some privacy.

“Hey,” she says, softly. Only one of the halla turns to look at her, snuffling softly. It regards her curiously for a moment before shuffling forward, nudging her hand with its snout.

*You have old blood, the halla tells her,* and Arya’s eyes widen.

“You can sense that?” she murmurs, voice barely above a whisper.

*Yes. The People have old blood, but it is diluted. You shine with it,* he says, bumping her hand again.
She takes the hint and starts scratching behind the ear. Bellanaris thums in her skull, for the first time, Arya lets go just enough so that Bellanaris can have some control.

“I was there when Ghilan’nian made your kind,” she murmurs, and her voice is different now, deeper.

What was she like? the halla asks.

“She was a creator above all. Your kind were not her only creations, but you have always been her most beloved. None would hunt your kind, not even Andruil,” she whispers, her eyes drifting shut. The memories are distant and clear all at once- Ghilan’nain, with halla horns sprouting from her temples, carrying a new-born halla. Riding through the forest on a halla’s back, faster than the wind, laughter shrieking in the air. A halla sewed from the finest materials to offer in Arlathan, stuffed with halla fur, tucked tight in the crook of Isala’s arms as she slept.

We have survived for generations. We are drawn here, to this forest. But the People need us, and so we leave, he says, leaning into the absent-minded scratching in between his horns.

“There is another ancient in this forest, slumbering nearby,” Bellanaris answers, and as soon as she does she- they- can feel the pull too. Solas is so close to them. It would be easy for her to slip out of the camp, to leave Arya’s friends behind, and find her own. Arya stirs in the back of their skull in response, but Bellanaris turns her attention back to the halla. She knows her time is limited.

He is not just an ancient, the halla says, and Bellanaris can’t help her smile. There is much that has been lost, but it is a comfort that the halla have remained. Isala had always loved them. She wonders, with a twist of her heart, if her daughter had reincarnated as one of the Dalish. It would have put her closer to the halla she loved.

“No,” Bellanaris agrees, but she doesn’t say anything else. She closes her eyes and lets go. 

Arya opens her eyes, a splitting headache pounding between her temples.

“And on that note, I think I should go to bed,” she murmurs. The halla snorts against her hand, vaguely amused. She scratches him once more, and hesitantly leans down to kiss his snout, before she backs away.

Arya had come up with no less than a half dozen excuses to get to sleep in the aravel, but it turns out none of them were needed. The second she asked if she could sleep in one, everyone agreed that she could, provided she take Lysander with her, because they were more than tired of listening to the two of them at night. Her head hurts too badly for her to be embarrassed, sickly sweet pains that shoot through her skull.

The inside of the aravel is large enough to fit four, but her companions had seemed content to stay in their tents. The beds were built into the walls, with two bunks on either side. There were empty trunks pushed up under the beds, likely for the storage of personal items.

Arya’s head was hurting too much for her to really enjoy the fact that she was sleeping in an aravel. It’s enough that she wants to split open her skull and scoop out her brain, but that’s impractical. She settles for soaking a cloth in water and using magic to freeze it. It worked almost as well as an ice pack. She strips down to her smalls, ignoring Lysander completely in favor of melting into the bottom bed.

She jumps when she feels his hands on her thighs, but he isn’t doing anything inappropriate, just shifting her legs out of his way. He’s stripped down out of his clothes too, and probably taken the
time to put them away properly instead of leaving them piled onto the floor. He curls around her, tucking his face into the crook of her neck and breathing her in. He drapes an arm over her, and then his leg follows, until he’s laying on her more than he is the bed. Arya doesn’t mind, though. The weight is comforting, and it means she doesn’t even need a blanket.

   Arya falls asleep easy, but staying that way is another story. She can feel Solas’ pull, like a siren’s call telling her to go find him. Soon, she promises, and it is only then that she slips into a steady doze until dawn breaks.

Chapter End Notes

my notes for what follow are a disorganized mess that happened at one in the morning. sorting through it to make fic is gonna be Not Fun. since the last few chapters were super long, i may try to make the next chapters that follow longer. the only downside is more of a wait between chapters but it should give more substance per chapter. the other downside is that there really wouldn't be that many chapters taken up in the brecilian- it only takes them a few days to do everything, although they do stay there for awhile.

all that being said, i am very much open to scene suggestions, especially for what happens once the werewolf conflict is resolved. they're gonna be there for a month, whatever shall they do with that time

thanks again for the continuing support- i remain super grateful for it.
Eldris had lost count of the months. Once, he had kept a tally of the days since Tamlen’s funeral, to mark how long it was that he was away from home. Over time, his duties had caused it to fall by the wayside, and so he had no idea how long it had truly been since he was away from home. Even now, he isn’t technically at home. Clan Valendris is not Clan Sabrae, or even Clan Mahariel, so all that is truly home here is Theo and Eden.

Even now it is obvious there are missing pieces. The three of them slept in a pile on the floor of an aravel, like they had when they were children, but there is a spot missing where Tamlen used to go and another where Merrill would stay. Merrill’s absence doesn’t ache quite so much- he knows by now they have crossed the Waking Sea, and once the Blight is over they can join her again. But the loss of Tamlen is like a knife to the heart, a phantom limb throbbing with pain.

The reunion is bittersweet. Theo and Eden carefully dodge around the topic of Tamlen, but Eldris can see the way grief has set in along the lines of Eden’s face. Still, there is a part of it that makes him feel as if he is whole again. While Arya and the others were now considered his friends, he had still felt lost and adrift in their world.

He sleeps more soundly in the aravel than he has slept in tents or palaces. Even so, he wakes with the dawn, slipping away from Theo and Eden and out into the pale morning sun. Most of the clan still slumbers around him. Only a handful of the hunters are awake, already dressed with their bows on their backs to hunt for the day’s meals. They smile at him, nodding greetings, but they do not ask him to join them and he does not offer.

Instead, he slips through the camp until he finds the place where the halla have bedded down. Most of them still sleep, but there are three that are awake. Two of them are babies, so young that their horns have barely started growing, and the third must be their mother. The two young ones swarm around him immediately, bumping their heads against his knees and bleating softly. He laughs, crouching down to pet them, and he isn’t even startled when the mother snuffles his hair before curling around him.

“The quick children put too much on you, da’len, she says, resting her head on his lap as he relaxes into her. There had been a time when he had entertained the idea of becoming a halla master, until he had learned that Eden would not share the job with him.

“They put too much on everyone, I think. But yes, I think so too. My vallaslin was still fresh when I left home,” he says. One of the young halla crawls into his lap, all awkward limbs, until it splays out and falls asleep. It brings a smile to his face and allows him to turn his attention to the other one, running his fingers through silky soft fur.

Your sister spends much of her time with us. She has told us of you, and of the circumstances of your departure, she tells him, watching her children fondly. As far as she was concerned, Eldris might as well be one of her flock too, at least for the moment.

“Eden always did like to gossip,” he says, grinning. The halla lets out a sound that is almost laughter in his ear.

“Talking about me, lethallin?” a voice says, and Eldris looks up to see his sister standing in...
front of them. He’s pretty sure she’s wearing one of his shirts.

“I have nothing better to do,” he tells her, a grin on his face. The hall behind him shifts to make room for Eden, and she curls up eagerly. The other halla crawls onto her lap, so Eldris turns his attention to the one sleeping in his own. They are so ungainly at this age. He supposes he had been like that, too, before Tamlen and the mirror and the Joining, when he had grown up too much too fast.

“Oh? Not even saving the world?” she asks, grinning back at him as she nudges him with his shoulder. He rolls his eyes, shifting so he can lean up against her, his head dropping to her shoulder.

“It can hardly compare to gossiping about you with the halla,” he says. Eden laughs, nudging his head with hers. Behind them, the halla mother snuffles with amusement. The two elves are not so different from her own children, after all.

“Oh, by the way, I came over here for a real reason. Not just to harass you. Zathrian found me moments after I left the aravel. He asked to speak to you and your companions at your earliest convenience,” she says, her lilting accent changing to mimic Zathrian’s on the final words. It was something else he loved about her.

“I suppose that means I should go round them up,” he says, sighing. Eden grins at him, bumping their heads together again.

“I’ll go too. But maybe we shouldn’t bring all of them? Just a couple. Besides, so many shems talking to a Keeper makes any of us twitchy,” she says, and it brings a smile to his face. He has to agree with her, though. There was no need to bring all of his friends with him. Perhaps Arya and Anaba would suffice. Besides, Zathrian was sure to be more comfortable speaking with elves.

The halla mother nudges her children off of their laps, and reluctantly Eldris and Eden rise to their feet and make their way through the camp. It is beginning to wake up now- the party of hunters has left, but there are elves bustling around to make breakfast. The smell of it has Eldris’s stomach growling- bread with halla cheese and honey, eggs scrambled over the fires with more spices than he’s seen in his entire time in Fereldan. As they made their way through the camp, he even noticed jugs of blackberry wine. It was going to be the best meal he had had since leaving. Creators, all Zathrian had to do was feed him and Eldris would go toe to toe with the archdemon alone.

Arya and Anaba are both awake and sitting next to the campfire by the time they reach their part of the camp. Wynne is awake too, perched on a log and drinking tea out of a wooden mug. He can see someone’s shadow stirring in the tent Morrigan shares with Reno, but he doesn’t linger long enough to place who it is or wait for them to exit. Besides, it’s not like they’re going to join his little party, anyway. He can come back after he’s spoken with the Keeper. And after he’s eaten.

They’re his friends, but he doesn’t like them that much. He’s been waiting for a meal like that for months, and they’ll be there when he’s finished it. Probably. If not, well, halla cheese is one of his favorite foods, and it’s probably worth it.

“We’re going to talk to Zathrian. I want you two to come with me,” he says, gesturing for Anaba and Arya to follow them. Arya looks slightly panicked at the statement, but rises nonetheless. She shares a glance with Anaba before yanking her hair down out of the messy bun she’d thrown it up in, likely just to get it out of her face. Her fingers move quickly as she braids it, and even as she works at twisting her hair, she’s following Eldris and Eden through the camp. She’s wearing a shirt that he’s pretty sure belongs to Lysander- it’s certainly too big to be hers.

Suddenly, Eldris realizes he’ll have to properly introduce Theo and Eden to the rest of his
friends. Creators help him, but he’s afraid.

Arya’s first impression of Zathrian is that he is old. She tries desperately to remember how old he really was- a hundred? two hundred?- but all she could remember is that the curse unnaturally extended his lifespan.

Her second impression is that he is at least nice enough to give them tea, after expecting them to function as actual people so early in the morning. Gods, but she’d give anything if she could have slept properly. Even now, though, there’s a niggling feeling in the back of her stomach, a subtle pull towards Solas’s resting place. It isn’t magical, so far as she can tell, more like a desire to have someone else, to not be alone, and curiosity about what might happen.

Bellanaris is old, after all, and Bellanaris wants.

But none of this is an immediate concern, and Arya and Bellanaris can both agree that they should put it aside and focus on Zathrian and the problems the clan faces, even if they- she- knows it’s his fault.

The conversation goes much the way she expected it to. He tells them of the curse, with omitted details of course, and tells them that he wants Witherfang’s heart. Her third impression is that Zathrian has a flair for the dramatic.

Eldris, of course, pays no attention to the things Arya has already told him. He listens to the Keeper with rapt attention, respect written on every feature of his face. It isn’t much of a conversation, in all honesty. Eldris doesn’t ask many questions, save for how many of the clan are injured and is there anything else you need, Keeper, I’d be glad to do it?

Of course he decides to be respectful now. When the conversation is finally over and they’ve wandered out of earshot from the old Keeper, Arya pulls on the sleeve of his shirt.

“Something you need, lethallan?” he asks, throwing a glance over his shoulder at Eden, who’s piling a plate full of breakfast. She can’t even make fun of the open longing on his face- she’d had one much the same when she saw the pizza on her birthday.

“You know we don’t have to kill Witherfang, right? We can broker peace. It is difficult, but the clan already accepts you as one of their own,” she says, biting her bottom lip. Eldris just shrugs.

“Keeper Zathrian said he wanted Witherfang’s heart,” he says, and then pulls away before she can say anything else. Well. She didn’t want to wipe the werewolves out, but she wasn’t going to tell him how to run the show, only remind him that he had options.

Arya had never seen Eldris eat so much in one sitting. He’d eaten not one, not two, but three loaves of bread, all of them smothered in halla cheese and honey. He’d eaten two plates of scrambled eggs, washing everything down with an entire jug of the blackberry cider. Even so, she has to swat him away from her food and drag him away before he can eat more.

“If you actually want to take care of the werewolf problem at all, we should actually go and do that,” she grouses, and Eldris looks like he’s seriously considering going back for another serving or three.

Theo, bless him, had spent the morning packing. They were expected to be back by evening- today was a day for scouting and reconnaissance- so they didn’t need many supplies. Still, Theo had rounded up a change of clothes for all of them, in case something happened, and plenty of snacks.
and water, as well as lunch. Arya loved him for it.

While the others took time to change into their armor, Arya weaved her way through the camp until she reached Varathorn. The craftsman was hard at work, and while he seemed wary around her, he was friendly enough.

“Something I can help with, da’len?” he asks, but his fingers don’t stop their motions on the bow he’s carving.

“I was wondering if you possibly had some robes or something I could buy?” she asks. A slow smile spreads across the old craftsman’s face.

“I suppose that question means an apostate has wandered into our camp,” he says, putting the bow aside and rising to his feet. His movements are slow and deliberate as steps around to an aravel.

“But an apostate with coin. And if you’d prefer another method of payment, I’m sure we can work something out. My friends and I are heading out into the forest today. Are there any materials you might happen to need?” she asks. She’s hoping he’ll say yes and knock a few silvers off the price of anything—full set of robes would likely be expensive.

“I’ll tell you what- I’ve been lamenting the lack of ironbark for months now. There’s some in the forest, but I’ve been too busy to go out and get it myself. I’ll give you the mage robes if you bring it back for me,” he offers, lifting a box onto the worktable.

“Of course. Where might I find this ironbark?” she asks, bouncing on the balls of her feet as he opens the box. He pulls out shimmering fabric—sky blue, laced with enchantments.

“In the western part of the forest. Theo and the others can help you find it. Now, step into my aravel and try this on,” he says, holding the robe out to her. Arya takes it gingerly, as if she’s scared she’ll break it, and steps into the aravel. It is a single one, meant only for Varathorn. Much of his tools are stored here, in overflowing chests that line the walls. She strips out of her clothes and steps into the robe. There’s no mirror to help her adjust it, but it’s not an overly complicated garment.

*You should wear armor. An arrow could kill you instantly,* Bellanaris chides as Arya twists to examine herself. The robes fit well, she has to admit. It’s almost like a dress, except there are leggings with it. It would be strange to wear boots with it, but then, maybe Arya doesn’t need them. A lot of the elves are barefoot.

“I don’t need armor, I have a barrier,” she mumbles, before she steps outside to let Varathorn see. He’s fussing over her immediately, plucking at the fabric to adjust it. After a moment, he steps back to observe her.

“It fits well. Better than I expected,” he says, eyes crinkling in a smile.

“Thank you, Master Varathorn. It’s beautiful. I’ll get you that ironbark,” she promises. She ducks back inside his aravel to collect her clothes, making her way back to their part of the camp. Eldris and the others are ready to go—Zevran’s going to be the only one accompanying them aside from Theo and Eden.

“Who’d you kill for that robe?” Theo asks, a grin on his face.

“Nobody, yet. Varathorn told me he wanted some ironbark for it. I figured we could bring it back,” she says, twirling just a little in her new robes. She’d be lying if she said she wasn’t excited.

Lysander comes up behind her, almost unexpectedly. Somehow, she knows it’s him, and it's
easy to relax into his touch.

“I’ll be waiting, kitten,” he says, leaning over to press a kiss to her cheek before shuffling towards breakfast. Someone had been nice enough to save some for him. It was probably Wynne.

“Well, if you’re done being gross, we should get on it with,” Eldris says, and Arya shares a grin with Zevran over his shoulders as they head towards the edge of camp.

Eldris had insisted the others stay behind because he didn’t need them. It was something they bought easily enough- this was supposed to be a scouting mission. They were going to find out more information on the werewolves and the curse, and take care of a few easy-to-do things, like get the ironbark Arya promised Varathorn.

Really, though, Eldris was more sentimental than he let on. He wanted to them to see the best of his People- something he couldn’t claim to have shown them so far. Anaba, in particular, seems excited about learning more, and Eldris couldn’t say he blamed her. He wanted to give them a chance to discover Dalish stories and Dalish traditions and Dalish life- everything that he had given up to join the human world.

“I suppose we should tell them about you, lethallan,” Eldris says. Arya groans next to him.

“Do we gotta?” she whines, and Zevran laughs.

“It’s a good idea. It’s a big secret to keep,” the assassin says.

“What’s a secret?” Eden asks.

“Well, now’s as good a time as any. I’ll make sure there are no other ears around,” Zevran says, disappearing into the brush. It was a little unnerving how easily he did that. Eden was just as good at it, too.

“This should be good.” Theo says, coming to stay next to them. Arya glances at Eldris for help, but he only shrugs his shoulders.

“Right. So. Long story, I guess. You guys know Asha’bellanar, right?” she asks. What follows is a long conversation that Eldris only sort of pays attention to. Theo believes her much more easily than Eden does, but then, Eden always was wary about everything. Maybe if she’d been there with Tamlen, she could have convinced him to go back for Keeper, or at least keep him from touching it. Creators know Eldris hadn’t been able to do it, but Eldris was always stupid-impulsive, especially when it came to Tamlen. He shifts, wiping his hands on his trousers, but they’re clean. No matter how much it might feel like it, there’s no more black blood on his hands.

Not that he deserves something so easy.

They stop for lunch around midday. Arya isn’t that hungry- she feels sort of nauseous, really. There’s a hard knot of anxiety sitting heavy in the pit of her stomach- she’s worried about the curse, she’s worried about the ironbark, and she’s even worried about Solas. Not that the bastard deserves it- he’d gone and ruined the world and there he was sleeping it off where he would stay until he woke up to ruin it all over again.

She slides down the base of a tree while the others eat, her fingers trailing through the grace. A short distance away she notices a flower that seems vaguely familiar- is it something shared with her world, she wonders?
“Hey, Theo. You any good with plants?” she asks. He swallows the bite of bread he’d been eating and scoots closer to her.

“Yeah. What do you need?” he asks. She points at the flower.

“What kind of flower is that?” she asks. She lets her hand fall back to her side, twisting some of the loose fabric of her sleeve between her fingers.

“Oh. The shemlen call it Andraste’s Grace,” he says.

It makes her think of Leliana. She’s not sure if it’ll be salvageable by the time she returns to the camp, but she figures her friend will appreciate the gesture.

“Help me keep an eye for anymore?” she asks, and Theo agrees easily enough. He picks the flower carefully, tucking it in a pocket of her robes.

Leliana will appreciate it, if nothing else. But Arya thinks it might ease the anxiety she’s feeling.

Arya loses count of how long they’d been walking. It was different than it was on the open road, and almost reminded her of a childhood spent playing in the woods with Ella. They’d set up houses in the forest. Arya had gotten the best one, of course, because the woods were on her land. There was a tree that had fallen into the fork of another one, and she had painstakingly moved branches until she had a shelter. She’d even climbed onto Ella’s shoulders and tied it with rope she’d stolen from the shed.

Ella hadn’t had anything quite so cool in her little section of the forest, although at one point she had managed to tunnel through the overgrown branches of several bushes, breaking the lower ones away until she had something to crawl inside. It had gotten more difficult as they had gotten bigger.

They’d also had a little store in between their forest houses. Their currency consisted of leaves from the laurel bushes, and their stock was mostly pretty flowers and fern fronds. The height of forest décor, after all.

Their mission in the Brecilian was a lot less cheerful and certainly much less nostalgic, but it was nice to remember. She was in the middle of remembering it— and the time when Ella had convinced her to eat tree bark instead of going inside for a snack and gods but she can still feel the grit of the dirt between her teeth— when Theo drops back to walk beside her.

“You said you know the outcomes of how we can handle this curse,” he says, without any preamble. Arya didn’t hold it against him— he was practically glowing with curiosity.

“Yeah. If I remember correctly, there’s three. Obviously, one of them isn’t an option for us, because it involves siding with the werewolves and wiping the clan out, but the other two are pretty valid. The first one is to do what Zathrian asks and kill Witherfang, and the other option is to broker peace,” she says, reaching up to push her hair out of her face. After a day of walking and getting smacked in the face with tree branches because Eldris wasn’t considerate enough to hold them back for her, much of it had fallen out of her braid. She really should take the time to redo it, but somehow it didn’t seem that important.

“Why should we bother brokering peace? These werewolves have done a lot of damage to the clan in the short time that I’ve been with them, and Lanaya and Zathrian tell me they caused more problems before,” he asks, and it’s a valid question, all things considered.
“The curse is Zathrian’s fault in the first place. He was the one who made them werewolves. And now the descendants who are not responsible are suffering because Zathrian’s revenge is long-term,” she says, shrugging. The choice was still Eldris’s to make, but Arya could still voice her opinions.

“That’s…a fair point. Perhaps I should ask Zathrian about it when we return to camp,” Theo muses. The thought doesn’t scare Arya like she thinks it probably should.

“Maybe, but also maybe don’t. I’m not keen on having the Seer discussion with him, and I doubt he’d appreciate the fact that an outsider is the one with the information,” she says.

“Makes sense. I’ll talk to Eldris about it. After so long away from home, he’s keen to do whatever he can to make up for his absence,” he says. Up ahead, Eldris’s ears perk when he hears his name. It makes him look a little bit like the mabari they left in Denerim, and suddenly Arya is worried about the cats. Sure, she doubted Anders would let the dog eat them, but worrying was her whole thing, especially on this trip.

“Are you talking about me?” Eldris calls over his back.

“No, some of us have better things to do,” Theo calls back, and Eldris huffs but his ears twitch with amusement.

They find the ironbark, and it is one less thing for Arya to worry about. Or, at least, she thinks it is, until she realizes she has no idea how to carry it back home. Eventually, Theo convinces her they’ll be coming back this way, so she leaves it until they start their trek home.

They come upon Swiftrunner just as the sun begins a downward trek in the sky. He is standing over a natural bridge made by a fallen log, on an island in the middle of narrow rivers. The water is turbulent, and if Arya had to guess, she’d wager it was deep, too. Not like the wide and shallow rivers back home. She has a sudden thought of falling into it. She’d never been afraid of heights, but drowning was scary.

Eden pushes past Eldris, and Arya’s heart stutters in her chest. They’re nowhere close to the edge, but the idea of it has her worried anyway. Christ, she needed to chill out.

“You need to go back, little elf,” Swiftrunner says, in that weird wheeze-growl voice that Arya remembered from the game.

“I mean no disrespect, but I’m not sure that we can. Not truly, anyway. The Keeper has sent us, and we’re just hunters. But we are open to hearing things from the wolves’ point of view,” she says, her voice clear, gentle but firm at the same time. Arya admired her grit- she had no doubt that Eden had no less than four knives hidden on her person that she would use if Swiftrunner didn’t play nice.

“If you were willing to lesson, you should have done it before now,” Swiftrunner growls, and the anger flares up enough that Arya can almost feel it.

“We weren’t the ones in charge then. Zathrian was, and still technically is, but we’re unsupervised, so we do what we want,” Eden says, with a shrug.

“The Lady will decide your fate,” Swiftrunner says, after a moment of silence. It’s clear he isn’t quite sure what to make of them as he turns and disappears into the forest. Eden watches him go and then turns back to the rest of them with a sigh.
“Well, that could have gone better,” Eldris mumbles, mostly to himself.

“It could have gone worse, too, vhenan,” Theo reminds him.

“Anyway, we should probably head back. We need to tell Athras about Danyla, and we need to pick up the ironbark,” Eden says, her hands on her hips, a slight frown on her face.

With a collective groan, they begin to retrace their steps.

Chapter End Notes

that little interlude about arya and ella playing the woods? yeah those are memories of mine i shoved into arya's head. i'm still bitter about my friend making me eat tree bark.

anyway, thanks so much for the continued support! this fic is so close to getting finished and it wouldn't be happening without you guys who read and comment and leave kudos.
Morrigan finds that she is bored. She doesn’t begrudge Eldris the choice of taking his sister and his boyfriends out, and Arya was really just a logical choice with the information she had, but Morrigan had little to do back in the camp. Anaba had easily been absorbed into the clan’s daily activities, but they were more suspicious of her and the other humans. It left her feeling vaguely grateful that they hadn’t taken Oghren with them- she didn’t know the dwarf very well, and had eventually started going out of the way to avoid him both because of the lingering stench of alcohol and because the inappropriate comments he made left her feeling uncomfortable.

Lysander was happy to have a day with nothing to do. He had disappeared somewhere with Leliana- probably either sparring or swapping stories or something. Wynne was mending some of the traveling clothes that had been ripped during their journey, and Reno had asked if he could speak with some of the warriors in the clan about their technique. They had agreed, cautiously of course, and now Morrigan was left alone in the camp with little to do.

Well. There was always her mother’s grimoire, but Morrigan was a little afraid of the contents. She hadn’t looked at it again after finding out how Flemeth extended her lifespan. She considered approaching Lanaya and asking about any magic she might have known, and even offering to teach her about shapeshifting, but in the end, she decided against it. Lanaya was probably too busy to talk magic with her, especially since it was likely her job to tend to the elves affected by the curse.

Restlessly, she paced around the camp, until Wynne politely asked if she needed anything. Morrigan made her excuses and left. She thought about finding Reno and asking him if he could please pay attention to her instead, but she had no way to find him and even the thought was a little embarrassing. An idea began forming in the back of her mind, and with little left to do, she decided she’d indulge herself.

She slipped inside her tent, leaving her staff secured by her bedroll and glancing towards the tent flap before she stripped from her clothes, folding them neatly and putting them back in her pack. She closed her eyes and concentrated, and when she opened them again she took stock of her paws and her swishing tail before opening her mouth and scenting the air.

Reno’s scent was easy to place- she recognized it even as a human, with weaker senses. The only difference was that as a cat, she was able to smell the trail he left and follow it through the camp.

A few of the elves saw her, stopping to scratch her ears or her shoulders and Morrigan really hadn’t intended on letting them do it, but it felt nice enough that she put up with it until they withdrew their hands. At least there wasn’t anyone who could tell Reno about it. Or Arya. She had a feeling her friend would tease her relentlessly over it, should she know.

Reno himself was easy to find- he was in the center of the camp, sitting near a fire and talking with a group of Dalish hunters, who were much less wary than any of the other elves were. She supposed they must have built up some sort of comradery through shared stories. She had a leg up, though- she knew he had a weakness for cats. She twisted around his ankles, purring, and when he glanced down at her stood up on her hind legs, her front paws on his knees, and meowed.
He had the same look of wonder on his face that he had had when they found the kittens in the palace, and he didn’t hesitate to pick her up and plop her in his lap. His fingers started working through the fur at the base of her shoulders, and Morrigan was a little surprised to find that she was kneading his legs without quite realizing it. Her purring wasn’t intentional now either as she curled up, her eyes drifting shut.

She must have fallen asleep like that, because the next thing she knew, Reno was picking her up and carrying her back to their tent. From the sun’s position in the sky, only an hour or so had passed, so she didn’t feel like she’d wasted any time.

He seemed surprised to reach their little camp only to find that she wasn’t there, even ducking his head into the tent to see if she was inside. She shifted in his arms, secretly pleased with herself as he turns to look at Wynne.

“Have you seen Morrigan?” he asks, his fingers working through her fur again, and she was going to be so smug when they were alone and she could change back. She was a little nervous about that- she hadn’t actually thought about the whole changing back thing with the fact that she would be naked when she did, but she trusted Reno. She knew he’d probably look at her like she was the most precious thing in the world, the way he always did when they first woke up together, and that’s when Morrigan knew she was probably maybe definitely in trouble because that look always took her breath away.

“No, dear, I haven’t. She disappeared an hour or so ago after pacing all morning. I’m sure she’s somewhere doing something to keep her from feeling so restless,” Wynne answers. Reno lets out a disgruntled sound before he thanks the old mage, ducking back into the tent.

Morrigan waits until he’s settled before she changes back. It’s probably the least graceful transformation she’s ever done- she ends up as a tangle of limbs on his lap, naked as the day she was born.

“Morrigan?” he asks, looking around as if he might see the cat that had disappeared. She laughs, reaching out to cup his face and draw him in for a kiss.

“I mentioned I knew shapeshifting magic,” she reminds him, and Reno laughs too, that impossibly soft look in his eyes that makes her heart melt. Damn him.

“That you did. So it was you the whole time?” he asks, kissing her again, a faint brush of his lips over hers. Reno was always so affectionate. She didn’t mind the constant casual touches as much as she thought she might. She might even like them, not that she was going to admit it.

“Mhm,” she says, tucking her head in the crook of his neck.

“Were you naked the whole time?” he asks, an amused glint in his eyes.

“Mhm,” she says, and maybe she would have taken the chance to flirt- there were probably a dozen more terrible pick-up lines that she could come up with, but the idea of it reminded her how close they were to the end of it all, which in turn reminded her of the ritual.

“How naughty!” Reno exclaims, laughing again, and Morrigan leans up to press a kiss to his cheek.

“There’s something I want to talk about,” she says, shifting. She slides off his lap and pads over to the tent flap, double checking to make sure it was secure.

“What is it?” he asks, wary of the sudden shift in her tone. She takes a moment to cast a
silencing charm before she sits next to him on the bedroll.

“You’re not a Warden, so some of what follows is not my information to tell. That isn’t going to stop me, but ‘tis something you likely shouldn’t know,” she says, almost apologetic. She’d already told Eldris, though, so she doubted it would matter.

“I won’t breathe a word of it,” he says, reaching up to tuck a piece of her hair behind her ear.

“When an archdemon dies, it must be done at the hand of a Warden. The soul is then absorbed into the Warden due to the Taint in their blood. The process is fatal,” she says, and Reno’s face falls.

“One of them is going to die, then? Eldris or Alistair?” he asks, and his face is that of a man who has lost too many people before. Morrigan thinks of what Arya had told her of Highever, and grimaces in sympathy.

“No. I’ve already spoken with Eldris. There is a ritual, to be performed on the eve of battle. I’ll spare you the specifics, but from the ritual, a child will be conceived, and the soul of the old god will be absorbed by the child. It is a ritual that must be done with a Warden,” she says. She feels overexposed, suddenly. She had been fine moments before, even with all of her skin bared, but something about telling him left her feeling vulnerable. She realized with a start that she was afraid he wouldn’t want her anymore. After all, why would he want anything to do with fatherhood when the child isn’t even his?

“And I take it you’re the one who’s going to be doing this ritual?” he asks, and she nods, reluctant to speak. “Is it something you want?” he asks, reaching out to take her hands in his.

“It…does not matter. I never wanted to be a mother, and that isn’t so different now. But I want Eldris and Alistair to survive more than that. It is only…I wanted to let you know, because of the way things are between us,” she says, and Reno squeezes her hands.

“If you’ll have me, I’ll be there, for every step of the way. Every terrible craving you have, every time the baby kicks,” he says, and Morrigan feels tears welling up in her eyes for some inexplicable reason. Reno doesn’t wait for an answer, just opens her arms and lets her crawl in, pulling her close against his chest.

“Thank you,” she whispers finally, voice cracking just a little. Reno presses a kiss to the top of her head, holding her just a little tighter.

“You’re not alone, Morrigan,” he tells her, and it is exactly what she needed to hear.

Arya hadn’t realized just how far they had walked. They wouldn’t make it back to camp until past nightfall at the earliest, but between the enhanced night vision elves possessed and the fact that the party held two mages, she wasn’t worried. Still, it was a little daunting.

Up ahead, Eldris and Theo were engaged in a heated conversation. Whispered, of course, so no one else could overhear. Even so, Arya occasionally heard snippets. From what she could gather, they were arguing about whether or not they should work to broker peace. It was not a conversation she was eager to intervene on.

Eden had been walking in between Arya and the two up ahead, but she drops back to walk beside her. Arya’s a little surprised, but she’s certainly not going to protest when Eden is carrying no less than four knives on her person.
“Since you’re the one who brought it up- what do you think we should do?” she asks, reaching up to tuck a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. She carries herself like her brother, now that Arya has had time to watch them together. It almost reminded her of Bellanaris and Lanaste.

“In terms of the outcomes? I’ll follow Eldris’s lead no matter what he does, because this is personal for him, but I want to broker peace. It’s possible, I know it, especially with the way Zathrian likes Theo,” she says, shrugging. She steps over a log, almost tripping over the hems of her robes.

“Cute. Why?” Eden asks, effortlessly jumping over the same log. Damn, but she was impressive. Not that Arya would ever say anything. Eden was a little scary, although admittedly that was likely because of the vallaslin. She wondered if that had been intentional.

“The werewolves we’re dealing with now aren’t the ones who committed the crime. I’m all for punishing those who deserve it, but when that extends to people who haven’t done a damn thing, I don’t like it all that much. Like, I’m all for going for the nobles of Orlais who go on hunts in the alienage as a rite of passage, but the common people haven’t done anything,” she says, ducking under a branch. Her hair was still a damn mess- she was going to have to ask Theo or Eden about how they managed to wear their hair long and keep it that way, without getting twigs and leaves in it.

“Interesting view. Thanks for indulging me,” Eden says, dropping back even further. Arya glances back to make sure there wasn’t any problem before she fixed her eyes on Eldris’s back again. At least he seemed happy, even in the middle of an animated argument.

“The Dalish are such a cheerful, conversational bunch, no?” Zevran says, appearing by her side out of nowhere. Arya jumps, still not used to the way he moved silently. And now they had Eden, who was arguably better than even Zevran.

She didn’t know if she would survive Thedas without a heart attack.

They stop once more for a snack, at Theo’s insistence. Arya’s pretty sure he was just tired of listening to Eldris complain about being hungry, but she wasn’t going to complain either. All this walking left her starving, and the nausea that had plagued her earlier had dissipated, leaving her ravenous. Gods, but she could probably eat more than Eldris right now.

She flops down on a log while Theo digs around in their packs for the trail snacks he’d packed that morning. She looks up to say something, only to find that her vision is blurred. Theo shifts before her eyes, until she’s not quite sure if it’s Theo or Lanaste, and if she is Arya or Bellanaris.

The forest shifts too, flickering between what Arya sees and what Bellanaris had seen. She lets out a groan, raising her hand to her forehead. She shuts her eyes, but when she opens them again the world is still flickering.

“Arya? What’s wrong?” Eldris asks, brows furrowed. She can’t even appreciate the look of open concern on his face. The world flickers again, and instead of Eldris, there is a corpse in a puddle of blood. She glances around the rest of the small clearing where they’ve stopped.

It is a battlefield. There are fewer trees and more saplings, blood splattered on the ground, an echo of the stench of death hanging heavy in the air, and Bellanaris feels almost apologetic in the back of her mind.

*What happened here?*) Arya thinks, disoriented. She squeezes her eyes shut.

*It was a battle. A difficult one. It was in the early days of the rebellion. We were few in*
number. We wrested the stronghold from Andruil’s forces. It took weeks, Bellanaris answers, and still, all these years later, there is an echo of grief.

“Arya?” Theo asks, reaching out and touching her arm. Her eyes fly open and her vision is blessedly clear. She throws her arms around Theo’s neck and pulls him into a hug.

“Sorry, it’s just...memories were overlapping with now and it was a weird time,” she apologizes, letting him go. Theo gives her a crooked grin.

“Well, I guess you’re collecting stray mages. Except this one isn’t a stray, he’s mine. So you can only have part of him,” Eldris says. Theo elbows him, sitting down beside Arya.

“What were you seeing?” Theo asks, taking her hand in his. One thing she’d started to notice was that casual touch was rampant among the Dalish. Another thing she noticed was that Theo was full of questions- he’d asked questions for two hours about what Orzammar had been like.

“A battlefield. Bellanaris said that in the early days of the rebellion, they took this forest from Andruil. I think the ruins up ahead that the werewolves have camped out in may have been hers, once. I’m not sure. She’s quiet now and won’t answer my questions. I think she’s grieving,” she admits. Theo looks fascinated, but Eldris looks like he has very different feelings on the matter.

“She’s talking to you now? Directly?” Eldris asks, eyes narrowed.

“Yeah. I don’t really hear her voice per say, but I can feel it. She doesn’t talk all the time, but sometimes she does. Whenever I picked up the robe from Varathorn, she told me that I should wear armor. I told her I didn’t need it since I used a barrier,” she says, a sheepish smile on her face.

“Theo. Do demons talk to their hosts?” Eldris demands, turning on his boyfriend with his hands on his hips. Theo looks vaguely amused.

“Demons do all of their talking before the possession takes place. After that, we don’t have a host. We have an abomination,” he says, grinning. Eldris shakes his head stubbornly before turning his attention back on Arya.

“Whatever. Anyway, this sounds like a bunch of bullshit. Be careful,” he demands, pointing a finger at her.

“Of course, Eldris. If anything else changes, I’ll tell you right away,” she promises. He nods, seemingly satisfied, and breaks away to go find Eden.

“You’re not going to keep telling him things, are you?” Theo asks, one eyebrow raised.

“No. Speaking of, I want to get my vallaslin, when this is all over. And by this I mean the werewolf stuff, not the Blight. I was hoping you could help,” she says, looking up at him. Theo squeezes her hand in reassurance.

“I’ll get you your vallaslin even if we have to do it in secret,” he promises, before he hands her the lunch she hadn’t eaten. Gods above, but Theo was her favorite person in all of Thedas right now.

They reached the camp once more as night truly fell. Lysander and Reno were there to greet them, ushering back to their little camp to fuss over them as they unload their bags. Eden disappeared as soon as she shucked her bag off her shoulders, but Theo lingered while Eldris took the time to remove his armor and dress in casual clothes. Arya waited, anxious again, and when Eldris was
finally ready, she trailed after him to the main campfire. She had taken the time to change out of her robe and into a set of trousers and a shirt.

Anaba was there, working eagerly with the other Dalish to feed them. The hahrens were sitting around the fire, and Arya realized as she sat down with a bowl of chicken and potatoes, all mixed up and drizzled with a creamy cheese sauce. Gods, but it was the best thing she’d had in her entire life.

The hahrens wait until all of them are settled around the fire. Lysander perches on a log behind Arya, a brush in hand as he tackles the mess she’d made of herself in the forest. When the hahren starts to speak, his hand slows as he turns his attention to them. Even Arya gets swallowed up by the story.

The hahren, Eloyn, tells the story of the slow arrow. It is grand and dramatized, with some of the hunters beating on drums and shaking maracas, and Lanaya taking part. It’s impressive, really, the First uses her magic to make shapes out of light. The great beast is red, of course, and the arrow is a brilliant gold as it strikes true.

She realizes when it is over that she had been forgetting to eat. By now, the cold meal turns her stomach, so she puts it aside. At least she’d eaten half of it.

Lysander retires to their aravel before she does. She’d wanted to stay and speak with Anaba, but the other elf was swept away before she could. Eventually, she gets tired of waiting and shuffles back to the aravel, falling into bed beside him. He grumbles, half asleep, as he drapes his arm over her and pulls her close.

Sleep that night comes no easier than it had the night before. In the middle of the night, a storm breaks.

Chapter End Notes

can you tell i’m running out of chapter titles?

thanks so much for your continued support- we're nearing the home stretch and it would not happen without you
Eldris hadn’t spent time alone with Theo or Eden since they’d arrived at the camp. Theo had shot him a handful of heated glances the day before, but the idea of touching Theo (black blood slick on his hands and Creators he can’t touch Theo with the same hands he killed Tamily with) makes him taste ash in the back of his throat. At least sleep came easier when he could rest his head on Theo’s chest, with Eden draped across them both. He didn’t know what he would do if he woke them screaming from his nightmares.

He didn’t know if he could field their questions. He knew he had to tell them soon, but Creators he was afraid that Theo wouldn’t touch him again and that Eden would never be able to meet his eyes. He had already lost Tamily- he knew he could not survive if he lost the two of them. It would be even worse, if they were right there at arm’s reach and gone all the same. Those thoughts had kept him company for dozens of sleepless nights, even before Orzammar.

That morning, he woke long before they did once again. He knew he could not bear to stay inside the aravel while they slept. He could hear rain pattering on the roof of the aravel, so he took a moment to take a cloak from one of the chests as he dressed. He’s pretty sure it’s actually Theo’s, but it wasn’t like either of them were upset by the other wearing their clothes. He pulled the hood up over his head, laced up his boots, and stepped outside.

The well-worn paths between aravels were muddy, but sometime during the early morning hours, the hunters had erected a massive open-walled tent over the central fire. So long as the wind didn’t start to blow, breakfast would proceed as normal. The elves were just barely beginning to flit around the stone ovens. It would be some time yet before it was ready. Hunger growled sharp in his stomach, but there was nothing to be done for it. He glances around the rest of the camp.

The halla had disappeared into the trees. He knew they had likely found a grove or cave that would keep them dry, and he also knew that if they wanted his company they would come and find him. He didn’t think they’d turn him away, but still. The halla were intelligent enough to communicate with them- he didn’t want to disturb them or impose on their company. He spares a thought for the two baby halla that he’d petted the previous morning. He hopes they’re warm, dry, and well-fed.

With little left for him to do, he slipped into a storage aravel and picked up a bow and a quiver of arrows. He was certain they wouldn’t mind- he was only borrowing it. Even so, he was careful to practice with it where the elves that were already awake could see him. Once he was more used to the bow and none of them had come to stop him, he slipped it over his shoulder and bounded into the forest.

He had always liked hunting, even if he wasn’t the best at it. Eden was better- she could move quieter, and had a better sense of which direction the wind was blowing. Even so, Eldris wasn’t terrible. The rain masked any noise he might have made, letting him move silently through the forest. The rain had turned the ground into mud, leaving an easy trail of prints for him to follow. Many of the animals were sequestered away somewhere dry, but there were plenty that were out, and Eldris knew where to find them. Besides that, he was a good tracker. Better than Eden, who’s eyes skimmed over the small details like broken twigs or disturbed grass. He preferred his knives to a bow, but he’d trained with both of the weapons before.
It wasn’t long before he was on the trail of a deer. His ears twitched with excitement under his hood- if he could bring a deer back for the clan, he was sure they would appreciate it. He kept his bow on his back, though his eagerness made him want to nock an arrow and keep it at the ready. He knew it would only slow him down, make him more prone to making a mistake that would cost him the hunt.

He wasn’t sure how long it was that he tracked the deer. The cloak he wore was waterproof, as were his boots, but even so, the rain had long since become monotonous and though he was loathe to admit it, he was cold. But the trail led him onwards and was relatively fresh, and Eldris was not the sort to give up.

Finally, through a break in the trees, he caught sight of his prey. It was a buck, and Eldris let out a silent breath of relief. If it had been a doe, he would quit the herd then. He had been taught to do so, especially in the spring when it was likely she might have had babies. But it wasn’t a doe, it was a buck, and Eldris breathed a prayer to Andruil as he slowly raised his bow and pulled the arrow back.

The wind wasn’t blowing- his arrow flew straight and true, sinking into the deer’s eye and killing it nearly instantly. It crumpled to the ground and Eldris slipped the bow over his shoulder again and slipped through the mud until he was kneeling at the buck’s side. The mud on the knees of his trousers was bothersome, but he could always change once he got to camp.

He placed his hands on the buck’s still-warm side and said a prayer of thanks to Andruil. He bound the buck’s legs together with straps of leather before hefting it onto his shoulders and beginning the trek back to the camp. His hood slipped down, the rain quickly soaking him, but Eldris didn’t mind.

Most of the others were awake when he finally returned. Many of them, Theo and Eden included, had already eaten breakfast. His stomach had been grumbling on the way back, but when he saw them his appetite vanished. He thought of Tamlen and tried to pass his shudder off as a shiver from the cold rain.

Mithra accepted the buck, helping him carry it to a hastily cleared section of the camp. She promised she would tell Zathrian of what he had done and let him slip away, back to Theo and Eden.

“I need to talk with you. Let’s go back to the aravel,” he says, and something in his face must convince them he’s serious. He’s sure it probably breaks Eden’s heart- Eldris had never been this serious before, except for when they had lost Tamlen and he had doggedly hunted until Merrill had to drag him back to camp. Even then, he would have searched the whole Brecilian if it had been possible. Perhaps if he had, he would have found Tamlen.

At the very least they could have died together. But that wasn’t really fair, was it? Eden would have been left all alone. He wasn’t that worried about Theo- he still had Merrill- but Eden had only ever had him and Tamlen.

They are silent when they reach the aravel, Eldris stepping inside and hanging the cloak up. Water had run down the hood, drenching him, and he was starting to shiver. With numb fingers, he began to undress.

“What’s wrong, lethallin?” Eden asks, her voice impossibly gentle. She had only ever used that tone of voice with them. That had been what unofficially made the decision to bring Merrill into their group. She had just arrived, and had been sitting all by herself, with drooping ears and a wobbly chin. Eden had plopped down next to her and taken her hand and very gently asked if she would like
some berries.

Creators, he would have to tell Merrill too. Merrill, who trusted him, who looked at him like he’d hung the moon in the sky. Merrill, who would probably hate him when she knew what he had done. Mythal help him, but it should have been him. Should have been him to touch the mirror, should have been him to die in the Deep Roads. Tamlen would have made a better Warden anyway.

“It’s about Tamlen,” he forces out, and that is as far as he gets before he has to sit down on the edge of the bed. He’s in nothing but his smalls, and he has never felt so vulnerable before. Theo walks the length of the aravel and pulls an old threadbare blanket from a chest. Eldris’s chest tightens when he recognizes it—had been one of the two that his parents had brought when they transferred to the Sabrae clan. Theo just tucks it around his shoulders and presses a kiss to his head and Elgar’nan take him, but he doesn’t deserve this.

“We’re ready whenever you are, vhenan,” he murmurs, moving to sit back on the pile of furs on the floor. Suddenly, Eldris feels stupid for that, too. He was a grown man and had the vallaslin on his face to prove it should have been sleeping in his own bed. He closes his eyes for a moment and takes a breath. When he opens them, he stares down at his hands. They’re clean now, but it still feels like they’re covered in blood, hot and sticky. His heart cries out, and he knows there will never be an answer.

“I found him,” he says, voice rough. He closes his eyes again because he can’t bear to see the tentative and hopeful smile on Eden’s face, or the guarded wariness on Theo’s.

“Where is he, then? Recovering in Denerim?” Eden asks, and then he hears a hissing intake of breath that tells him Theo probably kicked her. He swallows past the lump in his throat and opens his eyes once more. They are blessedly dry, even if he is sure his heart is splitting in two all over again.

“He is dead. I think… I think he would have liked it for you to have this,” he says, leaning over and pulling his pack to him. He pulls Tamlen’s knife out of his boot (black blood hot on his hands, Tamlen dying in his arms) and holds it hilt-first to Eden. She recognizes it instantly, and her face tightens as she accepts it.

“What happened, vhenan?” Theo asks, his voice gentle, and it’s a reminder that no matter how much he wishes otherwise, Eldris has to tell them.

“He was Tainted. He told me he could hear the song. Alistair said… Alistair assured me he was too far gone to save. Tamlen begged me to kill him, and I did,” he says, his voice hollow. There is a long moment of silence, and he can’t bring himself to look at them. Creators, what has he done?

“Oh,” Eden says, and he braces himself for her anger. She wore the markings of Elgar’nan, and there were times her anger burned hotter than the god’s.

It does not come. There is nothing, and then there is Theo’s arm around him, the other reaching out for Eden, and then she’s there too on his other side.

Theo hums a lullaby under his breath, his arms reaching all the way to Eden, and somehow Eldris feels like everything might be okay. Five had become three, but Merrill was still safe. It would be four again, once the Blight had ended. Morrigan had told him she would see to that, and Creators, maybe he’s selfish for letting her do this, but he can’t die like that. Not when the Blight killed Tamlen. He couldn’t let it take both of them.

Eden is the first to break the hug. She leans away, pulling Eldris with her, and then rests her
forehead against his. He stares into eyes the same color as his. He stares into a face he knows as well as his own.

“I am glad he got a quick end, and I am glad that you were there, so he did not die alone,” she murmurs, and it is only then that Eldris lets the tears fall. He crumples, forehead falling to her shoulder, and Eden holds him while he breaks all over again. She had grieved him once, but her brother was the sort who wouldn’t give up until the body was in front of him. Eden only wishes he hadn’t been alone when it happened.

Arya had woken early too. The pull to find Solas’s resting place was stronger than it had ever been, so in the early hours of the morning, she slips out of Lysander’s arms. She had been listening to the rain for quite some time— as she dressed in her new robes, she was sure that it picked up, raining harder. She knows the ground will have turned to mud, so she pulls her boots on as well. It is a little awkward with the way the robes are made, but if she is to walk through ankle-deep mud and Gods only know what else, she does not want to be barefoot. She slips a knife into each of them before she straightens.

We cannot wake him, she thinks, as she digs around for her cloak. It isn’t waterproof, but she thinks she knows a spell to help with that.

We are alone, is the answer, and it is enough that Arya’s heart aches. This cannot be easy for Bellanaris, trapped in a body she has no control in. She remembers, faintly, how Bellanaris had once done a ritual to split Lanaste from herself. But that had happened in the Beyond, when they were spirits waiting to be reborn. She does not think it would be as easy as presenting her with a corpse for her to claim.

She stops at the doorway before she leaves. She should probably bring some food, but anything that would hold up through a wet overgrown forest is something that turns her stomach. The idea of eating now is not something she can do either— she knows she stands on the cusp of the biggest decision in the history of Thedas. If she wakes Solas now, she changes the entire timeline. It is a sobering thought.

She glances over her shoulder at Lysander. He is curled on his side, arms tucked around the pillow. She hesitates before she crosses the distance between them, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. Anything else feels like too much of a goodbye, and Arya is not saying goodbye.

She casts the spell just before she steps outside, a shimmering barrier that keeps the water off her skin. She can still feel the chill of the rain, and she pulls her cloak tighter. She wishes now that it wasn’t red, for entirely practical purposes. It is a deep and bright crimson— it would be easy to spot her through the trees, and she does not have an explanation for where she is going. Now that she thinks about it, though, she is walking into a forest in search of the Dread Wolf, and the forest itself is full of werewolves. Little Red Riding Hood ain’t got nothing on me, she thinks, a faint smile on her face as she disappears into the trees.

As she draws closer to the ancient temple where Solas sleeps, the Veil grows thin enough that she can almost taste the magic in the air. Knife-sharp and electric-hot, it makes the hairs stand up on the back of her neck until she gets used to the sensation. She remembers walking through Arlathan when the Veil had not even been dreamt up as a contingency plan. Magic was as natural as breathing then, but this still feels wrong. The magic pushes against the Veil, hard enough to set her teeth on edge.
The forest is grown up, too. The closer she gets, the harder it is to slip through the tangled underbrush. At one point, she has to climb a tree and jump over a particularly nasty tangle of briars. She is navigating through instinct alone. Bellanaris is little help— the forest had changed so drastically since the last time she had been there. There is little she can offer, save for memories of what the temple had been. Arya doesn’t want them, but a few leaks through all the same.

It had been simpler than Mythal’s temple in the Arbor Wilds. It had not been standing when they took the lands from Andruil. Mythal had granted Solas the resources needed to build it. His tastes were less extravagant than hers had been. They had had to chase off the dangerous beasts that Andruil had filled the forest with before they could even begin building. Fen’Harel’s temple had stood smaller than Mythal’s, although it was large enough that it served as their base of operations for a time. It was also where Lanaste had stayed until Solas and Mythal had introduced them.

When Arya finally finds where the temple had stood, she cannot hold back a soft keen. There is little left now save for impressions of where it had once stood. She knows instinctively that in what had been the central chamber there had been a staircase leading down. It had been concealed in the mosaic tiles covering the floor, requiring a single drop of blood from those in Fen’Harel’s army to open. It had been a clever way of keeping his secrets secure.

The beautiful gardens that had once stood were now grown up. One couldn’t even tell there had been a garden there at all— many of the plants that Solas had painstakingly planted had been choked out by the weeds. Arya knows a few of the plants had gone extinct entirely, and somehow the loss of the plants hurts as well. There are no remnants of the path that had once led to the now-crumbling stairs, but Bellanaris helps her follow it all the same.

As she places her foot on the first step, Arya thinks that maybe this is unsafe. She can’t let it stop her, though. Bellanaris guides her with flashes of images, little more than thoughts. It is still enough to make her heart ache when she thinks of all that has been lost. She climbs the steps slowly, her fingers trailing through the grown-up grass.

There will be no returning this place to the former glory it once held. Some of the materials that had been used in the construction of the temple were no longer available in any part of Thedas, as far as she knew. That was something else she couldn’t help but grieve.

Finally, she stands at the top of the stairs. A few feet in front of her, the great doors would have stood. They had towered tall above her— one night, she had tipped herself back to see how far she would need to go before she could see the top without craning her neck. She had ended up on her back, with Lanaste laughing beside her. She can still see faint impressions of the door and the walls in the grass. There are a few piles of rubble— it had once been a beautiful marble used to accent stone.

She steps across the threshold, gingerly picking her way. There is more rubble the further she goes in— near the back of the main chamber, one of the walls remains high as her waist. There are also remnants of the mosaics Solas had used as flooring— he had designed each scene himself. Across the center of what had been the floor, it is mostly intact. There are a few pieces of shattered stained glass. She picks up a piece, red as blood, and tucks it into the pocket of her cloak. Time had worn the edges smooth.

Bellanaris guides her to the hidden door. Arya cannot see it, but that does not surprise her. Solas had appreciated subtlety. When it came to his rebellion, he could hardly announce that he had hidden chambers, especially when those chambers hid the most sensitive information he had.

Arya plucks the knife from her boot and looks around, as if anyone might be there to observe her. She wonders if it is an old habit that Bellanaris had held, but there is something in the air, too.
Something that tells her she is not alone. Still, she doesn’t see anything, and to be safe she adds wards along the perimeter of the door. She hopes it will be enough to keep her from being followed.

With nothing else to do and no other reason to stall, Arya pricks the tip of her finger with the tip of her dagger. Her blood falls to the surface of the floor, bright red, and for a moment nothing happens. It takes long enough that she starts to feel the sharp edge of panic- would the door allow her entry, if this was not the same body? But before she can worry too much, the floor opens in front of her.

This staircase, at least, is fully intact. She slips her knife back into her boot, casting a magelight spell, and begins to descend. This part of the temple had been built with magic laced into the very foundations, and it has stood strong against the test of time.

The first thing Arya notices as the door closes above her head is that it feels like a tomb. She knows that is ridiculous- Solas had not come here to die, and anyone who might have died here would have died above ground. After her death at Mythal’s temple, with Lanaste by her side, there wouldn’t have been anyone left who had access to these hidden chambers.

Still, there is something heavy and silent hanging over the air. It is enough that her footsteps echo. When she reaches the bottom of the stairs, she slips her boots off, tucking her daggers in her belt. She considers carrying them with her, but she leaves them by the archway. She considers leaving her cloak, but it is cold enough that she needs it still.

She passes rooms that she once knew as well as the back of her hand. It is like a wheel, branching out. In the center lays the room in which she had spent countless hours, pouring over maps and going over strategies and devouring books that might have the knowledge they needed. She feels a spike of anger, distant, and knows it isn’t hers.

All of it, for nothing! Bellanaris seethes. Arya feels some of her own anger adding to it- she knows that when Solas wakes, he plans on making the same mistake all over again.

Solas’s private chambers lay furthest from the entrance, but there were other rooms for her to explore. Her bedroom, for one. She steps inside, and it is like a time capsule, perfectly preserved. The bed is still made, the trunk is still thrown open. There is a necklace on the dresser. With bated breath, she opens the top drawer and finds a robe. It shimmers with electricity, and it is far finer than anything Varathorn might have had. It is black, darker than any of the black clothes she had seen in her time in Thedas, and reminiscent of the red leathers Flemeth had worn. In the next drawer down, there is a dress. It is entirely impractical, but it is beautiful. It is white, with gold and silver accents. She doesn’t need it now, but Arya refolds it carefully.

There is an empty pack in the corner. She remembers the last time that Bellanaris had been here, she had swapped her packs out, so that she could carry a bigger one. This one is plenty good enough for her, so Arya puts the dress carefully inside before going back to the dresser. There are also robes much like she is wearing in a dark forest green. There are two casual dresses, and leather trousers, and fine shirts. She takes the robes, putting them in the back, and leaves everything else.

Then, before she can let herself think too carefully about putting on clothes that were ancient, she lays her cloak out on the bed and stripes out of the robes she is wearing. She pulls the black leathers on carefully, glancing in the mirror to see how she looks.

It fits perfectly. Bellanaris hums her approval in the back of her mind, so Arya takes a moment to fold the robes from Varathorn and put them in her bag. The leathers seem to adjust to the temperature, warm against her skin, so she folds her cloak and puts it in with them. It takes her a
moment to locate the matching boots, and when she does she shakes them out. No creatures have made them homes, so she slips them onto her feet. She looks into the mirror and realizes the only thing she is missing is the vallaslin. It is odd, to think. This is what Bellanaris might have looked like if she had taken her freedom when Solas offered it. It is not a thought that Bellanaris wants her to dwell on.

Arya takes a moment to look around the rest of the room, in case there is something sentimental. She finds nothing of importance- most of Bellanaris’s things had been in Mythal’s temple. She gathers the pack, looking over her shoulder at the room. She finds it a small blessing that she still feels disconnected from it- this had been Bellanaris’s home, but it was never Arya’s. Hopefully, it never would be.

She backtracks enough to leave her pack with her old boots before she continues through the rest of the chambers. There is little else that she wants to see, so she goes straight to Solas’s rooms. Her new boots are silent against the stone- likely an enchantment of some sort.

The doors are shut and gleam with wards. It only takes her a moment to remember how to disarm them, and then she is pushing the ancient doors open and stepping inside.

It occurs to her suddenly that she is the first person here in thousands of years, if not millions of them. She can’t quite figure out how long it’s been, but it hardly matters. No one has entered these chambers since Solas entered them to sleep. The thought is sobering.

She walks slowly through the antechamber, opening the final door. She takes a moment to note that it isn’t warded like the others- perhaps she should berate him for his carelessness. Then again, there hadn’t been anyone left alive who could even reach those.

Solas sleeps on a bed. He is unnaturally still, save for the shallow rise and fall of his chest. His arms are crossed over his chest, and his hair is pinned back. She hadn’t been sure what she was expecting- to find him in the center of a room on a stone dais, perhaps? She can almost pretend that this is a normal bedroom, save for the elaborate construction and the quality of the sheets. Bellanaris thrums in her head, but it is comforting.

Arya steps forward, until she stands at the edge of the bed. Solas doesn’t even twitch, but she knows that it would be far more difficult to wake him. She’s not even sure that it is possible- she remembers that how he had explained his weakness in Trespasser, and that was with an extra ten years of sleep. Warily, she reaches out, her fingertips touching his hand. When the world doesn’t end, she slips her hand into his and perches on the edge of the bed.

“I can see why you’re lonely,” she murmurs, her voice quiet. She doesn’t want to tempt fate too terribly, after all. She watches Solas’s face, but it doesn’t change.

“It’s funny. I wish you were awake to tell me if I should wake you or not. You never left any instructions about this,” she says, and for some inexplicable reason, she begins to cry. It is quiet, but her shoulders shake from the force of it, and she leans forward until her forehead touches their joined hands.

“What happened, Solas? We wanted something better than this. We planned, and we planned. You could have waited. Lanaste and I would have come back, we always did. We could have avoided all of this,” she whispers. She realizes that she cannot tell if the emotions are hers or if they belong to Bellanaris, and with a start, she realizes that there is little difference between the two of them.

She should leave. She should turn her back on Solas, and walk back up the stairs and through
the forest and back to camp. She should go, and not look back.

The very idea of it breaks her heart. Solas was her friend, and even if he had made the choice she had died to keep him from making, she could not leave him alone entirely. She pulls back, sniffing. Slowly and methodically, she stripes out of the leathers she had just put on. She pads over to the dresser, stealing one of his shirts. Somehow, she doesn’t think he will mind. She crawls into the bed beside him, pulling the blankets over her, her forehead touching his arm.

For once, she falls asleep without the aid of magic.

When she opens her eyes, she finds that she is in Solas’s bedroom. She knows instinctively that she is in the Fade. She sits up in the bed, which is empty save for her.

Solas sits nearby, in an armchair. He seems startled to see her.

“Arya? How are you in my chambers? You shouldn’t have been able to access them in the Fade,” he says. He looks as though he wants to rise to his feet, but he doesn’t. She swings her legs over the side of the bed, but makes no move to get up.

“That’s because I’m here. In the waking world,” she says, and he draws in a deep breath. The look in his eyes- fear mixed with surprised mixed with wonder- is not reassuring.

“How did you know how to get here?” he asks, and she smiles. He is ever the scholar.

“Bellanaris helped me remember the way. We’re in the Brecilian forest to ask a Dalish clan for aid against the Blight. I felt a pull towards you. I do not know if it was magical, or if I’m just empathetic enough that I couldn’t leave you here alone any longer,” she says, slipping off the bed. She pads over to him. Instinctively, he opens his arms, and she crawls into his lap. They had spent many nights like this- it had only ever been platonic between them, but they had been close.

“You should not have worried about me,” he says, but she knows him well enough to know that he is touched, and terrible at expressing it.

“You’re my friend, Solas. But that is not why I fell asleep. Originally, I thought it might be nice if I came here and just sat with you for a bit. Told you stories, stuff like that. But we- I- kind of want to wake you up. It scares the hell out of me, too. I don’t know what it’ll do for the timeline,” she admits, chewing on her bottom lip.

“I don’t even know if I’m able to wake up,” he admits. She can still hear the open longing in his voice. She knows that it will disappear when he wakes to see the world that he had wrought.

“Why wouldn’t you be able to?” she asks, curling against him the way she always liked, her ear pressed against his chest. There’s something soothing about listening to the beating of his heart.

“Creating the Veil made me weak. I am still recovering my strength. In truth, I do not know if I am strong enough to survive waking up,” he admits, and she can tell that the thought rankles him. She can understand why. Once, he had been one of the most powerful mages she had known. To hear that he might not survive a thing as simple as waking up is a sobering thought.

“I guess that means I shouldn’t attempt it,” she says, weakly. She doesn’t have to see his face to know that he is smiling.

“Probably not. I could survive quite easily, provided you give me your energy. I would
still be weak upon waking,” he says, and it almost sounds like he suggested it so that she would do it, but Arya doesn’t think she wants to go down that path.

“I do not know how much energy I have. I’ve been feeling tired lately. And anxious, and as a result, I’ve been feeling sick,” she says, shrugging. He knows her- knows Bellanaris- well enough to know that she is uncomfortable with the idea of it. And always, he knows not to push her. Mythal had always pushed her- to be better and faster and stronger and smarter- but Solas had never once pushed her. As a result, she had thrived.

“I would not ask you to do it, then. But still, I’m pleased that you came all this way to see me. I’m sure you haven’t been sleeping well. Let me help with that,” he says. She doesn’t protest, so he wraps his arms around her, carrying her to the bed. He tucks her in, curling up next to her. The vision slips away, and for the next couple of hours, Arya sleeps peacefully.

Chapter End Notes

how did i manage to write this chapter so quickly whaaaat

thanks again for your continued support! we're chugging along towards the end!
Arya wakes up in Solas’s bed. She makes her way back up to the entrance, only to find that it is dark, and still raining. She retreats back inside, the entrance sealing above her again. While elves can see better at night than humans can, trudging through the thick brush in the middle of the night in the pouring rain is not an experience she is eager to have. She supposes she is lucky that she hadn’t taken the time to change out of Solas’s shirt before she went to investigate—this way, she doesn’t have to change back into it.

The temple is full of old ghosts, but for the first time, Bellanaris is content. She feels a little guilty about not telling any of them where she is, and she is sure that they’re worried about her, but there is little she could do, save for finding Morrigan in the Fade. She finds that she is unwilling to go back to sleep.

The libraries here are extensive. The books are written entirely in ancient elvhen, and there are a few novels and storybooks. She can’t remember if Solas or Lanaste had insisted they join the collection of research tomes, ancient and dusty even then, but it brings a smile to her face. She remembers that they had both insisted she read aloud to them. That had been in the early days of the rebellion, when they had more time on their hands than they knew what to do with. In the later days, they had spent every spare moment pouring over ancient battle plans and ancient tomes.

The books themselves are still in excellent condition. There are a few she wants to bring back to Theo—there are a few that she is sure belonged to Isala when she was young. They’re children’s books, easy to read. The Dalish have lost so much of their language that it might be a good place to start. Hesitating only a moment, she plucks them from the shelf. She thinks of taking more with her, but there is only so much that she can carry. Reluctantly she leaves them behind, drifting through more of the rooms.

It feels like a half-remembered dream, the kind where you wake up sad because you woke up at all. She knows she’ll shake it as soon as she gets back to the camp, back to Lysander and Morrigan and the others, because she wouldn’t trade them for all the half-remembered dreams in the world.

She comes up short when she finds a room. Lanaste’s, Bellanaris supplies. It is much like Bellanaris’s own room—there is a bed pushed up against one wall, a dresser and a closet against the other. But at the foot of the bed, there is a crib, and as Arya’s eyes land on the ancient wood (ironbark, shaped carefully with magic over months of her pregnancy as a secret project of Lanaste’s). She drifts closer, kneeling next to it and tracing over the carvings (she and Lanaste had carved them together, magic pouring into it as they worked, a promise of how much their daughter would be loved).

The grief is overwhelming. It is so much that Arya thinks her heart might stop beating, like she is trying to hold the ocean in her hands and it is threatening to drown her instead. A shaky sob is torn from her throat, and she is not entirely sure that it is her own. She closes her eyes and lets go. It is the easiest thing she had ever done.

Bellanaris wraps her fingers around the bars of the crib and weeps. She had been stubborn and headstrong, wouldn’t trust Din’an even when his plan was strong. She had let him die because of her own pride (was it really Solas who deserved that name?) and Isala had died in the dark (her
dreams were still haunted by her daughter’s screams, but Arya never remembered when she woke up and Bellanaris didn’t know if that was a blessing or a curse, that she was so alone in her mourning.

She curls further in on herself, head bowed. She remembers crouching down in the mornings, fingers wrapped around the bars of the crib as she smiles and coos at Isala. She remembers standing over her daughter’s body, the blood of the servants of Falon’Din and Dirthamen on covering her hands.

Isala’s body had still been warm when she had found her, and Bellanaris had never let herself mourn. It is only now that she realizes it is because she hadn’t thought she deserved it. She had thrown herself into Fen’Harel’s rebellion, dying over and over again, until she woke on Earth (she wonders if she would have been happier if she had lived out her life there instead of here. A single life in a thousand where her life wasn’t a tragedy. Would it have even made a difference?).

She had planned to kill the Evanuris, and then Mythal had died, and she had died defending her temple, and Solas had torn the world asunder. It would have been a lonely burden to bear, she thinks. To kill them all alone.

Elgar’nan had told her once that she would do great and terrible things. He had told her that she would bring about the end of the world. He had told her that she would survive past it.

She wonders if she could convince Arya to take them to the Arlathan forest. The veil would be thinner there, if it is there at all (how many died screaming when the Veil rose? how many died in agony days later because they had relied on magic that wasn’t there anymore to survive? all these years later and spirits of grief and despair and rage and wrath would press up against the veil still). She is one of the last of the elvhen- it is her duty to remember. To walk amongst the graves and the bones of the city and remember what had been. It would not hurt if it felt like home while she did it.

She wonders, briefly, if she could take over. It is not a serious thought- Arya is building a life here, and Bellanaris knows enough about losing them that she wouldn’t take it away. She raises her head, tears still trickling down her face, and traces her fingers over the carvings once more. She can no longer remember which ones were made by her hand and which ones were done by Lanaste. They fit together perfectly, seamlessly.

She pushes herself to her feet, her fingers curling around the top of the crib. It is not empty- there are dusty blankets, and in the corner buried beneath them is a stuffed halla.

Bellanaris moves one hand, resting it on her stomach. Even in the days of Arlathan where time held no meaning (she remembered dozens of rituals that had taken months to do, and it had passed as though it were no time at all) it seemed as though it had taken an age or more for her stomach to round out. Lanaste had laughed at her impatience- she remembers standing in front of the mirror each morning, shirt hiked up as she ran her hand along her stomach, twisting around to see any hint of growth.

She hesitates for a moment before reaching out and picking up the stuffed halla. She cradles it to her chest for a moment, nose buried in the fur. But any scent that would have lingered had faded in the following centuries, so after a moment she raises her head and wipes the tears from her eyes. She moves deliberately, with an ease that Arya lacks, and places the stuffed halla in the pack.

Arya stirs in the back of their head, uncomfortable by Bella’s extended control, but she doesn’t start pushing back against her. Not yet.

She pads back to her bedroom first. She knows she will have to give up her control eventually, but for now, she can pretend that she won’t. She pulls Solas’s shirt over her head, laying
it out on the bed. She thinks about leaving some sort of note for him, but it will be ten years yet before he wakes. She rifles through her closet until she finds what she was looking for. It is a set of armor, much like what Solas had worn in Trespasser, in the days of Arlathan. It is missing the fur pelt and the buckles crossing her chest, but it is the same glimmering gold metal. It is lighter than the black leathers Arya had worn previously- those she had only worn when Mythal had wanted to show her off. The robes were what she wore casually, but the armor was what she wore to war. It was what she had died in.

It fits perfectly. She moves to stand in front of the mirror, pulling her hair down. It takes her a moment to locate the hairbrush, but when she finds it she brushes her hair out carefully and methodically. When she is done, she braids it like back like she had worn it in her time.

When she looks in the mirror, she almost feels like she always did. The only thing missing is the forest green vines trailing over her face, a mark left by Mythal. It brings the ghost of a smile to her face as she turns and strides back to Solas’s chambers. She has yet to replace the wards, so it is a simple matter to enter his bedroom. She perches on the edge of his bed, taking his hand in hers.

Arya’s return is a gradual one. At first, she does not know that she has returned, until she raises her head. By now, it is likely dawn. She leans down, pressing a kiss to his forehead. His face twitches in a smile as she rises from the bed, squeezing his hand as she lays it by his side. She gathers the black leathers (she had not known when or why Bella had worn them, and now she wonders if she wants them at all, but they are made from dragon hide and they fit her like a glove) and makes her way slowly through the chambers once more, stopping only to replace the wards she had removed. She picks up the books she had selected for Theo on her way, and deposits everything in her pack.

She leaves the boots she had worn on the way over by the door. When Solas wakes, she hopes he will see them. She hopes they will bring a smile to his face, a reminder that someone had been here. That someone was out there.

It is still raining when Arya reaches the camp. Her barrier spell kept it off of her, but it was still annoying the squelch through the mud. She hesitates for a moment before she steps into the camp proper, coming in the same way she had left. The tent flaps had been rolled up, the tents themselves moved as close to the firepit as they could manage while still avoiding the mud.

She stands there for a moment, the pack on her shoulders, and then she hears Lysander calling her name. She doesn’t even have time to turn and look at him before he’s scooping her up, his face buried in the crook of her neck.

“Maker’s breath, I missed you!” he said, and she feels another stab of guilt as she wraps her arms around him. The armor she wears is smooth and light- lighter than anything else she’s seen in Thedas- and is no more uncomfortable than a heavy cloak. He spins her around, his arms tight around her, as if he is afraid to let her go again.

“I was worried. But I’ll let you talk to the others. I’ve got something for you when you’re done,” he says, kissing her. It’s short and quick, lacking any heat, but there’s something in Arya that wants to pull him to the aravel and see how loud he can make her scream.

She supposes that means she’s missed him too. It was worth it, though, she thinks. She no longer feels the pull to the temple- she had seen what it had to offer, had taken what she needed. She thinks again of the stuffed halla Bellanaris had put in the pack. Maybe she’ll return home to find Anora pregnant, and she can pass the halla on.
Which makes her think of the Andraste’s Grace she’d forgotten to give Leliana. Shit. Hopefully, it had survived in her other pack.

When Lysander steps back, the others take it as a signal to swarm her. Leliana is there, cooing over her new armor and her new hairstyle, and Morrigan is there scolding her for taking so long. Wynne fusses over her, checking her for injuries. Reno just slaps her on the shoulder hard enough to make her stagger and tells her it’s good to see her again. Anaba hangs back until Arya can break away, only pulling her into a brief hug before letting her go again.

When they ask her where she had been, she tells them that she had remembered the location of a safehouse. It isn’t entirely wrong- the underbelly of the temple had served as their most secure safehouse- but she thinks they can sense she isn’t giving them the whole truth. They don’t press her for details, though, other than what the armor is made of. She realizes that she doesn’t have an answer. It is only something else that has been lost to the ages, and she realizes that she is so tired of mourning lost things.

“Where’s Eldris and the others? I have something for Theo,” she says, lifting the shoulder strap of the pack she is still wearing.

“Eden slipped out into the forest to hunt. She took Cammen with her. It was a scandal when they found they had slipped out, being as Zathrian has forbidden his clan from leaving the camp save for a few hunters. But Eldris and Theo are in their aravel. You might want to knock when you approach- I think Eden had left to give them some alone time,” Anaba explains, a grin on her face. Arya shakes her head fondly, but makes her way through the camp.

Many of the other elves are hunkered down inside, waiting for the rain to pass. There a few milling under the central tent- it isn’t raining hard anymore, just enough to serve as an annoyance if one wasn’t able to summon a magical barrier to act as an umbrella. She finds the aravel that Eldris has been staying in. It is quiet inside, so she knocks, three raps of her knuckles against the worn wood.

It is Theo who opens the door. Eldris is curled up on the bed, sleeping under a pile of children. They have mud on their faces- pale imitations of the vallaslin the adults wear. She looks at Theo with a question in her eyes.

“Babysitting duty. The da’lens were driving the hahrens mad. He volunteered. We just barely got them down for a nap, and I suppose he’s fallen asleep with them. But come in, Arya! Everyone’s been so worried about you. They knew you were safe because of Morrigan, but they were so concerned! Creators, I almost thought you’d gotten yourself killed with the way Lysander paced around the camp. But look at me, making you stand out in the rain! Come in,” he says, stepping aside and ushering her in with a hand on the small of her back.

She can see the way he eyes her new armor, and her new pack. She wonders if he recognizes their designs as elvhen.

“I’ve got something for you,” she says, perching on the edge of one of the empty beds. Theo sits next to her, ears perked up with excitement.

“What is it?” he asks. She grins at him, opening the pack and unwrapping the books. She’d wrapped them with the black leathers- she knew it was waterproof, in case she couldn’t keep the barrier spell over her bag as well as her.

“They were children’s books. I- she- used them to teach her daughter how to read. There were other books, but many of them were difficult for even me to understand, and I remember
ancient elvhen. The modern dialect is likely different, and I know the Dalish as a whole have lost so much, but I thought... if Isala grew up learning these books, then perhaps it could help you recover some of what was lost,” she says.

Theo takes the first book in his hands with reverence in his eyes, holding it like it is the most precious thing in the world. There are half a dozen of them that Arya had pulled from the shelves, and more remaining in the temple that she hadn’t taken. There had been many parents who let spirits of Wisdom and Knowledge teach their children how to read. Many of the spirits passed the information freely and willingly, merging briefly with the child to impart the knowledge. Bellanaris and Lanaste had wanted to teach Isala themselves. Bella remembers hunting through dozens of bookshops over the course of her pregnancy to build the collection.

“Ma serannas, lethallan. This means more to me than you could know,” he breathes, gently putting the book to the side to pull her into a hug. Arya curls into the touch- Theo’s a better hugger than he has the right to be.

“I’m glad you like it,” she tells him, pulling back.

“I love it. Speaking of gifts, though, your shem has something for you. I’d get back to Lysander if I were you. He was so excited Zathrian almost kicked him out of the camp so he wouldn’t have to deal with him,” he teases. He shoots a longing look at the books, and Arya thinks that maybe he just wants some time alone with them.

“All right, I’m going, I’m going. Don’t let Zathrian or Lanaya know you’ve got those, unless you’re willing to give one up. I didn’t bring anything back for them,” she says, rising from the bed.

“All right, I’m going, I’m going. Don’t let Zathrian or Lanaya know you’ve got those, unless you’re willing to give one up. I didn’t bring anything back for them,” she says, rising from the bed.

“Your secret is safe with me,” Theo promises, a twinkle in his eyes.

Arya goes straight to the aravel she has been sharing with Lysander. She isn’t sure what he might have gotten her, but for Theo to know about it, she’s sure it must be something important.

He’s sitting on the bed, leg bouncing with anticipation. As soon as he sees her open the door, he pulls her inside, the door shutting behind her with more force than is necessary. His arms wrap around her again, face in the crook of her neck as he breathes her in. He doesn’t know how to tell her how worried he had been, so he settles for squeezing her like he’s trying to kill her. He finally lets her go, but she hooks her fingers into his belt and stays close all the same.

“So, like I’ve said, I’ve got something for you,” he says, rubbing the back of his neck. She smiles- he’s cute when he’s nervous.

“What is it?” she asks. He leans forward to kiss her before turning around, pulling a small leather pouch from underneath the pillow. Her curiosity effectively piqued, she leans forward as he turns back around.

He opens the pouch, shaking the contents into his palm. It takes her brain a moment to catch up with her mind- two rings, carved from the ironbark she’d brought Varathorn. The carvings are minuscule and intricate, a magic all their own.

“The Dalish craftsmaster helped me with these. I know you already said you’d marry me, so I’ll leave what they are up to you. They can be promise rings, or I can keep them. We can use them as our wedding rings,” he says, voice quiet and serious and she can see how much he loves her. It makes her chest feel funny, just this side of painful.

“I want it on my finger ten minutes ago,” she says, trying to pretend like she isn’t about to
cry. He seems to understand, because he takes her hand in his and slips the ring onto her finger, leaning forward to kiss her as he does.

She plucks the other ring from his hand as soon as they pull apart. He holds his hand out to her, fingers spread, and she slips it onto the ring finger. She holds hers next to his to compare- a perfectly matching set. Gods, she owes Varathorn more than the old elf could know.

“So, promise rings then?” he asks, a lopsided grin on his face. She pulls him into another kiss before she answers.

“I don’t know if I want any other ring. This is perfect,” she breathes. He cups her face in his hands and kisses her again before he slides his hands down to rest at her waist.

“Maybe when this is over, we should see the Keeper. Maybe we shouldn’t wait until the end of the Blight,” he breathes, and she kisses him again, all soft and slow.

“I think that is the best idea you’ve ever had,” she tells him, tucking her head underneath his chin. She’s sure he’ll want another wedding later, a proper one that makes her a Cousland in the eyes of Andraste and the Maker and all of that bullshit, while at the same time sticking it to the Chantry. She’s not sure where Fergus is, so until he shows up, Lysander is the Cousland heir.

Oh, gods, she hopes Fergus shows up. She doesn’t think she could be the teryna of Highever.

“Oh? I’m glad you find it agreeable, my lady,” he says, in that overexaggerated dramatic voice that she loves. She presses closer to him.

It is silent for a good long minute as they stand there. Outside, the rain picks up, beating on the roof of the aravel.

“I’ve got a question,” she says, after a moment. She pulls herself out of his arms only to pull him towards the bed. She dumps her pack at the foot of the bed before clambering onto the blankets. He curls up next to her, holding an arm out so she can tuck herself against his chest.

“What’s your question?” he asks, looking attentively at her.

“Theo promised he’d give me my vallaslin when we finish the stuff with the werewolves. Would you happen to object?” she asks, almost sheepish. She hadn’t planned on asking at all, and she probably wasn’t telling anyone else save for Eldris until it was finished, but if she was to marry Lysander, she thought that she maybe shouldn’t keep something like that from him.

“It’s your face, so no. I just…maybe give me a heads up? That’d be a hell of a surprise,” he says, grinning at her. She laughs, leaning over to kiss him again.

“I promise not to get face tattoos with my own blood without telling you,” she says, curling up on his chest. Lysander runs his fingers through her hair, movements gradually slowing until they stop.

The sound of the rain lulls them both to sleep.
the plan was for more quest stuff but none of these fuckers care about doing what i want

thanks so much for everyone who's still reading!
Overnight, the rain stops. Eldris wakes them bright and early the next morning, supplies already packed. Arya grumbles as she pulls on her armor, fastening her staff behind her back. Leliana is gathered outside, alongside Anaba and Theo and Eden. Reno stumbles out of his tent, yawning and grumbling, still fumbling with the buckles on his armor. Anaba offers Arya a piece of bread smothered in halla cheese, and Arya has to turn her head so she doesn’t gag.

“Sorry,” she says, with an apologetic smile. Theo hands her a piece of plain bread, which is much more palatable than the cheese. Eldris gives them a moment to catch their bearings, and then he distributes the supplies. This time, they bring a large tent and bedrolls, and rations to last them a couple of days. There’s a determined look in the Warden’s eyes that tells Arya they won’t be back until they’ve finished what they’ve sat out to do. She hangs back long enough to kiss Lysander before scampering after the rest of the group.

It is dull, passing through the same stretch of forest that she’s seen twice now. Not that she would really know - the forest is unfamiliar and the known and unknown blends together, until the entire group is caught off guard when they find the sylvans. Or, rather, the sylvans find them. It is quiet as they walk along, most of them lost in their own thoughts, save Anaba and Reno who are off debating some particular of the Chantry’s history. Arya had stopped paying attention a long time ago.

And then, all hell breaks loose. One of the trees moves with a great groan, and it is Arya who sees the branch coming down. She throws a barrier up just in time - the branch slams into her and Eldris, catching her around the chest and launching them both backward. The barrier softens their impact, leaving them both winded but little else.

Theo lets out a wordless yell and the sylvan goes up in flames. Seconds later, he and Eden both are kneeling next to Eldris as he waves them away. Anaba and Leliana rush over to pull Arya to her feet, while Reno stands behind them, hand on his sword as he watches around nervously.

“I’ve never seen trees do that,” he mumbles, half to himself. Eldris steps forward and claps him heartily on the shoulder, making him jump.

“They’re called sylvans. I’ve heard legends of them. It’s one of the reasons Keeper never wanted us to venture too terribly deep into these woods. Arya? Any insight?” he asks, glancing at her over his shoulder to make sure she’s on her feet. She tugs at the armor she’s wearing, as if she’s trying to pull it back into place.

“Up ahead should be one that talks. He’ll ask for his acorn,” she says, almost absentmindedly. There was a part of her worried that her shiny new-old armor had been scratched or dented. She knew that the metal it had been formed from was rare enough that it may as well not even exist anymore, and the crafting methods sure as shit didn’t. She almost regrets wearing it - something like this should be
put away in a museum. Not that Thedas even had museums. Maybe that was something she could talk to Cailan and Anora about?

“Oh. Wonderful. A talking tree,” Eden groans, and Theo laughs. They take a moment to let Arya and Eldris catch their breath before moving forward. This time, they’re much more alert.

Theo burns a half dozen sylvans before they find the Great Oak. The rhymes seem to annoy Eldris, but he flops down at the base of the tree while Eden slips away to find the acorn. Arya had warned her about the hermit in between sylvans three and four. At least the archer seemed more fond of her now.

“Hey, Leliana?” Arya calls out, rising from the shade of the oak, almost reluctantly.

“Yes?” the bard answers, not moving from her place, sprawled on her back.

“Come with me. There’s something I want to show you,” she says, motioning into the bushes. It’d give them some semblance of privacy, at least. Not that they necessarily needed it. Leliana huffs a sigh, but clammers to her feet and trudges through the bushes with her. By the time she catches up with Arya, she’s already dug the flowers out of her pack. They aren’t too terribly damaged, miraculously.

“What did you want to show me?” Leliana asks. Arya pulls her hand from behind her back, holding the admittedly pathetic fistful of flowers out to her. Leliana looks at her, brow furrowed in confusion, until the wind just so happens to blow and she catches the scent of the flowers.

“Oh!” she exclaims, a soft gasp. Gently, she takes the flowers from her, holding them up to her nose and breathing them in.

“I thought you might like them. Been meaning to give them to you since the first time we headed into these damned woods. And this one right here can go in your hair,” she says, reaching down to pluck one from the ground. A bumblebee flits lazily away as Arya tucks the flower behind Leliana’s ear.

“Thank you, Arya,” she breathes, reaching out to pull her into a hug. It was almost sweet enough that Arya could ignore how uncomfortable the armor was. Seconds later she pushes Leliana away and vomits her lunch into the bush. Leliana’s nice enough to hold her hair back and murmur soothing sounds. Well. At least Arya missed her boots.

With the Oak’s branch in hand, Eldris lead them through the mist, ears perked warily. But the branch sees them safely through, and suddenly they are in a part of the forest that even Arya can tell is different. It’s the air, she thinks.

There is still plenty of time left in the day. Eldris uses the oak’s branch as a walking stick, leading his
way deeper into the forest. They don’t get far when he stops them, ears perked. Arya has to hold back a nervous giggle— he reminds her of the dog, in that moment.

“Werewolves ahead,” he murmurs, and Eden nods, looking around before scaling a tree. Theo is nonchalant as he casts a barrier around her, and moments later Arya catches sight of the silver buckles on her armor as she launches herself from one tree to another. There’s something in her that aches at the sight— she remembers different times in a different forest with a different elf where she did the same thing, free as the wind that blows through the leaves.

She is shaken out of it when Eldris motions them forward, striding into the midst of the werewolves with all the confidence in the world. Arya holds her magic close, ready to cast a barrier over all of them.

“Turn back,” Swiftrunner demands.

“Go suck a dick,” Eldris replies, and all hell breaks loose. Arya’s barrier springs into place and the werewolves howl. An arrow flies from the forest canopy, sinking into Swiftrunner’s leg. He howls, claws lashing out at Eldris and destroying Arya’s barrier. Theo’s barrier snaps into place over it as Eden jumps from the tree’s branches, discarding her bow on the ground as she swaps it out for daggers. She bares her teeth into a snarl as she launches herself into the fight, back to back with Eldris. Anaba has slipped around behind the wolves, her own daggers finishing off one of the wolves. Reno bangs his sword on his shield, letting out a wordless yell meant to attract attention. Arya and Theo tense as Leliana fires arrow after arrow— there are few spells they know that could do anything without catching any of their friends. Fuck, but they both hated being useless.

And then Witherfang charges into the fray. A white wolf, bigger than a wolf should be. An unearthly howl echoes through the forest, loud enough that they all have to clap their hands over their ears. Witherfang snarls at Swiftrunner, nipping at his heels, and the werewolf turns on his heels and sprints into the forest, followed by the other survivors. Witherfang bounds after them, and it is only after they’re out of sight that the echoing howl is bearable.

“What the fuck?” Eden demands, stomping over to the werewolf Anaba had killed and drawing her leg back to kick it. If Eden wasn’t scary before, she certainly was now, with the way her eyes blazed. It is only then that Arya notices the way Leliana sways on her feet. “Shit,” she swears, diving forward to catch her just in time.

“Set up a camp,” Eldris orders. Theo kneels next to Leliana, pulling her head into his lap as Arya’s fingers make quick work of all the buckles. The others spring into action, erecting the tent nearby and setting up a campfire.

The wounds are not fatal, at least. Long and deep scratches over Leliana’s midsection (the armor she was wearing is ruined, Arya knows), they bleed entirely too much for her liking. She places her hands over the scratches and pours her magic into the wounds, eyes shutting as she concentrates. Slowly, the bleeding stops and the skin knits back together.
Theo’s magic joins hers, gently lulling Leliana to sleep. Arya doesn’t know how much time has passed before she finally sits back on her heels, exhausted. She couldn’t cast another spell right now if her life depended on it. Leliana sleeps, her skin whole, if scarred.

“That…was some of the best healing I’ve ever seen,” Theo murmurs. Eldris kneels next to them, a bucket of water in his hands. Arya looks up at him dazedly.

“Is she okay?” he asks, nodding to her. Theo nods, a wry grin on his face.

“Think she used too much of her magic reserves, but she’s fine. The bard is fine, too. They’ll both need some rest, is all,” he answers. Eldris passes him a rag and then he gently takes Arya’s hands in his. She blinks at him, pretty sure she’s dissociating. Is this what it feels like when she uses too much magic? Shit. That’s not so bad. She watches as Eldris scrubs the blood off her hands, while Theo dabs gently at the puckered scars on Leliana’s stomach, cleaning the blood off.

“Think…Think I’m gonna stay here, with her. You all can go on, deal with the werewolves. Remember what I’ve said, about brokering peace,” Arya murmurs. Eldris hums in affirmation, guiding her to a bedroll nearby. As Theo finishes cleaning Leliana up, he lifts her onto a bedroll nearby.

“I’ll set wards,” he promises, and together he and Eldris exit the tent.

Arya lets herself drift away, welcomed gently into the Fade. She doesn’t wake up until they come back into camp.

Bellanaris dreams of a war that passed long ago. She remembers Andruil, fierce and proud, fighting with her warriors until they were overwhelmed. She remembers that those who died to cover the goddess’s escape had unmarked faces. She remembers Solas, barely a general, still under Mythal’s thumb. It is only now that she realizes he never managed to get out.

Chapter End Notes

can u tell i just wanted this chapter to be over, who has time for quest stuff anyway
Arya wakes once to see Theo hovering over her, brow furrowed in concentration and the tip of his tongue poking out from between his teeth. He makes a soothing sound in the back of his throat, and Arya closes her eyes and drifts off again.

Bellanaris rushed through the halls, a feeling that something was wrong propelling her forward. The halls were remarkably empty—usually, they were filled with servants, all of them wearing the same vallaslin she herself had on her face. Tonight, there were no servants. She was the only person in the hallway, and it only served to further remind her how strange and wrong the world felt. She wrapped the Fade tight around her, used it to propel herself forward all the faster.

The heavy doors to Mythal’s chambers were cracked. That, too, was unusual. Mythal was often meticulous about closing her doors—if she was in her chambers, they were often shut and warded. There were few in the world who could pass through the wards—Bellanaris herself, Lanaste, Solas, and Elgar’nan. She had asked once, why Elgar’nan was allowed admittance into the chambers. Mythal had only reminded her that he was her husband, even if it was only in name now.

The dread intensifies the closer she gets to the door. Whatever she sees, she knows it will not be good. But Bellanaris has never shied away from terrible things, so she steps forward, one hand on the worn wood, and pushes the door open.

Mythal is arranged on her bed, arms crossed over her chest. Were it not for the blood soaking the white sheets beneath her, Bellanaris would have thought she was only sleeping. Even so, she hurries forward, her fingers fumbling at Mythal’s neck to find the pulse point. She has seen her lady endure far worse wounds than this.

But there is no pulse, and Mythal lays still, not even the gentle rise and fall of her chest. A sharp keen is torn from Bellanaris’s throat. Footsteps sound from the hall, but Bella does not turn to look at them until the door slams back against the wall.

Solas stands in the doorway, and even from here Bellanaris can see the way he shakes. She glances back down at Mythal before she pushes herself to her feet. She lets her hands rest at her sides when she turns to face him.

“We must act quickly,” she says. Solas does not answer, only steps forward with a quiet whimper. He sinks to his knees at Mythal’s side.

Bellanaris steps forward and presses a kiss to the wolf skull bone that holds his hair in place. Still, he does not answer, and so she turns and walks away. There is too much to do to linger idle at the bedside of a corpse. There will be time to mourn later.
Once, she had been a spirit. She thinks she might have been the oldest spirit in the world, but it has been so long that she no longer remembers. Isn’t that the curse of eternity, after all? An eternity to learn things, to know things, and the oldest of them slip away like grains of sand between her fingers. Once, that had bothered her, but no longer.

Her memories of a time before the rise of the elvhen are distance and foggy, but some of them are still there. Some of them still exist in sparkling clarity, and sometimes she is lucky enough to find one of those memories.

This is one of them, marked by a sparkling river. She is both very young and very old. She had already borne Lanaste from herself and both of them have taken bodies. Their bodies, this time, are young too. Teenagers, really.

They sit on the bank of the river, under the shade of a willow tree. It is late afternoon. They had spent the day chasing each other through the forest. Once, they had stopped to pick raspberries. Their fingers are stained pink. Tomorrow, their day will go much the same.

“I hope we never forget this,” Lanaste murmurs. Bellanaris blinks her eyes open—she is laying with her head in his lap, and she had been dozing.

“What do you mean?” she asks. There is nothing remarkable about this moment. It will be one of many.

“The world will change. We’ll change with it, until we decided we can take no more, and then we will die and won’t come back. I only hope, when things are bad, or when things are so different we can barely recognize each other, that we remember this. Or moments like this,” he says, fingers trailing through her hair.

“We’ll probably look back on it with more nostalgia than it is worth. Perhaps we will say something about the good old days, and we will sound like the elders we meet in the villages,” she says, a faint smile on her face. Even knowing that things will change, she does not think they will change too much. Or, rather, she thinks that no matter how much things change, eventually it will come back to this. She and Lanaste will always find each other, and one day, after the world has been made and unmade and made again, they will find themselves on the banks of a river and they will eat raspberries together again.

“Or we will be locked in the middle of a war, and when things seem too great and terrible to bear, we will remember that it was not always so, and it will not stay that way. It is memories like this that will give us hope,” he tells her, and Bellanaris thinks there might be something worth remembering in there. But for now, she is content to let the days slip away, to spend them lazy on the banks of a river, going wherever the wind decides to take them.

“You sound incredibly idealistic,” she remarks, and Lanaste laughs.
“We all need a little idealism every now and then,” he tells her. Moments later, he gently nudges her off his lap, and strips down to his smalls before wading into the river.

It is dark when Arya wakes. Many of the bedrolls in the tent are now occupied. Whatever Eldris decided in the ruin must have passed while she slept. She can’t decide if she minds or not, so she gives up trying to figure it out. Instead, she slips between the bedrolls until she can duck outside.

The night air is cold. She had forgotten that not long ago they were in the dead of winter. That, and Fereldan is often cold, even in the heights of summer. Maybe she’ll get Lysander to take her somewhere warm. Somewhere she can lounge on a warm beach and stand with the ocean lapping at her feet. Antiva, maybe, or Rivian.

“How do you feel?” Theo asks from his place by the fire, and Arya jumps. She glances over at him and realizes he must be on watch. Gingerly, she sits down next to him.

“Fine. I’m…surprised. I remember waking up earlier, but I was so tired it was like I couldn’t,” she says, picking up a stick and poking absentmindedly at the flames.

“That’s what happens when you use too much magic at once,” he says, a faint smile on his face, but he looks troubled, too.

“You look…Did something happen?” she asks.

“I’d hoped to wait until we got back to camp to talk to you. I don’t suppose I could say that anything really happened- Zathrian was lurking nearby, and we managed to convince him to broker peace. Eldris…got rather angry at him, for being so stubborn, so Eden and I had to take over. In the end, though, we convinced Zathrian. Eden went back to the camp to let Lanaya know what happened- I’m sure she’ll paint a pretty picture with Zathrian as a hero. She’s good at that,” he says, but still, that troubled look is on his face.

“That’s good, though. So…why the long face?” she asks, one eyebrow raised. She’s got to admit she’s more curious now than she is concerned- if it was truly so bad, she doubted Theo would be beating around the bush while everyone else slept.

“I insisted on examining you earlier. I wanted to make sure you were okay- you’d been having problems earlier, and Leliana told me that you’d thrown up, and after you exhausted yourself like that I wanted to make sure there wasn’t any other problem,” he says, fingers tapping on his thigh.

“What, did you find out I’m dying or something?” she asks, but now there’s a hard ball of anxiety in the pit of her stomach. She’s got a feeling that everything is about to change, and she’s not entirely sure she’s ready for it.
“Not…exactly. You’re pregnant,” he says, and she stares at him for a few seconds.

“I’m sorry…what?” she asks, counting back in her head. Had she had a period recently? Had she been drinking the teas that Morrigan had recommended? She knew she hadn’t been casting the spells, growing lax over the winter because she hadn’t been having much sex with anyone at all, much less anyone who could do this.

“You’re pregnant. Fairly early along, too. I’d wager around nearly two months,” he says. Two months? With the travel time that would mean…well, it was probably Lysander’s, at any rate. Cailan hadn’t been sleeping with her lately, mostly on her insistence that he save it for Anora.

“You’re…sure?” she asks, unable to resist glancing down at her stomach. Pregnant? It…didn’t feel real, if she were honest.

“Yes. I…If you don’t want to do this, there are ways that I can…help. I do think you should tell Lysander though, just so he knows and can help with any emotional repercussions. And if you do wish to keep it I…congratulate you,” he says, eyes trained on the fire like he isn’t quite sure what to say.

“I…think I want to keep it? I dunno. I’ll talk to Lysander before anything. Will this…Can I still get the vallaslin?” she asks, brow furrowed. Well. This would probably throw a wrench in their plans. She probably couldn’t help with the archdemon like this, but at least this was the last of the quests they needed to do. There was no civil war and no Landsmeet, which meant there was little left to do but wait for the end of it. And if she were honest with herself, that was a fight she wouldn’t mind missing.

“Oh! Yes, there shouldn’t be any issues with that. Usually, for the ritual, we fast from sundown until sunrise, and we don’t sleep. We meditate instead, on who’s vallaslin we want. But you already know you want Mythal’s, and you already know why, so that’s unnecessary. I’ll talk to Lanaya, and if she doesn’t want to do it, I’ll do it as the Second of my clan. I can do it whenever you like, once we get back to camp,” he tells her. Bellanaris stirs in the back of her head- the ritual Theo described was nothing like what she’d ever endured in Arlathan. And she’d endured it several times over, inked anew for every life she lived.

“Cool. I guess I’ll let you know,” she says. They lapse into silence as she stretches out by the campfire, laying on her back, looking up at the stars. She glances at the tattoo on her arm- she’d forgotten about it, for the most part. It was just another part of her now, the same way her magic was. The same way Bellanaris was.

They were all relieved to see the assortment of aravels that marked the Dalish camp. The sun was shining- if Arya had had to walk back through the rain after all of that, she may well have tried to summon a physical manifestation of the weather so she could fight it. Leliana seemed fine- her new scars were still red and puffy, but it was far better than an open wound, and it didn’t seem to hinder the bard much. Though tired, Arya was confident her friend was fine.
When they reached the camp, they all scattered. Eldris and Theo slipped away to find Eden, Leliana disappeared into her tent and didn’t come back out. Anaba went to find Mithra while Reno goes to look for Morrigan. With the entire group dispersed, Arya makes her way to the aravel she and Lysander have been staying in. She doesn’t know whether she should expect him in there or not, but when she opens the door he’s propped up against the wall reading a book she thinks he brought from the palace. He looks up when she enters, his whole face lighting up.

“There’s the hero of the hour! I take it you worked everything out?” he asks, dog-earing the page he’s on before putting the book aside. He stands up and sweeps her into a hug, heedless of all the sweat and grime. At least she’d managed to avoid getting blood on her.

“No thanks to me. Leliana got hurt and I used too much of my magic to try and help her. I slept through everything exciting,” she grumbles. Lysander laughs, pressing kisses all over her face. “At least you missed the dangerous bits,” he says, shifting so he stands behind her, stooped so his chin can rest on her shoulder.

“There is that,” she agrees. They stand in silence for a few moments before she speaks again. “Listen, I’ve got something to tell you. Do you think we could sneak away for a bath in the river?” she asks.

“It’ll be cold in the river,” he says, and she can hear the frown in his voice. She laughs, turning in his arms to kiss the frown away. “I’ll have you to keep me warm,” she tells him. He can’t say no to that.

The river is cold enough that Arya begins shivering almost immediately. She’s doggedly stubborn though, insistent that she scrub off all the dirt and grime. Lysander doesn’t stay in the water long, giving himself a cursory scrub before kneeling on the banks of the river to wash his hair. Overall, it is not the worst bath he has ever had, but it is far from the best. Arya is pretty sure it’s the worst she’s ever had.

It is only once they’re clean and dry, sitting on the bank of the river as Arya brushes her hair, that they begin to speak.

“So, what did you want to tell me?” Lysander asks.

“You remember how I mentioned that I used too much magic healing Leliana, right?” she asks. She stares at the ground while she talks.

“Yes?” he answers. She doesn’t have to look at him to know the puzzled look on his face.

“While I was sleeping, Theo did a magical examination. He wanted to make sure everything was okay, since I’ve been sick Bellanaris has been being weird,” she says.
“What did he find? I’m guessing it’s something serious by the way you’re dancing around it,” he says. She looks up and shoots him a withering look.

“I’m pregnant, you ass. And it’s yours,” she says. Lysander stares at her for a moment, eyes wide.

“Oh. Well,” he says. She thinks it’s the first time she’s seen him at a loss for words.

“Yeah,” she agrees.

They sit in silence until she’s finished brushing her hair. They sit in silence while she uses magic to dry her hair. It is only when she begins to braid her hair that Lysander speaks again. “So what do you want to do?” he asks, voice quiet. She’d only ever seen him so serious a handful of times before, and most of them centered around the trip they’d made to Highever.

“I…I want to keep it, of course. I just…Should we go ahead and get married?” she asks, twisting to look at him.

“I…probably. I guess we should talk to Theo about it,” he says. She nods—she doesn’t have anything remotely resembling wedding attire, but she thinks a set of the robes she’d gotten from the temple would do. They were finely made, after all.

“That’s…a good idea,” he agrees.

He waits until she finishes her braid, tying it with a ribbon she’d found somewhere, before he leans forward. Gently, he takes her face in his hands and kisses her. Her hands come up, wrapping around his shoulders. They sit like that for a moment after they break their kiss, her head tucked into the crook of his neck.

“Theo said I could still get my vallaslin. I think…I’d like to do it tonight,” she says. Lysander pulls back enough to give her another kiss.

“One condition,” he says. She looks at him with raised eyebrows.

“And what would that be?” she asks.

“I get to see it first,” he tells her, with a grin. She laughs, leaning up to kiss him again.

“I’ll try to make it happen,” she says.

Arya approaches Theo at supper that night. Most of the clan has already eating, dispersing through
the camp to celebrate. There’s lots of dancing and even more drinking. With an uneasy start, she realizes that she can’t partake. In the alcohol, at least. She sees no reason why she couldn’t dance, although she’s not too interested.

Theo is sitting by himself, on a log near the fire. Eldris and Eden have disappeared somewhere, likely dancing together. She’d watched Eldris drink far too much blackberry wine earlier, while she was eating.

“You look awfully serious, lethallan,” Theo says, by way of greeting.

“I was hoping I could get my vallaslin tonight,” she says. She doesn’t bother sitting down next to him.

“I thought you might say that. I prepared everything earlier. Come with me,” he says, rising from his seat. He leads her through the camp, past groups of elves partying. She thinks she sees Anaba twisted around Mithra, but she averts her eyes to give them privacy before she can be sure.

Theo leads her to an entirely deserted part of the camp, and then he only gathers a bag of supplies.

“Where are we going?” she asks, crossing her arms over her chest. The night was cool- not cold, but enough that she wished she had brought a cloak.

“Into the forest. So we won’t be disturbed,” he tells her, an easy smile on his face. Arya follows him- they can both see well enough in the dark that they don’t need any light. They don’t walk far, only until they reach a clearing with a tree stump in the center. He gestures for her to sit on the stump as he kneels on the ground, casting a spell that creates a hovering ball of light. While they hadn’t had any trouble navigating to the clearing, he needed to be able to see perfectly for this.

“Walk me through the process?” she asks, a sudden flare of nervousness making her hands shake. She slides them between her thighs to keep them steady.

“I’ll show you the different designs we have to honor Mythal, and I’ll show you the colors we have. Once you pick everything, I’ll prick your finger to add some blood to the ink we’ll be using. After that, I’ll just have to do the tattoo,” he says. From his bag, he pulls out a book, flipping gently through the pages until he finds what he’s looking for.

“Are these the designs?” she asks. He nods, turning the book so she can use it. All of the designs for Mythal are spread out on one page- she recognizes most of them from Inquisition. These are also the same designs that Bellanaris had worn, once. She’d gone through all of them at some point- once Mythal trusted her, she’d let her pick the design each life. She runs her fingers over the crinkled paper, finally settling on one.

It was not quite the simplest design. Like all of Mythal’s designs, it was made of curling vines. These
would go up her cheekbones and branch out across her forehead, coming down onto the bridge of her nose. It only lacked the tree roots on her chin. For the color, she settles on a sky blue. Theo tells her it’ll be darker on her skin, but it is something Arya already knows. Of all the different designs Bellanaris had worn, the one constant was the color. And this was a near-perfect replica. She sucks in a breath when Theo pricks her finger, mixing the blood with the ink.

After that comes the hard part. Bellanaris remembers it as being much more painful. Arya thinks it pales in comparison to the feeling of the needle on her arm. Between the two of them, she manages to sit still, her fingers curling into a fist, nails pressing crescent moons into her palms. Theo doesn’t speak, even when it’s over. He only nods at her, taking a moment to cast a spell to seal the ink to her skin, healing her just enough to make sure the ink stays. After that, he gathers his supplies and leads her back to the camp.

Lysander is absolutely delighted by the vallaslin on her face. It is only when he kisses her, tangling his fingers in her hair, that she realizes she forgot to ask Theo about some sort of wedding.

Chapter End Notes

i don’t even have an excuse for why it took so long to get this up tbh

either way, i hope you enjoyed it! thanks as always for continuing to support me- your comments and kudos are why i keep writing <3
Days pass. Eldris wants to stay with the clan for as long as possible, and none of them can find it in them to protest. Besides, nobody really wants to get back on the road again. Despite Arya and Leliana both wishing they were back in Denerim, neither of them is eager to spend days walking. And Arya, at least, is not eager to spend her nights sleeping on the hard ground. Frequently, she reminds her friends that there are three empty beds in the aravel. None of them take her up on the offer, especially once the news comes out that she’s pregnant. Reno’s the one to make a joke about not wanting to witness a repeat of how it came about. Arya threw a stick at him for it and, unfortunately, missed.

Despite not wanting to leave, Eldris spends much of his time hunting alone. Theo and Eden were coming with them, after all, and they were the only two he was interested in spending time with. At least, that’s what he told himself. He was good enough at lying that it made it easier to pretend that he was hunting alone because he couldn’t hunt with Tamlen. The clan, at least, were thankful for his many kills. Most of them were small—several squirrels, a half a dozen rabbits. Occasionally, he’d manage to bring back an elk. None of it went to waste.

He always hunted in the mornings, when it was still dark and the sun hadn’t breached the horizon. There were never many awake aside from the sentries posted to watch the camp—he’d manage to sneak out several times, but eventually, he walked right past the yawning guards with a small wave. He got used to the feeling of a bow in his hands once more—he had spent too long relying on his daggers and nothing more—and there was something he liked about breathing in the crisp and cold air as the light began to streak through the sky. Even on his longest hunting trips, he was always back in the camp well before noon.

So it came as a surprise when Eldris rose one morning when the sky was still dark, quietly pulling his boots on, foregoing the cloak that would drag the ground even though it was cool enough that he shivered, slinging his bow over his shoulder, and found Anaba waiting in the treeline, leaning against the trunk of a birch tree. If they had been anywhere else, anywhere he hadn’t known with his entire being that they were safe, he might have put an arrow in her before he realized it. As it is, his hand twitches towards his daggers without touching them, and he recognizes her in the dim light as he relaxes.

“Creators, Anaba. What are you doing here?” he asks. He can feel all the sleepless nights pressing against his eyes, curling around the base of his spine. He was so tired, but even so, he knew he could not sleep.

“I wanted to talk to you,” she says, voice quiet in the pre-dawn morning. Eldris sighs.

“Hunting doesn’t necessarily lend itself to conversations,” he points out. Anaba flashes a smile at him.
“I know. I’m not going to go with you. I just wanted to catch you when nobody else was around,” she tells him. He cocks his head to the side, sizing her up, trying to figure out what it is she wants before she tells him.

“What is it?” he asks, finally. She pushes herself off the birch, coming to stand in front of him.

“I don’t want to leave,” she tells him. He blinks at her.

“It’ll probably be a few weeks before we do leave,” he reminds her. She gives him a small, sad smile, and suddenly he realizes where this is going before it gets there.

“I don’t want to leave at all. I want to stay with the Dalish. Mithra told me there’s a place here if I want to stay and…I do,” she says, a tiny shrug of her shoulders.

“This…is very sudden. Why are you springing it on me now? I mean, we’re nowhere close to leaving,” he says, one eyebrow raised.

“I wanted to tell everybody else tonight. I wanted your support when I did,” she says. Eldris sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

“I’ll be there with bells on,” he says, letting out a sigh. Anaba grins, reaching out to ruffle his hair as she passes.

Eden finds that Zevran is good company. She knows well enough by now to know that there’s some sort of entanglement with her brother, but Eden has never pried. If Eldris wanted her to know something, he always told her. She knew he had spoken to Theo, she knew something was between them, and as far as she was concerned that was all she needed to know.

Still, Zevran was quiet when he wanted to be. He was also playful, in a way none of the others were. Arya was preoccupied, and Eden didn’t blame her. Eldris was blaming himself. Theo was busy with travel preparations and sending out letters to Merrill and Marethari. So Eden and Zevran were left alone, and Zevran didn’t have any qualms about doing stupid things in the forest.

They started small. Games of hide-and-seek (or cat-and-mouse depending on how they looked at it, and there was often a predatory gait to their stride that let them explain it off as training) started them out. They were both silent- Zevran was better at it than Eden in cities, but Eden knew the forest like she knew the back of her own hand. She knew where and how to step to keep the leaves from rustling or branches snapping underfoot, she knew how to hide her trail, and she knew how to blend into her surroundings. After that, it turned into dares. Who could climb a tree the fastest, who could jump the highest, who could run the fastest.

Slowly, Eden began to remember what she felt like all those months ago, when she was still a child.
Leliana spends her time with the hahrens. She had started to learn that her point of view was limited, and the elders were gracious enough to pass on their stories to her. She was glad enough to listen. First it was the ones that the hahrens were most willing to share with her—stories about Arlathan, of the elves as they recovered from the Exalted Marches. Of elven heroes and Dalish gods and the things that Leliana had known nothing about before.

Carefully, quietly, she tucks them away. Her audience for these stories will be limited but she has noticed the hard set to Eldris’ jaw that never really goes away. She hopes she can remind him of home and all the things he never truly loses.

Anaba’s announcement was made around supper one night. Mithra had joined them for the night, Anaba tucked under her arm. The news was received with varying reactions—Arya felt bittersweet, Theo was happy for her, Eden welcomed her warmly. In the end, though, it was a quiet thing. Anaba told them, there was stunned silence, and quiet reactions, and then it was over and everybody was left to make peace with the fact that Anaba would not be returning with them.

Lysander is the only one who knew that Arya cried.

The morning after Anaba’s reaction, Reno has stolen Morrigan’s hand mirror and frowns at his own reflection. Morrigan, for her part, had made a token protest as he snatched it from her, but both of them knew she wasn’t serious. Besides, Reno was the sort to be far more careful with her possessions than his own, so she knew her mirror wasn’t truly in any danger.

“If you frown any harder, your face will freeze like that,” Morrigan tells him, scooting up behind him to wrap her arms around his chest, her chin resting on his shoulder. He sighs, reaching up to run his fingers through his hair— in the months since he had arrived in Denerim, his hair had fallen to the wayside. It had grown out until the ends curled over his ears—just too short to pull back and just long enough to be frustrating.

“Do you think my hair makes me look younger like this?” he asks, after another second of frowning at his own face. Morrigan hides her grin in the kiss she presses to the back of his neck.

“You did look a little older when we first met, but you also looked quite haggard then from being on the run and all. But yes, you prematurely aged man, I think your long hair suits you far better,” she tells him, a playful edge curling up the corners of her voice like a smile.

“It’s just…annoying, at this length. I do want it to be longer, but it’ll be a pain to get it that way,” he groused. She presses another kiss to his cheek, leaving a plum lip print behind.

“I do know a spell that can help. Barring that, between myself, the bard, and Arya, we’ve got enough hairpins that I can pin it out of the way,” she tells him, reaching out and gently pulling at his hair until he could see a weak approximation of the way she planned on pinning it back. He looked utterly ridiculous.
“I suppose I’ll manage without. Especially if you say you like the hair,” he decides, after a moment. Gently, he lays the mirror down before pulling Morrigan around to his lap, peppering her face with kisses while she laughs.

“You sentimental fool,” she declares, draping her arms over his shoulders. Their faces hover inches apart- all she has to do to kiss him again is tilt her head just so.

“You sentimental fool,” he reminds her.

Neither could say which one closes the short distance between them until they’re kissing again.

One night, Eldris slips out of the camp, pack on his back. He leaves Theo and Eden asleep in their aravel, a soft smile on his face at the way they curl closer together to chase away the chill his absence left behind. He ghosts through the camp until he reaches the forest, long accustomed to moving swiftly and silently. Then, he silently slips through the branches until he reaches the bank of a river. It is not a particularly remarkable riverbank but the grass along the edge is soft and there’s a long strip of land between the edge of the forest and the edge of the water. He kneels down in what he thinks is the middle and begins to dig, first with a flat rock he’d picked up from the bottom of the shallow river, and then when the ground gets softer he uses his fingers, scraping through the red dirt.

Once the hole is dug, he rinses his arms off in the river, mud sloughing off into the water. He’d forgotten how cold the water was- by the time he is kneeling at the edge of the hole once more his fingers are stiff from it. Carefully, he takes twin daggers from his belt (months spent jostling shoulders as they worked, quiet exclamation that the other was going to ruin it, pride shining bright behind tired eyes weeks later as each presents the dagger to the other in the quiet of the morning) and lays them carefully in the hole he had dug. He gently scrapes dirt over top the knives, muttering an inaudible prayer under his breath. When the daggers are covered, he turns back to his pack, gently lifting a tiny sapling out. With another knife from his belt, he gently scrapes Tamlen’s name in the bark, careful not to damage the sapling. With that done, he lowers in into the hole before gently packing the dirt around the base of the sapling.

Eldris leaves as dawn rises over the forest. He turns back once to look at the lone sapling, Tamlen’s stark-white name visible even from here. He thinks, for a moment, of what the tree will look like in the future. Of Tamlen’s name, no longer stark-white, reaching for the sky.

When he returns to camp, nobody questions the smile on his face.

Three days after Anaba’s announcement, and Arya receives a letter. Anaba tucks it into her pocket in the weak hours of the morning, when Arya is clutching a tree and desperately holding her hair back as she vomits her breakfast into the brush. It is hours before she reads it- when she finally stops vomiting she leans back against the tree that had been holding her upright. Her hand drifts down to the tiny swell beneath her shirt.

“Kid, you have got to quit making me sick like this. They told me it’d go away soon, and by the
Gods, I am going to hold you to that,” she murmurs, the tiniest smile on her face. There is, of course, no response from within. She isn’t far enough along yet to feel movement, although she knows it won’t be long until she can feel the heartbeat. She knows it won’t be long, all things considered, until she is far enough along that all her stomach will do is get in her way.

She’d always thought she’d be able to wear those stupid maternity shirts when she got pregnant. Of course, she’d always thought she’d be back home, going to appointments with an obstetrician with a husband or a wife holding her hand, because this was the sort of thing she would have planned. She did not think she would be pregnant at eighteen, stuck in the middle of a forest that only existed in a video game. Stubbornly, she wipes away the tears pricking at her eyes, firmly deciding that it is far too early to cry over something she’d long since resigned herself to.

With a sigh, she peels herself off the tree and trudges back to the camp. Wynne is waiting at the campfire with a mug of tea she presses into her hand- Arya takes it gratefully, the last traces of nausea still lingering. She slips inside the aravel, curling up on the still-warm bed. Lysander must have just left for his own breakfast- she hopes he’ll think enough to bring her some, since hers was now on the forest floor. As she shifts in the bed, she hears the crinkle of paper in her pocket and remembers the letter. It takes a moment to fish it out of her pocket, but popping the wax seal felt immensely satisfying as she slides it open. Unfolding the thick paper, she begins to read.

**Dear Arya,**

*Though you know me, I am confident you will not be able to figure out who I am. For now, know that I am a friend that knows you. I know where you’re from and how you got here, and much of what happened in between then and now. Just as you claimed to be a seer when you first arrived in Theads, so you should consider me. Although, neither of us are truly seers. (One day you’ll look back on this with a smile. For now, I am sure you will be frustrated with how cryptically vague I’m being.) Going forward, you should know that everything I do, I do with the best of intents. I would never willingly hurt you, and any advice I give is from the knowledge I have from my ‘status’ as a seer. Please, trust me. You have nothing to lose, not from the advice that I offer.*

*If this letter reaches you when I intend for it to, you are camped in the Brecilian forest with Zathrian’s clan. If memory serves me correctly, it should be Lanaya’s clan now. If this is truly the timeline I think it is, you should have just found out you are pregnant and received your vallaslin. If you did not yet know you’re pregnant, well…congratulations. If you did know, congratulations anyway. You’ll be a good mother. Better than your own, I promise. There is so much I wish to tell you of the coming days, but much of that comes from a wish to reminiscence. And much of it is information I am not so certain you should have. Though I’m doing my own meddling with the timeline, there is much that I cannot change, if only for fear that it’ll break time. So I’ll leave you with a few pieces of advice that I hope you find helpful.*

*The first is this: get married with the clan. Anora will want to throw a large wedding ceremony, and she’ll be disappointed to find that you married without her there, but I promise the noble backlash isn’t worth appeasing her. There will be plenty of other lavish ceremonies for Anora to plan parties for. Besides, you always did want a hand-fasting ceremony. If you or Lysander are worried about making it official in the eyes of the Chantry, I’ll gently remind you that you’re traveling with a bard-turned-Chantry-sister who has the authority to perform such a ceremony. There is, of course, the possibility of a small and private ceremony when you return to Denerim, but I promise it’ll be much harder to say no to Anora.*
The second piece of advice is this: you’re pregnant with twins. I tell you this only because that sort of surprise is not the best sort. It is better to be prepared. I know there will be an urge- from you or from Bellanaris- to return to the safehouse and collect Isala’s crib. Don’t. Leave it, and her, in the past. She’ll be happier that way, and so will you. If I know you, and your husband-to-be, neither of you have even consider names. I’d wager a hundred dollars that you’re sitting there with the uncomfortable realization that yes, you do have to begin thinking about names, and your laptop is all the way back in Denerim so you can’t even search on those baby naming websites for something you want to name your children that Lysander likes and that doesn’t sound horribly out of place and that your children won’t hate. I’m telling you now to take a deep breath. You’ve got this. Or maybe I do, depending on your decision. With the aforementioned knowledge that I have…the twins will be identical at first. Pick different colors of clothing for them, and for the Maker’s sake, stick with it. It’ll make it easier not to worry about mixing the two of them up. That being said, you’ll have a daughter. You started to suspect she was trans when she was ten, and began to research into alternatives for hormone therapy and surgeries. I’m here to tell you that you no longer have to do this- once I’m reasonably certain you’re back in Denerim, I’ll send you the information you’ll need to help your daughter make any choices she might want to make. And with this in mind, your daughter is the one with Lysander’s eyes. Your son will have yours. And you will be absolutely smitten with both of them. Going back to names- your daughter picked the name Lyra for herself. You and Lysander named your son Asher. Take this for what you will, but perhaps it’ll help.

For now, I’ll say goodbye. Drink your tea every morning, don’t let your friends make you feel bad for having to piss every ten minutes on the journey back to Denerim, and don’t forget to tell Ella when you get back.

Yours,
A Friend

Chapter End Notes

holy FUCK that took so long to update anyway please enjoy it
They stayed with the Dalish for a few more weeks. Part of it was ensuring Lanaya’s transition to Keeper went smoothly and that all of the previously injured elves recovered and part of it was making sure Anaba was settling into her new place among the Dalish. For most of them, this passed slowly and quietly, mainly lazing around with little to do. Arya and Lysander went over the letter she’d received countless times, although Lysander insisted they keep it to themselves. Arya didn’t push the issue- there was something about the letter that niggled at the back of her mind, although she could never quite put her finger on it.

Their last week with the Dalish was the only time they spent any time doing anything. Much of it was spent hunting- with all of them used to lazing around in one place, they all agreed to take the return trip slow. It was something Arya was immensely thankful for- her stomach had begun to round out and she found that she inconveniently had to piss all the time. Lysander thought it was funny with the way she’d heft herself, grumbling, out of the bed and stomp off into the woods to relieve herself once more. It also made her think more of home- how much more convenient it would be to have indoor plumbing again instead of having to squat in a bush after taking everything off from the waist down. And though she couldn’t help them hunt, there was plenty she did to help. The Dalish insisted on helping them prepare for their trip by providing provisions- bread that would keep longer, dried fruit, salted meat, jerky, and hard halla cheese. All of the provisions, though, needed to be prepared, and Arya volunteered to help. It wasn’t like there was much else she could do- any mending that needed to be done was handled by Wynne, who’s stitching were neater, and there wasn’t much of that left anyway. So Arya found herself working next to Anaba in the days leading to their departure.

By the time they left, spring was beginning to fade into summer. The mornings were cool, the days were hot, and the nights were warm. Still, they waited until nearly midday to set out, packs bursting with provisions. Anaba waved to them until they disappeared into the forest and even though they were leaving her behind, there was almost a surreal quality to the whole thing, like it wasn’t real.

They camped early the first night, too. The sun had just begun to set in the sky, leaving plenty of light behind as they pitched their tents in the forest. Eldris’s tent was rather full- Theo and Eden and Zevran all shared it with him- but the rest of them stayed two to a tent. Like most of their days with the Dalish, as soon as the camp was set up, many of them scattered. Wynne sat near the fire, quietly reading a book. Lysander had followed Eden and Zevran into the woods. Theo was in his tent, pouring over one of the tomes Arya had given him. Morrigan had gone off with Eldris to forage for herbs- while the Dalish had seen they had plenty, they had decided on a stew for supper and Zevran had only agreed to eat it if they did something to add flavor.

Leliana, too, sat by the fire, and eventually, Arya flopped on the soft grass next to her, her travel cloak bundled under her head as a pillow.

“How are you doing?” the bard asks, after a few moments pass between them.
“I’m pregnant, Leliana, not injured,” she scoffs. Leliana laughs, running her fingers through Arya’s hair with a twinkle in her eye.

“‘You’ve whined enough to fool me,” she teases. Arya grumbles, and the conversation lulls.

Eventually, Leliana begins to speak. It takes Arya a moment to realize it’s a story she’s telling, and with the sun dipping even closer to the horizon and the day turning into dusk, she lets herself drift into a doze. She’s roused later, when Eldris and Morrigan return to the camp, bickering quietly with each other.

She raises her head up to look at Leliana, who had been telling the story the entire time and had since begun to act it out with her hands, which hovered around the swell of Arya’s belly. She had no idea what the story was- the moment Leliana noticed she was waking, she’d begun to lose steam with the story. Still, her attention remains mostly focused on her belly.

“My eyes are up here,” Arya murmurs, stretching. Though she hadn’t fallen asleep properly, listening to the soft lilting sounds of her friend’s voice while she drifted had been relaxing.

“It is a good thing I wasn’t talk to you,” the bard scoffs, humor glittering in her eyes.

“So you’ll tell my baby a story, but not me?” Arya asks, a fake pout on her face. Leliana’s not fooled.

“You’ve never asked for one,” she points out, her fingers combing through Arya’s hair once more. Morrigan and Eldris are still playfully bickering as they move around the fire, setting up the stew pot and gathering what they need.

“You’ve never asked for one,” she points out, her fingers combing through Arya’s hair once more. Morrigan and Eldris are still playfully bickering as they move around the fire, setting up the stew pot and gathering what they need.

“Neither did the baby,” Arya answers with a grin, stretching once more as Leliana rolls her eyes. After a moment, she hauls herself up- she had to piss. Again. Gods, she couldn’t wait until the kid-kids? she still didn’t know whether to believe the letter- were out of her.

They start early the next morning, but they keep a relaxed pace, and they stop in the early afternoon. At first, they were just going to rest before continuing on, but their days with the Dalish made them lazy enough they called it a day. At this rate, they’d be into summer proper before they reached Denerim again. Lunch was a light thing- bread with halla cheese and some of the fresh berries they’d taken with them. And once more, with nothing left to do, everyone scattered.

Unfortunately, everyone was much more scattered than the day before, and Eldris was left alone without any supervision. The previous day with Morrigan they’d come across some mushrooms- the witch had recognized them and called them a mild aphrodisiac while Eldris had thought he recognized them as something else. Eldris had snorted and pocketed a few, determined to prove her wrong. He’d forgotten about them the night before, but now, with Arya and Theo being the only two left in the camp and both of them engrossed in other things, he decided he’d try them out and see.
It turns out that he had been wrong. And he supposed Morrigan was too—mild was an understatement. Theo had waved him off, too engrossed with the tome he was pouring over to pay much attention to his words since it clearly wasn’t an emergency. With Zevran off in the woods, Eldris was momentarily convinced he was going to die. He wasn’t sure what persuaded him to ask Arya, but she was there and wasn’t busy.

She stared at him for a moment as he fidgeted, armor uncomfortably tight. “No. Wait. Actually. Yeah. Lysander’s not here, it’s been forever since I’ve had any action because he’s weird about the whole pregnancy thing and kind of convinced it’s bad for the baby even though I assured him and Wynne assured him and Theo assured him it’s fine but whatever that’s not the point. The point is yes. But, also, like, not here. I’m not fucking you in the tent you share with your sister, and you aren’t fucking me in the tent I share with Lysander,” she says.

Eldris whines with frustration, pulling her up and into the woods wordlessly. Well. Her professional opinion was that he could stand to work on his seduction skills.

Zevran finds them nearly an hour later near the bank of a stream. It’s obvious what had happened—they’re both still breathless, the scent of sex lingers in the air, and they’d shed their clothes. Arya’s sprawled out on her back, Eldris draped across her with his head on her chest and an arm slung across her hips. Zevran’s careful to make sure they hear him coming— he doesn’t want to properly disturb them, after all. As it is, Arya only rolls her head to the side to look at him, and Eldris lifts his head up for a moment before planting it firmly on her chest again.

“What brought this on?” Zevran asks, laughter in his voice.

“Morrigan told me the mushrooms were a mild aphrodisiac. They didn’t feel very mild to me,” Eldris grumbles.

“Theo was busy and he was desperate enough to ask me. I thought it’d be fun, because Lysander is confused it’ll hurt the baby, so I haven’t gotten in any in gods know how long,” Arya adds.

“Oh. Why are you still laying there?” he asks, mild curiosity in his voice.

“I’m pregnant. Also I have to pee again, and at this point, I’d rather die,” she mumbles, worn out and half-asleep. Despite his inelegant seduction, Eldris had been energetic and she’d lost count of how many orgasms he’d wrung out of her. All she wanted was to bask in the afterglow and take a nice nap.

“I hope you remember that it’s nearly summer and you’re laying on the forest floor. Where bugs live,” Zevran says, faux casual.

Arya screeches and shoves Eldris off of her. He grunts, rolling to his back, and she’s halfway to her feet before she realizes she had been perfectly content to lay naked in the grass until a certain blonde
elf had opened his mouth.

“I hate you,” she groans. Zevran’s laugh is cut short when she zaps him with electricity.

Their travel speed slowly picks up after that. Still, they take frequent breaks, most of them at Arya’s insistence. On one such day, they’d stopped less than half an hour ago when Arya stops them once more.

“Hold up, I gotta pee,” she says, already stripping her pack off her shoulders and letting it thud to the dusty ground.

“Really? You just peed like, twenty minutes ago,” Reno says, crossing his arms over his chest as he settles in to wait. Arya tries to swallow down the flash of anger, remembering the story her mother had told her about threatening her father’s life with a hairbrush over buying too-ripe bananas. He’d thought it amusing and Arya got angry about that, too.

“Hey, asshole, look me in the eyes. I have at least one baby bouncing on my bladder. Shut the fuck up,” she says, reaching up to pat his face before trundling off into the bushes.

“That’s my girl!” Lysander calls after her, ignoring the dirty look from his brother.

Eldris has to pull Theo in for a kiss so she doesn’t hear his laughter.

They’re not far from Denerim when they get stuck in a cave once more. It’s the same cave they’d been trapped in before, and Arya’s beginning to wonder if the area is cursed with excessive rain. Although the ground was looking parched and dry when they took shelter in the cave for the night, so it was more likely that the group just had terrible timing. At least this rain was far warmer than the last one-thought it lasted nearly two days, by the middle of the first day Arya shed most of her clothes and pulled Morrigan into the rain.

The witch protested, of course. Arya didn’t pay it any mind- she wasn’t truly serious. Besides, the closer they got to Denerim, the more Arya could tell that the upcoming battle with the archdemon was weighing on her friend. They had no idea when it was coming- Eldris could only assure them that so far that archdemon had made no moves. They were all getting a little antsy, truth be told. Eamon had already pledged his support, and they’d made full use of all the treaties. There was little left for them to do- the city would need shored up defenses, but that was something for Cailan and Anora and Loghain to focus on, if they hadn’t been doing so already. And when the waiting set in, so did the anxiety.

But Morrigan was worried for an entirely different reason- she’d already worked out the ritual with Eldris. All that was left was to go through with it, something her friend wasn’t looking forward to. Arya had no idea how to comfort her- but she could distract her. So she pulled her out into the rain, while Leliana kept a rhythm going by clapping her hands and stomping her feet. It was odd and strange to dance without music and Morrigan said as much, but once again Arya paid no heed.
After a few minutes of watching them, others began to join them. Lysander and Reno came out together, each one taking one of the girls. Morrigan still groused, but Arya saw the smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as Reno pulled her into a spin. Lysander claimed her attention moments later, where it stayed until they staggered back into the cave, soaking wet and laughing.

The rain cleared up in the middle of the next night. By dawn, everyone was up and packed. Though they would need to push themselves, they would be at Denerim by sunset. None were happier than Arya, who’s stomach had gotten big enough that she frequently used it to balance her bowl on at supper. Let the others laugh- she couldn’t wait to sleep in a real bed once more. Her back would certainly thank her.

Chapter End Notes

we're almost there kids, buckle up
Cailan and Anora met them at the palace gates. Their matching grins wavered as they took in the swell of Arya’s stomach— it only takes her a moment to notice that Anora’s also pregnant, albeit obviously not as far along as Arya herself. Stupidly, the only thing she could think of was well, one of us has to change.

She kept that thought to herself. A servant was sent inside to round everyone else up as Anora led them into the foyer, at least, and out of the cooling night. A scout in one of the watchtowers on the outskirts of the city had sent word back earlier that the group was coming and it had given Anora enough time to lay out a proper dinner for them all. After the flavorful fare of the Dalish, Arya was left wrinkling her nose. Thankfully, her morning sickness had subsided. And Anora had, once more, had the kitchens prepare a homemade pizza.

Soon they were all gathered around the table, passing plates of food and bottles of wine, the candles flickering. It was too warm to necessitate a fire, reminding Arya that she’d been in Thedas for nearly a year. There was enough chatter that the room was loud— Arya ended up being seated in between Cailan and Anora, with Lysander on Anora’s other side.

“I see we both have the same sort of news to share,” Anora teases, stealing a brief kiss from Arya before returning to her meal. She doesn’t reply, instead taking a bite of the pizza and letting out a nearly obscene moan. They’d managed to fix the sauce— it had tasted a little weak last time but now it was perfect.

“I, for one, am incredibly excited,” Cailan says, reaching over and plucking a grape from Arya’s plate. He’d finished his own, and the bowl was somewhere on the other end of the table.

“Don’t get too excited. I think hers is mine,” Lysander says, leaning around the table. Arya still doesn’t pay any attention to them— she’ll make it up to them later that night. Or tomorrow, she amends, realizing how tired she is. Right now all she can think about is eating as much as physically possible.

“We’re all family here. After the Blight, maybe we can make it official?” Cailan asks.

“Sorry, buddy. Already tied the knot with her while we were staying with the Dalish. A hand-fasting ceremony, she called it,” he returns. Cailan doesn’t pout but he does snag Arya’s attention long enough to kiss her.

“You know I wanted to plan a celebration for it,” Anora groused. Lysander shrugs, snagging a roll from her plate. She retaliates by plucking the cheese from his.
The conversation continues as the candles burn down, until Anora turns to ask Arya a question only to find her slumped against Cailan. She clears her throat to get his attention, nodding her head at Arya when she has it.

“I’ll take her to bed,” he murmurs, gently shifting her into his lap before standing up. The conversation lulls for a moment until Cailan has gotten through the doors before picking up again. The candles burn even lower as he tucks her into bed.

Despite being one of the last to go to sleep the previous night, Eldris is one of the first to wake up in the morning. There’s still a few provisions left over- he grabs some of the dried fruit left in his pack from the Dalish as he dresses. Eden wakes before he’s gone, and he hangs around long enough to let her join him. They’re silent until they step outside the palace- as twins they’d long since learned to communicate wordlessly.

“Where are we going?” she asks, reaching into the bag of fruit for a handful. She pops a piece into her mouth as she waits for her brother to answer.

“The alienage. Anaba sent the letters for Shianni and her father. Besides, I want to see Shianni again anyway. There was quite a bit of coin in those ruins back in the Brecilian, enough that it added up. If anyone could use it, it’s them,” he answers. She nods, satisfied with the answer as he leads her through the city. Though it’s perfectly legal to be out and about and it isn’t as though anyone could arrest them, he still finds himself ducking around corners and sticking to alleyways.

Unlike the rest of the city, the alienage is already stirring when they slip through the gates. Shianni is easy enough to find- her red hair helps her stick out from many of the other elves, and she’s standing outside the home she’d given Eldris directions to, talking to Anaba’s father, a basket on her hip indicating that she had been on her way to the market. Anaba has her father’s eyes, Eldris realizes. He calls out a greeting. A grin breaks across Shianni’s face as she recognizes him, foregoing formality to pull him directly into a hug. She spends a brief moment introducing him to Anaba’s father before she leads him away. Eden had disappeared, likely to explore the alienage. Eldris wasn’t worried- he knew she’d pop back up. His guide through the alienage leads him through twisting alleys with precariously leaning houses- it looks as if a great wind could blow them over. But Eldris has a sneaking suspicion that the buildings of the alienage are as resilient as the elves who live there. By the end of it, she’s led him on to the top of the walls line the alienage, showing him a view directly into the market below.

“So, have you made much progress with saving the world since you’ve been gone?” Shianni asks, sitting her basket down beside her.

“Some. A Dalish clan has promised aid when the time comes,” he tells her, voice measured as he looks out across the city.

“All right, out with it. Why do you look like you have bad news for me?” she demands. He reaches into his pocket, presenting the three letters Anaba had penned- one for Shianni, one for her father,
“It isn’t necessarily bad news. But Anaba decided to stay with the Dalish rather than returning to the city,” he says. Shianni hums a noncommittal response, breaking the seal on the envelope addressed to her. The letter is long, and Eldris falls silent as he gives her time to read it. After several long moments pass between them, she finally speaks.

“I’m not really surprised. Anaba always talked about the Dalish. She just wasn’t going to leave her father. Or Soris, for that matter. And when her father picked out a match for her…well, she was ready to play the perfect daughter and marry. She would have been happy, too. But I think she’ll be happier with the Dalish. Besides, after what she did, it’s not like she can really come back. The guards and the nobles would want her head. Anora already pissed them off by turning her into a servant instead of killing her or letting her rot,” Shianni says, her voice measured in a way that tells him she’ll keep her feelings to herself. He respects that.

“She seemed happy there. I doubt she would have stayed if she wasn’t. And she knows she can always leave to come back- the Dalish would never turn her away. If Lanaya’s clan will, then there’s always Sabrae she can go to. But as I said, she seemed happy,” he says. He takes that moment to dig through his bag, pulling out a heavy pouch of coins he’d set aside just for this. He passes it to Shianni, as well.

“What’s this?” she asks, tossing it in her hand.

“Coin. I looted much of it from the various things we fought for the elves. Figured you and the alienage needed it more than I did,” he says. Shianni beams at him, and they lapse into silence once more. They sit like that, together, as the sun crawls higher in the sky. Eventually, Shianni stands up, dusting her skirts off as she picks up her basket.

“Well, I’ve got to get to the market. Maybe I’ll see you again, Eldris,” she says. He raises his hand in a halfhearted wave farewell and watches her go. Moments later, he drops down into the market. The wall hadn’t been too high- high enough that the alienage elves likely wouldn’t have attempted such a thing, but not too high for him. Besides, he’d stuck his daggers into the space between bricks and used that to lower himself down to a safe height.

He turns around, sheathing his weapons and checking to make sure no guards saw. It’s only then he notices a child hanging back, peering up at him through a shock of blonde hair. She tilts her head when she sees that she’d been noticed, her hair shifting to reveal pointed ears. She’s dressed too finely to be an alienage elf, even though the patched clothes she’s wearing is clearly meant for play.

“What are you?” he asks, kindly. She hesitates for a moment, glancing around like she might get in trouble before she creeps closer.

“My name’s Sera,” she says, creeping closer.

“What’re you doing all alone, Sera?” he asks, kneeling down and pulling some of the dried fruit left from breakfast. It wasn’t proper candy but it was better than nothing. She snags the treats from him warily, darting back out of reach once she has them and holding them to her chest.
“Lady Emmald’s sick. She wants me to call her my mother, but she ain’t. She doesn’t like me going into the marketplace, either, but she’s too sick to stop me now,” she tells him.

“Why don’t you want to listen to this Lady?” he asks, ears twitching with curiosity. Sera’s quiet a moment before she answers.

“Cookies,” she answers, decisively, after a moment.

“Cookies?” he asks, bewildered. The child hesitates a moment before grabbing his hand, pulling him further into the marketplace. She stops in front of a bakery and points at it, hanging back from the actual entrance.

“She told me she could bake cookies. And she told me never to come here, because see that man behind the counter? She told me he hated me. Elves. But he doesn’t. She couldn’t bake cookies, so she came and she bought them and she lied. She was too proud to tell me and she let me hate to make herself feel better. And it’s- it’s like I’m a doll. She just wanted to dress me up and fuss about things that didn’t matter,” she says, and it’s almost like a weight has lifted from her tiny shoulders. He hesitates a moment before he opens his arms. Sera hesitates another moment before she leans against him, letting his arms wrap around her.

“Well, I can’t bake cookies either. But what do you say I go buy you some candy? I saw a stall over there that sold candied fruits. Better than the dried stuff I just gave you,” he offers. She hesitates another moment before she nods into his neck, stepping back only to launch herself onto her back, scrambling for purchase. He reaches up to stabilize her and heads for the stall, a grin on his face.

Arya sleeps late the next morning. When she finally rolls over and blinks her eyes open, she finds that the bed is empty. Truth be told, she had no idea if there’d even been anyone else in it at any point last night. She’d crashed, hard, at the party Anora had set up for them, and only briefly woke up when Cailan scooped her up. She’d slept so soundly she hadn’t even entered the Fade- her dreams had been normal, for once. She stretches, noticing that the ache in her back had subsided after a night in a real bed rather than on the ground. She hears a soft peep before Pitter Patter jumps onto the bed. He’d gotten so big in her absence, his tail curling around his paws as he stared at her.

“That’s creepy, baby boy,” she tells him, reaching out. He shoves his head under her hand, purring. Well, at least he grew up to be affectionate. She runs her fingers through his fur as she contemplates everything she needs to do- Ella, of course, needs to be contacted. She needs a bath. And she needs to drop by and see Anders. With a grunt, she hauls herself out of the bed. Before she can head over to the closet, a package sitting in front of the door catches her eye. It’s a box wrapped in brown paper, tied with a string. A letter is slipped under the bow, with the same seal as the one she’d gotten in the Breceilian forest. Frowning, she drags the box onto the bed before slipping the letter out and popping the seal.

Arya,

This letter should reach you once you’re back in Denerim. I thought I’d send a few gifts this time, like I promised to last time. Regardless of whether or not you believe me, I’m sending over all the
notes I’ve compiled about transitioning in Thedas. Even if you don’t believe me about Lyra, perhaps you’ll find a use for it anyway. If not, it’s a fascinating read. At least it should be now, since I’ve cleaned it up and organized it for you. There’s also a few enchantments I’ve included- if you can get to Sandal, he should be able to enchant at least one outfit of yours to fit you no matter what your size is. It’s a very nifty enchantment from the days of Arlathan- and if you don’t remember it, it’s an enchantment on the robes you took from Bellanaris’s room. Besides, once Sandal is familiar with the enchantment, he can recreate it. It certainly beats buying maternity clothes. But I know how much you wanted to. How you expected to on Earth. So I’ve also sent a few gifts from you. It’s not the exact same- they’re embroidered rather than vinyl, but it’s close enough that I hope it brings you comfort.

-A Friend

Intrigued, she tore the paper off the box, leaving it crumpled on the bed. On top were three leather journals. Opening the first one revealed it was indeed notes about transitioning. She gathered them up in a stack, placing them to the side on the bed. Next, she pulls out the shirts. There are three of them, all of them some that she’d seen back on Earth. The first is simple and embroidered, a sky-blue t-shirt that had a buffering circle and “LOADING” across the stomach. It felt like the t-shirt she’d been wearing when she arrived in Thedas- for a moment all she could do was hold it to her chest. The second was black, also embroidered, and had a carefully stitched watermelon slice, above which it said: “I ate a seed.” The third and final was baby pink and just said “pregnant af” across the chest.

If anybody asked, Arya would have sworn she didn’t spend twenty minutes crying over it.

When Eldris takes Sera back to Lady Emmauld’s estate, Sera sniffs. She valiantly pretends she is not barely holding back tears, but the way she hugs him tightly proves otherwise. He presses a kiss to her forehead.

“I’ll be back tomorrow,” he promises, “and the next day and the next day.”

She gives him a weak smile and a wave as she goes inside.

Arya doesn’t get a chance to call Ella until that night. She hadn’t gotten a chance to speak with Anders, either, but that’s a matter that’s less pressing. She couldn’t even pinpoint exactly where her day had gone, only knowing that night had fallen and she was tired once more. Anora had claimed her bed for the night, snuggling up to her. Both of them had just come from the bath, hair still dripping as they arranged themselves in the blankets. Anora had claimed one of Arya’s new shirts- the pink one. Arya herself wore the watermelon shirt. She thinks it might be her favorite. Once they’re comfortable, she puts the computer on the side of the bed, turning over to face it as Anora snuggles up against her back, her head on her shoulder and her hand splayed over her stomach.

Ella answers immediately and the news makes her ecstatic. She asks dozens of questions faster than Arya can answer them, although there’s plenty that Arya can’t answer. She’d lost track of the time, so she wasn’t sure how far along she was. She hadn’t spoken to Anders yet, so she only had the letter to go off of with the rest of her pregnancy. The only thing she can assure Ella of is that they’re healthy, that the morning sickness stopped some time ago, and that Leliana had told the bump a story every night before bed. They talk for a couple hours until Anora’s so sleepy she can barely keep her
eyes open.

Ella insists on reading the babies a bedtime story before she hangs up. She disappears for a minute, digging around before she finally pops back into place. Arya shifts the laptop, angling it down towards her stomach. She can feel tears prickling in her eyes when she recognizes the book as Dinosaur’s Binket- it had been her favorite as a baby. She hadn’t thought about the book in years. Once, she had known it from memory, but she had forgotten most of it. Listening to Ella read it brings Arya memories of her mother reading it, kneeling on the floor by her bed, her night-light projecting stars onto the ceiling. She’d all but forgotten those memories, buried them under other things. She reaches up and stubbornly wipes her tears away, ending the call once the story is over.

Anora snuggles closer. Arya keeps meaning to turn over again, but there’s something that keeps her from it. They’re both drifting halfway to sleep when they feel it- a kick against Anora’s palm. For such a small feeling, it rouses them both immediately, Anora sitting up to look down at Arya. She presses down gently, just a little pressure. Arya moves her hand over Anora’s. They wait for a moment and then there’s another kick. Arya laughs, reaching up with her free hand to pull Anora into a kiss. It’s a little awkward, but neither of them mind much. There’s one more faint kick before the baby goes still. They stay like that for several more minutes, curled together, before they lay down to sleep too, both of them with a hand resting on her stomach.

Eldris finds himself frequenting the marketplace after that. Sera always meets him at the same time, until one day she doesn’t. Frowning, he makes his way to Emmauld’s estate, only to find that the old woman had finally succumbed to her illness. Sera, unsurprisingly, was fine. She was trying to refuse the Lady’s estate.

After a moment, Eldris stepped in. By the time he walked away, he had somehow managed to make himself her legal guardian.

They’d both refused the estate, though.

Time starts to pass molasses-slow like it did with the Dalish. There’s little left to do- Cailan’s settled back into court and nobles have settled back into having him there once more. He’s only needed in a handful of meetings throughout the day, having put much of his usual work on hold with the announcement of Anora’s pregnant and with the looming Blight. It takes on the hazy feel that summer always had back home- even when Eldris brought home an elven child that turned out to be Sera it was only enough excitement for the afternoon. Arya’s perfectly content to spend the final months of her pregnancy like this.

Eldris bolts awake. Wordlessly, he leaps out of bed, waking Theo and Eden and Zevran as he scrambles for his armor. Eden sits up sleepily, rubbing a hand across her face as she yawns. Theo glances at the window- judging by the sky outside it’s the middle of the night.

“What’s going on, mi amor?” Zevran asks, yawning. Eldris pauses briefly before sliding his foot into his boot.
“The archdemon is making a move. I’ll go find Alistair, one of you go get Cailan and someone else go get Loghain. We’ve some time, but not much,” he orders.

Outside, bells start to ring as the watchmen spot the horde’s scouts.

Chapter End Notes

here we fuckin GO kids
also shoutout to jennserrr for coming up with the scene where the baby kicks
Arya is roused by the bells outside. It takes her brain a moment to catch up with things but it’s easy enough to make the connection. She jolts out of bed, startling Lysander awake as she paws through her wardrobe for the enchanted robes. “What is it?” he asks, sitting up.

“I think it’s the darkspawn,” she answers, heart pounding in her chest. He rolls out of bed, fumbling for his armor in the wardrobe. Over the past few months, it had been pushed to the back. They hadn’t needed it, after all. And it isn’t as though this is a proper emergency, but there’s still a sense of panicked urgency as they dress in silence before making their way to the war room.

Everyone is already there, all of them in their armor. Most of them, though tired, are alert. Scouts interrupt the meeting regularly to report on the darkspawn progress- right now it’s only stragglers, but Alistair and Eldris can both feel the bulk of the horde in the distance. This is where the final stand will take place.

The meeting lasts longer than anyone expected. Arya is mostly useless- it’s all battle strategy. Eventually, though, it is decided. The horde is close enough that by sunset the fighting will have begun in earnest. Eldris and Morrigan will go to do the ritual. Everyone else will rest as much as they can, save for Theo, Arya, Anora, Anders, Brett, and Eliza.

She’s a little miffed she’s missing out on everything but just as she acknowledges the feelings the babies kick, reminding her precisely why she doesn’t want to be anywhere near it.

Cailan had spent months working on an evacuation plan. While he knew he couldn’t get everyone out of the city, he knew he could get enough of them out via back gates and secret passages. He’d spent more time than he could recall drawing up maps, highlight routes for every district. When he finally got it perfect, he and Anora and several of their servants had spent days copying it until every resident in the city could have a copy. The bells were what would kick off the whole thing- when they rang, guardsmen would go around, knocking on every door and rousing residents. The residents would use the maps to flee the city, while guards tried to keep things as orderly as possible. It wasn’t the perfect plan, because the perfect plan probably didn’t exist, but it was the best he could come up with.

As it was, he stood in the window, watching everyone file out. Loghain stood next to him, his armor clanking with every shift of his weight. “You’ve done better than expected of you,” Loghain says, after a moment, voice gruff.

“I only hope it was enough,” Cailan replies, and they fall back into a grim silence.

Theo leads them to the cave they’d gotten stuck in during the rain. They take the horses, getting them
there by dawn. It’s only a single cavern, large enough that they have room to pace around, stocked weeks ago with travel provisions in case the battle dragged on. It’d also been supplied with some furniture- an old but comfortable sofa, bedrolls, lanterns, candles. They had enough supplies that they’d be set for at least a week. If the battle dragged on that long, they’d need to move anyway. There had been concerns about the darkspawn- they were tunnelers, after all. As a result, the mages had taken turns coming out here and layering the cavern with wards. As it was, it hummed with magic. It’d repel the darkspawn well enough, especially since they wouldn’t be a target. Not even the archdemon was smart enough to target them. They’d also decided that at least one of the mages present would keep a barrier up over the cavern entrance. There were enough of them that they could take breaks often enough.

Arya decided, five minutes after arriving, that she hated the stupid cave.

Morrigan’s stomach fluttered with nerves. She wasn’t sure why- logically she knew how this would work. She’d slept with Arya enough times for that. And she trusted Eldris not to hurt her. He’d even reassured her, promising that he’d make it an enjoyable experience. But she couldn’t separate the purpose of the ritual from the sex she was going to have. When she left the bedroom, she’d be pregnant. It’d be months before she could tell, but she’d be pregnant all the same.

She tried not to think about how young she was.

The door shuts behind Eldris, making her jump. She keeps her back to him, though, taut as a bowstring. She hears a quiet rustle and a jangle of clasps- too short to be the removal of his armor. He must have taken off his gloves. Moments later, she feels his hands on her exposed back, making her jump.

“It’s okay,” he murmurs, his hands trailing over her skin. It’s a soothing motion up and down her spine and he keeps it up until he feels her relax beneath his touch. She finds herself leaning into his touch. Once she’s relaxed, he presses a kiss to her exposed shoulder. He keeps his movements slow and deliberate as if he’s afraid of frightening her away.

By the time they break apart, Morrigan’s anxiety is no longer at the forefront of her mind. Eldris pulls her down into a proper kiss, his fingers working at her clothes. Hesitantly, her fingers reach for the buckles on his armor. Hesitantly, her fingers reach for the buckles on his armor. She only toys with them, unable to work up the courage to undress him. Once he frees her from her clothes, he breaks away to lead her to the bed, urging her to sit down as he begins to undress. He keeps his movements slow- he’d done this teasingly for Theo plenty of times in the past, but he wasn’t interested in teasing Morrigan. He was interested in keeping her comfortable. He must be taking too long, though, because after a few moments she reaches out, cautiously and hesitantly, before undoing the buckles herself. Despite her hesitation, she moves faster than he had been, and in a moment he’s divested of his armor. His shirt follows but Morrigan freezes after that.

He hesitates a moment before he reaches out, taking her hand and putting it on his bare chest. Though she’s naked on the bed before him, he’s in no hurry to rush this- he can sense the horde, but it’s far enough away that they have plenty of time. He knows this is nothing entirely new for Morrigan- he’d heard her with Arya before- but he also knew exactly what sort of sacrifice she was
making just for him. The argument could be made that she was also making it for Alistair but they both knew that, had the ritual not been an option, Eldris would have struck the final blow.

He leans forward to kiss her again. Her hand stays stationary on his chest, feeling his heart beat beneath her fingertips. “We’ll take our time,” he promises, laying her down and crawling on top of her. He presses kisses to her throat, paying attention to a particularly sensitive spot that makes her gasp.

“I’m scared,” she admits, her arms coming around to wrap around his shoulders. It felt as natural with him as it did Arya.

“I know. And if you don’t want to do this, say the word. I’ll stop, and we’ll put our clothes back on, and we’ll go save the world,” he promises. She takes a deep breath to bolster herself before pulling him in for a kiss, her fingers trailing down his back to hook into the waist of his trousers.

“Not a chance,” she tells him. He laughs against her lips- such a stubborn and brave thing she was.

“At least you’ll have Arya to walk you through it,” he reminds her, his hands gripping her sides.

“Not you?” she inquires, her hands moving back up to roam over his back.

“I’ll be going to Kirkwall. Unless you want me to stay. If you need me, I’ll be here,” he says. She shifts, her fingers trailing down his back once more. He arches into the touch.

“No, I’ll have Reno and Arya and everyone else,” she says. She can’t quite bring her hands to drift lower yet, but that’s all right. They have time.

“Then it’s all settled,” he says, grinning at her as he ducks down to press another kiss to her neck.

“Eldris?” she says. He pulls back again, a faint and fond smile on his face.

“Yeah?” he asks, his hands drifting up her sides.

“I’m not scared anymore,” Morrigan says. He grins as he leans down to kiss her again.

Hours pass. By the time the horde make a move, Morrigan has joined Arya and the others in the cave. It’s well into midday, but clouds hang heavy over the city. When the horde moves, they can feel the ground shake. Arya whimpers, fumbling for Morrigan’s hand as she presses against her side. Theo glances at the barrier, hesitating only a moment before he casts another spell. A wave of calm washes over her and she lifts her head to send a glare his way. It lacks any heat, however.

“I know that’s you, Theo,” she mumbles. Anora reaches over to take her free hand, her thumb running across her knuckles.
“Would you rather I let you panic?” he asks, cheerfully. Arya rolls her eyes, settling in on the sofa.

“You’ve a point there,” she grudgingly agrees.

With that, they settle in to wait some more.

Anora decides very quickly that she hates this. She can’t cross the barrier over the entrance to the cave, but she can creep to the edge and peer out. From the cave’s position, she can’t see Denerim, and it leaves her feeling antsy. She hates the waiting. She hates, too, that were it not for the baby, she’d be out there on the front lines with her husband. Though she had her charm and her wit, in times of trouble Anora always preferred armor to a dress. And now she couldn’t even fit in hers, much less fight.

If anyone took issue with how she paced next to the barrier, they didn’t say anything.

Anora had barely settled when Arya began to pace. Bellanaris was strangely quiet in her head. She wished she could sleep- it would be easier to pass this battle in the Fade, speaking to Solas. But she could no sooner sleep than she could eat and so she was left to pace in an attempt to work out the rising anxiety.

She comes to a stop next to Brett, linking her arm through his and leaning on his shoulder. The old soldier was solemn, but not grim.

“Is it always this terrible?” she asks. He slides down the cave wall, tugging her into his lap. She reluctantly lets him, though she still wishes she were moving.

“Sometimes it’s worse,” he tells her. She groans. Brett laughs, patting her on the back, and begins to hum.

“The fighting’ll be kicking off now,” Eliza says, peering out over the barrier and looking outside. There’s a hazy red fog around the moon not obscured by clouds.

“How long do you think it’ll take?” Arya asks, wrapping her arms around her stomach.

“Shouldn’t take too long now,” she answers. Arya reaches for her laptop, desperate for a distraction.

The distraction lasts half an hour. The worst part of it, she decides, is that the computer keeps track of the time, making her painfully aware of how agonizingly slow the passage of time is. She pushes the computer into Morrigan’s lap and resumes her pacing.

In the city, Eldris is faced with the bulk of the horde. Between the rest of his group and the city
guardsmen, they were holding the line well enough. But as the moons rose in the sky, they began to flag. Just when he was certain the horde was going to break through the wall, arrows rained into the approaching horde. The Dalish had arrived.

And then, massive bulk obscuring the moon, the archdemon roars a challenge as it soars through the sky. Eldris pins his ears back, teeth bared in a smile.

Arya had nearly begun to drift off to sleep when she hears the archdemon roar. Everyone rushes to the barrier, leaning against it to look out. There’s little they can see, save a few stragglers who had yet to notice their cave.

They stay there as time ticks past, watching, waiting.

And then, a brilliant blast lights up the night sky.

The dwarves arrive in time to hold the line with the surviving guardsmen. It’s Alistair who beckons to Eldris, until the message is passed down the line. They break away, the archdemon landing on the roof of Fort Drakon as they regroup.

“This is it,” Leliana murmurs. This would be the point in her legends where everything builds up. Though this wasn’t one of her stories, she knew it would one day become one. For good or for bad, the ending would be decided in the next moment.

“Everyone drink your stamina potions. Wynne, I brought some lyrium if you needed it. Take a few moments to catch your breath. Once we’re ready, we’ll push towards the Fort,” Eldris says, falling into his role as the leader of the ragtag group. It’s the first time he’s had to- until now, he and Alistair have made decisions together, even when they clashed.

He’d be lying if he said he wouldn’t miss it.

The fight to the top of the fort isn’t a long one. Much of the horde had been held back at the gates, leaving only stragglers inside for them to dispatch. Leliana and Eden take out most of them with their arrows, and the rest are easy kills.

The roof, however, is swarming with darkspawn. He knows they climbed the sides of Fort Drakon, but he can’t help but think that the archdemon carried them in on it’s back. He only gets a moment to contemplate before he’s locked into battle.

As they fight, more darkspawn crawl up the walls of the fort, creating a near-endless wave. Still, between all of them, they make progress.

And finally, in the center of the fight, Wynne clears the way with a blast of fire. He sheathes his dagger, picking up a dropped sword from a nearby darkspawn, and sprints towards the archdemon.
His sword sinks into the dragon’s belly as he uses his momentum to drive it forward. The archdemon roars, thrashing. Eldris is consumed by a bright white light.

Chapter End Notes

one more left
A baby’s cry breaks the silence. Dawn has yet to break, but Asher had been fussy as of late. Arya groans, dragging a hand through her hair as she rolls over. Maybe she’d imagined it. Maybe, if she lays here, the crying will stop.

The crying gets louder. Lysander stirs beside her. “Your turn,” he murmurs sleepily. She huffs, only agreeing because her son was likely hungry, judging by the weight of her breasts.

Months had passed since the defeat of the archdemon. Eldris had already left for Kirkwall and Alistair had left for Amaranthine. The only ones who were still here were Morrigan and Anders. Palace life was quiet. Well, as quiet as it could be with three infants. Morrigan was due any day now, as well.

Over those few months, Bellanaris had gotten restless. Every night, no matter what Arya dreams, there is a part of her that reaches, searching. She never knows what it’s looking for, only that it has never been found.

Blearily, she blinks her eyes open, dodging around the toys on the floor as she approaches the crib. Lyra sleeps soundly next to her brother- the letter had been right about the twins, so Arya had decided to trust it on that, too. Asher quiets as she picks him up, fumbling with her shirt until he can latch on. She turns, shuffling to the armchair that sits next to the crib and sinking it it.

There, in the in-between of sleep and awake, Bellanaris reaches once more. Across the Waking Sea, she finds her answer.

Chapter End Notes

we did it, y'all

you can find the first chapter of the next fic already up

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